

BREAKPOINT

*A Patreon-exclusive novel
by Corrupting Power*

Part One

Len

Waking up in freefall wasn't a *common* occurrence, but Len would be lying to himself if he thought this was the first time he'd done it. Third or fourth time, maybe.

It wasn't as though he was hurtling towards the earth with no protection. Hell, he wasn't even hurtling *alone*. He was strapped in with three other men into what seemed like a large yellow life raft of some kind, although he could tell from the wind rushing around them that they were descending downwards and that the edges of the raft were affixed to some kind of parachute.

'So we're falling,' Len thought to himself. 'That's a start.'

The parachute had slowed their descent so they weren't going crash down, but parachuting with a raft wasn't generally the softest of landings. The other men hadn't woken up yet, which gave Len a bit of time to size up the rest of his situation.

They weren't the only parachute he could see, a number of large crates dripping down around them, pontoons attached, so they wouldn't sink, which made Len look down over the edge of the raft to see a wide swath of ocean beneath them. At that point, he looked around him and to the horizon in nearly every direction was nothing but endless blue water, although he did see a retreating C-130 off in the distance, which he assumed they'd been thrown unceremoniously from a couple of minutes ago.

The one exception to the limitless water was just a few miles off in one direction, there was a large island with what looked like an inactive volcano along one side of it, covered in lush, dense forest, probably no more than 60-70 square miles in total. It was literally the only thing they'd be able to get to before they died, so he was already thinking about how to gather up the crates and head over towards the island when he saw a small boat coming from the island towards their general vicinity, which only made sense when he thought about it. It looked like a pretty short range boat, though, which meant there was likely no way it would have fuel enough to get to somewhere populated. It felt like they were probably somewhere deep in the Pacific Ocean, but he'd know more after getting a look at the stars at night. That plane, he guessed was probably the only thing that ever passed by this island.

When the raft touched down on the water, the impact shook the other three men into consciousness, and Len could see utter confusion and shock on their faces, far more than he'd had. Clearly the Jumble had done a much more thorough number on them than it had on him, although he also had to admit it was possible that at least one of them played for The Other Team, something he meant professionally and not sexually.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the men said to him, a big bulky blonde Australian who looked like he was definitely more brawn than brains.

"Len." He unfastened himself from the harness he'd been strapped in and started pulling the parachute up and onto the raft. The last thing he wanted was for it to get caught in the undercurrent and to drag them down before the little cigarette boat could reach them. "You?"

"Oxford," the giant Ozzie said back to him, moving to help him in his task. At least the man knew enough to be useful instead of sitting around with his thumb up his ass. "Know where we are?"

"Nope."

"Know how we got here?"

"Nope."

"Some fucking help you are, mate," Oxford grumbled. It immediately made Len think Oxford

was Other Team potential. The obvious assumption was that they were all, literally, in the same boat, and that none of them would know anything, and by acting like someone else should know something, instead of deflecting attention from Oxford, it made Len turn the spotlight of suspicion back on the Aussie. "What're you two called, Frick and Frack?"

Len had to work not to smirk, as the other two men did look vaguely similar enough to maybe be brothers, Eastern European if Len had to guess, but that was a stab in the dark at best. Grizzled. Unshaven. Unpleasant. He'd known plenty of their kind over the years. Hell, he'd killed plenty of their kind over the years. By contrast, it was hard to hide his Midwestern heritage, although sometimes he got mistaken for German because of the blonde hair and the blue eyes. Very much a sharp contrast to the two somewhat similar looking men, who seemed to take offense to Oxford's comment.

"Vigo," the first one, slightly taller and older, said.

"Dicu," the second one, slightly shorter and younger, said, his accent much thicker than the other's. Hungarian, if Len had to guess. "I do not know this man, or either of you." There was actually a better-than-average chance of that being true, although whether or not that had been true a week ago was anybody's guess.

"Bully for you," Len said. "Grab an oar and let's start paddling over towards those crates. The boat's got to be coming to get us and them, so we might as well make it easier for them."

"Who put you in charge?" Oxford asked indignantly.

"Nobody," Len shot back. "But if you want to sit around being as useful as a vestigial tail, I'm sure the people on the island will look very kindly on that, don't you? I'm willing to work for my supper and get where we need to go with a little elbow grease."

Oxford grumbled in response, but picked up one of the plastic oars and started help slowly move the raft over towards the nearest floating crate. There were about half a dozen of them and they had only gotten the raft over to the second of them when the sleek little white boat pulled up near them. There was a very well tanned dark haired man in a half-open luau shirt at the wheel of it, and a couple of good looking women in bikinis sitting in back, one blonde, one brunette, both tanned, busty and friendly looking. "You fellas need a hand?" the man said to them as one of the women, the blonde, tossed a tow line over to them. She was gorgeous and the bikini was doing very little to hide her sizable assets. She also looked familiar, and Len thought he might know her from somewhere, but it was also possible the whole thing was just evoking nostalgia in him. It almost looked like a commercial to sell someone a boat or a summer holiday, Len thought to himself. "Secure that to the raft, and then buckle yourselves in, 'cause I ain't wasting much time out here if I can help it."

The man didn't have to tell Len twice, and the other men seemed to fall in line quickly, making sure the tow line was wrapped around two separate anchor points and wouldn't just flip over if they started going too fast. Once the tow line was attached, they all strapped themselves back into the harnesses just before the boat started whipping out towards the rest of the crates.

One at a time, the boat would pull up alongside one of the floating crates, attach it to a tow line, then move on to the next, until the four remaining crates were part of the convoy, in addition to the raft and the two crates already attached to it.

Len glanced over and noticed that all the men on the raft were dressed exactly as he was, in a dark blue flightsuit with workman boots, and a white muscle t-shirt on beneath it, which he could tell as all of them had unzipped the flightsuits down because of the goddamn heat. It had to be late afternoon, and despite the ocean around them, it was ridiculously hot, the sun beating down on them not helping matters any. Of course, they'd been in an aircraft's belly less than fifteen minutes ago, and Len suspected it had been much cooler in there, not that he could remember.

As the boat zipped them over towards the island, Len could finally start to get a better sense of what the lay of the land was. The trees were thick and heavy almost right up to the sand line, but he could see hints of buildings just beyond the ridge of them, with a few parts that he expected were trails or roads. There was also a deck extending out from the island, although it was hard to make out, since

it looked like someone had camouflaged it so that it wouldn't be recognizable easily by an orbital satellite unless someone was taking a serious look and studying the coastline for a while, all of which was highly unlikely for some random island in the middle of the South Pacific.

This, of course, made total sense. Whatever they were doing here, the people who had put them here, whoever the hell *they* were, didn't want anybody unexpected dropping by.

There were storm clouds gathering on the edge of vision, and Len suspected it would be upon them before any of them knew it. It made him glad they were being towed back to the island rather than having to paddle out to it. There wouldn't have been any guarantees that they would have made it before the storm would've overtaken them, and then it would've been anybody's guess if they'd had a shot getting ashore.

He knew a little about where they were heading, so he spent much of the short trip inward wondering which of his raftmates were Employees and which were Guests, like him. He had to suspect at least one of them was at least an Employee, if not Management, but these things were likely to be intentionally obfuscated, otherwise what was the point? Oxford felt like the most reasonable candidate to be Employee and not Guest, but he didn't want to lock into that too early based on initial impressions. The guy could've just been an uptight asshole, and the Jumble would make everything a bit more unpredictable upfront.

As the boat pulled them closer to shores, he saw that a handful of people had come out, diving into water to help pull the crates up onto the beach, dragging them up far enough to break them down and load them up onto the backs of a couple of small trucklike vehicles that clearly weren't actual trucks. The first give away was that they weren't gas powered. They seemed more like oversized golf carts to Len, something he immediately filed away for further study later.

The two women were tending to the boat as the man hopped off it, walking over to them, helping pull them onto the dock one at a time. Up close, Len could tell just how good the camouflage was – it would've easily been glossed over by automated satellite scans, and it was big enough to cover the boat when it wasn't in use. “C'mon fellas,” the man told them. “Let me welcome you to Honeywell Island, give you the dimestore tour and help you pick out your commodes.”

When Len started to try and get out of the boat, the last to get out, the blonde woman leaned down and offered him a hand, pulling him up onto the dock personally, instead of the man. She had a strong grip and tugged him to stand alongside of her, making sure he moved in close, her body almost right on top of his. “My name's Sally, big stack,” she said with a grin of pearly whites, leaning in so that he could feel her nipples, all stiff and tensed, through both his jumpsuit and her forest-green bikini top. “Once you get situated, drop me a line and maybe I can give you the *extra* special tour.” She licked her lips and swatted him on the ass as she scooted away. Len was *definitely* sure they'd encountered each other somewhere before, although he still couldn't quite place his finger on it.

“What the hell is this place?” Oxford asked, as Vigo and Dicu stretched their legs, as if maybe they'd been in cramped positions for a while. Nobody had anything with them to take out of the boat, so they were mostly just waiting for the carts to get loaded up.

“That's the million dollar question, one that I truly can't answer for you fellas,” the man said. “Didn't catch any of you boys names. They call me Tex.”

Len did his best not to laugh. If this guy was a Texan, then Len was the last son of a dying planet called Krypton. Sure, the man did a good impression of the accent and he certainly exuded Texan swagger, but there were enough little missteps along the way that Len would bet his last dollar that Tex was anything *but* Texan. Still, best not to call him out on it on the first day, especially since he was clearly the only person who seemed like he was self-identifying as Management.

“I'm Len, that's Oxford, Dicu and Vigo's the crabby one there in the back,” Len said, as Tex climbed into the driver's seat of a six seater doorless car that was waiting for them. “At least, that's what they told me in the raft, 'cause I don't know these guys from last week's dinner.”

“Can you *remember* last week's dinner, Len?” Tex asked him.

The fact that Tex knew enough to ask that question made Len even less comfortable. "...no."

Tex tapped one of his massive fingers against his temple. "Keep that in mind. Everybody here's got that, to some extent. For some of us, it's nearly a completely blank slate. For others, it's only maybe ten to twenty percent missing. None of us remember how we got here, but we've pieced bits of it together over the last several years."

"Pieced?" Oxford asked.

"Several *years*?" Vigo followed up.

"Sure," Tex laughed. "We been here quite some time. Imprisoned, maybe, or maybe just forcibly vacationing. I know what you're thinking – what kind of prison doesn't have guards? Well, first, we're not entirely sure it *is* a prison. It *probably* is, but if it is, what did we do to get sent here? Who sent us here? How long are we here for? And if what we did was really so bad to get banished to somewhere in the South Pacific, why not just kill us off instead?"

"Well, you clearly know enough to come by and pick up new arrivals," Dicu said, echoing Len's own thoughts.

"Didn't know there was going to be new arrivals until we saw the raft come down. Once a week, there's a supply drop, crates tossed out of a C-130 that doesn't have any markings and doesn't slow down. Usually it's food, booze, clothes, basic survival staples, but some of the time it includes new arrivals like you boys. My crew always makes sure to pull the supplies onto shore and drags 'em into the center of town, where people come and pick up what they want. Then once a month, we haul all the dropboxes back out to sea, attach a skyhook line and a balloon to them, and they pick up all the empty boxes for next month's shipments. Deflated rafts passengers are sent in too, along with the parachutes. There's always instructions on how they want it done the week before the pick up."

Tex was driving them down a gravel path that clearly saw a decent amount of cart travel, as it had been cleared away and had plenty of clearance on either side, despite being in the middle of a goddamn tropical jungle.

"Who's 'they'?" Oxford asked.

"Shit, son, you tell me!" Tex laughed, reaching over and slapping Oxford on the back of the shoulder. "I been here two years now, and I'm no closer to that answer than I was when I got here. I've checked all the messages they've sent us dozens and dozens of times, trying to figure out who the fuck these cowboys are, but nothing about who they are other than a simple signatory – Management."

"You aren't Management?" Len asked.

"If I was Management, boy, I'd either be telling you a whole lot more or a whole lot less," Tex said, bringing the cart around a bend, keeping them in line with rest of the convoy. "I'm just an old hand who's learned how to look out for himself."

"So what's in it for you hauling the boxes into town?" Len continued. "Why not pull them out of the water and just leave them there on the edge of the treeline?"

Tex grinned, pointing at Len. "You're the smart one of the bunch, I see. Well, we get first choice of all the stuff before we haul it back, so I take the best booze for my bar, but it also means we get books and albums before anybody else does. And making people go out to the dock just convinces more of them to dick around with the boat for a little bit before they realize it'd never make it to anywhere civilized. Most of my team are relative newcomers, still convinced they're going to find some clue about who's doing this in the drops, but shit, I gave up on that pipe dream a long time ago. Now, I'm just happy enough to lay out the welcome mat for the newcomers, give them the tour, put them up in lodging and make sure nobody's going to rock the boat."

"What is this 'rock boat' of which you speak?" Dicu asked, the idiom clearly lost in translation, but Tex seemed more than happy to elaborate.

"Troublemakers don't last long around here. Sometimes they vanish in the middle of the night. Sometimes we find a dead body in the center of town. But you got yourself a bunch of spooks, spies, soldiers, mercs, madmen and mischief makers around here, so we don't even bother with police," Tex

said. “Problems have a way of sorting themselves out, even without much in the way of weaponry.”

“Noticed you don't carry a gun,” Oxford said.

“No guns anywhere on Honeywell,” Tex replied. “We've got machetes and knives and the like, but this ain't no wild west Annie Oakley gun show here. That'll take you boys a bit of getting used to, I imagine, since you all strike me as the sort of fellers who like to sleep with a gun underneath the pillow. But you'll learn. If you're killed at a distance, it's most likely gonna be a bow and arrow what done it.”

The cart pulled out of the jungle and into a clearing full of what looked like thirty or forty buildings, none more than three stories high, sprawling out towards the edge of the jungle in all directions. Above them, however, the tree cover was still basically intact, the trees bending inward to soak up all the available sunlight they could get, only small amounts of it dripping into the clearing in shafts and beams.

All of the architecture was stark and made of heavy concrete, although there were balconies scattered everywhere. The buildings themselves were likely sixty or seventy years old, as the heavy vines running along the sides of them implied they'd been here for quite some time. More than anything, however, what caught Len's eye was the excessive amounts of neon. Each building had its own neon sign – some labeled things like Residence Hall C or Commissary – but a handful of them in languages he couldn't read. Most of the buildings had more than one sign, though, with half a dozen on the most covered structure. The colors were a struggle for control and dominance over the eye, all of them casting enough light to suffuse the air with the prismatic shades. It was like Blade Runner, Miami Vice, Hong Kong and eighties Soviet propaganda photos had been thrown into the wash together, and this secluded jungle city was the end result.

“Quite the look,” Len said, as the cart pulled into what seemed like the town square, a couple of the carts that had followed them moving along side a raised stone circle.

“It was that way when we got here,” Tex replied.

“Even the signs?” Oxford asked.

“If one of them burns out, there's a replacement in the next shipment but I've never seen people asking for them on the request lists, so clearly somebody here's got a way to ask for things on the sly,” Tex said. “But I'll be damned if I can figure out how. Maybe the drop boxes have hidden storage compartments, although I feel like I've gone over every inch of them with a fine tooth comb. We've tried leaving notes asking for tools or medicines in the drop boxes, but they're mostly ignored, although occasionally they'll send large things upon request if we can convince them the need is great and that we can't cause too much trouble with them.” He glanced over his shoulder at the guys and girls who were starting to unload the carts, placing the boxes one at a time into the raised stone circle. The pontoons had been stripped of them, and all of them had been opened, so clearly Tex's people had taken some things from them before they'd gotten to the town center. “Look for boxes marked 'Len,' 'Oxford,' 'Dicu' and 'Vigo,’” he called out to the people, before turning back to them. “You'll each have a box worth of clothes packed for you in the shipment, stuff in your sizes. Might even be some of your original clothes; might not. See if any of it strikes a memory when you get a chance. Might help fill in some gaps. Has for some people. Not so much for most of us, though.”

“You said you run a bar 'round here?” Len asked, as Tex was watching all the crates get moved from the carts to their spaces along the inside of the circle, although sure enough, each of them had a large steamer trunk with their name stickered on the front brought over to them and loaded onto Tex's cart. There were a handful of people starting to come out of the buildings, heading over towards the boxes within the circle, so Len supposed it was for the best they didn't get a chance to try and scavenge their clothes from them. “How do people pay? There some local currency? Shells or something ridiculous like that?”

“Nobody pays for anything here,” Tex said. “Not really. I mean, there's some bartering going on here and there for specialized services like special cooking but for the most part, people are just happy to have something to do. So if you want to cook in the commissary, you go right ahead, just make

enough for ten to twenty. Same's true for putting in some time in the mail room, working laundry detail or clean up and maintenance. You put in at least 10 hours each week in one of the common jobs, each month you can request one item that'll come in within a month or two – book or record. You can be broad or specific and generally those requests get delivered. We include all requests with a work log that goes into the monthly pickup they do. And they know if you did the work, so don't think you can lie and just get stuff for free. There's cameras all over the island, although nobody knows where they go. We tried breakin'em once, but they were just repaired the next day and the next supply drop was full of nothing but empty boxes and a note that said 'Stop that.' We had to conserve food like hell for the next month to adjust for an entire week's worth of missing food, and hunger'll drive folks into desperate shit. Ain't nobody messed with the cameras since, and people just do their work and get their stuff. But if you don't have any special requisitions and just want to eat whatever's been made for the day there? You can do that too. You want a drink? Come by the bar and I'll mix it up for you, no charge. The only currency I trade in is the only one that matters – information. You'll see a big neon sign over my place that says 'Tex's Bar.' Didn't ask for the sign – just showed up one day, so I guess whoever's running the show likes me doin' what I'm doin'."

"That's all of it, Tex," a black girl in a red bikini that didn't cover a whole lot said to him. Her hair was in a loose afro that she clearly had worked hard to keep from getting out of control. "Your boys got their boxes and we've got the circle filled out." She had on sandals, but most of the people on Tex's team were wearing boots. "We're going to take the rest back to the bar while you finish playing welcoming committee."

"Got it," the big burly man said. "I won't be long."

Behind the black girl, Sally gave Len a wave and blew him a kiss before turning to walk away from them, letting Len get a spectacular view of her toned ass beneath that green bikini bottom. She and the rest of Tex's people hopped back onto the two trucks and started heading towards the far side of the small town.

"How many people are here?" Oxford asked.

"You four will bring us up to sixty-seven, but who knows how long that count'll remain."

"There's places for all of us to stay?" Vigo asked.

"There's one hundred residences here on Honeywell, give or take a few extras, each one with a king or queen sized bed, so I suppose max capacity's two hundred, though we've never even come close to that. I'll give you guys unassigned units, but if you don't like where you're staying, you can take any other open unit and just let me know, so we've got a directory of where everyone's shacking up. None of the doors on the island have any locks, so better get used to that."

"None of them?" Len asked with a raised eyebrow.

"None that I've found," Tex replied, "other than the bunker door."

"The bunker door?" Vigo asked.

"There's a small heavy metal door up along the side of the volcano that nobody's ever been able to do anything with," Tex laughed. "You're welcome to try and get it to open if you want, but in two years, nobody's gotten it to budge a millimeter. We call it the bunker door 'cause it reminds most of us of those old bomb shelter doors. Damn thing's impenetrable, and doesn't even seem to open from this side. If somebody's in there, they ain't come out that we've seen."

"Were you the first here?" Len asked.

"Nope, but at this point, I think I've been here pretty close to the longest," Tex replied.

"Everybody who was here when I arrived has either died or disappeared. So I guess I'm the big winner or loser, depending on how you look at it."

"Why the directory?" Oxford said. "If nothing matters all that much, why keep track of where folks is shackin' up?"

"Because it doesn't hurt to know where everyone is. Also, people hook up all the time, and when they do, they usually start sharing a living space, which lets people know to stop hitting on

them,” Tex said with that ever-present wide grin on his face. “Lots of people around here choose to spend their time getting drunk and screwing, and who can blame 'em?”

“You got somebody, Tex?”

“Yup. Paulina, the brunette you saw in the boat with me when we picked you up. Been together about four months now. We'll see if it takes, but it's been pretty smooth sailing so far. She's Russian and I'm from the US of motherfuckin' A, but we ain't let that get in the way of nothin' yet.”

“Your first girl here on Honeywell?” Len asked.

“Sheeee-it, son,” Tex laughed. “My sixth. Most of the others are gone, one way or the other, although Jenny's still around. She's hooked up with Mayday these days I think.”

“You got somebody here calls himself Mayday?” Oxford asked in surprise.

“Well, *we* call him that, 'cause he's spent most of his time here trying to find some way to reach the outside world, all to no avail,” Tex said, his voice layered in amusement at the man's apparent futile efforts. “He's persistent, I'll give him that, but then again, so're most rashes. And shit, what's it to me how someone chooses to spend their time? He wants to wander the beaches praying to see a passing by boat or plane, that's his life to waste.”

“You said 'gone one way or the other,’” Len said pointedly. “What did you mean by that?”

“Couple of'em turned up dead, one stabbed and the other beaten.”

“Squabbles between inmates?”

“Maybe,” Tex said. “Or maybe the warden saw somethin' they didn't like, an' took'em out in the middle of the night, left the bodies out to convey a message to whoever'd been up to mischief with them. Never really certain. The other two went missing, which could mean any number of things.”

Len leaned against one of the concrete structures, tilting his head slightly. “Like what? Humor me...”

Tex shrugged, the question clearly no skin off his back. “Sometimes people go stir crazy, try and swim off the island. If we hear about it, we'll go try and find'em with the boat, but it's a big fuckin' ocean. And I suspect there's also a small contingent around here that knows a lot more than they're telling, the guys behind the guys, if you will. Secret Management. The wardens in inmates' clothing. I wish I could tell you I was one of'em, but I'm just a guy who tends to his bar and stays outta most folk's way. Not everybody who goes missing dies, that much I'm sure of. Just don't know much more beyond that. Maybe they make it off the island and back to the real world. Maybe they're here and beyond the hatch. Maybe it's something else entirely.”

“Couldja be any more cryptic, mate?” Oxford asked in annoyance.

“Dunno,” Tex shot back, a smug grin on his face. “Want me to give it a go?”

Tex brought the cart to a stop in front of a building with a green neon sign identifying it as “Residence Hall F.” There were a handful of carts parked out front, each connected to the wall by a thick cord.

“The carts are free for anyone to use?”

“Yep,” Tex responded. “Max speed of 35 kph, which is a little bit more than 20 miles an hour. They're full electric and fully rechargeable, so if you use one, just make sure you plug it in wherever it is you're going. Don't fuck around with'em otherwise. I know for certain that they take that shit seriously, and trying to muck around with civic utilities will definitely get you whacked. If it breaks, just send a message to central telling them where the car's broken down, and someone'll come and fix it. Vehicle maintenance is one of the public service teams you can work for if you want.”

“What do you mean 'message to central?’” Oxford asked.

“I'll show you, c'mon,” he said, getting out of the cart, rain starting to trickle down from the heavy foliage above. That storm Len had seen on the horizon was likely upon them now, although the dense trees prevented it from coming down too hard at once. He suspected there was a rainwater catcher somewhere on the island, which provided the drinking water. “All four of you should leave your bags here, and whichever of you decides you want one of these units can just get your bag when we come

back down. Let's go.”

Tex led them inside of the building, the interior of which had a strange late 60s early 70s décor, although thankfully there wasn't a hint of shag carpet as far as the eye could see. There was also an unusual mix of nationalities in the styles, Polynesian influences blending into foundations from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The interiors were far, far newer than the building structures themselves.

“How come nobody wants these units?” Oxford said. “Something wrong with'em?”

“They're a little bit further from the center of town than most people like being, but other people prefer that sort of thing,” Tex replied. “Other than location, all the residential halls are basically built on the same template, just with a few tweaks here and there. Four units per floor, three floors per building. Two of the four units on the top floor of this building are taken, and one on the bottom, but all the rest are open. Here, we'll look at this one, and show you.”

He pushed open a door and led the four men into a sparsely decorated apartment. While most of the men were probably just admiring the décor, Len was doing a bit of heavy thinking. All of the furniture was custom-built – no mass market stuff, nothing produced in bulk. It was also likely all built on site, nothing having been shipped here except maybe the raw materials. The buildings themselves were likely also constructed the same way, although it was possible that there had been some large construction machines here, though that would've had to have been over half a century ago.

Len's read on the island was that it had maybe been a remote military base for either Russia, Germany or Japan during WWII, but that it had probably lay dormant after being abandoned once the war was over for a few decades. There had likely been a second wave of inhabitants, researchers or scientists in the late 1960s or early 1970s, who had retrofit the place to make it seem a little less foreboding, but there was only so much that could be done with the early brutalist architecture. The endless tiny cameras scattered all over the place, and the electrical grid the place seemed to be running on had to be very modern inventions, and with Tex saying he'd been here a bit more than two years, Len would estimate the third wave retrofits couldn't be more than five years old, tops.

What was most impressive about all of it was that nothing was discarded, just built on top of, adding and adding without ever removing, so everything just kept evolving, giving everything a very surreal but organic feel, despite the harsh edges of the buildings themselves. Even the jungle itself seemed to be doing what it could to incorporate and embrace the community, rather than resist it.

“All this could be yours!” Tex laughed, doing an impression of a game show host, sweeping one arm to show off the interior of the place. “Your own couch, dining room, kitchen and bedroom!”

“Is not truly ours if anyone can walk in any time,” Dicu grumbled. “Do not like idea of having no privacy in own home.”

“Like I said, boys, it's something you just gotta get used to,” Tex said with an apologetic shrug. “I mean, if it makes you feel any better, you could barricade your front door from the inside, since the doors open inward, but it's still no guarantee that someone won't get in anyway. Plus, y'know, no locks the windows either, although I suppose you could probably build latches on those if you really wanted. It just seems like more trouble than it's worth to me. What do you have that's worth stealing? Am I right?” he laughed.

“No phone?” Oxford asked, looking around the place in confusion. “I thought you said we should just contact central if there's a broken cart.”

“Well, I specifically phrased it as 'send a message,’” Tex said with a chuckle. “We've got a different approach to communication here on Honeywell.”

“No goddamn way,” Len muttered, walking over to the wall. “I don't know that I've ever fucking seen one of these in person.” He reached forward, placing his hand against one of the two clear pipes he found there, feeling it hum a little beneath his touch.

“Yeah, me neither, before I got here anyway,” Tex said, “but 'round these parts, it's the only communication system we got. No phones, no television, no computers, no radios. Just good old fashioned pneumatic tubes. Each housing unit's usually got between five and ten empty pill capsules in

it. You ever need more, you can simply walk over to the mail office, or use your last one to request them to dispatch you a handful and they'll send you one every five minutes for half an hour, so you've got time to unload them and so they don't jam up the pipe. Some of the more updated systems only have one pipe for both send and receive but our system's a bit older than that. Left side is outgoing, right side is incoming.”

The two tubes each had a clear hatch over them, so that it was apparent there was nothing in them at the time. There was a box mounted on the wall next to it that he opened, taking one of the capsules out. They were hard cylindrical containers with rubber feet on either end to ensure a seal, but other than that, totally clear, maybe twice the length and diameter of the cardboard center of a roll of toilet paper.

“You put whatever is it you want in the capsule, you wrap one of these light blue sheets of paper around it with the name of the person or office you want it to go to in the little 'recipient' spot on one side, seal it up, toss it into the tube, close the hatch and away it goes, off to the mail room, who'll look at where the person is staying and then redirect it to their residence. Bob's your uncle. The art of letter writing lives again. Or you can just walk over and tell people things. That works too. But this is also how you file for media requests if you're doing public service work.”

“Everything fair game?” Len asked. “Nothing too edgy or revolutionary?”

“Sure seems that way,” Tex sighed, shrugging his shoulders a little bit. “You'll notice each unit here's got a record player in it, so all music'll show up on vinyl, for better or worse. That means if it ain' on vinyl, they ain't sendin' it, but seems like vinyl's amid a resurgence, so that helps. The more specific your request, the more of a chance you're going to be disappointed, but hell, sometimes they surprise us. Hell, just two months ago, we learned we'd been fucking ourselves for no good reason since we got here, and that was a goddamn game changer.”

Len grinned, tilting his head to one side. “Sounds like a hard earned lesson. What happened?”

“Well, we figured there was no point in asking for current news, right?” Tex said, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Sure, couple of the fellas had asked for Playboy or Penthouse mags, and those had come, but they were generally just randomly chosen issues that had to be ten or twenty years old. Then Mayday decided he wanted to try and push, so he spent a full forty hours of a week doing as much service as he could – cooking, cleaning, the mailroom, groundskeeping, you name it, he did it. And for his request, he put 'a current US newspaper.' We figured he wasn't going to get shit, y'know? Just chalked it up to Mayday being dumbass ol' Mayday.”

“And?”

“And... in the next package, there was a copy of the July 22rd, 2007 edition of The Cincinnati Enquirer, full and uncut. It was even a Sunday edition, with the funny pages and everything. Our guess is that it's a couple months old. He didn't want to share at first, but after reading the whole thing for a couple of days, he decided it was fine to share, so it's been passed around. Since then, every week, we've gotten some kind of newspaper or magazine, all summer of 2007, some English, some Russian, some German, some French, some Japanese, some in Mandarin, some in Arabic, a couple in Farsi... So our guess is that it's probably either autumn or early winter of 2007. That jibe with what you boys can and can't remember?”

“I remember,” Dicu said, “day I was taken, was November 2nd, 2007. That was maybe two weeks ago? Since capture, time grows... fuzzy.”

“Good,” Tex said, snapping his fingers, pointing at the man. “Good. That's good. That's useful. Mid November, 2007. That lines up with what we've been able to figure out. I dunno why they won't just give us a calendar set to today's date, but maybe they like the level of mystery and suspense they can keep us all in.”

“Controlling the flow of information is always something you can leverage,” Len said. “C'mon. We all know that. Let's not pretend like we don't have some basic knowledge about where we've all come from and why we're all probably here.”

“The fuck you mean, cowboy?” Oxford said to him, annoyance plain on the Australian's face. The more and more Oxford talked, the more certain Len was that the man was an Employee, and not a Guest. He didn't strike Len as smart enough to be Management, though.

“We're all operators and troubleshooters of some kind. I may not remember where I came from or who I used to work for, but there's enough tradecraft floating around inside this brain of mine that bubbles up to the surface so naturally that I think being a spy's second nature to me. Like breathing. Probably been that way for half my life. So if you lot want to pretend that you're not here – either directly or indirectly – because of our day jobs in some regard,” Len said. “That's fine. You go on and do that and see how far it gets you. But you won't catch me trying to downplay my own abilities. We're all spooks here, ain't that right, Tex?”

Tex smirked but nodded in his direction. “That's about right, Len,” he confirmed. “Everyone on this island is either ex-military, ex-intelligence or, most commonly, both. We think. Not everyone remembers their past very well. We've got a handful of people with some pretty nasty brainfry, or at least they claim to. Seems pretty genuine to me, but, like you said, we're all operators of some kind, and I wouldn't put it past anyone to spin tall tales in order to keep their past private. But something like that's hard to keep up as a long game. So, any of you feel like you want to bunk up here?”

“I want to see all my options before I make any decisions,” Oxford said. “I'm betting we're all the same.”

While Dicu and Vigo nodded, Len offered a shrug. “Nah, no need for me to keep looking around. I think I'll bunk up here, although I'll take one of the units on the third floor rather than down here on ground level.”

“Any reason?” Tex asked him.

“What can I say? I like a nice view, and being a bit away from town center appeals to me.”

“Then you should take unit three. One and four are both taken already, and while the view from two's okay, you'll get a better looksee from three,” Tex said. “Go get your bag and I'll meet you up there. I'm just gonna send a message to the hub, marking you as here.”

“Right. Be up in just a second. C'mon boys,” Len said with a grin. “I'll walk you back to the cart.”

The four of them walked out of the unit, letting the door swing closed behind them as they headed to the cart. “You think you're Mister Cool, don't you?” Oxford said, giving a shove to the center of Len's back. “I got my fuckin' eye on you, boy.”

Len didn't flinch at the push, shrugging it off as they arrived at the cart, taking his trunk off the back of it before sighing, turning to look at Oxford. “You *trying* to get your ass whipped?”

Oxford clearly took that as provocation, adopting a fighting stance. “C'mon, pretty boy. You've got a face that looks like ain't seen a propah fight its entire life.”

Len shook his head a little, pushing his trunk over to one side. “I'm willing to let you back down with no harm no foul, Oxford,” Len told him, a resignation to his voice. The amped up muscle bound Goliath had been itching for a fight from the moment he'd woken up, and it hadn't taken much in the way of nudging to get it turned onto Len. “I'm ser—”

Mid-sentence, Len saw a cannonball of a fist chugging his way and so he simply leaned to one side, reached up, grabbed onto Oxford's wrists and instead of providing resistance, yanking him with even more force, adding to the energy already in the swing, pulling the man forward and off balance. Oxford stumbled forward, bringing his feet out to try and regain his balance before turning back to look at Len, who was still looking as casual and relaxed as he had before.

The punch hadn't worked, so Oxford decided to charge Len, both of his arms wide, deciding to use his size to make sure Len couldn't move left or right to escape the grapple. Which, of course, was why Len didn't go left or right, but instead rolled onto his back, tensing up his right hand to punch the Australian in the kidney as he sailed over Len's body resting comfortably on his back on the paved road, the giant crumpling when he landed, his arms cradling to prevent his face from hitting the

pavement too harshly.

Len flipped himself back up and onto his feet, making the movement look graceful, not even winded or bothered as he looked over to Oxford, shaking his head. "Done yet? Or do we need to keep this going a bit longer?"

