

Trust Network

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For Corri.

Before

Xochitl sighed and dropped eye contact with the young woman in front of her.

“Xochitl. *So-chee*. X-O-C-, oh, never mind.” *The food runner will butcher it anyway.* “Just use Fontaine, okay? I can answer to that.”

“Sure, Miss Fontaine. That's one naked chicken burrito, wet, with cilantro and fresh jalapeños, a side of chips and queso, and a large unsweetened tea. Can we get you anything else? Chocolate chimi for dessert?”

Xochitl, still looking down at the register, barely registered the question but recognized the Upsell Voice enough to shake her head and grunt dismissively. When she realized that she was staring at her own reflection in the polished stainless steel of the cash register, she shook her head again to clear it and made a motion to hand the cashier her debit card.

“Okay, that'll be \$8.27.” The cashier took the card, not bothering to flip it over to look at the signature on the back, nor to compare the embedded photo to that of the cardholder standing in front of her. “Debit or credit?” The cashier swiped the card without waiting for an answer.

Xochitl sighed again and pointed at the debit keypad on her side of the register. A quick left-to-right glance didn't reveal anyone too interested, so she jabbed her PIN into the device. Her receipt printed almost immediately, and she had grabbed it and was on her way toward the drink fountain within a few seconds after that.

Ahh, technology – Enabler of the antisocial.

Xochitl filled her plastic cup with ice past the lip, repositioned, then flipped the tab on the tea dispenser. She sighed again when she saw that her assumption had been right – the tea in the urn was still hot enough to immediately melt most of the ice in her cup.

Lame!

She stopped half-way and added more ice, hoping there would still be some by the time she got to her table. She started to turn away from the fountain, but then thought better of herself and put

her tray back down to take a quick swig from her cup. At least this time they hadn't put the sweet tea in the wrong urn. *Gag.*

Grabbing her tray, she turned again and scanned for a good table. Since it was mid-afternoon, the place was almost entirely empty. She weaved her way through the mess of chairs, tables, and debris to head for the booth in the corner away from the front windows. She sat in the same area whenever they came here, so she knew Brian would have no trouble finding her.

Before she sat down she dropped the order number tent on the outer rim of the table and slid her drink, napkins, and utensils into place next to it. She walked her empty tray over to the nearest garbage stand and pushed it into the appropriate slot. A sign with a mustachioed jalapeño and a habaero in a sombrero admonished her to not throw away baskets.

On the other side of the island was a hot sauce bar, which she skimmed looking for anything marked with a black and red skull and crossbones. (Again, of course, a jalapeño's skull.) She grabbed a paper cup, filled it with the red chunky substance, and made her way back to the table.

She zoned out before her back hit the booth, so when the tray clattered down to the table in front of her she jumped visibly.

"Freak much?" Brian unloaded the tray and made a similar excursion to the garbage and hot sauce bar.

"Jerk."

"Me? You were the one off in your cave. I even brought you your food, so how am I the jerk?"

Xochitl looked down and saw her burrito in front of her. As she always ordered it naked, no tortilla, it was a bit more than a stretch to call it a burrito. Brian always referred to it as "BurritoMass" and then proceeded to make lame puns involving DNA, RNA, cloning, and Star Trek transporter malfunctions. *Dork!*

"It was sitting on the counter when I ordered, so I thought I'd be nice and bring it over before the next ice age." As he put his order number tent next to hers on the table he couldn't help but look up at the counter to make sure his lunch hadn't suffered the same fate.

"Nice. I guess minimum wage isn't the great motivator it used to be. It gives me a warm fuzzy to think that just anyone had access to my food." She paused to dump out the paper ramekin of hot sauce onto the BurritoMass. "Is it just me or have we been eating an awful lot of burritos lately? How many times in the last week?"

Brian chuffed. This was his way of communicating that her question was somehow wrong.

"Two since Monday, and four in the past seven days."

There it was: her usage of the word “week” was too ambiguous, possibly meaning both calendar and duration. Xochitl rolled her eyes in response.

“Either way, that's too many. And it's been a different place each time. This city has entirely too many burrito joints.” She began to mix her BurritoMass and couldn't help but giggle as the opening verses of *Macbeth* ran through her head. She gave up after a few seconds of Brian ignoring her.

“People are finally figuring out that if our ancestors were able to live off of the same basic ingredients for thousands of years, they can't be all that bad. Rice, beans, veggies, meat. Besides, I've seen you eat. Words like “voracious” and “frenzied” don't do it justice. You'd think a burrito had done you wrong in a previous life.”

He got up, before she could retort, and walked off to track down his missing lunch.

Xochitl snarked at him as he left, but simultaneously took the opportunity to stab her fork into the mass and start eating. She'd never admit it, but Brian was spot-on in her description of her eating habits. The most accurate way to describe it would probably be to say “she ate like a growing teenage boy”. That is, she ate almost anything and everything, and in large quantities, and often, and generally didn't think twice about it.

Despite her mutant diet, Xochitl Green was about as average as they come. At 26, she was neither athletic, nor chubby, but an average that meant “I'm lucky I don't have to work out”. She was maybe on the tall side of average at 5' 8”, but that may also have been because it seemed that everyone around her was tragically short. Her Mexican and Celtic heritage had produced thin hair that wasn't so much “jet black” or “inky black” or even “raven black”, but was probably most easily described as just “matte black”. Her eyes were a similarly unremarkable shade of blue.

The Celts had won the dermatological battle in the gene war, so she was a tad on the pale side with freckles only a half-shade darker and mostly unnoticed by everyone except Brian. The Mexicans had left a parting gift, in that she didn't sunburn like a Celt. The Celts, displeased at this, cursed her with an inability to tan. This produced a skin tone that most people figured could always just use an hour or so more out in the sun.

Brian, however, was a bit further down the scale than Xochitl. That's not to say that he was ugly or in any way unappealing, just that his adjective would probably be “stereotypical”. Stereotypical Geek, that is, and all of the trappings that come with the title.

His skin was noticeably paler than Xochitl's, and when combined

with his wavy but similarly pale blonde hair, placed him more in the “zombie-esque” range. The fact that he constantly seemed sleep-deprived and had the characteristic dark circles around sunken eyes only reinforced that image. The only thing he had to help him out was the fact that he’d probably eaten a few too many burritos and spent too few hours on an elliptical machine and had earned himself a padded frame. He probably couldn’t have looked any more like a Network Administrator if he’d tried.

Xochitl was a third of the way through her burrito by the time he got back. He made a point of accidentally brushing the unused order number tents onto the seat of the booth as he put his plate down on the table. He chuffed and she grunted in agreement. Xochitl continued to vacuum her food directly from her plate while Brian ate at a human pace, and the two continued mostly silent that way for the next 5 minutes. It was Brian, of course, that finally spoke up.

“I was thinking about the peer-to-peer problem that you’ve been ranting about lately.”

Xochitl slowed her eating for a few seconds to show that she was listening.

“On the one hand, I see what you’re saying. You want your music or your TV or your movies or whatever, and I agree that it sucks that you have to buy them new each and every time you want it in a different format – LP to cassette to CD, VHS to LaserDisc to DVD to Blu-Ray, and so on.”

His spork jabbed circles into the air between them as he talked. This went unnoticed by Xochitl, who would have seemed to be recovering from a decade-long liquid diet given her intent devotion to the solid food in front of her.

“However, I can also see the other side, in that if I’m an artist or whatever, I still want to be able to make a living, so I’d like to be able to at least make sure that I’m not getting totally screwed.”

Xochitl showed that she was at least listening by making a “fair enough” shrug to signal him to continue.

“iTunes still has a few kinks, but has already shown that people will buy the media if it is reasonably priced, be it music or video or whatever. So here we are. The future is within sight. The masses want the media, the artists want to make a bit of cash and be heard, and we just need a way to get from Point A to Point B and keep everyone happy along the way.”

The condiments and utensils on the table were rearranged maniacally as he illustrated his point. Xochitl was pretty sure the artists were represented by the Tabasco and the masses were the Cholula, but she might have had it backward.

“And thus we get to your favorite part: control. Digital Rights Management is a dumb route as it can never keep up with the times, and it's so draconian and untrusting. And I pity the fools that are buying the DRM-enabled CDs now that won't be able to use them as anything more than coasters in 5 years, let alone 10, because nothing can read them. They are the 8-tracks of our generation. And honestly, playing the artist here, do I really have a right to tell you how many copies you can make for yourself? That's just greedy. As long as you don't start selling the copies, what right do I have to say otherwise?”

“But this whole “poisoning the well” thing that's been going on lately is interesting. You said that there are companies that all they do is do man-in-the-middle attacks on the P2P swarms?”

Xochitl nodded and did her best to snort with a full mouth.

“But I thought most modern P2P protocols were resistant to that sort of thing?”

Xochitl did an “eh” frown followed by a “mostly” shrug and continued to chew.

“So explain it to me, then. What's the point?”

Brian resumed eating to show that she needed to talk for a while as his burrito was beginning to congeal. Xochitl swallowed enough of the food in her mouth to allow her to speak and still eat at the same time.

“Yeah, distributed hash tables and all that rot make it mostly tamper resistant. But I guess the point is to discourage the freeloaders and waste their time. When someone downloads a bad piece, they have to download it all over again. To make things more complex, many P2P protocols allow you to download chunks of data smaller than pieces.” She preemptively cocked her head and held up a finger to ward off the impending raised eyebrow.

“A piece, in P2P terms, is the smallest unit of data that has a pre-generated hash signature associated with it. It's an atom. You might assemble the atom out of protons, neutrons, and electrons, the chunks, but until it's a complete atom you can't really do anything with it. So the problem is that if you take one chunk from one guy and another from another and so on and put them together to make a full piece that you can verify, and you see that it's bad, you can't tell which guy is sending you bad data because the hash signatures only verify the whole atom, not the chunks.”

“There's even some guy that's using some big iron to come up with hash collisions to do more than that. He spends days generating a bogus piece with the same signature as a good piece. He uploads his bad piece and others pass it on until someone actually notices the

problem by listening to the MP3 or watching the movie or whatever. But in the time it takes to generate a single hash collision for a specific file a ton of people have already downloaded the unaltered original. That's why the current focus is more on frustration than corruption."

"Okay. So these bad guys are hired by the artists –"

"Not the artists, the corporations. There's a difference."

"Right, sorry. The bad guys are hired by the corporations to just sit around and pretending to be part of the swarm and upload bogus data to anyone they find?"

"Yep."

"That's weird. Won't users just figure out who is sending the bad data and set up firewall rules to block them?" This time it was Brian that waved off Xochitl's response. "Yeah, I know that your average user has no clue and doesn't even know what a firewall is, much less how to configure it. But I have to figure that at least some people do."

"Yep. Some."

"But that's got to get pretty unwieldy, managing all of those hostile IP addresses."

"Right. And it's compounded by the fact that the bad guys are doing this from hundreds, if not thousands of machines."

Brian held up a finger and cocked his head to stare at the ceiling for a second.

"Wait. Have they started using the zombies yet?"

"Not yet. Let's hope they don't figure that one out." Xochitl shuddered at the thought of literally millions of unpatched, unmaintained, virus-laden computers being fed instructions from the bad guys, all while the clueless users continued to buy gold-plated knitting needles off eBay, blissfully and tragically unaware.

"Adaptive firewalls and filters are being maintained that list bad guys like this and allow people to stay up to date through a sort of collaborative effort. When a new set of bad guys come online, people notice a spike in the bad data and submit the IPs to a centralized database."

Brian frowned, obviously not impressed.

"Yeah, I know. It's not a great solution. Good people accidentally get blacklisted. Bad people go unnoticed. Everyone has fights about who is good, who is bad, and how much of a difference there is between the two. It's ORBS all over again. But that's where I hit the wall. Short of using the zombies to attack the bad guys, which is a little aggressive for my tastes, I'm out of ideas."

"Right, and that's where Brian, hero to the little people, comes

in to save the day.” Xochitl couldn't even be bothered to snort a response to this. “You need a trust network.” Xochitl did deign to snort at this, however.

“You're not going to go all “Semantic Web” and “Web 2.0” on me, are you?”

“No, no, no. No buzzword bingo. I'm completely serious. I had to do a couple of papers on trust networks back in my school days. They're perfect for what you need here.”

“Okay, I'm listening.” Her burrito all but finished, she had slowed her eating to a relatively human pace and was now scooping up the remnants with tortilla chips. Brian chose to not point out the contradiction in this.

“What do you know about darknets and friendnets?”

Xochitl shook her head.

“Okay, I'll start from the beginning. Trust Networks 101. A darknet is a private P2P network or LAN. It's like an Illuminati meeting. Unless you know someone who knows someone, you don't even know the meeting is going on, and you certainly couldn't get in if you just stumbled on it. You only connect and share with a small, known group of computers instead of anyone and everyone. Darknets are the precursor to what I'm about to suggest.”

Xochitl waved him on, tortilla in hand.

“Moving on. Your life is a trust network. Okay, maybe not your life, as you never actually talk to anyone but me.” He paused for effect and the impending eyebrow. “Instead we'll use Jim –”

“The bagel guy?”

“No, the one in Marketing who is always coming in hungover on Mondays. You've seen his cronies?”

Nod.

“Think concentric rings. Let's call him Ring 0, because hopefully he trusts himself, and his cronies are Ring 1 – people he trusts above all others.”

The Tabasco was now apparently Jim. Splenda packets became his cronies.

“Presumably he doesn't go get hammered with everyone he knows, so there's a Ring 2 – people he knows and generally trusts but not nearly as much. We could go on creating rings ad infinitum to measure how much faith he puts in the people around him and the people around those people.”

“Of course, Jim's Number One Cronie, Abe, has his own set of rings.” One of the Splenda packets was replaced by the Cholula and several brown cane sugar packets were interspersed with the others.

“Like ripples in a pond, there will be places where those rings

intersect and there will be spaces in between. In the intersections are people. Maybe the person at that intersection, Connie, gets a bit more trust from both Jim and Abe because each knows the other trusts her."

A stack of plain white sugar packets became Connie. "Conversely, if Connie says that Abe's ex-wife is among her inner ring, Connie may go down in Abe's opinion and get a bit less trust from him."

Xochitl, not getting it, had long since finished her burrito and cleared off as much of the table as she could for Brian's condiment armada. "I mostly follow what you're saying – it's a mesh, a fractal landscape."

"Sort of. Technically, all that is a friendnet: applying your real-world relationships to your online presence."

"... and I presume you have a point coming ...?"

"Merge the three things we've been talking about: a P2P network plus a trust network plus a list of bad guys. Really, the third one is an extension of the second, but we'll keep them separate for now."

"Sounds like Friendster or something."

"Until you add in the third part and let it take over how you talk to the rest of the world. Then it becomes just like a cocktail party."

He continued quickly before she could interrupt.

"You're at a cocktail party. You tell your group of friends that the blonde at the door is hot, and they help you bag her. Er, or him. You come away from the inevitable smack-down and tell your friends that the blonde is a jerk and called you names, and none of them will talk to her. They'll tell their friends about the story and so on. Eventually, presuming you're at a party with a strong web of trust, the blonde won't have anyone left that will talk to her and she'll just leave."

Xochitl was stock still, staring at Brian.

"You're not keeping one Santa's List of naughty names for the entire party because you don't have to. You just ask your friends if they know anything about the blonde. If they do, they tell you and you make up your estimation of her based on what they say. If no one knows anything, you try talking to her and see what comes of it."

He paused to signify that he was coming out of metaphor-land and back to the real world. "It's basically like a really big friendnet. Normally a friendnet is made up of people you've met in person, but if you were careful you could learn from how one person interacts with another and make a trust estimate from that."

Brian noticed that Xochitl still hadn't moved and began to

wonder if she had forgotten how to breathe. "Xoch? Uh ... Xoch?" She blinked, but he still couldn't tell if she was breathing. "You okay?"

Xochitl made a concerted effort to raise a hand and wave an okay sign. Her back, until then stonily rigid, relaxed and her forehead dropped into her waiting upturned hand. Her other hand banged the table. Again, louder. A third time, even louder, this time enough to make Brian meerkat up above the booth to make sure that no one was staring at them. He thought she looked like she was having brain freeze, but he knew the tea here was never cold enough to retain ice, much less give her a headache. He reached out to touch her arm, but then drew back as he realized what he was doing.

"Xoch?"

Her head came up and turned toward the ceiling. He could see that her eyes were completely unfocused and she saw nothing around her. She rotated the empty hand and extended her forefinger to say "wait".

Brian was still a little freaked out, but he finally caught on that she was okay, just thinking. He'd seen her lost in thought before, but this was almost ... catatonic. He tried to stop staring at her and forced himself to look at his plate to start eating again. He found he wasn't hungry anymore and looked back up to speak.

"Seriously, Xoch, it wasn't that good of an idea. Someone had to have thought of it before me, right?"

The finger pushed forward with a slight waggle.

Having gotten an almost immediate response, he started to unclench and feel okay about her condition. He worked to relax all of the muscles he had tensed without realizing it. He realized that she only barely heard him anyway, so he may as well shut up and clean the table.

He stood up, telling himself it was to gain better access to the entire table, but he knew it was really because he was too fidgety to sit any more. It took him a minute or two to re-stack all of the sweetener packets back in their tray, pile all of the other detritus onto his plate, do a once-over wipe of the table with an extra napkin, dump all of the garbage in the receptacle, and return to the table. Xochitl seemed as if she hadn't moved, her hand still extended to ward him off.

Brian looked at his watch, realized that they had plenty of time before they needed to be back at the office, and sat back down. He unclipped his cell phone from its belt case and thumbed through the menus. None of the servers had blown up since they left. One of the Marketroids had sent him an email telling him that the Internet was

down and he couldn't get his Yahoo!. This normally would have amused Brian enough to show it to Xochitl and have a good laugh over it, but not this time. He deleted the email, knowing that if the user hadn't figured it out by the time they got back from lunch he'd just have a voice mail to remind him to look into it.

When Brian next looked up, Xochitl's other hand had come up to join its twin and both were making small movements. It didn't quite look like she was typing or conducting some unheard symphony. From the way her hands rotated and grabbed at the air, it almost looked like she was assembling something.

He went back to his email and started to filter out the spam that had slipped through his filters. It amazed him that Chinese and Russian spammers would bother sending spam to a ".us" domain. Why were there no Maori spammers? Or someone else interesting?

Finished, Brian considered playing a quick game of Tetris but then noticed the time. He locked the phone, clipped it to his belt, and inhaled, mentally steeling himself for dealing with Xochitl again.

Xochitl had stopped making the assembly movements and was sitting back in the booth with a smile.

"I can't believe no one has done this yet."

"No one?"

"The pieces, yes, but no one has put them all together. Turning your firewall into an edge in a peer-to-peer distributed trust network? Nope. Not that I know of, and if this thing is anywhere near as effective as I think it would be, I would definitely have heard of it."

"Huh. Cool. Think I could patent it?" His leer said that he was kidding, but Xochitl groaned anyway. "Sorry! Joke!"

They sat in silence for another minute before Brian's grin widened and a chuckle escaped him. Xochitl's eyebrow responded for her.

"Art imitating life. I've just given you the idea to bring cliques and popularity contests to how people talk with each other on the 'net. Not just "Hot Or Not", but computers telling each other who they should and shouldn't communicate with based on reputations."

"It'll take some doing, but I think we can pull it off." This time, it was Brian's eyebrow that answered. "You aren't going to make me do this all by myself, are you?"

"Xoch, you know I'd love to help you, but you also know that I've got IP entanglements right now. In fact, we never had this conversation, okay? Not if you ever want this to see the light of day."

Xochitl grimaced, then growled.

Brian had only just started working with Xochitl two months

ago. The company he'd been at before was a startup that had hired him to do some of the heavy lifting on the web application that a pair of guys had come up with. The pay was good, but Brian hadn't realized it was a little too good. If he'd read his contract closer, he would have known that he was only on for a 6-month job, and that wasn't even the bad part.

Deep in the contract's fine print was an intellectual property clause – most jobs had them these days. When Brian saw the boilerplate verbiage about all of his ideas belonging to the company he glossed over the rest. What he missed was the extra part about how anything he developed within another 6 months after his contract expired would be considered “influenced by or derived from” his work on the job, and therefore also the property of the startup. It had been a Herculean effort just to get him the Network Administrator job at Xochitl's company. He only got it because he had agreed not to do any development for 6 months. Whether or not it was legal or ethical, no one wanted to get sued by a company with a signed contract and a lot of unencumbered cash.

“Yeah, they're bastards. We know this. Give me four months and I can help you out.”

“Never mind. I'll just use you for your brain. No paper trail that way.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

They sat in silence. Again. Xochitl's eyes had lost focus when Brian's cell began to vibrate. He glanced at the display, suddenly remembering how late for work they were.

“It's the Emperor. We need to get back.” He got up from the booth and for the hundredth time had to suppress the urge to offer her a hand up. He knew the correct action was to turn and start walking, and as soon as he did she got up and followed. He frowned and rolled his eyes at himself.

He really, really needed to get over her.

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Brian watched Xochitl get even more withdrawn and reserved over the next two months, if that was even possible, as she worked on her new project. They still went to lunch, but most of the outings passed with only the briefest of conversations, and only about mundane things such as the current world news.

Xochitl had taken to carrying a small notebook with her,

everywhere, and most of her time was spent flipping the pages back and forth and scrawling diagram after diagram into it. Brian saw that the drawings ranged from what looked like social networks to Venn Diagrams to flow control logic to mathematical plots.

Xochitl had asked one or two icebreaker-type questions in the first few days, mainly looking for references and places to start. After that they had never spoken about it again. Brian wasn't too slighted by this, as he knew that's just how she was – she would immerse herself in the technology and figure it out for herself. She knew that not understanding something from the ground up was the mark of an amateur.

He'd seen dedication like this before, but not nearly as intense. When she'd been hired by their company out of college, she'd had a rude awakening. The Emperor had come to her and given her the task of building the company's web site from scratch. The kicker was that he had wanted it done in what was then still an infant language: Java. Brian had messed around with Java a bit back in college, but never got anywhere with it. At the time, it had been so new that they hadn't yet started teaching it in schools.

Xochitl was dead in the water. She asked Brian for a few pointers and then proceeded to go on a self-imposed reality exile. A month later she emerged and had Java pinned to the mat. She finished the web site on schedule and dazzled the Emperor, who never learned that she'd had no clue what she was doing a month earlier.

Until that point, Xochitl had always been a good programmer, but she had lacked the passion that had driven Brian – the passion that separates a code monkey from a guru. The passion that drives the guru to not just write code for a living, but because they must.

These days Xochitl was an absolute sponge, soaking up any language and technology she'd come in contact with. Brian's passion had always kept them even in their college classes, but now he would have to admit that her skills were on a higher level than his. Add in passion, and Brian had an inferiority complex almost overnight.

Brian enjoyed coding and picking apart problems to find solutions, but Xochitl blew him away in this. Xochitl was one of those people that you hate watching mystery movies with, because she always had it figured out in the first half hour. She once told him that she had stopped reading mystery novels when she was a teenager because by that point they just bored her. (Or, the author would just pull an Agatha Christie at the end and suddenly reveal previously unknown facts. This generally made her throw the book away without bothering to read the last half dozen pages.) She hadn't said

this to brag, but with a sadness – she had wanted more of a challenge.

Xochitl was now in her cave 24/7. The woman sitting at her desk and hacking the Emperor's ideas for new features into their web site was barely even Xochitl. Brian always saw this as a kind of resource starvation: there was no way he could compete with the rampant ideas that were multiplying and filling up her head. Her Human Interface Device Driver was normally a flaky and rudimentary piece of code, but now it was running with only a fraction of her processor. The best he could do was to make sure she kept eating and getting to where she needed to go.

The worst part, to Brian, was that no one else in the office seemed to notice. They'd never really paid that much attention to Xochitl in the first place, and that didn't change now. They put in their bug reports and trouble tickets and feature enhancement requests, and they passed on their voice and email messages, and magically everything got done. Xochitl had been quietly handling things for so long, many people had stopped thinking about her as a person. Even the Emperor had stopped coming by except in the most dire of emergencies, which were very few and far between because Xochitl had it under control.

How could they not care that she was coming in with darker and darker circles around her eyes? How could they not notice that most of her email correspondence, while never all that verbose, was now almost entirely reduced to Auto-Replies and messages consisting solely of “This is done”?

But at the same time he knew that he couldn't talk to her about it. Or try to comfort her. Or in any way acknowledge the white elephant in the room. Those were the types of conversations that Xochitl simply did not have. No, he'd have to just watch and try to make sure she found her way back to them. To him.

One morning in the third month, he was sure it was somewhere around week 11, Brian was making his usual rounds to drop off an apple muffin for Xochitl when he noticed that she was different. She looked ... fresher. It's not that she had given up on personal hygiene all this time or anything, but to Brian she had definitely looked a bit rough around the edges. Wisps of hair always managed to escape their bands; dark circles were ever-present; clothing wasn't as wrinkle-free as usual. This morning, Xochitl looked perfectly normal. The hair was militarily suppressed; the dark circles were gone; the clothes were impeccably ironed.

"Brian! Good morning!"

Brian dropped the muffin on the floor and stared.

"Smooth move, ex-lax." She snatched the muffin from where it had rolled under her desk and surgically peeled back the cellophane that had protected it. "Thanks for the grub."

Brian's jaw tried to follow the muffin.

"You okay, Bri?" Brian should have been able to tell that she was worried, as the muffin was still in one piece in her hands all these seconds later, but he wasn't quite coherent enough. "Bri?"

Brian swallowed, blinked to unlock his gaze, and shook his head.

"Yeah. Just, um, just surprised is all."

Seeing that the danger had passed, Xochitl began vivisectioning the muffin as she gave him the eyebrow.

"You've been in your cave a while. It's good to see you out with the rest of us."

Xochitl dismissed this with the other eyebrow. "I'm starving! Where are we going for lunch today?"

"It's not even nine in the morning, Xoch! We may want to wait until a few restaurants actually open."

"Thank you, Jack Handy, for that profound revelation. Seriously though, we need to make it a sit-down. I need to data-dump."

"I guess so. Let me do the morning backup tape calisthenics, then I'll set up everything to coast for a few hours. Things have been

pretty quiet lately, anyway. We can probably be out of here at eleven and should be good until at least one-thirty."

"Deal. Work fast, slick. I'm thinking Maria's."

Brian stood for a second with a goofy grin on his face before he turned to walk back to the server room. It was good to have her back.

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Xochitl sighed and maintained eye contact with the young woman in front of her.

"Fontaine. Two. We called ahead."

"Yes, ma'am. I have you right here at the top of the list." The hostess pointed with a bright pink pen that had something fuzzy and unwieldy-looking attached to the tail-end. "But we just opened and are still setting up. It'll just be a minute before we can show you to a table. If you'd like to have a seat," she made a sweeping motion with her arms that encompassed the entire empty lobby, "we'll let you know when we're ready for you."

Xochitl glowered, taking Brian by surprise. She was almost ... confrontational. He made a deliberate motion of walking to a bench on the other side of the lobby, the path to which just happened to pass between Xochitl and the hostess.

"No problem, we'll be over here."

Xochitl continued to frown for a few seconds, and then a little too loudly and passive-aggressively asked, "Why do they bother opening the doors if they're not serving yet?"

Brian shrugged and waited for Xochitl to sit before making himself comfortable. "They have their reasons, I'm sure. Personally, I'd rather wait a few minutes and have the illusion of an immaculately clean restaurant preserved in my head. Besides, you love this place. You know it's worth the wait."

Maria's was easily Xochitl's favorite for sit-down meals. The place was an interesting mix of tapas and what Xochitl always referred to as "Roman Italian". Pasta was noticeably absent from the menu, but everything else you could think of as Italian was there. The meals were served as lots of small appetizer-size portions, so if you wanted to compare Chicken Marsala to Piccata to Cacciatore to Carbonara, you could. And you'd have plenty of room left over for more. To make things even easier, most dishes came out within minutes, and it was encouraged that you order a small amount of food at a time and just keep reordering until you were full. There wasn't

much of a distinction between appetizers and entrees, so each meal progressed as a blur of small plates. You always had the perfect amount of food, and only walked away hungry or overstuffed if you wanted to.

In short, it was Xochitl's idea of heaven in a restaurant.

"We're ready for you now, Mr. and Mrs. Fontaine."

Brian moved to correct the hostess, but Xochitl shook her head slightly to stop him. Not worth it, the look said. The hostess wouldn't care that neither of them was named Fontaine, nor that they weren't married. She just wanted to get these people out of her lobby.

Walking to their table, Brian whispered to Xochitl: "You'll have to explain the Fontaine thing to me someday, Xoch. I mean, I know "Xochitl" is just asking for people to screw it up, but why "Fontaine"? Where did that come from?"

"Long and uninteresting story." That was as much as he was going to get out of her on that subject.

"Here you are. A booth in the corner, as you requested. You're lucky, they were going fast!" Neither guest needed to look around to know they were the only people in the restaurant. Nor did they smile, let alone laugh. "Heh, well, okay then. Philip will be right with you."

"Thanks. No rush, we'll be here for a while."

Brian saw the word "campers" flash across the hostess' face before she turned and briskly walked away. Next time he came here he'd have to be sure to wear his "Campers Suck!" t-shirt and see if the girl remembered him.

He turned to talk to Xochitl. She was staring at him and grinning from ear to ear. His heart froze in terror then got confused and decided to beat four times faster than usual to make up for it. Xochitl didn't smile nearly enough for his tastes. Certainly not a smile like that, and certainly not at him. He could watch a smile like that all –

Wait. She wasn't smiling at him.

His heart slowed back down to a crawl and he unclenched. She was smiling at what was in her head, and he just happened to be sitting in front of her. She was practically vibrating she was so ready to talk. He'd never seen her like this before.

"I –"

"My name is Philip, I'll be helping you out with your lunch today. I understand you will be with us for a while today? Business lunch? That's fine, stay as long as you like. Can I start you off with something to drink? A Mariatini, glass of soft Riesling, or maybe a sparkling water?"

Brian knew, logically, that Philip must have inhaled at some

point during the monologue, but he couldn't tell when.

"An unsweet for her and a diet for me, thanks."

"We're going to start with some Insalata Caprese, but have no idea where we're going from there."

"Great, good choice. I'll bring those salads out right after I get your drinks." Philip bustled off and the two went back to their conversation.

"I finished it, Bri. It works! I –"

"Slow down, cowgirl. Start at the beginning, not the end. Gimme a name."

Her eyes sunk to the table, avoiding his.

"Alfred." She got the eyebrow for this. "Bruce Wayne's butler. He basically does everything that Batman needs – makes him food, stitches him up, runs errands, gets rid of supermodels the morning after, all that stuff."

"Uh huh. I'm sure it'll make sense eventually. Go on."

Her eyes came back up to meet his, again flashing with excitement.

"You were right, it was the trust network that was the key to it all. Remember the cocktail party? What if you had a butler with a PDA reminding you of who you should talk to, running interference with those you shouldn't, and keeping track of it all for you? That's what I've written. It's basically a service that acts like your personal social secretary on the 'net. It plugs into your email, your instant messenger, your blog or web site, your PDA, your cell, whatever. It figures out your trust network for you, and of course allows you to tweak things a bit if you want. You don't have to, though, it's pretty smart out of the box."

Within a few seconds of Philip dropping off their drinks, each had downed half of them.

"It takes this trust network and plugs directly into your firewall, managing who you can and shouldn't talk to at the entry and exit point for your network. Like a butler standing at your front door. Any networked application, be it a web browser or P2P download manager or whatever, just keeps on doing things the way they always have, blissfully unaware that they're being protected from the things you don't trust."

"I follow so far. Give me some examples."

"Okay, the easy stuff first: P2P. You notice that you're getting bogus data from a particular IP or subnet. You open up Alfred and ban them. Better yet, you plug your app directly into Alfred and have the two of them manage your bans for you. Or web surfing. You tell your web browser "this domain is always giving me ads and popups"

and Alfred gets rid of them for you. Or email. Alfred can learn who to whitelist, who to blacklist, and will even do greylisting if you're into that sort of thing."

"Yeah, but I can already ban people from P2P, block ads when I'm surfing, and filter out spam. My apps already have that."

"Sure, they all have their own implementations of it, each working at the application level. You use one app because it lets you ban people, one web browser because it blocks ads well, and one email client because it blocks spam well. But what if another app came out that didn't do one of those other things well, but did everything else right? Shouldn't you be able to use any P2P app, email client, or web browser, regardless of how well it protects you from the annoying stuff? Doesn't that kind of protection seem like it should be at a lower level than it is? Like, say the operating system or even network level?"

"I guess. But filtering spam is one thing, blocking banner ads is something else."

"No, it isn't. That's the point, and you were the one that said it first: it's all about who you trust. Do you trust a web site that only serves Flash-based "Punch the Monkey" ads? Do you trust an email server that only sends out email with ads for drugs and printer ink? Filtering worked for a while, but it needs to go deeper to work better. That's where Alfred comes in – he does all the trust math and figures it out for you as you go. You don't even need to train him if you don't want to, he just learns. One day you visit the same site you've been looking at for weeks and suddenly you don't see any ads anymore."

"But the killer is that Alfred chats with the other Alfreds that he has learned he can trust. My Alfred would tell your Alfred whenever he learned of a new friend or foe. Your Alfred might trust mine completely, or he might weight it and figure my recommendation into the math. So when I send you a link to my favorite web site, maybe you go there and never see the ads that I've stopped seeing. Your Alfred can learn from mine and vice-versa."

"Better yet, you don't have to train Alfred about your friends, either. He'll look in your email and in your chat logs and your blog links and figure it out. Ban someone from messaging you and Alfred won't trust them, and so on. In the simplest case you just install Alfred, he pokes around and figures out what he needs to, and he just starts to work. No muss, no fuss."

Philip dropped off the salads and was smart enough to not interrupt their conversation again.

"What about passwords and encryption?"

"If you have passwords that Alfred can't figure out, he'll ask you

when he needs them. If you're using encryption, odds are you have the brains to take a minute and configure Alfred to work with it."

"Sounds a little invasive."

"You can configure him not to be, but by default I guess he is. Remember though, Grandma Smith isn't going to want to do any configuration or remember any passwords. She just wants to download some Avril Lavigne so she can burn a CD for her granddaughter. Alfred's going to have to do the bulk of the heavy lifting."

Brian nodded and conceded the point.

"Eat for a second. I need to assimilate this."

Xochitl suddenly remembered how hungry she was. The discs of mozzarella on her plate didn't last long, and the tomato slices followed shortly thereafter.

"So I assume we're not talking about a monolithic application, here. You had to have gone with a plug-in architecture."

Xochitl chewed and nodded in affirmation.

"I take it you've already developed a handful of plug-ins?"

Xochitl paused her sponging of the olive oil and basil on her plate to answer. "About a dozen, maybe two. The trust plug-ins are generally a snap. Have them rifle through your address book or contact list, build a Bayesian analysis of friend-or-foe data, and pass it back to Alfred. The application plug-ins are on the same level: increase trust for this group, decrease it for this other one. The firewall plug-ins are trickier and will probably eventually require the vendors to get involved. I've built them for CheckPoint, iptables, Windows firewall, and a couple other application-based firewalls. Ban this range, un-ban this other range. No problem."

"And the chatting between the Alfreds?"

"Signed, encrypted, and tunneled over multiple transports. Most of the time two Alfreds will exchange their keys without their humans even knowing about it. If the human already has a GPG or PGP key, we use that. I mean, I'm no crypto-geek, so we'd have to have someone who actually knows what they're doing look over it, but it seems pretty secure."

"Sounds like you've tried really hard to take the humans out of the loop. You're not getting a creepy *WarGames* vibe?"

"Most people don't know or want to know, they just want it to work. The more you keep the human in the loop, the more chance there is that they'll screw it up. I figure power users will want to pop the hood and start to go wild, but the starting point needs to be zero-configuration."

Brian noticed Philip heading their way. "Order some real food.

Let me think some more.”

“Hey there, folks. Can I get you another salad, ma'am? Maybe get you started on some of our fabulous Chicken Limone? It's our special today.”

Xochitl grinned wickedly enough to make Brian worry.

“Tell you what, Philip, we'll make this easy on you. How many chicken dishes do you have on your menu?”

“Uh, no one has ever asked me that before.” He cocked his head to think about it for a second. “About twenty, I guess. But you can mix and match most of the sauces, so there's a ton of different ways you can have them.”

“We are really hungry today, and we're kind of celebrating. Put us down for one of everything except the breaded or fried ones like the Parmigiana. Bring them out two at a time as you see us finishing off the others. You choose the order. But not too fast, we've got a lot to talk about. And one each of your veggies, mix those in as well.”

Philip stared at Xochitl, then turned to Brian as if to ask if the woman at the table with him was insane. Brian offered no help, so Philip nodded silently and backed away from the table. When he was out of earshot Brian leaned into the table and whispered, “I think you broke him. You're nuts.”

“I haven't eaten properly in two months.”

That was it, that was all she was going to say.

Brian swirled a forkful of mozzarella around on his plate, building up a good sheen of oil and a coating of basil shreds. Xochitl clearly had more to say, but seemed to be waiting for him to figure out how to make her say it.

“You said iptables and Windows firewall. Alfred is cross-platform?”

She smirked at him, condescending. “Of course. Since there's not much of a user interface, just a couple of questions every now and then, it was pretty easy. I figured some wizards would eventually come along and build front-ends for the configuration options for each of the platforms. I am perfectly aware that I don't have the design skills to come up with an interface those Mac weenies would like. The plug-in interfaces are standard C-compatible stuff, so any language will work.”

“Huh. Bloat?”

“Minimal. The Bayesian stuff is all done at night, as most of that is going to be shades of grey and doesn't need to be real-time. The application plug-ins do the real-time work, but that's just a few tables worth of information, no analysis. Same thing goes for the inter-Alfred chat. There's some crypto that has to be done in real-time, but

most anyone with a computer built in the last 3 years isn't even going to notice it. As far back as 5 years and it'll be noticeable, but not too bad, and certainly no worse than the potential effects of all the crap that Alfred is filtering out. Of course, at night Alfred's vampire side takes over and sucks every last cycle it can to do all the math."

A bread runner swapped out their empty basket for a new one. Xochitl attacked it and purred when she felt the warmth of the bundle. Brian smiled and kept his fingers a safe distance from the melee.

Shortly, Philip arrived with the first plates. "Chickens Limone and Piccata, with sides of marinated portobella and haricot vert with prosciutto. I believe next are the –"

Xochitl made a noise like an offended infant and waved a hand to silence him. "Surprise us, Philip!"

"Certainly. Enjoy." Xochitl was too busy dividing up the food to notice that he shook his head as he walked away.

"You take this round, Xoch, I'm still working on my salad." Brian continued to slosh the sliced tomatoes and mozzarella around to pick up every last bit of basil and olive oil. "So what's left to be done? I gather from your mood that the bulk of the work is finished. When do you start testing?"

"It's done. I told you that already, President Reagan!"

Brian paused and looked at her quizzically. "No, I mean when do you put it out in the wild and see how it does?"

Xochitl looked down at her plate and made to pretend like she hadn't heard him.

"Xoch? That was a simple question. What's going on?"

Xochitl moved the chicken around on her plate, still not looking at him.

"Alpha is already done. I kinda skipped beta."

Brian knew this wasn't an answer and stared at her to get more out of her.

"It's been on the external network for a week and on the internal since yesterday morning."

Brian's muscles went slack. His fork, suddenly deciding to obey gravity, clattered onto his plate. "I would have noticed –"

"Why? Haven't you been listening? Alfred is drop-and-go and completely transparent. I just had to give him the password to the firewall, and he's been handling it all week with no problem. In fact, I think you said yourself that it's been pretty quiet lately."

Brian hadn't chewed anything recently, but found himself swallowing anyway.

"And it's not like Alfred would have tripped any anti-virus or

malware scanners. He's not in their signature databases, nor is he doing anything suspicious. He's not even hidden, he's ... subtle. He's just sitting back and filtering, like he's supposed to."

Brian still looked very, very unhappy.

"Look. After the first day I noticed that the Alfred on the web server had already taken care of all the web worm attack attempts we still occasionally get. The Alfred on the mail server has reduced company-wide spam by some 80%. The Alfred on my workstation has taken that further and reduced my personal spam to a trickle and I see fewer and fewer ads everyday when I'm surfing. And -"

"You put in on the LAN? Who has it?"

"All of the servers, some of the workstations. He's not a virus, Bri. You have to install him. I've put him on a few PCs that I noticed unlocked in the evenings when I was leaving. You tell me, has anyone noticed?"

Brian thought for a minute. "No. I'd have heard about it."

"Exactly. And would you say that you've gotten fewer eye-dee-ten-tee calls lately?" Her forefinger drew the word "ID10T" into the air in front of her.

Brian was again slow to answer. "I guess. I did say that it's been quiet lately, didn't I?"

"Yes. You did."

At that moment Philip sidled up to clear off the stack of plates beside Xochitl and drop off a few more. Neither of them even noticed what was on them, and Philip could tell now was not a good time to interject. He made his escape as stealthily as possible.

"I still can't believe you rolled it out without even talking to me, Xoch."

"I'm really sorry, but I had to. I couldn't just let some half-finished alpha version out into the wild. I needed to test it. Our LAN is the perfect testbed. We have a lot of stupid people working for our company."

"But come on, Xoch, what if something had gone wrong? What if Alfred threw up and nuked a server or two?"

She squinted at him to reevaluate his question. Brian didn't give in.

"You're good, but you're not infallible."

"At any rate, he didn't nuke anything. Ends and means." There was no winning this argument with her, Brian knew this.

"Fine. Truce." He reached for his drink and began to polish it off. "It works. When do you release it?"

She smiled at him. "Last night."

Brian choked on his soda. "You're kidding!" She shook her

head. "And you're just telling me all this now?" He had the look of a kicked puppy.

"He was done. I didn't see any point in waiting. I put him up on SourceForge and Freshmeat last night."

Brian was still stunned.

"Geez, drama queen, you'd think I had released a new version of Windows or something. It's not like anyone even knows it exists. Do you know how many projects there are on SourceForge or how many postings there are on Freshmeat? No one who isn't at this table is going to notice or care. We'll tell our friends ... well, you'll tell your friends and eventually we'll get maybe a dozen people outside the company using it."

Brian shook his head unbelievably.

"Alfred is just proof-of-concept. Someone better than me will come along and make a leaner, meaner version for Windows, then a prettier one for Mac, then fifteen totally different ones for Linux."

Brian at least got a chuckle out of this.

"And you know someone will want to come along and rewrite him in Java so that your fridge will be able to know to not talk to your toaster."

She was just digging for a smile, and Brian knew that she knew the he knew it, but he couldn't help but give her one.

"The point is that now people will start to think in this direction and they can innovate and make some great things. You've really started something with this, Bri."

"I didn't do anything. Remember, it can't have even been my idea."

"Whatever. I posted it using the old accounts we set up together after college, so you'll eventually be able to get some of the credit if anything comes of it."

Brian considered this for a second and seemed to will away the dark clouds that had been hovering over him.

"Fine. Sure. You bet. It's just --" His face went slack and he pointed behind Xochitl. "Oh my --"

Xochitl spun around, jerking her head back and forth, scanning for something amiss. She couldn't see anything, but her view was hindered by the foliage behind her on the back of the booth. She gave up and turned back around to interrogate Brian as to what he saw.

Brian was sitting, peacefully, chewing on a piece of Chicken Marsala, a large smile across his face. All of the plates with food on them had magically been transferred to his side of the table, and all of the empty plates were on hers.

Xochitl eyed him menacingly. "Jerk."

“Yes I am. But I'm a hungry jerk and my brain's on overdrive.
Give me the juicy details.”

“How about I trade juicy details for juicy chicken?”

“Deal.”

A week passed and the Alfreds on their network continued to learn and protect. Brian and Xochitl rolled the software out to the entire LAN, as well as their home computers. Brian had been markedly impressed that Xochitl had been right when she said that Alfred needed no initial configuration. None of the users even noticed that Alfred was there, and the number of trouble tickets dropped dramatically.

One morning the Emperor dropped by Brian's office while he was chatting with Xochitl.

"I thought I'd find you here, Xochitl."

"Is there something I can help you with, boss?"

"I got your vacation request and I just wanted to say *bon voyage* face to face. I don't see any reason why you can't leave this weekend if you want."

Brian stared at Xochitl in confused horror.

"The request queue is all cleared out, as is the bug tracking system. The new features for the web site aren't that important, and we don't have the budget to get the graphics people started on them right now anyway. In a month we'll be up to our elbows in sewage, so now is a good time."

Brian finally spoke up. "How long will you be out, Xoch?" The stare he was giving Xochitl made her wilt.

"Just three weeks. I have to use it all up before the next fiscal year starts." Her returned gaze said *I'll explain later*.

"We'll miss her, of course, but I know she's got everything running by itself."

Brian shot an inquisitive look at Xochitl, but she shook her head slightly. She hadn't told the Emperor about Alfred.

"Well, that's it then. *Bon voyage!*" He turned and walked out, his managerial duty done. Brian waited until he was around the corner to close the door to the office.

"What was that?"

Xochitl backed away from him as if he had yelled at her. "I just

put the request in this morning, Bri. He had me put the budget numbers up on the intranet and I peeked and saw that they had cut the web numbers ... so I figured it was a good time to make myself scarce before they started to evaluate whether or not they need me around. Plus, I realized that I'm still a bit fried after all that work with Alfred, so ... it just worked out." He wasn't buying it. "Really, Bri, that's what I had come in here to tell you. I was working up to it."

Brian softened a bit. "Three weeks?"

"Like I said, I had the time accrued and it'll just disappear if I don't use it. I haven't taken a vacation in four years, Bri. I could really use it. Three weeks is a fraction of what they owe me; it's just the portion that would have expired."

Brian moved to sit back down at his desk, and Xochitl came out of the crouch she'd been in. "Where are you going?"

"No clue. This really was last-minute. I wish I'd thought of it three months ago when I started Alfred. I could have just taken the time to do that instead of working 20 hour days."

Brian chuckled. "Who are you kidding? You would have just worked 22-hour days on Alfred."

Xochitl smiled an agreement. "True."

They sat in silence for a minute until Brian spoke up.

"You should go someplace exotic. Some place you'd never think to go."

Xochitl shook her head and smirked at him. "What? To work on my fabulous tan? I don't even own a bathing suit, you dork!"

Brian cocked his head to do the visualization, but Xochitl rolled her eyes and blew him off.

"I didn't say tropical, you nag, I said exotic." Xochitl bobbed her head to concede the point and Brian continued. "Why not visit the homeland? Er, one of them anyway. Tenochtitlan would be a little creepy and deserted this time of year, but Edinburgh would probably be nice. Ooh, Scotland. I wonder how much tickets are?"

Before Xochitl had a chance to argue he was already plugging dates into his workstation and looking up flight prices.

"There you are, \$800 round-trip. You can't beat that with a stick!" He deftly multi-tasked and brought up the web site for Scotland's National Tourist Board. "Just a second more ... there. Look at that, a half dozen Beds & Breakfasts at – factor in the conversion – \$40 per night. You can't even get those kinds of rates here in the city!"

Xochitl squirmed in her seat. "I don't know, Bri. I was thinking I might just chill out at home, get some rest, that sort of thing."

"You can do that in Scotland! But you'll be in the old country

instead of this asphalt jungle. Green, Xoch! Actual, natural, non-spray-painted color!”

“I’ll think about it. I’ve still got a few days before I have to decide.”

Brian looked at her disapprovingly and shook his head.

“I can’t believe you’d let an opportunity like this pass you by. You have the time, you have the money, and you have no excuse not to. You need to do this.”

“I’m not like you. I don’t need to go and find my roots. Hello! Mexican and Scots? It doesn’t get more bizarrely orthogonal than that. Mexico and Scotland don’t mean anything to me. I may as well go to Iceland or Bermuda or Madagascar.”

Brian was beginning to wail. He didn’t know if he was mad at her or at himself or just in a foul mood or what.

“Then go to Iceland! Who cares? Just go somewhere! Don’t sit at home and be like every other member of our pathetic geek order.”

Xochitl stared at Brian, confused, watching him pant from the exertion.

“What’s going on, Bri?”

He hung his head and began to deflate. It took him a minute to answer.

“I ... I don’t know. I just ... I’ve dreamed of being in the position you’re in now. Time. Money. No strings.”

He couldn’t tell her that he’d finally figured out what was making him so mad: he couldn’t go with her, and it didn’t even occur to her to ask him to.

“What I could do with three weeks and a valid passport ...” He trailed off, his head still hung and still staring at his desk.

“But that’s not me, Bri. Sure, those places would be pretty, but I can just do a stock photo search if I want to see them.”

Brian couldn’t respond. Xochitl eventually got up and made her way out, pausing at the door to close it as she left.

“It’s not a bad idea, though. I said I’d think about it and I will.”

He knew she wouldn’t. He knew she was already probably planning on what ice cream to stock up on for the next three weeks.

“Screw it,” he said to the otherwise empty office.

Brian tabbed back to the airline reservation window and began the steps to buy the tickets, flipping back and forth to the B&B reservations at the same time. She’d never go if left to her own devices, but there was no way she’d turn down tickets and reservations handed to her, especially if she was told they were non-refundable.

Xochitl was not going to crawl back into her shell for three

weeks if Brian had anything to say about it.

Xochitl slammed open the door to Brian's office.

"What. Are. These."

Brian knew there was no right answer, and so remained silent.

Xochitl stared at Brian.

Brian stared at his desk.

Xochitl's breathing eventually returned to a normal rhythm.

"Look. It's not that I don't appreciate them, but I am not your pet that you can send off to the kennel whenever you want."

Brian had no idea what that meant, and so continued his silence out of fear.

Both of them heard the server room door open and turned to see who it was. The Emperor. Great. Xochitl did her best to compose herself.

"Xochitl. I'm going to stop going to your desk first and just start coming right here when I'm looking for you."

Xochitl shot Brian a look that would have curdled milk.

"I know I already said my goodbyes, but before you went I wanted to say thank you to the both of you."

Brian and Xochitl cocked their heads at almost the same time. The Emperor seemed to lose his train of thought for a second.

"Uh, yeah. Anyway. I just wanted to say that the Board is impressed with your recent efforts on the network."

Both of them froze. Had they not been who they were, the Emperor would have seen them go pale.

"I just came from our weekly meeting. One of the members remarked on how well the new email server was working out. I told him that I didn't think we had one, but everyone agreed that there's been a lot less spam lately. Then we all realized that none of us has had any computer problems in almost two weeks. I had to cover a bit, but I told them that I'd tell you that your work hasn't gone unnoticed."

The pair in front of him was still fixed in place staring at him.

"I mean, I don't know what you two have been doing, or if it's

just a lull in the Internet or something, but it's working out great.”

Xochitl and Brian again simultaneously exhaled and smiled. Brian quickly spoke up.

“Just tightening the reins, sir. Locking things down a bit. Xochitl, uh, found some new anti-spam software that we've been trying out.”

“Great! I knew it! Well, it's working out well.” He paused and turned to Xochitl. “Speaking of our resident genius, I saw the tickets on your desk this morning before you came in. Hope you don't mind. Scotland, eh? I haven't been there in years. If you make it to The Feisty Boar ...” Still in sync, Brian and Xochitl jumped at the mention of the name, but it went unnoticed. “... Ah, that was a good time. Well, if you make it and you see Claire, give her my regards. Oh, and the Board decided that your plane ticket is on us. You deserve it. Drop off a copy of the receipt before you leave today and we'll make sure you're reimbursed before your flight out.”

“Um, uh, thank you, sir. You really don't have to do that.”

“Of course we do. Just stay away from those burly Scottish men in kilts. We need you back here next month. No finding true love and running off, now!” With that he grinned, turned, and walked off.

Xochitl sank into the chair next to her. “Well, Scotland it is then. Did you tell him about The Feisty Boar? Wasn't that the place right next to the B&B you've got me booked at?”

“No, I didn't and yes it is. That is creepy. Very, very creepy.” He paused for a moment. “I'll drop off the receipt today and you can just pay me back later. I'm not going to try to explain why the ticket is on my credit card. Maybe they won't notice.”

Xochitl sneered at him. “I think you should have to explain, or at least try to. I'd kill to be there for that conversation. I'll pay you back when and if I get over what you did. And don't start any ends and means crap with me; I'm not in the mood.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl sat on her couch with a glass of iced chai in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other. She looked around the living room. A second couch, a glass and wrought iron coffee table, a generic black particle board entertainment center between two generic black particle board bookcases, a mid-sized television, and an over-sized boom box that passed for a stereo. That was it.

The magazines on the coffee table covered such fascinating

topics as Java, ColdFusion, .NET, and geek porn in the form of an issue of *Make*. The books on the shelves were standard science fiction and fantasy – Card, Sterling, Gibson, Stephenson, Gaiman. The DVDs on the entertainment center's shelves were primarily older movies and were vastly outnumbered by spindle after spindle of burned CDs and DVDs of movies that Xochitl had downloaded.

She turned to look over her shoulder through the door into the office. The furniture was the same black particle board. The books on the shelves covered the same topics as the magazines on the table in front of her. The desk was clean and organized, with not much more next to the computer than a large pad of sticky notes and a tradeshow mug holding pens and pencils.

The kitchen was over her other shoulder. Again, it was clean and organized, with nothing on the counters except the microwave and some dish and hand soaps and sponges by the sink. Peering as if through the cabinet doors, she could visualize the plain black bowls and plates, the simple yet over-sized glassware, and the matching mixing bowls, pots, and pans.

Her apartment was decidedly non-effeminate. Who was she kidding? Her apartment was almost non-human. She didn't even have fuzzy toilet seat covers!

She finished off the piece of pizza and reached for the lone paper towel. She caught her reflection in the table and frowned. She sat back up and lost line of sight to the doppelgänger, but the image was still fresh in her mind. Her frown deepened and she moved to gulp down some chai to give her face muscles something, anything else to do.

I need to get away from here.

I need to get away from me.

Maybe Scotland wasn't such a horrible idea. She didn't know anyone there, which meant no one would ask her to help fix their computer. It also meant that she wouldn't have anyone who knew her, which was more the point. If she wanted to lounge around all day in her bed, she could do that. Not Brian or anyone else could say anything, even if they knew about it.

She started to mentally pack her luggage.

Her ancient brick of a cell phone wouldn't work there. But really, who would she call? If she thought she'd need one, she could just buy a disposable. Didn't they sell them in every airport these days? What about a laptop? She didn't think she could go completely off the 'net for three weeks solid and not suffer some kind of crippling nerve disorder. But the first leg of the flight was seven hours. The laptop battery wouldn't last that long ...

Yes! An excuse to finally go out and buy an iPod!

She decided that she needed to start writing this down, and so walked to the office and grabbed a sticky note and a pencil. Disposable cell. iPod. The obligatory toiletries. What else?

Anything?

Was that it? Her entire life could be reduced to that little?

How pathetic.

Xochitl threw the sticky note and pencil onto the coffee table and grunted in exasperation. Shower. She just needed to take a nice hot shower and calm down.

She walked into the bedroom. Glass and wrought iron end tables. Black particle board bookcases. Ugh!

Away. Yes. Definitely away.

“Go.”

“Uh, Mr., uh ... Kami?”

“Yes. Go.”

“We, that is, my employers ... we require your services.”

“I would imagine so. I know who your employers are. Tomorrow. They know where to send you, and they know when. Order a green tea frappuccino.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Paul stepped through the doorway and was immediately assaulted with the smell of coffee. The place reeked of it. He felt tendrils of the smell twisting their way through his hair and settling in to stay with him for the rest of the evening.

“Good evening, sir. What can I get for you today?” The barista behind the counter smiled at him and twitched, unable to stand still from all of the caffeine absorbed osmotically through her skin.

Paul slouched his way to the counter, shrugging off his jacket and holding it, forgotten, away from his body, leaving a trail of water beside him. He did his best to focus on the barista and not look nervous. Unfortunately, the barista had more facial piercings than he could count without staring, so he shifted his focus to his feet. When he got to the counter he made a big production out of staring at the menu on the wall behind the counter before looking back down at the barista, whose name was apparently Sunshine.

“Um, yes. Sunshine. I'd like a, uh, a green tea frappuccino.”

Sunshine looked back at him and tried to hide what looked like disgust.

“Green tea frap? We don't really make those here. I can get you a mug of hot green tea, or maybe a chai frap, but we only sell green tea bagged, so I can't do a frap.”

Paul deflated and looked like he wanted to faint. Actually, he wanted the faux adobe tile beneath his feet to open up and swallow him whole, preventing him from having to tell anyone that he had somehow screwed up.

"Um, uh ..."

"How about a hot green tea? You don't really look like the coffee type, and a nice hot cup of tea is very calming."

Paul just nodded and fumbled for his wallet. Sunshine took his money and handed him a mug and a tea bag from beneath the counter. "There's a booth over there in the back." She pointed to the corner furthest from the door. "It's nice and warm and has a dowel for your coat on the side. Hot water is in the urns on the island to your left. I think you'll like the tea."

Paul mumbled a thank you and made his way toward the back of the establishment, filling his mug with hot water along the way. He hung his rain-drenched coat on the dowel, then pushed by it to get into the booth. The dowel was too close to the back of the seat and the water still dripping off of his jacket smeared across his pants as he moved past. He refused to look down at his wet pants, knowing that it would only agitate him further.

He had to think. His instructions had been very explicit. There were a number of coffee shops within a few blocks of this place, but none of them named *Chai, Whatever!* and none of them were open at this time of night. This had to be the place. But then why did the guy on the phone tell him to order a green tea frappuccino if they don't serve them here?

Paul unwrapped his teabag and dropped it into the hot water, dunking it up and down. He'd only had green tea when he'd been out to Chinese restaurants, which wasn't all that often, so he wasn't quite sure what color he was supposed to go for. He figured it was easy enough to just wait until the water cooled to a drinkable level, and call that done.

After a few minutes the steam coming off the now yellow water was down to being almost unnoticeable and he figured it was safe to drink. He took a careful test sip and quickly removed the teabag. The tea was noticeably too potent and tasted of flour and something else that made his teeth feel funny. Sunshine had been right, though, it was oddly calming.

Paul continued to sip his tea, trying to figure out what to do now. He needed to talk to his employers and let them know that something had gone wrong. He looked out the windows at the front of the shop and saw that the rain was still coming down thick enough to obscure the streetlights outside. Staying inside to think of a plan

was looking more and more preferable.

As he finished off his tea, Paul tossed the teabag back into the mug and slid it across the table. It was too bad he couldn't just stay here all night and not have to go face the people he knew were waiting for him. The light jazz in the background was accompanied by the fizz of the rain. Combined with the dim lights and a full, warm stomach, the place couldn't be more calming if they had offered free neck massages.

Paul folded his arms on the table in front of him and put his head down. He just needed to think for a minute.

He was asleep before he could complete his next thought.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Mister? Mister? We're closing now. I tried to let you sleep as long as I could while I cleaned, but I've got to lock up and go home.” Paul opened an eye to see Sunshine's face level with his and jerked upright in the booth. “You looked like you were a little stressed, so I figured you could use the nap. I was hoping the rain would clear up before I had to wake you, but it's still cats and dogs out there.”

Paul rubbed his eyes and temples, trying to wake up. The metallic and floury taste of the tea still filled his mouth.

“What time is it?”

Sunshine frowned and he knew he wasn't going to like the answer.

“Two-fifteen.” She hurried to explain. “We close at two, but like I said I had to clean up and you needed the sleep and the rain –”

Paul waved and shook his head. “It's okay. I appreciate it.” Suddenly he remembered why he was there and jumped up, only to be blocked by the table. He scrambled to get out of the booth. “Uh, thanks again. Sorry to be such a pain. I need to go.”

Sunshine backed away from him and nodded.

Paul grabbed his coat, ramming his arms into the sleeves as he walked. He made his way to the front door and ran out into the rain, groping for his cell phone in his jacket pocket. He hit the button to redial as he ran a block toward his car. There was no traffic at this time of night, but also no awnings on either side of the street, so he made his run straight for the car to minimize his time outside in the deluge. He pinned the phone between his ear and shoulder as he ran, now going through his pockets trying to find his car keys.

He found them seconds before he got to his car, disarmed the

alarm, unlocked the doors, and jumped inside. He was soaked, again, and pools of cold water began to collect in the seat under him. The phone continued to ring in his ear. Yes, he knew it was after two in the morning, but someone needed to answer!

He heard the click of someone picking up the other end and exhaled for the first time in what seemed like minutes.

"This had better be important, boy."

The voice at the other end was a little groggy, but even in that state sounded like Patton, both in tone and in forcefulness. Paul recognized the voice and sat up a little straighter in his seat.

"Uh, yes sir. It's about tonight's, er, last night's meeting. With the, um, gentleman."

"What's the problem, boy? We were told everything went as planned."

"I, uh ..."

"Is there something that you need to tell us that he didn't already?"

Paul began to hyperventilate. What was going on? He'd screwed up and missed the meeting! Why did they think everything went as planned? Why hadn't he woken up with his kneecaps removed?

"I still have the package, sir. I -" He did still have the package, right? He groped around the inside pocket of his jacket, feeling for the thick envelope he had stuffed in there earlier in the evening. It was still there. He pulled it out to look at it, hoping that the sight of something he hadn't screwed up would calm him.

It was the wrong envelope.

"What about it, boy? Bring it to us tomorrow, like you were told. You can handle that, can't you?"

Paul barely heard the other man. He was still staring at the envelope. The one he'd been given was a cheap white envelope, the kind you could get at any office supply or even grocery store. The envelope in his hands was made of something yellower and crisper. Rice paper, maybe? It looked like it hadn't been machined, but folded. The exposed edges were rough, as if torn by hand instead of cut. The lip of the envelop was sealed with a quarter-sized dollop of green wax. Wax! Who sealed envelopes with wax anymore? There was some sort of Chinese or Japanese symbol embedded in the seal. He stared at it in horror.

"Boy! Are you listening to me?"

He scrambled to empty out the rest of the items in his jacket, hoping that he hadn't lost the other envelope. It was gone, replaced by this new one.

"Yes, uh, yes sir. I'll bring it to the meeting, sir. Good night."

He hung up the phone, too dazed to provide a farewell, let alone an apology. When he realized what he'd done, he panicked again and promptly fainted.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Paul awoke several hours later when the sun had come up enough to make it past the hood of his car and directly into his eyes. The discomfort in his neck and the fact that he was shivering from the cold brought him from groggy to wide awake in what was record time for him. He looked at his watch, forcing his eyes to focus against contacts that should have been taken out the night before. It was just past seven.

The rain had stopped some time ago, and the moisture left on the street was beginning to vaporize into wispy streams. The sun was just above the horizon, turning the sky an orange that would have been quite beautiful, had Paul noticed. Unfortunately, he was too busy freaking out and hyperventilating again. His keys had fallen under the seat when he'd been searching for the envelope last night, and he was willing his hand to become skinny enough to reach them.

The envelope! He gouged his hand on a spring under his seat when he bolted upright to look for the envelope, keys suddenly forgotten. The envelope was on the floor in front of him, a little damp and grimy but still sealed and in one piece. He reached to grab it and contorted to try to get his keys from the same angle. Holding each in a hand, he stared at them, and his watch, trying to calm himself enough to figure out what to do.

The meeting was at nine, across town but close to his house. He had enough time to go home and shower, but barely. Yes, that would do. He could get cleaned up, put on a fresh change of clothes, something nice and pressed of course, and present the envelope to his employers. If they had been told that everything went okay, and he had the envelope to give to them, then how would they know that he had messed up?

Yes, yes, yes. That would do nicely.

Volume I

Edinburgh, Scotland

Day 1

Xochitl was still packing when Brian showed up to take her to the airport. She had seen again just how little she was taking with her and was already in a foul mood. She threw open the front door to let him in, then went stomping back to her bedroom.

“Five minutes!”

“No problem, Xoch. I'm running a little early.”

“I had noticed.” Xochitl looked down at the pile on her bed: clothes, laptop, iPod, toiletries. She stared at the laptop menacingly, trying to will it into some adjacent dimension.

Screw it.

“There's no way I'm taking my laptop.”

Everything else was hurriedly and haphazardly launched into the open bag on the bed.

Brian popped his head into the bedroom doorway. “Really? Wow.”

“It's a vacation, right? And it's not like I won't be able to check my email. I just won't be able to be quite so compulsive about it. That's what coffee shops and cybercafes are for, right?” She zipped up the bag after wrestling with it and extracting a few extra shirts.

“I guess. Bold ... and daring! I don't know whether to be impressed or disturbed.”

Xochitl looked around the room. That was it, there was nothing left that she could think to take with her. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and plugged it into the charger by the bed. Brian saw this and reacted immediately.

“No cell, either?”

“Won't work over there. I think. And even if it did, I couldn't afford the international rates. I'll pick up a disposable cell when I get through the airport in Edinburgh.”

Brian obviously was somehow offended by this, but couldn't come up with any sort of argument to the contrary. “Wow.”

In the time it had taken him to come up with that exhaustive monologue, Xochitl had dragged the bag past him out to the living

room and dropped it by the front door. She now stood at the pass-through bar to the kitchen, divesting her pockets of keys, loose change, USB thumb drives, and the other detritus one accumulates over the course of a normal day.

She went over her mental checklist again. The garbage had been taken out. The fridge never had anything more than energy drinks in it and so would last the three weeks without incident. The lights and air conditioner had all been switched off. She had turned the oven on maybe twice since she had moved in, and so didn't give it a second thought. She turned to Brian.

"Ready to head out, Jeeves?"

He made as if to remove a hat and bowed deeply with one arm extended to the front door. "Your hack awaits, madam."

They walked outside and Xochitl locked up behind them before handing him the key. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

Brian didn't laugh this time. He was too busy lamenting that he'd just gotten the key to a woman's apartment, Xochitl's no less, and he'd just have to give it back to her in three weeks. That was it. He was doomed to die a lonely man.

"By the way, Xoch, I need to tell you something. Remind me once we hit the highway."

He was already walking toward the stairs to the parking lot and didn't notice the eyebrow, but he knew it was there.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c1p —

"So what's this thing you wanted to tell me?"

Brian squirmed in the driver's seat.

"I don't know if you're going to be happy, unhappy, or completely ambivalent about this, so ... so I'll just come right out and say it." He paused and very hypocritically continued to not say anything. Xochitl looked at him sideways.

"That doesn't sound at all good. Are you sure this is something you want to tell me before I go on vacation for three weeks? I might just spend every minute of my time plotting your demise."

Brian, again, didn't laugh at this.

"I submitted a story about Alfred to Slashdot this morning. I got a confirmation email back stating that it had been reviewed and was in the queue to be published later this evening."

Xochitl stared straight ahead, unseeing and unsure of how to react. She thought she should be indifferent, as the whole point of

writing Alfred in the first place was to spur the community to innovate. So, in a way, exposure would be good. But Slashdot? The kiddies would eat her alive. Someone would take it as more than it was and post some scathing comment and a thousand other adolescent voices would join the cacophony.

She had wanted Alfred to get around by word of mouth and be tested more thoroughly before a large number of people started using it. No, that wasn't really true. She had hoped that no one would use Alfred, just pick him apart and make their own, better versions.

This was ... she wasn't sure what this was.

"Huh. Okay. Well, it's not the end of the world, just not really where I was going with it. And I guess the upside of me finding out right before I get on an airplane is that I won't sit at my workstation hitting Reload every 30 seconds to see what the latest comment is to the article. I can wait the three weeks and get them all at once. It's not like it's that big of a deal. It'll probably just get lost in the noise, anyway, just like all the other product announcements masquerading as news stories."

"Maybe you're right. It's just that I ... I was thinking this morning about how stable everything has been at work lately, and I was just ... unbelievably happy about that. As a network administrator, a stable network is a wet dream for me. I wanted to share that, and Slashdot was the best way I could think of. I guess I got a little heroic and had this grand vision of saving the planet or something. I don't know. I know you're not taking your laptop, but ... just in case. I didn't want you to not hear it from me first."

—— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 ——

Xochitl had Brian drop her off without following her inside to wait with her. She knew that she still had an hour and a half until her flight started to board and she needed the time alone to retreat into her cave and prepare.

It wasn't that she didn't like flying. Quite the opposite, she loved to fly. It was the rest of the passengers that she could have done without. Babies crying, little kids giggling and kicking the backs of the seats in front of them, middle-aged suits yakking about their work, and octogenarians gasping in and out from behind their oxygen masks. It was easiest for her to just go into her cave and tune out the world around her.

Standing in the line for the metal detectors, she sighed another

thanks that she had allowed herself to buy the iPod as well as left the laptop at home. A CD player would have sufficed, but the iPod eliminated the not-so-silent pauses during disc swaps. Also, the security guards were apparently making absolutely everyone turn on and boot up their laptops today, not just the usual unlucky few. That was always such a complete pain, and Xochitl couldn't remember the last time she hadn't been one of those unlucky ones. That, and she had never gotten used to glimpsing the innards of each laptop as it cruised underneath the x-rays and showed up on the monitor screen. It simply could not be good for the equipment.

As she was, she didn't even have anything to empty from her pockets at the detector. She never wore a watch and wasn't wearing any metal. She only had her carry-on backpack, which would be doubling as her purse for the duration of her trip. It was almost too easy. She sighed again as she thought that too easy was not necessarily a Good Thing.

As she picked up her bag from the end of the conveyor belt, she couldn't help but overhear the conversation of the two teenage girls a few feet away from her at the end of another of the belts.

"Oh my guh, Sarah, I can't believe you haven't heard it. It's so totally .. I don't even know, you just have to hear it! I'll totally burn you a CD."

"Thanks. My dad won't let me use Kazaa anymore. He says every time I install it I break the computer or give it a virus or something. What-ever."

Xochitl snickered as she moved out of earshot of the teens. It dawned on her just how surreal it was to have teenage girls talking about P2P and online music sharing and burning their own CDs. Two or three years ago no one had a clue, but today it was almost ubiquitous. Thank you, Napster. Absolutely amazing.

She eventually made her way to the gate for her flight and sat down to wait out the next hour. She saw the number of people standing pensively in the line for the check-in counter and clucked another thanks to the magic technology of online ticket purchases and ticket-printing kiosks.

She pulled her book out of her backpack. It was some random four-inch George R.R. Martin epic where no one was likable and by the middle of the story half of the people were dead and the other half were actively trying to screw each other over. She figured she'd have it done by the time the airplane landed.

She thumbed the iPod to life and brought up one of the two playlists she had created: "LOUD". As it was named, this playlist was aggressive and up-tempo enough to drown out just about anything.

The other playlist, “soft”, would be used on the plane when she was more worried about ambient bleed from her earbuds.

The world dimmed to a grey around the pages of her book as royalty backstabbed one-another to a mixture of techno and unintelligible German industrial.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Paul turned his car into the parking lot and began looking for an empty space, preferably one not under a debris- or sap-raining tree. He saw that, as usual, the entire lot was empty, so he picked a space toward the back. After turning off the car he checked his watch to make sure that he had another minute then sat and tried to calm himself. He could do this.

He pulled a lint brush from the glove compartment and did a quick but thorough once-over. Each roll of the brush calmed him a bit more. Once done the sight of all that lint that was now stuck to the roller instead of him sealed the deal and he was breathing normally again. He grabbed his jacket from the passenger seat, checked to ensure the envelope was still there, and opened the door.

It had warmed considerably since he woke up in his car earlier that morning. He could feel the sun on the back of his neck as he stretched to work out the kinks. He walked toward the front doors of the building, taking each step deliberately and slowly.

The building was new, but done up in the grey concrete, stone, and marble that most government buildings used to present a symbol of aged authority. Signs were posted to warn people not to litter, to stay off the grass, and how long to park.

As he began to walk up the steps, Paul looked up to see the familiar words etched into the façade: *Town Hall*. He shivered involuntarily, breaking his perfectly measured stride. He dragged his eyes back down to the doors ahead of him and continued on.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Nice of you to join us, boy.”

Paul knew not to look at his watch. He knew that he was on time, and he knew that looking at his watch would imply that the speaker was wrong in his inferred accusation. That would be bad.

Instead, he kept his head down and continued on to his seat at the table.

He looked around to the other seats at the table. None were occupied, but he was in no way alone. In front of each of the dozen seats was a monitor, all facing directly at him. On each monitor was a face. Paul tried not to notice that on each face was a scowl. No one ever smiled at one of these meetings.

In the middle of the table was a squat grey and black unit with a camera on top of it. The camera had sensed his entry into the room and had been tracking him ever since. As he pulled out his seat, he heard the tiny electric motors in the camera whir to follow him.

The face on the slightly larger monitor at the far end of the table spoke up. "Let's get started. Our boy here met with our contractor last night and has the response and estimate."

Paul pulled the rice paper envelope out of his jacket and flashed the intact seal at the camera, hearing it zoom in as one of the board members controlled it to look closer. After an appropriate pause, he turned it back to himself and slowly ripped open the seal. The wax tore and shredded, making him glad that he hadn't tried to open it sooner. There was no way he could have gotten it back to anything close to the way it had been sealed. The tearing released a scent that he could have sworn was some kind of pine or other evergreen.

The envelope looked simple enough on the outside, but had been ornately folded on the inside. He took his time unfolding it, careful not to rip the paper. When he got it completely unfolded, the paper was a square almost two feet on a side. It was covered in handwritten notes, bullet points, and budget estimates, all in a thick black ink except one. A grand total estimate at the bottom was written in the same Sherwood green as the wax. He inhaled sharply. It was more money than he'd be able to make in a very long time.

He flipped the paper upside-down and placed it in the large scanner that was in front of him toward the camera unit in the middle of the table. He pressed the scan button on the front of the unit. When it was done, he took the paper off the unit and sat back to wait for the inevitable response from the others. The eyes around the table stopped looking at him and instead veered off in different directions as the document image was transmitted to each of them.

Paul made a conscious effort to not squirm in his seat. He looked at the paper in front of him and started to re-fold it back to its envelope form. Several times he got to a point where the folds just didn't feel right and started over. Eventually he gave up, unfolded it, and cupped his hands on the table in front of him to stop himself from fidgeting any further.

Finally, the man at the head of the table spoke. "This is in the ballpark for what we asked for. All in favor?" Eyes flicked away for a second and little green check marks began appearing at the bottoms of each of the screens. "Resolution passes. The Treasurer will transfer the funds. Meeting adjourned."

One by one the screens went black. Paul waited for all of them to turn off, then sighed and let his head fall into his upturned hands. He'd done it. They hadn't said anything about him screwing up. He wasn't sure how they hadn't known, or how he'd ended up with that envelop, but he didn't care. He slowly got up from the table. He knew to leave the paper where it was. It would be taken care of.

As he walked out, the camera whirled to follow him and he pretended not to notice, never looking back.

Day 2

Xochitl's flight had been remarkably uneventful. Brian, seeing that the company was going to pick up the tab anyway, had upgraded her to first class. The cabin had been maybe half full, and the seat next to her went unoccupied. She had listened to her music and read the entire way, pausing only to eat the two meals that were offered and finishing her book as the wheels touched down. The lines through Customs had been similarly easy and she was in a taxi speeding toward her Bed and Breakfast in record time.

It was raining heavily as they drove along, so she didn't get to see much of anything during the trip. She could see the glow of headlights, streetlights, and the occasional neon sign, but mostly it was a wet blur.

The taxi driver was nice enough to bring everything into the B&B for her and even kept her covered with a double-wide umbrella as she scrambled from the car to the front door. She paid her fare and tipped him what she thought was an absurd but appropriate amount. He thanked her in an accent so thick that she understood the intent but none of the words, then drove off.

In the lobby, a uniformed man steered her bag to the front desk, then stepped around it to greet her. "*Ceud mille failte!*" Xochitl blinked at him then shook his outstretched hand. He smiled. "*Feasgar math.* Good evening, Miss Green, and welcome to our little bit of Scotland." His accent was pleasant, but not so much as to get in the way.

Xochitl smiled back at him and looked at the name tag he was wearing: Cailen. He saw her glance and smiled again.

"*Kee-lan.*" He saw the next question coming and continued on. "It means 'young warrior'. It was a very nice name to have in my childhood, but is just mocking me now."

Xochitl smiled wider.

"I'm sorry, but I must admit that I don't know how to pronounce your first name either, Miss Green."

"*So-chee.* If you ever see another one, some others pronounce it

So-chill. But at least now you've got a fifty-fifty shot of getting it right."

"Wonderful! Now let's get you to your room. You're already checked in."

They wound their way back through several plush and floral hallways, eventually stopping at an ornately carved dark wooden door. Cailen unlocked it, handed her the key, and pulled her bag inside.

"I know you've had a long flight and are probably dehydrated, even in this horrible weather, so Dolidh's made you a tray of some biscuits and limeade."

Xochitl heard the name and recognized it from the web site as being Cailen's wife and co-owner of the B&B. It took her a second to mentally reconcile "Dolly" being spelled "Dolidh". It was strangely comforting to be in a place where she wasn't the only one with a counterintuitive name. Her joy was short-lived before she realized that the names made perfect sense to everyone else that lived here, so she was still the only one who would continue to get bizarre looks.

Limeade? Okay.

"Sounds great, thanks."

"Breakfast is served as late as ten, Miss Green. Good Scottish pancakes, eggs, and Dol is known in these parts for her dumpling loaf. Sleep well." He bowed, turned, and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Xochitl walked over to the table in the corner and looked at the limeade. It must have been put there only minutes ago, as the ice was still intact. She put the room key down and poured herself a small sip in one of the accompanying tumbler-sized glasses. It was as tart as she had assumed it would be, but was also surprisingly sweet. She decided that she didn't really need any sugar right now and traded her glass for one of the iced bottles of water.

Glancing back at her bag, she decided that she could unpack in the morning. Instead she walked over to the enormous bed and flopped face down upon it. She stayed awake long enough to fumble the water bottle onto an end table.

At some point during the night she woke up to use the bathroom and strip out of the wrinkled clothes. The bed had several layers of blankets, some padded and some it looked like had been hand-knitted. They called out to her and she crawled beneath them and fell back to sleep.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami looked up at the flight attendant that was hovering beside him. He pulled off his headphones and gave her his best sneering “go away” look.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir. I was just asking if you would like a pillow or blanket.” She was one of those people that always looked sincere, like a puppy with a newspaper in its mouth. This was a great quality for a flight attendant, but profoundly annoying in every other way.

“No. Thank you.”

Before the flight attendant could continue he had jammed his headphones back over his ears and closed his eyes. He felt her continue on her way down the aisle. Just as he was about to doze off again, he felt a vibration in his pants. He growled and reopened his eyes, yanking off his headphones. In his wide First Class seat, getting his cell phone out of his thigh pocket was a snap. He detached the wireless earphone from its clip and tucked it around his ear.

“Go.”

“We’ve pulled together the information you requested on the subject, sir. I’ve emailed the address of where she is staying to your PDA.”

“Fascinating.”

Kami looked at his watch. For a second he considered taking a picture of him looking at his watch and sending it to the person on the other end. It was entirely too late for calls this pointless.

“Yes, sir, but there’s one other thing. Our research of the subject’s online postings shows that she’s a movie buff. She’s always got a movie quote in her signature, and she likes to work witty quotes into the bodies of her postings. We think that’s your hook. I’ve taken the liberty of uploading a database of quotes to your PDA.”

“Fantastic.”

“Her quotes are normally from really, really bad eighties movies. Like, *Goonies* level of bad. I thought you might need a refresher before touchdown.”

Kami only grunted a reply this time.

“Sleep fast, sir.”

Kami ended the call and unwrapped the earpiece from his ear. Sighing, he pulled his PDA from one thigh pocket while sliding his cell phone back into the other.

Eighties movie quotes? This was going to be a long night.

Xochitl woke with the sun the next morning, showered, dressed, and groggily stumbled into the dining room. There were about a dozen tables, half of them occupied by an even number of couples and people eating by themselves. Xochitl chose a small table in the corner, as far from the windows as she could. The menu at the entranceway had listed several things, but she had been unable to maintain a train of thought long enough to comprehend them. She spent a great deal of time unfolding her napkin and putting it into her lap, and within a minute Cailen had shown up.

"*Madiann mhath*, Miss Green. Good morning. I hope you slept well?"

Xochitl nodded, grunted, and smiled.

"Yes, I noticed that you didn't look like much of a morning person. Caffeine or sugar to start your day? Or both?"

Only then did Xochitl notice that he had carried over a glass in each hand, one limeade and one tea.

"Uh, both, I guess. And can I get an extra glass of just ice?"

"Of course. Did you get a chance to look at the menu? Dol has outdone herself this morning."

"Kind of. But I have no idea. Can you just bring me whatever you like? But nothing with ..." She thought for a moment, trying to remember what she had read online about Scottish food. "Nothing with the words black, blood, pie, or pudding in the names." She realized how offensive and American that sounded. "Um, I want to start off easy. I have three weeks to work up to haggis."

Cailen chuckled. "Many of our visitors never get that far. But it sounds like you've already gotten some help. Pancakes it is for today, then. We'll save the dumpling loaf for tomorrow."

He walked back to the kitchen, smiling and chatting with other guests along the way. He returned a minute later with her glass of ice, but then ambled off again to chat with more of the guests.

Xochitl tried her second sip of limeade since arriving in Scotland. This batch was just as tart as last night's, but no where near as sweet.

In fact ...

She poured two thirds of her tea into the glass of ice, then filled in the rest with limeade. She swirled it around with her finger then gave it a tenuous sip. Nice. Not too overpowering, but not too bland, either.

Finally waking up, Xochitl looked around the room. It was, for all intents and purposes, extraordinarily tacky, and yet at the same time very well done.

Photos, paintings, posters, newspaper clippings, record album

covers, and just about anything with a picture in it covered the walls. She presumed they were famous Scots, but she had to confess that she didn't recognize a single one of them.

No, wait, there was a young Sean Connery from his James Bond days. And side-by-side photos of Ewan McGregor from *Trainspotting* and as Obi-wan Kenobi. And the bad guy from *Mission: Impossible 2*. And was that a photo of Alexander Graham Bell? Was he Scottish?

"We find it helps our guests get acclimated to Scotland."

Cailen had come back around with some grapefruit and a small bowl of oatmeal and had noticed her looking around.

"It gives them something solid to hold on to and to talk about. Everyone has seen a Sean Connery movie, or Tony Blair in the news. Young American ladies like yourself seem especially fond of Annie Lennox."

He pointed as he spoke and she saw a collage of CD covers encompassing her solo work as well as a few earlier Eurythmics albums.

Xochitl thought about it for a minute and had to admit that it was true. Sure, they could have done the room up in something more neoclassical or stereotypically Gaelic, and that would have looked nice, but this room was ... comforting. It was an antechamber to Scotland from wherever was home.

"Very, very smart. I like it. It makes me want to soak it in. Just sit here all day reading the newspaper clippings."

"You could try, but Dolidh would have you kicked out by ten-thirty so that she could clean up. She cooks a brilliant meal and spins a yarn like no other, but she cannot abide a mess."

She heard him chuckle and walk off as she continued to look around the room. Trying to focus on each of the pictures and items was like trying to count the stars. Especially this early in the morning when her eyes still weren't focusing as well as they should.