Oxford growled as he stood up, his arm folded protectively over the spot where Len had just hit him. "You watch yourself," the man said. "I know where you sleep now, and you can't exactly lock your doors, can you?"

"You're right, I can't," Len said with a confident smile. "Of course, you can't exactly fly when I throw you off my third story balcony, can you?" He glanced around the area a bit. "I could probably make sure the small of your back hit that metal railing over there. Decent enough chance to break your spine, and even if it doesn't, gonna take you a hell of a lot of time to heal up to try again. And that entire time you're healing up, I can wander up to you and end your life in between heartbeats."

"Taking on an injured man?" Oxford said in anger. "Real fucking fair."

"You were one planning on coming after him in his sleep," Dicu said to him, apparently amused at how quickly Oxford was trying to play the aggrieved party.

"Shut the fuck up, Commie!" Oxford moved to hop into the front passenger's seat of the cart, the one Len had sat in on the ride over, as if that was some minor victory for him.

"Is all talk, no stick," Dicu said to Len in amusement, jerking his head to Oxford behind him, as they both laughed. "See you around."

"Maybe we can all meet up at Tex's bar tomorrow," Vigo said. "Doesn't hurt to have a few friends in a new place."

"Well, let's not go crazy throwing around words like 'friend' so quickly," Len chuckled. "But sure, I'm game for drinks tomorrow night. Take care of yourselves, fellas. And watch your backs around that guy. I'm betting he works here and isn't just a guest."

Len grabbed his trunk and yanked it towards the stairwell, walking up the stairs which were easily the most barren part of the building, each of the stairs almost too sharp at the corners, certainly far more dangerous that would be in a modern building. He made his way to the third floor and saw the hallway ran back and forth, a door on either end, and two doors offset in the middle. The door to his place, which was marked by a huge sharp metal 3 on the door from shoulder height to knee height, almost taking up most of the metal doorway. True to Tex's word, while there was a handle and a latch, there was no lock or keyhole. He opened the door and hauled his trunk inside of the apartment, finding Tex standing there over by the pipes.

"This place look good to you? Just want to be sure before I send the message to central," Tex said to him, holding the capsule in his hand, clearly having already written the note. Len almost wanted to tell the man he'd changed his mind, since he'd already done the work, but the view looking out over the city's bed of neon from his third story window was too good to pass up.

"Yeah, it'll do," Len said. "If I don't like it, I can always move after a few days. Plenty of other open places you said."

"Sure are," Tex replied, slotting the capsule into the chamber before closing the door on the pipe. A moment or so later, the capsule made a fwoomp noise as it shot down the tube and towards wherever the hell the main sorting center was. "You need to find me, I'm in one of the four units above my bar, number 2. You can also just put Tex's Bar and it'll make it to me."

"Got it," Len said to him. "I'll try not to be too much trouble, and maybe I'll be by the bar tomorrow to take a look at this place of yours."

"Oh, you'll be trouble, friend," Tex said, with a chuckle. "You're all trouble, one way or the other, in the end." He moved to the door, stopping to look back, a devilish twinkle in his eyes. "But then again, so I am. Be seeing you, friend."

And then he headed out, letting the door closed behind him, giving Len a chance to explore the space that was going to be his home, such as it was. True to Tex's word, none of the doors had locks on

them in any way. Not the front door, not the bathroom door, nothing. The unit had a small living room with a couch and two chairs, a kitchen, a small dining area including a table and four chairs, a bathroom with a very elegant if spartan glass enclosed walk-in shower including a pair of large towels, and a bedroom with a king sized bed. The bedroom also had two hampers and a note over them that read 'Laundry is picked up and dropped off the day after the weekly supply drop.' That made a certain amount of sense, that everything on the island was timed around the one singular event they could always predict.

There weren't any clothes in his unit, but he could see little tiny markers that someone had lived in here at some point, the silverware not entirely aligned perfectly, a Britta filter in the fridge that was half filled. Nothing that seemed too recent, but nothing that he would have pegged as more than a few months old. Maybe Tex really was telling the truth and people did come and go a bunch.

From the living room, he heard a thwoomp sound and he couldn't help but chuckle a little. It wasn't anything he'd expected about this island, but it certainly did have a very satisfying tone to it when a capsule arrived. He moved over to the tube marked "receiving" and opened the compartment, taking out a capsule before closing the door back up.

The capsules reminded him a bit of the old cylinders that he vaguely remembered his mom using at a bank drive through what felt like lifetimes ago, and maybe the warm sense of delight he felt was associated with that, he thought to himself as he took a moment to figure out how to open the damn thing. The address part simply read "Len," so he had to assume he was unique with that name on the island, not that that surprised him in any way.

Opening the capsule he found a single folded sheet of paper, and it was certainly seeped in perfume, because a blast of citrus and floral notes practically blasted him in a face when he opened the capsule. He unfolded the sheet of paper and saw a short note in elegant cursive handwriting.

Come join me for a drink soon as you can. Above Tex's bar. Floor 3, unit 4. Sally

Beneath her name, she'd drawn a heart. The woman was laying it on thick, but he'd expected *someone* to upon his arrival. The first assault, then. He unpacked his trunk, hanging his clothes up, most completely unfamiliar to him, but he lingered on one luau shirt in particular, a sky blue and white, patterned with orchids all over it. There was a memory associated with it, he could feel it clawing at the back of his skull, and as he held the shirt longer, it came back to him.

Scarab had just finished its first mission with its newest member, Harry, a milk run that had absolutely gone tits up within minutes of deployment, but Harry, as nervous as the rookie had been, had held together and shown that while he might *sound* like a wreck, he was still able to keep his head about him, and had been an excellent addition to Scarab.

As a thank you for being able to see the good among the slightly scrambled impression that Harry had given off, Harry had given him a shirt, this shirt, the one he now held. "Because you've always seemed too cool for school, boss," Harry had said to him in that posh English accent that he hadn't managed to shake himself of quite yet.

The memory fell apart as quickly as it had come together, but it was good to know that he still had enough core retention that he could recognize his teammates should he see them again. He took off the jumpsuit, put on a pair of khaki shorts and the shirt, just because he felt like if he kept it on, maybe it would rip more of his lost memories from the fog.

Len didn't see any reason not to go see Sally tonight, especially since she was on the way of where he'd intended to go, anyway.

The storm was certainly in full swing above them, and the rain was seeping down in strands and gushes, the heavy tree coverage above making it impossible to tell how the water might drip down, so Len did his best to sprint over to one of the carts, climbing into it. Thankfully, the charging area was covered, and the carts themselves mostly had little canopies atop of them. He unplugged the cable, hung it up on the charging station and then started to back the vehicle out. It reminded him of a golf cart, more than anything.

As he drove down the path, suddenly balls of light sprung to life around him, and he realized that the automated streetlights must have been kicking in, giving the path more illumination, something it certainly needed as the rain continued to dominate the landscape.

One thing he noticed as he approached Tex's bar was that the charging station next to the bar itself was already completely full, a number of carts having moved to line the wall next to it, and it took Len a few minutes to find a place where he could safely put his cart without blocking anyone else's path in or out, which was good, because it gave him an excuse to be around the back side of Tex's bar.

The back side of the building had a dumpster for refuse and an area for composting, so it was clear they made sure to waste as little as possible on Honeywell Island. He made a point of wandering over to the dumpster like he was going to throw away the letter Sally had sent him, but mostly that was just an excuse to look behind the left corner of the number. Either he'd find a letter or letters scrawled there, or nothing.

He'd mostly expected to see an M scratched into the metal surface, but instead he found an R, which surprised him, but at least he knew who to look for now. Next to the R, he quickly scratched a deep L, then tossed the paper from Sally into the dumpster and moved it forward again. He suspected he might have been seen in his actions, but that was okay. Some things they'd expected to get caught in, and this was one of them. It wasn't a huge amount of information anyway, and nothing that Management shouldn't already know, if they'd been paying attention.

There was a stairwell leading up along the backside of the building, with no entry points on the first or second floor, just a doorway leading into the third story, where four apartments lay. Len wondered a little bit if the benefits of being right by Tex's outweighed the downside of Tex's being just downstairs. If it was even a halfway decent bar, the noise level would certainly get out of hand every now and again, and that would make a regular sleep schedule damn near impossible. He was tempted to peek into the unit that belonged to Tex himself, but the man was certainly smart enough not to leave things out and about.

While the faux Texan had certainly done his best to paint himself as a common man of the land, Len wasn't buying into the whole act, although he felt like Tex had been too consistent in his story to actually be Management or even an Employee. He wasn't entirely in the ally column yet, but the man felt like he was likely on the side of angels.

When Len reached the door of unit four, he found himself wondering about the etiquette of a place like this, considering the doors couldn't be locked, but common courtesy still won out and he knocked on the door with two sharp raps.

"C'mon in," Sally's voice said from inside. "Of course it's open."

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him before walking into Sally's living room. The layout in this unit was mirror flipped from his own, the kitchen and dining room on the right instead of the left. Standing in the dining room, Sally had put her blonde mane up into a bun, and somewhere along the way ditched her bikini top, leaving her very generous breasts exposed to his eyes, clearly defined tanlines on her flesh revealing that she didn't usually walk around without it on, large brown areola the size of teacups with hardened dark nubs in the center.

"Thought you might be hungry, so I grabbed a couple of bowls of chicken fettuccine Alfredo from the mess hall, as well as a bottle of red wine and a bottle of vodka from Tex's," she said with a laugh. "I'll take them back tomorrow morning. He won't even notice they're missing, he's got so much booze down there. Did you poke your head in yet?"

"Not yet," Len said, shaking his head. "Looks like it's quite the happening joint."

"It's nice for folks to have someplace to gather and swap stories, not that a whole lot happens here on Honeywell," she said, setting the bowls at two place settings on the table. "You want wine, vodka or both?"

"Wine's fine," he said, moving to take a seat. "Looks like you were pretty confident I was going to show up."

“If you didn't, then I'd have been losing my touch, and we can't have that, now can we?” she giggled, pouring him a glass of wine before pouring one for herself. “So how much do you remember of before here?”

“Not much,” Len lied. “Tex said most people lose between twenty and eighty percent of their memory, so I guess I'm closer to the eighty.”

“Well, sooner or later it'll all start coming back to you, I imagine,” she said, starting to eat, clearly not standing on ceremony or saying grace. “I get little flashes of my old life here and there. I guess I was a pilot or something, not that there's anything to pilot here.”

'Yes, you were,' Len thought to himself.

“So you work with Tex at the bar?” he asked her.

“Mmm. Some of the time. I'm also one of the ranchers, tending to the chickens and pigs that we're raising. There's plenty of wildlife on the island, too, but it helps to keep some in captivity that we can always turn to for fresh meat,” she said. “They send some in dry ice sometimes, but keeping things chilled around here isn't exactly the easiest proposition. Shit, I think that's why Tex's is so popular. He's got the industrial strength ice machine, so you can always swing by for a cold drink.”

“Even in a place with no money, it's good to have a stranglehold on the market,” Len laughed.

“Well, each of our fridges has an ice maker in it, but they aren't all in the best of shape, and they can't do all that much at a time.”

“Where's all the power come from?”

“Combination of wind, water and thermal power,” Sally told him. “There are some wind turbines up on the mountain, and there are some water turbines that charge batteries off the ocean currents, but we're pretty certain there's also some sort of heat to power conversion going on in the mountain, which we think used to be a volcano. Maybe still is. Nobody's sure. As long as it works, people are incentivized not to care too much.”

The two ate dinner while very cautiously trying to ply the other for information about their backgrounds, Len giving up nothing while Sally kept trying to hint at kernels of information about herself that he knew were patently untrue.

In between bites became a game, where Sally seemed increasingly more and more direct about Len's past, making wild stabs in the dark, which Len would simply bat aside, neither confirming nor denying, something that seemed to annoy her but only made her want to press more. Being evasive came naturally to Len, and he found amusement in seeing her progressively try harder and harder to pin him down on anything.

On top of the digging, Sally also seemed to be pushing her level of flirting into overdrive, at times pressing her arms forward and together to make her massive tits swell towards his eyeline even more, as he did his best to remain calm and neutral.

As soon as they'd finished dinner, Sally came by and picked up his bowl, taking both his and hers into the kitchen, tossing them into the sink before turning on the water to let them soak for a while. Then she made her way back towards the dining area, making her way to stand behind Len, her hands rubbing over his shoulders. “C'mon, Len,” she purred. “You gotta give me *something* even if I gotta *fuck* it out of you... Not that it would be that unpleasant of a task.”

“I'm just afraid I don't have anything all that interesting to tell you, Sally,” he said, reaching behind his chair to grab hold of one of her thighs, sliding his fingertips up and down along that smooth tanned flesh. “But you can try and squeeze me for more, if you want.”

“Let's go to the bedroom, then,” she said, pulling away from him, tugging on his shirt, making him get up with her movement, as the two of them headed into the bedroom, but there wasn't even a door to close between the bedroom and the rest of the apartment. In fact, Len was noticing that there were, in fact, no internal doors anywhere in Sally's place, a marked change from his own place.

He unbuttoned his shirt on the way to the bedroom, tossing it onto a chair as she tugged down her bikini bottoms, kicking them to one side. She had a small blonde stripe of hair above her pussy, and

the tan lines on her breasts had matching patterns on her hips and ass, not completely pale but certainly much lighter than the rest of her flesh, which obviously saw more than its fair share of sunbathing. She also pulled the scrunchy from her hair, letting the bun fall into a massive cascade of lionish blond hair around her shoulders as Len stepped out of his shoes, tugging off his socks. Len reached down and unbuttoned his shorts and dropped them and his boxers, leaving him naked in the bedroom with Sally, who licked her lips, looking him over.

“Whoever the hell you are, you're a fine looking specimen, Len,” Sally told him. “And I'm certain that cock of yours has done more than its share of damage over the years.”

“I don't think I'm giving anything away by telling you it's done alright,” he said to her, watching her slowly crawl up and onto the bed, looking back over her shoulder at him. “How do you want me?”

“I want you as hard as you can fucking give me,” she said, slowly backing up until her knees were at the edge of the bed. “I want you to hammer the shit out of my pussy. I want you to slamfuck me until I can't even get up in the morning, I feel so fucking bowlegged.” She reached back and slid two fingers to spread the folds of her snatch open for him. “What the fuck are you waiting for?”

Len grinned, stepping over towards the edge of the bed, lining the head of his cock up against her cunt before both of his hands clamped down on her hips as he shoved inside of her, finding her wet and eager for him, a deep, sweltering moan burbling out of her lips, a shiver running up her back as her head dropped down, her hand clenching a fistful of the sheets in her slender fingers.

“Fuck yeah, you fucking motherfucker,” she howled. “Yes yes yes fuck yes fuck fuck I want you to fucking break me open!”

His hands on her hips set a stuttering rhythm, the draw backs a bit slow only to be interrupted by hard and crushing thrusts forward, his hips smacking into her body hard enough to make her asscheeks jiggle a bit, her large tits swaying beneath her, clapping against one another as he kept on punching his dick inside of her with corkscrew shoves.

“Pound it daddy!” she whined and whimpered. “Harder harder harder!”

She was getting quite loud and vocal, and Len almost wondered if she was trying to put on a bit of a show for anyone standing outside of the bar downstairs, seeing the window was open, knowing full well the sound of it would float down to patrons not inside of the place, even with the heavy rainfall obscuring it a bit.

“Fuck daddy! I'm gonna cum! Fuck! I'm gonna cum! Oh fuck oh fuck oh shit oh holy fuck fuck fuck I'm fucking cumming! Holy fucking shit I'm fucking cumming!” Her own fingers were rubbing down on her clit, but she was also using them to flick against his balls every so often, and when she clamped down, she squeezed *tight* on his shaft, and there was only so much he could do, so he let her body begin to milk his own orgasm out of him. He wasn't sure how long it had been since the last time he'd had an orgasm, but clearly it had been a while, because it felt like he was pouring a ridiculous amount of jism inside of her, feeling it ooze out around the edges of her twat and trickle a little onto his balls. When he pulled back, he could feel a heavy drizzle of it start to pour out from her before she slumped forward onto her belly, as he moved to lay down beside of her.

After a moment, she moved to shift until her head was resting on his arm, her tits pressed up against his chest, her arm barring across his body, preventing him from getting up. “Sorry if I made a bit of a mess. I'm guessing it's been quite a while for me, so maybe I was pretty backed up.”

She sighed, covering her eyes with the flesh of his bicep. “You're really not going to give me anything to work with, are you?”

“I'll tell you one thing, I guess,” Len said, deciding to be a little generous. “We were on different sides of the same op once. Back in Kosovo, when there were five or six sides all fighting at once, nobody really knowing who to consider an ally or an enemy. But back then you were going by Anika, and you were definitely working on behalf of the SVR. I won't tell anybody, but I can't imagine Russian spies are especially popular around here, considering how enthusiastically violent you lot were back then. Still are, I guess.”

She seemed to tense up against him, biting her bottom lip. “Tell me something, Len. Fuck. Tell me anything. You don't know what they're capable of if I come back with nothing, if I come back empty handed. I need to have gotten something out of this,” she said, a dire desperation undercutting her voice. “Anything. Even the smallest thing.”

He sighed a little bit and nodded. “Alright, one tiny bit of information, but hell, it's probably something they already know anyway. Up until 2001, I played for the Americans.”

She exhaled, a touch of relief seeming to wash across her face. “Thank you. Thank you for that. It's something. It'll be enough. It has to be enough. Anyway, you can sleep here tonight, and we can talk about it some more tomorrow.”

That wasn't going to be an option, but he didn't know it when he drifted off to sleep.

Rin

Supply drop days were always the most chaotic day of the week. Rin liked to think of them as Wednesdays, but that was just because it amused her, not because she had any real inclination that they were on actually being done on Wednesdays. It also meant that there was a chance for new arrivals in terms of people, and she smiled to herself when she saw Tex heading towards the carts, rushing out towards the boat.

It was the point where the village was the most active, with people coming from all the parts of the island to go through the weekly drop, and see what was in it. That also granted her the most freedom to move around the island without anyone noticing, since people would tend to congregate around the town center to get early picks of the new things.

Considering the supply drops were every seven days, she marked this drop as the third drop post the one she'd arrived with, which meant she'd been on Honeywell Island for about a month now. She understood why everyone wanted to rush out – they wanted to make sure they didn't miss any odd or unusual items that arrived, although most of those were in the special request crates, each item of which had a nametag attached to it. Tex's crew very much ensured that those items went to the correct people, and Rin had learned that while Tex's authority wasn't really backed by anything, it was respected by pretty much everyone. Maybe it was just because the guy was so nice.

When Tex and his team had run out, Rin used this particular moment to let herself do a thorough search of Tex's bar without anyone in it. It wasn't as though she was looking for anything to steal, but Tex had the lay of the land better than anyone else on the island, and if the man kept anything private, he would've kept it in his bar, which was only truly empty when they were running for the pickup.

The bar was decorated with all sorts of odds and ends, things that had clearly been scavenged from all sorts of parts of the island, including a couple of German war medals, some old 1960s photographs of Asian scientists of some kind and a number of cheesecake posters of both women and men plastered. The pool table saw regular use, as did the dart board, and Tex's was the only place with an actual jukebox player. Whenever people were done with records, they would take them to the archives, and Tex made a weekly trip every week, seeing what he wanted to add or remove from his previous jukebox selections.

Rin did a quick sweep of the bar, looking for any obvious hiding spots, but nothing immediately came to mind, and before she knew it, she could hear the sounds of carts returning to the area, so she decided she needed to split, ducking out the back door.

From the corner, she peeked around and smiled a little, seeing Tex with a handful of newcomers, recognizing her boss, Len, as one of them. There were plenty of holes in her memory, but there was no way she was ever going to forget how he'd pulled her ass out of the fire during that shootout in Pakistan when they'd first met. They'd been fast friends ever since, her and the rest of the members of Scarab.

Seeing Len warmed her heart, because he'd always been the one with the big plans, and it had been

his idea for them all to show up on Honeywell Island in the first place. Of course, they had been captured individually, and when she showed up to find the place behind Max's bar with no visible markings, she knew it meant she was the first to be on site. So she committed to watching, studying and learning.

She didn't want Len to spot her yet, so once Tex took the cart of new arrivals off to find places for them to live, she headed into the town square, determined to blend in, just another Guest looking through the scraps that Management had given them for the week.

Most of the things were being sorted accordingly, but there were several things just sort of tossed in for good measure, clothes of a size to fit several people, most of which Rin didn't care about, but she saw there were pairs of socks, which she grabbed, because she'd lost a few pairs since her arrival, having used them for practical applications beyond covering her feet.

After grabbing socks, she went to put in a shift over at the canteen's kitchen, cooking up some fried rice as well as whipping up some vegetable stir fry, setting them in the buffet style serve yourself containers for people to put out. A bit towards the end of the shift, she saw Sally walking in, picking up two bowlfuls of the chicken fettuccine Alfredo, heading back out and across the street to her place above Tex's bar.

Rin didn't often spend nights at Tex's, but tonight seemed like it would be a good place to hang out, maybe make contact with Len, if they could get away with it discretely. After her shift, she headed over to Tex's place, not wearing anything fancy, but as a single woman who hadn't hooked up yet with anyone for more than a night here or there, the men didn't need her to be wearing anything fancy.

"Heya Rin," Tex said to her as she headed into the bar, which was packed, at least half the island's population hanging out there tonight, although that seemed like it happened more often than not on supply days, people discussing the new stuff that had come in, as well as the new people. "Haven't seen Danil around, if that's what you're worried about. He's probably still smarting from you shooting him down a few days ago. Went pretty hard at him, didn't you?"

"He had his hand on my ass uninvited, Tex," she laughed at him. "He's *lucky* I just sprained his wrist. I probably should've broken the whole fucking arm, but I was feeling generous."

"Hey, you don't gotta tell me twice!" Tex said, holding up his hands in mock surrender, a bar rag in one of them. "I know well enough to not touch unless I'm invited. Get you a drink?"

"Just a screwdriver," she said as the man laughed.

"What are you, a 1980s sorority girl?" he asked her.

"Sure, don't you recognize me? I was the spokeswoman for Kappa Gamma Fuckoff," she smirked. She'd actually *been* in a sorority in college, but she wasn't going to give up that piece of information without someone doing some serious digging. Most of the people on Honeywell knew that she was Asian, although they didn't know which country she was from, most of them thinking she was either Chinese or Korean. In fact, she was Asian-American, having grown up in San Diego, but she spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and Japanese fluently, and it was enough to let her pass as from any one of those regions, especially since she'd spent so much time studying them.

At some point in the night, a redhead who perhaps too on the nose called herself Ginger pulled a handful of people out of the bar and into the rain, where they could all hear the sound of Sally getting well and truly fucked senseless a few floors up, something Sally had clearly *wanted* them all to hear. After Sally orgasmed loud and genuinely enough to make more than a few of the women jealous, everyone filed back into the bar to spend the rest of their evening.

Technically, there was always someone working at Tex's, so the bar was always open, but by two or three in the morning, it had died down, and Rin and Tex were the only two still hanging around, swapping tales about some of the greatest meals they'd ever had. Given enough time, the two of them always defaulted to talking about food or restaurants. The rain had finally dwindled down to a light drizzle, meaning it would be easier for her to get back to her place without getting too wet.

It became clear that Len wasn't going to be showing up tonight, so Rin decided to pack it in and

headed towards the front of the bar, stopping in the doorway, clicking her tongue with a slight shake of her head. “Well, fuck,” she said. “Hey Tex, grab the ladder and a shovel will you?”

Hanging from a lightpost out in front of the bar was Sally's lifeless nude body, a large F carved onto her collarbone. Whatever it was she was supposed to have been doing tonight, Sally clearly hadn't done it well enough.

Tex brought the ladder and the shovel to the front of the bar before he saw her body, sighing, shaking his head. “Fucking hell. I always thought she was an Employee, but I guess even they aren't immune to someone calling them out when they fuck up,” Tex said. “C'mon, let's get her down before too many people see.”

Part Two

Rin

Putting Sally in the ground was something that Rin had expected she'd be doing eventually since the day she'd gotten here. While the woman may have been an accomplished operative before arriving on Honeywell Island, there was something about this place that could rattle anybody's cage, and Sally had always seemed like she'd been under pressure.

The woman had been around a few months longer than Rin had, but she'd never seemed to find stable footing, always seeming jumpy and on edge. It had been enough that Rin had actually gone and followed Sally around a couple of times, hoping she might catch her engaged in some obvious transfer of information, but somehow she was sending her information up the ladder some way that Rin hadn't been able to spot, or just at times when Rin wasn't looking.

Tex cut Sally's lifeless body down as it slumped to the ground atop of the pool of blood and feces beneath it. There was no dignity for the dead, and the residents of Honeywell Island saw corpses too often to give them any particular respect. Rin suspected she'd been cut into while she was still alive and then strung up and hung. Nasty way to go.

They loaded the body on top of a plastic tarp on the back of one of the carts and drove towards the edge of town where a graveyard had been constructed, although rarely did people get a tombstone or grave marker. Typically they were just put into a hole in the ground and covered in dirt. No ceremony, no words to mark their passing, just the disposal of someone who used to have a name.

Tex and Rin took turns digging the grave, wanting to make it deep, but not so deep that it would take up too much of their time. The graveyard portion of the island was under enough heavy foliage that the rain mostly didn't get in, although they were still slinging as much mud as they were dirt, it felt like. But it was better than letting the body sit out until morning.

It wasn't the first grave Rin had dug on Honeywell, and she fully anticipated it wouldn't be the last. There had been talk about other ways to dispose of bodies – taking the boat out and tossing them out at sea, but that always ran the risk of the body washing up ashore again at some point, something that Tex had told her had happened once, and nobody had wanted a repeat of that. The smell of it still haunted Vin, the man who'd found it.

Once the hole was big enough, they threw Sally's body into it, and started scooping the dirt back on top, covering her up as quickly as they could. “You know her well?” Rin asked Tex. Every conversation on Honeywell Island was always a bit of a dance, two people interrogating the other at least a little bit, trying to gain a foothold of information that they hadn't had before.

“A little bit, but not all that much,” Tex sighed, starting to pat down the dirt, making sure it was packed good and solid atop the corpse. “Like I said, I always thought she was an Employee, but she never struck me as very good at getting info out of people. Too direct, too much to the point, never enough patience or subtlety.”

“Are *you* an Employee, Tex?” Rin asked genuinely. “Are you secretly *Management*? It would

explain how you got your own bar and how you seem to have your own functioning crew here, in a place where everyone is all for themselves all the time.”

“Don't I wish,” Tex laughed. “Nah, I'm just the guy who sensed an opening when he got here. Place needed a little more structure, a little more organization. And whoever it is that's *really* running things, seems they don't mind how I keep myself busy. No warnings, no threats, nobody showing up in the middle of the night to string me up or run me down. All any of us can hope for, I guess.”

“Fucking odd, not knowing who's Management, Employee or Guest here,” Rin said. “Month and change into it and I'm *still* not bloody used to it.” She liked to throw in odd slang bits from all over the world, knowing it would only add to the mystery of her backstory. The less anyone reliably knew about her, the safer her place on Honeywell Island likely was. She felt like she'd led people into thinking she was from Hong Kong for the first few weeks after her arrival before ditching most of the accent and shifting into something more eastern European. This week she'd been leaning into local London flavor, and the novelty of it was starting to wear a little thin.

“Like I told you on day one, Rin,” Tex said, smoothing the top of the grave over a bit. “Just assume everyone you meet is out to try and get something from you. Trust no one, believe nothing, and other than that, have fun. For a long time, I've suspected this is eventually going to become some spy training school or something, and that we're just the first runthroughs on breaking potential recruits, making sure those Employees among us know how to extract secrets from anyone they meet.”

“Two years is a long time to be having a 'test run' for a school, Tex.”

The two of them checked their handiwork, making sure the body was fully covered, then headed back over towards the cart, climbing into it. “There's a mistake right there,” he said, switching the cart into the on position once more.

“What's that?” she asked, as he started to bring the cart back onto the path that led to Tex's bar.

“The only reason you think I've been here two years is because I *told* you I've been here two years,” he said smugly. “I'm just as capable of lying as anyone else is. I could've gotten here literally just a few days before you did.”

“Except that you'd have to get *everyone* else's stories to line up with yours, Tex, and that's way too many false stories to keep juggling all at once,” Rin said with a certain smugness. “Beyond that, you have work logs dating back over eighteen months, so either you wasted several hours building a paper trail that I can, and have by the way, asked other people about, or you've really been here around two years time, and you're fucking with me because you think you're being clever when really, you're not, at all.”

Tex laughed slapping his knee with one hand. “Tarnation, ya done got me there, I suppose. Would've been far too much work to fake alla that, and then get everyone to memorize their bits so you could check against it. Maybe I ought to burn the old work logs.”

“If you're gonna try pulling that story on anyone else, you'd better,” she grinned. “Otherwise you're just gonna keep getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar.”

“Yeah, maybe I'll retire that one particular gag,” he said. “I know the idea of having anything down in paper runs contrary to our general line of work, but it makes it feel like at least there's *some* record of what's gone down here. Who's been here, who's died or left... a record of some kind, beyond whatever the Evil Eyes have recorded for posterity's sake.”

The endless number of hidden and concealed cameras were called 'the Evil Eyes' by many people on the island. Every so often, a newcomer would try and tamper with them or track them, and it never ended well for those people.

“For all we know,” Rin said, “this could be a test pilot for some new reality TV show, like 'Love Island' or 'The Bachelor' or some such.”

Tex brought the cart to a stop back in front of his bar, moving to plug it back in, giving the machine a chance to recharge some overnight. “I can't imagine any production company being okay with the number of bodies we've accumulated over here,” he said, as he walked back inside of the bar

with her.

“Audiences are getting pretty bloodthirsty these days,” Rin said, moving over to sit in front of the bar as Tex slipped behind it, taking over for a Latino man who called himself Carlos, but was definitely trying to hide an Argentinian accent. “And you remember that old movie, 'The Running Man'? This could be like that. There could be some audience of rich folks funding this whole thing. Maybe we've even got nicknames like Fireball and Sub-Zero!”

“Maaaybe you're letting your imagination run a little too wild,” Tex laughed, pouring her a shot of Jameson. “Here, on me, for helping me take care of the body.”

“It's *always* on you, Tex,” she chuckled. “Nobody pays for anything around here.”

“Sure, but I didn't *have* to give you the *good* stuff,” he said, grabbing a pad of paper and a pencil. It was just second nature for Rin at this point to be reading what he was writing upside down, but it was only what was expected – Sally's death notice.

If a body was found or a person had gone missing for more than, say, four or five days, a notice was filed with the central office, so that the housing could be marked as unoccupied and other people could move into the space. Also, it provided at least a little bit of closure as to when someone was gone. As far as Rin knew, nobody Tex had ever sent a death notice for had ever reappeared, but Tex himself admitted that some half of the time he filed one, the possibility was still there.

“Anybody have a list of all the names of the people on the island?” Rin asked him, as Tex folded up the paper, grabbing one of the pill containers from the rack beside the bar.

“Have I not been mentioning that lately? Sheee-it,” Tex groaned. “Yeah, you can just drop a note for central and they'll shoot you back a handful of sheets with the most recent phonebook, although it's just names and location of residence. Nothing all that juicy.” He opened the container and pushed the sheet of paper into it before closing it up once more, making his way over to the pair of pneumatic tube pipes that ran to the bar itself. Tex opened the slot, put the container into it, then closed the slot once more, and moments later the pill gave a satisfying 'fwoomp' sound as it went rushing downwards, making its way across town over to central processing. “Still, I guess if you wanted to know the name of everyone here on Honeywell, it wouldn't be a bad place to start.”

“I'll make a point to file a request for one when I get back,” Rin said. “Anyway, it's well past late. I should head home and get some sleep.”

“Less than an hour ago you were putting a fresh corpse in the ground and now you're already relaxed enough for bed?” Tex shuddered. “I'll be up at least a few more hours, trying to shake the image of poor Sally strung up like that.”

“After a while, you sort of detune from dealing with bodies, Tex, and you realize that after they're dead, there's nothing special or important about what's left behind, just a body,” she said, walking towards the door, heading out of the bar.

Lots of people on Honeywell got an early start and went to bed early, to take advantage of the daylight, but Rin had been running counter to that for the past few weeks. At night, it could be harder to see and get around, but there were less people to worry about when she was exploring the island, which was what she'd been doing for at least a dozen nights.

The island itself was large, meaning she'd been forced to do her recon a bit at a time, never venturing too far from the explored areas, although as it got closer to dawn, she would push it, simply because she could always just get to high ground and figure out where she needed to head back.

Whatever the Soviets had been doing on this island during World War II, they'd certainly been committed to it, with quite the assortment of buildings all over the place. She hadn't explored the island fully, but had so far counted over forty structures. Several residences, but also more than a couple of labs, and at least a couple of what had been weapons depots at one point. There was also what seemed like a helicopter landing spot, although it had grown over heavily, with no signs of use in years, maybe even decades.

It was the cameras that drove Rin crazy, simply because there were so many of them, and

attempting to cover or prevent them in most places would result in punishment or repercussions, although she'd covered the ones she'd found in her apartment, and those it seemed like were okay to cover, or at least weren't going to bring down any sort of judgment upon them. She was willing to put up with a lot of shit, but if she didn't have to endure people watching her while she showered, she wasn't going to.

Tonight, however, she was going to go inspect the infamous steel door everyone had talked about since she'd arrived. It was the one universal mystery that seemed to bother just about everyone when they started exploring the island, and when she arrived at it, it was relatively easy to understand why it had everyone so perplexed.