By the time she looked back down she had already finished off her oatmeal, but she didn't remember ever having touched the spoon. The taste in her mouth told her that there had been a decent amount of brown sugar mixed into it. She started on the grapefruit, but gave up quickly. The limeade was tart enough in her tea, she really wasn't in the mood for more.

It was then that she noticed the wooden plaque affixed to the wall above her table. She remembered the quote inscribed upon it from her high school literature classes:

*"Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it.
But we hae meat and we can eat,*

And sae the Lord be thankit."

Robert Burns' *Selkirk Grace*. She'd always had a soft spot for Burns in school. She remembered getting into arguments with other students about her fascination with him and asserting that it had nothing to do with her heritage, and everything to do with the fact that he didn't prattle on about vases, roses, or tygers.

In fact, when he did ramble it tended to be a good drunken tear about mice or war or something actually interesting. She snorted limeade tea through her nose in laughter, remembering some of the poems she had read.

When she looked up again after she finished choking, Cailen was standing at the head of the table with a plate of what looked more like perfectly normal pancakes. He was giving her a look that said that he wanted to know why she was giggling, but couldn't bring himself to ask. She cleared room for the plate with one hand and pointed at the plaque with another. "Burns," she choked out, "just remembering some of it from school."

*"Haud aff your hands, young man!" she said,
"And dinna sae uncivil be;
Gif ye hae ony luv for me,
O wrang na my virginitie."*

She blushed as she realized that not only was she reciting dirty poetry to someone she barely knew, but that she was reciting Robert Burns to a Scotsman. Cailen, however, didn't look at all embarrassed. In fact, he looked quite surprised.

"Well remembered, Miss Green. *The Lass That Made The Bed To Me*. You wouldn't be trying to start something with the help, would you?"

Xochitl blushed even deeper and choked out a small cough again. Cailen smiled even wider.

"Never you mind. I'd never be able to tell Dol about it, as she'd chase me around the kitchen with a cleaver if I did." He started to run away, but something stopped him. "But where did you pick that one up? I haven't heard it in years, and I can't imagine even your American schools would teach that one."

"I read a lot of books as a kid, and Robert Burns was one of my favorites." She paused in memory for a moment, then found herself continuing. "I went through a sort of ... Scottish phase." She paused again and the smile started to fade. "When I learned ... that my dad was from here."

Cailen sized her up, weaving his head back and forth to get a view of her from several different angles to verify her story. He

eventually clucked in what might have been resignation or acceptance. "Well, that sounds like a story I'll have to come back and visit to hear. But for now, your pancakes are getting cold. Dol wouldn't like it if I had you eating cold breakfast."

Xochitl smiled at him as he moved away and looked down at her plate. The stack of pancakes was huge, even by her standards. Each pancake was as thick as the knuckle at the base of her thumb. They had a sweet smell that she couldn't quite place, and were accompanied by a small cup of jam instead of syrup. She shrugged, made a why not face, and dove in.

Lemon. That was the smell. She hadn't been able to put her finger on it because it wasn't a smell she normally associated with pancakes. But really, it was only a hint of lemon, just for a bit of tartness. It went surprisingly well with the jam, which was some berry that she again couldn't place. She finished off her first pancake in record time, but looked wearily at the rest of the stack. She shrugged again and continued. It was her vacation. If she wanted to stuff herself with pancakes, she was certainly within her rights.

Her perusal of the wall hangings continued until she realized that she had seen all she could see from her seat. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, then quickly got up and sat in the seat across from her. Much better. She now had a whole extra half of the room to go through.

Her fork clanked against the plate. She looked down and realized that she had eaten all but a single half of a pancake. She took stock of herself and began to feel that she was beyond stuffed. She pushed the plate away, still eying the last little bit.

Xochitl turned as she heard Cailen snort behind her. It occurred to her that this was the first time she had actually heard him coming. For such a big guy, he had a Lurch-level of stealthiness.

"Miss Green, I'm impressed!"

Xochitl cocked her head inquisitively.

"Dol always throws a few extra pancakes on the stack for our first-day guests as a sort of "Welcome to Scotland". It's supposed to be daunting. She'll be terribly flustered if I tell her you finished them all off. I'll make you a deal: if you don't tell her that you ate the entire stack, and I won't tell her you're reciting love poetry to me."

Xochitl blushed again, but smiled wide and stammered out a response. "Cailen, you've got a deal." She took his outstretched hand and shook it once, professionally. Again, Cailen gave her a surprised look.

"My word, lass, that's the handshake of a Scot! Welcome home, I say. We'll have you on a steady diet of haggis and black pudding by

the end of the week.”

Xochitl continued to smile and nodded her head in acceptance. As Cailen continued on his duties around the room, she worked to finish off her limeade and make mental notes of where she needed to sit tomorrow to see some of the parts of the walls that she had missed. She made a point of getting up and leaving before she could become the last person left in the dining room.

The hallways leading back to her room, now that she was awake enough to notice them, were much more sedate and traditional than the dining room. Dark, carved woods lined every seam in the walls, each patterned with what seemed like distinct yet similar workmanship. It was all kept in excellent shape, so it could have been a year old or a hundred and Xochitl wouldn't have been able to tell.

The carvings were such a small detail really, almost unnecessary, but the place just wouldn't be the same without them. Xochitl felt comforted by this. Someone felt about their work the way Xochitl felt about hers. The big stuff was easy, but it was the details that made everything smooth and easy to be around.

In addition to the trim, carved wooden wall sconces were spaced every couple of meters. The odd ones were lights, the even ones were a wide range of flowers. Each bouquet had a unique combination of flowers, and yet they all worked together without any one seeming out of place. Again, Xochitl marveled at the care someone must take each day to maintain this level of subtle decoration.

Xochitl finally reached her room and flopped down backwards on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Not a particle of dust was in sight, and the carved wooden trim continued in from the hallway. A painting of a group of kilted men and their dogs on what looked to be a hunting trip hung on the wall opposite her bed. More flowers were arranged on top of the bureau beneath the painting, many of which could be seen on the hills of the painting itself.

Un-freakin'-believable.

Xochitl couldn't stop smiling. She'd had an amazing breakfast, she was staying in an amazing place, and everyone she'd talked to so far had been amazing to her. This was such a great idea. She had so definitely needed a vacation. She'd have to remember to buy Brian a thank-you card. She would never have done it without him, and yet now that she was here she couldn't imagine her vacation any other way.

As she drifted off to sleep she realized that as great a time as she was already having, she hadn't even gotten out of the Bed & Breakfast yet. She had a whole country to explore, and absolutely nothing else to worry about but enjoying herself.

Day 3

By the time Xochitl woke again, it was already mid-afternoon. She shook her head in the utter disbelief that she could have been out of it that long. She had just about chalked it up to jet lag when her eyes focused on the table on the other side of the room. There was again a fresh tray of limeade sitting there, ice barely melted. Seeing it made her realize how very thirsty she was.

Awesome. Creepy, but awesome.

A smile came to her with the thought of a limeade faerie running around.

She stretched as she walked to the table to pour herself a glass. As she put down her glass she realized that she had gone through three quarters of the pitcher. She could feel the sugar kicking in and the buzz gave her a slight headache. It wasn't anything debilitating, just enough to let her know that she would need to eat some solid food again soon.

She moved back to the other side of the room where her bag sat, still packed. She paused, considering whether or not to take the time to unpack it, but decided to just leave it for now. She had three weeks – she was not in any kind of rush. Instead she grabbed a scrunchie from one of the outside pockets and made her way to the bathroom. She ran a brush through her hair to disentangle it, then corralled it into submission and wrapped the scrunchie around it a few times. She splashed some water onto her face, and after a quick bout with the toothbrush she grabbed a sweater and was out the door.

Cailen greeted her in the lobby. “Hello again, Cailen.”

“*Là math*. Good day, Miss Green.”

“You know, you've said hello to me a different way each time I've seen you. How many ways are there?”

“Let me see. Last night it was *feasgar math*, good evening. This morning it was *madainn mhath*, good morning. Just now I could have also said *latha math*, it's a nice day. Of course there's also just *hallo*, but that's so informal and easily mistaken for a plain hello, so I prefer the more formal ones. When you go to bed tonight I will most likely

tell you *oidhche mhath*, good night.”

“Well then, *là math*, Cailen.”

He nodded and smiled. “*Glè mhath!* Very good, Miss Green.”

“Thank you. Now I need to find a nice quiet restaurant to go sit down and practice. What do you suggest?”

Cailen thought about this for a minute, sizing her up. “Are you still avoiding your list of four bad words?” Xochitl smiled and nodded. “Then you should stay away from The Feisty Boar. Save that one for next week. I’ll tell you what ...” He pulled out a pad of paper and a pencil from behind the desk. “You strike me as a lass who doesn’t mind a stroll.” This was phrased as a half-question, and Xochitl nodded agreement. “Wonderful.”

He started quickly sketching out a map of the surrounding area. There were a half-dozen little boxes with X-marks in them scattered around at various distances from the big triangle in the middle. Cailen had written one-word titles next to each of the boxes and streets.

“Any of these places will treat you right, especially if you mention my name.” His eyes twinkled as he handed her the note. Xochitl could have sworn that he surreptitiously pointed out the box in the upper-left corner of the map.

“How do I say “thank you”?”

“*Tapadh leibh* is a simple thanks, while *mòran taing* is many thanks.”

“Well, *mòran taing* then, Cailen.”

“*Se ur beatha*, Miss Green. You’re welcome.” He nodded and she was on her way.

As she walked out the door, Xochitl studied the map intently. For such a quick sketch, it was remarkably detailed. She chose the box in the upper-left corner that Cailen seemed to have been indicating and headed in that direction.

After a few minutes of walking, she finally lifted her head from the map and looked around her. She immediately stopped in her tracks.

Wow. What a beautiful place.

She was standing on the side of a hill, facing upwards. Up the hill she could see endless shop after shop, most with stands and displays on the sidewalks. Sweaters, fruits, trinkets, shoes, purses, anything and everything you could think of. It was quite a sight. The hill behind her was more of the same, but even more impressive due to the further field of view. It was just a mass of people doing their thing and generally being nice to each other as far as the eye could see, but it was still amazing.

Off to her right, in the distance, she could see what she assumed was Edinburgh Castle. From where she stood it wasn't much more than a blob of grey stone on a larger blob of green hill, but it was still impressive and beautiful.

It was only then that she realized that it was bright and sunny out. She hadn't been able to see anything the night before due to the driving rain, but she was now glad that had been the case. Seeing it all for the first time when she was awake enough to appreciate it was better than she could have imagined. She gawked and breathed it all in, slowly spinning in place trying to see everything around her at once.

An elderly gentleman bumped into her and apologized profusely in an accent so thick that Xochitl didn't understand a word, just the intent. She decided that she probably ought to keep moving before she became a bowling pin for even more people.

She worked her way up the hill, heading to where she believed the first box on her map should be. Sure enough, just beyond the top of the hill was a doorway with a sign over it that read simply "Maire's". Xochitl chuckled at the parallel and went inside.

When her eyes had had a moment to adjust to the dimmer lighting, Xochitl gasped. She was in what might have been a pub out of any Tolkien or Mercedes Lackey novel. Everything was wood and green velvet and polished silver. It was, quite literally, breathtaking.

A young boy approached her as she stood there. He couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve, and had hair so bright coppery red that it glowed even in the dim light.

"Ma'am?"

"Um, just me. For lunch."

The boy nodded and gestured for her to follow him. He wound his way past a labyrinthine tangle of tables to a booth toward the back of the room. This was a boy after Xochitl's heart. He looked at her to verify that this was an okay spot, and she nodded her affirmative.

"This is a great table, thanks."

As she sat she noticed a couple walk through the front door and straight to a table.

Oh. That's why the boy had looked so confused.

She was supposed to have seated herself. She must have missed the sign or something. She looked around for a menu, but couldn't find one. She turned to tell the boy, but he had already zipped off to the other side of the room and was clearing off a dirty table.

Xochitl looked around again. The table had the usual salt and pepper, but nothing else. No sugar or other sweeteners. No ketchup, mustard, hot sauce, or other jarred or bottled condiments. There

were a few rolls of silverware, but that was it.

The seats and backs of the booth were done in a plush green velvet that she was amazed were spot-free given how ancient and worn the rest of this place looked. Lighting was provided by ensconced candles high on the walls, each backed by mirrors that looked like they had been on the Earth longer than she had.

Xochitl turned as she heard a rustling sound approaching her. She couldn't help but think that the lady behind her was the perfect personification of this place. She was probably old enough to be Xochitl's mother, but was still strikingly beautiful. Xochitl saw an immediate family resemblance between her and the boy, but couldn't tell if the relationship was parent or grandparent.

The woman was wearing a pleated black floor-length skirt with a green apron and a white dress shirt with sleeves that were rolled up just enough to be out of the way and not get covered in stray food or drink. When the woman spoke it only completed Xochitl's picture of the perfect Scotswoman. The accent was, like the woman, stunningly beautiful and intricate but simple.

"Good afternoon, lass. How are you today?"

"Uh, *là math*," Xochitl articulated. The woman smiled and Xochitl knew that she'd gotten the point across, but had missed the mark just enough to immediately be labeled as a tourist. As if she wasn't obviously one, anyway.

The woman nodded in respect of the attempt. "Well spoken."

"Thank you. Cailen sent me over. He said you could help me out ... sort of easing my way into Scottish cuisine."

The woman's eyes widened at the mention of Cailen's name. "Oh he did, did he? I'll be sure to tell Dolidh that he's been lying to pretty young women again."

Xochitl gave her a confused look, but blushed a little anyway. She momentarily considered expanding on her request by listing the four bad things, but decided against it.

After a short pause, the woman chuckled and spoke again. "I'll see what I can do. Cailen's put me in a bit of a spot, and he'll definitely pay for that one."

Xochitl just gave her a confused look again. "Are you ... Maire?" Xochitl made her best guess and pronounced the name as "Mary", but knew she'd gotten it wrong when the woman gave her the same look as before.

"Yes, dear, I'm Maire." Maire put just enough accent on the "Moya" to be corrective without implying offense. She must have been used to tourists butchering her name. This was becoming a running theme for Xochitl – some kind of karmic payback for all the

curses she had murmured at people for getting her name wrong. She swore she'd never give another person a sideways look for it again.

"Wow. Sorry. I wasn't expecting to meet the owner."

"It's a nice and slow afternoon. *Tha e blàth*, it is warm outside and beautiful. I sent my servers home to go play in the sun while it lasts. Business will pick up in a few hours, to be sure. But let me get you something to drink –"

"Tea? Limeade?"

Maire smiled. "Tea it is. No one makes limeade like Dolidh, and I wouldn't even want to try. My limeade is good enough for the people that come in here, but I can see that you're already hooked on hers. And I'll see what I can come up with that's not too Scottish for you." She smiled as she said this, obviously just having a bit of fun at Xochitl's expense, but Xochitl still felt bad for having said anything in the first place.

"Sounds great, thanks. Um, *tapadh leibh*."

Maire nodded and rustled off toward the other couple that had come in. A minute later the young boy came over with Xochitl's tea, even though she had never seen him near enough to Maire to get the order. This place continued to impress her and creep her out at the same time, which was not a little bit of its charm.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami closed and rubbed his eyes vigorously to redden them and mentally prepared for what he was about to do. His back arched tighter. The muscles in his face and neck pulled back and a deep smile appeared on this face. His eyes widened and he adjusted the thick-rimmed glasses to be as close to his face as possible. He pulled a few strands of hair loose from their gelled position and let them fall free. He was ready.

He stepped through the door and was greeted by an older gentleman behind the front desk. His chest was covered by the stack of towels he held under one arm, but Kami recognized him without needing to see that his name tag would read Cailen. He made a point of looking about frantically and spotting Cailen as if out of a haze. He dashed toward the desk, tripping over his own feet half way there. The manila folders under his arm ejected their contents across the floor of the lobby.

"I'm, uh ..."

He knelt to start retrieving the papers, one at a time. He inspected each as he picked it up, rotating it and organizing

them as he went. "I'm looking for ..."

Cailen put down the stack of towels and stepped from behind the desk to help in the recovery effort. He didn't try to organize them, but then Kami really had no need to organize the End User License Agreement for the online reservation system for the cab that had brought him here. He just needed something in legalese, thick, and generally unintelligible at first glance.

"How can I help you, sir?"

Kami looked up at Cailen, as if only just noticing that he was helping. He gingerly plucked the papers from Cailen's hand and added them to his sorting and collating process.

"I'm looking for ... Miss ... Green. I need her to ..." He trailed off again, lost in thought at how to get his papers back together. Eventually all of the papers had been picked up and sorted into their correct folders. Kami made a point of pushing his glasses back up his nose and running his free hand through his hair in an attempt to tame it. He stood up from his crouch and looked Cailen up and down.

"Are you the manager here? I need to speak with a manager."

Cailen moved back behind the desk as if to show his position of authority. The desk wasn't so much a Great Wall of China as it was a Chain Link of Bob's when it came to projecting authority, but it would have to do.

"I'm one of the owners. You are looking for Miss Green?"

"Oh, thank you. Yes. I, uh that is we, we need her to sign some papers. She didn't sign them before she left and we haven't heard from her since she left, and I know she only just got her last night, but these are extremely important and can only be carried by an officer of the company, so you can see it's extremely urgent that I speak with Miss Green about these documents -"

"Yes, I understand. If you'd like to leave them with me, I can deliver them to her personally when she comes back in -"

"No!" Kami clutched the manila folders tighter to his chest. "I mean, it's just that ... like I said, I really can't let them out of my sight. This is a really big deal for our company, and an even bigger deal for me. Wait, you said when she comes back ... she isn't here?"

Cailen frowned for a second. "No, sir, she left for a walk and a late lunch about a half an hour ago."

Kami's face twitched, as if welling up with emotion. "I ..." He blinked and rubbed his eyes.

"If you'd like, sir, you can wait here for her. But, I don't know when she'll be back, as she didn't say when she left."

"I ... do you know where she went? Which direction, at least? Maybe I can find someone who has seen her. She can't have gone too

far.” He stared at his watch and twitched his head as if done some quick mathematical calculations in his head.

When Kami looked up again, Cailen had pulled out a pad and pencil and was drawing a crude map.

“My best guess would be here,” he pointed, “to Maire’s.”

Kami turned to face the front door, then oriented the map in front of him and began to walk. He mumbled a quick thanks, sped up to a power-walk pace, and was out the door.

He turned and maintained the pace for a block before he slowed down. His back relaxed, his eyes returned to a normal state, and the muscles in his face and neck drooped. He tossed the manila folders and papers into a wastebasket as he walked past.

His thick-rimmed Buddy Holly-style glasses were folded up and slid into his inner jacket pocket, to be replaced with a pair of mirror shades. As he passed some kind of outdoor eatery, he slid his hand across a glass at an empty table that had been full of ice water and was now covered in condensation. He used the dampness to reaffix the loose strands of hair, then rubbed his hands together to dry them off. By the time he reached the top of the hill the physical and mental transformation was complete.

He looked around and spotted the sign: Maire’s.

———— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 ————

Xochitl squinted and blinked as the sunlight poured in through the open door. Despite the spots and afterimages it was going to cause, she couldn’t help but look toward the source of the supernova to see who would be so rude. Her eyes strained to readjust, but the difference was too great and all she could make out was the silhouette of a man in a business suit. He stood in the door for a moment, propping it open. He groped around in his pants, then walked back outside with the door closing behind him. Her eyes threw themselves in full reverse, now trying to see in the usual dimness of the pub.

The poor guy must have left his wallet at home or something. Whatever.

She turned back to her food. Maire had brought out something she had called Hotch-Potch. It was, as near as Xochitl could tell, the best meat and vegetable stew she’d ever had. It was thick to the point that it slurped around in her bowl instead of splashing. The bowl was a huge, and looked like it had been pounded concave by hand from a metal disc a half-inch thick. It took Xochitl an effort just to move it

around on the table, so she was impressed that Maire had tossed it around so casually.

The stew had some sort of steak in it that was tender to the point of falling apart on her spoon. She didn't think it was beef, but didn't know if she wanted to ask what it really was. Maybe after she'd finished her meal she would go back and get an ingredient list. The young boy had also brought out a small loaf of what appeared to be sourdough bread that Xochitl had wolfed half-through and was now using to sponge up the last traces of stew from her bowl.

He now came back around with a pitcher to refill her tea. When he got to the table something startled him to the point of almost dropping the pitcher on the floor. Xochitl managed to help him catch it, but before she could say anything he was running his way back to the kitchen. Xochitl looked around to see if she had spilled anything or had something on her face, then checked to make sure she hadn't befriended any rodents or arachnids. Not seeing anything that struck her as odd, much less terrifying, she went back to nibbling on pieces of bread.

A minute later, she saw Maire and the boy come out of the kitchen. The boy still had the pitcher of tea in his hands and Maire was looking at him sternly. Xochitl couldn't hear what she was saying to him, but Maire didn't look at all happy with him and was shaking her head sternly. She put her hand forcefully on his back and walked him over to Xochitl's table.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, he's -" Maire cut off and gave Xochitl the same look that the boy had. This time, however, Xochitl could tell that Maire was switching her focus between her and the bowl in front of her. Maire turned, gently pried the pitcher from the boy's hands while whispering something comforting, and shooed him on his way. She turned back and started to refill Xochitl's glass. "I thought he was lying to me. You frightened him."

She had a wide smile and her eyes beamed as she said this. Xochitl could only stammer and look back at her inquisitively. "I don't -"

"You're a woman, you're not a Scot, you're thin ..." Maire put down the pitcher and put her hands on her hips. Her smile widened to almost Cheshire cat proportions. "And ... you finished off an entire bowl of Hotch-Potch." She flicked a hand at the boy, who was now standing in a corner on the other side of the room, but still watching intently. "He thought you had thrown it on the floor and were going to make him clean it up." She chortled.

Xochitl blushed. "I, um, it was very good."

"I'm glad you liked it. I'll take my mixing bowl back, then." She

held it under an arm which only made it look bigger.

Xochitl's eyes widened. She wanted to melt into an unnoticeable puddle underneath her table.

Okay, I give up. What's with the people here always giving me too much food?

"Most of the men that come in here can't do what you've just done, lass. Not even the Scots. That deserves something, I think. Are you stuffed yet, or could you handle a little more?"

Xochitl hesitated, causing Maire's eyes to light up even more.

"Math dha rìreabh!" The way she exclaimed this, Xochitl could only assume it was some kind of praise. "Stay right here!" She darted back toward the kitchen, snapping her fingers at the boy to follow her.

Xochitl, still a little dazed, sat back and pushed the plate of bread away from her. She got the feeling that she was going to need all of the room she could spare.

Maire was only gone a minute before she came bustling out of the kitchen at a pace that seemed even faster than when she went in. When she arrived at the table she had a bowl, this time a normal size, with some kind of creamy, frothy looking off-white pile sprinkled with almonds. She set the bowl down in front of Xochitl, then set herself down on the other side of the table. She leaned in, smelled the dish, handed Xochitl a spoon, and gawked at Xochitl with a big smile. *"Feuch e. Try it."*

Xochitl took the spoon and smiled back at Maire. She was a little weirded out by all of this, but was willing to play along. The little boy was a few tables away, but still watching her intently. The smell of the dish began to waft up to her, and she could smell the cream and almonds, as well as something else she couldn't identify. She looked back at Maire, shrugged, and stabbed off a large spoonful.

As her mouth closed around the spoon she knew she had made a mistake of diving in. The warmth of her mouth caused an instant reaction in the dessert. Before it even hit her tongue she could taste the liqueur evaporating and rolling off of it. The potency caused her to involuntarily gasp, which was another big mistake. The fumes hit the back of her throat and were thick enough to make her cough and choke. She removed the spoon from her mouth, sliding the cold, thick dessert onto her tongue.

When she regained control of her breathing she pushed the dessert against the roof of her mouth to melt it a bit and swallowed. It had a slight crumbly texture to it, but was actually quite good once she got over the initial kick.

She looked over and the little boy was smiling at her. She smiled

back and turned to Maire. "It's very good. It kind of takes you by surprise, but after that it's subtle. I like it." She felt like Fukui-san, which would make the little boy Ota. She giggled at the thought of him running around in a little tuxedo. "What is it?"

"Edinburgh Fog. I'm glad you like it. I was just mixing up a bowl for Dolidh when you came in. Would you take it back with you when you go? You can tell Dolidh I said she has to save you some more for dessert tomorrow."

Xochitl nodded an affirmative and continued to work on what she had in front of her. She paused to ask, "What's in it? Um, if I may ask?"

"Cream, sugar, biscuits, and almonds."

Xochitl gave Maire a look that told her that she knew that wasn't all.

"The rest is my own recipe. If I tell you, you'll tell Dolidh, she'll tell Cailen, and soon everyone will know." She winked at Xochitl and got up from the table.

"You know, dearie, I've told you my name but I still don't know yours. However will I be able to tell my men wild stories about your great feats if you don't have a name?"

Xochitl finished off most of what she had in her mouth and replied a very muffled, "Xochitl."

"So-chee? What an interesting name. Where does it come from?"

"Mexico. It's an old Aztec Nahuatl word for "flower"."

Maire laughed. "That fits. You are very beautiful, and the name sounds like *sòghail*, which we might use to describe this dessert: exquisite or rich."

Xochitl felt the heat in her face as she blushed and it occurred to her that she had done so more in the last two 24 hours than in the last several years.

"Oh, and let me get you a bag for Dolidh." She disappeared into the kitchen with her usual bustle.

She returned in a minute with a small paper bag wrapped in cooking twine. "Well, I hope you have a beautiful stay in Scotland, little flower. You have brightened my day." She curtsied and turned to leave, but Xochitl spoke up to stop her.

"But, Maire, what do I owe you for lunch?" She fished to get her wallet out of her pants pocket.

"Not a thing, dear. It was my pleasure." She turned again and was back in the kitchen before Xochitl could object.

Xochitl looked at the change purse in her hand and the empty bowl on her table. She had to leave something, right? At that

moment, the couple that had come in after her was getting up to leave. She thought for a minute and then beckoned the boy over. He came, but reluctantly.

"Can you do something for me?" He twisted and didn't answer. "Can you tell me how much their lunch cost?" She pointed at the other couple as they walked out the door. "Please?" She put on her best, widest smile. The boy finally relented and ran to the other table. He was back in a minute, smiling at her. He apparently was not going to make this easy.

Xochitl pulled out a few bank notes of different denominations. She fanned them out in front of the boy. "Which ones?" He pointed to three of them, which added up to a very fair sum. "Thanks! Here you go." She gave the boy a single and left the other three on the table.

As she finished off her tea and got up to leave, she figured it would probably offend Maire greatly by leaving the money, but she could not bring herself to not leave anything. She'd have to come back here before she left.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami began the transformation again as he walked across the street. Instead of a sniveling underling he targeted something more like a Yakuza heavy. His back hunched, pulling his shoulders forward. His elbows pulled out from his side, inflating his suit and adding to his bulk. His eyes squinted and his jaw clenched. He breathed in and opened the door.

The darkness inside was near absolute. He pulled off his mirrorshades, but his eyes still took several seconds to adjust. Before he could walk through the door his pants started to vibrate. He could tell who it was by the pattern, and they knew not to call unless it was urgent. He grappled to get the phone out of his pocket before it could stop vibrating, and backed out of the restaurant. Being seen as a business type on the phone was not the message he wanted to send.

He thumbed the earpiece to life and scowled into it.

"What?"

"Sir, we have a problem."

"Obviously. What is it?"

"We just got an email from our current employers. Apparently they sent you after the wrong subject. The new mark is a man named Brian Hawser. He's the one that's the problem. The software went

big this morning and he's taken credit for it.”

Kami cursed under his breath. He'd flown to Scotland for nothing.

“Can you confirm this?”

“We're still scrubbing the source code, but there's no attribution anywhere. The account is registered to both Hawser and Green, but the Green woman appears to just be a second-rate webmaster on vacation. Hawser is under NDA and non-compete from his previous company, and there's got to be a reason for that. Green has never done anything of note. The good money is on Hawser.”

Kami grunted loudly and went limp against the wall.

“Fine. Hawser it is. But I want an airtight confirmation. If I get back to the States and this thing involves the Green woman in any way, I will not be happy.”

“Yes sir. We understand, sir. We're working on it now, sir.”

“Do I have a ticket waiting?”

“You will by the time you get to the airport, sir.”

Kami disconnected the phone without another word. This didn't feel right. The Green woman had something to do with this. He pulled away from the wall and started to walk back down the hill. He needed to find a cab.

Jumping through hoops for these people was beginning to get to him. This was going to involve a renegotiation of fees, and negotiation was going to have very little to do with it.

This was going to be a very, very long day.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Brian smacked a CTRL+ENTER into his keyboard to send the mail, then leaned back from the desk. His hands went to either side of his face and began to massage his temples. He'd been stomping out emails for the last 4 hours and he needed a break.

Alfred had exploded. The Slashdot story went mostly unnoticed until a day had passed. All of the people that had installed Alfred on a whim were suddenly beginning to notice things happening. They had less spam and web banner ads. Their P2P download speeds were getting faster. The constant barrage of worm traffic hitting their web server was having less of an effect. They were getting fewer ads from instant messaging bots. All of the things they had learned to filter out from their daily networked lives were fading away. Things just got ... smoother.

They told their friends. Their friends installed their own copies of Alfred. The many Alfreds started talking to each other, which only improved the experience of everyone as the trust network was established. Alfred became almost virus-like in its deployment. It spread by word of mouth from geek to geek to geek's mom and dad.

The SourceForge hosting servers strained to keep up with the sudden load. BitTorrent distributions were made, and within a few hours their trackers began to show strain. Alfred was a relative lightweight, as the entire program could be copied onto a couple of ancient 3.5-inch floppies, but even a few megabytes transferred tens and hundreds of thousands of times would begin to have an effect on any server. Even SMTP servers began to slow down as people emailed copies of Alfred to everyone they knew.

Alfred's source code didn't fare as well. A few diligent hackers had been able to get complete copies of the source before the CVS server went under, but they weren't sharing. Each wanted to be the first to figure out how Alfred worked and make it do something new and interesting, or copy it and make their own version.

Brian knew that this was just a flash mob. Eventually a saturation point would be reached and everyone that was interested in Alfred would have a copy. The furor would die down, web and CVS servers would be rebooted, and things would go back to normal. That's when the truly interesting part would begin. Hackers would have had a few days to poke around in Alfred's guts and would start to bolt on their own creations.

Brian figured that application plug-ins would show up first, followed by firewall plug-ins. Everyone would want their own personal email or instant messaging client to talk to Alfred, and eventually their friends with the stranger firewall setups would see the light and start making Alfred talk with them, too.

Xochitl had created a plug-in registry on the SourceForge server that would allow people to tell the world about the plug-ins they had developed and link back to their sites. Registered SourceForge users could even vote to rate the plug-ins as they were tested. In this way, if five different people wanted to write a plug-in for one application, it would be the users who controlled which one would be the most used. Vendors could develop "official" versions of the plug-ins, but they weren't treated any better than anyone else.

This would take days to get rolling, of course. For now, Brian was busy answering questions over email as best he could. He'd had a few weeks to go through the source, to the point that he knew it back and forwards. Xochitl's design was excellent, and he had only found a few places that could have been better documented or sped up. He

figured he could play tech support for a few weeks until she got back.

Most of the questions they asked could have been avoided if people would just read the FAQ that Xochitl had set up. Brian had long since gotten past the point where most questions were answered by cut and paste. Instead, he'd taken to just cutting and pasting links to the FAQ. He knew the web server with the FAQ was sluggish under the load, but he was long past caring. Besides, he thought, people really needed to learn how to RTFM.

The email interviews took the longest. Why this and how that and tangential questions that took a while to answer. He tried to avoid the moral and ethical questions and stress that Alfred was just a tool, and really just a proof-of-concept.

The questions about who went unanswered and avoided, often cryptically so. He didn't want to claim credit for Xochitl's work, but he also knew that if he didn't answer the flood of questions, things would only get worse when the conspiracy-nuts started to show up.

Instead, all of the emails went out as the webmaster for the project, avoiding both of their names. His user account was attached to the original Slashdot story and the SourceForge project, so people could link him to the project if they really tried, but as long as he kept up the flow of emails he figured people wouldn't have a reason to dig too deep.

Brian got up and went over to his refrigerator. He pulled out a box of condensed chai, flipped back the lid, and knocked it back like a shot of whiskey. The taste was potent, but he knew he'd need the sugar and caffeine if he wanted to keep going.

He looked over at the clock on the microwave and saw that it was after three in the morning. He needed solid food, and no one delivered this late. He looked into the fridge and saw that all he had left was some pizza from last week.

Oh, well.

He pulled out the box, dumped the slices onto a plate, and jabbed them into the microwave.

The sound of rain in the background was steady and relaxing. He had set up a bot to watch several of the BitTorrent swarms. Each time someone downloaded Alfred and started seeding it out to the rest of the swarm he would hear a raindrop. He'd even added a thunder crash to represent every thousand downloads. It was dry and clear outside, but in his apartment it sounded like a monsoon was flooding him out.

The microwave dinged and he swapped the slices around and put them back in for another half minute. He hated half-cold pizza. The next ding of the microwave was drowned out by a boom of

thunder.

He sat back down at the computer, gingerly stuffing hot pizza into his mouth. He cursed as hot cheese scalded the roof of his mouth and he simultaneously noticed that the number of unread emails in his Inbox had doubled.

Day 4

Brian groggily opened his eyes. Knocking? Was someone knocking? Yeah, there it was again. He sat up on the sofa and tried to make his eyes focus on the clock in the corner of the monitor on his desk. They wouldn't. The light coming in through the window told him that the sun had been up for a while, but it wasn't noon yet.

The knock came again, more insistently this time.

"Hold on! Geez!"

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to get the world into focus. He'd crawled from his desk chair to the couch at six, too tired to make the trip all the way to his bedroom. He was still in the Dockers and polo he'd been in yesterday, although he was now quite a bit more wrinkled.

He stood shakily, his head pounding. The caffeine and sugar overdose from the night before was now exacting its revenge. He shuffled his way to the front door and looked through the window next to it. The man standing outside was about Brian's size and build. He had on a black suit and black tie with mirrorshades and slicked-back hair. He looked decidedly nasty, in a government-minion sort of way.

"Who is it?"

"NSA." The man flashed an ID at the window, which was too grimy to allow Brian to make out the name. "I'm looking for a Mr. Brian Hawser. Please open the door, sir."

Brian slid the door chain into place, cursing himself for not remembering to do so last night. He opened the door as much as the chain would allow and peeked out.

"Let me see your ID again."

The man handed Brian his ID. Brian wasn't an expert, but it looked authentic. James Nakamura.

Brian handed the ID back to the man. "What can I do for the NSA today, Mr. Nakamura?"

"Can I come inside, sir? This isn't something I am comfortable discussing in the open."

Brian looked him up and down, still suspicious.

"It's about our mutual friend." The man looked behind him and to each side down the corridors. "Alfred."

Brian flinched. What did the NSA want with Alfred? He needed to play this cool, but he wasn't awake enough to mount an intelligent defense.

"Yeah, okay. One sec." Brian closed the door to unchain it, then opened it enough to indicate that he still didn't trust the man. The man, sensing what was on Brian's mind, opened his coat and did a slow turn to show off that he wasn't carrying a gun. Brian relented and moved out of the way. The man walked past him and he relocked and re-chained the door. "I need some caffeine and solid food before we talk. Want some coffee?"

"No thank you, sir, I've already made my Starbucks run for the morning." He smiled. Brian hoped that maybe this wasn't the mess that he was worried about.

"Good. I hate the smell of coffee anyway. Have a seat and I'll be with you in a minute." He gestured toward the tan leather couches in the living room.

"Take your time. I imagine you were up pretty late last night."

Brian grunted an affirmative and grabbed the milk and chai out of the fridge. "Last time I looked at the clock it was six, but I don't remember much after that." He poured a small amount of milk into a glass and sniffed it. He shrugged, filled the glass with ice, then half with chai and the other half with milk. He looked around for a second, then shrugged again and mixed the drink with his fingers. He rinsed off his hands, grabbed the container of muffins off the top of the fridge, and joined the man in the room.

The man offered his hand to Brian. "You've seen my ID, but I'm James Nakamura. Just James is fine. The NSA is very interested in Alfred, Mr. Hawser."

"Brian is fine. Mr. Hawser is my father."

"Fair enough. Here's the deal, Brian. The NSA has been trying all night to get to Alfred's source code, but the servers are still down. We know that Alfred uses a significant amount of crypto. That's not the big deal, though, as it doesn't seem to violate any of the export restrictions that are still in place. But, combine that with the number of people that are installing Alfred, and it becomes a big deal."

Brian continued to alternate between downing muffins and chai. He nodded, prompting James to continue.

"The official line is that the NSA just wants to check and ensure that Alfred doesn't have anything malicious or any back doors that could be used against us."

“Alfred is purely defensive.”

“Granted. But let me be frank. You're an intelligent man. You know what we do at the NSA. We just want to make sure that Alfred isn't used by our enemies to thwart our ... activities.”

Brian shifted in his seat, but James held up a finger.

“That's the official line. Unofficially, I'm here in another capacity. What you've written is amazing stuff. We've got our own software that is very similar to Alfred, and it's worked well for us for the past two years.” Brian's eyes widened and James smiled. “Ours isn't as polished as Alfred, but that's what happens when you design by committee. But back to the point. We want to offer you a job, Brian.”

Brian choked on a muffin. “Excuse me?”

“Even without the source code, we can tell that Alfred is a real piece of work. The NSA would like to get your brains and skills working for our team. If, at the same time, you happened to help us out by making sure that Alfred works with us and not against us, well ... that just works out for everyone, now doesn't it?” He smiled widely.

Brian stared back at him. “I, uh, that is ... I need to think about it.” A muffin sat in his hand, forgotten. James looked back at him.

“Of course.” James stood up. “I can see that I've woken you up after a long night. I don't want to keep you any more. However, if we could just ask one more thing?”

“Uh, sure.”

“We really would like to get a look at the source for Alfred, preferably before everyone else in the world does. Do you have a local copy?” He reached into his jacket and Brian stiffened instinctively. When he pulled out a USB flash drive, Brian coughed and smiled nervously.

“Yeah, of course.” He put down the muffin still in his hand and took the plastic fob. “Give me just a minute.”

Brian went into the office, closing the door most of the way behind him. He slumped into the desk chair, slack. After a few seconds to calm down, he reached down and plugged the drive into the front port on his workstation. The root of the drive popped up on the screen.

From the other room he heard James call out to him. “My vCard is on the drive. Keep a copy of it so you'll know how to get in touch with me later.”

Brian saw the vCard and copied it to his desktop. “Got it, thanks. This will just take a minute to zip up and copy.”

He already had a zipped copy of the source on his desktop, and it

only took a few seconds to copy over. Brian looked, but there was nothing else on the drive. He'd been hoping for something interesting. Oh well. He ejected the drive and pulled it out of his workstation.

Brian walked back into the living room and handed the drive to James.

"Thanks, we really appreciate this. This should keep us busy for a few days. Definitely give me a call when you make up your mind. We have ways around your little non-compete predicament." He winked at Brian who gave him a lopsided smile in return.

"Yeah, great." Brian walked James to the door. "Thanks for stopping by. I'm glad you like Alfred."

James nodded and walked out. Brian closed and re-chained the door. He turned, fell against the door, and slid to the floor. He couldn't decide to jump for joy, start crying, or make a tinfoil hat.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Kami was a block away from Brian's apartment complex before he allowed himself to come out of the G-man persona. His fist came down hard on the console between the passenger seat and his own. He growled and pulled out his cell, snapping the earpiece in place and jabbing the number 5 button on the base unit.

"Yes, sir?"

Kami breathed, trying to calm himself.

"It's. Not. Him."

"Sir?"

"That man didn't write it. I could tell as soon as I started talking to him."

"We're still working on verification, sir, but the activity on the servers has made it very difficult. We've only got a third of the source zip. The, uh, gentleman keeps calling us, insisting it is Hawser that is the problem."

"He's an idiot. I'm the one who pays you, and I don't pay you to listen to idiots. Nor do I pay you to make excuses. I pay you to do what I tell you, and I'm telling you that Hawser is not the right man!"

"Yes, sir."

"Has there been any movement on Green?"

"Let me look, sir." Kami continued to scowl, but worked on slowing his breathing and willed himself to stop punching the console. "It looks like she's still doing the vacation thing, sir. She was

at Edinburgh castle most of the day today and is out at dinner now. Sounds pretty touristy to me, sir. Maybe it's not her, either?"

Kami thought for a moment. "Has she gone online? She didn't bring her laptop with her, we know that. If she wants to go online she'd have to visit a library or cybercafe or the university. Any hits?"

"Um ... no, sir. Just the B&B, the castle, and this restaurant she's at now. None of them have public access terminals."

"What about her email?"

"We're still working on getting into it, sir. We, uh, well, we'd put her accounts on the back burner while we worked on Hawser's. But I'll make sure we get back on hers."

"Good. Hers and Hawser's. He may not be the one we're looking for, but he knows something. We may have to deal with him later. And have a ticket for me when I get back to the Airport."

"Yes, sir. We'll get right on it."

Kami clicked the phone off, now much more relaxed than when he got into the car. He was back in control. Not total control, but he was getting here. He swapped his cell for his PDA and thumbed it on.

The screen blinked to life and the connection spiked to synchronize with his server. The thirty seconds it took allowed Kami the time to get his breathing completely back to normal.

He dragged a finger across the screen in a complex Spirograph formation. A black window popped up with an hourglass spinning inside it. A few seconds later the hourglass was replaced with bullseye symbol. The bullseye blinked for a few seconds before it and the black window disappeared.

Good.

The root kit had been installed on Brian's machine. Kami shook his head and smiled. It's always the tech-heads that are the most gullible. Give them a thumb drive and they don't think twice about what happens when they plug it in. And of course, they're always logged in as machine administrators. It didn't get much easier than that.

Day 5

Xochitl sat on the grass and stared at the columns at the top of the hill. Today's agenda had included another walk around town that paused for lunch at the National Monument. Cailen and Dolidh had disagreed on whether the place was beautiful or an embarrassment, but did agree that it was worth seeing, and was a nice place to stop and snack.

Dolidh had made her a bag of oatcakes and told her to pick up some cheese to go with them at a shop along the way. The cheese, something the shop had labeled as “Isle of Mull”, was good but a bit strong for Xochitl's taste.

Behind her and to the East, Xochitl could see Edinburgh Castle. She smiled and thought that it was rather nice of Edinburgh to provide such a prominent geographical feature for navigation. No matter how much she wandered around, she knew she couldn't get lost as long as she could see the castle.

Her next stop after lunch was to be the Princes Street Garden, which was just down the road from where she was. She knew to keep the castle at her back and head downhill and she'd find it soon enough.

Xochitl broke off another hunk of cheese and closed her eyes to just listen to the city around her. Of course, the constant drone of cars made for a flat background, but there was more on top of that. Families enjoyed their time together. Tourists snapped photos of the monument. The wind whipped around the columns, producing a low hum.

The temperature was quite cool, but Xochitl liked it. It wasn't any worse than standing in a server room for a few hours replacing blown network cards. Besides, it gave her an excuse to keep buying and wearing sweaters. She didn't get to do either often enough.

She heard footsteps and the crinkle of a paper bag within a few feet and opened her eyes. A man had walked past her, staring at the monument while working on unwrapping a sandwich. He plopped down on the grass, staring intently. Eventually his gaze moved on

and he looked around him. Xochitl realized that he had replayed what she had probably done not five minutes ago. The man broke from the script when he put the half-eaten sandwich back in its bag and flopped backwards to face the sky. Xochitl didn't have a very good angle on his face, but it appeared that he was just smiling and sitting there with his eyes closed.

When he opened them again he noticed Xochitl and caught her staring. His smile only widened. He sat up and turned to speak to her as she looked left, right, up, down, and anywhere but at him.

"You got me. I am indeed one of those annoying tourists. I just love coming here. I don't get why some of the locals call this place Edinburgh's Folly. I think it's great."

Xochitl smiled and gave him a quick "Yeah, I guess," but then quickly went about repacking what was left of her lunch.

"Hey, sorry. I don't mean to be the freaky random guy interrupting your lunch. You were here first. I'll just make like a tree and get out of here."

He had grabbed his bag and was starting to stand when Xochitl couldn't help but snicker.

"No, it's okay. You're fine. You should stay. But no more bad *Back to the Future* references, okay?"

The man gave her a big smile and nodded. "Deal. So then I can't say that you look familiar to me and ask if I know your mother?"

Xochitl rolled her eyes. "Ugh. Now references to quotes? I don't know if that's better or worse." Suddenly Xochitl blushed. The man noticed and laughed.

"Uh, hey, no. That wasn't a pickup line. Pickup lines that reference quotes from bad 80's movies? That's too twisted even for me. It was just the first thing that popped into my head."

"That's it, play it off. Very cool."

He flipped his mirrorshades down over his eyes and made a strange face. "Hey, when you're cool, the sun shines on you 24 hours a day."

Xochitl thought for a moment, trying to place the reference. She groaned and he knew that she had figured it out. "Wow. That was even worse."

She pulled her oatcakes and cheese back out from her bag and continued to eat. The man did the same, and Xochitl could see it looked like peanut butter and jelly.

"Hey. Why do you eat that stuff? There's no food in your food."

She stared at him deadpan and he just shook his head.

"If I could only have one food for the rest of my life? That's easy. Pez. Cherry-flavored Pez. There's no doubt about it."

"Nice. I've always wanted to fight a desperate battle against incredible odds."

The man waved his hand to break out of the game for a moment.

"This could go on all day. Alright, fine. Let's at least make it interesting. Loser buys dinner?"

Xochitl's eyes widened, but she was already too far in to back out now. She nodded.

"Can we walk while we do this? I think better when I'm walking around." He smiled, challenging her.

Xochitl blinked. This guy was good. "You have a strange predilection for Michael J. Fox movies, you know that?"

"It doesn't matter how you play the game, it's whether you win or lose. Oh, and now you're down one."

"I'm simply trying to illuminate the terrain in which we currently find ourselves deployed. You don't mind that, do you?"

She got up and brushed herself off. He followed suit.

"Hmm. Terrain." He thought for a second. "You're not the kind of gal that would be at a place like this at this time of the morning and, though the details are fuzzy, you cannot say the terrain is entirely unfamiliar."

Xochitl squinted at him. "When I volunteered for this mission I never thought I'd end up playing straight man to a tin can." She laughed at her own reference.

The man stared back at her. Xochitl stopped walking. "No? Was it that easy?"

"I don't know that one."

"The Black Hole."

"Huh. I guess I never saw that one. Ernest Borgnine, right?"

"Yep. But I did kind of cheat. It came out in '79."

"Ahh, now I see. You did cheat."

Xochitl smiled at him as they started walking again.

"There are several quintessential moments in a man's life: losing his virginity, getting married, becoming a father, and having the right girl smile at you."

Xochitl blushed and broke eye contact.

"My name is James, by the way. Where are we going?"

"I'm Xochitl. We're headed to the Princes Street Garden."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

"Xochitl!" The woman walked swiftly toward them. Xochitl

smiled and returned the hug the woman gave her.

"James, this is Maire."

"Nice to meet you Maire."

He gave a small, polite bow but made no attempt to join in the hugging.

"As in, *the* Maire?" He pointed at the front door to indicate the sign outside.

"The same." Maire turned back to Xochitl. "Do you never eat at a normal time, child?"

Xochitl's face dropped. "Are we too late? Oh, I'm so sorry, Maire! We'll come back tomorrow."

"Don't even think of it. You're not late at all, I'm still open for another hour yet." She turned and flicked some sort of symbol at a young boy behind her. He scurried off to the back of the room. "But you'll disappoint Connor if you don't come back before he's in bed next time."

Xochitl realized that she hadn't gotten the boy's name up to that point, but knew exactly who Maire was referring to. "Aww. I thought I'd scared him."

"Just for a moment. But you know how young boys are. Once you'd left he wouldn't stop telling all of his friends about you. Last I'd heard you had eaten your weight in Hotch-Potch and finished off the meal with an entire batch of Edinburgh Fog."

James stared at Xochitl, which only made her blush deeper than Maire had. Maire began walking them to the back of the room, toward a booth close to where Xochitl had sat last time.

"What would you like to drink, James?"

"Unsweet tea, ma'am."

Maire nodded and was off. Xochitl flopped into the booth with a sigh. "It's good to sit. I mean, I enjoy walking, but how long were we out today?"

James looked at his watch. "About seven hours. And you didn't have to lug around a laptop all day." He pushed the laptop toward the back of the bench, out of the way.

"I told you we could have dropped it off at your hotel. You're the one who went all toddler on me and wouldn't let it go."

"I don't know how you do it. A three week vacation with no laptop? I'd go insane. I go nuts if I can't check my email every day."

"I'll admit that the first day was a little uncomfortable, but since then I haven't thought twice about it. It's so relaxing to not have to worry about it. Besides, I know Brian can handle things while I'm gone. The servers run themselves."

"I'd be afraid I'd be out of a job if things ran that smoothly where

I work. After the Dot Bomb, I need all the job security I can get.”

“Eh. I dunno. I’m beginning to think that it wouldn’t be so much of a tragedy if I got back home and didn’t have a job waiting for me. I need a new career. A new life.”

“Come on. If you’ve got servers that run themselves, you must be pretty good. I’m lucky if my servers run two days without needing to be rebooted.”

“Don’t be too impressed. What we have now is the result of seven years of refactoring mercilessly. I, we, didn’t get there overnight.”

“Still, that’s amazing.”

The other young boy from earlier dropped off the teas and a loaf of bread. Xochitl tore into it, literally. The boy hovered by the table for a minute. Xochitl was intrigued.

“What’s your name?”

“Liam.”

“What’s on your mind, Liam?”

“Are you ... So-, um, So-chee?”

“Yep. Xochitl. That’s me.”

“Wow. My brother told me all about you. He said that ... well, he said a lot of things.”

“They’re all vicious lies, Liam.” Her eyes flashed as she looked him dead on. “Or they may be entirely true.”

Liam flinched. Xochitl smiled, causing Liam to relax and smile back. “We’ll see.” He ran off, presumably to tell someone about his encounter.

Xochitl gaped in mock horror. “I don’t know quite how to take that.”

James chuckled. “Yes, at some point you’re going to have to tell me how you gained such ... infamy.”

Xochitl cut him off with a grin. “No! Don’t start that again. No more movie references. I’m tapped out for the day.”

“Hey. Every occasion can be spiced up with a little *Three Amigos* humor. But I can play nice for now.”

Xochitl smiled and tore off some more bread.

“I can’t believe I got fanboyed by a ten-year old Scottish kid. For eating, no less.”

They both laughed then sat in silence for a minute. Maire eventually came over with two bowls of Hotch-Potch, both perfectly normal in size. She winked at Xochitl.

“Dolihd says Cailen has been sending you all around town. “That Miss Green”, she says to me, “my husband has her running around from castle to castle. I don’t know where she gets her energy.” But

then, that explains a few things, doesn't it?" Maire grinned wickedly at Xochitl, who grinned back in resignation. Maire took the empty bread board as she left, nodding that she'd get another for them.

When Xochitl looked back at James, he was looking at her very oddly, as if sizing her up. "What?"

"Green. Did she say your last name was Green?"

"Yep. I know, it doesn't go well with Xochitl. I don't understand it, either." She shrugged at him.

"You're kidding me. I don't believe this. I can't believe I'm about to go all fanboy on you, too."

Xochitl looked at him nervously.

"Hang on, wait. This is too great." He unzipped his laptop case, and extracted it onto the table, facing the screen so that both of them could see it. It only took a few seconds to come out of hibernation. "Look!"

He pointed at the left side of the desktop. Xochitl recognized the icon immediately and gasped. It was the installer for Alfred.

"I just installed him last night. You're that Xochitl Green, right? I mean, I should have put two and two together earlier. How many programmers are there named Xochitl?"

Xochitl was still too shocked to say anything. Her brain was working in full reverse, trying to figure out how he could connect her with Alfred. Had Brian mentioned her name in the Slashdot article? She thought he'd said that he hadn't, but she wasn't sure. She knew that she hadn't put her name anywhere on it, but obviously someone knew and was telling other people.

"This is so awesome. Wow. He's amazing. I've only had a few hours to train him, but I can already tell the difference. All of the guys at work are totally freaking out. They are never going to believe that I met you."

All of the guys at work? Freaking out? What's happened in the last 4 days?

"How, uh, how did you find out about Alfred?"

"One of the guys at work emailed it around to all of us. I think he said he'd gotten it off SourceForge before the servers melted. But he may have been bragging. I don't give him credit for being that connected. Man, I'd hate to be the guy paying that bandwidth bill."

The SourceForge servers melted? Because of Alfred?

She had to look.

"Do you have wireless on this thing?" James nodded. "May I?" He nodded again, turning the laptop more toward her to make it easier for her to type.

Xochitl brought up Firefox and went straight to the SourceForge

homepage. She gasped as she saw the top posting: the bandwidth problems had been worked around and everything would soon be back to normal. Then she noticed the link on the left of the page. There, at the top of the "Most Downloaded" sidebar, was Alfred. She hesitated, then clicked the link.

The page took a minute to come up, but when she saw it she fell back into the booth. The download counter for the Windows version read over a quarter-million downloads. She reached to the touchpad and clicked through to the download statistics page. The first two weeks were a solid line at the bottom of the graph, but the last four days were a giant almost vertical spike.

James peered around the screen to see what Xochitl was staring at. "Whoa! I can see why the servers melted."

Xochitl flicked the laptop back into hibernation mode. She wanted to spend the next hour surfing and tracing Alfred around all the places he'd found his way into, but she was still too much in shock and knew that she needed to come back to it later when she could think more clearly.

"That's really cool."

Xochitl looked up at James, who was grinning like he'd found a golden ticket.

"I, uh. I had no idea."

James looked at her sideways. "Really? Come on. How does something get this big without the lead programmer knowing about it?"

"I guess B-, um, I guess my partner did quite a marketing job."

"I'll say. But really, Alfred's spreading faster than *Hot or Not*. He doesn't need any marketing. He's his own best marketing."

"I guess." She trailed off, still working things through in her head.

They were quiet for another minute. James worked quickly on his Hotch-Potch while Xochitl just absently stirred hers around in her bowl. He eventually spoke up.

"So how long do you figure before the MPAA and RIAA fight back?"

Xochitl looked up at him. "What? I'm sorry, I was off in my own little world. What did you say?"

"Well, one of the big selling points for Alfred is that he keeps out all the bad folks and only lets you talk to the good ones, right? And if the bad guys are keeping you from downloading from Kazaa or Pirate Bay or whatever at a decent speed ... and if Alfred takes them out of the equation ... then how long until you figure they start to get a little pissed?"

"Alfred has applications beyond P2P. He helps reduce worms, viruses, spam, and a lot of other malignant network traffic."

"Yeah, so you're covered legally if they ever take you to court. But that doesn't mean they're just going to roll over and take it."

"No, I figure it'll only be a matter of time before they have something to fight Alfred. They'll hire a few dozen people who know all about trust networks and how to manipulate them. They can afford to pay out the ears for it, so it'll be quick."

She paused, finally interested in her dinner again.

"Alfred's weakest link, just like any security, is still the guy sitting at the keyboard. The bad guys will come up with a way to convince the users to treat them like friends. They'll do email campaigns with free offers. IM chat bots. Blogspamming. Anything to get the users to interact with them, because they know interaction implies trust. They'll work to keep that trust up just high enough to get past Alfred. It's like trying to gain faction in an online RPG. Kill enough of the right kind of bunny and suddenly you can walk around amongst the mobs without them attacking you. Alfred's not perfect. He can't do everything for the user."

James nodded and continued eating. He responded between mouthfuls.

"Sure. It's a Bugs Bunny versus Elmer Fudd arms race. But you have to admit, Alfred's a pretty powerful gun."

"That's just it: Alfred's not a gun. Alfred is completely defensive. He's just a butler."

"True." James scooped up the last of his stew and looked at it thoughtfully. "But ..."

Xochitl waited, not all that impatiently. "But what?"

"Well, we were talking earlier about job security and you looking for a new career, and just now you mentioned that these guys have deep pockets."

Xochitl shifted and squinted the question at him. "So?"

"So what if the bad guys came around and you were one of the people they wanted to hire? It's not unheard of."

"Work for the MPAA? Why in the world would I do that?"

"Well, we've been talking all day. You don't strike me as the elite hacker grrrl that just wants to steal movies and music in their mom and dad's basement."

Xochitl grunted something that he took as agreement.

"And I think you would agree that if the MPAA would just come up with a good idea instead of continuing the arms race, well, they might not be such bad people."

"You're starting to lose me. Any group that tries to DDoS me off

the 'net because I want to download *Finding Nemo* isn't exactly on the moral high ground, nor are they going to win any Nobel Peace Prizes any time soon."

"True. But, and I'm just playing devil's advocate here, what if they're just teenagers like the kids stealing music? They're the schoolyard bully kind of teenager, I'll grant you. But how many stories are about the hero reforming the bully into a productive member of society?"

"I'm not saying that I wouldn't like to see them grow up. Both sides, really. In a perfect world, we wouldn't need Alfred and that would be great. But would I want to be the hero that teaches the bully the error of his ways? Not in the slightest. I had to grow up on my own, and I have no doubt that if they just sat down and thought about it for a while, they could too."

"But—" He paused and put his spoon down. Xochitl cocked her head questioningly. "Sorry, it's my phone. I'll take this outside. I hate people who talk on phones in restaurants. I'll be right back."

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"Go."

"Sir, we thought you should know. We got an email from Hawser to your dummy NSA account. He, uh, he declined, sir."

"More."

"That was pretty much it. He said, and I quote: "I don't think I'd be interested in pursuing a career with the NSA at this time. Thank you for the offer, and if I can be of any more help, please let me know."."

Kami cursed and punched his palm into the wall.

"The girl isn't playing, either. Prep the email."

"Yes, sir."

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James sat back down in the booth.

"Sorry about that. Remember the server I was talking about? It's been two days and needed its reboot." He smiled and shrugged. "So ... enough shop talk. And no more movies. Let's talk about something else for a while."

"Deal." Xochitl nodded her head toward the kitchen. "But I think we're about to have our mouths full. Those are some big plates that Maire is carrying."

James flinched. "Yeah they are. Is there something I need to know? Why do I suddenly feel like the punchline to a bad joke?"

Xochitl smiled. "You and me both. Just try to keep up."

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The whole "lets talk about something else" idea worked for a little over thirty minutes. They had each finished their dinners and had started on some Edinburgh Fogs when Xochitl spoke up.

"You were talking earlier about ethical implications and moral high grounds."

James laughed and pointed his spoon at Xochitl to show that he he knew they'd come back around to it eventually. "Yeah?"

"It's true that Alfred is really just another step in the arms race. I'm willing to concede that point. But think about why Alfred was put together in the first place."

"I have my guesses, but you haven't exactly come out and said it."

"Easy. I got tired of having to worry about what the big corporations were trying to do to my computer behind my back. What kind of "benevolent" viruses and rootkits and whatever else, all in the name of DRM, in turn in the name of protecting the artists from us rapscallion pirates."

"Fair enough. But—"

"But nothing. I'm not going to argue the morality of downloading MP3s off of Kazaa or movies with BitTorrent. That's not what Alfred is about. Alfred is my way of telling the bad guys that they have definitely crossed the line. Shutting down BitTorrent trackers is one thing, but taking over my PC is something far beyond that."

"Granted. I can't argue with that. But don't you think that you're also glossing over Alfred's less noble aspects?"

"Such as?"

"Banner ad blocking, for one. Most sites on the web couldn't support themselves without banner ads. Alfred unabashedly removes that revenue stream."

"I'm willing to admit that it's a fine line. I might make the same argument as before, though: taking over my screen with a flashing

monkey is still taking over my screen.”

“But aren't you implicitly agreeing to deal with flashing monkeys by visiting that web site and making use of its content?”

Xochitl hesitated, then shrugged. It wasn't so much a shrug of concession inasmuch as to indicate that she'd have to think about it more.

“Am I? I might also argue that if the ads were relevant and useful then they wouldn't get blocked by Alfred in the first place. The user has to train Alfred which ads are the ones he wants blocked. Doubleclick and Intellitext might get blocked while Google AdWords might stay. Alfred doesn't do the discriminating, the user does.”

It was James' turn to shrug. “Again, fair enough.”

Xochitl, tired of being cross-examined, decided to take the offensive. “What about you? You've got Alfred installed.”

James put down his spoon and raised his arms in mock surrender. “Hey, I'm just playing Devil's Advocate, like I said. I haven't said anything the media isn't going to ask you fifty times over the next few months.”

Xochitl crumpled inward. James noticed and leaned forward.

“What?”

“You're right.”

James waited for her to continue, but she had gone back to the stir-my-bowl avoidance technique.

“I'm right about what?”

“The media. They're going to have a field day with this. No matter what my original intent, I'll be vilified.” She paused and muttered under her breath. “And it's not like I did any of this for attention, anyway. Ugh.”

James cocked his head and kept eating. It was his way of avoiding an explicit “of course I'm right”.

“Maybe if I'm lucky someone will come out with a better version and the media will move on to them.”

“Ha, you wish. No way, for two reasons.”

Xochitl waved her hand for him to expound.

“One, Alfred's too good. You released a working app. Maybe if you had just released the source you might have gotten away with being a footnote or anecdote.”

“But—”

He waved to calm her. “I know. You're a good developer. It goes against every fiber of your being to release anything half finished.”

Xochitl shrugged again. “And number two?”

“One word: Napster.”

Xochitl glanced off into space, decompressing that single word into dozens of scenarios and scanning each of them for any sort of positive implication. "Ugh. You're right."

"Yep. Dozens of P2P and music sharing apps sprung up after Napster showed the way. Some of them even before Napster had been shut down. But other than the occasional lamentation on Slashdot about the glory days of AudioGalaxy or Morpheus, no one remembers anything but Napster."

Xochitl continued to slosh her melting dessert around in its bowl. "I know. You're right. You're right. The geeks will get it, but there's no way the grandmas will." She sighed deeply, folding further in upon herself.

James' tone softened and he clucked. "Look at what I've gone and done. I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean to get you all depressed. I swear to you that I normally wait until at least the third date before I start making the girl want to throw herself in front of a bus."

Xochitl snorted a laugh, but didn't look up. James pressed on.

"Hey. How long until pumpkin-time?"

Xochitl looked up and gave him the eyebrow.

"What say we walk on back to the National Monument and stare up at the stars for a while? I'm hoping it'll help you put things in perspective and prevent you from henceforth having horrible memories of me."

"It was chilly this afternoon and downright cold when we came in here. It would be freezing by now."

"True. But, we can stop by our hotels and get some nice thick jackets."

Xochitl looked down, staring deep beyond her bowl. "I, uh, that is, I didn't bring one."

"You what?"

"I only packed sweaters."

James laughed loud enough to make Xochitl flinch.

"Are you telling me you came to Scotland for a three-week vacation and didn't bring a single winter coat?"

"Yep. That's pretty much the scenario."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you are the dumbest guru I know."

"Yeah, sure. How could I possibly take that the wrong way?"

James' smile turned into a smirk. "Come on, I probably brought an extra. I always do. If not, well, we'll figure something out."

Xochitl again gave him the eyebrow, but didn't argue. She was finally beginning to feel like she didn't need to escape anymore, and she didn't want that feeling to go away just yet.

James and Xochitl sat in a small café, safely out of the chilling winds and sipping hot cocoa. Xochitl peered through the steam rising out of the mug in front of her and blew at the surface of the frothy liquid.

“This was a much better idea than your first one. I like the cold just as much as any other tape monkey, but that was just ridiculous.”

James nodded. “But I have to admit that I have an ulterior motive.” He looked at her with a leer that was so over the top that she couldn't help but laugh.

“Oh, really?”

“But, alas, it's not what you think. I'm jonesing for an email fix. You've kept me away from it all day.”

“Me?” Xochitl feigned ignorance.

“Let's not split hairs. Point being, this place has WiFi and I'm still lugging around this pile of bricks.” He patted the laptop case on the seat next to him. “Would you mind terribly?”

“Not at all. Work calls. I've been there, know how it goes. I don't miss it, but I can't blame you.”

“Great, thanks.” He had the laptop out and booting up within seconds. “This will just take a minute.”

“Sadly, my experience with men leaves me unable to contest that statement.”

James flipped his hand as if to brush away her comment. Xochitl went back to focusing on the warmth radiating out of the mug between her hands.

Five minutes later James finally looked away from the screen and up at her. “Done. See? Not long at all.”

Xochitl's eyes lowered to her mug sheepishly. “Like I said: I am unsurprised.”

“Whatever. Hey, I'll be right back. Too much caffeine today.”

He got up and started to walk toward the restrooms at the back of the room. As he walked he continued to talk to her over his shoulder.

“You're welcome to check your own email if you want. I promise to clear my browser cache afterwards. Your secrets will be safe.”

As he opened the door to the restroom he saw that she was already typing. Before the door closed behind him he was already pulling his cell out of his pocket. He knew the restroom was empty, but he double-checked anyway while he waited for his call to connect.

What seemed like an eternity later, someone picked up the other end.

"Send the email. Make sure you take Hawser offline for a while. We don't need him showing up unexpectedly."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and reroute any calls from this phone to his number to the voice mail we set up. She may decide she wants to phone home after all."

He hung up and swapped out his cell for his PDA. He was working on combining the two into a Treo smartphone, but he knew it would take no small amount of time and effort to port over all of his custom software.

He fingered another complex pattern into the screen and another black window with an hourglass popped up. A few seconds later a task list popped up.

"Sneaky. Clever girl."

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Xochitl wasn't worried about browser caches or personal information. She never surfed the web with any browser but her own. Within a minute she had connected to the public FTP server running on her workstation at home and downloaded her custom VNC client. With it she could make an encrypted connection to her workstation from any PC and use it as if she was sitting right in front of it.

The VNC client also rooted out software keystroke loggers and used a combination of random password challenges and mouse gestures for authentication, so she wasn't too worried about hardware logging either. If someone wanted to do screen captures of what she was doing, oh well. They deserved something for their effort.

She brought up her email, which was always running. Since the copy of Alfred running on her workstation had been getting ongoing training for over a month now, she hadn't seen a single spam in weeks. This was a far cry from the three thousand per day she used to get. Today was no different: there were only three emails in her Inbox.

The first was from Brian and had been sent the day she left. It was short, as Brian's emails always were. It simply wished her a good and relaxing vacation and asked her to call every now and then to check in and keep him up to date.

The second was also from Brian, this time a day later. He said only that Alfred was beginning to blow up and that she should call him as soon as she got the email so they could talk about things. He sounded a little frazzled and she noticed that the time on the email was after four in the morning. That was it, though. He hadn't bothered to say anything specific about what was happening.

Way to go, Bri, nice level of detail.

The third email was to one of the SourceForge lists she was on. The admins made references to the servers being back up to normal after the meltdown. They avoided naming Alfred specifically, but Xochitl had no problem reading between the lines.

She needed more info. She needed to know what was going on. She opened her IM to see if Brian was on. No, of course not. He was probably still at work. Okay, fine. She needed to –

Wait.

Another email was delivered into her Inbox. It was from Brian. This one was similarly short, and even more desperate.

Xoch-

Things have been completely nuts around here. I got a visit from the NSA yesterday and from a group claiming to represent the MPAA this morning. I told the NSA guys to go pound sand, but the MPAA guys were more hostile. They're threatening to sue if I don't work with them. Oh, and The Bastards called about the No-Compete.

I haven't told anyone about you yet. It's getting pretty hairy here, but I don't want set the hounds on you while you're away from home. We need to talk, though. I'm thinking that a deal with the MPAA guys might not be so bad. Better them than the NSA, anyway. I don't trust those guys, and at least with the MPAA I know I won't just disappear some day.

Sorry. Rambling. Give me a call when you can.

-Bri

Xochitl reread the email two more times. WTF? What was going on? Obviously there was more to it than Brian was letting on. What was the deal with him getting in bed with the enemy?

She close the email and noticed that there was yet another email from Brian that had been delivered to her Inbox. That's weird. This one was completely different in tone.

Xoch-

Strange days, kiddo. Had a visit from the NSA. Been up the last 3 nights answering emails.

Xochitl shook her head, confused. Why was he repeating himself? She looked at the message headers and compared them to the previous email. The first had come from his home workstation through his vanity domain, while the second had come from his Gmail account. Why was he sending her two emails from two different accounts within minutes of each other? She knew that he used the same VNC trick that she did, so the email from home made sense. But if he was VNC-ed in to his house, why would he send an email through Gmail?

Something just didn't add up, but she couldn't tell anything from the email headers. As near as she could tell, both were completely legitimate. She cursed the fact that they were both too lazy to use GPG to sign their emails. She'd have to get him to start doing that.

Xochitl gave up looking for explanations and continued reading the second email.

It's actually kind of fun, this anonymous celebrity. It's like being Tom Cruise, but without the annoying paparazzi.

Seriously tho, they're eventually going to figure out that I'm just the big floating head. They're going to want to talk to the woman behind the curtain. It'll be interesting to see if I can hold them off another two weeks until you get back.

Take care. Hope you're having fun.

-Bri

Wow. That was totally different from the first one.

Xochitl shook her head again, thinking that might make one of the emails disappear into the æther.

Geez, Bri, manic depressive much?

She closed down the VNC connection and deleted the software from the hard drive. She knew she'd have to come back to reality sooner or later, but the second email made it sound like he was doing okay, even enjoying himself. Maybe he'd just been kidding around with the first one. That might explain why he sent them out so close together.

Whatever.

She wasn't going to worry about it right now. She was having a good time and instant celebrity would only ruin that. She closed the laptop and picked up her cocoa, staring into the steam and trying to

lose herself in the chaos of hot fluid dynamics.

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Kami saw the VNC connection die and the laptop shut down a few seconds later. He hadn't counted on the the VNC trick and so hadn't been able to track what she had been doing. She'd been in there long enough to see the email, though. He walked over to the sink and splashed some water on his pants then walked out of the restroom. Even across the room he could see that she was deep in thought, staring at her cocoa.

"Sorry about that. But of a mishap with an overzealous sink."

Xochitl shook her head and smiled without breaking her focus on the mug. He'd soaked his pants for no reason.

"No problem. You have perfect timing. I just finished up."

"And how many Viagra and fax toner mailing lists have I been subscribed to?"

This broke her out of her concentration. "Ha! If only I'd thought of that five minutes ago!"

James sat down and picked up his own mug of cocoa. "You looked a little ... pensive ... when I came out. Is everything okay at home?"

"What? Oh. Yeah. I just got some weird emails from a friend. I think he was playing a practical joke, but he didn't do it very well. He gave himself away too fast. Yet again with the men and their short ... intervals."

James looked back at her and for once he was the one with the confused look. She waved it away with her mug.

"Sorry. It was nothing, really. But I did appreciate the opportunity to check my email. Thanks." She took a long sip of her cocoa.

"But to be honest, it was like the first beer for an alcoholic that's been 30 days sober. It was a bit of a letdown and now I just feel sorry I did it. No more email or web for me for the rest of my vacation. I am officially and completely unplugged from here on out."

James shrugged and put away the laptop.

"Well, okay then. What next?"

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

An hour later Kami had dropped Xochitl off at her B&B. No sooner had he gotten back outside than he was on his cell again.

"What. Was. That."

"Sir?"

"I told you to lock down Hawser. She said she got multiple emails from him, back to back."

"It, uh ... it may have been an outside account. Let me see. Yeah, he's archived some things he's sent himself from a Gmail account. That may be it. We locked down his home PC like you asked, but we can't control his Gmail account. And, uh, we still don't have access to Green's home PC to block it on the receiving end. It was a one in a million chance, sir."

Kami simmered.

"That's hours of preparation wasted, and now she's off the net for the next two weeks. Get into her workstation, whatever it takes, but leave no tracks."

"We may have to go physical, sir. It looks like the Alfred she is running isn't letting anything of ours in over the wire."

"Do it. No excuses, just results."

Kami hung up the cell and walked slowly toward his hotel. He knew what he had to do next, but he wasn't in a hurry to do it. It was going on almost a week since his employers had paid him. They wanted invisible results, and they knew that kind of subtlety took time, but their patience wasn't infinite.

He shivered from the cold and pulled his jacket tighter around him. In his pocket he thumbed the number into his cell from memory, confirming the tones through his earpiece. The phone rang for a moment before it was picked up without a greeting.

"Mr. Chairman."

"I could waste time telling you how uneasy we're getting and make vague threats as to your ongoing health, but we're both experienced businessmen. Let's cut to the chase."

"Yes, sir. I have the Green woman under control. Given another day or two, I am confident I can sway her over to your cause. You know my work. You know there will be no side-effects or breadcrumbs."

"Be that as it may, you are not instilling me with confidence, son." The voice on the other end condescended in a way that only rich old white people could. "And, we have a bigger problem."

"Sir?"

"Our contacts in the press have let us know in no uncertain terms that they are chomping at the bit to go live with what they think they know. They want to put Hawser in the center of a three-

ring circus. We've got them stalled off for now, but we both know it's only a matter of time before some pajama-clad web-nut puts something we haven't filtered on his web site and all his little friends find out about it and tell all their little friends. We can't control the small fish, and these days when enough small fish start to congregate it makes us lose control of the big fish."

Kami thought for a moment.

"I think we can turn this around in our favor. It won't be as low-profile as you might prefer, but I think we can get rid of all of our problems at once."

"Do tell, son. Do tell."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Twenty minutes later Kami was off the phone again and shivering even more. At this time of night, the wind and cold were keeping everyone off the streets. This was good for his privacy, but the ear the piece was on had gone numb quite some time ago and was beginning to throb. Thankfully, he had just one more call to make and the ball would be rolling. He didn't remember the number this time, so he had to expose a hand to the chill so that he could flip through the PDA to get it.

The call went straight to voice mail, just as he was counting on.

"Mr. Hawser, this is Agent Nakamura from the NSA. We met earlier this week."

"I appreciate that you don't feel that you can join our team at this time. That's okay, because it's an open-ended invitation. Besides, between you and me, our propellerheads enjoy it more when they get to do the disassembly than when they have to sit through lectures or read documentation. I'm sure you can relate to that."

"However, that's not my only reason for calling. During our investigation we also tracked down your partner, Miss Green. It seems that we weren't the first to find her in Scotland. I can't go into detail, but I'm offering you the opportunity to help us, temporarily, in our efforts to find her and get her back."

"You have my numbers. Give me a call any time, day or night."

Kami hung up. That should do it. According to his people, Hawser was on his way home from work right now. He'd get the voice mail and have called him back within minutes.

Geek love. It was just too easy to manipulate.

Xochitl ran from the bathroom straight to the bed and buried herself in layer upon layer of blankets. It wasn't nearly as cold in her room as it had been outside, but after the scalding-hot half-hour shower she had just taken everything was a few degrees too chilly.

She closed her eyes and calmed her breathing, but she was far too wired to sleep. After a minute or two she finally admitted this to herself and poked her head above the covers. She snatched at the book on the nightstand and cursed herself for not bringing a reading lamp or flashlight with her on the trip. Her wet hair would have to stay in the open for now, as she knew that if she didn't lose herself in a book then she'd be up all night thinking about the events of the day.

It's not that she was attracted to James. (*What was his last name? Did he say?*) She liked him, but not in that way. (*What is this, kindergarten?*) He was just a nice guy to talk to that seemed to know his way around the city. Isn't that exactly what every girl on vacation for three weeks in a strange country really needed? A few bodice-rippers came to mind that might suggest that what she really needed was significantly more substantial, in particular nearly every Anne Rice novel she'd ever read, but she brushed these out of her head. That was so not what she was thinking.

She grunted and rolled her eyes as she realized that even though she had a book in front of her and was suffering through a frozen scalp for it, she hadn't even gotten a full paragraph in.

Fine.

She could admit defeat. She'd call his hotel in the morning.

Happy?

Brian flopped onto his couch, mentally exhausted. He decided that while Alfred was doing wonders cleaning up the LAN at work, that only freed-up the suits to find more things for him to do. He knew he needed to get up and get changed or he'd just end up falling asleep on the couch in his work clothes again. And food. Food would be good.

He opened his eyes and started to empty his pockets onto the coffee table. As he reached to turn on the lap, he noticed that the light was blinking on the Caller-ID unit. Voice mail? No one ever

called him on his home phone, so who would be leaving him a voice mail? It didn't matter.

Checking his voice mail gave him an excuse to sit on the couch for a while longer. The Caller-ID didn't have any useful information, only "Unidentified Caller". He rotated and laid back longways on the couch, grabbed the phone that was now behind his head, and punched in the recall number for the voice mail.

He rolled his eyes through the intro. He'd thought he'd done a nice job of telling the NSA guys that he wasn't interested, but he'd been on enough job interviews to know that the really anxious ones never gave up after a single rejection. He was glad their propellerheads were going to have fun dissecting Alfred. Blah, blah, blah.

The second part of the message made him sit up fast enough to drop the phone. He fished it out of the couch and mashed the rewind button a few times. Xochitl was missing? That's all the guy would say? Could he be any more vague? He rewound it one more time to make sure he'd heard it right.

No. Way.

Who would want to kidnap Xochitl? Alfred was cool and maybe a little pesky, but certainly not kidnap-level pesky. He extracted himself from the couch, swapped the phone in his hand for the cell on the coffee table, and ran into his office.

He still had the vCard from Nakamura. He hadn't imported it into his address book yet, but he did have it archived. He jammed the numbers into the cell and waited, every muscle in his body straining to do something.

"Mr. Hawser. Brian."

"Agent Nakamura. I got your message. What happened to Xochitl?"

"We're still working on that, Can you get away from work? I can have you booked on the next flight over here."

"You're in Scotland? I mean, of course. I'll do whatever it takes. Work will just have to do without me for a few days."

"Excellent. I think you'll be a significant contributor to our efforts. Take your time and pack warm. It's getting chillier here. Do you need me to call your office to grease the wheels?"

"No, I can handle it when I get to the airport. Thanks, though."

"Don't bother storing this number permanently in your cell. I'll give you my direct line when you get here. But, do call me back on this line when you're on your way to the airport. Do you have a headset for your cell?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I have one around here somewhere." Brian

began looking around and compiling a mental list of what he would need.

“Good. I may have you do some work for us in-flight. You do have a laptop, right?”

He'd just been thinking about that. He'd definitely want one for the trip. “I can swing by the office and grab one, yeah.”

“Actually, don't bother. You've got enough time before your flight leaves, but not if you run by your office first. I'll have one waiting for you at the airport.”

“Um, okay.” Brian fidgeted, ready to be off the phone and getting out of there.

“Don't worry, Brian. I'm sure we'll find her, especially now that we have your help.” The line went dead and Brian was still for a minute, finishing his list. Once it was complete he went from a crouch to a frenzy in a matter of seconds.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Now back in his room, Kami had washed up and thawed out his ears. He put the earpiece back on and dialed his people.

“Yes, sir?”

“Hawser should be out of his apartment in the next few minutes. As soon as he leaves I want you to upload the patch. Will it be ready?”

“The techs assure me that the scrubbing will be complete in under five minutes. They tell me that it should look like a minor bug fix for a possible buffer overflow exploit.”

“Excellent. Have the chase car pull past him as soon as he gets on the highway. I'll create an opportunity. They are to wait for my signal before moving into position for the shot.”

“Yes, sir.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

“I've got your flight details all taken care of, Brian. Your ticket is at the counter and the plane leaves in ninety minutes. How far are you from the airport?”

“I'm just getting on the highway right now. Thirty minutes max.”

Kami triple-tapped the map on his PDA at the point where

Brian's car would have gotten on the highway. Another hourglass spun for a second and was replaced by a green check mark in the upper-right corner of his screen. After a few seconds the map zoomed-in and he could see that Brian would be in range of the chase car in under two minutes.

"Great. Do you have an ePass?"

"Yeah. I've had mine for about a year now. I love it."

"I am admittedly quite spoiled by them. All of the government vehicles have them these days. I eventually broke down and had to get one for my own car. They just make life so much easier, don't they?"

Kami circled the toll plaza on his PDA that was a mile and a half in front of Brian's current estimated position. A few seconds later the circle changed from red to green. The plan was in motion. All Kami had to do now was keep Brian distracted for another ninety seconds.

"Don't tell anyone I told you this, but I am horrible about slowing down for the scanners. I've gotten worse since they upped the limit from 25 to 45. I always feel bad doing it, but ... I don't know."

He heard Brian snicker on the other end.

"I was just thinking the same thing. I was wondering how horrible it would be to zip through one at 70 while on the phone with a government official."

Kami watched the clock intently.

"Yeah. Hey, I can't go into much detail over the phone, but can you think of anyone who might be particularly put-out by Alfred's release?"

"I've been working on that one since I got your message. It's tricky. The obvious players are the movie and music industries. They would be annoyed, but really not much beyond that. They have a business model that can and does still work in the face of piracy and eventually even with Alfred in place."

"Okay, I follow you so far."

"So ... I was trying to think of people that would be put out of business by having computers and networks more secure."

Kami watched the silver dot get closer to the green circle on his PDA. He needed to keep him talking and distracted for another 30 seconds.

"Right. We've been working along similar lines. Go on."

"Hang on a second, I'm hitting a toll plaza and the traffic is getting a bit thick. It seems that no one else shares our view of ePass speed limits."

"No problem." Kami watched the silver dot duck inside the green circle and catch up with the red dot as Brian and the chase car

approached the toll plaza. This was it.

"Brian ... I've just been handed some pictures ... wow ... she looks ... oh, wow. That's not good."

"What? Is it Xochitl? Is she – what the?"

Kami heard the tire blow out a half-second before the crunch of Brian's car hitting the reinforced concrete toll stanchion. The line went dead immediately. Kami didn't bother taking the earpiece out. A few seconds later his cell vibrated.

"It's done, sir. He was doing at least 55 when he hit the wall, and we have visual confirmation that the airbag was successfully disarmed and did not deploy."

"And the tire?"

"The railgun worked exactly as we were told. The only thing the police will find is a perfectly normal two-penny nail that could have fallen off of any truck. It was a tragic accident, sir."

"That's good to hear."

"Yes, sir."

Kami removed the earpiece and thought about the next step. He needed the news to reach Xochitl without coming from him. It would be a few hours before his people could start leaking the connection between Hawser and Alfred. The press needed to think that they had figured it out on their own. CNN should have it on the ticker within the next twelve hours or so. Internationally, it would be more like 16-20. Tomorrow night, then.

That's okay. He could be patient.

Day 6

Xochitl picked up the phone next to her bed and stared at it for a moment before putting it back down. She looked at the window. Sunlight attempted to burst through the unsecured areas between the curtains. She looked at the clock. She had enough time to shower and get to the kitchen before Dolidh would scold her for being too late for breakfast, but not if she spent the next half-hour talking on the phone with James. That was it, then. She'd call him after breakfast. Skipping breakfast was never a great idea in the first place. Yeah, that was an okay plan.

She pulled the blankets over her head for a last few seconds of blessed, warm darkness before flinging them off and running for the bathroom. She was almost there when she realized that the room was actually a pleasant temperature. Oh well, she smiled, it was a great way to get the blood pumping anyway.