To get up to it involved a good twenty minute hike up the side of a mountain or dormant volcano, it was hard to tell the difference. The door wasn't concealed – far from it. There was a well-trod path leading up to it, nothing paved, but something that saw regular foot traffic, or at least had at one point or another.

The mountain wall had a steel frame basically built into it, and it looked almost like the stone had been melted or liquefied around the frame until there was no purchase point to try and jam a chisel or a wedge into – just the slightly recessed heavy, bulky door, with no handle or mechanism on the outside of it. Based on the shape of the door, it had to swing inwards, the hinges on the inside designed to keep the door in place when it wasn't locked, which, if people were to be believed, was never.

But Rin wasn't quite so sure.

While the door was a foot or so above the ground, there were still signs of muck and dirt around the lower part of it, but the place where the mud should've been one solid unbroken piece had a slightly visible split in it, showing that the door had been opened at some point over the last few hours even, otherwise the mud would've just been one solid piece still.

She wasn't especially surprised by that, as the camera feeds clearly had to go *somewhere* and nowhere else on the island seemed like a great place for it, unless there were subterranean bunkers or something hidden in some of the structures, something that seemed unlikely but still wasn't *so* unlikely that she felt safe in ruling them out.

The door had been weatherproofed several times, as if the last thing anyone wanted was the constant exposure to rain and wind to wear it away, and she even noticed that the area of the mountain around the door had several plants that looked younger than expected, maybe transplants or things that had been added at some point to give the metal door some base protection from the elements.

As for the steel of the door itself, it was thick, ungodly heavy, like it was almost a blast shield door, or something designed for a nuclear fallout shelter. She wished Mick was here already, because demolitions was really his specialty, but until then she tried to remember some of the lessons he had reinforced in her over the years, and the number one rule of demolitions was to look for the weakest point of whatever it was you were attempting to blow up.

She was deathly afraid that when he finally got here, Mick would tell her the weak point was the mountain itself.

Rin had used a heavy-duty flashlight to get around, and she flipped it over and tapped the base of it against the steel door, a quiet gong-like sound resonating, telling her that it was indeed a door of a thickness that could only be summarized as 'No, *YOU* Fuck Off' thickness.

She flipped the flashlight back around again, and started using the bright light to sweep around the mountain outside of the door, and a few feet above the door, there was a slight reflection for a moment, something that Rin suspected was an inset protected camera pointed straight down at the door itself, so whoever was inside could have a look at whoever was standing at the door.

Maybe nobody was watching.

Maybe somebody was.

She flipped the camera off, just in case. She had a reputation to uphold.

The trip back down the mountain was a little more challenging than the trip up, made slick by

the rain which had muddied up much of the trail, but to Rin, it actually made it safer, letting her get more purchase by sinking her feet in deeper.

When she got back toward the central city area of Honeywell, she stopped and took a moment to wash off her boots and pants, wringing the fabric out, making sure she wasn't tracking mud anywhere. Most of the people didn't seem to care one way or another, but Rin had made a point of making sure she wasn't leaving easy to follow tracks in her wake.

Despite it being only a few hours from morning and nearly no one being awake, the haunting ghostly glow of neon still kept the area mostly lit with a sort of haunting presence. When she'd first arrived, she'd expected there to be a flurry of activity at night, and while there would sometimes be a couple of people milling around, poking their head into places while the majority of the island's residents slept, it wasn't something they commonly did. It was more the sort of thing new arrivals did on their first few days on the island before coming to the common consensus that moving around during the day time was both easier and more enjoyable.

There were still a handful of stops she wanted to make before returning to her quarters and packing it in. The first was Sally's apartment, to see if whoever it was she'd been banging earlier in the night was still there. She tested her boots on the concrete first, making sure there weren't still mud flakes shaking off of them like fleas, and when she was satisfied she could traverse the stairs without leaving a trail behind her, she hiked her way up to the third floor and slowly pushed open the door of unit four with one hand while drawing her knife from its sheath, holding it blade down in her grip, in case she was expecting trouble.

What she found was even more confusing.

The lights were on, and there stood Len, pants on but no shirt, casually going through whatever Sally had left behind, not even looking over his shoulder to see her coming into the place. "Heya Rin," he said to her. "Saw you cleaning your boots by the stairs, so I'm assuming that's you, and not the goons who were here earlier."

"Weren't *you* the one who taught *me* never to assume anything?" she said, tucking her knife away once more. "Didn't you say it would get me killed?"

He turned to look over his shoulder with a sly smile, shrugging a little. "I also told you that no rule applied to *everything*, so at some point you have to learn to trust your judgment." He stopped his search and walked over to give her a hug. "How long you been here, Rummy, and how much did you retain?"

"About a month and not nearly enough," she sighed, patting him on the back before they broke the hug. "I'd say I've got maybe 50-60% of what should be there rattling around upstairs. Like I remember that when you call me Rummy, I usually call you Whiskey in return, but I can't remember where that's from."

"Our drinking habits," he said. "I think I got lucky. Feels like I've got most of it up there still, although there are big chunks missing. Call it 80%?"

"Weird question to ask, top, but you have any idea what you're missing?"

He bounced his eyebrows a moment. "It's like there are weird spots just blanked out when I try and remember things. Like I can remember my favorite color is orange, but not what my favorite food is. And what's the tactical use of taking something like that from me, right?"

"It's an inaccurate process, top," she told him. "Some people on the island claim to have almost all of it still up there, but there's also some others who are barely holding it together, considering how much they lost."

"We shouldn't stay here too long," he said. "Sally's likely to come back any minute now."

Rin frowned, looking away from him for a moment. "No, she's not, boss."

He stopped mid search, drawing in a deep breath before letting out, sounding disappointed, with himself or Sally, Rin couldn't quite be certain. "Dead, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah, someone hung her from one of the lampposts a few hours back. Carved an F into her

chest. Me and Tex buried her over in the graveyard.”

He shook his head. “I should've known when she slipped out after she thought I was asleep that it wouldn't end well. She was trying to press me for information, about myself, who I am, where I came from, and I could've, well, I guess I could've given her a little bit more than I did, but how much would she have needed to buy her way out of whatever hole she was in?”

“C'mon, Len, you know better than to go down that rabbit hole,” she told him. “People make their own decisions and walk their own paths, so don't go around bearing crosses that haven't got your name on them.”

“Who gave you such shitty advice?” he laughed darkly.

“I do believe it was you, top.”

“Then I'd better learn to keep my mouth shut more often.”

“You know you don't believe that, boss.”

“Yeah, I know I don't,” he said, grabbing his shirt to pull it on. “But maybe I should. How's your recon going?”

“How do you know I've been doing any?”

“Because it's what *I* would've done if I had gotten here first?”

“Fair,” she smiled. “Haven't seen the whole island because it's bigger than we anticipated it would be. I think they must have moles in the major satellite companies, doing everything they can to keep it off the maps, because while I've got a rough idea of where we are, it might as well be the Moon for as far off normal shipping lanes and flight paths as we are.”

“So where's it put us?”

“Best guess? If you imagine us as a third point on a triangle with Bora Bora forming one corner and Easter Island forming the second, we're somewhere deep in the South Pacific, way the fuck away from everyone and everything.”

“How big are we in comparison?”

“Maybe a third to half the size of Easter Island, so 15-30 square miles, all said and done? Probably closer to 15, but making an actual map of this place is a goddamn nightmare.”

He tilted his head. “Why's that?”

“Compasses don't work, there's loads of jungle wildlife, some of which doesn't make *any* goddamn sense...”

He raised a hand to stop her. “Okay, first, we should get out of here, but let's go through both of those points one at a time while we walk.” They both took a quick sweep of the place, being sure that nothing useful or informational was being left behind, then headed out of the apartment, moving down the stairs. “What do you mean 'compasses don't work'?”

“There's some sort of local electromagnetic field that screws up compasses, so no matter where you are on the island, a compass thinks 'north' is the mountain near the center of the island,” she said as they started walking away from the building. “Hell, it might actually *be* the center of the island, but I can't be entirely certain. Four or five people have made their own maps, and nobody's map quite lines up with anyone else's.”

“That's good information to have, though,” he said. “Weird magnetic center for the island. Now, tell me about the wildlife.”

“So there's the kinds of things you would expect – wild boars, monkeys, birds, all that sort of thing, although there's also some stuff that doesn't make any sense at all. We've seen a Bengal tiger at least a couple of times, and if stories are to be believed, there's a hippopotamus that lives in the raised mini lake along the far side of the mountain.”

“A hippo?” Len said, stopping in his walk. “Sounds like a ghost story to me.”

“I've been by the lake, and while I didn't see anything, I also didn't want to stick around too long, because I saw the tiger drinking on the other side of the lake when I was there,” she said. “And with no guns, hunting a tiger isn't exactly an easy task. A couple of people have been trying to make

bows and arrows to hunt it down, but that's gone about as well as expected.”

“Any luck finding weapons left behind?”

“If there were any, I'm certain they've been picked clean and either used or disposed of,” she told him as they started to walk again. “Tex's story mostly holds, and despite how he sort of organizes a lot of the daily chores around here, I'm mostly certain he's not Management or an Employee, but an actual Guest just trying to make the most of his situation.”

“You recognize any of our fellow inhabitants? More importantly, anyone recognize you?”

Rin shook her head. “Nobody's recognized me, although there's certainly someone who *should* that *isn't*. Caulfield's here.”

That made Len stop walking again. “How certain are you that he doesn't recognize you?”

“He *hit* on me.”

He continued walking. “Yeah, I'd say *that's* a pretty good sign that he doesn't know who you are. And you've had a whole month here with him and haven't done anything? I can't tell if I'm impressed by your restraint or disappointed in your lack of initiative.”

“I didn't want to go around dropping bodies left and right until more of us were here,” she sighed. “And I *really* didn't want to be the first one here.”

“Well, you were, so there's no point in dwelling on what you wanted,” he said as they reached his building. “You've got a month's worth of information I'm going to need to glean from you as quickly as I can, so maybe we'll need to keep meeting up nights for a bit.”

“We could try and play the couple card,” she said to him. “If I was in your bed, I could brief you all night long.” She'd never had any interest in Len beyond professional, and Len had made it abundantly clear that none of the team should shit where they eat, so Rin had kept her gaze off both Mick and Harry, not that either of them had shown much interest in her either.

“And then neither of us is out gathering data, and using our best assets.”

“You almost sound like you're whoring me out,” she laughed.

“*Us*,” he corrected. “I sound like I'm whoring *us* out. Because I am. You know as well as I do that we use our sexuality like any other weapon.”

“Hopefully I don't turn out to be the black widow that you are,” she teased. “First person you fuck on the island ends up dead a few hours later. Maybe that's the reason you don't want me in your bed. Worried I'll end up like Sally.”

“Sally seemed desperate, Rin,” he told her. “You don't seem that way to me.”

“I'm not, sir,” she said, coming to a stop in front of one of the residence buildings. “Just not thrilled at how hard it is to tell the friendlies from the enemies around here.”

“Around here? That's always been our line of work, Rin. We never know who's with us or against us up until we have to put a bullet in their skull.”

“No guns here, boss,” she grumbled. “And you have no idea how much I want one. Anyway, this is me. Second story, unit 2. Meet up again tomorrow around the time Tex's closes?”

“Sounds good,” he said, offering her a hand, which she shook. “It's good to know you're okay, Rin. And I'm glad to have you here.”

“Glad to have you here as well, sir,” she told him as she released the hand.

Len

He felt a little bit better knowing that he had someone else from Scarab on the island already, although the vague aura of hauntedness around Rin had counteracted most of that ease he'd gained. In the month she'd been on the island, she'd obviously seen more than her fair share of unusual things, and the fact that she was putting a body in the ground came far easier to her than it had used to.

While he didn't remember everything about his and Rin's past, most of the key details were in there, and he remembered that Rin had been the third member of his four-person team, having added her after Mick but before Harry. He'd recruited her in Lebanon, over a wonderful order of migas. She'd

been bitter with her previous employer and the idea of carving out on her own appealed to her a great deal. Their paths had crossed a couple of times before, but he made sure she had all the facts before she agreed to essentially go rogue. That had been six years ago, give or take.

It was nearly dawn, and he felt like he needed to get back to sleep. He'd gotten an hour or two after Sally had slipped out of bed to go meet her handlers before the goons had come up to try and quietly search the apartment while they assumed he was sleeping. It had been tempting to engage them in combat, subdue them and see who they were, but he felt like he'd gained a handful of details about them that would let him identify them later, should he see them again.

He was certain that he would.

When he headed back into his apartment, he gave it another cursory sweep, mostly just checking for intruders because with unlocked doors, anything that was valuable had better be on his personage at all times. Not that he had anything of value on him.

Len moved over to the balcony, looking out as he could see that sky was shifting slowly from black towards blue, dawn probably only an hour or so away, which meant he needed to get his rest. He stripped off his clothes, tossing them into the hamper then he crawled into bed, and drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke several hours later, nearly midday or so, he wasn't alone in his bed.

Part Three

Len

Waking up with a surprise guest wasn't something he'd ever really get used to, although he supposed in this particular case, there was more than ample reason why she'd been able to sneak past his usual self-defense techniques while he was sleeping. She'd had a decent amount of practice at it. Hell, he'd sort of taught her how to do it.

He hadn't even opened his eyes yet, but he recognized that gentle touch along his belly, fingers grazing before slowly curling around the length of his cock, starting to stroke it tenderly, a soft giggle rippling through the air right alongside his ear.

"No matter how much you study sounds of yourself sleeping in an attempt to mimic it, John, I'm always going to be able to tell the difference," that familiar voice said to him, even going so far as to call him by his real first name, although she still didn't know his surname. (Which, to be fair, basically no one did. A secret that multiple knew wasn't really a secret.) And he knew her real first name as well. Hell, she was part of the reason he'd even decided to do this madcap adventure, as he suspected she might have been on the island after she'd gone missing.

"I didn't know you were *you* for sure until I heard your voice," Len said with a sly smile. "But I'm very glad you're you, Mira." He opened his eyes and saw her face off to the side of him, her naked body curled up against his, a little bit older, certainly, no worse for the wear.

"No 'how you've been, Mira?' or 'what happened to you, Mira?' or 'why the fuck did you up and disappear on me without any warning, Mira?' None of that?"

Len grinned, rolling his eyes. "I'm guessing you got taken, much like I did, and brought here. In fact, I'm willing to bet that you were taken when you ran out to get coffee that last morning we were together. Because I know that you were. I saw it on cameras, but too late to be able to do anything about it. That's how I knew you were abducted."

She nodded. "I was. I can remember that much, even if a lot of the memories are sort of jumbled together. How long ago was that?"

"Well, I don't know for certain how long it was between my abduction and my arrival here, but best guess? About six months or so."

"Yeah, that tracks with about how long I've been here, give or take a week or two," she sighed, not lifting her hand off his cock, still leisurely stroking it. "I'm sorry I left you that morning, but you

know me and my need for caffeine in the morning.”

It was good to see her again. While he didn't know her real last name, he knew her real first name – Mira – and that was enough for two spies to forge a relationship of sorts. Mira was either working for, or had worked for, the Mossad, the Israeli Special Forces and Intelligence Agency, although her loyalty to her country hadn't always been reliable. She'd told him that she was loyal to a nation, not to a government, because governments habitually let people down when they need them the most, and nations made a point never to promise anyone anything.

From the moment they'd first met, he'd had to work hard to keep his emotions in check. They'd both been in the middle of a firefight in Iran, allies by opportunity and necessity but not planning, each of them trying to get out of the same building with entirely different (but not conflicting) objectives. Still, they'd recognized each other as a friendly, and instead of shooting each other, they'd teamed up to get not only out of the building, but out of the block and out of the city, the adrenaline rushing the entire time. It was a meet-cute unlike any other.

Mira was in her mid thirties, with skin a light shade of olive tan, her brown hair having blistered into blonde from overexposure to the sun. She was a tiny slip of a woman, barely an inch over five foot, slender with small breasts and a pert ass, never as curvy as she would've liked to be, but she also just couldn't bring herself to eat more than her fair share. She'd bitched at Len about how small her tits were a number of times and he'd just done his best to constantly reassure her that she was attractive to him, and that she just needed to be satisfied with who she was. She was from Jerusalem, or at least she'd told him that she was, if that was to be believed. But she was definitely Israeli, and worked for the Mossad, although over the time of their relationship, she'd been considering breaking away and being independent, like she thought Len was. He'd actually been considering bringing her to meet the team on the morning she'd up and disappeared.

They'd been what could only be described as 'dating' for about five months when she'd simply vanished one morning. Len, as paranoid as he was, had immediately considered the option that he'd been played, that Mira had been a honey trap to lure him in and get him to betray the confidence of his friends. But he was *him* and caution wasn't just a watchword, it was a way of life. The more he reviewed all their exchanges in his head, however, the less and less likely that she'd been playing him had seemed. While she'd been interested in him, she'd also been steeped in tradecraft as much as he had, and so they'd both known better than to ask personal or intimate questions, or about jobs that either of them had been involved in. He'd definitely been on high guard the first time they'd hooked up, but as the months had passed, it had been nice to be able to talk to someone about the challenges of their particular line of work without getting into the specifics. She was the same way, treating him with a sort of open candor that had surprised him, but also impressed him with how good she was at obfuscating details, making sure he wouldn't know any operational details about anything she was talking about. They could relate in the generals without compromising anything for specifics.

They had shared a wonderful date night – a late dinner in Rome before walking the streets until the moon was high in the sky, then some of the most intense sex he'd ever had. He'd even fallen asleep without much effort, and then in the morning, she'd just been gone. He'd suspected she'd headed off for a cup of cappuccino, one of her usual vices, and he wondered initially if she'd just gotten distracted. It wasn't typical of her, but for a spy, Mira could sometimes be drawn in by a particularly shiny object or a ridiculously cute pair of shoes. It was so wonderfully *normal* of her that he couldn't fault her for it.

But the afternoon came and went and she had not returned. And, more importantly, she had left several of her things behind, things she would not have left if she'd intended to be gone for long. And when night fell again, *then* he'd started to get worried.

It had taken him canvassing much of the next day, but eventually he found security camera footage of Mira having a bag thrown over her head and a tazer jammed into her ribs, before her unconscious body was loaded into the side of a van, which drove off into the streets of Rome. It all happened within a matter of seconds, so fast that none of the people on the streets even took notice of

it, as the van was driving off before it registered in their brains that something odd might have just transpired. Shock and awe, baby; shock and awe. Whoever the abduction team was, they were *good*.

And, of course, Len suspected that the Mossad's first thought would be that he was responsible for her disappearance, so he'd forwarded the footage on to a contact he still had there, informing them that she had been taken but he didn't know by who. He'd also gathered up all the things she'd left in their hotel room – things he knew were important and things he knew weren't and some things that he thought could go either way – and then had them sent to the Israeli embassy.

He knew they'd have a lot of questions he couldn't answer, so he'd made sure to disappear as quickly as he could. His friend in the Mossad had understood, and had thanked him for returning all of her working gear along with the video of her abduction. The return of her things – which he was certain also included some operational information concealed and encrypted somewhere – seemed to buy him a little bit of goodwill. It *sounded* like they didn't hold him accountable, but if they had, they wouldn't have wanted him to know that, and they would've sounded like they believed him anyway. They were going to look into it, they assured him, not that *he* fully believed *them*. That was par for the course, though.

No spy truly completely bought into anything another spy ever told them.

The trail on where she'd been taken had gone cold almost immediately, but as he started to investigate, he'd discovered that her abduction hadn't been an isolated incident. In fact, someone was starting to abduct the world's espionage agents, and without respect for country or cause. There were agents strangely missing from all of the world's major spy agencies, usually kidnapped in public and then made to disappear, and that was the element that confused everyone the most.

At first, the thought was that they were being killed and the bodies were being disposed of somewhere nobody could find them, Al Capone style. But somebody had caught footage of one of the missing spies – a Soviet FSB agent named Gosha – being loaded onto a plane and flown out of Turkey for destinations unknown, and while he was drugged and unconscious, he was very much alive. The footage had shown him hooked up to a couple of IVs, one in each arm, with a gag in his mouth and a blindfold over his eyes. But Gosha had a very distinct tattoo done in an H.R. Geiger style on his shoulder that was visible in the footage, and there was no mistaking that it was him. It had been picked up in the background of some news footage being shot for completely unrelated reasons at the airport in Turkey, and some brand new analysis software had flagged it before any human eyes had even noticed it.

With the discovery of Gosha's abduction, suddenly everyone was taking The Great Spynapping much more seriously because now they knew for a fact it wasn't just spies killing spies and business as usual across the industry.

It had become the great riddle of the spy agencies over the last year, although there were indications that it had been going on far longer than that, and simply nobody had considered them as 'missing' and instead written them off as 'killed in action.'

So Len and the rest of Scarab had made the decision that they would get abducted and they would figure out what the hell was going on, even before someone had contracted them to locate one of the missing spies specifically. It hadn't been a great plan. Hell, it hadn't even been *much* of a plan, but they'd done some initial prepwork and thought some things out. He'd even leveled with the team about Mira, his feelings for her and her abduction. That had been met with, understandably, a certain level of distrust and suspicion, but the team was nothing if not thorough, and they'd done as much of their homework as they could beforehand, not just about Mira, but about all the various spies that had been reported missing or killed for the last few years, a tricky task for intel gathering in the best of circumstances, something they certainly were not in now, what with Putin threatening to go rampaging all over Eastern Europe, 'reclaiming' lost Russian lands that had never really belonged to them in the first place.

All of it had finally come to a head when Len himself had been abducted, although he'd been

the second member of the team to do so, with Rin having been taken slightly before he was. They'd happened so quickly after one another that they'd only just realized Rin had been taken a day or so before they got Len himself. It had led him, them, all to here.

Now, with Mira in bed next to him, he hoped he could finally start to get some answers. He hoped she would remember more about the abduction than he did, because for him, that entire area was complete and total blank. "What the hell happened, Mira?"

She frowned a little bit. "I wish I could tell you. You know everybody on the island has got some screwy wiring, so I can't even tell you how much I've got floating around in my head that's right, or things that have been put in there. There's giant gaps, holes big enough to fly a 747 through. I remember you, I remember us, I remember thinking about leaving the Mossad, but I can't remember where I grew up. I can't remember what my parents look like. I can't remember who I lost my virginity to, or where I went to school, or even if I have brothers or sisters." She drew in a sharp breath, steeling herself up a bit. "It's like an entire part of me has been taken away from me, and put behind some kind of wall. And there are some things rolling around in there that feel like they happened to someone else, not to me. I know it doesn't make but that's how it feels, like it's not my memory and that I'm seeing something that happened to someone else somewhere else. Memories where people are speaking Russian, French, Spanish... memories where I'm a man. They're only stray fragments, but it hurts to try and think about them for too long. It's like trying to catch a soap bubble – if I get too close, it'll pop and I'll have lost it."

He let out a soft breath. "Do you remember what we were talking about the night before you disappeared?"

"How I was thinking about joining up with whatever madness you were involved in?" she said with a kind glance. "That what you and I share was more important than any country to me, and that I was willing to go rogue with you? Of course I still remember that. We spent hours going around and around about whether or not we'd ever be able to trust each other, and what it would take for us to get over the spy life and just be... ourselves. But I remember you starting to come around to the idea of me joining your little merry band of rebels after I pointed out that if you could leave *your* country's employ, why couldn't I leave mine as well? What's strange is that I can't remember *where* we were when we were having that conversation."

"Rome," he told her, and she suddenly winced, as if a spike of migraine headache had flashed across her frontal lobe, her hands clutched to her temples in sharp agony, although it seemed like the moment passed as quickly as it had arrived, a sudden bolt of anguish before retreating back into the darkness of her mind. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she wheezed, obviously not but trying to convince herself that she was. "It's... it's just like that was a piece of information I didn't have, and shoving it back into my brain was like screwing a lightbulb into a turned on socket. Smarted a bit, but the pain's fading now. I can remember a bit more about that day – where we were, the hotel we stayed at, the way the bellhop kept checking out my ass in that cute little skirt I had on..."

"Mira, focus. You know anything about the people who took us? Who they work for? What side they're on?"

"Jesus, John, I barely got a look at any of them," she said, shaking her head. "I've spent most of my adult life checking for blindspots and they hit me from one I never saw coming. We should be less concerned with them and more concerned with surviving *this* place, because it's fucking insane." She was slowly rubbing one of her thighs along his, threatening to slip up atop him at any moment. "I do feel a lot better knowing you're here."

"What's so insane about this place?" Len asked. "Sure it's a little odd with everyone just volunteering to do work, but to me it feels like a sort of logical extension of a bunch of people doing what they need to to survive."

"Survive," she said. "Yes, that's my point, John. Why do they give a shit about any of us

surviving, when we're clearly prisoners? Why not just kill us? Are they trying to learn something from us, and if so, why fuck with our memories? They may well have deleted from our skulls the very thing they wanted to get out of us!"

"I don't think they *know* what they've taken out of us and what they haven't, Mira, so they're still trying to figure out how this process of theirs works and what it is and isn't capable of," he told her. "But I know that at least some of the people responsible for our abductions are here on the island. They dispatched someone last night to try and glean any information she could from me, and when she failed to get as much as they wanted, they had her killed."

"What was her name?"

"She said her name was Sally."

Mira drew in a sharp breath, then nodded. "I guess that makes sense. Sally's always been extremely eager to please, to ingratiate herself into any group of people, and because she was always so forward about trying to get into the cliques, nobody trusted her, and she really couldn't learn anything. Maybe you batch of newcomers yesterday were her last chance. I probably should've been paying more attention to her – where she went, who she talked to, that sort of thing – but I've been trying to keep a low profile and just not get noticed anywhere I went for fear of being recognized." She laughed, a bitter and angry note that Len had heard before, but only when she was truly frustrated to the point of being unable to hide it. "You have no idea how much the idea of no locks on any doors will weigh on you until you've spent a few months dealing with it, knowing there really isn't any place that's completely safe. Besides, there's something fundamentally *wrong* about this place."

Len paused and looked at her odd for a moment. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You haven't noticed it yet, but the layout... it *moves* from time to time..." It didn't sound like Mira for a moment, the fear and uncertainty, as if she wasn't comfortable bringing it up with him, but that she had to tell someone, and if not him, then who?

"You must just be forgetting things."

"I'm *not* forgetting things, John," she said to him, her hand clinging to his shoulder, looking deep into his eyes. "I've gotten up some mornings and the building I was in was in a different part of the *island*. The place I was staying in had *moved*, okay? I know it sounds fucking mental, but I'm *telling* you that the room I was in had been on the edge of the village when I went to bed and I woke up it was practically next to the fucking *bar*. All my clothes, everything was exactly where I'd left it when I went to bed except for the actual fucking *room* we were in. I know how it sounds, but you need to believe me when I tell you this – the place is definitely off."

"Okay, Mira, okay... I believe you, alright?" he said, because the haunted look in her eyes convinced him that whatever had actually happened to her, she believed that the room she'd been in had truly moved, and she was one of the smartest people he'd ever met, so as unlikely as he found the idea of teleporting rooms and relocating sections, he had to give it genuine consideration. "Do you know how?"

"No, I don't fucking know *how*, John," she said, letting out a slow breath. "Don't you think I've been looking into it? It doesn't make any goddamn sense, it doesn't happen with any sense or reason, but it *does* happen, and a few other people here on the island have seen it too."

"I'll keep an eye out for it Mira, but there's a lot to keep track of here on the island."

"You don't know the half of it," she grumbled. "But you will. Sooner or later, you will."

After that, they had a proper reunion. She climbed atop of him and pushed him deep into the bed as she shoved her cunt down onto his cock slowly and methodically, reveling in the feeling of their bodies pressed up against one another again for the first time in a long time. They fell together like familiar halves of the same whole, his shaft fitting perfectly into her slot, like they were made for one another. In sharp contrast to how his time with Sally had been, Mira paid close attention to his breathing, measuring it with her lips ever so slightly in between kisses, setting a tempo that was like a dance, ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, rushing then relaxing, each motion completely

unrehearsed and yet totally natural and authentic.

They even came together.

Together, they weren't spies – just a couple of old lovers reunited after a long absence.

It had been just like the first time.

While he felt confident she was who she said she was, and that she had gotten there how she'd said she'd gotten there, that little voice in the back of his mind reminded him once more that there were only two people he could trust with complete certainty in this world. The first was himself; the second wasn't her.

A few hours later, they'd gotten up and taken a shower together, only to have another go at each other beneath the falling water. Making up for lost time.

Somewhere along the way, Len decided he was going to have to start compartmentalizing people on the island. Rin and the rest of the Scarab would be the people he would trust with his life. He wouldn't quite be ready to put Mira in that category yet, but she was close. She would be in the category of 'very strong allies' he felt he could count on. Then there were the neutrals, people like Tex, who seemed like they weren't likely be part of Management or even Staff. Then there would be people who might be Staff or Management. There'd been a couple of those on the plane with him on the way in. Then there were the wildcards, and fuck all if it didn't seem like there were a shitload of those he'd have to contend with.

This had been the central problem they'd spent the most time preparing for, and even after a month or so of planning, they'd still be lacking for any good ideas, although they did have a shitload of bad ones, and Len supposed that was better than nothing.

He suspected that the rest of the team still wasn't happy about it, but figured they would sort things out as best as they could until either they found the island or the island found them.

For now, he needed to start exploring, and now he at least had someone with a bit of time spent with boots on the ground, so he and Mira headed out, with Len ready for just about anything.

Harry

If there was one element of Len's plan that Harry especially hated, it was *all of it*.

Three months ago when they'd taken the contract to find and understand where all these missing spies were going, all of their research had hit nothing but dead ends, and in a particularly frightening way. The foursome that made up Scarab liked to think of themselves as incredibly good at their job, and their inability to turn up almost any leads had all of them a little bit put off. The abduction of Gosha had been the biggest break they'd had since they'd started, and it turned into dead ends much faster than anyone had expected.

The plane Gosha had been taken on had been shot down over the ocean, and the only other person who'd been visible in the footage captured accidentally – a former member of the Mexican High Command GAFE named Nieto – had turned up dead the day after the footage had hit the intelligence community.

No paper trail, nobody who could describe anybody, nothing caught on any cameras. Everything felt like it was done through cutouts, and the moment they thought they had a description of someone who might have had something to do with one of the abductions, that person would be a dead body before anyone could find them.

Harry was the most recent addition to Scarab, having only been with the team for a couple of years, unlike Mick, who'd been with Len since the unit was founded several years ago. As such, he still felt like there was a bit of hazing going on now and again. They'd liked to play practical jokes on him every now and then. But even with all of that, he still felt like very much a part of a family, even if he was habitually the 'f'ing new guy.'

With Rin and Len both having been abducted, it meant either he or Mick were next, and so the two of them had banded together, making it look as much as they could that they didn't want to get

taken, and that they were hot on the trail of whoever had taken them.

That meant one of them stayed awake while the other one was sleeping, and that they were always looking out for each other. It meant being on guard at all times, ever alert, never once wavering in the high alert sort of—

—OW.—

Harry reached up to try and pull the dart from his neck, but he was unconscious before his fingers even touched the feathers of it.

Right before he blacked out, he decided that he wasn't going to let Mick give him any shit over this when he saw him next.

If he saw him next.

Part Four

Harry

When he opened his eyes, he was in what could only be described as a 'clean room,' as the overriding theme of the entire place was white. White walls, white benches (including one that he was strapped to), white doors and an abundance of white lights all around the room to infect his view with diffused light, as if everything was seeped in a heavy white glow.

He wasn't the only one in the room, however, as he noticed two other people strapped to benches. All three of them were dressed in white hospital gowns, hanging down to the knees. They were all shackled at the wrists and ankles, as well as straps around their waists, shoulders, knees and necks, making sure they had near no mobility, although they could turn their heads. Each of them was gagged, though, so none of them could talk to one another. They were on tilted slabs, mostly elevated, with their feet resting against a metal slat across the bottom, the two women at 45 degree angles off each side.

The woman to the left of him looked like she was either Latina or Mediterranean, with coal black hair down to her shoulders and well-tanned skin, her light green eyes whipping around the room, trying to take in her surroundings. She looked incredibly familiar to Harry, but where he felt like the look of her should connect to a memory, his brain kept returning back 'File Not Found,' something that made his head ache just a little bit, the absence of memory made that much more conspicuous by knowing something *should* be there. She was certainly attractive enough that she would've made an impression, short and slender, but still more than a little busty, as he could tell from how the gown clung more tightly around the chest area.

The woman to the right of him also seemed frustratingly familiar, although again he could not connect the person he saw before him with a memory rattling around inside of his brain, another 404 error being kicked back when he tried to follow the image to something more substantial in his mental library. She was Asian, about the same height as the woman to his left, so several inches shorter than him, as Harry was a decently tall guy, a little bit over 6' tall. Her facial features looked as though they leaned towards Thai or Korean, but he was mostly just taking guesses there, as he couldn't find any real details inside of his mind to connect to the woman's look other than, well, 'lush.' Both of them were more than a bit fit, and that felt important, but he had nothing to connect it to. Her black hair was kept long, swept back behind her ears, hanging down her back some length he couldn't tell based on the positions of her body in relation to his.

There was no one else in the room with them, but they were all sort of vaguely facing the same direction, the one part of the room that wasn't white, instead a matte black, a giant LCD television screen that was currently off. After a few minutes, once all three of them were clearly awake, the screen flickered to life.

Whatever camera they were using to shoot the image, it was clearly being put through a number

of filters, or maybe shot through gauze, or maybe even both, as the whole image itself was slightly fuzzy and distorted, not that Harry imagined it would make much of a difference, as what he was looking at only made him even more confused.