Since she'd had a shower just before going to bed, this one was going to be just a quick rinse. She knew it was compulsive, but she had to start her day with a shower. That was the process.

Twenty minutes into the shower, after repeated attempts to convince herself to leave the warm, lathery goodness had failed, she heard a knock at the front door. She could almost see Dolidh standing there, tapping her foot at her, arms crossed sternly and frowning. She rinsed, turned off the water, grabbed for the terrycloth robe, and slid her way to the door.

Looking through the peep hole she could see Cailen there, head down, wringing his hands, and looking very distressed. She flung open the door and looked at him nervously. This was something bigger than missing breakfast.

"Cailen, what's wrong?"

"Miss Green. Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to disturb your shower. It's just that ..." His head lowered and he wouldn't make eye contact with her.

"What?"

"Your company called, a Mr. Smith, and he wanted me to tell

you. He didn't want to leave you a message. He wanted you to hear it from someone, not from a voice mail. There's been an accident. He said that if you wanted to head back they could have you on the next flight out. But, also, if you wanted to stay, that would be okay, too."

Xochitl wanted to grab him by the shoulders and make him explain. "What kind of accident? With who? What happened?"

"The friend you were talking about? Brian? He had a tire blowout on the highway. He ... he hit a concrete barrier."

Xochitl looked at him, horrified. She knew what was coming next, but she refused to think it until he said it.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Green. He didn't survive the accident."

Xochitl continued to stare at him, unable to react. "I ... I ..."

"Mr. Smith thought that you might want to cut your vacation short. I have the number to call them back. What should I tell them?"

Xochitl nodded, barely comprehending. It wasn't until Cailen looked up at her and she saw his eyes that it hit her. All at once she was in his arms and sobbing with her entire body. Cailen just held her.

A few minutes later she regained enough composure to pull herself away from him.

"Yes. Of course. I'll head back immediately."

"I thought you might. I'll drive you myself. Let's get you packed and be on our way. My car is in the garage in the back."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami was a bit surprised that Xochitl hadn't called him to join her for breakfast. That woman was seriously in her own world. Instead, he found himself sitting at a café just up the hill from the B&B, sipping a green tea that had long gone cold and watching the entranceway. He occasionally pulled out his PDA and tried to look inconspicuous, but he wasn't too worried about it. He looked like a tourist businessman trying to kill time before a meeting.

He'd been there for two hours, having gotten there long before Xochitl would have gotten up. She hadn't left the building, and only two cabs had stopped at the entrance, both dropping people off and neither picking anyone up.

Five more minutes passed and the green tea, cold and unpalatable as it had become, disappeared. Another ten minutes and Kami began to shift in his seat. She should have been up by now.

Breakfast had been over for an hour, which would have been more than enough time to finish up and be on her way.

He knew she had no reason to stay. She had no computer, which meant she had no email. The tap he had on her phone hadn't gone active. She had a television in her room, but he knew she probably wouldn't turn it on the entire three weeks. She couldn't possibly know yet, but where was she?

A barista started wiping down the tables around Kami in the universally unsubtle "you've been here too long" manner. He agreed. He got up and pulled out his earpiece. He started walking away from the B&B at the same time that he dialed their number. A woman answered instead of the man.

"Yes, I'm looking for Miss Green in room seven."

He stopped walking abruptly, causing the person behind him to jump to one side to avoid slamming into him.

"Checked out? When?"

He resisted the urge to swear.

"I see. Did she say why she left early?"

The answer was short.

"No, I understand. Of course you can't. Thank you."

He clawed at the earpiece to hang up the call and get it off his ear. He resisted the urge to throw it to the ground and smash it beneath his feet.

An hour. He'd been sitting in that café like a chump for an hour too long. He moved to the street to flag down a cab.

He knew he couldn't have missed her. But if she didn't leave through the front ... could she have found out about him? Why else would she leave early, and through a back door? She must know something. She couldn't have found out about Hawser yet, could she? And have reacted that fast? No way.

He threw himself into the waiting cab. "Airport."

He put the earpiece back in and a few seconds later had his people on the phone.

"She's gone, presumably back to the airport."

"Sir?"

"Don't talk, just listen. Find the next flight, get me a seat on it. I'm on my way to the airport now and should be there in ... forty-five minutes. Have someone come around and get my stuff out of my hotel room. I'll pick up whatever else I need at the airport. Find out what she has been told. We cannot lose her now. Do you understand?"

The line was silent for a second. "Yes, uh, yes sir."

He disconnected the phone and sat back in the seat, attempting

to assert control over his breathing. Before he had counted to fifteen his cell vibrated.

“What?”

“Sir, there's a further complication. The next flight back to the states ... it's leaving in five minutes. We can't yet guarantee that she's on this one, but it's not full, so ... she probably is. The next is in six hours.”

Kami swore and completely lost control of his breathing again.

“Fine. That will have to do, won't it?” He reached forward and tapped the plastic divider to get the driver's attention. He twirled his finger to show that he wanted the driver to turn around, then pointed to his earpiece. The driver understood and nodded, slowing the car.

“I'll get my own stuff from the hotel, and I'll see what I can find out about what she knows. However, if you find out before I do, that will go a long way toward keeping me happy with you.”

As he pulled the earpiece away he thought he heard the beginnings of a “Yes, sir” before the line was disconnected. He sat back in the seat and started the count over.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl gripped her bag closer to her chest and tried once again to control the shake she could feel coming. As she stepped up to the gate she silently presented her ticket and passport to the flight attendant that was standing behind the podium.

The flight attendant noticed her bloodshot, watery eyes and Xochitl couldn't help but look down and hope this one wouldn't ask what was wrong. She bit her lower lip as she saw a hand reach out toward her, but sighed in relief as she realized it was just to give her back her ticket and passport.

“You're just in time, miss. We we're just about to close up. Let me show you to your seat.”

Xochitl nodded and followed the second attendant through the walkway. When they got to the plane she could see that the First Class section was empty but for two other people on the other side of the plane. She slumped down into the seat that the attendant pointed to and dropped her bag into the seat next to her.

She closed the window shade for her seat and the ones she could reach in the rows in front of and behind hers. She turned and unzipped her bag. Cailen had given her some pills that he said would help calm her a bit. Normally, she was adamantly against most

medications, but this was well beyond the norm. She flagged down a passing attendant for a bottle of water and tossed back the pair of horse pills.

A few minutes later as she heard the engines throttle up for taxiing away from the gate an attendant came by and put her bag in the compartment above her head. The pills were already having a disconnecting effect and she barely noticed that the bag had been moved.

Xochitl closed her eyes and pushed the button to lean back her seat.

Maybe these pills will knock me out and I won't have to think about Brian for a while.

She shook at the thought, but was asleep only moments later.

Day 7

As soon as his cell started vibrating he knew who it was. He made his way to an empty area of the concourse before he answered.

“Yes, Mr. Chairman?”

“Son, I don't know whether to kiss you or have you kneecapped.”

“I see, sir.”

Kami put his brain on autopilot and prepared for the banality and derision he knew was about to come.

“Let me make myself perfectly clear, son. We are, of course, pleased as punch with how you and your people handled the Hawser situation. From the way CNN is almost proclaiming him to be the unknown messiah, hell, I'd almost shed a tear and be tempted to download that software myself.”

“Thank you, sir.” The lint on Kami's shoulder held more of his attention than did the conversation.

“But. And does it seem like there's always a “but” when we talk? The Green woman is back in play! You assured us, you assured me, that she was all but under your thumb.”

Kami paused a moment to be sure the man wasn't about to continue rambling.

“From what we can gather, the innkeeper was informed of the incident by someone at her company, possibly the CEO, and personally passed the message on to Green. While we hadn't completely discounted such a possibility, we had deemed it extremely unlikely given the attitude the company has shown her in the past.”

Kami paused again. He continued when the man didn't speak up.

“Given this project's budget, we had a limited number of resources in Scotland, consisting primarily of just me. It was a calculated risk given the options available to us.”

The man snapped back immediately this time.

“Don't you try to turn this back around to money, son. We're paying you and your team enough to finance a third-world coup.”

Kami rolled his eyes. He knew better than to ever bring up money with these people. He must be more tired and frustrated than he realized.

“Of course not, sir. That was not my intention. I only meant to —”

“Don't bother. I don't have all day to spend on the phone with you. I've said my piece. Get the Green woman off the field and back under control, and do it quietly. We've got a good thing going with Hawser, so let's just let that one ride for a while as it is. No need to muddle with it.”

“Of course sir. My team is on it.”

Kami heard the line go dead before he could take his next breath. He cheered himself up by reasoning that at least now he had a good twelve to sixteen hours before that abhorred and obsolete accent would be in his ear again. That at least ensured a peaceful, uninterrupted flight. He looked out the window and cursed the solid grey downpour that drowned out all but the closest and brightest of lights.

Now if he could just get out of Scotland he would be able to get to work.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl woke up to the sound of the engines being adjusted for landing. A drowsy look out the window told her that they were circling the airport and were at most ten minutes from landing. She looked forward to see that the screen at the front of the First Class cabin was silently showing some Fox News commentary program. She huffed, rolled her eyes, and looked back out the window.

A second later the afterimage of the TV screen was decoded by the idle and still-waking part of her brain. Programmer. Dead. Internet. Security. Her head whipped back around almost without effort and her vision dimmed for a moment as the blood flow was rerouted.

The ticker at the bottom of the screen was showing unrelated headlines and she was still too fuzzy to even try to read lips. She looked down and fumbled for the headset she knew had to be in her seat's armrest.

Way to go, Koch. This is what you get for taking meds. You know you're a lightweight and now you can barely maintain a coherent thought.

She ripped open the plastic bag and slid the earbuds into place.

Both hands fumbled to work the jack into its receptacle. Clumsy fingers mashed at the channel buttons on the armrest until she found the right one. Her head snapped back up to look at the screen, causing only slightly less dizziness than the last time.

The men on the screen ranted at each other plaintively. She didn't recognize either of them. The one on the left in the horrible blue shirt and yellow tie was shaking his head and waving his hands at something the other one, in a white shirt and equally horrid menstrual-red tie, had said.

"This is a big deal. Look. He may have been a nobody yesterday, but today he's more popular than Gates, Torvalds, and Ellison combined. What he's written ... it's just amazing. Anything that I can get my mom to install over the phone that will then keep me from having to rebuild her computer every two months ... that's just amazing. This man has in one week changed how the world uses the Internet."

"I'll grant you that it's a neat little program, but the truth is that it doesn't do much more than a system that is correctly configured from the get-go." He waved his pen at the first man to preempt the rebuttal that was welling up and turned to face the camera. "That's my point: this should be a wake-up call to all you Big Business software manufacturers out there. You know who you are. Brian Hawser and I say to you: get your ducks in a row and stop selling computers and software to our mothers that are, as my colleague has so correctly asserted, that are causing us to waste days out of each month rebuilding them. We're tired of it, and we're not going to take it any more."

Blue-shirt rolled his eyes and flopped backwards on whatever backless stool-thing he was sitting on.

"Yeah. That'll help. I'm sure they are listening and shaking in their diamond-studded boots, Ken. But can we get back to the subject at hand? Brian Hawser: taken before his time at only 28."

"In many scientific fields, 28 is past prime age, Dave."

"That's just cold and uncalled for."

Red-tie waved his hands in surrender. "I'm just saying. Let's not start carving a cross just yet."

Blue-shirt just shook his head and continued.

"Taken at 28 by a flat tire from an ordinary nail. He became an overnight celebrity and was dead before he even knew about it. It's a story that could have been written for any of us. I'm told that his death is having far-reaching implications beyond just the software industry. The makers of the automatic toll system, ePass, are involved in a joint investigation with the Department of

Transportation on the safety of such systems. Tire manufacturers have been quick to jump on the bandwagon, hawking their newer lines of puncture-resistant and self-sealing tires at the same time they are absolving themselves of any responsibility for the accident. SUV manufacturers are even getting into it, hinting that the extra protection afforded by a larger vehicle might have saved this young prodigy's life."

Xochitl's head fell back against the seat as the TV was switched over to the pre-landing video. She had been wanting to rip the buds from her ears, but hadn't been able to bring herself to do it.

The sadness and tears from the morning had given way to confusion and curiosity. How had Alfred become such a big deal? How had Brian been irrevocably linked to Alfred and not Xochitl?

She looked back out the window, half expecting to see a furred monster ripping parts out of the wing. She felt like she was in the Twilight Zone.

As it worked out, due to weather, terminal traffic, and various other delays, Kami's flight took off within minutes of Xochitl's flight touching down.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl wrestled her bag off of the conveyor belt, now fully awake and head working a mile a minute to figure things out. The only conclusion she could come to was that she didn't have nearly enough information to make any sort of useful conclusions. She twisted her way into her backpack's second strap and turned to wrangle her bag toward the taxi stand outside.

Before she got ten feet she saw a chauffeur holding a small whiteboard with "X. Green" on it. She trundled over to him, frowning.

"I'm Xochitl Green."

"Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Luis and I will be your driver. Mr. Smith sent me to take you wherever you want. Except the office." He smiled. "I am under no circumstances to allow you to go into work today."

Xochitl raised her eyebrow and was about to expound upon it when Luis spoke up.

"He said that there wasn't anything you could do for them today, and that he would prefer to have you rested and ready tomorrow."

Xochitl shrugged. "Fair enough. That's why he's the Emperor."

Luis moved to grab her bag and pointed the way to the car. Xochitl's bag wasn't heavy, but it was quite unwieldy and didn't have wheels. Luis struggled to walk a straight line and Xochitl smiled for the first time that day. They neared the exit and she pulled her sunglasses down off the top of her head. Luis paused and readjusted for the umpteenth time before they stepped through the automatic doors.

Xochitl stopped in her tracks and gawked. Luis was making a beeline for the rear doors of a mirror-black and chrome stretch Hummer H2, and it was the only limo in sight.

Luis noticed that she was lagging behind and turned back toward her, dropping the bag as gently as he could. When he saw the look on her face he smiled.

"Yeah. We get that reaction a lot. It drives like an armored school bus, but it sure does catch the eye. Can I assume you'd like your bag with you, and not in the trunk?"

It was more of a statement than a question, but Xochitl nodded anyway. She moved to pass him and open the door as he neared it.

"I know, you're supposed to get the door, but after making you carry that thing all the way out here, I figured we'd be even."

Luis only nodded as he slid the bag along the carpet to butt against the far wall of the vehicle. He switched positions with her and offered a hand up into the dark passenger compartment.

As she ducked and made her way to the forward seat, Luis leaned in to point out the amenities. "The media center includes a half-terabyte MP3 selection, another half-terabyte of videos, a PS2, an Xbox 360, and a Skype video conferencing setup. Sorry, but no GameCube, and the web browsing has been acting up lately. It's got a touchscreen interface, so I'm sure you'll be able to figure it out."

He turned and pointed to the rear of the compartment.

"In the fridge you have a selection of sliced and diced fruits, salads, and sandwich fixings, as well as an assortment of non-alcoholic beverages. Traffic has been crazy all day, so it may take us a while to get back to your apartment. If you need a bit of a nap, I personally recommend the rear bench, as it is both long and wide enough even for a man of my stature. I've already taken the liberty of closing the curtains on the windows for you."

Xochitl could only nod her head as she took it all in.

"If you don't have any more questions ... the call button is integrated with the media center. Buzz if you need or can't find something."

With that he tipped his cap and closed the door. Xochitl

continued to gape for another moment before reaching to the touchscreen. A terabyte of music and videos? This, she had to see.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

The vibration in his pants woke Kami from his power nap. He was fully awake and aware by the time he had the earpiece in.

Kami looked around. There wasn't anyone sitting next to him, but there was someone behind him. He pulled his PDA out of his pocket and scribbled on it with his finger. A low jabbering sound started and he placed the unit in his left shirt pocket. He pulled out the cell, and flipped through the menus until it started making a similar sound. When he placed the cell in his right shirt pocket the two low sounds warbled and faded. To him it was now just pink noise, but anyone more than a foot and a half away would be unable to make out more than a syllable of his conversation at a time. It wasn't a perfect system, and it certainly wasn't intended for close quarters like an airplane, but it would have to do.

"Go."

"Miss Green is with me, sir. You might be amused to know that she did indeed go straight for the media library, just as you thought."

"Good. Just playing around in there should keep her busy long enough for you to be on your way. You'll be on the highway before she realizes that the Skype won't connect, and she still doesn't have a phone on her."

Kami paused and waited for his smile to fade.

"Go straight for the Town Hall." The next words were spat out. "The Chairman called me, again, and has decided that he wants to deal with her personally. Good riddance. Our role in this drama is almost at an end."

"Yes sir, and none too soon. Excuse me for a second, sir."

Kami could hear what sounded like Xochitl on the limousine's intercom, but he couldn't make out her words, only those of Luis.

"Yes, ma'am? ... I see. Well, they told me that the web surfing might be up or down, but assured me that the Skype would be up. It might be our satellite connection that is having the problem. I am truly sorry about that. ... Yes, ma'am. ... I figure another hour or so. I may get off the highway and cut through the city. ... Okay, ma'am, no problem. ... Relaxing music? Hmm."

Kami interjected. "Gregorian. Tell her to look for Gregorian."

"You might try Gregorian."

Kami continued to explain while Luis talked. "It's the artist's name, as well as the style. It's monks chanting Gregorian versions of eighties and nineties pop songs. It's just twisted enough that she'll get a kick out of it, and it's relaxing enough to put her out."

"Yeah, that's the artist's name. It's, well, it's interesting. It's pretty relaxing, though. I've never had a client that didn't like it. ... Sure, ma'am. Glad I could help."

Kami heard the click of the intercom being switched off.

"I'm back, sir."

"Excellent work, Luis. If she starts to question where you are going, keep playing up the shortcut angle. She shouldn't notice, though. I doubt she'll open the curtains. Just get her to the Town Hall, help them get her inside, and then have the team scrub the limo. I'll touch down in ... six and a half hours."

"Yes, sir."

"And Luis? Quietly start packing things up. These people are driving me mad with their micromanagement. They pay well, but it's time for us to move on. I'll be having a discussion with the Chairman when I land and I intend to extricate us from this tangled web."

"Sounds good to me, sir. I just wish we could keep the Hummer."

Kami grinned and disconnected the call and the earpiece. He would have to find a way to do that. That was a nice vehicle.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl went back to tabbing through the media library. The interface didn't give her a count, but given the quality of a few of the clips and the number of movies in each genre, she guessed that there were around 600 movies in the system. She didn't see anything you couldn't get on DVD from your local Blockbuster, but it was still impressive that some poor lackey had gone through and ripped and converted that many. Even on modern hardware ... wow. Between man-hours and computer-hours, it must have taken a solid month to get this thing stocked. Impressive. The music half of the library was, of course, even more expansive, but she didn't give it more than a quick glance.

She was bummed that the Skype hadn't worked. The satellite connection must have been horked, as Luis had suggested, as she couldn't even get a live TV feed. She began to feel that even though she was back in the US, she was still cut off from reality.

She moved her hand to the curtain to pull it back, but stopped herself. Maybe being on a plush island for another hour wouldn't be so bad. Frankly, she could use the time to readjust. Even after only a week in Scotland, she had grown accustomed to the slower pace and laid back lifestyle. Injecting the adrenaline of city life right now would just be pointless, especially since she'd been told in no uncertain terms that she wasn't allowed back at the office. When she got home she'd have all night to trace Alfred's spread, but for now there was nothing she could do but sit back in her decompression chamber and work the bubbles out of her system.

She leaned forward again to reach the touchscreen when the limo hit a bump. Her hand came down a little too hard against the side of the screen and it tilted at an odd angle. When she pushed it back into position she felt the familiar give of Velcro and realized that not only was it a touchscreen, but it was also wireless. Nice. She gently pried it free from the wall and tucked it into her lap.

She flipped through the menus until she found what she was looking for: Gregorian. Luis had given it high praise, so it was worth a shot. She queued up all four albums, hit the Play button, and gently tossed the remote back at its Velcro patch on the wall. It missed completely, thudding to the carpet. She rolled her eyes as she swooped to pick it back up and pressed it firmly into its mount.

"I am so white it hurts."

Within a few moments the sound of Gregorian chanting filled the compartment. Xochitl recognized the beat. *Blue Monday*? A glance at the display verified this. Bizarre.

She lay her head against the leather headrest and listened with her eyes closed for a minute. The music wasn't nearly as horrible as she had initially thought it should be. It was actually ... soothing and comforting. This would work out well. She could get her head straight, and when she got home she could worry about everything else.

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Xochitl wasn't aware of the exact length of time before the limousine came to a stop, but her best guess was about an hour. She had lost track of how many songs had played and the ride had been exceptionally smooth. She had snacked her way through the ride, finishing off bananas, apples, a field greens salad, a roast beef and provolone on rye, what was probably a half-pound bag of baby

carrots, and two bottles of green tea. She surveyed the damage, remembering how much she always ate after long flights as her way of coping with jet lag.

She shut off the music and heard Luis walking around to open her door. Almost too late she grabbed for her sunglasses as the door opened and the brilliant light streamed inside the compartment. She took his hand to help herself down to the ground and blinked for a moment as her eyes adjusted, despite the sunglasses. A dull, taunting throb began at the base of her skull.

As the world regained color from its oversaturated state, Xochitl noticed that wherever she was it was not her apartment complex.

"Uh, Luis? I think they gave you the wrong address."

She turned to see that Luis had dragged her bag out of the limousine and was closing the door behind her.

"Actually, ma'am, we got rerouted in-transit. Your Mr. Smith called to say that you were needed for a meeting at this address. It sounded important. He said ..." Luis looked around for something, eventually having to work his way around to the other side of the limo. "He said it was that building over there." He pointed and Xochitl walked over to him so that she could also see past the black and chrome behemoth.

"Town Hall?" Xochitl looked around, trying to get her bearings. "Where are we, anyway?"

Luis had gone back around to fetch her bag and seemed not to have heard the question. He reappeared a few seconds later, doing his best to manhandle the bulk.

"I figured since you just got off an airplane, and you had to go to some business meeting, you might need a change of clothes and the rest of your things. I don't mind carrying it inside for you, and when you're done I can bring it back out to the car. It will give me something to do while everyone else is in at your meeting." He smiled at her and began to trundle toward the stairs at the front of the building. Over his shoulder he called, "After that, Xbox!"

Xochitl shrugged to herself and walked to catch up with him. She looked around again to see if she could see absolutely anything she recognized.

"Luis, don't you think it's weird that this place is so empty? We're the only car in the parking lot, and the only car I can see in any direction."

"We may be a bit early. Mr. Smith didn't say when the meeting was supposed to start. But that's good, right? It will give you a chance to get changed." There was an implied "all women take forever to get ready" behind his voice that Xochitl chose to ignore.

"This place is weird. What did you say the name was?"

"I'm not sure, I've never been here. The directions were uploaded to the limo's navigational system. Those things are a godsend, I tell you. If I had a nickel for every drunk football player that couldn't remember his way home ..." He trailed off just as he began to carefully navigate his way up the steps.

"Huh. It looks like a ghost town. It's a beautiful ghost town, what with all the trees and brick roads and marble, but it's still creepy. Actually, I think the fact that it has perfectly manicured hedges makes it even creepier."

Luis grunted, but Xochitl couldn't tell if it was in agreement with her statement or because of the gyroscopic gymnastics he was performing to stay upright with her bag on the steps.

"You know ... the Emperor mentioned something about going for municipal WiFi contracts. I wonder if this has something to do with that?"

"Well, this is a Town Hall building. That makes sense to me."

Xochitl took one last look around before opening the door to walk inside.

"Yeah, but who's going to use wireless around here?"

The inside of the building was just as well groomed and ornamented as the outside, but also just as disturbingly empty. They both looked around and silently agreed that following the signs that said "Meeting Room" was probably the best idea.

The rooms that were off the hallways all seemed to be fully operational. Piles of paper and manila folders were stacked neatly on desks next to generic pencil jars and low-end flat-screen computer monitors. The place could have been any local government building that Xochitl had ever been inside.

Excepting, of course, the complete lack of people.

Several corridors from the front doors, they finally reached a set of yellow wooden double doors. Xochitl pointed to a set of restrooms just beyond.

"I guess I'll get changed in there."

She turned and dragged her bag into the restroom. She decided she didn't want to squeeze into a stall to change, so she slid her bag behind the door to hold it closed. It wasn't foolproof, but it would at least give her a moment to shout out a warning, should anyone come along.

She crouched down and unzipped the bag, folding back the canvas flap. She rummaged through the bag, hoping that she had something at least moderately more presentable than the faded jeans and sweatshirt that she was currently wearing.

Unfortunately it was a lost cause. She had packed a few nice shirts and pairs of pants, but they had been buried at the bottom of the bag since the day she left. She never had gotten around to unpacking, so most of her clothes were still rolled up and tucked tightly together, unwearably wrinkled. She had been living in jeans and sweaters in Scotland, so that would have to do for now. She grabbed the least-faded pair of jeans, a collared shirt, and the most professional-looking sweater she could find. She frowned as she realized that the best she could do was look like a sorority pledge.

She changed quickly and dug around for her bathroom kit before stuffing everything else back into her bag. She worked her hair for a few minutes, first thinking of leaving it down, then putting it in a scrunchie, and finally digging in the kit for a band. She repacked everything, rinsed her face, and stood back to see what had become of her.

Yep, sorority girl. Like, totally gag me with a spork!

Well, at any rate, it couldn't be helped. If they wanted to hijack her from the airport, they could take what they got. A minute later she had dragged her bag back out into the hall.

"All done, Luis, thanks. I really appreciate you taking care of my bag."

"Not a problem, ma'am."

She moved to open the meeting room door as Luis turned to walk away, but then stopped herself.

"Uh, Luis?"

He turned to face her. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Am I supposed to tip you? I mean, in case this thing lasts a while and they just send you off to your next job or something?"

Luis smiled and his eyes sparkled.

"No, ma'am, but thank you. It's all covered by your company."

Xochitl nodded. "Well, thanks again."

As she opened the door the automatic lights flicked on and she could see that the room looked just like any other meeting room she had ever been in. A large table of some ambiguously dark wood occupied the majority of the room. Judging by the video camera in the middle, the room was set up for video conferencing. In front of each of the chairs were more of the cheap flat-screens.

Xochitl stopped. Each of the monitors was turned not to face its respective chair, but the empty seat at the near end of the table. It couldn't have been coincidence, as the sight lines had been set up so that no monitor blocked any other. At the far end of the table was a larger monitor, this one with a widescreen aspect ratio.

As she moved into the room she heard the electronic snaps as

each of the monitors came out of standby mode. At the same time the camera in the middle of the table whirled to life and rotated to focus on her.

Okay. That was creepy.

It was beginning to get a whole “James Bond meets Demolition Man” feel to it. She turned to look behind her into the hallway, but Luis had already disappeared around a corner. She stepped completely into the room and the door gave a muffled click as it closed.

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Xochitl crossed to the end of the table and took the seat that was obviously meant for her. As she did so, the large monitor at the other end blinked to life. Each of the other screens went from black to showing country flags that waved out of sync and bounced haphazardly around the screen. Japan's rising sun. The United Kingdom's Union Jack. The white, blue, and red stripes that she thought made up the new flag for Russia. The black, red, and yellow of Germany. The Union Jack and star constellation of Australia. There were a few more that she recognized but couldn't name the country. The big monitor warmed up and showed a full-screen United States flag for a second before fading back to black.

Even though she knew it had to be coming, Xochitl still jumped in her seat when the big monitor came to life again. On it was the face of a man that could have won any audition for Colonel Sanders that he tried out for. For a second she thought it was just another image, but then he blinked.

“Miss Green.” It was not a question or an introduction. He was establishing that he knew who she was.

The accent was a southern drawl that perfectly complemented the white-haired and bespectacled plantation-owner image. It would have made her laugh had his tone not been so commanding.

“It is nice to finally get to talk to you.” His tone continued to refute that anything was nice about the conversation. “I am Mr. Perkins, and I am the Chairman of our little board here.”

The camera on him had zoomed out enough that she could now see him from the chest up. The background was obviously composited in, as it was currently showing some kind of underwater scene with a coral reef and schools of darting fish. Despite her initial assumption that he was wearing a white-on-white suit, he was

actually dressed in what appeared to be a cheap blue denim button-up shirt.

"Um, nice to meet you, Mr. Perkins. I should let you know that Mr. Smith hasn't arrived yet."

"He won't be joining us today. Our gathering here," he paused to reconsider his use of the word, "well, our conference here is all about you."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand. I thought this was about the WiFi work our company is doing?"

"No, Miss Green. This is about Alfred."

Xochitl stiffened as her worldview spun a 180 and too many pieces fell into place at once.

"I'm sorry again, but I don't know anyone named Alfred. I'm afraid you have the wrong person." She started to get up as if to leave.

"Sit. Please." Perkins casually swatted at something outside of the field of the camera and she heard the door click behind her.

Okay, girl, don't panic yet. Panic later.

She lowered herself back into her seat and interlocked her hands in her lap.

"Thank you."

He paused to let the moment pass.

"Miss Green, do you know how many computers there are on the Internet at this moment?"

Xochitl paused to let him continue, but then shrugged when it became apparent that this was intended to be a conversation, not a monologue.

"No clue."

"Well, we don't really know, either, but our guess is that it's probably in the half-billion range. I don't know about you, but a half-billion of anything is just too much to fit into my head at once. But here's the kicker: how many of those computers do you figure were set up by people who really knew what they were doing?"

Xochitl shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"Okay, let me put it this way: how many of that half-billion were you thinking about when you wrote that little program of yours?" His finger came down on his desk, tapping out the words as he said them.

When she didn't answer he continued.

"Let's assume that the vast majority of the computers out there were set up by someone who at least tried to do it right. You and I know that it isn't nearly true, but it'll help us make that half-billion a little smaller. Let's talk about the computers that some grandma unpacked on Christmas morning and just plugged in without thinking

about it. How many of those do you think there are?"

Xochitl was completely silent, this time not even bothering to shrug.

"As it turns out, we have a much more accurate estimate of that number: just over an even million. That one fits in the head much nicer, doesn't it? Did you know that even though almost everyone has anti-virus these days, not even one of the large computer distributors pre-installs firewall software?"

Xochitl spoke up.

"Zombies. You're talking about zombies."

"Give that girl a cookie." He clapped, mocking her.

"You can do a lot of things with a million computers, Miss Green. Link them together and you would be amazed."

His eyes widened and his hands began to wave around.

"You can be a patriot and use them to break the codes that terrorists use to hide from us. You can be a good parent and use them to make it so that the next *Toy Story* or *Finding Nemo* comes out in six months instead of three years. You can be a humanitarian and use them to find a cure to cancer. You have the power to do wonderful things."

Xochitl crossed her arms in front of her.

"Whatever happened to "with great power comes great responsibility", eh?"

He stared back at her, clearly missing the reference but still irked at her tone.

"I don't buy it. I don't buy the noble messiah act. Not with a locked door behind me." She didn't let up. "Look, I see where this is going. You're tweaked because Alfred ruins that. Well too bad, so sad. Alfred is out of the bag. Even you can't stuff him back in."

Perkins sat back in his chair and steeped his hands in front of him, grinning widely.

"Oh, my naïve young girl, why ever would I want to do that?"

With that, Xochitl lost all her momentum.

"I admit that we were initially a little worried about what Alfred would do to our efforts. But your Alfred won't be giving us any more problems. In fact, you might say that he's our Alfred now."

Xochitl stared at him in shock, the fire of her righteous indignation snuffed out.

"Let's just say that this whole Open Source thing you folks came up with works very well for us. It gives everything a nice Robin Hood feel that just sucks people in. And really, who ever actually bothers to try and figure out what the source is really doing?"

Xochitl sank back into her chair.

They had control of Alfred. How? Had they cracked the password on her SourceForge account? Not possible. They couldn't have stolen the password, as she had only been to the site as a visitor since she left. She hadn't logged in.

They could have broken into her apartment and taken over her workstation ... but what good would that have done them? She didn't have the password stored on it.

Could they have control of the SourceForge server? No. No way. That was too left-field-conspiracy-nut even for her.

The only other way they could have gotten access was-

“Brian.”

Perkins continued to smile as he watched her figure it out.

“Yes. Mr. Hawser, while he did turn down our initial offer of cooperation, was eventually nice enough to ... allow us full access to Alfred. It's funny, though, as it turns out that he wasn't the one we were really looking for. Trust works wonders, doesn't it, Miss Green?”

Xochitl wanted to scowl at him but all she could do was hang her head.

“Did you do ... that ... to him?”

Perkins paused before he answered. Xochitl looked up at him and knew that no matter what he said, she shouldn't believe it.

“We would never get our hands so dirty. No, it seems that poor Mr. Hawser was done in by a stray nail. Tragic.”

Xochitl ground her teeth together, feeling the tension work its way down her neck. She took a minute to try to compose herself, all the while knowing that Perkins was staring a hole into her.

“So ... what now? What is it that you people want?”

“Fair question. The simple version is that we need, no, we would like your help.”

“What?” She threw her hands up at him. “What could you possibly want from me now?”

“We were able to get Alfred under our control just shortly before Mr. Hawser has his accident. We were able to update it. You should be happy to know that your creation is now at version 1.0.1.”

Xochitl grunted at him, disposing all pretense that this could possibly be a civil conversation.

“Our people have come up with a few more ... enhancements ... for the next version, but you see we've somewhat painted ourselves into a corner. We can't exactly go out and publish a new version when everyone knows that Hawser, the brilliant man who came up with it all, is quite dead.” He paused as if to let the last point sink in even more.

"Oh sure, we could cook up some cockamamie story about silent partners or corporate backing or venture capital, but let me tell you one thing I've learned in all my years: the best lies are mostly true. No matter what we came up with, there would always be some random blogger or aspiring journalist with a theory, picking at our cover. Instead, if we can present you to the world, it's the perfect cover because it's absolutely true. We, my team through you, could release as many updates to Alfred as we want, and no one would think twice about it."

Xochitl knew that the look she was giving him shouldn't have had to be spoken aloud.

"You, Miss Green, would get exactly what you were looking for in the first place: people downloading your software and using it to keep themselves safe and secure from the big bad Internet."

"You're kidding me, right? You are the big bad Internet! You are exactly the people I was thinking about when I wrote Alfred."

"Be that as it may, the fact is that we do have control of Alfred and you ... you are an easy solution to our dilemma, but ultimately not entirely necessary. I think what we're offering would benefit all of us."

Xochitl put her head down into her hands.

"Give me a minute," she whispered through her fingers.

"Of course, Miss Green."

Xochitl stood up and started to pace around the table. She knew that the more she kept moving the harder it would be for Perkins and whoever else was watching to read her. The camera followed her around the table, causing Perkins' eyes to stay focused eerily on empty seat where she had been.

"I need to talk this through out loud, and I do that better when I'm moving around. Is that okay by you? This is just a little too much to handle sitting down."

"Certainly."

"Let's start off by moving past you being the villains in this epic story of right and wrong."

Perkins made as if to protest, but she put her finger to her mouth to silence him.

"Shh. I told you, I need to talk this through."

He raised his arms and faced his palms to her silently.

"Methods aside, the goals you talked about were ... interesting." *Yeah, right.* "And we've, Brian and I, we've had plenty of talks about ends justifying means."

"But don't think that I'm so naïve as to believe that those are all of the schemes you've cooked up for the zombies, nor are they all so

heroic and pure.” Not by a long shot.

“In fact, you must already be in control of your own botnet or you wouldn't be thinking three versions down the road for Alfred.”

Perkins made another palms-up sign of deference.

That meant they were already doing nasty things. His estimate of a million computers probably wasn't an estimate, then. He probably knew exactly how many they had. Somehow, Xochitl didn't think he had put them to work on the next *Shrek*.

“What you are basically talking about is putting Alfred on as many desktops as you can, then co-opting them to do whatever when the owner is idle.”

Perkins nodded.

Xochitl knew the next part was going to be tricky. Up until now she'd simply been restating facts without putting value judgments on them. She knew that she tended to go fanatic when it came to her computer and what other people could tell her she could and couldn't do with it. She had to work hard to dial it down and channel someone more ... morally ambiguous. But who?

Catwoman. Purrfect. Michelle Pfeiffer, here we go.

“I don't necessarily have a problem with that.”

Perkins cocked his head in disbelief and again got her index finger.

“Wait. Listen.” She softened and lowered her voice. “Presumably you have taken measures to ensure that once a zombie is in your botnet it won't get hijacked back out by someone else.”

Perkins nodded.

“Good. Then other than a few stolen cycles and megabits in the middle of the night, not only would we not really be harming anyone, but they would actually be more secure than when we found them.”

Perkins nodded again, a smile creeping into the corners of his lips.

Flattery. I just need some flattery to push this over the top.

“It's a surprisingly good idea. I'm impressed. Quite impressed. We make the Internet more secure. Maybe we make a little money or some friends in high places. Everyone wins. If I get to drive around in that sweet Hummer limo from now on, it might not take much beyond that to get me to sign up.”

She noticed that his smile flickered at the mention of the Hummer. Interesting. He didn't know about it. That meant that either he was very trusting with his lackeys, or that the transportation was subcontracted out a few layers. She might be able to use that.

Xochitl stopped pacing and rested her hands on the back of the

chair in front of her, signaling that she was done talking and he was finally free to speak.

"I'm happy to hear that, Miss Green."

He wasn't completely hooked yet. She needed a hair flip. But what? He was a condescending old boy. He needed ... hard-to-get.

"So let's put all our chips on the table, Mr. Perkins. You need Alfred and I can make that easy for you. The question is: what is it worth to you?"

Perkins reacted just as she had hoped. He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows at her boldness.

"We need little more than your cooperation and your willingness to help out your fellow man. In the end, what Alfred is worth to us really depends on how much we can accomplish together. So let me turn it back on you. What do you require to be comfortable and get started as soon as possible?"

Xochitl paused, as if pondering the question. She started walking around the table again to play it up. She went back into narrative.

"Getting me out of my job should be easy enough. Between Brian's ... accident and the rigors of sudden fame, I'm sure we can convince them that an extended sabbatical is in order. And if I never happen to make it back to the company ... oh well."

Perkins did a nod-shrug to show that he had no immediate objections to that plan.

"Money ... I'm not so worried about. I have no doubt that I will be compensated well enough."

"Of course."

"Oh, and I'll need a minion." She held up her finger again preemptively. "I'll need to train someone to do tech support for me. I hate doing tech support. But, if Alfred is going to have any sort of long-term credibility then the project can't be a black hole. I can play the part of the reclusive genius, but if I never answer any emails or post on any message boards then people are going to lose interest and maybe even get suspicious. Hence, I need a support-minion."

Perkins actually chuckled at this. "We hadn't even considered that. I like the idea. I'm sure it can be arranged. It will be nice to know that you'll have more of your time free to work on the important parts of our venture."

Xochitl nodded.

"One more thing."

"I'm listening."

"Brian's accident has kind of burned me out on this town, this whole area. I need to get out of here, and Scotland seems like as good

a place as any, if I can just get used to the food. You need to relocate me to a small house near Edinburgh. I'll need broadband access with a satellite backup, a shower that gets disturbingly hot and has good water pressure, and a nice big sleigh bed. Beyond that, I'm easy."

Xochitl stopped pacing again. She was done.

"Perfectly understandable. We'll make that happen by the end of the month."

"Good." She hung her head, as if going through all of her bad memories one at a time.

"Well, Miss Green, I think we have an arrangement here."

He paused and looked at something off-screen.

"If you'd like to go home and get a good night's sleep, we'll get to work tomorrow. I believe Mr. Hawser's service is in the afternoon. It would be the perfect time to inform your Mr. Smith of your impending ... sabbatical. We'll have you on your way back to Scotland the day after. If that works for you, of course."

"It should. When do you want me to start making myself known? Associated with Alfred, that is?"

"I would say as soon as possible, but only a teaser for now. Maybe a short, heartrending post about how you have been torn apart by Mr. Hawser's accident and that you will be taking a few days to travel and to piece together the changes he made before he died. We'll make version 1.2 the "Brian Hawser Memorial Release" and set up all donations to go to a scholarship in his name or something. They'll eat it up."

"Alright. I'm sure it'll take me a while to dig my way through my email tonight, anyway."

"Of course. In fact ..." His eyes flicked down below the screen and she heard him typing. "I have just sent you an email with the protocol for contacting me directly."

She heard the door click again behind her.

"I am told that your driver should be waiting for you in the parking lot. We'll talk again soon, Miss Green. I'm glad we could come to an agreement."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

As Xochitl walked out the front doors and back into the glaring sunlight, she looked toward the limo. She couldn't see through the windows for the passenger compartment, but the driver's seat seemed to be empty. That confirmed her suspicion: Perkins didn't

have direct contact with the driver. Luis must be a few links down on the chain. She might have a few more seconds before the news filtered down to him.

She walked quickly to the limo. When Luis didn't immediately poke his head out she decided to take the initiative. She flung open the door, hopped inside, and closed it behind her quickly.

"Hello, Luis."

He had jumped and rolled away from her and now looked at her tensely.

"It appears that we'll be working together a bit closer than driver and customer." His eyes showed that he didn't know what she was talking about, but was trying to play along.

What had Perkins called himself? Oh, yeah.

"I figure the news and orders from the Chairman will catch up in just a minute." She saw the game that was still running on the Xbox and decided to push a little harder. "Care for a quick race while we wait?"

Luis relaxed a little and nodded. He was still trying to play along and she'd obviously thrown him for a loop. "Okay, sounds good."

They were two laps into the game before Xochitl heard a buzz coming from the front of the limo. Luis had left the divider down so that he could hear any calls coming through to the car. Xochitl jumped forward.

"I'll get that, and I promise to stay quiet while they fill you in."

Luis couldn't think of a rebuttal fast enough and she was quickly leaning through to the front seat, fumbling for the right button. She scowled when she saw that the display showed neither a name nor a number. Luis spoke up when he heard the line go active.

"Yes, sir?"

Xochitl was pulling herself back into the passenger compartment when she heard the voice on the other end. Her arms slipped out from under her but she recovered quickly and tried to play it off as just being clumsy.

"Has the Green woman come out of the building yet?"

Xochitl turned to Luis and put on her best bad-girl smile, shaking her head.

"Um, no sir."

"When she comes out, drive her to her apartment then get the limo scrubbed down. Apparently our patrons at Town Hall are buying it off of us. Once you have it squared away, deliver it back to their building and drop the keys through the mail slot. They'll take it from there."

Xochitl twirled her finger around to encompass the whole car

and then pointed to herself, grinning like a schoolyard bully. Luis frowned back dejectedly, his shoulders dropping.

"Yes, sir."

"I should be landing by the time you and the rest of the team have us all packed up. We'll move out tonight. I have already terminated our contract with the micromanaging morons, and Green's delivery is the last part of it."

"Sounds good to me, sir."

"I've uploaded Green's apartment address to the navigational system. Contact me when you've dropped off the limo."

The line went dead and a second later the phone clicked off.

Xochitl twisted her face and looked at Luis. "No hello? No goodbye? No job-well-done? Does James always talk to his people like that?"

She saw the surprise on Luis' face at the mention of his boss' name, but masked her smile with a broad mischievous grin.

Score. I'm not half bad at this cloak-and-dagger stuff.

Luis shrugged. "It's just his way. We're all used to it."

"Well, I'm bummed that we won't get to work together, and positively put-out that James is going to try to get out of town without so much as a hug goodbye."

Luis had given up any hope of maintaining a cool-guy exterior and had apparently decided that he was never going to know the whole story. Instead, he just shrugged.

"Tell you what, Luis. Since I haven't actually come out of the building yet ... why don't we restart this race while we're waiting?" Her eyes sparkled with a challenge. "Girls can take quite some time in the bathroom, after all."

Luis just smiled and picked up the controller.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

An hour later they were turning off the highway at the exit for Xochitl's apartment complex. She leaned forward to speak to Luis.

"Right at the light, through two lights, then another right at the third. It'll be the complex on the left. Take the second entrance or you'll never be able to get this beast back out of there."

"Got it, Miss Green."

Xochitl finished off her green tea and tossed the bottle into the trash. She had worked her way through the rest of the food in the fridge as well as all of the crackers and other dry goods in the small

pantry drawer. Her adrenaline had crashed hard as soon as Luis was back in the driver's seat and she'd had the chance to drop the Spygirl act. This had left her ravenous and she had attacked whatever looked digestible.

As Luis pulled into her complex she put an arm through to the front and pointed out a building. "Second one on the right. I'd say you're best off just leaving the car in the street and not trying to get any closer." He nodded in agreement and slowed the car to a stop.

She didn't wait for him to get around to the side to open her door. Instead she put on her best helpless-girl face and fluttered her eyelashes at Luis as he poked his head through the door.

"Can I ask you one more favor?" She pointed to her bag.

Luis smiled and nodded. "Okay, but next time pack a steamer trunk or something a bit easier to manage."

"Yeah, no kidding."

She took his hand and stepped onto the asphalt. The sun was just touching the horizon beside her building. She made her way up the stairs and was in front of her apartment door before she realized that she didn't have any keys. She cursed herself when she remembered that she had given them to Brian.

Out of desperation she reached out and tried the knob. Something inside of it twisted and clicked, but after a few shakes it turned enough for her to get the door open.

Interesting.

The door had been opened before. The ancient and decaying locks that the apartment complex used apparently didn't stand up well to being picked. She looked behind her and saw that Luis was just making it to the top of the stairs with her bag. He hadn't seen her without her keys. She made a motion as if to put them back into her bag and held the door open wide for Luis.

"The bedroom is off to your left. If you can just drop it on the bed it'll make it easier for me to unpack."

He nodded and huffed his way down the hallway, returning a few seconds later. He looked like he wanted to ask something. Xochitl smiled and pointed at the door behind him.

"It's right behind you. Be my guest."

Luis chuckled and scurried into the bathroom. He came out a minute later looking much less tense. Xochitl walked to the door and held it open for him again.

"Well, Luis, it's been fun. Take care of my little wagon, okay? I'm kinda getting attached to it."

She smiled wide and held out her hand to shake his. He took it, gave it a quick uncomfortable shake, and bobbed his head toward her.

“Good night, Miss Green.”

“Tell James I said to stay out of trouble, okay? Bye now!”

She closed the door and listened to him walk down the stairs. She hovered near the window long enough to see him back the limo out of the complex, then sprinted to her office. She stood in the doorway and checked around for obvious cameras.

Get real, Xoch. These guys wouldn't be that dumb. It has to be on the computer.

She walked to the desk and dropped to her knees in front of it. Ducking into the open space she could just barely get her head far enough back to see all of the connectors coming off of the rear of the tower. She didn't see any obvious wedges, and all of the cables seemed to go to the right places. She pulled out of the space and backed herself into a sitting position in the chair.

She took an inventory of the things on her desk. It was too spartan to hide anything in. The home firewall/router was the only thing that really caught her eye. It was generic enough that it could have been easily replaced with one that would sniff her traffic. Beyond that, everything looked undisturbed, right down to the gunk she kept telling herself she would eventually get around to cleaning off her keyboard and mouse.

Well, if they had gone through all of the trouble to hide something that well, she probably wasn't going to find it without tipping them off that she was snooping around. For all she knew they might even have someone on the other side of the wall pulling some van Eck phreaking voodoo against her screen.

She wiggled her mouse and the screen snapped to life. The display was still locked by her user account. They hadn't gotten into the system or rebooted it.

She needed to get James' phone number or email address, and she was willing to bet that he was the NSA guy that Brian had made reference to. Brian had turned them down, which meant that he probably had the contact info that she needed.

Brian's home system had pretty much the same security system that hers had, and of course she knew enough of his passphrases and challenge responses to get through. She brought up a search of all of the files modified in the last week and sorted it in reverse order. She knew she could always slog through his address book, but she was willing to bet that this would be faster.

Xochitl scowled and clucked when she saw that the files at the top of the list were from Alfred's source tree and were timestamped as being modified only minutes before Brian had his accident. In fact ... the time was too close. She jumped when she realized what

that meant.

His system is compromised. They have remote access.

There was nothing she could do about that right now. Stay on track, Xoch. Figure it out later.

She scanned down the list past all of the source files. *There.* There was a vCard for James Nakamura. She didn't want to go through the hassle of mucking around in his email client, so she opened a Notepad window and dropped the vCard into it. The file was mostly human-readable and it was easy enough to pick out the number she was looking for.

Xochitl jumped out of her chair and sprinted into the bedroom to grab her cell off the charger. It listed that she had 11 missed calls but she ignored them, jamming the number into the keypad. The line went active after six rings, but there was no answer.

"Hello, Jimmy-boy. You and I need to talk."

There was no response, but the person on the other end hadn't hung up. She could hear what sounded like a faint tapping.

"Why don't I pick you up at the airport? We can catch a late dinner. I know a great hole-in-the-wall Mexican place that you'll just adore."

There was a pause and an intake of breath as if the other person started to say something and then stopped.

"I have an offer for you. Something far more lucrative and fulfilling than those micromanaging morons could ever offer you."

This time Xochitl refused to fill the silence and waited for his response.

"Fine."

The line went dead. Xochitl exhaled and dropped back into her chair. Almost immediately her brain started making a list of everything she needed to do before she could head out. Most importantly, she needed to find her spare set of car keys.

She continued adding to her list as she ducked below the desk again to yank the network cable out of the back of her tower. It never hurt to be too careful. She squirmed her way back up into her chair and began typing furiously.

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Xochitl sat in the terminal, sipping on liquid courage in the form of an iced chai latte. She knew that to pull off what she was about to try was going to take all of the sugar and caffeine she could get her

hands on. She had seen how well keeping Luis off-balance had worked in her favor. She knew that James wasn't going to be as easy to bowl over, but she hoped that she could at least gain the upper hand every now and then.

Her hand fluttered to tap a driving beat into her thigh, the iPod blasting The Crystal Method into her skull. She could feel the chai seeping into her bloodstream and starting to kick in. A heart-palpating surge of adrenaline hit her system as a flight attendant announced that the doors would be opening in just a moment.

She stood up and took a long last gulp of the chai before throwing it into the trash container next to her. She popped the buds out of her ears and flicked off the iPod, stowing it in her pocket. She fanned and closed her hands repeatedly, as if getting ready to start bouldering across the walls of the concourse.

Her eyes flicked around the gate. There were a few other people waiting around, maybe a dozen. They each began to stand as they saw the attendant move toward the door.

As soon as the door opened she could see him at the far end of the ramp walking toward her. It was time for her show.

She began hopping up and down and clapping lightly. As soon as he cleared the door she ran to him and threw her arms around him, cheering and doing her best impression of *An Officer and a Gentleman*. She planted several tiny kisses on each of his cheeks and continued to make happy noises as she bear-hugged him.

"Jimmy! I missed you so much!"

He recovered quicker than she had anticipated, backing carefully away from her. His eyes let her know that he knew exactly what she was up to. He raised a arm to stifle a yawn.

"Sorry, hon, it was a long flight and I haven't completely woken up yet. Shake me around later."

Xochitl pouted and wrapped her arm around his. She gave him just enough time to adjust before dragging him along the concourse. "The baggage claim is this way!"

Several hundred feet down the concourse they were out of earshot of everyone and Kami extracted his arm from her grip.

"That was ... unexpected. I have to give you credit, though, you're even more clever than I'd thought."

Xochitl's smile faded.

"You have no idea."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl looked down at her plate at the pair of burritos smothered in mole sauce. She smiled at the symmetry.

"So—"

She cut him off with a flick of her fork.

"Not yet. Food first. Work second."

He squinted at her. She knew that she wasn't going to be able to keep leading him around for much longer. His eyes dropped and he stabbed at the strips of Carne Asada on his own plate.

Half-way into her first burrito Xochitl started talking again.

"Okay, Sparky, here's the deal."

Kami kept chewing as if he hadn't heard her or had no interest.

"Actually, wait. What am I supposed to call you? Is James even your real name?"

He finished off a strip and took a sip of lemonade before answering.

"James is the name I use when I want to put people off-balance. Seeing a six-foot-tall Asian man with a name as white as James ... it works well."

"Yeah, I can see that. Cognitive dissonance." She waited to acknowledge that she knew that he hadn't answered the question.

"Most of my people, when they aren't calling me "sir", call me Kami. It's close enough to my last name and is what I tend to use online. You may use whichever you prefer, just not "Jimmy". That's almost offensive."

"Fair enough." She scooped another slice of burrito into her mouth before continuing. "It's obvious that you're not the person I met, so for now we'll go with Kami."

He refused to react to this, so she continued.

"Obviously you know that I've figured out most of what has been going on. Perkins and his crew look like they have the money, but are too far into their own hype to have any actual brains left."

Kami grunted and continued chewing.

"I can only assume that they originally wanted you to recruit me on the sly, all Sydney Bristow-like. That's why you told Brian you were in the NSA."

"Our research showed that he would respond best to something covert, while you would react the opposite and were best tempted on a more personal level. I was quite amused at the Chairman's description of your defection. It was obvious you were playing him, but I hadn't given you credit for the spine to do so."

"Thanks."

He tipped his fork at her and popped more steak into his mouth.

"You're a smart guy. You couldn't have kept me talking to you

for an entire day if you weren't. I can hear in your voice when you talk about them that you think they're just as nuts as I do."

He shrug-nodded in agreement. "They do, however, pay extremely well. Which brings us to your offer."

Xochitl fished in her pocket and pulled out a flash drive on a lanyard. She put it on the table and pushed it toward him.

"Give a girl a cave-like limousine and drive her around for long enough and she'll have a few ideas."

Kami took the drive and dropped into his shirt pocket.

"They don't really have control of Alfred. Their people--"

She cocked her head. "Your people?"

He nodded.

"Figures. Your people were smart, but they obviously hadn't had enough time to work out all of the kinks in their ideas. They made changes to the code to allow themselves a backdoor, but they didn't make a trust allowance for it. Since the backdoor traffic isn't related to a real-world activity, it's just as susceptible to the trust filters as any other traffic. Eventually, enough peers would spread the news that the backdoor traffic was bad juju that it would effectively seal itself shut."

Kami grunted and shook his head.

"Yeah, we thought about that. But we didn't have enough time to find a way to throw in a trust allowance without also putting up a blinking "Backdoor Here" sign. We figured we would patch it up eventually, if we were lucky it would be long before too many doors were slammed shut."

Xochitl pointed to Kami's shirt pocket.

"The code on there does two things. Obviously it removes the back door. Second, it adds in a trust metric for how Alfreds of different versions talk to each other. They can now learn that some versions aren't trustworthy and can challenge each other to prove their version. It may not be foolproof, but it'll prevent what they tried to pull off."

"And why give it to me? I have no interest in any of it any more. My work for the Town Hall is over."

"That's my offer. My offer is me. My skills. That drive is my first project deliverable."

Kami stopped chewing for a second and arched his eyebrow at her.

"These Town Hall folks are going to get pretty ticked at me when that patch goes live in a few hours. I'm not going to want to be around to see how well they take it. You have your little covert team, which means that you are obviously pretty good at staying below the

radar. I'm asking you to take me under the radar with you. In return, I offer up a good chunk of my time as your webmistress and code monkey."

He went back to chewing but didn't say anything.

"Look, I'm not asking to do the supa-dupa-spy thing like you do. In fact, I'd prefer to be set up in a hotel suite somewhere remote with just my workstation and room service on call. Maybe every few months we move me around to a new city or country. You've seen what I can do. I'm sure you could use another coder, and I need to disappear until I can get those nutjobs raided and taken care of. It seems to me like we have the makings of a pretty sweet deal here."

"Do we?"

Xochitl finished off the last bite of her burritos and put her fork down. Her volume and tone dropped.

"I'm not an idiot. I'm generally in my own little world, which makes me look sort of clueless, but give me enough time to think and I can work out anything you throw at me."

She paused and took a deep breath.

"I know it had to be your team that caused Brian's accident." She waved her hands to stop any rebuttal. "I don't want to know how, and I will probably never forgive you for it. But, the truth of the matter is that right now I need your help. The feds would throw me in Witness Protection and never get anywhere, all the while I wouldn't be allowed to work with computers ever again. No good. You're my only shot at being able to continue to live the life that I know."

"And I ... what I have to offer in return is my skillset. I'm not Hiro Protagonist or Johnny Mnemonic. I am not the greatest hacker in the world. But, I am pretty good, and I have control of something that can be used as a powerful tool. I think that's not a half-bad package."

With that she stopped. She pushed her plate away from her and reached to grab her oversized mug of horchata. She sipped it slowly while Kami finished off his own meal.

He looked up at her, weighing his options. He leaned back in his side of the booth and crossed his arms in front of him.

After a few minutes of silence he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a wireless earpiece. He reached back into his pocket and when he pulled his hand out again he put it on the table with the other and leaned forward as if waiting for the call to pick up. She heard a muffled sound as someone finally did.

"Miss Green and I are just about finished here. Are we packed up and ready to go?"

Xochitl couldn't read him at all.

"Good. We have one last project before we leave. Call your contacts at the morgues. Miss Green will be joining our team and she needs an exit strategy."

Kami disconnected his cell as he unclipped the earpiece and dropped it into his shirt pocket.

"You understand that this is not a vacation? It is business, pure and simple. Whatever you think is between us, thought we shared, is and was just business."

Xochitl fanned her fingers at their server to get her attention and only replied to Kami with an ambiguous grunt. Before he could react, the server was at their table.

"We'd like a flan and a fried ice cream for dessert, please."

The server nodded and was silently out of earshot within seconds.

"Look, I'm not expecting some kind of magical bond to develop, nor a sorority-esque pillow fight and toenail-painting gossip extravaganza. You stick to your end of the arrangement, I'll stick to mine, and we'll both be better off for it. Once I've accomplished my goals we'll work out some sort of termination of my indentured servitude."

Kami eyed her, betraying no emotion.

"Fine. Deal."

"Good. Let me swing by my apartment to pick up a few things, then -"

Kami snickered at her.

"No. You cannot go back to your apartment. Any extraction we do becomes suspect if your apartment is found to be missing anything at all, vital or trivial."

"But -"

"I am not the only contractor that Town Hall has in their address book, just the cleanest and the quietest. An investigation of your demise requires neither of these traits. They can be ... much less subtle ... if they desire."

Xochitl just looked at him.

"No, Miss Green, you're starting over. We need to make it a clean break if you want it to be believable. I'm thinking something simple ... apartment fire, maybe? That would eliminate any potential for misuse of your old computer."

Xochitl started at the thought of her workstation suddenly no longer belonging to her. She'd invested entire paychecks into that machine, tweaking it until it was more of an appendage than an accessory.

"I'll tell you what," she said, "I can agree to that, but you have to let me copy some stuff off of it first. We can do it right now with your laptop, before your minions get to my place."

Kami didn't look convinced.

"I'll be much more useful to you if I don't have to spend the next six weeks rewriting my toolkit."

Kami squinted at her, but then reached for the laptop bag. The desserts arrived just as Xochitl was logging in.

"Look, my broadband has a quarter-megabit upload cap thanks to my lovely provider, so we're talking about ... what ... maybe a hundred megs an hour? Zipping up my sources ... yeah, it looks like just about a quarter-gig. Give me two hours, maybe two and a half, and it'll be done. Your plan won't be ready to go in under two hours, right?"

Kami nodded.

"And if you have an FTP server I can send it all to, then we won't have to leave this thing running." She spun the laptop around to face him, the FTP application ready to accept a host login.

Kami eyed her again, still not entirely trusting her, but quickly keyed in a host and started the transfer. He closed the VNC connection without asking if she was done, and powered down the computer.

Xochitl gave a brief smile and grabbed at the flan.

"Great. Bon appetit."

Kami half-raised an eyebrow at her and pulled the fried ice cream toward him. His other hand dipped into his shirt pocket and pulled out the earpiece. As the dessert slid into place in front of him he made a show of his ambidexterity by reaching into his coat pocket to dial the phone while simultaneously clipping on the earpiece then picking up his spoon to begin eating.

Xochitl caught on that he was trying to show off and nodded slightly in acknowledgment. "Must be nice," she mumbled as she spooned more flan into her mouth. She couldn't tell if he smiled back at her. "But why not just use the voice -"

He cut her off and ignored the question. She could tell before he started to speak that he wasn't talking to her.

"I'm thinking apartment fire. Any contraindicators? Have you found anything that might indicate a better scenario? ... Good. We're getting a few things off of her hard drive now. Watch the FTP server for completion, some time in the next two or three hours, then move in. Make sure that the workstation is unrecoverable except as scrap metal and twisted plastic."

He might not have been talking to her, but he was still goading

her. He shifted and took a bite of the fried ice cream. She sensed that the topic had changed.

“Good. ... No, Miss Green won't be joining us at this time. ... Correct. I think the Webb will do nicely. Make sure her flight leaves before ours and lands after. I'm thinking something sunny and exotic – Bermuda.”

Xochitl almost dropped her spoon into her flan. She did her best to protest without actually interrupting him. He continued without so much as an acknowledgment.

“No. She may catch up with us later, but for now she needs to get lost. ... Very well. Contact me when it is done.”

He disconnected the phone and dropped the earpiece back into in his shirt pocket.

“Your flight leaves in a little more than eight hours. We'll have a new identity for you long before then. I'm afraid you won't have much time to get used to it, but we'll be able to help with that.”

“What is going on?” Her spoon became yet another in a long line of utensils forgotten in mid-air.

“To be honest, Miss Green, I am not entirely certain that I can trust you. Your performance today has been ... surprising. So, instead of you tagging along, I think it would be best if you were an off-site contractor for a while. We'd like to try before we buy. Long-term hotel accommodations will have been made by the time you land.”

“But –”

He continued, unfazed.

“Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, it being as late as it is, you won't have time to do any shopping before you go, so you'll be traveling light.”

Xochitl's mind derailed and raced through all of the things she had left at home. Clothes, laptop, toiletries. Brand new iPod.

“I will need to destroy your cellphone.” He held his hand out and waited. She dug into her pockets until she found it and handed it over. He flipped it upside-down and pulled out the battery and SIM card, dropping them separately into his open laptop case. “We'll swap you out for a new purse when we get to the airport and get your new identity.”

He pulled out his wallet and dropped a stack of bills on the table. He didn't sit back down.

“Come on. We need to get going. So much time and so little to do.”

Xochitl was too dazed to get the reference, much less retort. She could only get up from the table and wave a half-hearted goodbye toward their server.

Half of her flan quivered on her plate, uneaten.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Water streamed down Xochitl's face as she lifted her head to look in the mirror. It dripped from her chin and she made no effort to wipe it away. She stared at herself, not knowing who was looking back at her.

An airport restroom is not an appropriate place to have a breakdown, Xoch.

She squinted and shook her head hard enough to make herself dizzy. She grabbed a paper towel and meticulously dried her face. Her adrenaline had long since given out and she was physically and mentally exhausted. She didn't at all trust James ... Kami ... whoever he was, but here she was putting her life and future in his hands.

When did she become a person that could even consider doing such a thing? How?

She continued to absently drag the paper towel across her face until the remaining dry patches scratched at her chin. The person in the mirror frowned and looked at the brown wad in her hand before dropping it into the hole in the counter. The hand fell to the rim of the sink and she leaned forward to put the top of her head against the mirror, breathing slowly and intentionally.

After her heart rate returned to normal she leaned back and looked at the small clutch on the counter. That was it – that was all that was left. Her eyes flicked nervously toward the reflection of the entranceway as she swatted the clutch down the same hole in the counter.

Xochitl Green was no more. She didn't know what she had become or who she would have to be in an hour, but it wouldn't be Xoch.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami approached her as she exited the restroom and handed her a large brown leather purse – exactly the kind she would never buy for herself, as it screamed domesticity and dependency.

“So who am I?”

“Mary Webb. Double-B.”

"Sounds like my new mom read too many bodice rippers. You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all. The name had been set up a few weeks ago for someone else on my team. We just reworked the package to use your photo and description. It's much easier than trying to cobble it all together from scratch on such short notice."

"Huh. Where do you get these wonderful toys?"

Kami smirked for a second, but it disappeared all too quickly.

"It's certainly not easy or cheap, but there's one thing you'll need to learn about our line of work, Miss Webb. The weakest link in any secure system isn't the technology --"

She nodded and cut him off.

"It's the people, I know."

Kami nodded with her for a second before moving toward the elevators.

"Very good, Miss Webb. I may not have made such a horrible mistake after all. Tickets are in the purse. Enjoy your flight. You'll hear from us." He tipped a nonexistent hat as the doors began to close in front of him. "Be seeing you."

She wanted to stop him and ... what? She didn't know what. Have him keep her company? Give her pointers on how to be a supa-dupa-spy? What?

She looked down and unzipped the main compartment in the mammoth purse. Beneath the tickets was a brand-new iPod, plastic still on the screen. She pulled out the tickets and glanced at the flight number. She looked up and spun slowly, scanning for a flight listing. She saw that her gate was just down the nearest concourse. She dropped the tickets back into her purse and walked slowly down the empty hallway.

As the concourse opened up and the seating for the gates started, Xochitl looked for a secluded place to go through her purse. This was hard not because there were too many people around, but because there were too few. Most of the gates were long closed for the night, with the remaining people having the look of the sort of hard-core business traveler that had no problem spending the night sleeping on plastic airport seating. Xochitl knew that she did not have that look and therefore could not have pulled off sitting too far from an open gate without looking suspicious. The trick was to find seating relatively close to everyone else, but still secluded.

Or, maybe you're just being paranoid.

She found a bench that backed up to a nice, wide concrete support pole. As she sat back in her seat she rubbed against the pylon and flashed briefly to Brian, frowning.

Her head flopped backwards, wishing for a high-backed seat or headrest. No joy. When had she last slept? She shook her head for a second to clear it, then looked down into her lap.

The purse was truly hideous. Giant. Brown. Leather. Embroidered. Straps and buckles all over the place. It might as well have had the words "World's Best Soccer Mom" stitched into it instead of that goofy flower pattern. She started her inventory on the outside with the small pockets and compartments and worked her way toward the middle.

The small pockets were filled primarily with detritus: fruit-flavored gum, Altoids, aspirin, pens, pencils, small pads of paper, a lone hoop earring, hair bands and a key that looked like it went to a diary-sized lock. Weird, but very soccer mom.

The two large compartments in the middle held all of the interesting stuff. A half-used checkbook and register showed that Mary Webb had a membership at a popular women's gym and a semi-regular appointment with an overpriced masseuse. The checkbook was one of those combo-wallet deals and had roughly \$1,500 in cash and another \$500 in traveler's cheques, as well as her new ID and a small assortment of credit cards. One card in particular looked extremely well-used and had a small sticky note attached: "Think of the interest rate! Are you sure?"

Mmmm-kay.

As she slid the ID out of its sleeve she tuned into the airport's ambient music. Monkey finger. Toejam football. When had she gotten so old that Aerosmith was normal middle-of-the-night background music?

Her eyes flicked around to reassess her solitude, then down to the ID in her hand. She gasped when she saw it: the photo had been taken a few years ago when her company, ex-company, had been smaller and had all of the employee photos on their web site. But either Kami's people had some amazing Photoshop skills or they had managed to find a high-res version somewhere, as the photo was flawless.

She scrambled to dig into the purse for the passport she had seen. She flipped it open and gasped a second time. This photo was from her college graduation ceremony, but somehow the mortarboard had been edited out and the robe replaced with a bulky sweater.

Her eyes flew back and forth between the ID and passport, trying to absorb all of the details from each one. Each was dated within a few months of when the photos had actually been taken. Her birthday had been skewed by two months and two days – easy enough

to remember. The ID was set to expire in just under six months. The passport still had a few years left on it, but not a single stamp in it yet. Mary Webb apparently had never worked up the courage to go abroad.

Mary Webb. Not Xochitl Green. It was disconcerting seeing someone else's name next to her face. She jammed the ID back into the checkbook/wallet and dropped it and the passport back into the purse. Her purse.

She slumped down in her seat, abandoning all pretense of comfort or a decent posture. The clock on the wall indicated that only ten minutes had passed. There was one thing left to check in her purse: the iPod. She popped in the earbuds and thumbed it to life.

She resisted the urge to go straight for the music and instead headed for the calendar. Sure enough, the sporadic masseuse and personal trainer appointments were listed. She worked her way back to the music and thumbed through the listings: Dave Matthews, Sarah McLachlan, Matchbox Twenty, Santana. Ugh. Gag.

She thumbed her way to the Favorites menu. Hmm. The top listing was for "Mary Webb (Live Set)". She quickly started the track.

"Good morning, Miss Webb." The smooth male voice wasn't one she knew. "We've got you set up with your basic new identity package. This track is designed to give you a bit of back-story on Mary Webb to help make things like airport screenings a snap. Sit back, relax, and please remember to delete this track when you are done with it. Don't worry, your iPod is not going to self-destruct."

Xochitl flipped the display over to show the remaining track time and saw that there was more than a half-hour to go. She popped the earbuds out and thumbed the track to a halt. She didn't think she was in the right state of mind to listen to this yet. She was still too distracted and frazzled by it all to be able to remember any of it. That, and she was dead tired.

She slid further down in her seat and wedged her head between the concrete pole and top of her seat. She concentrated on her breathing for a minute and was out cold within another two.

Day 8

Xochitl awoke with a start. Someone had dropped a large and heavy-sounding bag into the seat on the opposite side of the concrete pylon. A loud and overacted sigh came next.

"I just ..." The female voice trailed off. It sounded like she had been crying. This was confirmed by a small snuffle.

Another exasperated sigh followed. Xochitl squinted and a vision of a young man came to her.

"Mare. Look. You know that I want you to be able to come. You know that I want us to be able to afford it. But we can't right now. That's what this job is all about. Three months. I'll be back in three months and we'll have enough leftover cash to go anywhere in the world."

"I know. It's just –"

"Look, even if we could afford a ticket, well, you heard the lady at the ticket counter – the flight is booked solid. They always are these days."

"I know." The woman's voice wasn't completely resigned. There was still a small glimmer of hope that half of the passengers on the flight would suddenly come down with dysentery and keel over, throwing their tickets at her.

The idea smacked Xochitl in the face, causing her to bolt upright in her seat. The noise caused the couple to stop talking for a minute. Xochitl thought fast and made yawning sounds. Mare. Probably short for Mary or Meredith or something. The dutiful husband braving the unknown to provide for his wife – probably newlyweds. This could work.

Xochitl rubbed her eyes to redden them, put on her best weepy-face, and peeked her head around the corner, making sure to make as much noise as she could.

"Oh! Excuse me!"

At first sight she was able to confirm what she had deduced. The couple was a little younger than her. The man twisted his wedding ring absently. The woman's engagement ring was still shiny and new,

as well as modest.

"Um ... yes?" The man answered a question that only he had heard. He leaned forward to put his torso between Xochitl and his wife.

"Well hello. My name is Mary. Mary Webb." She saw the wife soften a bit, confirming her other deduction. "Did I hear that your name is Mary, too?"

The husband looked confused, but the wife gave a quick nod.

"And did I hear that you really wanted to be able to get on this flight?"

The wife nodded again, stabbing a handkerchief at her nose.

"It just so happens that I was thinking about canceling my trip. I was trying to get away for a while and start over ... but now ... I don't know."

She paused and tried to deepen the sadness that she was projecting, to match what was sublimating off of the other Mary.

"It's only a one-way ticket, but ..."

She dug into the rucksack of a purse and fished out the ticket.

"But it seems to me like you want to go and I really don't and ... well, you can have it."

She thrust the ticket past the husband, directly at the wife, and did her best to blink as if holding back tears.

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It took Xochitl a solid thirty minutes to extract herself from the couple. Mary Patterson, suddenly nee Mary Webb, kept hugging and thanking her. David Patterson continued to be confused and distrustful, and maybe not a little put out by his new wife's reinsertion into his near future, but was smart enough to keep smiling and shut up.

Xochitl refused to let Mary give her the small amount of cash left in her purse, which just set Mary off crying again. Xochitl made excuses about needing to get away to reassemble the broken pieces of her life and was off. As she walked away she heard the boarding announcement for the ticket she no longer had.

Her mind raced, trying to figure out what to do next. The sun had long since risen and was currently assaulting her through the floor-to-ceiling windows that she walked past. She was still sleep-deprived enough to wince at each flash of light. It occurred to her that she probably looked like she had been beaten about the head and

neck.

Actually ...

She stopped walking.

... that could work.

She darted for the nearest restroom. She saw that it was empty and made her way to the rearmost stall.

As she sat down on the toilet she shrugged off the purse and dropped it into her lap to dig through it. She pulled out the iPod and thumbed it to life while popping in the earbuds. She flicked through the menus and started the Mary Webb track. She reconfirmed that the track would last another half-hour and settled in to absorb as much of Mary Webb as she could.

One brother, Randy, older, in the Army, currently somewhere in the Middle East. Parents dead, both of cancer. No husband. No kids. No degree. She had worked as an executive assistant and HR administrator at her last job before it had gone under. She had almost no savings to speak of, but several cards with high credit limits thanks to her old salary. She had grown up in some podunk town in South Carolina and had only gotten out a few years ago. She had no appreciable skills and no direction in her life.

Mary Webb is a train wreck waiting to happen.

Ten minutes before the end of the audio track Xochitl heard the final boarding call for her flight. She was right on schedule. The track ended and she put the iPod back into her purse. She sat perfectly still, counting to five hundred.

After she was sure that she was alone in the restroom she tossed her purse behind the toilet and unlocked the stall door. She lowered herself to the cool tile floor, making sure to lay an arm toward the door so that it could be seen if someone came close enough. She made herself comfortable, inasmuch as she could, and waited.

Less than a minute later she heard heels on the tile floor, followed by plastic wheels thudding at each line of grout. She moaned softly and waited. She saw the ankles of the person hesitate for a second then continue on to a stall several away from her own.

She moaned louder and added a bit of a wheezing cough to the end of it. The ankles paused again, the straps around the heels flexing as the other woman shifted her weight while trying to decide what to do. Xochitl poured it on and moaned again, whimpering this time. The heels stepped back out of the stall.

"Hello?" The voice was middle-aged and confident despite the circumstances.

Xochitl moaned louder in response and closed her eyes. She heard the other woman walk closer.

"Excuse me? Are you okay?"

Xochitl wheezed then rustled around and rolled over, flopping her hand out past the stall door.

"Oh my goodness!" The heels click-raced toward her and the woman's attempt at knocking on the stall door threw it wide. "Oh, gosh!"

Xochitl jerked as if involuntarily, then curled into a fetal position, covering her head.

"Oh my gosh! Are you okay? Hello? Miss?"

Xochitl curled even tighter. She heard a rustle of fabric across nylons as the other woman squatted down beside her. She felt a hand on her shoulder and unfurled her body, flailing. She snapped her eyes open, but made an effort to keep them unfocused and searching.

"Who ... what ..."

The other woman recoiled but then quickly leaned back in. "Are you okay, Miss ... ?"

"I, uh, where am I? How did I get here? I'm in a toilet stall! How did I get here?"

The other woman reached to help Xochitl to a sitting position. "My name is Susie. I'm not sure how you got here, I just found you like this. You were moaning when I came in."

Xochitl leaned against the wall of the stall and put her palms to her temples. "Moaning?" She turned her head to look at Susie then unfocused her eyes again and made a retching sound, snapping her eyes closed. "Oh, my head! I think I'm going to be sick!"

"No better place for it, I think." Susie snorted at her own joke, then sobered quickly. "Sorry. That came out wrong."

Xochitl played along, lightening up and smiling thinly.

"No, you have a good point. But I think as long as I keep my eyes closed I'll be alright. The world seems to be in a ballroom-dancing kind of mood today."

Susie did her laugh-snort again. "That's just the tile pattern on the floor. It's enough to make anyone sick."

Xochitl nodded and winced.

"You just tell me when you're ready to stand up and I'll help. Don't rush yourself. In fact, I'll go get you a cup of water. Stay here and stay put."

Susie was up and sprinting out of the restroom before Xochitl could protest. She was yelling to someone as she went, but the strange acoustics of the entryway made it impossible for Xochitl to understand. A few moments later Susie came rushing back in – far too soon to have gotten some water.

Hmm. Two people might be harder.

"Kendra's getting the water. She'll be right in."

"Thanks."

They sat there in the stall for a few moments in silence. Xochitl spoke first.

"Oh, wow. I'm sorry. You don't even know my name. Mary. Mary Webb. How rude of me."

"Nice to meet you, Mary, although it could have been under better circumstances."

Xochitl made a show of slowly opening her eyes and looking at Susie. A stewardess. Er, flight attendant. Whatever. Perfect. Her look couldn't have been better. She blinked a few times for effect.

Susie snorted again before she said, "Good girl, now just don't look at the tile."

"I don't know, Susie, that neckerchief isn't much better."

Susie's hand involuntarily jerked toward her neck.

"Oh! I know! Isn't it horrid? The things we're made to wear these days!"

Susie was middle-aged, maybe in her late forties. Her short blonde hair was done up in a severe helmet-like cut that probably required a can of hair spray each morning, but would likely survive even the longest of international flights undisturbed. Her makeup was minimalist and impeccable. The blue and white suit was accented by a maroon neckerchief and pocket linings, both stitched with an abstract cubist pattern that seemed to vibrate against itself.

"No, I'm sorry. It's not that bad."

"It really is, dear. It really is. I'm convinced that these new uniforms are going to lead to a run on airsick bags."

Xochitl laughed and winced, putting one palm back on her temple. As if on cue, she heard a racing set of footsteps on the tile. Susie turned to look and smiled. She reached to the new woman and turned back to Xochitl with a bottle of water in her hand. She unscrewed it quickly and handed it over to Xochitl.

"You only get this if you promise to drink it slowly. It's still very cold and it'll just make you sick again if you drink it too quickly."

"Yes, ma'am!" The hand a Xochitl's temple mocked a salute and both women smiled. Xochitl made a point of taking small sips. The water was indeed ice-cold and she could almost watch the condensation forming on the outside of the bottle.

A young woman's head popped into the doorway. She looked at Xochitl and gasped, a disembodied hand coming up to her mouth.

Susie introduced them. "Mary, this is Kendra. Ken, this is Miss Mary Webb."

Kendra flashed an inquisitive glance at Susie before her head

disappeared from the opening. Susie gave her a strange look that Xochitl couldn't interpret.

"Nice to meet you, Kendra." Xochitl projected through the door of the stall. "Thank you so much for the water. Sorry I'm in such a state!"

Kendra's head reappeared. "No, I –"

Susie laughed a little to thinly and interrupted her friend. "Ken's just a little skittish." She barely paused before changing topics.

"Do you think you can get up, Miss Webb?"

"Yeah, I probably should. It's extraordinarily unladylike to be a sack of potatoes on a restroom floor."

"Not at all. Let me help you up." Susie was on her feet and extended a hand before Xochitl could blink.

"Thanks, again." Xochitl got to her feet slowly and belaboredly then leaned against the stall and sipped more water.

Kendra had moved to Susie's side. "Did she – did you fall, Mary?"

Xochitl furrowed her brow as the two women waited for an answer.

"I ... I don't remember. I don't think so. I –" She raised her hand to her temple again. "The last thing I remember was ... sitting in the terminal waiting for my flight. My flight! Oh no!"

"Slow down, Miss Webb. You're in no condition to fly. We'll make sure you catch your flight or get transferred to a later one if need be. When you are ready, not before. Which flight are you on?"

"Bermuda. I forget the number. It was supposed to leave just after seven."

Kendra goggled again, but hid it more quickly this time. It made Xochitl's gut twist nervously, but she continued.

"Did I miss it?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Webb. It left the gate just before I came in here. But don't you worry about that now. What else do you remember?"

"I was ... I was talking to a very nice couple. Just married, but having to be apart for a while. It was sad, really. I guess between talking to them, and then never having been on a plane before ... I got a little uptight. The nice man, I think David was his name, gave me something he said would help calm me down."

Kendra and Susie shared a look.

"I mean ... I know I shouldn't be taking medication from random people in airports ... but they were so nice. I'm sure I probably just had a bad reaction to it or something."

Susie looked skeptical. "I hope so, Miss Webb. It could have been much worse."

Kendra insistently tapped Susie on the shoulder.

"One second, Miss Webb. Ken hasn't learned to talk in front of strangers yet." She threw Kendra a withering squint that had precisely that effect. Xochitl focused on the water bottle and tried to look preoccupied.

The two women disappeared into another stall a few doors down. Xochitl couldn't make out exactly what they were talking about, but it sounded like Susie was trying to pump Kendra for some kind of information. Eventually they reappeared in the doorway.

"Ken tells me there may be more to this than we thought, Miss Webb."

Xochitl gulped, which she didn't think she had ever actually done before.

"Really?"

"You may have been luckier than you know. Can you walk with us? We're going to try and get you sorted out."

Susie offered her hand and Xochitl stole a glance before taking it. No wedding ring, tan line, or even an age-old indentation. Appealing to Susie's maternal instincts was probably a lost cause. Xochitl decided to try a different approach.

"You don't really think that couple I was talking to, that man, was trying to take advantage of me, do you?"

Susie flashed an angry glare that was almost as quickly replaced by her flight attendant's How-May-I-Help-You facade. Xochitl knew this had meant that she had chosen correctly – her feminine independence was the key here.

Was this how James did it? Watch for the chinks in the armor, then leverage them in his favor?

Is that the kind of person I'm becoming?

Susie's eyes narrowed as she misread the disgust on Xochitl's face.

"Don't you worry, dear. We'll find them and get you squared away and back on track."

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As the three women walked through the concourse, Xochitl stumbled and linked arms with Susie for support. They approached an unmarked door and Xochitl brought them all to a stop.

"Susie? Is there any way we can do this without involving airport security? They'll just see some woman traveling by herself and try and call my husband ... which will just be my ex .. and I ..."

Susie looked conflicted. Kendra bobbed nervously behind her.

"I just wanted to get away. That's all I've been trying to do. But with security comes questions and more time here and ... I just ... can't. Can we just get me on the next flight out and pretend I just overslept or something?"

Xochitl lowered her eyes and sniffled.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, dear, as I didn't want to worry you any more." She paused to allow Xochitl to steel herself. "Ken saw the couple that took your ticket – said they were smiling and laughing while they boarded. They are criminals, dear, and they didn't show an ounce of remorse or compassion about what they did to you. When I find out who let them board ..." The veneer reasserted itself before she could finish the threat.

"But ... there must be a way ... surely ... I just can't go through that today. It took so much out of me to work up the nerve to get this far. I'm afraid that if I lose my momentum now I may never get it back."

"I don't know, dear. Those two –"

"Can we please just say that I fell asleep in the terminal and woke up to find my ticket missing?"

"Sounds rather thin, dear."

Xochitl looked at Susie, pleading with eyes that were not entirely acting.

"But ... I suppose we can wing it. We'll see who is at the ticket counters."

They linked arms again and headed back toward the gates.

"Thank you so much. I really don't think I could have gone through anything else like that today."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

The three women stopped at the first set of gates and peered down the concourse to go through the people at each ticket counter. Susie started.

"Gary, no. June, no."

Kendra continued when she saw Susie squinting to identify the people at the farther counters.

"Beth."

“Maybe.”

“Jim.”

“Which one? Never mind. Neither. No.”

“Faith.”

“Yes! Perfect! Lead on, Ken.”

They walked along and when Xochitl snickered the other two women paused to look at her.

“The carpet.” She unlinked an arm to point at the rectangular pattern beneath their feet. She got only blank stares. “It’s yellow.”