The image was that of a single figure situated behind a wooden desk, something old and antique, but also rather sturdy looking, like it had seen a few hundred years without blinking. The figure was wearing a red and black yoroi, or samurai armor, which concealed any real details about the person underneath it in terms of physicality or gender. The face was wearing a big rubbery Richard Nixon mask, the kind with the overly large nose sticking out. Instead of eyes, however, there were bright red LED lights shining around the eyeholes, obscuring any level of detail there. On top of the head was a giant, wide brimmed black fedora that extended out almost to the edge of the shoulderpads of the yoroi, with a single brown band around the base of it.

Behind the figure was what looked like an endless number of green vines covered in thorns woven together as some sort of backdrop, sprouts with leaves jutting off from some of them, each of them trembling a little bit, as if a strong wind was being blown across the set. It also almost looked like the vines themselves were shifting up and down a bit, although Harry wondered if that was just his eyes playing tricks on him.

On top of the desk in front of the figure was an old golden set of scales, the kind he'd only ever really seen in statues of Justice, although the scales themselves seemed balanced, with nothing on either of them. To the left of the scales was a ball composed of what looked like clockwork or some other sort of gear based machinery. To the right of them was a cage with a large rodent-like creature, although it was hard to see, as much of the cage was hooded. Maybe it was a wolverine or a mongoose. Harry didn't know, and frankly, didn't know if it mattered.

The whole image was so utterly baffling that he wasn't sure what details, if any, were even relevant for him to try and commit to memory, so he was doing what he could to keep it all impressed in his brain, as a voice on the other end began to speak, the sound of the voice heavily distorted and garbled through what had to be a number of vocal filters, changing the sound of it to something inhuman and alien.

"Good morning, captives," the voice said to them. "We are certain you are wondering where all of your memories have gone. You do not have need of them at this time, and should they become of actual importance, you may find them returning to you naturally. Until then, you should consider them to be unimportant and give them no further attention."

Harry wanted to argue, but knew struggling against the gag would serve no real purpose, and instead chose to keep quiet.

"Very soon, you are being sent to The Retreat, where you will spend an indeterminate amount of time. In some ways, the amount of time you spend there will be up to you, male figure. We have decided upon an experiment with the three of you and your introduction to The Retreat."

As much as Harry was listening to the voice, he was also trying to focus on the image, hoping to see whether or not the figure was making any movements at all, but the constant sway and slithering of the vines in the background, as well as the poor level of video quality, made it very difficult to tell.

"From your arrival, you will have one week to make a decision. At the end of the week, one of these two women will be killed, and you will decide which one. If you do not survive the week, *both* of these women shall die, so it is in their interests not to let you be harmed, and, in fact, to find a way to co-exist with you comfortably, as whichever of the two women survives will be linked to you for the entirety of your time on the island, her health linked to yours, and vice versa. If either of the two women die before the week has elapsed, all three of you shall die, so do not consider that a loophole, ladies, that you can exploit."

Harry was already starting to do calculations in his head, considering what he knew about each of them, and what was the best possible way to make a cold and level-headed assessment but he just knew things were going to get a lot more complicated once they were on the island. He glanced

between the two women expecting to see panic and/or desperation in their eyes, but instead he saw only solid resolve.

“We've also got some modifications made to you three, but you'll see those in time, we are certain. Now it is time for you all to sleep, but when you awaken, remember this – you are being watched, and you are being judged.” A heavy white fog started to fall into the room, a knockout gas, Harry was certain, and while he could've held his breath, he knew they would wait until enough time had passed that they were all unconscious before entering the room. The last thing he heard before he passed out was the voice saying, loud and booming, “No one escapes Oversight.”

When he awoke next, his ears were popping and the sky was falling all around him, except sort of in reverse. Within a few seconds, he realized he was strapped in to a large inflatable raft that was parachuting towards the ocean, along with the two women he'd seen in the room earlier. Time had clearly passed, although he had no idea how much. His internal clock was generally pretty good, and he felt like he'd been out somewhere between twelve and sixteen hours, at least some of that which must have been spent in an airplane, probably that giant fucker he could see zipping away off in one direction, which looked like it had also thrown a handful of crates out after them, all of which were also parachuting down towards the ocean below.

There was an island of what looked like a decent size off to one side of them, and other than that, it was just blue seas as far as the eye could see in any direction, even from their decent height. Based on the temperature, he was guessing they were somewhere in the Pacific and in the southern hemisphere, but that was a giant amount of blue space they could be anywhere within, the sun almost ready to set on the horizon.

Both of the women had woken up and were taking in their surroundings, but really there wasn't much to do until a minute or two passed and the craft landed on the water. “So who're you then?” the Asian woman asked him. Her voice sounded like it might have been from Hong Kong, which would have put her with the Ministry of State Security, although it was still possible she could have been with the National Intelligence Agency (Thailand) or the National Intelligence Service (South Korea). Harry didn't have anywhere near enough experience in the Southeast Asian Theatre to be able to spot that right away. “Why're you so important?”

“I'm not,” Harry shot back. “I'm just a cut-out, a go-between for two different groups with real power, so I know bugger all about what game they're playing.”

“Bullshit,” the Latina said, and he could tell that her accent was actually Portuguese, which meant she was likely from the Defense and Strategic Informations Service (SIED), which was like Portugal's MI-6. As former MI-6, he'd had a couple of encounters with SIED during his time in the service, and found them to be generally capable and reliably dangerous. But whether or not that included any time with this particular woman, he just didn't know. Once again with that empty space, and no frame of reference as to how big that particular chunk of empty space was. “You gotta know something, limey.”

“Anything I think I might've known got burned out by whatever they put us through, ladies, so your guess is literally better than my own might be,” Harry shot back, just before the life raft hit the water.

There was a zippy little speedboat that came out to gather up the packages and the life raft Harry and the two women were in, hauling them back towards an island that Harry had been dreading arriving at ever since they'd begun discussing the plan.

The women were busy focusing their attention on him as the speedboat pulled them towards the island, but Harry was doing everything he could to study the island itself. He'd always had a good grasp of spatial location, so he was trying to build a overall structure of the island that he could use to fill in later, but as the speedboat was dragging them towards the island, Harry felt like any time he focused on any single portion of the island for too long, his vision started to blur a little and his head started to hurt, so he decided not to spend too long staring at any one thing, trying to build a general picture of

the size and shape of it.

Once they got to the island itself, a swarm of people immediately began transferring all the crates from the water to a series of golf cart like trucks. Harry found the whole story their host, a genial enough fellow named 'Tex,' to be plausible enough, but resolved to take a longer look at it sooner rather than later.

Things got weird fast, though, when Harry decided to ask Tex about Oversight, just after Tex had finished explaining about housing and accommodations to them. "So tell me what you know about Oversight, Tex," Harry said to him, as Tex was driving them over towards one of the blocks of apartments.

"Who's Oversight?" Tex said, and for the life of him, Harry was pretty sure he was being genuine.

"That's what the people who sent us all here called themselves in a message they sent me before they dropped us out of an airplane," Harry said as Tex slowly brought the golf cart around the corner and then moved to put it in a parking space.

Tex nodded, scratching his chin. "That's the first time we've heard them refer to themselves as *anything* so I guess it's as good a name as any. We were just callin'em Management. What was the message they gave you?"

"Some bullshit about having to decide which of these two women lives and dies," Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"Who the fuck are *you* to decide?" the Latina said to him from the back seat.

"That's just it, ladies. I keep telling you, I'm nobody."

"Nobody here's nobody," Tex said with a smirk. "But if you don't remember who you are, there's no shame in that. Lots of us here don't remember who we are or even which teams we used to play for. I'm dang certain that Tex ain't my real name, but when I woke up, I was talking with a drawl, and so everyone kept calling me Tex, and it stuck, 'cause any time anybody asked me my name before that, I had fuck all to tell them."

"Hell of a problem to have."

"Didn't catch any of your names," Tex said. "So I better ask."

"Harry."

"Stella," the Asian woman said, offering no information past that.

"Calisto," the Latina woman said.

"Well, normally I'd offer you a tour of the units, tell you about all of the features available, including our nifty pneumatic tubes system, but to be honest, you folks showed up far later than our arrivals normally do, and I'm just too damn tired to want to get into it tonight, so you can swing by my bar with any questions, or just ask your neighbors anything you need to know. The only thing I'm going to tell you now so it's not a shock is that there aren't any locks on any doors here on the island, so consider everything that isn't on your personage as 'borrowable,'" he said with a dry chuckle. "Despite the fact that you've probably been sleeping for ten to twelve hours, you're also probably tired as fuck, so go claim a room and we'll see you folks around tomorrow." Tex gestured with a wave of his hand before suddenly raising a fingertip. "How long did Oversight give you to decide which one of the two women lives and which one dies?"

"They said a week," Harry replied. "And it had all sorts of weird rules about it, but they can't really just kill somebody on the island, can they?"

"They can, have and do all the time, my boy, so I'd start putting some serious thought into which of these two women's lives you want to make significantly longer than the other."

"Bloody hell," Harry grumbled to himself as he grabbed the box with his name on it off the back of the cart, just as Calisto and Stella had done moments earlier, the two women waiting for him at the stairs, looking at him expectantly. "What?"

"Where are we going, limey?" Calisto said to him.

“What makes you think *we* are going *anywhere* together?”

“There aren't any locks on the doors, and until one of the two of us is dead,” Stella said, “we're both going to be your fucking shadows, so you'd better wrap your head around that idea.”

“Great,” Harry said. “Doesn't this just sound like a laugh and a half?”

He walked up the stairs with the women both keeping just a few steps behind him, as he made his way up along the side of the building to the third floor, making his way down to the fourth unit on the floor, knocking on the door before pushing it open. “Anybody in here?”

Harry set foot into the room, finding it empty. The décor was certainly about forty years or so late, with wood paneling on the walls of the living room and a yellowish-green hue to all the cushions on the couches.

“1972 called,” he muttered to himself. “It wants you to give up the ghost.”

True to Tex's word, Harry didn't see a lock or even a latch on anything. Tex had also been right with how exhausted Harry felt. There was a clock on the wall that was running and said it was only a little past seven in the evening, but there was no way in hell he was going to stay awake much longer, so he set the box with his name on it on top of a dresser in the bedroom (which had walls of lined bricks painted white and exposed wooden beams) before he kicked off his boots and hopped up into the bed. He laid his face down against the pillow, finding it a little dusty, so he started to pull the top sheet back, trying to yank it out from underneath him.

“The hell are you doing?” Stella asked.

“Going to fucking bed,” Harry said. “Whatever the hell it is you want to ask me can wait until the goddamn morning.” He moved to slide underneath the sheets, laying on one side, reaching over to hit the light switch next to his bed, which plunged the room into relative darkness, although there was a soft purple glow seeping into the room from a neon sign just outside of the window.

“Hey!” Calisto suddenly said loudly, which made Harry glance over only to see Stella stripping down to her bra and panties, tossing the jumpsuit aside. “What the fuck do you think *you're* doing?”

“Getting in bed,” Stella said, smugly. “My life depends on this man, so if you think I'm sleeping out on the couch, you are mistaken.”

Calisto looked like she was ready to shit bricks, but as Stella was moving to crawl into the bed behind him, she started stripping down as well. Calisto decided to take it one step further, though, and shed her bra and panties as well, exposing her slender and elegant body for any who would look over. Harry could also see a couple of circular scars along the left side of her belly, the sort of pockmark scars left behind by gunshot wounds. He had one himself on the front and back of his left shoulder, just below his collarbone.

As Calisto was crawling into the bed in front of him, he could feel Stella moving to shuck her remaining clothes as well, despite the fact that Harry had just crawled into the bed in the flightsuit he'd been wearing when they through him out of the plane earlier. Once Stella had stripped down to nothing, she pulled Harry to roll onto his back, sliding one of her arms over his chest, just in time with Calisto doing the same with one of hers.

He was fairly certain he was going to be miserable come morning, but the rules of the game had been set and there was nothing left to do but play the hand that had been dealt him. He drifted off to sleep, convinced that by daybreak tomorrow, he'd have a better idea of what was going on.

Instead he woke sometime in the dark middle of the night, a shiver running up his spine as he realized that while Calisto was still asleep next to him with his right arm pinned beneath her neck, he couldn't feel Stella on top of his left arm. That was, of course, when he realized he could feel someone running their tongue along his cock beneath the covers.

Since his left arm was mobile, he used it to lift the sheets enough to peek down, and sure enough, he could see the top of Stella's head as she glanced up at him with a little smile, bringing her index finger to her lips in a shushing motion before turning her gaze back down, sliding her lips down along the length of his dick, Harry having to bite his bottom lip a bit.

Back when he'd first joined Scarab, he'd had a conversation with all of them about how he'd generally been the wheelman for most of his operational work to date. That meant he'd never really been subjected to a full-on frontal assault of a female operative using her charms, and Harry asked them how one went about resisting being influenced by it.

Rin, in typical Rin fashion, had said that if Harry allowed himself to be swayed by a piece of ass, then he'd be dead within a few missions and they'd worry about finding his replacement. Harry had shot back asking if Rin had ever been the piece of ass in question. Rin's smile disturbed him just as much as her reply. "Not that anyone alive can tell you about."

Mick's, by contrast, had gone completely the other direction. He'd pointed out that men and women had been doing this particular dance for as long as there had been men and women, and that men inevitably came up on the short end of the stick. "You're not gonna beat 10 million years of evolution, kid," Mick had told him. "So your best bet is to just be aware of the manipulation and understand the consequences, so you can minimize and manage them, best you can. Don't lose your pants, because you're gonna lose your shirt no matter what."

And Len, the team's founder and de facto leader, who'd been keeping quiet during all of it, had sort of chuckled, giving a little shrug. "Best thing I can tell you, FNG, is that it's enjoyable to take what's being offered, but you gotta make sure you're never giving back *more* than you're being given. It's like working any other asset in our business. You're always gonna have to give'em *something*. But you need to make sure that when the rent comes due, you always got more than you gave, and you never ever gave anything you couldn't afford to lose."

Harry was trying to keep all of that advice swirling around in his head, but in the end, Stella was doing far too good a job bouncing her head up and down onto his cock, her tongue coiling around it each time she drew her head back up, the blanket muffling most of the sound, although he could occasionally hear the wet slurping of her lips puckering on his prick. The sound was at least muted enough that it didn't seem like it was in any risk of waking Calisto.

He was trying to use what he'd learned in terms of how to time and temper his breathing, to control the pace at which Stella was sucking him off, but her fingers were cradling his balls and her tongue was squeezing around the head of his cock, the foreskin pushed back so that she could toy right against his glans.

In his head, he was trying to run all the things he could do to prolong the experience, but it had been a while since he'd had anyone in his bed, and the added thrill of Calisto being naked and asleep pressed up against his side only enhanced the sensations. Before he knew it, he felt like the release was about to hit him, so he reached down to tap on Stella's head, a polite notice that he was about to cum, but instead of backing off, she pushed her head down as far as she could, like she wanted to be sure not to let even a drop of his cum escape her mouth.

That was when things got *strange*.

When his orgasm started to rush through him, he felt Stella's lips lock down hard, but he could feel her starting to vibrate against his leg at the *exact same moment* as Calisto also began to tremble against his side, her lips parted to let one of the most intense moans he'd ever heard pouring right into his neck.

Calisto opened her eyes, an almost wounded expression on her face. "What the fuck was that?" she said to him, as Stella suddenly moved up from beneath the sheet to lay back alongside of him, swallowing his load.

"God, I think I came when you did," Stella said, glancing over to see Calisto's panting face. "What's wrong with her?"

"I came when he did," she whimpered. "I was completely asleep and then suddenly I was awake and orgasming..."

"Wait, what?" Stella said. "Are you saying we *both* came when *he* did?"

From the living room came a loud SHUNK sound, startling all three of them, although Stella

hopped out of bed first, running into the living room, glancing around before seeing the capsule inside of the pneumatic tube, a single sheet of paper in it.

Stella opened the chamber, took out the capsule and closed the chamber back up, before opening the capsule, taking out the sheet of paper, reading it as she walked back towards the bed, a look of consternation on her face. “What the fuck is happening?” she said, holding out the piece of paper to them.

In large printed block letters read a simple message:

“WELCOME TO YOUR NEW LINKED LIFE. 6 DAYS AND COUNTING. -OVERSIGHT”

Stella crawled back into the bed, and both her and Calisto clung to Harry tightly, to calm their anxious nerves down.

Harry's nerves, on the other hand, would run wild until daybreak.

Rin

Since Len's arrival, it had been easier for the two of them to start building a map of the populated area of the island, however it was strange how the *rest* of the island wasn't reliably the same each time they went out to explore it. Len had argued that she was just imagining it, but she made him count the number of paces to the first reliable landmark and one day it was 56 paces and the next it was consistently 85.

Len had insisted on walking those 85 paces at least five times, there and back, before he finally believed the space was entirely different. That wasn't even the reason Rin had rushed back to the village to grab him, pulling him deeper into the jungle.

“Rin,” Len said with a sigh. “At this point, I'm almost positive there is nothing about this island that is going to throw me for a fucking loop at this point.” They were hiking a good ten minutes before Rin answered him.

“Okay then, boss, you look at *that* and tell me it's not throwing you for a loop,” she said as they came over the hill, looking down into the little ditch where Rin had hidden the thing she'd shot with her bow and arrow about an hour ago.

In the ditch was the corpse of a praying mantis the size of a *pony*, with Rin's arrow jutting out from one of its eyes. Attached to the back of it was a small bundle of machinery about the size of Rin's fist, with a long, singular antenna jutting out like a thin metal spike.

“Huh,” Len said. “You're right. I'm fucking thrown.”

Part Five

Rin

“It's a big fucking thing, innit?” Rin asked Len. “They aren't supposed to be this big, are they?”

“I'm not an etymologist, but—”

“Entomologist,” she corrected.

That seemed to throw him, because he paused for a long moment before he turned to look at her. “Wait, what?”

“Entomology is the study of insects, chief,” she said. “Etymology is the study of origin of words.”

“Well shit, Len, if you can tell me the difference between those,” he chuckled. “You should know way better than I do.”

“I don't study bugs, boss. Just people.” She was trying to read the expression on his face, but Len had always had a great knack for being impossible to read. That had always frustrated her, but she'd learned that you just had to follow up with him and if he was in a particularly giving mood he'd shade in some of the details that his expression had been hinting towards. “So again I ask, they aren't

supposed to be this big, are they?"

"No, Rin," he said as he crouched down to take a closer look at the giant insect below them. "They are not supposed to be this goddamn big." His hand reached down and tapped a snarl of machinery jutting from one of its sides. "Nor are they supposed to have electronics grafted onto them, but lo and behold, so it is written, so let it be done."

"You know what it's for?"

"No," he sighed. "I've never been the engineer of our lot, and we don't have any sign of Mick showing up yet." Len tapped at the metal with his fingertip twice, the scrap giving a little ping-ping in response – before sighing deeply. "But I can tell you that in twenty some years of military, paramilitary, semi-military and completely off-the-books military work, I've never seen anything fucking like this damn thing, and if that doesn't scare the crap out of you, well, I'm not sure what will."

"So we've got an impossibly big bug with a bunch of technology we don't recognize on the outside of it..."

"And it's dead," Len added.

"And it's dead," she agreed. "But at least we know what did that. I shot it with a fucking arrow and it died. Now what do we *do* with it?"

"I'd love to try and pick it apart, but I don't think we'd learn anything," he said, sitting down alongside it. "And if we leave it here, they'll know we found it. Burn it, maybe?"

"You sure it'll burn?" She didn't know a whole lot about bugs, but she at least remembered they had exoskeletons, and she wasn't sure exactly how flammable those were. It had never really been a concern to her before now.

He sighed then shook his head. Rin didn't like seeing the chief uncertain. It wasn't an expression he wore often, and it didn't suit him well. "You're right. We don't know that it *would* burn. How far to the water?"

She glanced over at the hill. As with all things involving navigation on the island, whatever estimate she gave him was probably just hoping for the best, although it seemed like most of the changes happened sometime at night, and during any given day things remained mostly the same. Mostly. "We can probably haul it there in just four or five minutes. You think that'll do?"

"It'll have to," he said.

She nodded her agreement, and while the two of them could've talked about it for a while longer, instead they just got on with it. It wasn't anywhere near as heavy as it looked, so once they each grabbed a piece of it, it wasn't that hard to drag the giant insect away from where it had died and through the trees until they reached a clifftop overlook. Once there she gave it a stern shove with one of her boots and the thing tumbled off, crashing along the rocky sides of the cliff while it fell before making a loud splash tinged with a bit of a crunch as well. It was ... satisfying.

"Never seen anything like it anywhere else on the island," she said as they started walking along the edge of the cliff parallel to the water, the sounds of waves a hundred feet or so below them. "But then again, the amount of freaky shit I've *already* seen on this island will blow your fucking mind."

"Like what?"

"Boss," she sighed. "Trust me when I tell you that you're just gonna have to see most of it for yourself, otherwise you're gonna think I'm going out of my fucking skull. None of it makes any sense, and half the time I have to remind myself that this is all what I'm really seeing. Distances that shrink and grow whenever the fuck they want, buildings that are only there some of the time... "

She saw that caught his attention as he turned to look carefully at her, narrowing his eyes a bit suspiciously. "Buildings that disappear? Really?" He stopped and crouched down for a moment, looking through a handful of stones that were of various shapes and sizes before picking one up. He narrowed his eyes, shifted his arm and then winged it as hard as he could off towards the ocean. He looked almost disappointed when it splashed into the water a good distance away.

"You weren't hoping for some sort of invisible forcefield or something to briefly pop into view,

were you?"

He smirked before giving off a slightly guilty chuckle. "Maybe."

"Little too optimistic, maybe?"

"Yeah, maybe," he agreed. "But at this point, I'm not going to take anything as a fucking given. Next thing we know, gravity's going to take five and we're going to be flying off towards the skies."

"God, I hope not. I've gotten rather used to having gravity around. It makes my tits look great."

"I forgot to ask earlier, Rin, but what the hell were you doing when you shot that damn thing with an arrow?"

"Out hunting for wild pigs," she told him. "Somebody's gotta get the meat for them to be cooking up in the kitchen and it gives me an excuse to be mobile and constantly exploring the island without anybody asking me too many questions."

"Pigs are the most common thing you get?"

"Yes and no," she told him with a shrug. "Sometimes it's weird and exotic shit like bears or mountain lions. That kind of thing."

"This is not the kind of environment that should naturally have bears or mountain lions on it, Rin," he told her.

"So *that* much I *did* know, boss, but I'm telling you, there's all sorts of wild shit roaming around on this island," she said. "I'm pretty sure I've stumbled across what used to be a zoo or an animal research facility at some points, but the damn thing isn't reliably in the same location on any given day, so more or less you're just going to have to stumble onto the fucking thing if you want to go exploring any of it. Maybe the lions and bears came from there."

"Great. Just fucking great. And here I was hoping we could have a map of the place drawn out long before Mick showed up, just so I could put to rest his bitching and moaning about how hard this job was going to be."

"Forget it, chief. We're never gonna map this place out in anything other than vague terms, and even then, it's never going to be all that reliable," she said as they started walking downhill while the land sloped back down towards the water. "I could tell you wanted to try, but you weren't gonna believe me until you saw it with your own two eyes." She crouched down and picked up a large stick, standing back up, using it as a walking stick. "I also saw you found Mira. How's that going?"

"I'm glad she's okay," Len said, his voice keeping all of his emotion played closely to the vest. "And she seems like she's mostly who she used to be."

"Mostly?" Rin said with a scowl. "I can't say I'm a fan of that word, and you didn't used to be either, boss."

He nodded in agreement. "I'm still not. But there's only so much ourselves any of us can be when we're missing half our memories or more. I'm still trying to decide if that's what has me most concerned about her or if it's the other thing."

"What's 'the other thing?'"

"She's... something about this place makes her uneasy."

"Well, shit, boss, it's doing that to all of us."

"Yeah, except Mira doesn't *get* uneasy. It was one of the things about her that always blew my mind the most," he said with a tiny blip of laughter. "I've always been playing the part of the hardass, but that girl puts me to shame. Nothing rattles her cage." He glanced back towards the center of the island, towards the mountain or volcano that seemed to be the only constant in the island's landscape, in seemingly grim admiration. "Least nothing used to. But this place sure does."

"It rattles everybody, boss. No need to be ashamed of that."

"It wouldn't have rattled Mira in her old life. That means she isn't entirely my Mira, and I can't trust her like she was."

"Everybody here's a little different than they used to be, boss," Rin said to him. "Even I don't feel exactly... what the hell is that?" She stopped in her tracks and pointed down deeper into the valley

at a concrete structure in the middle of a field, no high trees anywhere near it, partially covered in heavy vines and salt weathering, a pair of giant painted-green steel doors partially open at one end of it, a small hole in part of the roof, although the size of it was difficult to gauge from the distance. "I've never seen that place before."

That brought a smile to Len's face, something she was glad to see. She preferred him being smiling and invincible rather than dragging the weight of his expectations around behind him like he had since his arrival on the island. "That sounds like an invitation for us to go and have a look at it," he said. "Don't you think?"

"Shit, we'd better not look away, otherwise who the hell knows if it'll still be there?" she laughed. The two of them quickly made their way down the hill towards the open field, heading over towards the building before Rin suddenly raised her fist sharply, sending the silent 'hold in place' signal, which made Len stop in his tracks.

"What's up?"

She pointed to a sign and though he didn't recognize the language or what it said, there was an icon he very much *did* recognize – that of a disc with a small explosion drawn over it. "Looks like a minefield."

"Shit. Think it goes all the way around the building?"

"Probably," she said, crouching down to examine the earth a little bit.

Neither of them spoke for a minute or two, considering their situation, but eventually Len ventured forth with an opinion. "Think we should just go see the building anyway?"

She chuckled, looking back over her shoulder at him with a nod. "Read my mind, chief. We just need to take it slow."

"Or we could try something else instead," he said as he waved a finger off to the side, where a number of heavy oil drum barrels were busy with the very important job of gathering rust. She immediately caught on to his idea.

The two of them spent half an hour putting together an impromptu system with them rolling barrels out into the field, watching them roll quite some distance before occasionally popping off an old landmine. The explosions weren't especially large, and after a few hours, they'd made enough of a path to get to the building safely.

As they approached the structure, Rin noticed it was relatively undamaged, although there were very old bullet holes in parts of the concrete, peeking out through the heavy foliage around the outside of it. "Whatever happened here, it didn't happen recently," she said to him.

"And we know the island hasn't always been gun free."

"Oh, I knew that almost the minute I got here," she said. "I found spent shell casings littering all over the island. In fact, I'd say the island's probably been under siege at least a couple of times, and from multiple different countries, although nothing in the past twenty or thirty years, maybe a lot longer. Last time this place was being attacked was probably around the time the Berlin Wall fell."

"Makes sense," he replied. "If this place had been on anybody's radar recently, it'd look a lot differently. What're you thinking? Armory of some kind? Troop bunker?"

She frowned a little bit as they moved over towards the doorway. "Not sure. Can't imagine it would be something you'd want people coming near a lot if there's a minefield around most of it. Looks like there might have been a roadway here at one point, but even still, this looks like the kind of place you hole up in and don't want to come out of, not the kind of place you need to be in and out of all the time, y'know?"

"Maybe," he agreed. "No real external markings either, so whoever was here, they weren't going out of their way to advertise which team they were playing for."

"Might be covered entirely by the foliage, chief."

"Yeah, suppose that's possible too."

"There is literally a metric fuckton of it."

“Glad you clarified,” he said as he started to peek his head around the corner into the building. “There's a shitload of difference between a *metric* fuckton and an *imperial* fuckt– Holy Jesus.” He had leaned in enough to get a peek inside the building and as soon as she could get around the corner behind him, she completely respected why.

The inside of the building looked like it had been some sort of laboratory with a number of open and empty large steel cages scattered around the interior. There were many kinds of heavy machinery also strewn around the place, but as they moved inside of the building it became clear that at least some of them were antiquated computer parts, the kind from maybe the 1970s at best. Certainly nothing with a modern circuit board on it. No, these were all vacuum tubes and punch cards, although she also saw some magnetic tape strewn around the place, no doubt rendered completely useless by exposure to the elements not to mention all the time that had surely passed since it was last safely encased in its spool housing. Several of the cages had shackles and chains in them with manacles either far too big or far too small for human usage, all of which lay open regardless, some pried open, some ripped open and some, it seemed, opened by the key still resting within them.

That wasn't to say that the place was deserted. Oh no, there were skeletons all over the damn place, most still in parts or pieces of their uniforms. And it looked like after their fight in which, at first glance anyway, Rin had to assume there were *no* survivors, their bodies had been left to rot here. And yet even the most daring of scavenger animals had not been bold enough to come here to feast upon their bodies. Which made the whole puzzle even that more complex.

The uniforms were the hardest thing to figure out. Because based on what they could see even at just a first glance, there were at least four kinds of uniforms here, none of which made *any* sense at all. The first ones she spotted were Nazi uniforms from the 40s, which made some degree of sense considering what she'd suspected about some of the island's history, but the next ones she could identify were North Korean uniforms from the 50s. After that were a couple of American G.I. outfits, but they looked like late 70s or maybe even early 80s. And then there was the last one, colorful and decorative, and so *utterly* out of place. There was only one corpse in the contrasting attire, but that single one stood out like a spotlight because it *so* didn't belong with all the others. Rin crouched down to look at it with wonder, the three colors bright and brilliant, almost as if daring dirt and grime to contaminate their presence. The skeleton within was still clenching onto a pistol with one hand and a knife in the other, a black beret still resting atop the skull, a bullet hole penetrating through part of both.

“What the fuck is a member of the Papal Swiss Guard doing here in the middle of fucking nowhere?” Rin asked out loud, probably not loud enough for Len to hear her, but she was mostly just thinking verbally. “There's, like, a barely more than a hundred of them in the whole goddamn world.”

“Rin, I think you better come take a look at this so I'm sure I'm not losing my fucking mind,” he called over from behind one of the cages.

“Is it crazier than a member of the Swiss Guard?” she yelled back at him, both of them unable to see the other's position from their obscured locations behind wreckage. “Because I've got one of those over here, and that's pretty fucking weird! So I ask again... crazier than that?”

He paused for a second, as if giving her question genuine consideration before he answered the only way she wasn't expecting him to. “Yes. Yes, I'm pretty sure it is.”

That made Rin frown. They were meant to be exploring the building, not playing a fucking game of Top This. She pulled the part of the uniform with the emblem off, the body beneath her apparently a Major at the time of his death, walking over towards where she could see the top of Len's head peeking out from behind some cages. “Okay, what beats a member of his Holiness's private security detail?”

“Cowboy?” Len said, pointing to the body in front of him, a weird grin on his face.

Rin closed her eyes before turning her head to look where he'd been pointing, trying to convince herself that whatever she saw when she opened it would be easily explained and dismissed, somebody wearing attire similar to what Len thought he saw, but not actually *that*.

Then she opened her goddamned eyes.

When she opened them, the body was almost exactly what she feared it would be. The clothing was thick and heavy, totally unlike a *costume* of a cowboy, but in fact like the sort of thing a *real* cowboy would've been wearing. There was a Stetson hat just off to one side, and the body had on thick leather boots that had clearly seen more than their fair share of use, with tiny metal spurs jutting from the backs of them. There was also a bullwhip hanging from the belt. Like all the bodies, however, the actual firearms were missing. Even the individual bullets from the cowboy's bandoleer had been removed and absconded with. The skull also had a clear bullet hole through it. It seemed like a lot of these bodies did.

"Fucking hell, chief," she sighed, crouching down to inspect the corpse a little further. "I'm all proud of myself because I find a member of the Pope's Fucking Honor Guard and you gotta go find Billy The Fucking Kid."

"The *actual*-?"

"No, not the *actual* Billy the Kid, you twit," she scoffed. "But everything about this guy screams late 1800s to me. No labels on any of the outfits, everything feels handmade. Good odds he was what he looks like he was." She paused to inspect the damage done to him. In addition to the bullet hole in the skull, parts of the jacket had additional holes, stained with dried blood that had seeped into the leather and cotton itself. "Of course, these bullet holes look like they were made something a bit more modern than an old Colt Peacemaker."

"We thinking all these people were in some kind of shoot out... together?"

"I mean," she said, standing up to glance over the room. "Maybe? I can't imagine that if it *wasn't* at the same point that somebody would've come and cleared away these bodies."

"But all of the guns are missing, so *somebody's* been in here since then."

"Not just the guns either," she said. "Grenades, bullets, explosives, even combat knives are missing off the bodies."

"Left the whip, though."

"You know how to use a whip?" she asked him sarcastically.

"Only in my dreams," he sighed. "I dressed up as Indiana Jones for Halloween, like, five different times."

"You can take his whip and start practicing," she told him. "I don't think he's gonna mind."

Len seemed to be considering for the moment then crouched down and took the belt with the whip off the corpse, sliding it and fastening it around his own waist. "Who the hell knows if we're gonna get back here," he said. "Might be now or never."

"You're right. Who knows when we'll be able to get back here," she agreed. "That means we should give this area a pretty thorough search before we head out."

"Can't be here too much longer," he said, gesturing to the fading sun they could see through the doorway. "Anything more than an hour or two and we're going to be trekking back to the city through pitch blackness. Assuming we can still fucking *find* the place anyway. So let's be quick about it."

"You got it, chief."

The two of them spent a bit looking through the machinery, trying to discern what purposes any of it served, but there was so much damage and the parts all thrown together so badly that all they could be sure of was that some sort of testing had been happening here. They also noticed a surprising lack of handwritten notes or paperwork, though. None of the soldiers had any forms of identification on them – no dogtags, no wallets, not even pictures of their loved ones well concealed in some pocket. There were no nameplates or ranks on most of them – it seemed like the member of the Swiss Guard had been an exception – and nothing seemed to give any real indication of who was here first, who had been attacking, how they had gotten here, what they'd been looking for or who'd taken all the guns.