Susie rolled her eyes. Kendra still didn’t get it, but Susie brushed her off. She relinked her arm with Xochitl’s and they continued.

“Stay off the medication, dear.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Even though Xochitl was still only a Social Engineer’s Apprentice, she had Faith pegged from the moment she stood up from behind the counter. Xochitl quickly saw why Susie had chosen her.

Faith was in her early twenties and was as down-home southern naïve as you could find. She obviously wasn’t stupid, but the sob story that Susie laid out had Faith’s defenses down in the first few seconds. Three minutes of “oh my gosh” and “you poor dear” gasps later, Susie had her working the computer to re-book their new best friend. Xochitl hadn’t had to say a word.

Another half-minute of frowning and frantic typing passed before Faith looked up at Xochitl.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Webb,” – Faith obviously made a conscious effort to work past a hardwired southern drawl, but each word had still come out with two syllables – “but the next flight to Bermuda isn’t until late this evening. I tried to reroute you through a few other legs, but you wouldn’t get there any faster, and you’d just be in the air longer.”

Xochitl frowned and slumped her shoulders.

“That’s too bad. The nice lady I had talked to this morning had spoken so highly of it.”

She got a few inquisitive looks and continued.

“I hadn’t originally planned to go to Bermuda, you see. I didn’t really have any place specific in mind. In fact, had just called this morning because I was thinking that I wanted some place exotic. When I spoke to the nice woman, I asked her where she would go if she could get away. She said Bermuda.”

"Where –" Kendra bobbed from behind Susie to glance at Xochitl. "Where had you been going before that?"

Xochitl coughed and put up a finger while she unscrewed the water bottle in her hand. She drank a bit, patting her chest. Faith broke in to fill the silence.

"Los Angeles."

Xochitl coughed again, this time for real.

Los Angeles? Interesting.

"The, uh, the woman I spoke to this morning said that L.A. might be a bit ... busy and crowded ... for my tastes."

Susie cocked her head, rolled her eyes, and nodded.

"Wise choice, dear. Leave L.A. to the starlets."

"What do you think, Susie? I just want to relax for a while."

"Hmm. What are our options, Faith?"

Faith turned to look at a printout on the desk beside her.

"Straight shots from here ... Puerto Rico ... Mexico City ... London ... Barcelona –"

Susie's eyes flashed and she grabbed Xochitl by the shoulders before she realized what she was doing. "Barcelona! I love Barcelona! It's a great place to just kick back and be a girl on the town."

Xochitl smiled a big, warm smile. "Sounds wonderful. Sign me up! Do you have a favorite hotel? Some small place out of the way?"

Susie looked almost giddy. "Do I ever. In fact ... how long will you be there? It may just be tempting enough to meet you out there and show you around."

"Well, my original ticket was open-ended – assuming I didn't screw that up when I bought it ... Faith?"

"That's right. Up to sixty days."

"Yeah. Like I said, I haven't exactly planned this out."

Susie was so excited that she was bouncing up and down on the tips of her toes.

"Book it, Faith!" She turned to Xochitl and the bounce decelerated to a mere sway. "When does she leave?"

"Let me ... oh wow! They're boarding now!"

"But I don't have time to call ahead and ..."

"Never you mind, I'll take care of it." The ticket printer started to click and Susie started barking off orders. "Ken, grab Mary's bag. We're heading to ..." She half-vaulted over the counter to get a look at the ticket that was still coming out of the printer. "Gate 29. Faith, Ken, lunch is on me today, just as soon as I see Mary off." She snatched the ticket and turned toward Xochitl. "Mary, don't you worry about a thing. I'll make all of the calls and you'll have someone waiting for you at the other end."

A hand shot out to Xochitl's shoulder, spun her around, then pushed insistently on her spine before Susie shot past her and started to pull her by her wrist.

"You just enjoy your flight, get a few massages, lay out by the lake --", she turned and sized her up, "-- but do remember your sunscreen, dear. I'll be there in eight, no, nine days. Vacation!"

As they ran along, Xochitl realized that there was one more thing she had to do. Susie was focused on steering them through traffic, so she didn't notice when Xochitl started fishing through her purse. Her hand came back out with the iPod. The second brand-spanking-new iPod. Her heart shrank a little.

Just as she was about to toss the iPod into a trash bin, her breath caught as she saw a young girl a few dozen yards ahead. The girl was sitting cross-legged on the ground by herself, fishing through her backpack. The pile of detritus was growing beside her, and off to the side was an iPod. White, shiny, and the exact same model as Xochitl's.

Could she do this? This would require James Bond, no, Sydney Bristow skill levels.

Screw it. Can't hurt to try.

Xochitl leveraged herself around to Susie's left side and made a show out of digging in her own purse, gently slowing their pace. She palmed the iPod as best she could and took a deep breath. The distance closed faster than she would have liked.

Ten yards. She tried to will her knees and elbows to loosen up, knowing that they would bear the brunt of what she was about to do.

Five yards. She exhaled.

Three yards. She raised her purse to almost eye level and jammed her left hand into it, digging deep.

One yard.

She tripped and aimed her fall so that her purse landed just between the girl and her iPod, ejecting some of her own purse's contents as she did so. She rolled to her left to temporarily block the girl's view and quickly made the switch, burying the girl's iPod in the depths of her purse.

Well, quickly enough anyway. She pulled herself to her knees and apologized profusely while replacing the contents of her purse.

Susie misinterpreted what had happened and snapped at the young girl. "You shouldn't be spreading your mess all over the terminal, young lady!"

Xochitl looked at the girl for the first time. The girl couldn't have cared less about some old woman yelling at her, and went back to digging through her backpack.

"I'm so sorry," Xochitl said as she stood up.

The girl didn't acknowledge, and the two women were back up to full speed within seconds.

Xochitl felt a small twinge of guilt.

That poor girl is going to have a fit when she sees the horrific music selection on her new iPod.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Three weeks.”

The immigration officer didn't even look at her. His mustachioed lip twitched as he talked to himself while he typed.

“Business or personal?”

“Vacation. Personal.”

More keystrokes and Spanish muttering. He flipped her passport open and pressed it into some kind of scanning device.

“Are you bringing any foods, medications, or other forbidden items into Spain?” He absently pointed to a display case that she had passed while in line. It held items such as lighter fluid, fertilizer, and several other random and sometimes seemingly-innocuous things.

“No, sir.”

He pulled her passport out of the scanner and looked at the picture, then at her. He went back to his typing without so much as a second glance.

Xochitl was cool. She'd finally gotten a decent amount of sleep on the flight over, and it had done her more good than she could have imagined. As the plane had descended into the airport she had closed her eyes and allowed the rhythms around her to calm her. There was nothing she could do but be Mary Webb. Panicking and being all tense wouldn't help.

The immigration officer finally stopped typing. He looked at her briefly again, then stamped her passport and immigration form.

“Do not lose.” He laid the form on the counter in front of her and thumped his finger on it to emphasize the severity of what he was saying. “Very important.” He lifted the thumping hand and rubbed his fingers and thumb together. “Very expensive to fix.” He dropped her passport onto the form.

“Okay. I'll be careful. Thanks.”

He nodded and looked past her at the line that seemed to go on forever.

“Enjoy your stay.” He continued to look past her as he waved over the next person in line.

Xochitl took her passport and immigration form and walked toward the exit.

Customs was even easier. Since she didn't have any baggage or anything to declare, she breezed through.

As she exited the secured area, the automatic doors opened into a mob of Spanish faces, all disappointed that she wasn't the one they were looking for. She clutched her purse tight against her and pushed through the mass.

She was ejected out of the other side of the crowd and immediately saw a second line of people, this time all holding signs with names on them. She briefly scanned the names and had to repeat the scan when she realized that she wasn't looking for one that read "Green".

The gentleman holding the "Webb" sign was, by all rights, hot. H-A-W-double-T, hot. He looked like a darker-skinned clone of Ricky Martin and he stood patiently still like a Rock of Gibraltar. She found herself walking toward him without thinking about it. Susie was easily her new best friend.

Wait. There's something else you need to do first. Chill the libido for a sec.

Before he could turn his head to look at her, she spun ninety degrees and jammed herself into the second wall of people. Her eyes scanned the far wall for a restroom sign. The closest one was a thirty-second bob-and-weave away. She locked herself in the handicap stall and sat down.

She dug into her purse for the last time. The cash and credit cards came out of the checkbook and into her jeans. A few hair bands and a small comb made it into the same pocket. The iPod and earbuds slid into her other pocket. She'd have to clear off the gigs of Natalie Merchant, but the young girl had been nice enough to provide her with what she assumed was every CD and bootleg that Incubus had ever released.

The trash receptacle was a stainless-steel job, recessed into the wall and labeled "Basura/Trash" in a dark maroon enamel. The opening was a little smaller than her purse, so it took a bit of wedging before she got it all the way in. She heard it slide down at least a yard, sorry, a meter before coming to a paper towel-padded stop.

That was it. There was nothing left to do but wash her hands and move on.

Back in the terminal, she fought her way to the front of both crowds before pushing laterally toward His Hawtness. As she was again ejected from the first mob, the man was instead looking right in her direction this time. She made a sweep as if looking for her name,

then caught his eye. She tried to be smooth, but she figured she probably looked like a complete dork. She pointed toward his sign, then to herself, and nodded.

He stepped forward and she realized it was the first time she'd actually seen him move. His posture, which had until then been server-rack straight, loosened as he tried to lose a bit of height and become less imposing.

"Miss Webb?"

She nodded before remembering that she was also capable of speech.

"Yes. I'm Mary Webb. Mary."

He smiled wide and loosened even more. The thin Man In Black suit lost the last of its authority and he instead took on the look of a man out for a nice dinner.

"I am Eduardo." He paused for a moment. "Miss Susie said that I was to give you a big welcome hug, but I would never impose without your permission."

Okay, now that's just too thick. Cover me with peanut butter and call me dessert.

She couldn't think of anything witty to say that wouldn't make her blush, so she just reached out and hugged him. It was like hugging a woven-steel teddy bear. The man's hawtness continued unabated.

"Thank you, Eduardo."

"Oh yes. Miss Susie also says that you are to call me Eddie."

"Okay, Eddie. Easy enough." Eduardo was hotter than Eddie, but whatever. It certainly said something about how Susie thought of him, though.

"Our car is this way." They began to walk down the terminal. "Miss Susie said you have no bags, yes?"

"Right."

"She said to tell you to shop just enough for until she gets here, then the four of us will go on a ... spree? Yes, we will go on a spree together."

"Four?"

"Yes. With my little brother, Theodore."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

If Eddie was hot, then Teddy was cool. When first Xochitl saw him, he was leaning against their car reading a newspaper. In

contrast with Eddie's black suit, Teddy wore a pressed light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of charcoal grey pleated slacks with a slight bulge on the right thigh for his cell phone pocket. His hair was combed out and back, highlighted with a subtle blonde against the jet black. He looked like any up-and-coming Sales Manager that Xochitl had ever seen – the kind that could look deep into your eyes, smile, and sell you hot sauce while you were dying of thirst.

“Good evening, Miss Webb.”

“Theodore?”

“Indeed. But, Susie has chosen to call me Teddy, so I suggest you do the same. She gets cranky, otherwise.”

Xochitl was surprised at Teddy's smooth accent-free English. Eddie was understandable, certainly, but his English was still a little stilted and heavily accented. Teddy spoke casually, as if he didn't have to translate in his head as he spoke. Teddy saw her pause and smirked.

“Carnegie-Mellon. I got my Bachelor's there. Eduardo hasn't yet been tempted to leave our beautiful home.”

Eddie scoffed and a rapid-fire exchange of Spanish shot between the brothers. Both of them smiled widely, making Xochitl grin as well even though she didn't understand a word of it. Eddie eventually stepped back and put up his palms in resignation.

“Sorry, Miss Webb. My brother and I have not seen each other in a long time. We get started and forget that not everyone wants to hear us jab at each other.”

Xochitl continued to smile at the two of them.

“No no. Please. My Spanish is very poor, so you two are welcome to use it as much as you like. I promise I won't be offended. I hope to pick up some here and there.”

“I think my brother should try to speak English more. I try to tell him that I will be very happy to teach him, but all he ever wants to learn are the naughty words. Right, Eduardo?”

Eduardo blushed and said nothing, instead opting to open the front passenger door for Xochitl.

“Oh no. I'll take the back seat. You look like you could use the leg room, Eddie. And really, I'll just be sliding around in the back trying to look out all of the windows at once.”

Teddy looked a little disappointed while Eddie looked unsure.

“No, really, it's okay. You two sit in the front and be my tour guides.”

“It won't be much of a tour at this time of night, I'm afraid. But when we go shopping tomorrow, we will take our time along the

scenic route.”

“Tomorrow, I will drive. Theodore is too ... adventurous ... for my stomach.”

“Fair enough, brother. You handle the slow stuff, I'll take the rest.” He shot a glance at Xochitl as she ducked into the back seat of the black Acura. As Teddy opened the driver's door and lowered himself into the driver's seat, the car automatically started turning on the dashboard lights. He saw her notice and smiled again.

“Magic.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him and he backed down.

“Bluetooth or RFID?”

His eyes widened for a second. “Very good, Miss Webb. A little of both. Technophile or just well-read?”

Eddie slipped into his seat and closed the door as they spoke.

“Both, I hope. I'd heard about systems like this, but never been inside of one. Is it completely keyless?”

Instead of answering, Teddy quickly keyed in a code on the touchscreen where the air conditioner controls would normally be and the car purred gently to life.

“Niiiiice.”

Teddy only smiled in acknowledgment.

“My brother and his toys.” Eddie rolled his eyes and buckled his seatbelt, double-checking it for security.

She patted Eddie on the shoulder. “Now if only I'd brought my laptop I could show you how to make your brother drive safer or else.” She smirked at Teddy.

Teddy again showed surprise.

“Extremely well-read, I see. David Beckham is a wonderful soccer player, but technologically inept. Steal my SUV once, shame on you. Steal my SUV twice ... and it's time for me to get a clue.”

Teddy backed out of the parking space and Xochitl sat back silently in her seat for a few minutes to allow him to navigate the twisty maze of parking lot passages, all alike. As Teddy merged onto the highway he began again.

“So, Miss Webb, we've established your knowledge of the black arts of information warfare. What sort of career leads you to such secrets?”

Xochitl had to keep herself from answering immediately. She almost purred at the intricate dialogue.

He's smoother than chocolate silk. Careful, Xoch.

“Mary, please. Call me Mary.”

It'll help me stay in character, and I need all the help I can get.

“I was a web programmer in a previous life. We have to stay on

top of technology. You can fall behind all too fast in my business. My ex-business.”

“Interesting. I had to take a few web and programming courses at CMU. It was all a little too much bit-switching for my tastes.”

“There are more propellerheads in my old line of work than I care to admit. The bit-twiddling definitely isn't for everyone.”

Teddy laughed while Eddie just smirked. Xochitl figured she had pushed the limits of Eddie's English skills, and made a resolution to try to back off so he didn't feel lost and left out.

“And what do you two do?”

“We both are currently helping our father run the family business. The same as almost everyone here in Spain. It's tradition.”

She heard something in his voice and saw that Eddie had, too.

“But ...”

Teddy paused almost imperceptibly to choose his words.

“But ... it can be a little mundane for my tastes.” Eddie grunted. “Don't get me wrong, brother, I love our father and would gladly help him as long as he needs me. I just want to drag him into the twenty-first century, kicking and screaming, I'm sure.”

Xochitl saw that this was an old argument between the brothers and decided to steer away from it.

“What did you do at CMU?”

“Actually, I started off as a propellerhead, too. But I couldn't get into it. I switched to an International Business degree after the first year, with a minor in Communication Technologies.”

It was Xochitl's turn to smirk.

“Hence the toys. I see.”

Eddie actually laughed out loud at this. “She has you figured out, brother. Only ten minutes!”

Teddy threw Eddie an exasperated look but then pretended to not have heard the remark.

“And what of you, Mary Webb? Where did you go to school?”

“I, uh –” *What had the intro track said? Some college? Where? Think!* “Hey, that was cool. What building was that?”

Teddy and Eddie looked in opposite directions.

“Which one?” Teddy responded first.

Wait. Why do I need to stay in character? Does it really matter now?

“Never mind, it disappeared behind some apartment brownstone looking things.” Teddy resumed weaving in and out of traffic while Eddie continued to look for an errant skyscraper. After a minute she spoke again. “So, what exactly does an International Business degree teach you?”

Eddie sighed and quietly slumped back into his seat. Xochitl

couldn't tell if it was because he was used to his brother getting all of the attention, or if he had heard too many times about Teddy and his adventures abroad. She wasn't ready to alienate either of them – she needed to get back around to conversation that would interest Eddie.

“Nothing useful, actually. It comes down to a lot of secret board room meetings, negotiation, and learning to keep your options open. It includes required courses such as *Golden Parachute Preparation* and *How to Flee a Country*.”

She caught his eye in the rearview mirror and flashed him an eyebrow. He laughed.

“In all honesty, Miss Webb, it's just very dull. Buying, selling, bartering –”

Eddie interrupted. “Yes, Miss Webb, trust him when he says that. That is very true.” He feigned falling asleep in his seat and snoring. Teddy just squinted and straightened his posture.

Xochitl half-whispered to Eddie: “I believe you. I never got my degree – I dropped out. The required business courses with the introductions to accounting and statistics were too much for me.” She imitated Eddie's snoring. They shared smirks and turned to Teddy with wide grins.

Teddy ignored them, staring intently at traffic that wasn't there.

Xochitl had actually aced her business classes. She hated them, but she'd always felt they were too obvious and miscoded as being harder than they actually were. Statistics came naturally to her, while her strong math background had allowed her to progress well beyond introductory levels to the calculus- and number theory-based statistics classes that were normally reserved for Math majors and true accounting dweebs. Developing Alfred had stretched her statistics muscles even further, as networking and trust theory were really only large statistical models.

Hmm. I've been thinking that anyone could have written Alfred and that I just happened to be first. Maybe that's why? Maybe it needed a strong statistician more and a mediocre coder less? This, Xoch. This is why you have - had - no life.

“Enough talk about school. Where are we headed?”

Eddie and Teddy answered simultaneously with “Home” and “Our father's house”, respectively. Teddy continued.

“We are headed to our father's estate. Eduardo still lives at home, continuing the family business. I, on the other hand, think of it as temporarily helping out and stopped calling it home many years ago.”

Xochitl chose to not pick that obviously sore open wound.

“You keep saying that. What is this family business? Are you

some kind of Spanish *la cosa nostra* or something?"

Teddy laughed out loud while Eddie just stared at him. When Teddy could speak clearly again, he explained the joke in quick Spanish to Eddie, who laughed as well and started Teddy up again.

"Miss Webb ..." Eddie wheezed, trying to catch his breath. He pointed to a dark outline in the distance. "That is my family's business."

Xochitl squinted, but all she could see was a long, dark building on the edge of the horizon against a moonless and cloudy sky.

"I can't really see it. What is it? Wait ... is it a hotel or something?" The building got closer and larger. She could make out at least three floors and several dozen windows per floor. It was hard to make out, as there were countless unmanicured trees surrounding the building and obscuring her view. Fountains overgrown by rampant hedges dotted the landscape, none with running water or lighting. In fact, that was what was so eerie about the place: there were not lights whatsoever. It looked like it should have been magnificent, but it was instead ... dead.

"That is our father's dream. Welcome to what will one day become the Salamanca Resort and Spa."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami snapped awake to the sound of his cell phone vibrating against the nightstand. He only caught the last half of the vibration pattern, but he could still tell who it was. He looked out the window. The sun still hadn't gone down, so he couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour. He frowned and yanked the phone off of the charger. He tried for a dismayed bark, but settled for an angry croak.

"What?"

"We have a problem, sir. She never got off of the plane. We're still trying to confirm that we didn't somehow just miss her, but we don't think she was ever on it."

"You assured me that she was."

"Our source with the manifest said that she was. He even confirmed that a woman was in her seat."

"But not her?"

"We can't be sure. Yet. We are following up on it right now."

"Find her. We have the means."

"Yes, sir."

Kami paused for a second, resisting the urge to terminate the

connection.

"What is the status of the erasure?"

"It will be ready to go in ... two hours, sir."

"At least something is under control. What about Hawser?"

"The rootkit is still active and transmitting."

"Max out the feed. I need that drive image as quickly as possible."

"Yes sir. Best estimates put us at four to six days. We've got someone sifting through the data selection and pruning out the parts that are obviously dead ends, but the upload cap on his DSL is killing us."

"Can we do anything about that?"

"We're working on it, but it's not looking good. It would be easier if we could go physical, sir."

"We can't chance it. Even the rootkit is risky. Actually ..." He thought for a moment, now fully awake. "Figure out the absolute maximum time it will take you to get the data, then set the rootkit to clean itself up 4 hours later. It shouldn't point back to us, even if someone did find it, but there are already too many unknowns on this job. We need to start tying down the loose ends."

He heard typing sounds as the person on the other end of the line took notes. The acknowledgment came moments later. "Yes, sir."

A few more moments passed in silence before Kami spoke again.

"Find that courier. Paul. I have a use for him."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

She had been in the car with Brian when it happened. She was in the passenger seat, telling him to slow down and look around, but he never heard her. It happened again and again. They would hit the concrete and everything would go black for a second. Then the world would fade back in as they were merging onto the highway. Everything would start over and she'd endure the same two minutes of screaming and pounding her fists on him and trying to unbuckle a seatbelt that would never release.

The first time they had hit the wall, it had been a simple tire blowout.

The second time, Brian swerved to avoid a small, blurry animal.

The third time, some faceless man in sunglasses and a huge black SUV cut them off, forcing them into the wall.

The fourth time, the sunglasses-man was Kami. James.

The fifth time, she never even saw what happened – one second everything looked like they would finally make it past the wall, but suddenly they were in the wall and she was blacking out again.

What might have been the sixth time, she never looked up from crying into her hands to see what caused it.

It all started to break down after that. The resets got more random and jumbled. Sometimes they never hit the wall before they were back at the on-ramp. Sometimes she was the one that had been driving. Sometimes the airbag deployed too soon, causing the accident.

On the last one, as they hit the wall everything slowed down to a crawl like something out of a John Woo film. Still, she was unable to get out of her seatbelt. She had to watch the hood of the car crumple and twist like it was made out of paper. Brian's head and shoulders moved millimeter by millimeter toward the steering wheel and windshield. Just before he hit, the scene froze completely and just stayed there. For what seemed like an eternity she wailed and pounded on anything that she could reach, impotent to make even the slightest change in the scene playing out around her.

Xochitl woke up screaming.

She panted, out of breath. The room was a perfect temperature, but the layer of sweat that now covered her head and shoulders gave her chills when the cool air hit.

When no one immediately came bursting through the door, she relaxed and a small sob caught in her throat. Her eyes felt puffy and her temples were sticky and gritty. She wiped at them absently.

Brian. Oh, Bri. What did he do to you?

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Paul found himself in front of the door into *Chai, Whatever!* and unable to muster the willpower to extend his arm and open the door. The next 15 minutes flashed before him, making his hands jerk and twitch. He'd order the green tea, sit down, and fall asleep at the table. Drugged. Oh yes, he had figured it out. There was no other way it could have happened. And no other way it could happen tonight. He gripped his slacks to stop the shaking in his hands.

He took a deep breath and put his arm out in front of him. The door had a lead pipe for a handle. He willed his hand to close around it, and breathed again.

Come on, Pauly. You have to do this. It worked out okay last time. Just pull back on the door and step through it. The rest will just happen. It'll be alright.

His breathing quickened to match his heart rate, which was through the roof. His left hand rubbed his forehead, his right still holding the pipe. His teeth chattered. He jerked the door open with a wide sweep, slamming it into the side of the building. The sound made him jump backwards. The door began to close again and he had to force a step forward to prevent it from closing and putting him back at square one.

The same girl was behind the counter.

What was her name? Sunshine?

He inhaled sharply.

Was she in on it? Did she drug me?

It had to have been her. No one else came near his tea, and he saw her pull it from behind the counter.

Paul squinted and started to walk toward the counter. Sunshine was staring at him with a strange expression on her face. Her multitude of piercings glinted in the café's track lighting. She smiled as he approached the counter.

"Hey there. I remember you! You were in here, what, like a week ago?" She leaned across the counter and whispered to him. "You didn't come back for another nap, did you? We still haven't gotten the cots and hammocks that I ordered." She winked at him, piercings meeting in unexpected places. She dropped back to her feet and continued in a normal voice. "You ordered something funny last time, right?"

Paul had been thrown off-guard. Were murderers and people who worked for murderers supposed to be perky and friendly? Were they allowed to make jokes? Well, maybe she didn't work for murderers. But she certainly worked for people that drugged other people's teas, and that wasn't much better.

He eyed her for a second before forcing a smile and answering.

"Green tea frappuccino."

"Right! That was it! Yeah, that just sounds weird. We still don't have one of those, but the tea for tonight is a minty masala chai with cloves and cinnamon. Up for a little spice? I can't make it into a frap, though. If you really want a frap I have a regular chai mix I can use."

How had he ever fallen asleep in this place? He could once again feel the airborne caffeine permeating his skin. Sunshine was obviously hooked up to an I.V. underneath the counter or something. No one had that much energy naturally.

"I ... I don't know. Something mellow."

"Hmm. A chamomile would be mellowing. Or maybe something with rose hips?"

What had she given him last time? Was it a green tea? Or was it a chamomile? Why couldn't he remember?

"I guess chamomile sounds fine."

She nodded a snappy "Okay!" and was off in a blur of motion behind the counter before jerking to a stop.

"I almost forgot to ask! Do you want anything to eat with that? We have these killer no-fat blueberry and vegan cream cheese muffins today. They are organic and to die for."

Paul nearly jumped back, forcing himself to stay in place. Was she hinting at something? Was that a message? Was she on his side, or just trying to get him to buy drugged-up muffins?

Look, Pauly, if she's going to knock you out, she's going to knock you out. Better with a muffin than with a baseball bat to the head or something when you're not looking.

"Yeah. A muffin ... that sounds great."

"Cool!" She was off in a blur again, and again stopped a second later. "Heated? Would you like me to heat it up for you? That's how I like them. Heated. Just a few seconds in the microwave."

"Yeah, sure."

Chamomile and a warm muffin. That did sound good. Maybe someone would actually meet him this time instead of knocking him out. That would be nice.

His tea appeared in front of him while the muffin was popped into the microwave on the other side of the counter.

Did he really want to meet face-to-face with these people, though? The kind of people that knocked you out and rifled through your things? The kind of people that could do the things that he knew they were doing? Probably not. Better to be out of it.

The microwave dinged and Sunshine had the door open before the sound had bounced off the far wall of the café. She slid the plate onto the counter next to his tea and rang up his order on the cash register.

"That's \$5."

He fumbled out his wallet, having been completely unprepared to pay. He flipped through the cash in his wallet: four singles and a ten. Of course. He pulled out the ten and handed it to her.

"Here you go."

She made change with five singles and not-so-subtly flicked her eyes at the tip jar. He was oblivious and stuffed all of the singles back into his wallet. Something that might have been a complete lack of surprise flicked across her face before she was off and wiping down

counters and sinks. Paul picked up his muffin and chamomile and walked back to the table that he'd fallen asleep at last time. It wasn't until he'd set his food down that he noticed that there was already a man sitting there. He jumped backwards and started apologizing.

"It's okay, Paul. Sit. I know this booth has sentimental value for you."

The smooth voice had Paul half into the booth before he realized that the man knew his name. He started, bumping the table and splashing tea everywhere.

"You!" He realized he had yelled and repeated the accusation with a whisper. "You! You're the one that knocked me out last time?"

The man eyed Paul as he sank into the seat.

"Not me, but my people, yes. Nothing personal. You understand."

The man turned and flicked his hand at Sunshine, who had been watching them while she cleaned. She nodded, hit a switch behind the counter, and walked to the front door. She flipped the sign to "Closed" and locked the door. She was as nonchalant as if it had actually been closing time, and not hours too early. She picked up the broom next to the door and started sweeping.

Paul, however, was not as calm. He had begun to writhe in his seat. The tea on the table turned into the North Sea and fought against the confining mug.

"Calm down, Paul. We're just going to have a nice, private conversation."

Paul couldn't stop squirming, but he did force himself to squeak out an "o-okay".

"Have some tea. Chamomile is very relaxing."

Paul's eyes flicked to the mug, still sloshing. He didn't move for it and the man chuckled at him.

"No drugs this time, Paul. Just chamomile. You have my word."

Paul stared at the man and slid the tea toward himself without looking at it. The man took a sip of coffee that was darker and thicker than anything Paul had ever seen, then reached calmly for the muffin.

"Are you going to eat this? No? They are messy, but they are also so wonderful."

Paul continued to shake his head after the man had finished speaking, holding the mug of tea up to his chin. The man pretended not to notice and started carefully peeling the paper down the sides of the muffin, splaying it out on the table. Paul watched as the man vivisected the muffin.

"Who are you?"

"My name," the man popped a stray blueberry into his mouth and smiled, "is James."

"What ... what do you want from me?"

The man popped a medium-sized chunk of muffin into his mouth and swallowed it almost without chewing. "That is an interesting question. For now, I figured we'd just have a chat."

"A-a-about what?" Paul fought to control a stutter that he'd obviously had plenty of experience with in the past. The man, James, smiled at him again.

"About our common employer."

When Paul didn't say anything, mug still hovering in front of his chin, James spoke again. "It really is good tea, Paul. It'd be a shame to waste it, and you really could use something calming right now."

Paul sipped the tea without thinking about it. When it hit his tongue, it rolled around in his mouth before he could force himself to swallow. It tasted like any other chamomile he'd ever had.

"Very good, right? So, as I was saying, I have a single question about Mr. Perkins and his little group of like-minded individuals."

"W-w-what? They don't tell me much. I j-j-just run errands for them."

"Don't worry, you're not in trouble. I simply need to know when the first demo is." Paul didn't say anything, hiding behind his mug. "Surely they've told you? Or at least had you pencil in some time to be free?"

Paul looked at the man and watched him continue to pop pieces of muffin into his mouth and swallow them without chewing.

"I-I'm not sure. I think next week."

James eyed him, requiring more detail.

"I think Mr. Perkins said something about "six days from now" when I was there yesterday morning. He hasn't given me any dates, but I think something big is coming up."

James nodded and kept eating. "Yes, that sounds about right. Very good, Paul. Thank you." He looked done. Paul lowered the mug of tea to the table, missing the saucer entirely.

"That- That's it? That's all you wanted to know?"

"Yes, that was it." He polished off the last bite of muffin and wrapped up the paper into a small ball. The ball went onto the saucer of his coffee mug. Not a single crumb had made it out onto the surrounding table.

"So now what? I can just go?"

James looked Paul straight in the eyes, making him shiver. "Not quite." He leaned across the table and grabbed the courier by the wrists, pinning them down. Paul's eyes went wide, but before he

could say anything, a hand reached around from the booth behind him and closed over his mouth. A smell that didn't make any sense surrounded him. The world went blue then green then red, and finally black.

James let go a few seconds later.

"Do something simple but nasty to him and put him by the woman's corpse. It will need to look to the firemen like a struggle that got out of control. The timing will be tight," he looked at his watch, "we've all got planes to catch in an hour and a half."

Volume II

Barcelona, Spain

Day 9

Despite her solid nap on the flight over, and the nightmares from earlier, Xochitl still managed to sleep through the morning. Her body let her know that it was not at all happy with her, and that even a warm shower wasn't going to win it over. She stumbled out of her room shortly after noon and found her way to the main lobby.

Several carpenters were standing atop a scaffold, affixing molding to the roof of one of the many high domed ceilings. Half-hanging buttresses mixed at odd angles with flaking plaster and entire sections of roofing that looked like they were put up yesterday. It gave Xochitl vertigo to look up at them. Actually being on one of the scaffolds must have been like standing inside of a Picasso. She waited until the carpenters looked like they were at a good pausing point, then called out to get their attention.

“Excuse me. Uh, *perdon?*”

“*Si, señorita?*”

“Where is .. *donde estas Señor Theodore or Señor Eduardo?*” A semester of high school Spanish was not going to cut it.

All of the men started talking at once in a language and at a speed that Xochitl had no chance of understanding. They also seemed to contradict each other. One of them eventually figured out that she wasn't getting it, quieted the others, and pointed toward a hall that led deeper into the hotel.

What was it? *Gracias? Gratzí?*

“Um, thanks!”

Several of the men nodded and went back to work. Others kept watching her as she walked down the hall.

Xochitl walked slowly, distracted by the overwhelming amount of decoration and detail in the hall. Actually, gallery was probably a better word for it. It was flanked on both sides with huge oil paintings – workers picking grapes from vines, olives from trees, and fish from the sea; couples dancing in the middle of a road in the rain; portraits of all sizes of people of every race, color, age, and profession. The frames for each painting were all different, ranging from what

looked like wrought iron to ornately carved wood painted red and bronze.

Wedged in between the paintings were several sets of wooden doors with centimeter-thick iron hinges that looked like they would take a team of horses to drag open. None of them were labeled, so she figured that people must navigate by describing the surrounding artwork.

"We'll be having dinner in the rain-dancing-people room tonight, Muffy."

She could only imagine the size of the rooms that would be behind doors of that heft. She couldn't help but get visions of candle-lit ballrooms teeming with tuxedo-clad aristocrats and their silk and gem-encrusted arm candy, spinning and dipping their way through an evening. Or maybe it was more like flamenco and meringue.

Xochitl suddenly felt very under-dressed in her two-day-old jeans and collared v-neck.

Spain! How in the world did I end up in Spain?!?!

Her pace quickened and she approached the end of the gallery. What looked to be an opening into another large foyer or room of some kind was blocked off with scaffolding draped with canvas and plastic sheeting, so she couldn't see through or around it. Her only option was an open set of double doors just before the end of the hall.

As she passed one of the doors she could see it edge-on and whistled as she confirmed that it was indeed several inches thick, as she had thought. She sidled up next to the door and poked just her head around to see the inside of the room.

What struck her first was that the room wasn't nearly as big as the spinning aristocrats in her head had led her to believe. What little of the four walls that she could see through the scaffolding and sheeting looked like this was probably a smoking room or some sort of similar after-dinner chill-out lounge. It was still a pretty decent size, and one or two couples could probably work up a good spin if they really wanted to, but any more than a dozen and a half people would be a little cramped.

Four more workers were laying on their backs atop some scaffolding in the far left corner of the room. One of them was gesticulating wildly with his hands toward the bare ceiling above them all and explaining something emphatically and repeatedly to get his point across. She couldn't swear to it, but what little Xochitl could hear didn't sound exactly like the Spanish she remembered. It was just different enough to sound a little funny, but she couldn't place why she thought so.

She turned her head, scanning the room. She caught sight of

Teddy in the opposite corner of the room, finger in one ear and cell phone in the other, pacing back and forth and also explaining something emphatically. He was dressed in the uber-salesman style that he had been in yesterday, which she figured was probably “casual” for him.

She stepped inside to make her presence known, and he smiled and half-waved in acknowledgment when he noticed her. She moved toward him, but stayed a respectful distance away, as his call was obviously business. She couldn't help but overhear some of it, and whatever he was speaking sounded much more like the Spanish she knew. The conversation wound down and he flipped the phone closed and tucked it into his belt holster.

“Good morning, Miss Webb. I hope you slept well? International flights can be so taxing, can't they?”

“Yeah, I guess they can. I'm still new at the whole world-traveler thing, but I have noticed that I sleep at least as long as the flight was, whether or not I've already slept on the plane. I hear it's dehydration that does it to you. Hence why they give you peanuts and other salty snacks. There's a doctoral thesis study in there somewhere, I'm sure.”

Shut up, Xoch, you're blathering!

“Very true, I'm sure.”

She could almost believe that he wasn't just humoring her. He was the perfect combination of good looking, warm, and sincere. Kind of like James, actually –

Gah. Now that was a sobering thought. There's nothing like thoughts of a cold-blooded hacker-assassin that knows everything about you and is probably currently plotting a subtle way of involving you in a deadly accident to wake you up in the morning. Who needs caffeine?

“Are you up for some shopping? I cannot promise the grand tour that I'm sure Miss Susie has planned for you, but I can at least offer to help you find a second set of clothes.”

“Sounds good to me.” She hesitated for a second, and he was on it immediately.

“After lunch, of course. Or breakfast, whichever you prefer.”

Xochitl couldn't help but smile. “Teddy, you're a man after my own heart.” She blushed at how easily it had come out, but then turned her head and faked a sneezing fit to cover it up.

If Teddy linked the two, he didn't let on. “Yes, it is rather dusty in here with all of the plaster-work. Give me a moment with the workers and we'll head back to the kitchen.”

She nodded and walked back out into the hall-gallery. She could hear him speaking with the workers, but the language was funny

again. She still couldn't place it, but the cadence was a little weird, and the vowel-consonant pattern wasn't quite Spanish. She mentioned it when Teddy joined her in the hall.

"I have a really weird question."

He nodded for her to continue.

"Was that Spanish? I couldn't help but overhear some of your conversation on the phone and some of what you said to the workers, but they sounded different somehow."

He made that tanned two-mile smile of his.

"You have a very good ear. On the phone I was indeed speaking in Spanish, but with the workers we were using Catalan."

She raised an eyebrow for him to continue.

"It's a very long story that I would probably get very wrong on all of the major details, but suffice it to say that the people in this area, in and around Barcelona, don't all consider themselves Spanish. Of course, if you told them that Catalan was just a dialect of Spanish, they would probably never talk to you again in either language." He paused to smirk. "But do not worry – you will not have to learn another language. Most people will not speak Catalan with you, as you are very obviously not Catalan."

"I was thinking I could pick up a phrase or two and at least sound like an interested tourist, instead of some ignorant American."

"Even if you started up a conversation in Catalan, they would respond to you in Spanish or English. It is not meant as an offense, it is just their way."

Xochitl shrugged. "Oh well. Catalan – input only, no output. Got it."

Teddy rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Xochitl sighed and said, "Propellerhead. Yes. I am well aware."

Teddy grunted in response and steered them to the right, down another hallway.

"If you prefer, I can be a more typical girl. Purses, shoes, perfumes."

"Not at all. I would have very little to say in response."

"Good, because I don't have much to say about them, either. Purses should be unobtrusive, shoes should be functional, and perfume is for women that haven't figured out showering and deodorant."

There was a pause as Teddy tried to figure out how to respond. He obviously didn't agree with her on at least one of the points.

"And that ... that's all I have to say about that. Moving on. I'm babbling again. Let's talk about this place."

He steered her to the left, down another cloned hallway.

“What would you like to know?”

“I’m just curious. You keep saying family business, but this place obviously hasn’t been open in years.”

“That ...” He frowned for a second and weighed his response. “That is another very long and confusing story. And we are almost at the kitchen. Hold that thought.”

The hallway ended in a set of double-doors, similar to all of the other doors she had seen. But when he opened these, she noticed that door was only a few centimeters thick and didn’t carry a fraction of the weight of the others. Stepping through the door was like stepping into another world ... of chaos.

Teddy turned to see that Xochitl had stopped at the door behind him.

“The kitchen is just starting its renovation this week. Unfortunately, we were a little too optimistic in our timetable, so all of the appliances have been here for two weeks, and we do not have the time or expertise to move them twice.”

Brand new stainless steel ovens sat next to cast-iron stoves. Gleaming white institution-sized floor mixers sat next to and on top of rusted contraptions that Xochitl couldn’t begin to identify or even classify. Copper pipes, some shiny and some encrusted with decades of oxidation, jutted from walls and floors and ceilings. Plastic sheeting covered amorphous black shapes. Canvas covered spiky behemoths. Plaster and dust covered everything. The smell was wet, burnt, and old.

“I feel like I should go get some mountaineering gear.”

Teddy’s bodily response let her know that he was not in any way happy or responsible for the situation. He came out of it quickly, though.

“It will be a work of art when it is finished. An efficient work of art.” He took her by the hand and began leading her through the maze. “We would like to start hosting grand events like this hotel used to. Barcelona has a wonderful history of very fine galas. If we can reopen by *Carnestoltes*, the local Carnival, then we will have a large double celebration.”

Xochitl had visions of Mardi Gras crossed with the running of the bulls and the giant tomato-squishing thing she had seen on the Discovery Channel. Or was that in Portugal?

“Because well-to-do people who don’t want to be running drunk through the streets have to somewhere to go and spend their money, right?”

He paused, visibly impressed, then continued goose-stepping through the carnage.

"Of course, Miss Webb. Large celebrations require large amounts of food. Large amounts of food require a large kitchen ... and this interim mess. But," he took her other hand and helped her over a large pile of galvanized venting. "But, it will be spectacular. When it is done."

"I have no doubt. It sounds like you are working hard to make it happen."

"That is my job here. My father has the money and the contacts. My brother has the dedication and endurance. I ... I am here now to make sure it gets done and done well."

"And how does Susie figure into all of this?"

He got another of those too-much-to-say-at-once looks and paused again before he spoke.

"That is part of the long and confusing story that I have not figured out how to tell in a way that someone outside of it would understand."

Xochitl smiled, amused.

"Forget mountaineering equipment, we need a Wonkavator in here," Xochitl muttered. Teddy threw her a confused look, but she brushed it away with a wave.

"And we are here."

They came to a stop in front of a large stainless steel door in an even larger stainless steel wall. Even Xochitl knew it was a walk-in fridge.

"We're having lunch ... in there?"

Teddy only smiled and opened the door wide for her. A blast of cold hit her, but it wasn't nearly as cold as she was expecting. Teddy flicked a switch on the wall and a few bare light bulbs snapped on. Inside the fridge was a small table made out of what looked like leftover wood, surrounded by wooden crates with pictures of peaches, tomatoes, and lettuce. The table and some of the surrounding crates were covered in papers, blueprints, pens, pencils, and even a laptop.