There was also no clear indication what had caused the hole in the roof, which looked larger than it had from the distance, although still no bigger than maybe the size of a car. It had looked like it

might have been mortar fire at first. They'd grown more concerned after a few minutes inspection when both of them had reached the same conclusion – it had been broken *outward* from the *inside* and neither of them could find a blast point of origin, nor explosives residue.

Each minute they spent inside the bunker made Rin feel even less comfortable than she already was with the place, and they'd barely explored the front quarter of it. There was a lot more real estate going back into the darkness that they hadn't set foot on, because neither of them had a flashlight with them. She preferred staying closer to the light seeping into the building, even surrounded by the dead as she was.

“Ho-lee *shiiiiiiit*,” she heard Len say from over her shoulder while she was giving one of the corpses a very thorough search, looking for anything identifiable at all. “You better come over and take a look at this. And if you see a backpack or a bag of some kind, bring it with you.”

She stood up and looked to find him just on the edge of the light towards the middle of the bunker, standing next to a giant pallet with a heavy tarp over it. She knew one of the American soldiers had a satchel bag along side him, so she headed over to that body, scooped it up then started making her way back towards the palate. “I don't know what you want to haul back, boss. Remember we can't lock anything up anyway.”

“I think just hiding a few of these or, y'know, keeping them with us at all times wouldn't be too much of a bad thing, especially considering we don't know how to get back here easily,” he said, as he lifted up the tarp.

The sudden reflection of light caught her off guard and she had to raise one of her hands to block the glare before stepping forward to prevent the light from behind her casting down into it so she could see clearly, although once she could, she wasn't entirely convinced she wasn't hallucinating. “No *fucking* way,” she muttered beneath her breath.

Beneath the tarp, stacked nearly shoulder high, in a square shape about eight feet to a side, were hundreds and hundreds of gold bricks. Len picked one up of the top and it had clear weight to it as he turned to show her inscribed on top of the brick a pontiff's hat flanked by an upside key crossed beneath it to form an x shape. “The Holy See,” he told her. “It's the Pope's insignia. I guess we know why there was a member of the Swiss Guard here. This is Vatican gold.”

“Vatican gold? Cowboys? Nazis? Giant mecha bugs? What the unholy fuck have you gotten us into, chief?” she sighed, although she was reaching to pull a couple of gold bricks to slide into the bag as she said it.

“Believe me, Rin, if I had any clue, I would absolutely tell you. But I think it's safe to say that whatever the fuck we expected to be on this place, all of this,” he said, gesturing the bunker around them. “This was definitely *not it*.”

With three bricks slung into a bag that was straining to hold them from the weight, they made their way back out the way they came in, and when they were about half way up the hill, they both looked back to see that not only the building but the entire clearing behind them had disappeared and been replaced by a sloping incline covered in dense palm trees.

Rin was *certain* she heard Len grumbling about fucking quantum relocation the entire eventless hike back the rest of the way to the village.

Harry

The sun was starting to go down on his second day on the island, and Harry was no closer to a decision now than he was when he'd woken up that morning. He'd been looking forward to getting out and exploring the island a bit by himself, but the minute he was up and out of bed, it became clear that neither Calisto nor Stella wanted to let him out of their sights.

They talked to him while he was on the toilet taking his morning shit, one of them sitting on the countertop, the other using the shower. While *he* was in the shower, one of them joined him while the other was waiting taking *her* turn on the counter top.

When the three of them had headed out to get some breakfast, he found that one of them was always walking in front of him and the other was always walking behind him, and neither of them were all that talkative when they were moving between places.

At the canteen, at least, they were willing to be a bit more chatty. The two women had apparently decided that to get a little from Harry, they were going to need to give a little. "Fine, since everybody's dancing around it, I'll go first," Calisto said. "Calisto obviously isn't my real name, but it's all I'm going to give anyone here. I'm SIED. You two?"

"I was with South Korea's National Intelligence Service for five years, but I left them three years ago to go private sector," Stella told them. "Stella's my real first name. At least... I think it is? I can't remember my last name, nor can I remember who in the private sector I was *working for* for the last few years. I was with Wildneedle Securities for a year or so, but their quartermaster was a dick who wouldn't stop hitting on me, so I bailed with them and went... shit, where did I go?"

Harry smiled softly. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. You're going to find giant holes in your memory no matter how you slice your bread. We all are. Somehow we got sent to The Retreat."

"What the hell is The Retreat?" Calisto asked.

"Consider it the spy equivalent of sending your pet upstate to live on a farm," Harry laughed. "It's supposed to be a myth, a place where any spy who's gone missing has been taken to. But it's not real. At least, I didn't think it was up until we got here. Because it pretty closely matches all the stories I've ever heard about The Retreat."

"Which were?"

"Just little bits and bobs here and there. Deserted island somewhere remote. No real weapons to speak of. No visible martial forces. Just a weekly supply drop from the sky and fuck all else."

"So we shared some, limey," Stella said. "Your turn. Spill."

"Harry isn't my real name, but it's all you're going to get, because I can't remember any *other* names," he sighed. "I used to be with Five..."

"Five?" Calisto said.

"MI-5," Stella filled in.

"Ah."

"Anyway," Harry continued. "I was with MI-5 for about three years before we had something of a severe falling out."

"What over?" Stella prodded.

"You know, I don't remember? Anyway, after that, I went out on my own and started selling the best skill I had."

"Being evasive?" Calisto grumbled.

"In a way," Harry said with a grin. "Evasive transportation. Smuggling and security, getting things and people from one point to another without being noticed and/or caught. If it's got wheels, I can drive it. If it's got wings, I can fly it."

"Boats?"

"Speedboats, sail boats, submarines, shipping vessels... don't know there's a craft out there I wouldn't at least have the fundamentals down on."

"You're a very arrogant man, you know that?" Calisto said to him.

"Doubtful," Harry chuckled. "Because while I'm very good at transportation and I'm not a half-bad shot, I'm pretty crap at just about everything else. Never was much good at disguises or cover identities. Maddeningly, never picked up those skills needed to spot tells and detect when folks are lying," he blatantly lied to them. "So yeah, can get you and your stuff from A to B and keep you safe while I'm doing it, but rely on me for anything beyond that and you're going to be in a spot of bother."

The food at the cantina wasn't exactly amazing, but it was certainly better than he'd had in a lot of other places. It seemed like there were generally three or four things on offer at any rough point in the day, so there were always options. The kitchen area was also open to anyone, so if nothing was on

offer that appealed, the option of going back and making something was also available.

“Is there enough money to be had in smuggling?” Stella asked him with a gentle smile. It seemed like Stella was going for the softer approach while Calisto was trying to treat him with harder caution.

“Loads,” he said. “But it's all reliant on you actually *getting* the gigs, which is where the real trick comes into play. I've got a contact for that, but they don't always come through.”

“So what do you think we did to get sentenced here?” Calisto asked, suddenly pivoting subjects on them. “And who the hell do you think Oversight is?”

“Bunch of lunatics if you ask me.”

“That's not helpful,” Calisto snapped, reaching up to slap her hand against the back of his head. When he leaned forward in sharp pain, he noticed that both Stella and Calisto had done the same thing. “Fucking hell! What the hell happened?”

“You hit me,” Harry grumbled.

“And me!” Stella chimed in.

“I didn't lay a finger on you, Stella!” Calisto countered. “And you hit me back!”

“I did no such thing!”

The two began to bicker back and forth and while Harry could hear them shouting at one another, his mind was already racing onto a different path, replaying the moment and the timing in his head. There wasn't any possible way Calisto could've hit Stella or that Stella could've hit Calisto in return. In fact, there was only one thing Harry could think of that made any sense. So he'd have to do something truly stupid to prove it.

He placed his left hand on top of the table, closed his right hand into a fist and brought it down hard on top of his left hand. He may have known the pain was coming, but neither Calisto nor Stella had any idea what was about to happen.

As soon as the pain bloomed in his left hand, he saw Calisto and Stella each clutch at their own left hand, as if they'd been struck themselves. “Fuckin' hell!” Stella said. “What was that?”

“Ladies, I think we're a bit more linked than originally expected,” he sighed. “Let's go back to our room, and I can demonstrate a bit further.”

Part Six

Harry

It was surprising to him that the ladies hadn't figured out what was happening sooner, but he wrote it off as he was always slightly more open minded to the impossible than the average person ways. They made their way back to their room and looked at him expectantly, as he moved to sit down on the bed, each of them part way across the room from him.

"Alright, so watch me now, ladies, and you'll see what I mean." He extended his left arm outward and then set his right hand atop it, pressing his fingernails down onto the skin enough so that he'd feel the pressure, and then dragged his fingertips from his elbow to his wrist, dragging on his flesh and drawing little white lines on the skin as he saw both women instinctively reach for their own left arms, rubbing the top of it with their right hand. "You both felt that, didn't you?"

Calisto frowned, her face bunching up with discomfort. "What the hell have they done to us?"

"Our nervous systems are somewhat linked, it seems. We don't seem to share feelings of minor things, like the feeling of a fork in your hands, but when it gets strong enough that more nerves are involved, we're all linked into that sensation," he told them. "That's just my guess about it, anyway. I knew when we showed up at The Retreat that all rules of how the world worked were being thrown out the window. Every rumor I've heard about this place has done my head in, so the idea of us having linked nervous systems? Not really all that implausible. There have been all those studies into how twins are able to empathically communicate pain or pleasure with each other. Now, whether or not any of that is bullshit, all I'm pointing out is that there *is* precedent for this sort of thing."

Stella reached one of her hands up and gave one of her own breasts a hard squeeze through her top, smirking when she saw both Harry and Calisto wince a little bit. "Felt that too, did you, Harry?"

"Just because I'm a man doesn't mean I don't have breasts, Stella," he grumbled.

"Oh yeah? Then how about this?" Calisto said, pushing her hand down the front of her pants and sliding a fingertip inside of her own pussy.

It was rather a strange sensation for Harry, but clearly whatever sort of link they shared was functioning somehow, because it felt as though a finger had slid inside of his body just between the bottom of his shaft and the top of his balls, working its way inside of him, brushing against tender nerves he didn't know he had.

"I'm certainly feeling that, even if he isn't," Stella said, shifting a little bit uncomfortably, her hand now a bit more gentle on her own breast.

"I'm definitely feeling *something*," Harry replied. "How about if I do this? You ladies feel anything?" He reached down into his own pants and gave his cock a long, strident stroke, watching both women shudder in response to his touches.

"That's so fucking *weeeeird*," Stella groaned. "Like I'm getting stimulated in ways my body isn't supposed to feel."

Calisto looked uncertain about what she wanted to do next, looking from Harry to Stella and back again three or four times before finally, reaching down to pull off her shirt, kicking off her boots and tugging down her pants. "Get naked. Both of you." The commanding tone of her voice made it clear she didn't want to wait, and Harry was trying to get over to the bed while Calisto was yanking his shirt up and off for him as he shimmied out of his shoes.

Stella looked like she wasn't sure what they were about to do, but she certainly wasn't going to miss out so she stripped faster than either of the two of them had done. As soon as she was over at the bed, she shoved Harry onto his back, and pushed her head down onto his cock, swallowing his shaft whole before Harry and Calisto both moaned at the exact same time in the exact same cadence. What

was even weirder was feeling Stella's moan flowing over his shaft.

They were a tangle of bodies very quickly, as Calisto finally pushed Stella out of place and moved to straddle Harry's waist, pushing herself down onto his cock. It was truly a bizarre sensation, because it almost felt like he was being mirrored, and he'd never had a sensation of being entered before, even knowing it was all entirely in his head. And even as he started to thrust his hips upward, Stella moved to climb and straddle his head, pushing her cunt down onto his mouth, as he did his best to push his tongue up and inside of her. And he felt the sensation of his own tongue vaguely somewhere in his crotch.

For the next half hour, they were a weird triangle of erotic sensations, connected to each other in standard ways that were overly complicated by the fact that nobody was experiencing the sensations of their nerves alone, but instead all three of their nervous systems functioning in tandem, often causing conflicting or complicated feelings as their minds struggled to separate the signals coming from their own bodies as opposed to those they were just listening in on.

When Harry came inside of Calisto, it was the most unusual and mind bending sensation he'd ever had to deal with. He could feel his jism exiting his body, but it also felt like it was reentering his body at the same time. There was something exotic and thrilling about it, but it was also downright disconcerting.

None of the three of them wanted to talk much about it afterwards, happy to just sort of lay in bed, nestled up against one another, until they all drifted off to sleep.

Except, of course, Harry was still awake and was pretending to sleep. He very slowly extricated himself from the two women and pulled on some clothes as quietly as he could and made his way towards the doorway. He'd made it down the hallway before he felt a hand on his shoulder. He stopped and looked back to see Stella standing behind him.

"Thought we made it clear, wherever you go, we go," she said to him quietly. "Where you going, Harry?"

"Look, either you trust me and go back to bed and rise up a bit in my estimations, or you follow me and fall a bit in my estimations," he said to her. "But one way or another, I'm heading out for just a little bit and will be back in bed within an hour or so at the latest."

She looked at him for a long moment, sighed, then hugged him. "Don't get hurt, okay? That's all I ask." Before he could answer, she'd released him and turned to head back to their apartment.

That gave Harry the freedom he needed to move, as he headed down the stairs and started making his way across the village. Despite the fact that there was ample light, he was able to keep mostly to the shadows. He wasn't trying to sneak around that much, but he still didn't want to draw attention to himself, and the last thing he needed was someone asking questions about what he was doing out this late at night. Although he wasn't entirely certain someone would even ask. He was still getting the hang of what expectations people had of each other on the island, and it seemed like the majority of the people preferred to be out during the daylight. With all the neon signage lit up from sunset to sunrise, though, it wasn't as though it wasn't safe to move around at night.

Harry moved his way around the back of the bar, finding Len leaning against the wall, flipping a coin over and over again.

"If that keeps coming up heads literally all of the time," Harry said as he walked up, "I wouldn't be the least surprised."

"No, but it's landed edgewise a couple of times since I started, which is a different kind of weirdness," Len said to Harry. "So, it looks like you made it to the island okay."

"Okay is a matter of perspective, chief," Harry sighed. "But I'm alive. Still, there's some next level weirdness going on here."

For the next few minutes, Harry tried to explain how his nervous system seemed to be mirrored to the two women he'd arrived with. Len seemed skeptical at first, but as Harry had kept detailing the whole thing, Len had grown less and less amused, and more and more concerned.

“Jesus, man,” Len said, rubbing his eyes. “You’re not kidding. That sounds odd as hell. You given any thought to what you’re going to do when they tell you to decide?”

“I’m not keen on leaving anyone to die on my say so, chief.”

“Doesn’t look like they’re giving you much of a choice, Harry.”

“What if I refuse to choose?”

“Then I suspect either they’ll make you choose, or they’ll just kill all three of you.”

Harry frowned. “Can’t say I’m particularly fond of any of these options, chief.”

“This ain’t a weekend retreat, Harry,” Len chuckled. “You don’t get turndown service and a complimentary continental breakfast. Nobody’s gonna give a damn about your feelings, so you’d better be prepared for that kind of thing.”

“Well, I’ve still got a bit of time left to consider it, so it’s something I’ll keep working on in the back of my brain. I saw Rin’s here. Any sign of Mick?”

“Not yet,” Len confirmed. “I assumed he was the last to get picked up so he’ll show up eventually.”

“How’s Rin doing?”

“She got here first, and she’s a little shaken up, but you know Rin – she’s a professional and I don’t know of much of anything that’s going to put her off job.”

“Tell me the island’s weirder than the shit I’m going through.”

“It’s a whole hell of a lot weirder than the shit you’re going through, brother, but don’t discount your own personal weirdness in the whole thing,” Len chuckled. “What’s weird to you may not be as weird to all of us, and vice versa. That said, take a look at this.” He reached into his satchel and pulled out a gold brick, hefting it over towards Harry, who caught it, surprised by the weight of it.

“You found a gold bar?” Harry asked, lifting it up towards the light. “The hell is that symbol on the top of it?”

“Oh right. You wouldn’t recognize that, being you were raised CofE and all that. Anyway, that’s the Holy See.”

“The whatnow?”

“The mark of the Vatican. That’s property of the Pope, or at least it was.”

“What the hell is it doing on an island in the South Pacific?”

“Who the fuck knows?” Len sighed. “It’s here, though, and not just this one brick either, but a whole shit load of it.”

“Are we gonna steal it?”

“You know a way to get it off of here?”

“Yeah, okay. Fair point.”

“Besides, not even all that sure it’d be back that way if we went by it again,” Len said, stretching his back against the concrete wall like he was some kind of giant housecat. “You probably haven’t noticed yet, but this whole island’s layout seems like it changes on a dime and nothing is exactly where you left it, once you venture outside of the city limits.”

“I’d say you’re fucking with me, Len, but after what I’ve seen and felt for the last couple of days, I’m not entirely sure what I do and don’t believe in from my own experiences anymore. I’m starting to think I should believe you over my own lyin’ eyes.”

“Just don’t rule anything out and you’ll probably be okay, Harry.”

There was a rustle from the trees, and both men turned to look in that direction before a man came barreling out of the jungle at them. The back of the bar faced part of the jungle so it was the ideal way for someone to approach. The man rushed straight at Len before either man could get a good look at him.

Len, however, had been the wrong choice for the man to attack. While Harry was sufficient at hand-to-hand and close-quarters combat, Len was easily the best trained out of their unit and took great delight in being able to manage and disarm an opponent.

The man attacking him was dressed in a drab grey outfit, heavily encrusted with dirt and grime, a large knife in one hand, which was perhaps the only reason why Len hadn't dispatched him quickly. The man was European, with blonde hair and blue eyes, a sort of borderline mad look to him, and his face had dark grease smeared on it, as if it was some kind of camouflage. He bared his teeth wildly and swiped at the air between them with the knife, trying to follow it up with a lunge, but Len obviously didn't have patience for the man's antics, so he shifted the movement and shoved the man's knife towards his own chest, stabbing him with his own weapon.

The movement wasn't anticipated and as soon as he was stabbed, the man from the jungle collapsed, gasping up at them. "Bist du eine Art Dämon?"

Len's face scrunched up in annoyance. "Die Nazis sind längst weg, Soldat. Warum tragen Sie noch die Uniform?"

"Was? Ich glaube dir nicht. Berlin würde niemals fallen," the man wheezed. "Engländer?"

"Amerikaner. Wie lange bist du schon im Dschungel?" Len said, crouching down next to the man.

"Ich habe die Tage... aufgehört zu zählen, aber ich... denke, es müsste Juli 1944 sein."

"Deine Welt ist schon lange vorbei, Soldat. Ruhen Sie sich jetzt aus und schließen Sie sich Ihren Freunden an."

The man on the ground coughed, nodded once and then slumped lifelessly against the dirt floor.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Harry asked Len.

"Despite how utterly impossible it should be," Len said, "I think I just killed my first Nazi." He pulled the knife out of the man's body, wiping it off on the corpse's uniform before removing the scabbard from his belt, sheathing it and setting it aside. "Our friend here said he lost count of the days, but he was pretty certain it should be somewhere around July of 1944."

"He had to have been lying," Harry muttered. "Right? He was lying?"

"His German was far better than mine, and that surprise on his face looked pretty genuine. He thought I was British. And I dunno about you, but this outfit looks damn authentic to me. No modern stitching, no modern fabrics... it is exactly how it should be if he was who he said he was. Help me search his body."

They spent a couple of minutes going through the man's things. There was P38 in a holster on the man's hip, but it seemed like it was long since out of ammunition, and hadn't even been that well maintained. Len took it anyway, Harry noticed. The dead man still had his E tool and a collapsible spade, as well as a number of ammo pouches, all of which were entirely empty. There was a dogtag of sorts hanging around the man's neck, with three little holes in the center of it, like it was meant to be broken in half. Harry shoved that into his own pocket, just so that he'd have something to prove the encounter was real. In the man's pocket they also found a letter to home, with a name and address on the envelope, although no stamp. Harry saw Len tuck that into his pocket, while they finished searching the body, finding nothing else of any real use on it.

"What do we do with him?" Harry asked Len.

"The last thing I want is anyone coming across the body, so I suppose we're going to bury him. Thankfully he came with his own shovel, and I know where Rin says they typically bury the bodies. Nobody ever digs them up, so he'll just be another nameless unmarked grave, and nobody will be any the wiser. C'mon, grab his ankles."

The two men picked up the body and hiked over to a large fenced off section with a number of graves in it, mostly without headstones or markings, but a few that had a tiny little shrine on top of them. They found there were a couple of half-dug holes already, as if the idea of throwing bodies into the area was common enough that it didn't hurt to do some of the work in advance. Once the hole was deep enough, they tossed the impossible man's body into it and quickly covered it with dirt.

Harry was sweating more than a little when they finally finished. "Gold from the Pope. Nazis who think it's 1944. Buildings that are sometimes there and sometimes not. Women who're somehow

linked to my nervous system. Any other crazy shit I should know about, top?"

"Rin shot a praying mantis the size of a motorcycle with an arrow yesterday. Killed it, too."

"You're kidding, right?" Harry looked for any sign of a punchline coming and sighed when he didn't spot one. "You're *not* kidding. Fucking hell, boss, this place is next-level creepy."

"I told you this was likely to be the weirdest job we'd ever take on in our lives, Harry, so maybe sometimes you guys'll learn to trust me when I say shit like that, huh?"

"You say shit like that *all* the time, boss," Harry grumbled.

"Not quite this vehemently, though, do I?"

"I suppose that's fair."

"Besides, you've got the singular experience of truly knowing what it feels like when someone tells you to go fuck yourself."

Harry laughed, reaching over to slug Len in the shoulder. "What's next?"

"What's next is we start trying to figure out who's playing for what team around here, who remembers what and who's forgotten what. I know Rin's already seen a couple of people she recognizes, and I found Mira."

"Hooray for small miracles. How's she holding up?"

"Her memory comes and goes, but she's got large portions of it in place. I'm more worried about what's missing than what she has, but that's just me," he sighed. "I'm always trying to make sure there's nothing in the blindspots coming to kill me. I worry that there's something in one of her memory holes that we're going to desperately need and we won't have access to it."

"What's missing?"

Len laughed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, it doesn't work that way, Harry. I can't just ask you what you don't remember, can I? There's all sorts of things wrong with that. Anyway, tonight was mostly just supposed to be you and I trading brief info, up until we got attacked by a Nazi clearly out of his element."

"You're really thinking that guy just stumbled here from 1944?"

"Not directly, but sure. There's pockets of weirdness all around this island, so if you told me there were pockets of loose time just drifting over the place, I wouldn't even bat an eyelash at this point. I'd just ask you how I could spot them moving around."

"Let's hope they're not common enough that we get caught up in one."

"I can't imagine they are," Len said confidently. "Otherwise it would've been a lot more of them going missing and then showing up again. It's gotta be minor things here and there, otherwise the whole place would know about it, instead of just us. But it's an important lesson about this place that we as a squad need to commit ourselves to remembering – the laws of physics and reality are just *guidelines* around here, not hard and fast *laws*. The drifting layout once you get outside of the village boundaries is something we're all going to have to be especially careful of. No idea why the village itself seems to be immune to it, but right now, it seems like there's a very clear 'safe zone' around the village structures."

"I've got two thoughts about that, boss."

"Two's better than zero. Hit me."

"The first is all the neon. Notice how *every* building has a neon sign on it of some kind? Many of them are just decorative, so why have them at all? Unless they're more than just decorative."

"I'd wondered if the neon served another purpose, but that's a definite thing I had not considered. What's the other?"

Harry led Len over towards the edge of the village, bringing him right towards the sharp demarcation where village turned into jungle, tapping the thick line with his foot. "You see this? I noticed it when I first got out of the water, because it basically circles the village and the road leading to and from the dock. I'm not sure but I think it's either a buried line of copper or iron, and it encases everything that seems like people are mostly staying to, so I'd bet the weirdness doesn't generally cross

it. It might be like the eruv that encircles Manhattan.”

“The whatnow?” Len asked.

“You’ve probably never noticed it, chief, but there’s over a dozen miles of fishing line hanging around the border of Manhattan to allow Orthodox Jews to interact with areas outside of their homes on the Sabbath. It’s called an eruv. I read about it when I was studying some of the lesser known facts about New York City. It might be something like that.”

“If it’s iron, there’s also legends that ghosts and spirits can’t cross iron boundaries. Maybe that figures into it too.”

Harry shrugged. “At that point, boss, you’re talking more theology and mythology than you are anything I’ve got real world experience with, but hey, maybe it means something, maybe it means nothing. But the ring around the area is something I noticed.”

“A’ight, get back to your ladies, Harry, and figure out what you’re gonna do about having to say goodbye to one of them, because this place doesn’t take no for an answer, so the last thing you wanna do is get stuck with the choice getting taken from you.”

“Got it. Thanks chief.” Harry shook Len’s hand then pulled him into an appreciative hug, taking the older soldier slightly offguard before both men chuckled. “Sorry, just needed to remind myself that I’m not alone here.”

“Together until we go down swinging, Harry. You know the rules.”

The two men parted under cover of darkness.

Len

He’d tried not to let on too much, but the sight of the Nazi had rattled his cage a little bit. Before that, he’d been able to write off much of the weirdness that he’d seen as things that existing in the fringe of plausibility, but with an actual goddamned Nazi having been transported from sometime in the 1940s to now without aging a day, he had to admit they’d stepped into genuine science fiction bullshit now, which was the *last* thing he needed.

Len missed the days when all the weirdness in his life could’ve been attributed to people doing weird people shit. He also wished like hell Mick would show up sooner rather than later, because the man’s knowledge would’ve been incredibly useful right about now, but he would have to just keep waiting, because there was no sign as to when Mick would arrive at the island.

Walking through the village at night reminded him of incredibly late nights in Japan, navigating along empty streets that still somehow seemed to have life in them because of the amount of lighting still illuminating the area.

Once the sun went down, the residents of the island tended to be far less active, at least in the public spaces, something Len was still struggling to acclimate to. He had always preferred to live his life in the evening hours, but that meant that he was now vulnerable when he slept, since there were no doors that locked or latched anywhere on the island. Even more complicated, all the doors for the apartments and buildings generally opened outward, so barricading them was damn near impossible.

He’d made his way back over to his building when he suddenly dipped to hide down behind the edge of the corner he’d been about to turn around, his eyes having caught motion near the bottom of the stairs at his building.

At the bottom of the stairs, he wasn’t entirely even sure *what* he saw. It was vaguely human shaped, but it was mostly comprised of lines of light, giving a weird impression of a person without it being an actual person. There were white glowing columns where arms, legs and the torso should be, and a weird blue ball of electrical light sparking at the top where the head should be. It was human shaped and sized, but other than that, it was almost like an after image of a person moving through the space. It had no hands, but there were two big sweeping curved edges extending from the ends of the arms like scythes, and Len could hear a humming sound like an electrical generator caught out in the rain before the figure let out a little cry of frustration. Then it turned and ran straight towards the forest,

disappearing into nothingness as soon as it crossed over the borderline that Harry had just shown him a little earlier.

Len waited a couple more minutes, as if he was nervous the thing might unexpectedly come back, before he eventually felt safe and secure enough to walk out into the open. As he approached the area where he'd seen the thing standing, he found there was a sigil of some kind painted in mud on the wall. He wondered if it had kept the creature away or summoned it to the building in the first place.

He did a quick perimeter sweep around the building, but didn't see anything else out of place from when he left it. The inability to lock anything had slowly been doing his head in, because it meant the only things he could guarantee were safe were the things he had on his person at any given time. He couldn't store things, he couldn't stash things and hiding things seemed a fool's errand, especially since there were so many people at The Retreat that it was still far too early to be making friend and foe assessments beyond those he'd known before his arrival here, and even those he wasn't completely rock solid on either.

He'd kept the knife they'd taken from the Nazi although he'd done his best to tuck it beneath his shirt, to keep it concealed. It wasn't much, but it was something and something was better than nothing on an island where weapons seemed to be almost impossible to come by. His German was passable, but not great, and the last thing he wanted to do was intrude on the thoughts of a deadman, but he was fairly certain he didn't have much of a choice.

Len headed inside and moved into the unit he and Mira were staying in. She was still sound asleep in the bed, where he'd left her a bit ago. He turned on a reading light in the living room area, opened the envelope and slowly began to translate and read.

'My dearest Claudia,

If you are reading this, then I have died on this god forsaken island, and for what? There is no glory of battle here. There are no real foes to fight beyond the monsters that come and savagely pick us off from the dark. We have been told that our stay here will only be a few months, but after three months, the supply drops stopped, and we have seen no sign of anyone coming to relieve us. Klaus and Rainer decided to take the Uboat to go back towards Australia, in an effort to receive updated orders or just even find out why we have seen a lack of supplies. At least they told us they were going to do that, but I don't even know how they would get access to the Uboat after Hauptmann Schenk went missing a few weeks ago. We have been unable to regain access to the underground part of the facility.

I fear I may die soon, Claudia, but if I do fall, know that my last thoughts were of you and our dearest Stephen. This damn island has taken everything from me but my soul and my life, and I fear both of those will fall soon.

Eternally your husband,

Olaf Grannemann"

As much as he wanted the letter to be fake, there had been something undeniably terrified in the man's eyes, and he'd come at the two of them as if they seemed like easy targets, so it was entirely possible that he'd killed before. The paper didn't *feel* like modern paper. He pulled the knife out beneath his shirt and started to examine it in the light.

While he wasn't a military historian, the general shape and feel of it were certainly not modern in make. He'd held classic K-bar knives a bunch, but this was older, treated with a bit more respect because it was clear it couldn't be easily and quickly replaced.

"What've you got there?" he heard Mira's voice say. He looked up to see her standing in the doorway, dressed in the nightgown she'd been wearing to bed.

"Would you believe me if I told you I killed a Nazi using his own knife tonight?" he said to her, hoping like hell she'd just call him crazy. "How much do you know about older weapons?"

"Enough that I can probably tell you you're full of shit, but lemme take a look at it."

"Look at this first," he said, pulling the empty P38 from his pocket, setting it on the table in front of him. "Don't worry, it doesn't have any bullets in it."

She moved over and kneeled next to the table, picking up the weapon, holding it up to get a better look at it. “It’s a P38, alright. Everyone seems to think all the Nazis were using Lugers, but the P38 was issued to way more troops. Despite the wear and tear from use, it’s in remarkable shape for being like eighty years old.”

“That’s just it, Mira,” he sighed. “I think it may have skipped a bit...”

Part Seven

Len

“What the hell do you mean it may have skipped a bit?” Mira asked him. “You don’t just find new Nazi guns lying around.”

Len chuckled, offering a little shrug. “I mean, I told you, I killed a Nazi with his own knife tonight. He looked like he’d stepped right out of a historical documentary on World War 2. Here, take a look at the knife,” he said, holding out the sheathed blade to her.

One of the reasons he’d made her look at the gun first was so that it would open her mind a little when it came to looking at the blade. Historical bladed weapons were something of a hobby for Mira, at least they used to be, back on the outside. If she could remember it at all. The things they had lost were never really clear in advance. He hoped that some of that knowledge was still rattling around inside of her brain.

Mira took the knife in her hands and considered it for a long moment, flipping it over and over in her fingertips, examining it carefully before handing it back to him. “Definitely a Nazi knife, although I don’t know that I would call that all that unusual on this island.”

“Okay, take a look at the note that he had on him,” Len said, fishing the paper out of his pocket, holding it out to his partner.

She took the letter from him and glanced at it, examining the paper, lifting it to her nose to take a sniff of it. “*Now* I’m more likely to believe you,” she told him. “I don’t know German, so I can’t read the letter, but everything about that paper feels antique, and yet, it’s almost brand new. The handwriting is messy, but it’s still markedly legible, the way people tended to write back when they knew it had to be read by someone. But this ink hasn’t had time to fade. There’s something significantly incongruous about the handwriting and the paper. Tell me all about this Nazi you killed.”

For the next several minutes, Len told Mira about his time with Harry, and his time with Rin before that. He didn’t leave anything out. If he was going to trust Mira, he was going to have to go at it full force, and that meant keeping her abreast of everything he saw and did. He went over all of it – the warehouse that was there then wasn’t, the Holy See, the gold bricks, the Nazis – every weird thing he’d seen since arriving at the island.

And she didn’t call him crazy or constantly interrupt him. She just took the information in, nodding sometimes so it was clear she wasn’t zoned out.

“Yeah,” he finished. “So, I’m thinking there’s some kind of time shenanigans going on here on the island, although I couldn’t tell you even the slightest how any of it works. Do you believe me?”

Mira grinned a little. “Of course I believe you, hon. I’ve been wondering how to bring up the fact that I thought I saw a German Spitfire flying overhead very early on after I got here without sounding like a lunatic, but it turns out, I’m not crazy – the island is.”

“Wait, you saw something weird *before* I got here, and it wasn’t the first thing you told me about?”

“If I told you that I thought I’d seen a WW2 German airplane flying above the treeline, would you have believed me?” she giggled.

He nodded. “Yeah, okay, I suppose that’s entirely fair. This sort of weirdness has to be

experienced at least once in person to be really believed. What now?"

"Dunno, babe," Mira sighed. "Maybe ask some of the people who've been around the longest if they know anything."

"Assuming they're not Management."

"I'm pretty certain that you've already figured out at least a few people that are and aren't management," she told him. "You've always been good at sniffing out hidden motives. Who do you think we should ask?"

"I barely know most of the people on the island."

"But of those you *do* know..."

"Let me sleep on it."

The next morning, Len decided they needed to go talk to Tex. The man had clearly been on the island for some time, and if anyone would know his way around what was going on, it would be him. Len still hadn't decided what to make of the man's long-term plans and agendas, but he certainly seemed like he knew better than anyone else on the island that the entire place was a madhouse with funhouse mirrors everywhere and nothing reliably made sense for more than a few seconds.

"Len!" Tex called at him as they entered the bar. The man was standing behind the bar with a plate of what looked like scrambled eggs covered in hot sauce in front of him, a fork stuck somewhere vaguely into the middle of it, dressed in jungle camo pants and a button up shirt, with a brown leather vest on over the top, just for a bit of added flair. He was, of course, still wearing the massive cowboy hat. It seemed like he rarely took it off. "Welcome welcome! You want some of these huevos rancheros that Bonita whipped up a couple of minutes ago? Woman knows how to make a killer breakfast."

"Sounds great, but I wouldn't want to take away from your meal."

"You'd only be doing me a favor," Tex laughed. "She made enough to feed the Bolivian army. Bonita, can you dish out a couple more plates for our guests here? And shit, dish one out for yourself and come to join us. I'll handle the cleanup."

The Spanish woman arched a suspicious eyebrow in his direction, but then dished out three more plates, bringing them over to the bar. Len had seen Bonita around Tex before, but couldn't be entirely certain what their relationship was, although he'd have put good money on them sharing a bed every now and then. They had a certain level of comfort around each other, a natural rhythm that generally only people who'd seen each other naked or spilled blood together had.

"Thanks," Mira said as Bonita pushed a plate down in front of her, while Len glanced at Tex.

"So, I have to tell you something, and I don't want you to freak out about it," Len said to the man as he settled on the barstool.

"You're secretly an alien," Tex guessed.

"No, but you're not too far off," Len chuckled, moving to saddle up to the bar. "Yesterday, I'm pretty sure I killed a Nazi who I think may have accidentally time traveled here from the 1940s."

"Sure sure," Tex said, nodding like Len had said something as obvious as 'it's hot outside' or 'it's raining.' It didn't seem to phase him in the slightest. Len was almost disappointed by the lack of reaction. "Like you do. Now what is it you don't want me to freak out over?"

Len felt his face take on a shape of confusion. He *really* hadn't expected Tex to be so calm about the whole thing. "That. I didn't want you freaking out over the fact that I killed a time traveler. A Nazi at that."

"Shit, Len, I thought you were going to tell me something actually *impressive*, but time weirdness? Nazis?" He rolled his eyes with a sly sideways grin. "That's par for the course 'round these parts. Sheeee-it, I killed a dinosaur last month."

"The fuck you did," Len scowled. Nazis were one thing, but dinosaurs? That had to be Tex pulling Len's leg. There was no possible w-

Tex lifted one of his legs up and propped one of his boots on top of the bar. It looked like it was made out of some kind of thick lizard skin, a sickly sort of green but the scaling was too big to be snake

or iguana. “Wasn’t all that big, but I made a pair of boots out of the body and kept a couple of the back plates and the skull. We cooked and ate the rest, which made for some mighty fine stew.”

“Lemme see the skull,” Len asked. Tex shrugged and pointed up, behind and above him, and sure enough, hanging from the wall was an elongated skull, like that of a giant bird or lizard, about the size of his torso. There were a couple of ropes holding it in place, in addition to the mounting beneath it to keep it against the wall. “You’re telling me that’s a genuine dinosaur skull.”

“Yep, had it up there about a year now,” Tex said. “Don’t think it was full grown, not by the size of it, anyway, but wasn’t a newborn either. Maybe the dino equivalent of a teenager or something. Came trundling out of the forest one day, so a handful of us put it down. Turned out afterwards that someone claimed it was a vegetarian and it might’ve been okay just being peaceable and the like, but none of us felt like it was worth the risk, ‘specially if it was gonna get to be a lot bigger. Didn’t want no dino to eat us out of house and home. Used a machete to take a swipe across the neck and then just ran out of the way until it bled out. Haven’t seen another one since then, but if you’re telling me there was a Nazi attacking you yesterday, who am I to say you’re lying? I’m just glad you’re okay. You seem a nice enough fella. Better’n damn Nazis.”

“Nazis, dinosaurs,” Len chuckled, shaking his head. “What’s next on this crazy island? Vampires? Werewolves? Wizards?”

“You promised me you *weren’t* an alien,” Tex said as across the room the pneumatic tube system thumped, announcing a delivery. “I’m going to hold you to that. I find out you been lying to me, I’m coming after you with that machete next.” He headed across the room and opened the chamber to pull out the container before closing it back up again, leaving it empty in case something else came rolling in. He walked back from the tube and towards the bar again, opening the container, pulling a single sheet of paper from it.

Len saw the man stop mid-stride most of the way back to the bar, a frown crossing his face. “What’s up, Tex?” Tex had seemed pretty unflappable so far, so to see him simply stop walking made Len a bit nervous.

“This message didn’t come from central processing, so I’m not entirely sure how it got into the tubes,” he said, his face showing a level of uncertainty that Len hadn’t seen on the man before. “You mind if I borrow you two for a little bit?”

“Always happy to help, Tex,” Len said. “What’s the message?”

“Says there’s something waiting for us outside of the mountain door.” He handed Len the slip of paper and it was written in text like from an old typewriter. “PACKAGE AT MOUNTAIN DOOR. COME COLLECT. -Mgmt”

“You ever gotten a message like this before?”

“Not for a long while. Got one a few times to tell us there was an incoming plane drop that was off schedule, but it’s been a while since we’ve randomly gotten one showing up. It matches up with their usual style, though. Typed message. No handwriting. Signed Management.”

“What the harm in not going?” Len asked.

“Could be food. Could be sensitive machinery or whatnot. Who knows. Besides, management knows how to make you regret giving them guff.” Tex sighed, heading over to the coatrack, grabbing his jacket. “No need to piss them off needlessly.”

“Well then,” Len said as he and Mina hopped off their barstools, “let’s go have us a looksee.”

The three of them headed out of the bar and climbed into one of the golf carts out front of the bar, unhooking it from the charger before heading down the road. Len had walked to the mountain door before and it wasn’t that far from the main center of the village, but the drive was certainly faster. The path was a bit windy, but it was kept very clear and Len noticed it looked like there may be buried lines on either side of the path. He hadn’t noticed those things before Harry had pointed them out to him, but now he was starting to wonder if he could use them to draw a map of the reliable part of the village. If the buried line formed a barrier around the fixed portion of the village, separating it from the part that

was constantly in flux, that could be extremely useful information to have.

The treeline receded and as they got close enough to see the door itself, the looming metal door built into the side of the volcano visible like an evil monolith. But that wasn't what caught Len's attention. On the ground down the hill just a little bit before the door was a large pile of a naked human, a man rumbled up into a mound of dark-skinned flesh, covered in bruises and cuts. The man was clearly alive, as the heap of muscles shifted and groaned a little.

On the back of the man's shoulder, though, Len spotted a familiar tattoo. From it, he immediately knew who they were looking at, and found himself both more nervous and less simultaneously. It was the last member of his team, Mick. The tattoo was a distinctive Zulu war mask, and even against Mick's coffee-colored skin, the colors still popped, as they'd been touched up recently. Len remembered when they'd gone in to do it. They'd been in Amsterdam, and Mick said since he was near the only tattoo artist he trusted, he was going to brighten the shades.

Of all the members of his team, Len trusted Mick the most, had known him the longest, and in a world where nobody was supposed to trust anybody, he'd found Mick to be indispensable, reliable and in perfect lockstep with him. He was Len's co-founder of The Scarab Unit, eight years ago when an operation had gone tits up for both of them, they'd both agreed to disappear and come back as new people, but with all their information about the game and its players intact. Both of them had been forgotten and abandoned by their country, and as such, they had left all loyalty behind to anyone beyond each other.

Mick was Len's ride or die, although the rest of the members of The Scarab came close.

The Scarab was an independent, off-the-grid, and decentralized team of counterintelligence agents that kept themselves drifting from place to place, without so much as an office where they could be regularly reached. The digital revolution had been extremely powerful for them, letting them be anywhere, anytime, always able to be contacted but never traced or tracked. The motto for the squad was that they could be putting down problems anywhere in the world within 24 hours if the money was right and the cause was just. (Unjust causes could subject to a couple of days' delay.) They didn't call anywhere "home." They didn't keep any possessions beyond what they could carry with them. They held no alliances or allegiances. They were, perhaps, the purest practitioners of spycraft living.

Together, the foursome was *exactly* the kind of unit that the island seemed to be designed to manage, so once they'd intentionally gotten a little sloppy, Len hadn't been at all surprised that whoever was running the madhouse had started picking them off one at a time, bringing them here. That had been Scarab's *plan*. Make it look like they were distracted, making mistakes, and once one of them was picked off, let that seem to affect the concentration of the remaining members, allowing them to be taken easier. If anything, Len had been a little worried that whoever Management was, they wouldn't want all four Scarab members, for fear that they might be too much to handle as a united front. Of course, they might also want him to think somebody on the team had been compromised, try to plant some seeds of dissent among the group.

Len and Mira ran over to Mick's body as Len started to assess the damages that had been done to the man, thankful to find they were mostly superficial and definitely not life threatening, although someone had certainly beat the hell out of him somewhere along the way, and pretty recently. That wasn't what concerned Len. What he *was* bothered by was the fact that Mick hadn't arrived the usual way, via air drop on a regularly scheduled plane – he'd just appeared outside of this mysterious metal door that nobody on the island supposedly knew how to open. That meant Management had a way to get things on and off the island that was behind the volcano's door.

They helped lift Mick up, the man mostly still limp and unconscious, as Tex ran over to join them, the three of them dragging him towards the golf cart. They were halfway from the door to the cart when a loud clang sounded from behind them. They looked back to see that there was now a naked woman piled up in the space where they'd just lifted Mick up from. The door still looked as immobile as it ever had, but clearly it had opened and closed again quickly, because there was no other place the

woman could've come from.

The woman looked to be in just as bad of shape as Mick was, her pale white skin blacker and bluer than cream. She was a tiny slip of a woman, but Len didn't recognize her. Who was she, why had she come in with Mick and why had they arrived this way instead of via plane like everyone else on the island had?

After putting Mick's body on the back of the golf cart, they gave him a more thorough sweep, just to make sure there weren't any injuries that they might have missed. All the wounds were basically bruises, and it looked like the bruising around the wrists and ankles was from struggling against restraints designed to keep him in place. Mick had been chained up for a while at some point before his arrival here.

When they moved over to the woman, she had similar heavy bruises on her wrists and ankles, and her short hair was strewn to mostly cover her face as they carried her to the cart as well, laying her down next to Mick, trying to fit them both on the back of the cart while still having them semi secured.

"Now they're coming out of the goddamn door," Tex grumbled. "What's next, showing up through the goddamn pneumatic tubes?"

Rin

Rin stood in the belly of the beast, the underground sorting room where all the pneumatic tubes came through. She'd never been in the internal hub room before, and it was a lot more chaotic than she expected it to be, with tubes pointing out in every direction, loops of metal and clear plastic all over the space of it, with erasable whiteboards hanging over most of them, although a handful of them just had worn sheets of paper with a word or two written on them taped to them. The tubes with paper were things like "Tex's Bar," "Canteen" and "Central Meeting Hall," all locations that didn't have residents in them that would change.

Like most things on the island, it was a system that worked without being immediately obvious to anyone who looked at it. It was jury rigged together, held functional by the constant efforts of its caretakers, who would update the signs. Some of the names looked like they'd been up a lot longer than others, and she spotted Harry's among the recent additions.

The woman staffing the tubes right now was an athletic black woman dressed in a green sleeveless t-shirt and green camo pants. She was reading a thick book, and with a little maneuvering, Rin could see it was a copy of Alexandre Dumas' "The Count of Monte Cristo," which made her smile a little bit.

"Hey friend," Rin said. "Got a minute?"

"Got plenty of them, but I bet it's answers you're looking for, and those I've got very little of," the woman responded, her voice tinged with an African accent from a region Rin couldn't quite place. "I'm Myo."

"Rin." They exchanged handshakes without Myo getting up from her seat at a table towards the center of the room. "It busy in here?"

Myo shrugged. "Not generally. I suspect we get maybe a dozen messages a day coming through here, but some days it's better or worse. You thinking of taking up some shifts in the relay? If so, I recommend you bring a good book or three."

"You got a pretty good one there," Rin said. "This the only hub for these tubes we have on the island?"

"That we know about," Myo replied, "but we don't know everywhere the tubes go, so it's certainly possible some of the lines might have additional stops or entry points. Shit, we've got about two dozen pipes there down at the end that we just have marked with question marks, because we can't tell where they go or what's on the other end of them."

"Wait... you don't even know where they go?"

Myo shrugged again. "Maybe they're buried chambers we haven't found. Maybe they're places

behind the mountain door. Who the hell knows? Until something comes from them, we're not really going to worry about them. You'll note we've got one marked 'Management' over there, which we've gotten messages from a few times before, although they never directly respond to anything we send to them. Why, you looking to send a message to them?"

"Not right now," Rin replied. "I'm trying to figure out where a message came from. You sent it to me about an hour ago?"

Myo frowned, shaking her head. "No messages in or out going the last three hours. Whatever you got, must've come through a phantom depot. What was it?"

"Nothing I'd like to talk about, if you don't mind."

The woman shrugged. "No skin off my nose. It something that requires a response?"

"It deserves acknowledgement of some kind, sure, but I'm not just going to send it out along random pathways hoping it gets noticed," Rin sighed. "How long does it take a message to get through the tubes?"

"A couple of minutes or so?" Myo looked empathetic, but unhelpful, nevertheless. "Nobody has a clock or a watch, certainly no radios or phones, so we're all just sort of estimating. If you drop something in a tube for your place here, it'll get there before you could get back there yourself, almost assuredly."

Rin looked around the room, but it was clear she wasn't going to get any real answers here, so she decided to head out. Just as she reached the door, there was the sound of a thump behind her, so she looked back and saw Myo opening one of the tubes to take out a capsule. The woman opened the top of it, looked at where it was supposed to be sent, then closed it back up, dropping it into another tube, closing up the chamber before it whooshed off quietly through the tubes once more.

She headed up the two flights of stairs from the basement where the mail service was situated, looking at the photograph that had been sent to her earlier that day. It was a photo of her and a man named Krieger having sex out in the jungle, having been taken last week, the only time she'd slept with the man, in an effort to get some information out of him, although it hadn't particularly worked.

Worst of all, Krieger and Rin's boss Len had bad blood that ran deep. She needed to find Len to let him know in advance that it was coming. The last thing she wanted was to be ambushed by it.

Harry

The last day hadn't helped much, as Harry still found himself stuck in a pickle. Neither Calisto nor Stella was giving him any cause to wish ill upon them. Sure, Calisto was slightly crankier and less openly eager to be around him, but that wasn't any reason to wish harm upon the woman. Stella was quicker to push for affection, but the minute she and Harry started getting at all physical, Calisto would crawl right into the middle of it. He supposed since she was feeling it anyway, she didn't want to be left out, and was afraid that if she didn't participate, Harry would just choose Stella by default.

He and the two women had decided they needed to continue exploring the island together and had headed down from their apartment to head off into the jungle, away from the central building structures. The three of them were geared up and moved away from the buildings and structures.

Once they got far enough into the jungle, Harry wondered what oddity they were going to come across this time. Between what they'd already come across, he fully expected it would be something radical and unnatural, but as it turned out, the wonder they discovered couldn't be any *more* natural, although it was still pretty radical.

They broke from the jungle to find the edge of the island, a little cove hooked in with a waterfall dropping down what looked like about two stories above the waterline into the ocean itself.

"God, what a view," Calisto said.

"That's gotta be like a stream or something that runs down from up the mountain or volcano or whatever there is over there," Stella added.

"I'm less concerned with the water and more concerned with what's behind it," he said, pointing

to the exposed cliffside behind the waterfall. There, glimmering in the faded light of the afternoon, was a wall of crystal like a geode, although the shade was a deep crimson red, shiny and reflective.

“Is... is that all ruby?”

Part Eight

Harry

“You have any idea how much money we’re probably looking at right now?” Harry said to the two women with him. “I mean, assuming we could get it out of here and back to civilization of some kind.”

“It’s not like it’s a wall of diamond,” Stella said to them.

“No, it’s probably more valuable,” Calisto replied. “Rubies, in large size and of high quality, they’re incredibly rare, so oftentimes if you’re comparing precious stones, a ruby will sell more for a diamond of around the same size. The Hope Ruby was like 32 carats and sold for almost seven million dollars.” She glanced at the wall again almost in astonishment. “How many carats would you guess are in that?”

“Too many to count,” Harry replied. “I bet if we dig around there, we’ll also find a bunch of sapphire too, since technically they’re the same stone.”

“They’re what now?” Stella asked.

“Ruby and sapphires, they’re both corundum, just colored differently,” Harry said. “Rubies are red because of the chromium in them, which gives them that glow in the sunlight. It’s also hard as shit, with only a couple of things harder than it on the planet.”

“Diamond being one of them,” Stella countered, clearly hoping to prove she knew *something* in what they were talking about.

“Yeah, and moissanite being the other,” Harry agreed. “But to find a wall of ruby of *this size*, I mean, Jesus, it’s completely unheard of. There’s nothing like it in any history that *I* know about. I don’t even know what to do about it. I mean, I can tell everyone back in the village about it, but it’s not like they can really do much trying to get anything from it.”

“Oh, like *hell* we’re going back without trying to get at least some kind of rock from there to haul back,” Calisto snorted. “I want to have a great big hunk of that shit the size of my head, just to plop it down on Tex’s bar, so I can ask him how many drinks it’ll buy me.”

“I thought everything on the island was free,” Harry said.

“Nobody asked you, limey,” Calisto said. “Now let’s get over there.”

Making a path around the outside of the cove border was much more complicated than it looked on first pass, simply because the foliage was so thick that they were doing their best to shove it aside where they could, cutting it away when they couldn’t. Harry didn’t really understand why guns were banned on the island, but knives and machetes were plentiful, but he guessed there wasn’t really any way to completely restrict residents from having any way to kill one another. They were all on an island with dozens of trained killers; for most people there, something as minor as a nail could be a deadly weapon. But with a bit of time, they were able to make their way around and over to the top of the waterfall without incident.

As they approached, Harry was fairly certain nobody from the island had made their way over to the waterfall before, as everything had a completely undisturbed vibe to it – no cut marks, no footprints, no paths, no carving markings, nothing that showed humankind had been over near it any time recently. There weren’t even any animal tracks or bird nests, which had very much surprised him. Most waterfalls had loads of bird nests near them, but this was stark deserted.

Even more eerily, Harry was fairly certain he could hear a high-pitched humming in his ears

that he felt like had to be coming from the wall of ruby, although he didn't see it affecting either of the two women, so he wondered if it was just something that he alone could hear. Different people had different hearing ranges, and it was entirely possible neither of them could hear the vibrations that were ringing in his ears.

"Can we just shear off a chunk of this?" Stella asked.

"Sure, what've you got that'll cut through it, keeping in mind what we told you just a little bit ago about it being one of the hardest things on the planet?" Calisto sneered.

"Fine. We'll just look for a loose chunk then, I guess," Stella said.

"The best bet is to dive down and look around in the water beneath it, see if there's a chunk down there we can haul up," Harry said.

"You see an easy way down there?" Calisto asked.

"I could just jump," he suggested.

"Harry, our lives are reliant on you deciding to keep one of us alive, so maybe you j—"

That was about all the reminder Harry needed to launch his ass off the cliff and down towards the water, so in the middle of Stella's sentence, he flung himself down towards the ocean without even taking much into account about the height. As soon as he was in the air, he guessed it was probably around thirty to forty feet, which meant if he didn't land right, or if the water was too shallow, he could do some serious damage to himself. Thankfully, Harry had more than his fair share of training for this kind of thing, and while it hurt like a son of a bitch when he connected with the water, he slipped into the correct posture before he did and didn't do any damage to himself as he sunk down towards the ocean floor right along the beach beneath the waterfall.

As expected, there were a number of large chunks of the gemstone wall that had been knocked loose over the years and he swam down as quickly as he could to try and find one that wouldn't weigh him down too much, a crystal about seven inches long by seven inches wide by about five inches thick, and despite the relative small size of it, it still felt like it weight fifteen to twenty pounds. The stone had been somewhat polished by the constant barrage of water pouring down into it, but it was still one big damn heavy rock.

Harry realized he probably should've stripped out of some of his layers of clothing, but it was too late now, and he swam up towards the surface, clutching to his massive ruby a little bigger than half of an American football. He wasn't sure the actual value of the stone he was carrying, but some part of him knew it was the most expensive thing he'd ever held in his hand. It mostly smooth and rounded, like a giant egg or an incredibly oversized opal, and when his head broke the surface of the water, he could see that Stella and Calisto were both making their way back over towards a portion of the cliff face that started to slope downward. He moved up to get along the coastline itself and then started swimming along it, slowly working his way around the edge of the island until he could see it start to dip downwards. Every so often he would take a short break and pin the incredibly large stone against the stone cliff, just to let him catch his breath.

It took the better part of twenty minutes before the land had receded enough that there was an easy enough portion for the women to climb down and space for him to climb up, as he stripped off his shirt and wrung it out before pulling it back on again, the large stone shining brilliantly at his feet in the fading sunlight of the afternoon that was stretching into evening. "Well, that was bloody heavy," Harry grumbled as Calisto and Stella moved over towards him.

"Are you insane, jumping off a cliff like that?" Stella scolded. "You could've been killed and we would've been killed with you!"

"What? From a little hop like that?" Harry laughed, moving to sit on a rock before tugging his boots off, peeling his socks off one at a time so that he could wring them out as well. "Not hardly. Might've sprained something if I'd landed wrong, or worst case broken a bone, mayhap, but I know how to safely dive into water from that kind of height. Anyway, here's your ridiculously oversized stone, although considering we don't have locks on doors, I don't know how you're going to keep it

safe, shy of burying it.”

“It’s not like I think we’re planning on taking it off the island, Harry,” Stella said, as she picked up the large stone from his feet. It shimmered and sparkled massively in the sunlight, although Stella wasn’t sure how to hold it. “I just want to have something to show the others, so people know we’re not full of shit when we tell them about the waterfall. Nothing dispels uncertainty like holding a big ass ruby in your own hands to validate what we told ya.”

“No playing footie with the giant precious stone,” Harry said as he saw Stella giving it little tosses, almost hefting it to check the weight, causing the woman to giggle a little bit. “You’d only break your foot or some such.”

“You may as well take your pants off as well, wring them out, otherwise you’re going to be making mud all the way back,” Calisto told him. Harry wasn’t particularly thrilled by the idea, but peeled off his pants and balled them up to give them a hard squeeze. “And since we’re here…” she said as she dropped to her knees, reaching into his pants to fish his cock out before she began running her tongue along the length of it.

“Good lord, woman,” Stella said, shuddering a little bit, as the pleasure signals were being relayed through all three of their brains. The giant ruby tumbled from her hand and plopped back down into the sand again. “You’re going to do whatever you have to in order to ensure he chooses you to live, aren’t you?”

“Survival of the fittest, bitch,” Calisto sneered before she pushed her head down hard onto his dick, swallowing as much of his shaft as she could before pulling her head back to gasp for air, laughing wildly. “I’m gonna do whatever I fucking have to so that I don’t just snuff it.”

Harry hadn’t exactly been a top tier ladies’ man when he’d been on the outside working, and now that he had two women vying for his attention, it was hard to keep his focus when they had turned their affections onto him. Both of the women were trained in using their bodies as a weapon, and Harry was doing his best to keep his head clear, but he was fighting a losing battle in that regard.

He noticed that Stella had her hand down the front of her own pants and could feel that she was fingering herself through whatever weird empathic link they currently shared, because it was lighting up nerves that Calisto had and he didn’t. He’d been doing his best to try and keep a clear head about it, but when he was getting double blasted by pleasure sensations, there was very little he could do to force his focus to stay on.

Within moments, he was spilling his seed into Calisto’s mouth, his orgasm cascading into triggering Stella’s, which triggered two in Calisto, all three of them getting lost in the cross-talking waves of pleasure rolling through their bodies for a minute or two.

“That’s never going to be *not* weird,” Stella muttered as Harry tucked his limp shaft away and pulled on his still damp pants back on.

“Well, it’ll stop being weird when one of us is dead,” Calisto grumbled, moving to get off her knees. “And, no offense sister, but better you than me.”

“Same to you, missy,” Stella said as she picked up the giant ruby again. “Now let’s get back to the village. I want to drop this thing on Tex’s countertop and watch his eyes bulge out.”

Mick

His head hurt.

A lot.

It wasn’t just his head, either, because he could feel bruises all over his body, the result of several beatings he’d endured at the hands of his captor before they’d strapped him into the table where they’d injected him with loads of drugs and flashed all sorts of lights and images into his face, although he couldn’t remember what any of the images were.

More annoying, he realized he couldn’t remember what an orange tasted like.

He’d always loved oranges, and finding the memory missing from his stable was infuriating,

but he had more important things to worry about than finding an orange to reacquaint himself with his favorite fruit.

“Well, you’re moving,” he heard Len’s voice say to him. “That’s progress at least.”

“Was I not moving before?” Mick heard his own voice say out loud, the tone of it surprising even him a little, as he realized he’d forgotten what his own voice sounded like. It had a harsh London city boy accent to it, because of course it would. Unlike Len, Mick hadn’t started out as an American. He remembered that much for certain. Mick hadn’t opened his eyes yet, simply because he was trying to figure out how many people were in the room first. It sounded like just one, but it didn’t hurt to be sure. The more information he could keep in his back pocket, the better.

“Nope,” Len said. “They beat you up pretty good then left your body for us to find. You and some woman I’d never seen before.”

“Well,” Mick said, starting to move a bit in what felt like a bed, “if *you* ’ve never seen her before, then she couldn’t be at *all* important, could she?”

Len chuckled somewhere across the room. “That’s not what I was saying at all, and you know it. Dick. I’m just saying she isn’t someone I recall us ever encountering in our work, so I have no idea if she’s a civvie or just some operator I’ve never met before. You know who she is?”

“No idea.” He opened his eyes and his eyelids immediately hurt, but he decided to keep them open anyway. It looked like he was in some sort of small one bedroom apartment that had been decorated in 1964 and gone untouched since then. “Never saw a woman the entire time they were working me over. Just the same three or four men in those ridiculous pig masks. Are we where we’re supposed to be?”

“We are,” Len said, moving over to sit down on the edge of the bed. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got the shit knocked out of me three or four times while falling down over and over on a treadmill,” Mick groaned as he turned to look at his best friend. “Tell me you got her. Tell me all this wasn’t completely for nothing.”

“I got her,” Len said, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “She’s here, she’s mostly fine and she remembers me.”

Mick lifted his dark-skinned hand and placed it on top of Len’s lighter flesh. “Well, hoo rah, amigo. Let’s hear it for one solitary thing going right.”

“Harry and Rin are both here as well,” Len said. “Harry’s a bit dinged up, but Rin got here first, so she’s been getting the lay of the land. They’ve both got some holes in their memories, but they both remembered me and you, so I guess we can be glad they didn’t take that from us.”

“That’s just great, but who’s Harry?” Mick said, struggling to sit up. He grinned a little bit, seeing the nervous look on Len’s face. “Relax. Fucking with you.”

“Don’t *do* that, man,” Len sighed. “The memory holes are nothing to joke about. I’ve spent more time than I want to admit for the last week trying to remember my mother’s real first name, and I *still* don’t have it in my brain.”

“Evelyn,” Mick offered.

“Evelyn!” Len cheered. “Oh, thank fucking God you’re here, man. That would’ve driven me absolutely mental given much longer.”

“No problem. You have an orange handy?”

“We can probably go down to the cantina and get one,” Len said. “Why, is it important?”

“It might be the most important thing in the world to me right now, but it’ll keep,” Mick said. He checked himself and realized that while he was dressed in a boxers, a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, he also had loads of bandages wrapped around his arms, legs and torso. “Was the Mummy Returns treatment really necessary?”

“We weren’t sure if any of the cuts were deep, so better to be safe than sorry out here in the goddamn jungle,” Len told him.

“We’re in a jungle?”

“We’re in a jungle, on an island,” Len said. “South Pacific most likely. Most definitely a good way out of any shipping lanes.”

“How big an island?”

“Nobody’s entirely certain? Best guess, maybe half the size of Tongatapu?”

“So, what, a little more than a hundred square kilometers?” Mick asked.

“Maybe?” Len said. “It’s... well, it’s pretty fucking complicated.”

“It’s a geographical feature, Len,” Mick grumbled, putting one of his feet down on the ground, then the other, before moving to stand up, finding his legs a little uncertain and wobbly. “How the fuck is geography complicated?”

“Well, it’s on a volcano, first off, and second off, there’s some pretty specific weirdness going around here that has to be seen to be believed.”

“Weirdness is just people’s way of saying they saw something they couldn’t reasonably explain,” Mick countered. “You know that. What’s so weird that you can’t explain?”

“Nazis. Dinosaurs. Vatican gold. Praying mantises the size of horses.”

Mick squinted at Len with an annoyed look. “Are you sure *you’re* not the one who got beaten up here?”

“I know how it sounds, Mick, so you’re gonna have to trust me on this, but I can show you the knife the Nazi had on him, or a letter he’d written to his girl back home. The paper, the ink, the style of handwriting... everything about it screams non-modern. I’ll show you once you’re ready to start exploring the island a bit.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that this mysterious island prison we’re on, the one that doesn’t exist on any maps that we can find, that doesn’t show up on any satellite scans, in addition to all of that, it’s time travelling?”

“Parts of it. Yeah.”

Mick shrugged his massive shoulders. “Yeah, fuck it. Why not. It makes about as much sense as anything else regarding this place. You learn anything about the people who’re running it yet?”

“They call themselves Management, but beyond that, I got absolutely nothing.”

“Then tell me about the island.”

“It’s had its share of residents over the years,” Len told his friend as he moved to sit down at a wooden chair in the little living room area. “We think the Germans were the first to find it, back in World War 2, but even that we’re not entirely sure of. We also think the Japanese had a military station on here for a while, but that’s also guesswork. The last real residents here had to have been here in the sixties or seventies, at least until Management started using it for its pocket prison. There’s hydroelectric power, again we *think*, being generated somewhere beneath us, which charges everything. All the vehicles on the island are electric, but they aren’t exactly brand new.”

“How do you mean?”

“They’re like electric golf carts from the 1990s,” Len said. “They’ll hold charges for a while, but it’s not like they’re Teslas or anything.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess. Electric carts seem better than walking.”

“In the places you can use them, sure, but that’s mostly just around the village, and to and from the dock.”

“We have a dock?”

Len nodded. “It’s a small one, with a single boat on it. Electrically charged as well, although they use batteries for it that they can swap in and out. I think it’s mostly just so management can generally toss things out of the sky with parachutes and we have to go out and fish them out of the water before they sink. We can’t try and storm a plane if there’s never a plane on the ground.”

“Smart thinking,” Mick agreed. “So that’s how we all got here?”

“Well, that’s how *most* of us got here. I think nearly everyone *but* you woke up being shoved out of an airplane strapped into a life raft with a parachute. You, my friend, decided that wasn’t *flashy*

enough for your entrance.”

“It’s not like I remember *any* of this, Len,” Mick frowned. “So if I wasn’t thrown out of a plane and parachuted down onto the ocean, how the hell did I get here?”

“There’s a big metal hatch along one side of the dormant volcano that never opens. We’re pretty sure you got tossed out of that.”

Mick’s frown deepened. “Which means what exactly?”

Len shrugged a little. “My best guess is that they’ve got a submarine pen somewhere underneath the island, and that there’s a small compound inside the volcano where Management keeps tabs on us all locally. There’s cameras all over the place, but nobody knows where they go. I suspect they brought you and your friend in on the submarine for whatever reason, and then threw you out of the big metal door. I’m not sure why they would’ve wanted to draw attention to it, though.”

“How do you mean?”

“We got a note telling us to come pick you up, when they could’ve just hauled you out and thrown you into some random apartment while you were unconscious, and then we wouldn’t have had any proof that that door opens,” Len said. “But now we know for sure it does, because while we were picking your body up and loading you onto a cart, the door opened again behind us, pitched out the lady we found with you and closed again before we even got a chance to see. Just heard the loud clanging sound of the door slamming shut again, so they must’ve moved incredibly fast.”

“What did you do with her?”

“She’s in the apartment next door.”

Mick chuckled, nodding as if this was expected. “You lock her in there?” He wasn’t particularly stable, but he started walking around the apartment a little bit, trying to get the lay of the land, and get the layout of the place committed to memory as quickly as he could.

“There aren’t any locks anywhere on the island.”

“You’re joking,” Mick said.

“You hear anybody laughing?”

“No locks on anything?”

“Nothing. Everything is completely unguarded. Not even so much as latches on bathroom doors to keep them locked from the inside for privacy, so get used to the idea that there really isn’t anything or any place secure on the island, other than that bigass metal door they threw you out of.”

“It’s locked?”

Len shrugged. “It’s unopenable. There’s no handles, no latches, no hinges we can see, no mechanism to open it. Working theory is that it’s only openable from the inside of their little compound.”

Mick’s eyes had been slowly scanning the room before his gaze finally landed on the two tubes that ran along the wall in the living room, with the small chamber for catching things empty. “This can’t *possibly* be what I think it is, can it?”

“Pneumatic tube system,” Len confirmed. “Fully functional. They use it to send messages across the village. It’s also how we found out about you being outside of the door. Management sent us a note that we were to come and collect you.”

“They couldn’t just call you on the telephone?”

“No phone lines here. No radios either. No computers. No firearms.”

Mick laughed. “You’re fucking having a laugh. No firearms?”

“Nope,” Len shrugged. “You want to kill someone, you’re gonna have to probably use your bare hands, unless you’ve got a knife on you. There’s a number of those on the island, although I think most of them are either used for cooking or clearing foliage.”

“You figured out what the hell they want from us yet?”

“I assume it’s just the usual – information, by hook or by crook,” Len said. “Of course, nobody’s really been asking much in the way of questions yet. In fact, up until Harry showed up a bit

back, Management had apparently been pretty hands off, beyond their weekly supply drops, but when they dropped Harry off, they included two women with him, one from Portugal's SIED, the other with South Korea's National Intelligence Service, although both of them claim they'd left their respective agencies a few years ago."

"That certainly sounds familiar," Mick said, his hand smoothing along the length of the heavy clear plastic tubing that ran down into the floor. "He believe them?"

"It's Harry, y'know?" Len laughed. "He's always been the Pollyana of us, trying to see the best in everyone, no matter how shit they can be."

"Sure, but the kid's got good instincts."

"Well, they're a little rattled right now."

Mick shrugged. "Being dumped onto a remote desert island prison'll do that you."

"No, that's not it," Len said, standing up. "Management gave him a message before sending him to the island that one week after he got here, they were going to make him decide which of the two women came with him lived and which one died."

"Christ on a bike, what kind of sick Saw shit is this?"

"It gets even weirder," Len said. "Harry tells me that somehow, they linked their nervous systems, so whenever he feels pain or pleasure, the two women feel it as well, and vice versa."

Mick turned to glare at Len intensely. "What kind of weird world shit have you gotten us mixed up with?"

"Look, if I known even *half* of this shit, I wouldn't have suggested you all come with me. I'd have gone after Mira on my own."

"But you said she's here, she remembers you and she's mostly fine?"

"Yeah, she's got memory holes, like all of us, and I don't know how deep any of them run, but she remembers enough for her to remember how she and I met. And she remembers you and Rin and Harry, so, small miracle there."

"And you don't think she's been compromised?"

"Don't let me sway your judgement on that, Mick," Len said. "I might have a clouded opinion, since I wanted her back so damn badly. Other than me, you knew her best out of Scarab, so you can size her up for yourself and see what you think."

Mick moved to step into the bedroom, smiled and leaned his head back out to give Len a grin. "Well, now I *know* you remember me, because otherwise, I doubt *this* would've been here." Inside of his bedroom was a slightly beat-up six string acoustic guitar resting on a stand. Mick picked it up and carried it out into the living room. "This isn't contraband?"

"There was one included in a supply drop a while back, but nobody requested it, and apparently nobody else on the island plays guitar, so it's all yours," Len said. Mick had been known to play blues guitar during their downtime, and while Len couldn't play any instrument to save his life, he had a solid enough singing voice. "Anyway, that's enough briefing for right now. I'm just glad you made it here okay, and you don't seem to be too fried in the head."

"Well, you know how brain injuries go, Len," Mick said. "You never know the extent of them until you start realizing what you're missing. How's Rin? Still as quiet and cryptic as ever?"

"She's on our side, Mick."

"Oh, I know she is, but that doesn't make her any more communicative with us than she is with the enemy," Mick said, a dry amusement to his voice. "Girl naturally keeps secrets from even the people she trusts the most. Well, now that we're all here, and you've found Mira, what's first on the agenda? Trying to find a way off the rock? Or are we trying to pull back the curtain and meet the wizard?"

"I don't know about you, Mick, but I'd like to know who the hell has the money to fund this kind of operation, and just what the hell they're doing with it."

"Any leads? Any threads we can start by pulling on?"

“Once you’re up and running, we can go explore the island together, see what you make of any of the stuff we’ve already found.”

Mick set the guitar down on the table and then moved over to the couch, slumping down into it. He was sore and ached but not so much that he felt he would be down for long. “And you got no idea who the woman you found with me was?”

“She looked Mediterranean, maybe, but beyond that, I got nothing. We can go over and talk to her if you want, although frankly, we should probably get you something to eat.”

“Fuck yes,” Mick said. “I need to relearn what oranges taste like.”

He went to grab some socks and shoes to put on, and when he walked back out into the living room, the pneumatic tube vibrated for a bit and then suddenly a plastic capsule shunted into place, waiting for Mick to pick it up.

“Tex, the guy who helped me bring you here, he said he was going to tell the Post Office you were here, so that’s probably just a standard greeting message from him, giving you the basic rundown of the island.”

Mick opened up the chamber, pulled out the capsule and then closed the tube back up. After opening the capsule, he pulled out a small clamshell jewelry box from the plastic enclosure. He opened it up slowly, just enough to peek inside before snapping it shut again sharply. He glanced up at Len, his face almost aghast. “The woman who came with me... you see any tattoos on her back?”

“Yeah,” Len said. “She had a comedy/tragedy mask tat on her back right shoulder, except—”

“Except the eye holes on the masks had cats’ eyes in them,” Mick finished.

“How the *fuck* would you know that?”

“Because...” Mick opened the box and turned to show a large white gold ring inside of it, hanging from a long silver chain that was mostly tucked beneath the pedestal the ring was on. “This is my old wedding ring. Which means that the woman next door is my wife.”

“Wait, your *dead* wife?”

“*Presumed* dead wife,” Mick corrected. “She’s been gone six years now, but nobody ever found a body, and she was the last one to have my wedding ring... we used to lend them to each other for good luck charms.”

“Well then,” Len said. “We’d better go check and make sure your wife’s okay.”

Mick scowled. “This isn’t too weird for you?”

Len chuckled. “A couple of days ago, I was looting Vatican gold and yesterday before I hauled your ass over here, I killed a time travelling Nazi with his own knife. At this point, weirdness is all pretty relative.”

Part Nine

Mick

There were a lot of things Mick had been prepared for when Len had come to him and pitched the gig of them finding and breaking this mystical, mythical island prison for spies and covert operatives, but to find his wife, alive and unharmed, certainly wasn’t one of them.

Len had wanted to wait until the woman woke up to enter the apartment that they’d put her in, but Mick refused to wait. The time for waiting was long, long past. He’d done everything he could’ve with his wife’s absence that he could’ve. He’d gone through all the stages of grief, lingering in denial perhaps a bit longer than he’d probably should’ve (with a dash of alcoholism on the side, because why not), specifically because her body had never been *found*, but that was the life of a spy – one day, you were a person and the next day you just *weren’t*, and no one would ever know where you’d gone or why. The one thing he *hadn’t* done with her absence was *deny* it.

And son of a bitch, he thought to himself, that's her laying there in bed, looking just like I remember her on the day she vanished. Six years had been far kinder to her than it had to him, and as much as he wanted to shake her awake, to ask every question that had been rattling around in his head for the last six years, his first thought was that she looked tired, clearly having been wounded in much the same way that he had, dozens maybe hundreds of small cuts all over her skin beneath the bandages, and that it would be better to let her rest. But there were questions rattling around in his brain that demanded answers, that demanded resolution, and he wasn't entirely certain he could wait much longer for them when they were asleep just a few feet away.

Or so he thought.

"Enjoying the view?" his wife's voice said from across the room, her voice tinged with those faint remnants of her Greek accent. "I can give you a little shimmy shake if it would make you feel better or make your old man cock twitch a little."

"Old man cock?" Mick chuckled. "Woman, who do you think you're talking to?"

At the sound of his voice, the woman sat bolt upright and turned to look in their direction. "Babe is that you?" Her eyes caught sight of him and a wide smile blossomed on her face as she jumped out of bed and sprinted over to throw her arms around him, clinging to him tightly. "I knew you'd come and get me, whoever the bastards were that took me." She glanced over at Len before looking back at Mick. "Is that one of the bastards or one of *your* bastards?"

"I'd always meant to introduce you, baby, but this is my partner, Len," Mick said, sliding his arm around his wife's waist. "Len, this is my wife Iris, the one I won't shut up about."

Len offered a hand for her to shake, and she did, quite firmly. "So you're one of the only men my husband has ever trusted with his life. You'd figure after three years of you two being partners he would've introduced me to you, just so if you had to ever haul my ass out of a fire you'd know what I look like."

Mick's eyes narrowed a little bit, as he tilted his head, glancing quickly at Len, almost wanting to pull away from the woman he was no longer certain was his wife, but not wanting to frighten her. "Iris, what year is it?"

She scowled at him with a harsh frown. "Are you joking?"

"Humor me, babe."

"It's 2001."

Mick looked at his friend before looking back to his wife. "Babe. It's 2007."

"The hell you say," Iris said to him, before looking over at Len, seeing the same look on Len's face as she saw on her husband's. "How the hell can it be 2007?"

Len chuckled bitterly, shaking his head. "At *this* point, in *this* place, I'd believe just about anything. Welcome to the madness ride, m'lady."

"I don't understand, baby. How can it be 2007? It's February 2001, give or take a few days!"

"You really don't remember any time passing?" Mick asked her.

"It was, like, a week ago that I was sitting in our flat in London when I noticed there was some sort of smoke coming into the place and then I passed out and woke up in some sort of strange attic, in some old wooden musty house. I was kept there for a day or two, fed, given a bucket to piss and shit into, and eventually they gassed me up again and moved me."

"Do you remember any details about the places you've been?"

"The last one felt like a metal box, and my ears kept popping, so it was a container box, maybe, although I'm not really sure. I feel like I've mostly been drugged for the last week or so," she said, looking at Mick in disbelief. "You really do look a little bit older, love. But... six years?"

Mick reached down and pulled his shirt up over his head, setting it aside before turning his back to her, showing her the back of his right shoulder. There was a well-healed gunshot scar against the back of his shoulder, just to the left of the shoulder blade. "You see that, love? I got that about a month after you disappeared, laying down cover fire for Len on an operation in Belarus, back when Scarab

was just the two of us.”

She moved over to run her hand over the scar, brushing her touch on the skin, as if making contact with Mick’s flesh would somehow make the fact that she was missing so much time sink into her mind. Mick didn’t blame her. If it hadn’t been Len who had told him about the whole time-travel nonsense, he wouldn’t have believed it either. “Scarab isn’t just the two of you?”

“We’re a foursome now,” Mick said. “We brought on a couple of others, to fill in the sort of gaps we had in our skillsets. Between me and Len, we can’t do everything.”

“Len?”

“We’ve got code names now – Len, Mick, Rin and Harry.”

“Cute. What happens when you pick up a fifth?”

“We’ll reevaluate the codename system,” Len joked. “Or they can be Suttu or something.”

Iris’s face looked weary as she tipped her gaze down. “Six years gone. Bet I’ve missed some shite, haven’t I?”

“Loads more than I can tell you about in a few minutes, love, but we’ve got plenty of time to catch up.”

Iris looked up at Mick and the expression on her face had changed from one of lost frustration to one of intense anger, which put Mick more at ease. The unrestrained consternation was classic Iris. “Who the fuck did this to me, baby?”

“That’s what we’re going to try and figure out...”

Harry

It had taken them a few hours to get back to the main village, mostly because they felt like the jungle kept turning in on them over and over again, sending them down strange curves and turns, through portions of the jungle they’d either never seen before or walked through several times. Harry had tried to mark their path by stopping and carving symbols in the trees on their way into the jungle, but even though he was certain they were walking back the same way they came in, none of his markings were anywhere to be found. He was starting to get more annoyed with the layout of the bloody island than he probably had any right to be.

When they got back to the edge of the village, it started to rain again, and Harry was starting to wonder just how often he was going to have to get used to this sort of heavy pissing weather while he was here. It wasn’t like it would gently come on, a mist of water that dusted over the jungle ceiling, but it always seemed to charge in like a threat, overcast one moment, torrential downpour the next.

The three of them tried to take cover but considering how quickly the rain started to power down onto them, none of them had a chance to be anything less than drenched, their clothes plastered onto them like second skins. If he hadn’t been shivering like crazy, he might’ve taken time to appreciate the views of his two female partners, but instead, the three of them rushed into Tex’s Bar, letting the door slam shut behind them.

“You look like an armadillo that’s just avoided bein’ run over by a Jeep, partners,” Tex said to them. “Lemme get you all some drinks and you can tell me your tale of woe and chaos.”

“You won’t believe our tale even if I tell it to you, Tex,” Harry laughed, wringing his shirt out a bit, trying to get some of the endless rainwater out of it. “Can you make a g’n’t?”

“Course I can, boy, but I can’t understand why you’d want me to,” the burly man cackled. “And for you ladies?”

“Sangria,” Calisto said.

“Whiskey, neat,” Stella countered.

“While you’re at it, Tex,” Calisto followed up, “what would you say you think of this?” She reached into her bag and pulled out the giant-sized ruby they’d found, dropping the oval-shaped stone onto the countertop.

“I’d say that’s a pretty big fucking stone you got on you there, missy. You seen any more like

that?”

“Whole *wall* of ruby, just beneath a waterfall,” Harry said as Tex slid his drink in front of him. “I’d tell you where we saw it, but I have a sneaking suspicion it won’t be back that way again any time soon. It feels like just when you think you know how something works around here, it stops working that way. But when we walked along the ... left coast? Leading away from the village, we eventually came across a waterfall with a giant sheet of polished ruby behind it. We scooped up one of the loose shards of it from the area around the bottom of the waterfall. There’s sort of a sunken tidal pool beneath the waterfall that doesn’t always push out into the main ocean itself, or at least there *was* when we were by it today, but I guess that won’t be there tomorrow.”

“It’s hard to say when any individual feature’s going to appear or disappear, so if you tell enough people about it, some of the other residents’ll keep an eye out for it and maybe it’ll reappear or maybe it won’t,” Tex said, placing a big pitcher of sangria and an empty glass in front of Calisto. “I know there’s a couple of partners here on the island who were trying to map it out for a while before they done given up, sayin’ nothing’s ever in the same place twice, and that the whole damn island don’t make no sense.”

Harry lifted his gin and tonic up in a salute before taking a long draw off it. “I wholeheartedly concur with that sentiment in its entirety.”

“You’re sure it’s ruby?” Tex said, placing a double shot of whiskey in front of Stella before moving over to the giant stone. Harry wasn’t even bothered when the older man ran a fingernail along the smooth surface of it. “Sumbitch, that damn thing ain’t even bothered is it?”

“Ruby’s one of the strongest things in the world, Tex,” Calisto said to him, pouring herself a big glass of sangria. “I imagine that wall of it we saw’s worth billions, assuming you could figure out a way to get it loose from there and take it back someplace where the laws of reality were a bit more clung to.”

The three of them were sitting at the bar in a row, with Calisto to his left and Stella to his right. Each of the ladies was drinking with their outside hand, their inside hands resting on Harry’s thighs, not aggressively or demandingly, more just like reminding him of their presence around him. The rest of the bar was empty, although Harry could still feel the presence of the cameras looking down onto them from their recessed and protected nooks. He’d asked Len about whether or not anyone had tried damaging or destroying the cameras, and he’d been told that Tex had relayed stories about how those who tried such things were often punished or, worse still, just disappeared. Harry wasn’t sure he believed the stories but didn’t feel like pushing his luck to find out how true or not they were.

“Whole island’s full of shit like that,” Tex said. “Dinosaurs. Nazis. Even supposedly a second village that appears and disappears counter to our own, although that one seems like it might be even a bit too much for me to swallow.”

“Doppelgängers are too far, but dinosaurs you buy?” Stella asked.

“Sure. Hung its skull over my door, up there near the rafters. Take a look for yourself.”

The man hadn’t been exaggerating, and up near the beams of wood supporting up the third floor of the building was a large reptilian skull that had to be at least three feet in length, far too big for it to be a gator or crocodile.

“This place fucking blows,” Calisto grumbled, rubbing the cool glass across her forehead. “I can’t trust anything I see or hear here, and at some point, it’s gonna be the death of me.”

“You and me both, sister,” Stella said, raising her glass in front of Harry, so they could clink them together. “Assuming he doesn’t die first.”

“Nobody’s dying any time soon if I have anything to say about it,” Harry said. “Not that I think I have much to say about it.” He frowned a little bit. The deadline was rapidly approaching, and Harry didn’t like the idea of condemning one of two women he still barely knew to death for reasons that would be shallow and superficial at best, if they could conceivably be called reasons at all. He felt that might’ve been generous. As the words left his mouth, he regretted saying them, because it was a

promise he knew deep down that he could not keep.

A minute or so later, the pneumatic tube linked to the bar rattled as a delivery arrived in the carriage. Tex opened the chamber, pulled out the pill and closed the tube back up. After opening the pill, he took out a folded sheet of paper, looking down at it, not unfolding it. "Looks like it's for you, Harry," he said, holding the singular piece of paper out.

"The hell?" Harry took the paper from the man and unfolded it. There, in printed text, was an instruction.

TIME'S UP. YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE TO DECIDE.

Harry crumpled up the paper, shaking his head, looking up at the camera, tossing the wad of paper in that direction. "Fuck you, take me instead," he said. "There's no point. You can't make me choose between two people I don't know. I'm not playing God. I refuse. Kill me."

Another delivery chunked into the carriage, Tex taking it out, opening it quickly, holding the paper up to Harry.

CALISTO KILLED YOUR SISTER. STELLA KILLED YOUR BROTHER. THIRTY SECONDS.

Harry's eyes widened, trying to process the information. There was no reason to assume it was true, but somehow he knew that it *was* true, because the truth would be so much more powerful here than a lie. He was the youngest of three children, all of whom had gone into the Special Services for England, and both his brother and his sister had died within the span of a few months, about two years ago. Six being what it was, they refused to give him any details beyond that they were killed in the line of duty, and that they would be honored posthumously. It had never set well with Harry.

"No," he said. "I refuse to play whatever fucking mindgame it is you think you've going on here!" Harry shook the sheet of paper in the direction of the camera. It was impossible to have an argument when the other side was somewhere on the other side of a screen, deciding things for you without so much as a word of discussion. "You can kill me, or you can kill nobody."

Suddenly, Harry felt a bolt of lightning shooting through his brain, as if he was being electrified for a moment, his brain crawling with ants from the gods, tearing his synapses open and then, just as quickly as the pain had appeared, it was gone again.

He turned to look at Stella, whose face was scrunched in pain as she rubbed her temple. Then his eyes whipped to the other side of him, where he saw that Calisto's head had slumped forward. As he started to shift his body, hers fell backwards, taking the stool with it, her lifeless body slamming onto the floor, blood running out of her eye sockets, nostrils and ears.

She was dead before she hit the floor, but Harry had no idea how they'd done it, or why they'd chosen her instead of him, or instead of Stella.

Whatever nerve link he and Stella had had with the woman, it was clearly gone now.

He hadn't even felt her die. One minute she was there, the next, suddenly not.

Harry hopped off the stool and moved to crouch down next to Calisto, bringing his hand up to close her eyes for her, so her dead eyes weren't staring at him, but her face was expressionless, her death having hit so rapidly that it hadn't even had a chance to register.

No pain, no fear.

Alive.

Dead.

SHUNK! Another pill slotted into the carriage, and Tex, just on force of habit, opened it up, took it out, opened up the container and immediately held out the folded sheet of paper to Harry. He wanted to take the paper and burn it without reading it, but the people on the other end of the camera had demonstrated how willing they were to just to make a point.

He wasn't afraid; he was being respectful.

Harry took the paper from Tex's hand and slowly opened it.

YOU NEVER HAD A CHOICE.

Harry inhaled a deep breath, folded the paper closed again and then looked to Stella, who was the most visibly shaken he'd ever seen her. He debated what to do with the paper, but then held it out to Stella, along with the one before it, that said she had killed his brother. She took them from him and began to read.

And then Harry walked out of the bar, alone.

Rin

She'd been looking for Len for hours when she finally came across him, along with Mick and a woman she didn't recognize. Len looked confused, weary and frustrated, all things she was not used to seeing on the boss's face. "I see you picked up our stray heavy hitter," Rin said with amusement. "Glad to see you're alive, Mick."

"Heya Rin," Mick said. "Let me introduce you to Iris."

Iris offered her hand, and although it took a long moment before Rin shook the hand extended towards her. "No offense, but aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"I seem to be hearing that a lot today. My husband—"

"Husband?"

"We were married before she disappeared, Rin," Mick said to her. "I never mentioned it because, well, I never mentioned it..."

"No offense, Iris," Rin said, "but where you been all these years?"

"You mean all these *days*, don't you?" Iris flinched. "Sorry. 2007. Right. Still getting my head fully wrapped around that."

Rin sighed, shaking her head, looking over at Len. "Time shenanigans again? Like the Nazis and the Vatican gold?"

"Vatican gold?" Iris asked.

"It's a thing," Rin replied.

"It's a *whole* thing," Len grumbled. "Time travel. Nazis. Vatican gold. Dinosaurs. Oversized praying mantises. Metal doors that don't open except when they do."

"If I hadn't seen the scar on Mick's shoulder, old and regenerated, that I *know* wasn't there a week ago, I wouldn't have believed six years have passed, but I know my husband." She swallowed a deep breath. "He wouldn't lie to me. Not *me*. I've lost time. A lot of it."

"And somehow not aged a day, my love," Mick chuckled. "It's downright unfair it is."

"Anything interesting happen while I was away?" Iris joked, and immediately after the words left her mouth, she came to regret it. "Wait, what happened? What did I miss?"

Rin looked at Mick and Mick looked at Len, and Len shrugged a little bit. "On September 11th, 2001, a terrorist organization called al-Qaeda attacked the United States. They hijacked four passenger planes. They flew two of them into the Twin Towers in New York City and brought down both buildings. A third ran into the Pentagon. The last was crashed by the passengers in an attempt to stop the terrorists from running it into its target, assumed to be either the White House or the Capitol building. There were almost three thousand people killed on that day, the deadliest terror attack in human history. The person responsible for the attack, Osama bin Laden, remains at large to this day."

"Shit." Iris clenched her hand into a fist. "I imagine you've been quite busy since I've been gone, then."

"You have no idea, my love," Mick said. "Nobody trusts anybody, and everybody's causing problems for everybody else."

"And my husband's part of the most dangerous and untraceable pair of mercs in the business." She glanced over at Rin and sighed. "Quartet, sorry."

"We've been very busy, dealing with all sorts of problems," Len said quietly. "Starting wars. Ending wars. Overthrowing governments. Finding troublemakers and dealing with them."

"So, what brought you all to this neighborhood?" Iris joked.

“We were looking for his girlfriend, actually,” Mick said, pointing at Len.

“She’s also a spy. She went missing several months ago. In fact, we determined a *lot* of spies were going missing, so we set out to see if we couldn’t join the ranks of the abducted,” Len said. “Sure enough, one by one, we all started to go missing and all started to appear here. The time frame’s a little wonky, and we don’t all remember all the bits and bobs, but we’re doing what we can to figure out what’s going on and who’s in charge.”

“And what have you got so far?”

“Not a whole fucking lot,” Rin grumbled.

“Other than the fact that this island is a fucking mess, and we’re not even sure how many of the basic rules of reality work here,” Len added. “The people who control this island are very good at keeping their secrets.”

“I just got here, same as you, baby,” Mick said to Iris.

“And your fourth team member?” she asked.

“Harry,” Len said. “He’s been dealing with his own level of impossible to manage bullshit.”

“No missing wife, girlfriend, sister, long-lost cousin? Nothing like that?”

“No, but his seems to be biologically linked to a couple of women, sharing all the same nerve sensations,” Len said. “I wouldn’t wish his problems on anyone else.”

“Shared the same nerve sensations?” Iris asked. “What, like two people listening in on the same phone call?”

“Yeah, except it’s pain and pleasure all rolled into one,” Len sighed. “But you look like you had something else in mind, Rin. What’s up?”

“I wanted to get ahead of this, boss, because the last thing I want is this information hitting you the wrong way.” She looked down at her feet before looking up at him. “You’re gonna be mad. I mean, really *really* mad. But I want you to understand... I didn’t...” She inhaled a deep breath and then let it out again. “I didn’t know who he *is* until *after* I’d fucked him, okay? He was just another person I could use to get information, but after... after I’d fucked him, it all came flooding back to me. I wanted to kill him right then and there, but... well, I know you’d be pissed if I just offed him and didn’t give you a chance to light into him yourself.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the photograph, holding it out to him.

Len took the photo from her hand and looked at it, her legs wrapped around the waist of one of the few men Len had ever truly *hated* in this world – Arturo Krieger. Len was no stranger to having to use himself as a honey trap, but they’d never asked Rin to do it, even though she had anyway a couple of times, when the op provided no other speedy solution. And yet, there was a photo of her, thrusting up passionately at Krieger, somewhere in the middle of the jungle.

“You didn’t tell me Krieger’s here,” Len snarled.

“Yeah, well, I figured if you went off and killed him too soon, we’d all be up shit’s creek without the proverbial paddle,” she said, her voice quiet and apologetic. “I’m pretty certain he doesn’t recognize me, or even remember his run ins with Scarab.”

Len looked up at her in anger. “Yeah, I’d believe that with my dagger between his shoulderblades and not a moment sooner. But you’re right – killing a resident would probably draw a lot of attention to ourselves, and I don’t know that we’re ready for that yet.”

“Should we even be having this conversation inside their buildings?” Mick asked.

“We’re not entirely certain what areas have cameras and what don’t, and we also don’t know how many of them have microphones, if any,” Len said.

“Besides,” Rin said. “Even if there’s a microphone with every camera on this island, there’s no way they have the manpower to watch and pay attention to them all. And we’re just one group of spies on this island, and there’s loads and loads of other spies like us on this island.”

“I’m amazed you haven’t all killed each other already,” Iris joked.

“It’s a lot harder with no guns,” Rin said, moving to sit down in one of the chairs in the room.

“What do you mean ‘no guns?’”

“There aren’t any firearms anywhere on the island,” Len said. “In fact, while we’ve found a handful of old weapons on the island, none of them have had any bullets in them.”

“So what now, top?” Mick asked Len.

“Now, you and Iris take a day or two to get healed up while Rin and I will circle around with Harry and maybe see if we can start coming up with a plan to try and determine how and why this island is the way that it is.”

“I’ve been trying to do that for weeks since I got here, boss,” Rin said, “and I’m telling you, I don’t know that there’s any easy way to map anything out other than the village.”

“Well, we’ll do it in installments then, and maybe things’ll pay off in the end. You’ve been on your own before we got here, but the whole team is here now, and we need to start using that to our advantage. We also need to catalog everyone on the island, so we don’t get any more surprises like this,” he said, holding the photo back to Rin. “Where’d it come from?”

“Random delivery in the tubes.”

“Any message with it?”

“On the back.”

Len turned the photo over and written in black sharpie was written WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON? in heavy block lettering. He rolled his eyes, giving the photo back to Rin. “Amateur hour psy-op shit,” he sighed. “They aren’t even *good* at this...”

“You’re not mad at me, are you, top?” Rin asked.

“I’m mad, but not *at* you, Rin,” Len confessed.

Part Ten

Harry

It had been two days since Calisto had died and Stella had not, and during that entire time, the two of them had barely spoken at all. The information that Stella had killed his only brother was still lingering in the air between them, as was Management’s taunting last message that Harry had never had a choice to begin with, and that the whole “YOU MUST CHOOSE” had been another one of the fucking mind games the place had inflicted upon them.

The final message they’d sent him had haunted him since.

YOU NEVER HAD A CHOICE.

He couldn’t imagine that the people behind the island were so cruel that they didn’t gain *anything* from presenting him with a choice then retracting it, so his mind had been reeling with trying to figure out what possible benefits they’d had to presenting a false choice and letting it linger on his conscience for so long.

After a bit, the answer had come to him.

They were gleaning biofeedback from whatever weird link they had established between himself, Calisto and Stella.

It wasn’t a test; it was a *fucking study*.

They were examining the results from how the feedback had worked, and the illusion of choice was designed to evoke panic and fear, the period of time when Calisto and Stella had been trying to convince him to spare them to evoke hope and paranoia. They wanted to put the three of them through as many emotions as they could to test the devices they’d implanted within them.

Nobody else on the island had ever encountered anything even remotely like it, and on this tropical nexus of weird, that in itself had felt strange, but now Harry understood – they were being

prototyped for later people to be brought onto the island.

In the last couple of days, the amount of connection between himself and Stella had been dwindling, like whatever they had used to link the three of them was slowly dying off, whatever power source they had connected it to had fully expended and the implant passing itself was its way out of their system. By the end of the two days, when Stella tapped him on the shoulder, he only felt the sensation of his skin being touched, not her skin touching his.

“Mmm?” Harry asked as non plussed as he possibly could appear to be.

“You didn’t feel that, did you?”

“No.”

They were sitting up in the room they were sharing. Harry had been in something of a fugue state since Calisto’s death. He’d barely eaten anything, slept far more than he should’ve, had trouble focusing, and even avoided the other members of Scarab, although he’d heard Stella filling in Len about what had happened with Calisto at one point outside of the apartment when they both thought he was sleeping. Len had wanted to storm in and shake Harry from his stupor; Stella had begged him not to. He’d relented, allowing that maybe some time for the shock to pass would be good for him.

‘What the fuck does Len know about *this* level of fucked up?’ Harry had thought, although he’d done his best to just drift to sleep.

“I think the link is entirely broken,” she said to him, placing her hand on his shoulder. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not especially.”

“Well, *I* want to talk about it, and I think you need to snap out of this funk that you’re in,” Stella said. “And we can talk about the elephant in the room. Apparently I killed your brother.”

“Apparently?” Harry said, whipping his head to look at her with a sneer, snapped out of his fugue with a startle. “You don’t know?”

“No! No, Harry! I don’t know!” she shouted in exasperation. “I’ve been in nearly a hundred firefights in my lifetime. Most of the time, I haven’t stopped and asked for names, or even to check if they’re dead or just wounded! I’ve been trying to get my own ass to safety, and a lot of times, that’s much harder than expected. In our line of work, we leave bodies in our wake! It happens! That’s just part of who we are and what we do! It wasn’t personal! I don’t know where I did it, or what the circumstances were, but it’s likely either your brother was shooting at me, or he was in the way of me trying to do my job. I don’t like to leave a lot of bodies on the floor whenever I can help it, but that’s the nature of our business, Harry!”

He let out a heavy breath. “I *rarely* leave hats on the ground, Stella, because what we do is *covert operations*. Leaving bodies in the wake contradicts the whole *covert* part of that. Get in, get it done, get out. *That’s* the job. Putting bodies in graves means somewhere along the way, *somebody* fucked up.” He looked down at his feet, trying to focus. “Now, I know it’s the field, that shit breaks off from time to time, but you have to understand, knowing that my brother’s dead because someone fucked up, and that you pulled the trigger, that’s hard.”

“But that’s just it, Harry!” Stella said, her voice extremely frustrated. “I don’t know that I did pull the trigger! Or even that he was shot to death! All I know is that’s what the people who run this place *say* happened, and I wouldn’t trust them to tell me that water is wet. We can’t believe anything anyone tells us in here!”

“Maybe I don’t believe you then!” Harry countered. “Maybe I can’t! Maybe you know exactly who my brother was, and you killed him with your bare hands because someone in some office told you to, and you never stopped to think that he was a person with a family!”

“I always think about them!” she finally shouted, throwing her hands up in the air. “I think about all the people who might’ve gotten caught up in my wake, about all those who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I think about the people who might have died because of what I had to do, and all the people I’ve left without a father, a brother, a son, a daughter, a sister or a mother, but I

have to do what I have to do, so I try to remember that they would've done the same to me given half a chance, and that the business we're in, the stakes are too fucking high for us to be dicking around!"

The two of them sat in quiet silence for a very long moment before Harry leaned back and laid down on the center of the bed, looking up at the slowly spinning ceiling fan above them. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?" He reached up and wiped his eyes dry. "You're entirely correct. You are. We don't know, neither of us, that you had anything at all to do with my brother's death. We just know that someone's claiming that you did. And I don't know any way that we'd ever really be able to answer that question, so... the only way out is through. Let's start with a few key details that you and I can share about one another, and maybe we'll learn a little something, yeah? I truly was with Five, but I *do* know exactly what it was that resulted in me leaving their employ. I'm just not fond of talking about it."

"What was that then?" she said, laying down next to him on the bed. While he was looking up at the spinning fan, she was looking over at him.

"Our betters, those in management, they wanted us to make something go away by pinning it on someone who had nothing to do with the problem, and I didn't want to play ball."

"Why not?"

"Because they weren't the actual perpetrators, were they?" Harry grumbled. "They were just a couple of foreigners that had snuck into the country illegally and were easy enough to use as patsies. Scapegoats meant Five could seem to have had arrested someone for a bus bomb that killed four people. But we knew it wasn't them, because we had footage of them getting on and off the bus, and they were never even close to the part of the bus the bomb went off on. Still, Downing Street wanted someone to pin it on, so our betters decided these people would have to do. And that I could not stomach. That's why I left Five."

"Where did you go after that?" she asked.

He wagged a finger. "Not the way the game is played, Stella. Now you."

She sighed, smoothing her hand over his chest. "I told you I left Wildneedle because their quartermaster wouldn't quit hitting on me, but that I didn't remember who I'd gone to work with afterwards. I guess that was somewhat of a lie. It wasn't then, but it would be if I stuck to it. I didn't remember who I was working for when I was abducted when we were talking about it the first time, but I do remember now." She inhaled a deep breath and then slowly let it out again. "I was working for NovaLantern Associates."

Harry tensed up a little bit. "That's not a name you forget lightly."

"No," she agreed, sliding one of her legs over his. "No, it very much is *not*. But somehow I did, and that's what has been rolling around in my head for the last couple of days. I don't remember how I started working for them, but I know I wasn't particularly happy over there. They were... needlessly *cold*, even for mercenaries."

"That's exactly what their reputation paints them as," Harry said. "They're all about getting the job done and not giving a damn for what's left in their wake. I've heard talk that they poisoned an entire village just to kill one man who was in hiding there. That true?"

"You mean the Berenger Plan?" she said, moving her leg back and forth atop his. "Yeah, it was true. They wanted to ensure a terrorist hiding out in a village would get killed, so they poisoned the well they were all using to make sure they got him. Ended up killing close to a hundred people, and yes, I'm sure some of the people there were harboring the guy willingly, but a lot of them were just innocent collateral. I'm not fond of that approach, but the money is great, and I couldn't stay with NIS, so I had to find some place to apply my skills somewhere. The job market isn't exactly booming for ex-spies, so when you get an offer that can keep you fed, clothed and housed, and not locked up somewhere. Spy life is complicated."

"What now?"

She sighed a little bit. "Look, I know you don't know me from anyone. You've got allies in

here. You've got friends and teammates, and I don't have shit like that, so I'd like to hitch my horse to your wagon, if that's okay." She laughed a little bit. "I can throw in an offer for regular sex if that'll be enough to tip the scales in my favor. Although, if I'm honest, I'm throwing that offer in for my own interests as well. While I was trying to convince you to choose me to live, I rather got to like the intimacy we had. You're actually quite a good fuck. Never thought a posh English geezer would be my type but—"

"I'm not a geezer, and I'm certainly *not* posh..." Harry laughed. "I got into the armed forces to dodge my sketchy childhood and my criminal record."

Stella grinned, moving to straddle him, lightly banging her fists against his chest. "You can't just lob a hand grenade into a conversation like that and then try and walk it back or pretend like you didn't say it. What's on your criminal record?"

"Vehicular theft, criminal damage with a vehicle, assault... I'd love to say it was just sort of a teenage prank, but I was described as remorseless for my crimes, and when asked to explain myself, I declined, so they sort of threw the book at me," Harry grumbled.

"Why wouldn't you explain yourself?"

"Because the fuzz and the magistrate were on the same page and wanted to make an example out of me. They had a stake in the matter and would've considered my grievances to be 'petty' and 'not measuring up to the amount of retribution' that I took. Not that he should've been in a position to make that call. The man in the robe should've recused himself, let someone without chips in the game review it all, but instead, he decided he wanted to see me punished more than he wanted to do the right thing," Harry said. "He *could've* done the right thing, could've recused himself from the case, and then the entire trajectory of my life would've been reshaped in one singular moment, but instead, the die was cast, and I was considered a career criminal from then on out. I figured, if I'm going to have these skills, and if I'm going to need to apply them, I figured the Armed Forces would be the place to start."

"And was it?"

"Was it, bollocks," Harry scoffed. "Yeah, I could use me skills for Queen and Country and all that, but all the lads I was serving with never let me forget that I was, in their eyes, their pet villain, the one who'd always take the fall for the mistakes, whether I'd done them or not. I was the guy they liked to carve up to pin stuff on, so I had to make extra certain nothing stuck to me. One criminal act my entire young life, but it was the SAS that taught me to think and act like a *proper* criminal. Because before I got there, my one 'crime' I'd done I made no attempts to hide or conceal, but once I got into the SAS, I had to learn how to cover up *everything*. Once there were other people looking at me to do things, I had to figure out how to become a proper troublemaker. After a couple of years of all that, I knew I didn't want to hang around letting the army get their talons too deep into me, so I shifted and went to work for MI-5. I figured what are the odds of spies being as much of tossers as soldiers."

"Just about the same, isn't it?" Stella joked.

"Mmmm, except they're wearing much more expensive clothing and nobody's sharing a rack," Harry said. "A bit less colorful language, maybe, but at the end of the day, it's still people causing trouble for everybody else and claiming they're doing it for the greater good. But the people are still fundamentally lazy, and they'll still look for shortcuts to get out of doing their bloody job. Wrong people, wrong place, wrong time. That was why I left 5. Nobody could be bothered to fucking get it *right* the first time."

"I told you I'm with NovaLantern, but you didn't mention who you're with now."

Harry inhaled a breath, kept it inside for as long as it took him to make a decision on how far to trust this woman, then let it out. "We're a very elite, very specialized, very small agency. We're called The Scarab Group. We take on very select deployments, things that require not only our selection of skillsets but our particular flourish of disciplines. We're also selective in that we won't take deployments or missions that we don't feel comfortable with. Oh, we'll still do assassinations, regime changes and the like, but we need to be convinced the cause is just and noble, otherwise we'll just

pass.”

“What, like the A-Team?” she giggled. “I do so love it when a plan is coming together’ and all that? Are you especially difficult to locate?”

“We do alright,” he said, smiling up at her. “Partners then?”

“For now,” she said, leaning down to kiss him, her hands spreading out along his chest. “But we agree to let the other know if interests have changed before anything serious.”

“Naturally,” he said, as he felt her starting to grind her hips down against his.

He didn’t trust her as far as he could throw her, but for now, he needed allies.

Len

The longer they were on the island, the less answers they seemed to get. Each member of Scarab had tried to make a map of what they knew of the island, and yet none of them could be considered at all reliable with one exception – the borders of Neontown and all the contents within never seemed to change. They were as reliable as taxes.

Once a person stepped foot *outside* of Neontown, though, nothing was fixed, nothing was set. There were a few major features, such as the impenetrable door on the side of a mountain, that were generally around 50-60% of the time, but anything else? It felt like there were at least two dozen islands wrapped around them, and no reliable way to navigate them, or to know which one a person was going to walk into until they set foot outside of the safe borders of Neontown.

So instead of a map, they’d been building a catalog instead, trying to identify what features were next to which others. It wasn’t much to go on, but it was something, and something was definitely better than nothing when there wasn’t a whole lot else to keep busy with.

The headcount for the island was up to eighty, with a few minor fluctuations here and there. But as with all delivery days, there was a chance for new prisoners (or jail keepers) to arrive with the shipment of supplies. Len had decided to go out with Tex and Paulina (Tex’s girlfriend, who had surprisingly been with him consistently since their arrival, despite Tex’s insistence that he went through partners like phases of the moon) out on the speedboat.

“Is that the plane?” Len said, pointing off in the distance. “You ever think about trying to send them a message, flag them down or even get on board?”

Tex scoffed. “How the hell do you think we could get on board? They don’t even really slow *down*,” he said. “Plus, they’re never low enough, even if you could jury rig some kind of harpoon with a rope attached to it. Not that I think we got enough rope on the island to make it work. Nah, put it out of your head. Pretty quick, they’re just gonna start chucking things out of the back of that thing, and most of the time, we’re just picking up the pieces.”

True to Tex’s word, while the plane descended a little bit, it certainly didn’t decelerate, and eventually boxes began vomiting from the backside of the plane, little parachutes attached to each crate as they tumbled down from the sky and fell into the water, pontoons inflating on impact to keep the boxes from sinking.

Tex’s boat had a tow barge behind it, so they couldn’t move too fast, but all said and done, there were about a dozen crates or so, and as they rained upon the ocean, he kept moving the boat from one to another as Paulia used a pole with a loop on it to drag them back over to the barge, pulling them up and locking them in place on the barge before moving on to the next one.

In that moment, Len wished they still had someone on the outside, because he’d been thinking that all the supplies being dropped off regularly could be a thing they might have been able to try and track, although he had to wonder how many layers of obfuscation they were running things through to get supplies to the island without anyone realizing it.

Overall, he thought they must’ve been running their operation out of several locations, with no one consistent point, otherwise they would’ve been easier to track. From a purely operational point of view, the entire structure of everything, he had to admit, was rather brilliant. They’d not been able to

find any point to find the island other than getting themselves caught for it, so Scarab had done the most ridiculous thing they could possibly think of...

...they'd put up a bounty for their own capture.

Anonymously, of course, but the money was through a renown fixer, and the cash was in escrow, so as each of them was captured, a chunk of the cash was taken. And if they wanted to get their money back, they'd have to figure out who was running the island, why and how.

Len's head was focusing on running the permutations when he realized there was one final thing being thrown out of the back of the airplane – another raft with two people strapped into it. He couldn't see any details about them from a distance, but he realized this was exactly how he'd come in, and now he could get a chance to see if there were any details that he'd missed that he might pick up from the other side. But the plane was unmarked, there weren't any telltale signs that could've given any insight as to where it was coming from or heading to.

And while he'd hoped not to let anyone see him looking, he felt Tex tapping him on the shoulder. "There's not much to pick up there, amigo, but if you want to look at that plane until it's out of sight, I don't rightly blame you. Hasn't done me a lick of good, but you ain't me, and I wouldn't trust me none neither, was I you."

"Oh, I trust you plenty, Tex," Len said. "But it never hurts to verify, to check on things for myself, and see if maybe there's something you overlooked."

"I've got good eyes, cowboy, but you want a second opinion, that's all yours to have. Take a look and see if you see anything I don't."

"I didn't, but I just wanted to look," Len sighed. "Was what you did with me the standard protocol for newcomers?"

"Pretty much," Tex said as he steered the boat over towards where the life raft had parachuted onto the water. Getting over to it quickly was important, although it was clear that the two people on the raft knew enough to be pulling in the parachute onto the raft itself, so it wouldn't drag the boat down or get caught in the currents and pull it away. "We play each one as they lie, but for the most part, it's just get 'em back to the island, get 'em squared away in some room, get 'em their stuff and let 'em do their thing."

Len nodded and the boat whipped closer, which let him get a good look at the two people on the raft, and to his surprise, he recognized one of the two. There was a man and a woman, the woman with deep black skin, hair cropped incredibly tightly, and a gaze that looked like it was going to rip all of them in two, even though Len was pretty sure he'd never seen her before in his life. She was dressed in a black jumpsuit, similar to the one he'd worn when he arrived. But her face was a complete unknown to him.

The man, however, was someone who'd worked for the CIA, although Len had never gotten a name from him beyond 'Lynch.' He was a rather unassuming man, late thirties, dirty brown hair, completely forgettable face, fit without showing off, but there was something about the man's sunken green eyes that had left an impression on Len. That and the fact that the last time he'd seen Lynch, Lynch was deciding to leave Len behind, surrounded by hostiles, while Lynch took off safely and flew away from the problem.

Lynch had left Len to die.

The man looked annoyed to see Len, as if him not following through with dying had been a personal affront to him. "Jesus, John, why can't you fucking expire like everyone else whose time has passed?" Lynch said, shaking his head.

"I dunno, Lynch, but I expected company cockroaches like you to be harder for these people to get than this, and yet, here you are, just like the rest of us," Len said as they helped the two of them up and onto the speedboat. "If I'd have known it was you, I'd have just left you out here to drown, if it was up to me."

"Is it up to you, though?"

“It’s not up to *anybody* here, as far as we know,” Tex said. “I’m Tex, and I always come out and get everyone they drop off.”

“And what happens if you *don’t* come out and get people when they’re dropped off?” Lynch asked, anger clear in his voice.

“I haven’t chosen to find out,” Tex chuckled. “Considering how easily they’re willing to kill people off at the drop of a hat, figured my best bet is to be useful and stay out of folks way.”

That answer didn’t seem to satisfy Lynch, so he moved on to his next question almost immediately. “Where do I get a gun?”

“You don’t. No firearms anywhere on the island. That’s the first thing you’re going to have to get used to.”

“What’s the second?”

“No locks on any doors,” Len said, a smug grin on his face, knowing exactly how much that was going to annoy Lynch, who’d always been a super paranoid twitchy little fuck. “That means you’d better get used to sleeping with one eye open.”

“Why’s that, John? You got it in for me?”

Len laughed, rolling his eyes. “You don’t need *my* help in getting yourself killed, Lynch. I’m sure over half the people on this island have got beef with the CIA in one form or another. And you personally have never been much in the way of looking after your people, unless there was something in it for you. For a spy who’s supposed to be cultivating assets, you certainly threw them away like you only ever had one use for them.”

“Use an assets too much, too long, and they’re gonna burn you, John. They’re gonna figure out how to feed you bad intel and then you’re up shit creek without a fucking paddle, so I never give them that long. Get as much as you can then cut ’em loose and let the bad guys clean up your mess for you. Speaking of which, how the hell did you get out of that shit sandwich I left you in the middle of?”

“I’ve always been smarter and more resourceful than you, Lynch, so I don’t know why you’re surprised that I was able to see a way out of your little deathtrap.”

Lynch grinned and, in that moment, Len realized he’d accidentally given something up. “It wasn’t anything *I* planned, John; I just took advantage of a situation that’d gone tits up to gain a leg up and remove a burr from my shoe, that burr being you. But you’ve got your own crew now, so you can stand on the moral high ground and pretend you’re better than all of us all you want.”

The speedboat started to zip back towards the island, dragging the cargo with it as the new woman leaned over to tap Len on the shoulder. “You’re Len, right?” Len nodded in response.

“I’m supposed to give you a letter from management,” she said, her voice thick with an African accent from a region he couldn’t place. “But don’t take me *as* management, okay?”

“Sure.”

She opened a pocket on her jumpsuit and reached in to pull out an envelope within a sealed plastic bag. “When they ask, tell them I did what I was told.”

Len opened the bag and took the envelope out from within it before opening it to read it. It was typed, as if by an old typewriter, and he had to read the words several times, trying to understand.

MIRA CAN LEAVE THE ISLAND IF SHE AGREES TO FORGET YOU FOREVER.

He wanted her to be safe, but safe without him? That wasn’t what he wanted. But he was going to need to tell her one way or the other.

Part Eleven

Len

He very much wasn't looking forward to the conversation he had to have with Mira, but he also knew that the longer he tried to avoid it, the more it was going to suck for him. Fundamentally, he knew that he had to try and talk her into getting off the island, but he knew exactly how she was going to react when he told her that it would have to be without him, and, more disturbingly, without her *memories* of him. That was the part he knew she was going to take big issue with, not that he blamed her. While he wanted her safe, and getting her off the island would do that, it would take them away from each other, from what little bit of happiness the two of them had been able to scrape together in their lonely business.

Len was near certain she wouldn't even entertain the option, but the last thing he wanted to do was to be making decisions for her, so he tucked the paper into his pocket and then started unloading things from the water onto the back of the cart truck.

Package arrival day was the day when the most islanders would come out, letting Len take stock of everyone who was not in the day-to-day rotation of people they normally saw. All in all, there were a lot of islanders trying to lay low and not draw attention to themselves. He also knew many of them were in conflicting states of compromised memory, as he saw a number of people who should've been adversaries standing right next to each other with no sense of nervousness or fear apparent on their faces, so either they didn't remember who the other person was, or they wanted to give the impression that they didn't remember who the other person was when they actually *did*.

Causing memory problems for spies only complicated a thousand times further than they really needed to be, because it was much harder to spot someone lying when they might not even *know* if they were lying.

He wanted to try and categorize people in cliques or groups, and there was just no chance he was going to do that until he'd been around much longer. But being around longer had never been part of the game plan. The idea had been to get in, get Mira back, figure out where they were and who was running it and then get out.

The one thing he'd put on order, a copy of "Logan's Run" by William F. Nolan, was indeed waiting for him, so he'd gone and picked that up, as well as a couple of different pieces of clothing that were around his size. Clothes were never sent to just one individual but were sent in bulk and whoever happened to pick them up could take them, but sometimes things that he'd sent to the wash hadn't come back, but something else in the same size had. The laundry team, it seemed, had final say over who got to wear what, not that he really minded. When you couldn't even lock your room, the idea of 'possessions' became to reduced to 'whatever you have on you,' and even that wasn't all together that safe.

He also grabbed a couple of pieces of clothing for Mira, stuff that he thought she'd like. It wasn't much, but maybe it would be more likely to help her say no the offer that the others were making, because as much as he would've liked her to stay with him, he had to admit the offer to escape would be tempting.

Len was a little surprised not to see her sifting through the boxes herself but wondered if maybe she had been in the middle of a work shift when the incoming plane siren had sounded, giving notice that pick up was required. For as much as the fact that they were all basically prisoners remained, everyone still maintained the facilities and worked with one another to provide amenities for all the other prisoners to enjoy, like cooked food and washed clothing.

So he headed over to the cantina and the attached kitchen area, finding her there, prepping a large vat of stew for the evening meal. The challenge was providing enough options for people that there was always something that people wanted to eat out of the available options, but Mira had told

Len her stew was one of the perennial favorites, so they kept asking her to make larger and larger batches of it. Now she was making a batch so that nearly a quarter of the island could get a bowlful of it, as she'd been asked to do. "Hey babe," she said, seeing him standing in the doorway. "What's with that look on your face?"

"There was an incoming supply drop a little bit ago," he said. "Picked you up some clothes. Didn't see anything that had your name on it."

"I asked for a Miles Davis album, but I imagine they're having trouble tracking it down on vinyl," she laughed. "It would be so much easier if they'd just give us tape decks or CD players or something like that."

"They're probably worried about us using some of the tech in those to try and contact the outside world," he said.

"That the sort of thing you're capable of?" she asked him, a wry grin on her face.

"Me?" he said, a dry laugh rolling from his throat. "No, although I bet Mick probably could. Rin too, most likely, although not Harry. If it's not locking down a car, that boy has no interest in electronics."

"Where'd you pick him up, anyway?"

"MI-6. Like pretty much everyone in Scarab, they'd written him off as a loss, and I didn't agree with that assessment," he chuckled. "We're like the Island of Misfit Toys but for spies. That's why I was trying to get you to sign on with us. You kept trying to tell me the Mossad was different, but we both knew better. You were just holding out that if they let you down, you wouldn't live to know about it, and I get that. That's true for most people in our line of work."

"How'd you vet them?"

"Same way I vet anyone – do the work," he said. "You gather all the intel you can on them from their allies, your allies, your enemies, their enemies, competitors and just people who gather intel for a living without ever really picking a side. The information's out there, but you just have to figure out which parts of it you can trust and which parts of it are there to fool you *into* trusting it."

She focused her gaze upon him and frowned. He'd never been very good at hiding things from her, so he wondered what she saw written upon his face. "Something's happened, hasn't it?"

"Island Management has an offer for you."

"Then I don't want it," she said, looking back at her stew as he closed the distance across the kitchen until he was standing below her, peering up at her on the ladder.

"You haven't even heard what the offer is yet."

"It's from *Them*," she said, disdain in her voice so sharp it could cut through brisket. "That means it's a bad offer and I don't want it."

"You should at least hear it."

"Why? So I can indulge them with whatever ridiculous mindgames they're playing in an effort to try and cause problems? I don't know that that would benefit anyone."

"There's definitely a benefit on offer."

"Is it that we can all leave the island and go back to our lives if we just forget about this place? Because that I might take them up on."

"It does involve leaving the island," Len said.

Mira scowled down at him. "Fine. Tell me, so I can make an *educated* dismissal of the matter and we can go on to enjoying each other's company again. What is it?"

"They've offered to let you leave the island, alone, safe and unharmed, as long as you agree to forget me forever. I assume they feel confident they can just remove the portion of your memory."

"That's rubbish," she said, rolling her eyes, looking back to her stew. "Why the fuck would I ever agree to something so crap?"

"Because you could go home again, Mira," he said, his hand reaching up to touch her thigh. "You could get away from all of this nonsense and see your family again."

“My family...” Her voice trailed off, but not in the way he’d expected it to. “We never really talked about how we got into this business did we? Bits and pieces of it have come back lately, enough that I’m almost certain I was all alone in the world before we met up. I... I remember my mother and father dying in a missile strike when I was barely more than a girl. My uncle, Abraham, he decided to use the anger and sadness I felt and to channel it into public service, which was how I found my time in the army being used as training for the intelligence forces. But my country failed to see me as a person, John. They didn’t see the young girl who needed help, who needed comfort to console her that her parents were gone and that she was running on empty. I just went further and further into my hole, and lost sight of whatever dreams I’d carried with me when I young.”

Len was running his hand along her hip as she kept slowly stirring that heavy stew with a spoon that might have been a shovel instead. “I’m sorry to hear that, Mira.”

She turned to look down at him, and her smile was genuine, but it was also cut with a hint of her trying to stomach back a lifetime of people trying to tell her they understood what she was going through, but Len knew well enough that loss was a personal demon that people could appreciate and relate to, but nobody ever truly *knew* another person’s flavor of pain. “Mmm. I got lost in trying to make a country love me in place of a parent, trying to prove something to someone who was never going to give me the familial approval I was so desperate to receive, not that they would ever give me such a thing. The answer remains what it was before, John. I will not leave this island without the man I love, and they can take their offer and shove it up their asses.”

He pulled the piece of paper from his pocket and held it out to her. “Well, I don’t want be accused of hiding anything from you,” he said.

She took the paper from his hand, glanced at it for a moment, then held it up in the air, so any of the cameras watching could see it, then lowered it down to the open flame of the burner just below the pot, letting go of the paper as it caught fire and quickly burned to cinders. “Of all the things I struggled to hold onto when they were attempting to take my memories, John, you were the thing I clung to the hardest, that I refused to let them rip from my mind. Having fought to keep even the kernel of you nestled inside of me, a seed of who I used to be tangled up in my memories of the time we spent together? They can take it from me by putting a bullet in my skull and no other method.”

Len wasn’t surprised when he felt Mira’s lips connecting with his, although he did find the choice of venue a little humorous. Normally when she was cooking, she liked to be left to it, not distracted or bothered by someone else’s presence. He suspected she wanted to reestablish the point to whoever was watching, but then he felt her hand sliding down to grapple with his ass, and he almost squeaked a little into her mouth.

“Here?” he found himself saying.

“You didn’t have to tell me about the offer, John,” she purred at him. “It’s kinda hot that you care enough about me to be willing to send me away to keep me safe. Stupid, lunkheaded and oblivious to my own feelings on the matter, but still kinda hot and sweet, in a Cro-Magnon sort of way.” Her hands on his back started tugging up his shirt. “Here’s just like anywhere else on the island – someone could walk in at any minute. No locks on the doors, remember?”

“Sure, but this is the *kitchen*, Mira,” he laughed. “Maybe we should step into someplace more private?”

“Oh *alright*,” she giggled in return, pulling him over towards one of the pantries. “The doors on these open inward, so as long as I’ve got my hands on my back on it, we should be good to go.” He could see she was right as they pushed the door inward into the slightly cooler room, not quite cold, but definitely not the sort of heavy jungle ambiance he’d gotten used to. As soon as they were inside the room, she spun around and pushed the door closed quickly with both hands. “How do you want me?”

“Any way I can get you,” Len said, watching her tug her shirt up over her head, tossing it onto a nearby shelf atop some bags of flour. She wore a very workaday kind of bra – nothing fancy or elaborate – but Len didn’t give a damn. The wrapping was much less important than what lay beneath.

She shoved her pants down and unveiled a pair of sea foam green panties beneath. Neither was long for her body, as she unfastened the bra, slipping it off her shoulders, tossing it atop her shirt before pushing her panties down to her ankles, stepping out of them with one foot, leaving them wrapped around the other. “Goddamn, you’re beautiful.”

“Flattery will get you into my pants.”

“You’ve already taken them off,” he said, unbuttoning his belt.

“So I have,” she giggled, leaning her back against the door. “Silly me.”

He fished out his cock as he grabbed one of her legs and brought it up to his waistline as he rubbed the tip of his shaft against her slit, finding she was already wet and eager for him. They lined each other up and he pushed inside of her pussy with one long, deliberate thrust, as she grabbed his head by the back and pulled him in to kiss him as they shared a feverish moan.

Whatever else they’d gone through, they knew each other, and they knew how to keep each other happy. Any doubts about how much she remembered of him were constantly erased each time his flesh touched hers, especially as intimately as this. Her small breasts lodged up against his t-shirt, her tongue wrapped around his as his hips dipped down and back then pushed up and forward, each of them feeling the other’s heart thumping in tune with their own.

His hips railed into her, making her ass smack against the door like a drumbeat, and he wondered for a moment if there was anyone else on the other side, but in the end, he didn’t really give a fuck, too happy to be reconnected to Mira in this long moment, savoring his body and hers together.

The sounds from her throat were excited, giddy, and before either of them knew it, he was orgasming inside of her, her heel digging into the small of his back, keeping his body wedged up against hers, pinning her to the door until both of their breathing started to ease off and relax back to normal, an almost dopey giggle escaping her lips into his before she pulled back.

“And you thought you were going to get rid of me,” she teased.

“Never in a million years would I want to.”

Rin

Krieger’s appearance on the island couldn’t be a coincidence, Rin had decided, and the more she thought about it, the unhappier she was. Originally, he’d been just another Eastern European spy on the island that she didn’t recognize who might’ve had information, and so she’d gone through her bag of tricks and pulled out the obvious one that was the best approach for the job – the seduction one.

Despite everything, Krieger was a very good-looking man, and he had plenty of charm to spare, so when they’d shared an intimate moment in the jungle, Rin had thought she was doing a good thing, gaining his trust and developing an ally she could count on.

Except that in the moment of her climax, she had a moment of clarity, and some of her memories surged back into her brain, and she was horrified at what she’d done. Krieger had a reputation in their business of being one of the ‘dark operators,’ people who were always willing, if not eager, to add bodies to the floor over the course of their operations. Krieger enjoyed killing people who got in his way, even just a little bit, and it had gained him a certain reputation of being a man who would always get results, but not always as cleanly as some clients would like. His exact background was a bit unknown – he might have been formerly Stasi or KGB, but no one was entirely certain. He’d been private sector since the late 80s or early 90s, but he certainly didn’t look his age.

She hadn’t been anywhere near Krieger since she’d realized who she was. As adept as she was at trying to obscure her motives and conceal her intentions, when her memory had come flooding back to her, it had been nearly impossible to hide that fact. Even the brief momentary lapse of composure had been enough for Krieger to recognize that she knew something about him that he didn’t know in return about her, and that had put up a wall between them immediately.

Still, whatever skills Krieger had before he’d gotten to the island, he’d found maybe some of them were slipping, because he wasn’t keeping tabs for tails anywhere near as much as he used to. So

Rin had taken to following the man around when she had spare time, and she hadn't liked anything she'd seen.

Most of the time, he was keeping to what was expected of him – exploring the island, putting in time at the vegetable gardens, fishing out on the boat – but there were large chunks of time where he seemed to be tailing a woman named Elise that Rin knew next to nothing about, other than she was Swiss. She wasn't an operator that Rin had had any run ins with, but the intelligence world was full of all sorts of people.

And it was Krieger's tailing of Elise that had Rin worried.

Because Krieger was carrying a knife with him most days.

It was early in the evening after the supply drop that Rin found Krieger was in total pursuit of Elise, and Elise was on some kind of mission that involved traversing the borders of the village. Based on the way she was walking and how she was stopping and making notes, it seemed likely she was making some sort of map, although Rin herself knew the semi-futility of doing such a thing. Perhaps she would have more luck, or perhaps she was using a different methodology, maybe trying to keep track of which buildings were next to which on any given day. While most of the internal layout of the village remained consistent, from time to time, pairs of residential buildings were known to swap places in the middle of the night, without warning or even any of the residents noticing until they woke up in the morning.

Elise didn't seem like she was doing much to keep tabs for anyone pursuing her, out of lack of caring or simply because she didn't think she was being threatened, but in either case, it wasn't a smart move for the woman to make.

The village itself wasn't all that large, so the process of mapping the layout on foot wasn't a project that would take very long, and it looked like Elise must have been on her second or third data gathering expedition, because she was comparing one set of notes against another, as if she wanted to be sure she hadn't filed her notes in the wrong place instead of the numbers just being somewhat different on each and every pass, which was what Rin expected them to be.

Elise was a short, thin waft of a woman, long blonde hair braided into a heavy interlaced tail that hung down to her waist. She wore large, baggy clothes, something that immediately gave Rin a bit of suspicion that the woman was carrying a blade of some kind squirreled about on her person, not that Rin would've blamed her one bit. She didn't seem to take counsel with anyone else on the island, which isn't to say that she was unfriendly, only that she hadn't seemed to make any reliable friends since her arrival a few months ago, only a few weeks after Rin's. It wasn't that uncommon – people on the island either developed a clique within a matter of weeks or seemed unlikely to ever develop much of a rapport with any of the others, and Elise had just fallen into the latter.

For a bit, Rin had even considered the option that Elise might have been a member of management, but she seemed too insatiably curious for that to be likely, always trying to discover some new aspect of the island that she could figure out. The notebook she carried with her everywhere looked to be filled with endless amounts of scrawled thoughts, computations, layouts and God only knows what else.

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more Rin had to admit that Elise seemed much more like a scientist than a spy. That didn't make Rin feel any better, the thought that some of the people trapped on the island weren't intelligence workers at all, but just civilians caught up in some complicated spy game being run by... somebody...

Instead of heading back into camp, it seemed Elise was walking down one of the few marked pathways leading out of the village, this one leading up towards the only locked door on the island, the giant metal gate against the side of the volcano, the only door with completely unknown things behind it and no possible way to open it.

Krieger followed Elise and Rin followed Krieger, as the three of them moved out of the village and into the more open air area, as rain started to fall down on them once more, Rin thankful for the

weather providing some coverage that made it easier for her to move stealthily in the relatively open and exposed area. She tried to keep her body near the safety of foliage, but even that was hit and miss and at some points, she was nearly completely exposed, if either Elise or Krieger had turned back, but instead, neither of them even so much as glanced over their shoulders back, too intent on their own thing to be bothered for operational awareness.

Whatever Rin had expected from the rest of her night, what followed was about as far from it as possible. Elise moved up towards the giant metal door, glanced behind her in her first real attempt to spot a tail, but missed seeing either Krieger or Rin, then turned back and gestured up towards one of the cameras stationed high above the metal gate, her hands doing a complicated series of motions seemingly to no avail.

Except that a few seconds later, the gate started to open.

It was such an unexpected thing that Rin almost stood up and revealed her position.

Almost, but not quite.

The solid sheet of thick steel lifted up a few feet and a pair of men in dark red overalls walked out from the darkened tunnel behind it. One of the men was holding a large flashlight, which was immediately pointed at Elise, who lifted one of her arms to shield her face.

“Get that fucking thing out of my face,” she shouted at the man. “Does it make you feel impressive blasting it in my eyes? Feel like you’ve got a real big cock?”

“I’d be happy to show you, Doctor, if it would make you feel any better,” the man on the left said, the blonde one. The one to the right of him was brunette, so Rin decided to think of them as Light Goon and Dark Goon.

“I’d take you up on that offer, but I forgot my microscope,” she said. “Where is Charlotte?”

“She’s busy with other things,” Dark Goon answered. “She sent us to take in your progress report. What have you learned about the village layout?”

“It seems like there’s only five basic variations, and none of them change any of the footprint of the structures, just where individual structures are located,” she said, looking down at her notebook. “That said, the pneumatic tubes always seem to be routed to the correct location, so it seems like whoever built the tube system also built in some kind of router redirect somewhere underground that we haven’t been able to locate yet. Whoever it was that built the village here before we found it, they clearly understood some of the temporal and spatial anomalies far better than we did.”

“Any *sign* of the previous residents yet?”

“Negative,” Elise sighed. “I keep telling you, either they took off and left nothing behind, or whatever took them made sure not to leave anything in their wake. In either case, they’re all fucking gone, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of them.”

“A hundred people don’t just fucking vanish, Elise,” Light Goon said.

“Yeah, well, *these* fucking hundred people did.”

“Whatever,” Dark Goon said, taking a fresh notebook out of his pocket, tossing it to her as she tossed the very full one she’d been carrying back to him. “Stay low, keep your cover down and *FUCK!*”

Kreiger had broken from his cover and was charging towards the three of them with his knife drawn, but the distance was too far for the man’s own good, as Light Goon reached to his pocket, grabbed his pistol and shot Kreiger in the chest, just in time for Elise to shout, “NO!”

As the bullet ripped through the air, it left a prismatic spray of color in its wake that burst into flames before imbedding itself in Kreiger’s chest. And then the man’s body began to erupt with streaks of color beneath his skin until he exploded in a mass of rosy flesh.

“God *fucking* dammit, you morons!” Elise shouted. “Not above ground! You’ve been told and told and fucking *told!* *No! Fucking! Guns!* You’re only making things fucking worse!”

“Nobody said *why* we shouldn’t shoot above ground, Elise, so forgive us for not knowing it was going to fucking break reality, or whatever the fuck *that* was!”

“That was a temporal and spatial rift that *you* fuckers just caused! Now who the fuck knows when that’s going to come back and haunt us! Grab the fucking body and drag it into the tunnel. We can’t fucking leave it up here for the others to find.”

Light Goon tossed the flashlight to Elise before he and Dark Goon moved over to grab the ankles of what remained of Kreiger’s corpse, dragging his remnants into the tunnel as Elise moved in after them, the steel shutter dropping down as soon as they were inside.

Whatever the fuck she’d just seen, Rin knew for absolute certain...

...She didn’t understand *any of it*.

Cast

Scarab

Len (John) – The head of the Scarab unit, American, Caucasian, ex-CIA.

Rin – The Scarab unit’s trained sniper/demolitions expert, Asian, ex-US Army Ranger.

Harry – The Scarab unit’s trained vehicular expert, British, ex-MI6.

Mick – The Scarab unit’s extraction/infiltration expert, black, British, ex-MI6.

Scarab adjacent

Mira – Len’s former partner, ex-Mossad. Her disappearance triggered Scarab’s interest in The Island.

Iris – Mick’s wife, went missing (presumed dead) in early 2001, only to appear on The Island in 2007 with no knowledge of her missing time.

Calisto (*deceased*) – Woman paired with Harry, formerly of Spanish intelligence services.

Stella – Woman paired with Harry, formerly of South Korean intelligence services.

Prominent islanders

Tex – Runs the bar, has been on The Island longer than almost anyone else, very likely *not* Texan.

Kreiger – An operative with a bad history for members of Scarab.

Lynch – CIA operative who left Len to die on an op gone bad.