"This is our war room. My father, brother, and I use this place to get away from the noise and dust and to plan the next steps of the project. It is quiet, cool, and while not completely stocked, has enough to keep us fed while we think and argue."

Xochitl snickered and stepped inside.

"Sounds like my kind of place."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Kami waited a few moments for the pink noise to go unnoticed by the sleeping passengers around him, then dialed the phone. Perkins never answered in under three rings. He thought it showed power and control. Kami rolled his eyes.

"What now, boy?"

"Your new partner, the Green woman, is out of control."

"What are you talking about?"

"One of my people was handing off the limo and the Green woman lost it. She caught my agent off-guard. Went at her with a kitchen knife, screaming about Hawser. My agent didn't survive, and her handler got to listen to the whole thing as it happened."

"If your agent was taken down by a computer nerd, I'm paying you people too much."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, sir, because she took out your man, as well."

"What? Who?"

"The courier. Paul."

"How? What was he even doing there?"

"We handed off our write-up to him earlier in the evening. We can only assume he got a little too curious and tailed my agent to Green's apartment. He may have seen the struggle, or he may have gotten greedy. We don't know. If we hadn't been forbidden from drugging him again, he might still be alive."

"That boy had no spine. That's why we chose him. He would not have gotten brave." The older man's accent became a drawl when he was angry.

"As I said, we don't know what motivated him to tag along. When we went to check on our agent, we found the two bodies in Green's living room. We're not sure where Green is."

"Well this is a mess. You are still under contract until this is cleaned up."

"We assumed as much. We are, after all, professionals. We initiated a scrub of the apartment. We have ensured that my agent will be identified by the authorities as Green, but you will need to have your people spin the courier."

Perkins was obviously distracted for a moment, then acknowledged.

"We'll come up with something."

"We thought that fire would be agreeable, yes? Green's workstation has been destroyed, which will limit her options and make it easier for us to flush her out."

"Yes, yes."

"Had you started your spin for her reveal? Is there time to put a

stop to it?"

"Let us handle that, boy. You just track her down and do what we pay you to do."

"I assume she is now fair game? Or did you want us to try to keep her around?"

"Son, you have my blessing to do to that woman whatever comes into your head."

"Thank you, sir. We are on it. If we need any additional resources, I'll contact you."

Perkins didn't bother saying anything, he just slammed down the phone.

Kami shut off the pink noise generator and popped out the earpiece. He put it into his pocket then leaned back his seat. He was out in under a minute, still smiling.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl popped the last bite of her second sandwich into her mouth. This one had consisted of layers of lamb, bell peppers, and cheeses she couldn't name. Teddy had finished with his sandwich a few minutes prior and was leaning back on his crate, sipping his mineral water. Xochitl had searched for tea, already hearing the mild whine of a caffeine-withdrawal headache, but had eventually also settled on a mineral water. She unscrewed the cap and swished a mouthful around to wash down the remains of the sandwiches.

She paused for a minute, weighing whether or not to make another sandwich. Instead, she grabbed a pair of oranges that were in yet another crate behind her. "May I?"

Teddy nodded his assent and continued to sip his water, eyes focused several feet above her head and several more feet on the other side of the wall.

"This hotel is the third hotel my father has operated. When I say it is my family business, it is because hotels have been my father's life for longer than he has been my father, and were also his father's life for longer than he had been a father."

Xochitl peeled her orange absently.

"My grandparents owned a large house a short way from here, a little closer to the city. When a doctor told them that they would never have children, my grandfather knew that the only way my grandmother would be happy was if she was looking after someone. When he suggested that they rent out the extra rooms in their house,

she was delighted.”

Xochitl made a small awww sound and continued to peel.

“Of course, eventually my grandmother did have a child – my father. But at the time, my grandparents were renting rooms to four other families, and it never occurred to either of them to evict anyone to reclaim the living space. Instead, my grandfather, who was an excellent businessman, turned his home from a sort of hostel into a proper hotel, so that he could impose some rules and be able to deal officially with any problems that might arise.”

Xochitl nodded and peeled apart the wedges of her now-pristine orange.

“My father grew up in that hotel, and my grandfather hired him on as staff on his fourteenth birthday. My grandfather was a better businessman than father, so my father was treated just like the other couple of people that were now on the staff. My father worked endlessly to earn his father's respect.”

“When my grandmother died several years later from complications with her second pregnancy, my grandfather did not take it well. The business still ran, mostly because of my father, but it was not the same. One-by-one the families moved on and their rooms were left vacant. My grandfather closed the doors on the hotel shortly after my father turned twenty. Grandfather became reclusive and father had no choice but to find another path. He had saved quite a bit of money, as he had nothing to spend it on, and so decided to go to university.”

“He returned after six years, and grandfather was the same withdrawn and sad man that he had left behind. Father argued that the house should be reopened as a hotel, as it would give grandfather some purpose in his life. Grandfather resisted until the day he died of a heart attack only a month later. The two loves of his life were gone, and he had distanced himself too much from his son – there was nothing left for him.”

Xochitl nibbled at her orange wedges through a deep frown. Teddy sighed before he continued.

“What my father did not know was that my grandfather had arranged it so that my father did not inherit the house, but instead was forced to sell the house and would only inherit the proceeds from the sale. Grandfather believed very strongly in spirits and did not want his son to be burdened with a past so heavy.”

“My father had gotten a taste for city life while he was at university, so he decided to start a new hotel in Eixample, just outside of what you would call downtown Barcelona.”

Teddy paused for a moment, reconsidering what he had been

about to say.

"There is a middle part of this story, but it has already gone on too long, so I shall instead skip to the end. Several very successful hotels later, my father had made more money than he had ever dreamed of. He was presented with an opportunity to sell all of his properties for a small fortune. He thought about it for many months, but eventually realized that he was growing tired of life in the city. Eixample is a very busy place, and only gets busier and noisier every year."

Xochitl had started peeling another orange and nodded for him to continue. Teddy sighed heavily, looking deeply into that spot on the wall beyond her, and chugged his water.

"But that sounds like it was a good thing, right?"

Teddy's focus shifted back to her, as if suddenly remembering that he still had an audience for his monologue.

"For all his success, my father had never wanted to be anything more than a simple hotel owner like his father before him. His wealth had grown beyond one small hotel, or even two or three, but was not so large as to be limitless. He came to me two years ago, asking what to do now. I was, at the time, very preoccupied and did not give my response the thought or respect that my father deserves."

Xochitl arched an eyebrow, waiting for the other shoe.

"I told him he needed to do two things: invest in land, and get in at the beginning of work on a large resort or casino. Both, I told him, would almost guarantee a return on investment that would suffice for anything he could possibly imagine to do with his money."

Xochitl smiled as she saw where this was going.

"So he went one step beyond and decided to buy his own land and build his own resort?"

Teddy frowned and wagged his head back and forth.

"Not quite. My father spent a full year, without my knowledge, looking into every resort or casino being planned in all of Europe. When he finally chose a project, his partners were expecting him to be quiet and let them use him as a source of money. But my father was renewed and impassioned. He wanted to make decisions every day. His partners realized that his decisions were very good, but that he was too strong-willed for their long-term needs. They bought him out of his part of the business, doubling my father's investment."

Teddy shook his head and smirked.

"It gave my father a big head to have made so much money so quickly, and, as he saw it, so easily. He decided his younger son was only half right, and that he needed to own land and be in at the beginning of a resort – as long as the resort was his own. So, another

year passed with him and his secret business deals. One month ago I get a call because he has fired all of the contractors that had been working for him. He needs his son with the International Business degree to come in and make everything run smoothly again.”

He paused for the briefest of seconds, as if recounting whether or not he was done. He shrugged.

“And here we are today.”

Xochitl also paused before she asked the obvious question.

“And how does Susie fit into all of this?”

A wide smile took over his face and she saw a glimmer of honesty and love in his eyes.

“I’m sure you will hear a much longer version of this story from her, but I suppose it would only be confusing if I did not at least give you a summary.”

Xochitl started on her third orange.

“Miss Susie, as I have always known her, met my father at his first hotel in Eixample. She was a young stewardess, seeing the world through her career. He was the father of two young boys that happened to run her favorite hotel in Barcelona. When they met, he appreciated her free spirit and energy, and she was drawn to his independence and personality.”

His eyes continued to sparkle as memories flashed behind them.

“They have cared very deeply for each other for as long as I can remember. My brother and I grew up always looking forward to visits from Miss Susie. But, they are both too entrenched in their own worlds to ask the other to give up everything and join them. There was a time when I thought my father might be ready ... but then I did not say the right things at the right time.”

Xochitl saw his shoulders slump under the weight of the burden he felt. She wanted to comfort him and tell him it wasn’t his fault, but with sticky hands and a mouth full of juice, nothing appropriate came to her.

“I think,” he said absently and not really to her, “that my father is building this place for her. If it can be big enough and have enough to do and see, she will not feel that she has to go away again.”

Xochitl’s heart sank. She finished chewing and wiping off her hands and made sympathetic sounds beneath furled eyebrows.

“Wow.”

That wasn’t quite the depth she was searching for, but it was all that she could come up with.

He snapped back into the present and smiled again.

“And now you have the entire story, and I hope a full stomach?” She nodded. “Excellent. Now let me tell you were I think we can go

for some interim shopping. I am not the shopping fanatic that Miss Susie is, but I think I can get us to the right places.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Good morning, sir. I trust you had a nice flight?”

Kami ignored the question as if it hadn't been asked. “What is the status on Green?”

“We have been able to confirm that it was another woman that used her ticket, and not Green. The woman claims that Green was, quote, “distressed and scattered”, end quote, and just gave her the ticket. Neither she nor her husband saw where Green went.”

And we were too busy packing up to have someone at the airport to watch her.

“She could be anywhere, then. But, she's a technophile. She won't be able to avoid the lure of Internet cafés and coffee houses for long.” He looked at his watch. “Any hits on that yet?”

The response took a few seconds. “Not yet, sir. But, the tracker would only have activated 45 minutes ago. We'll know as soon as she walks through any wireless access point.”

“Very well. Keep me up to date.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl downed the salad in front of her in a manner that was typical of her meals – with a complete lack of awareness that she was doing it. On some level she appreciated the tang of the balsamic vinegar in the dressing and how it perfectly complemented the slices of orange and several types of nuts, but that level was currently starved for resources in her overworked consciousness. The teeming mass of people flowing around her claimed a staggering majority of her mental processing power. She licked a smear of oil and vinegar off of her lower lip, sipped some water, and swirled it around her mouth to clear away any embarrassing detritus before she spoke.

“I love standing in the middle of a crowd and just watching people throng by. Or sitting. Whatever. And this ... this is amazing.”

Teddy smiled a smile that said something not unlike “crazy American tourist”, but then beckoned her to continue.

“I don't know. I can't explain it. I think it's the sheer urbanity

of it. So much getting done. People getting from Point A to Point B and accomplishing wonderful things along the way.”

She stopped and chuckled to herself, zoning out a bit. He again motioned for her to continue.

“The punch line is that I wouldn't want to actually interact with any of them. Just watch.”

He shook his head and and chuckled at her. “Propellerhead?”

“Propellerhead.”

“I don't pretend to understand it, but I know what you mean. Some of my classmates in college ...” He raised his eyebrows and made a groping, confused gesture. “Not at all good at interacting with other people.” He paused and the memories again flashed behind his eyes. “I never could quite speak their language. It was obvious that I would never be truly great at computers.”

Xochitl snorted and took another drink to hide her laughter.

“I can't argue with that. It's not like there are all that many rock star coder geeks.”

He cocked his head at her.

“Okay. Any. It's not like there are any rock star coder geeks. I submit.”

They both went back to watching the bodies seethe around them.

They were seated in a café on the outskirts of Eixample. Teddy had suggested that they ditch his car early in the morning and stick to the metro stations, and Xochitl could now see why. Driving here would be comparable to driving in Boston or D.C. – it was something you should avoid doing at all costs. They had spent the better part of the midday walking around Eixample. Xochitl had bought a few new outfits, but obviously not enough to last for any useful length of time.

“I guess this proves it. I'm a genetic mutation – a woman that hates to shop.”

Teddy sipped his espresso before he responded. He looked like he was still deep in thought.

“I find it refreshing. I enjoying buying new outfits, but I almost always know exactly what I want before I enter the store. It seems that you have the same mind. If all women shopped as you do, we would all have more time at the end of each day.”

Xochitl could tell he was speaking from personal experience. Maybe he had been forced into one too many sorority débutante shopping sprees? She decided it wouldn't be remotely polite to ask and instead moved on.

“Yeah, I guess that's true. But, really ... don't take this the wrong way?”

He perked up, pulled out of his revelry. "Of course not. What?"

"We've been to some really nice places, and I've really appreciated it, but none of those places have really been me. I can certainly appreciate the nicer clothes and all, but I guess I'm just not the type of person that needs to blow a hundred on a pair of pants. In fact ... even if I absolutely loved the pants, I still wouldn't feel comfortable doing it. It's not that I can't afford them or that I'm cheap ... it's just a mental block against extravagance, I guess. But I'm rambling. Does that sound horrible?"

Teddy sympathized, but still weighed his words carefully.

"I appreciate what you are saying. But may I present a counter-argument?"

"Certainly! More people should disagree with me!"

"I would say that you have this mental block against extravagance because you are a propellerhead."

She looked at him inquisitively, but he held up a hand to signal that he was going to formalize his argument point by point.

"Propellerheads are generally socially awkward, as we have discussed, yes?" Nod. "And that awkwardness comes from, at least in part, a sense of discomfort with their own selves, yes?"

"Some might argue it is the other way around, but I'll grant the connection."

"What if this discomfort comes from the fact that these propellerheads were never taught that they were beautiful or handsome? What if they were only taught that they were smart and nothing else?"

"Are you telling me that I don't like nice clothing because my mother didn't play enough dress-up with me as a child?"

He bobbed his head back and forth in a noncommittal way.

"Maybe not exactly, but close enough, yes. If I may ask a personal question?"

"Of course."

"When was the last time, as an adult, that you played dress-up?" She could tell that he knew what the answer was, and that he knew that she knew he knew. She ceded the point without argument.

"Is that where this is going? I need to get dolled up to appreciate getting dolled up?"

He smiled at her.

"I'm saying that maybe you might try something new today: do not look at the price tags. And if I might be so bold," he paused for her assent, "when you look in the mirror, stop seeing the propellerhead and start seeing the woman. I think you will enjoy the experience. Maybe not enough to keep up with Miss Susie, but

enough to make a difference for this evening.”

Her initial instinct was to be offended and blow him off, but she instead forced herself to think about what he was saying. She couldn't really argue with any of it. Her eyes unfocused from the hordes. How would that even work?

“Hmm. I'll make you a deal. That's a tall order on such short notice, but I'll think about it. You are right, and I do have this perfect opportunity to start fresh and rethink the lovehandles of my life. So instead of going all crazy tonight, I'll go crazy when Susie gets here. Fair enough?”

He thought for a moment.

“It is fair, but I should apologize. I crossed the line. It is not my place to tell you how to live. I am truly sorry.”

“What?” Xochitl was confused and wasn't recovering. “No, wait! Seriously. You're absolutely correct. I'm comfortable with being a propellerhead, as it's all I've ever been. But am I destined to be one for the rest of my life? Some octogenarian with feeble wrists who can only fall asleep to the glow of a laptop screen? I really hope not. I'm not saying shopping and consumerism are going to save me from that future, but I should start thinking about what I want to be when I grow up. I've lived so long on momentum.”

She paused and they were both silent for a moment. Teddy was still figuring out how to have himself drawn and quartered by a few dozen volunteers off the busy street, while Xochitl fast-forwarded though her life in five-year increments.

“I do need rethink some things. Hmm. Wow. Singularity.”

Teddy pulled himself up out of the sewers and prodded her to explain.

“Not in the cosmological sense. Um. It's a trend these days in propellerhead fiction – what happens to humanity, or just one person, when an event so radically unexpected and universal comes along that their life is forever changed? God comes down from the heavens or aliens cure cancer or something. What do we do? What do we become? Singularity.”

“Interesting.” It was Teddy's turn to be lost in thought.

“I don't know if there is an equivalent in the business world. I mean, it's beyond winning the lottery or inventing something new and incredibly useful. It's completely unexpected and unimaginable before it actually happens.” She caught herself and blushed. “Oh, I'm so sorry. That's was incredibly condescending. I didn't mean that you couldn't possibly understand it, but I know that's how it sounded.”

He heard her but shrugged it off. He was obviously used to

conversing with people that had no edit button.

"I am intrigued by the idea. In a way, I have experienced my own singularity, but I did not realize it at the time. When my father called and asked for my help, I had no idea how much it would change my life. I have been handling it as if the obligation was a burden, but you have presented another option. We both have a chance to rethink and rework our entire lives. It is ... an exhausting concept."

For once, Xochitl couldn't add anything. They both sat in silence, sipping their drinks and staring blankly at the world passing around them. A server popped her head out of the entrance to the café and was about to ask them if they needed anything before she thought better of it. She silently cleared away their empty dishes and disappeared back indoors.

They were interrupted a few minutes later by the buzz of Teddy's cell phone. He shot her a look that asked if he could answer it or if he should instead find a cliff to throw himself from. She smiled and nodded, making an effort to look like she was focused on anything else and completely unable to hear the conversation that was about to take place across the table.

Teddy pulled the phone out of his slacks and looked at the caller information displayed on the outer display. He grinned widely and energetically flipped the phone open.

"Miss Susie! Your delightful and beautiful friend and I were just talking about you."

Xochitl couldn't help but blush, no matter how obviously over the top he was intentionally being.

"No, no, no. It was all very pleasant, I promise you. I was lamenting my inability to take her shopping correctly. We agreed that I am but I pale shadow of the event that is shopping with other like-minded ladies."

Xochitl rolled her eyes.

"Oh yes, I know she is looking forward to it."

The conversation became largely one-sided for a minute or two, with Teddy's smile fading only slightly, being supplanted with an air of honor and duty and obligation. His half of the conversation was mostly affirmations and assurances.

"Of course. Here she is."

He handed the phone over to her. The large smile had again overtaken his face. Xochitl was surprised, but accepted the phone.

"Hello?"

"How are you holding up, Mary? Are my favorite men taking good enough care of you?"

"This place is amazing, Susie. I can't believe it. Everyone has

been very nice. Teddy has patiently chauffeured me around Eixample", she paused for a nod from Teddy confirming her pronunciation, "all morning. It's been great."

"That means a lot to me, dear. I felt simply awful all day yesterday when I thought that I had just dropped you on a plane out of the country with no one you knew. I still can't believe I did it, but you sound happy, so I feel a little better."

"No, really, it's great. I wouldn't have done it by myself, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate the nudge."

"Well, don't let Teddy wear you out. I'm told that even in my advancing years, I still make a mean tornado through Barri Gotic when I'm in a buying mood." Xochitl laughed politely. "I'm still on schedule for vacation in just a few days." She paused. "Will that work for you? I can have you back on the next flight if you start to get overwhelmed."

"Oh no! Never! Really, Susie, this has been amazing so far. You take all of the time you need. I'm sure Eddie and Teddy will be able to keep me entertained."

"Oh, I'm sure he will, dear." Both of them knew which one she was talking about. Xochitl threw a mischievous smile at Teddy that he returned with an overacted overwhelmed look. "Well that's just wonderful. Tell Teddy I miss him and that I told him to say something nice to his father today."

"I will. Oh, and Susie, before you go?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Can I ask you one more personal favor?" She made a motion to get up from the table but Teddy stopped her. He signaled that he would be in the restroom for a minute.

"Of course! It's the least I can do for shipping you overseas on such short notice."

"I think I mentioned my ex. James?"

"I didn't think you had said his name, but I remember he didn't seem like a very nice fellow."

"Right. Well. This is going to sound crazy."

"Dear, I'm sure it will sound like almost every other man I've ever met. Go on."

"Well, James and I didn't break up on the best of terms. But it's worse than that. James works for the government. He does things ... that I don't even want to think about. But he's very resourceful. He has a lot of people working for him. Can you talk to Ken and Faith and ..."

"Say no more dear. I'll put them to the screws if either of them says anything to anyone. No one will find out from us where you are."

If we hear from him, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Susie. I can't tell you how much that puts my mind at ease."

"Dear, don't think another thought about it. I have to run, but I'm sure I'll check in again in the next few days. By for now!"

"Bye Susie, and thanks!" She hung up the phone, and flipped it closed. That was almost too easy. Teddy came out of the café a moment later and she handed the phone back to him. "She says you need to say something nice to your father today."

He snickered. "Yes. Yes I do."

They both took a moment to take inventory of the café table. The server had cleared everything except the bottles of water.

"Actually, that's a good question. How does tipping work here?"

"It's ... complicated," he said as he pulled out his wallet and left a few notes wedged under the sugar bin. "It is not traditional to tip. In most family-owned restaurants it would only offend them. For the most excellent of service, you might tip a little. Maybe five percent. But ..."

He waffled a bit and pointed her in a direction that was mostly agreeable with the flow of traffic.

"But these days it is more interesting than it used to be. Many of the places that cater to tourists will be offended if you do not leave a tip. Some of them expect merely some spare change, while some of them expect the American fifteen percent. More than a few incidents have started with a traditionalist not leaving a tip for a server that was expecting one."

"It sounds like I'll just have to wing it. I'm beginning to think I am doomed to never be able to do it correctly while overseas. It may cost more, but it's so much simpler in the States."

He didn't commit one way or the other. The subject was obviously more complex than Xochitl was going to be able to fathom with a two-minute conversation. He continued to steer them in and out of traffic, dodging bodies in a way that only a European or a New Yorker could do. She left him to his navigation for a minute through a particularly crowded mass of a market before she spoke again.

"So ... where are we going, anyway?"

"Miss Susie is very good at pointing out the obvious. In this case, she reminded me that you did not bring any luggage. Suitcases, handbags, the like. She says she has some ideas beyond shopping for the two of you once she arrives, and it involves travel. Travel requires luggage, so she has tasked me with that."

"Fair enough. If nothing else, it will help with some of those bags. Which, by the way, you really don't need to carry. I'm perfectly

capable.”

“And how would it look for the man to be empty-handed while the woman is saddled with a half-dozen bags? That might go unnoticed back in America, but I would be dragged off the street and beaten by many of the shop owners here.”

Xochitl sighed and acquiesced. “So ... where are we going, anyway?”

“*El Corte Inglés*. Think department stores.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Teddy translated for Xochitl. “I have had him send most of the bags directly to the hotel. He says they will go out tonight and arrive tomorrow afternoon. He wants to know if you want to have them personalized?”

Xochitl had chosen a minimalist luggage set – only 4 pieces of matte black canvas and leather. She no longer owned enough stuff to fill any more than one bag, and the irony was depressing her visibly.

“No. Not really. Plain is fine.”

She could tell that the salesperson had understood her and was visibly perturbed at the thought of naked luggage. But, really, she was unable to wrap her head around having someone else's initials on her bags. She changed the subject.

“How much do I owe him?”

Teddy grinned. “It has been taken care of.” He continued before she could object. “Miss Susie has insisted that you are not to spend a single euro while you are here. She chastised me for allowing you to spend money this morning and has let me know in no uncertain terms that I will be hearing about it from her when she arrives.”

Xochitl was taken aback. She had been trying to figure out how to work around her zero-income issues, but this might have been a little too much.

“That's – I don't know what to say. That's amazing and generous and – wow. Thank you. I'll try not to bleed you dry.” She smiled, very uncomfortable, but both of them knowing that there was little she could do about it. To his credit, he only nodded and said nothing.

Wait.

“Actually ...”

“Yes?”

“I have a compromise, but it's going to require that you believe that I've been trying to figure out how to bring this next question up

all day.”

He smirked and motioned for her to continue.

“Where can we go to get a nice laptop?”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“So what did you say to him?” They exited the store bagless. “You two went back and forth for a while and it was way too fast for me to follow. Did something go wrong?”

“Not at all. We were just haggling over my discount.”

“Ha! He did look a little squirmy. Why was it a haggle? It wasn't some kind of fixed percentage?”

He smirked, then nodded his head.

“Not exactly.”

Xochitl eyed him suspiciously.

“We worked out a discount because while I was willing to pay that price for a single computer, three computers demanded some special consideration.”

“Three?”

He laughed at his own private joke. “It is what I said earlier – you and I have very similar shopping habits. We know what we want before we go into the store. When you went into that store, what did you do?”

“I don't follow.”

“You dragged me up to the counter and had me translate exactly what you wanted to the storekeeper. You didn't even bother looking at the models on the shelves.”

Xochitl shrank a little.

“Wow. You're right. I'm sorry. That must have looked incredibly rude.”

“Maybe to him, but not to me. As I said, I appreciate your directness.”

“So how does this lead to three laptops instead of just one?”

“You are an excellent salesperson – your confidence was absolute and unwavering. It made me realize how much I have been wanting to upgrade my own laptop. I may have the nice toys like the keyless system in my vehicle, but they are just that: toys. The systems that man is now building are not for people who want to play with toys. They are for people that want to do work.”

Xochitl looked at him with her best international “well, duh” pose.

“And now I will have a tool for my work on my father's project. This day with you has been a sort of little singularity for me. While I have tried to get you to take the propeller off of your head, I have realized that my own propeller has been sitting unused on the shelf for far too long. Today, my propeller has begun to spin again, if only just a little.”

Xochitl was dumbfounded for the second time that day.

“I have to tell you, Teddy, if that's your version of hitting on a girl, it's going to work far too well on any other propellerheads you meet.”

It was Teddy's turn to look bashful, but if he was blushing Xochitl couldn't see it through his tan. Xochitl felt about as awkward as she thought she possibly could, and quickly changed the subject.

“I assume the laptops will be delivered in the next few days?”

“They will be done in two days, and delivered the day after. Can you last three more days without a computer?”

Xochitl rolled her eyes and shook her head, refusing to reply.

“And you're probably not going to tell me how much that all cost, are you?”

“You can work it out with Miss Susie. I have my instructions.”

“Hmm. So ... about spending more of your money. What's for dinner?”

He laughed hard enough to make him stumble as he walked. He pointed to a sign across the street and said, “This time I was ready for you.”

“What's *La Rambla*?”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl inhaled what she was told was paella. She wasn't given an exact ingredient list, but as near as she could tell it was some kind of European seafood jambalaya – rice, shellfish, and whatever else the chef could find to toss into the pan. It was phenomenally tasty, and like any rice dish was very fast and easy to eat.

She was finishing off her second helping, and the man behind the counter was spooning her third onto a new plate. The first serving had been mostly shrimp, and the second mostly scallops and mussels. She couldn't tell what was in the third yet, but it was a greyish, bluish, black kind of color. She shot an eyebrow at Teddy.

“*Arròs negre*.”

“Um, that's ... rice, black ... black rice?”

"Very good."

"So ... why is it black?"

He sized her up while giving her a look she could tell meant "do I or do I not tell her", then hesitantly said, "Try it first. I will tell you after you decide if you like it or not." He said something quickly to the man behind the counter, who shrugged and shot back an unhappy look. The man fished for a small spoon, scooped up a bite-sized portion, and handed it to Xochitl.

Xochitl took the spoon and sniffed at it. There was a smell she couldn't identify, but it mostly just smelled like onions and what she assumed was calamari.

Oh.

"Squid ink?"

He was visibly impressed that she figured it out, and nodded as such.

She give him her best "why not" look and downed the spoonful. It was ... actually rather bland. There were a few flavors vying for her attention, but none really stood out. It wasn't horrible, but she rather preferred the paella. However, she didn't want to offend anyone on her first day in the country, so she smiled and reached for the plate from the man behind the counter before he could add any more to it.

"Not bad. Simple is good."

"You were expecting something else?"

"I was expecting something incredibly spicy like wasabi or scotch bonnets or habaneros or something. Surely someone in college handed you something to try that you later regretted?"

He smiled and nodded. "Certainly. But Catalan cooking comes from a different kind of place and mind. Catalan food is all about being simple and subtle and to the point. It is not supposed to be spicy, but interesting. Most Americans are unwilling to try something so interesting as squid ink."

"I'll grant you that. But by now I think you've seen enough of my appetite to know that I don't eat like a typical American."

"No, you eat like my brother." He laughed to himself and she waited for an explanation. "Of course, he is twice your size, so I assume you have a black hole or pocket dimension stashed somewhere that I have not seen yet."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've heard that song before. What's for dessert?"

Teddy turned to the man behind the counter, pulled out his wallet, and dropped a few bills on the table. "*Adéu, señor. Gràcies.*" He turned back to Xochitl.

"I can only take you to dessert if you make me a very small

promise.”

She was intrigued and showed him as much.

“You have to promise me that you will not say the words *crème brûlée*. What I am about to show you is *crema catalana*. We invented it, and it was so good that the thieving French chefs had to come across the mountains to steal it from us. You must be careful what you say, or you may start an international incident.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

“Sir? We got a hit on Green's tracker.”

“When?”

“Just a few minutes ago at some kind of coffee house. We waited for a second ping to confirm, but then called you immediately, sir. I'm sending the coordinates to you now.”

Kami pulled out the small device and flipped it open, scribbling on the screen. He nodded to himself, put his free hand to his temple, and thought for a moment. “We don't have anyone close, do we?”

“No sir. The closest is Luis. We haven't rerouted him yet. We weren't sure if you wanted someone on her that she hadn't met before.”

“No, Luis will be fine. Pull him out and get him working on her. In fact ...” He nodded his way through a mental roster of his field agents. “Pull everyone out. No contract extensions. We're spread too thin, and we're losing focus. We need to concentrate on one job, and right now it'll be the Green/Town Hall job.” The man was a self-righteous pig, but he did pay his bills. “Don't compromise anyone, but get everyone working on this. And book me a flight over for later this afternoon.”

He heard the familiar typing and pause before the acknowledgment. “Got it, sir.”

“Have the pings automatically traced and the coordinates sent immediately to my PDA as they come in. I'll need to see the data in real time.”

“Yes sir, I'll put a tech on it.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

“And how was your first day in Barcelona?”

Teddy sped along the highway, weaving in and out of cars. He was relaxed and cool, back in Host mode, maybe a little more aloof than he had been when he had really opened up earlier in the evening. The question came with a sense of obligation and duties fulfilled.

Xochitl's mind was racing, trying to figure out how to ask him to slow down. The nightmares from the morning flashed in front of her eyes, over and over.

"Maybe a little overwhelming. *La Rambla* was ... intense."

Her voice had more strain in it than she would have liked. He noticed and looked over at her. Without saying a word, he slowed down and pulled into a slower lane.

"I am very sorry. I very much enjoy driving, but that is no excuse. I should be more careful when I have others with me."

Xochitl realized that she had been clawing at her seatbelt, white-knuckled. She forced her hands to unclench and rubbed her palms on her legs.

"No, look, it's just that ..." Her gaze dropped to the floor and the old, unsocialized, familiar Xochitl reasserted herself. "It's just that I had a really good friend recently ... pass away in an accident. He was driving along a highway like this one and lost control. He hit a concrete barrier."

Her palms were warm from where she kept rubbing them on her jeans. She began to choke up.

"I ... I haven't said that out loud since it happened." Admitting that helped her swallow the knot in her throat, but she was still far too disheveled for her comfort. "Look, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be such a mess."

"No, no, no. It is I who am sorry. I had no idea, but I still should not have been so careless."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Xochitl's world extended an inch out from her skin and dropped into inky blackness beyond that.

"Would you like to talk about him? You obviously cared very deeply for him. Would that help?"

Xochitl didn't respond immediately – she had to think about it. Her gaze switched from the floor to the roof, but she didn't say anything for another minute.

"Not yet," she forced herself to say. He nodded. "But ... but definitely, please, do ask again tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll be ready, and I'll tell you propellerhead stories that will have you in tears."

He nodded again, never taking his eyes from the road. "It is a deal."

Day 10

The next morning's breakfast found them in deck chairs beside an empty pool.

"These," Teddy held up a fork with a yellow and white cheesy mass, "are a vice I gained while in college. Scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon. There was a small cafeteria near my first class of the morning. I must have eaten my weight in scrambled eggs by the time I finished that course, and I was late more than once so that I could spend time finishing my breakfast properly. I do not have the skill to make them as good as they were back in college, but I still enjoy them."

Xochitl gulped down some orange juice before she replied. "They are excellent, and don't you let anyone tell you differently." She polished off the last scraps on her plate, wiped off her mouth, and leaned back in her chair.

"I know that you will never actually ask, and I appreciate that, but I did promise you a story."

He put his fork down on his plate next to the small mound of eggs that remained and settled in to listen.

"Brian, that was his name, had this thing about bacon. He absolutely hated the taste of ham and pork chops and just about everything else you can make from a pig, but he loved bacon. When he was on his Atkins kick, he would come in every morning with little tub stuffed with bacon. He'd cook up pounds and pounds of the stuff and keep it in the fridge for days, bringing in his tub with enough bacon to last him through to a late lunch."

"I can tell you that I know that I have some very strange eating habits, but Brian and his bacon beat just about all of them hands down."

"A few years ago, the company we worked for was smaller and in a different building than they are now. Bri and I were the only two Info Systems people, and we were stuffed in the smallest office in the furthest, darkest corner of the building."

Teddy interrupted, smiling. "Which, of course, sounds like you

probably loved it.”

“We did! But you never tell management that! Anyway. The server room was really just a converted janitorial closet next to our office, and was already starting to show signs of being far too small for all of the equipment that we had in there. So, Bri had convinced management that they needed to either allocate some space for an actual server room, or they needed to pony up some money for a decent air conditioning system. Space was at a premium at the time because we were still growing, so we got the A/C instead.”

“Of course, we didn't own the building, and getting that sort of equipment installed into a closet where the infrastructure and architecture had never been designed for it ... well, the project moved along at a geologically slow pace. In the mean time, more employees and more work meant that we kept having to get more servers and equipment. We did our best to keep everything organized, but we couldn't do anything about the laws of thermodynamics.”

“You've been in a server room before, right?”

“Yes, one or two.”

“So you understand the difference between a workstation, a tower, and a rack-mount, right?”

“Towers, yes, and I think I know what you mean with the rack-mount servers.”

“Think of boxes about two or three inches, sorry, ten centimeters high,” she cupped her hands for the visual, “maybe two-thirds of a meter wide, and anywhere from a foot to a meter deep. All mounted on top of each other with slivers of air space between them. This was before blade servers, so we had dozens and dozens of these servers on a couple of different racks, each about as tall as you. Got it?”

He squinted to visualize, then nodded.

“The trick here is that everyone makes their servers the same width and height, so that the facings will mount correctly in the racks, but not everyone agrees on how deep the units should be. A patch panel, where all the cables plug into, might be not much more than an inch deep. A hub or a switch might be a few hands deep. A multi-processor server, at the time, would be a steel-reinforced box a meter deep.”

He nodded again, following a little better this time.

“Since there's no real space between them, all of these things are built with fans that suck air in the front, pass it over whatever internal components they have, then blow it out the back. Some of the fans in those things are really powerful, as some of those multiprocessor servers get hotter than you would imagine would be

safe.”

She grinned, remembering, before she continued. “And here's where the two parts of my little tale intertwine.”

He cocked his head at her, unwilling to interrupt, but curious how this was going to end.

“The two of us were in the office one morning. I remember it was a Thursday, because it was Thanksgiving. Most of the company was out, but a few die-hards like me and Bri were there working.”

“Our company had just gotten a big new hosting contract that required us to set up four new servers. We had only had two empty mount points on the racks we had, so we'd had to go out and get a new rack. Of course, to fit the rack in the room, we'd had to take out the tiny end table we had in there. Bri had spent all morning cutting up carpet and bolting the new rack into the concrete floor. At this point, there wasn't enough room for both of us to be in the server room at the same time, so I had stayed at my desk to watch the phones and try to get some work done.”

“At around two in the afternoon, I popped my head into the server room to get Bri to come to lunch with me. I figured we'd go down to some deli and at least have turkey sandwiches or something. He had the new servers mounted on the new rack and was just plugging them in when I came in. He whined to me about how he had wanted to get more done during the day, but how the Emperor, our boss, had kept calling him on his cell and driving him nuts all morning.”

“Your boss wasn't an actual Emperor, was he?”

Xochitl laughed. “Oh no. We just called him that behind his back because he would occasionally prance around like an Emperor, and he had a tendency to oversell products that we hadn't actually built yet. The Emperor and his new clothes, and all that.”

“Got it.”

“I remember that without the little table in the room, there really weren't any flat surfaces to set anything on. The front of a server rack is flush vertical, so he'd been putting all of his screwdrivers and crimpers and other tools on top of the backs of the longer servers that were jutting out the backs of the other racks. But the backs of servers have tons of cables coming out of them for power and keyboard and mice connectors, so even with all of those servers, horizontal space was at a minimum. I watched him keep having to pick up one tool, and put down the tool he had been using in the same place, like some twisted, server room version of the Towers of Hanoi.”

“We always mounted our racks from the bottom up, on the theory that cool air descends, so the coolest place in the room would

always be the floor. This meant that there was now a new horizontal space, at about knee-height, with no cables or anything getting in the way."

"Since Bri knew he would be back in the server room later that day, he didn't take any of his tools out with him. We were still trying to figure out where we were going to put them, as we had usually just thrown them under the end table. Instead, he gathered everything up from the various server racks that he had put it all on, and left a pile on top of the new server in the new rack."

"I had eventually convinced him to come out to lunch with me by reminding him that we had to burn in the servers anyway, and that took at least an hour. We set it up on one of the servers to do a continuous burn and left for lunch."

"Burn?"

"Bri and I have always built our own servers, and when you do that you need to be sure that every component in the system is going to work. We had a CD that would boot a special version of Linux that was designed to make all of the processors in the system run really difficult math problems, all of the RAM do random transfers from chip to chip, and all of the hard drives read and write data until we told it to stop. If the server could do this for a few hours without any strange errors popping up, we knew we had a machine we could trust."

"Interesting idea."

"Well, it wasn't our idea, but it served us well. We identified all of our bad or flaky hardware in the first few hours after each server was built, and could generally then put them online and forget about them after that. But ..."

"But?"

"But again, we were trapped by the laws of thermodynamics. Running a server that hard causes it to get really hot, as basically every component inside it is running full speed at once. That's why we had only set one of the servers to do the burn, as we didn't want all four of them, mounted on top of each other, doing it at once."

"And ... ?"

"And these were new quad-processor servers that Bri had never built before. He had gotten distracted by the Emperor's calls and had remembered to plug them in, but had forgotten to set the jumper that allowed the motherboard to control the speed of the fans. Instead, they were stuck in their lowest speed. They had come on when he plugged in the servers, so he hadn't thought twice about it."

"I can see where this is going."

"Not quite. I told you I'd tie everything together in the end."

He cocked his head at her.

“Bri had brought in his morning tub-o-bacon. He had even brought it in the server room with him to do his work, just like he always did. But because of the lack of space in the room, and his complete unwillingness to just set the tub of bacon on the floor, he had put it on the back of one of the servers so that he could munch on it while he worked. When he had gathered up all of his tools and stuff before we went to lunch, the tub of bacon came with them.”

She paused for effect.

“And ... it got set on top of the server with the rest of the tools. And ... it just happened to be the topmost server that Bri set to burn before we left for lunch. And ...”

Teddy had gone from a wide smile to an honest belly laugh. Xochitl was miming the entire story, which was making him laugh even harder.

“And by the time we got back from lunch, the bacon was burned to a crisp. It was black and dry and because Bri had forgotten to completely reseal the tub, the smell of bacon in the server room was overwhelming.”

She mimed out a reaction to a wall of smell assaulting them when they opened the door. Tears fell slowly down her cheeks from the memory, and from just the thought of him picking up a piece of bacon out of the tub and munching down on it when they found out what had happened. She wiped her eyes and continued.

“We kept everyone out of the server room after that, for fear of the questions that might have been asked. We got the new A/C unit a few weeks later, and we got a bunch of really strange looks from the contractors that installed it. When we moved to the new building and finally had a real server room, more than a few people wanted to know why our servers all smelled like bacon and made them hungry every time they walked into the room. We would just shrug and try to keep from laughing. As far as I know, he never told anyone else what really happened.”

They both wound down and sipped their juice for a few moments. Teddy spoke up first.

“That was indeed a wonderful story. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“Thank you for letting me tell it. I needed to. I miss him more than I would have ever thought I could miss anyone. I didn't appreciate him nearly as much as I should have.”

Xochitl picked up the last piece of bacon on her plate and popped it into her mouth, still a little watery-eyed and lost in thought.

After breakfast, Teddy led Xochitl on a tour of the grounds of the resort. Most of it was still either overgrown with weeds or barren and dry. Teddy was unhappy about the state of things, but spent much of the morning waving his arms like a film director and trying to present a picture of the final state of the grounds as they would be in a few months.

"You can see that there are many hedges that will be shaped into animals and ornate walls. Like your Disney World, or like our Gaudí, but with plants instead of stone. There is a word for it ..."

"Topiary."

"Yes, topiary. It will be beautiful, and it will employ many gardeners, which will make the nearby towns happy."

"Nice. Although, when you talk to your next propellerhead girlfriend, you should say shrubbery. Trust me on this."

He shot her a sideways glance that said he had no clue what she was talking about, but her lopsided grin told him to move on without asking. But he couldn't just drop it.

"You know, until I met you I thought my English was excellent."

She interrupted with "it is!", but he shrugged her off and continued.

"Maybe, maybe not. But when I talk with you, I always feel that I am missing some of the conversation. Like I am back in school taking lessons again."

"Oh no! Really?"

"It is not so much the words. Well, topiary was new, but I do understand the rest. But with you ... you always have a secret smile and a sparkle in your eyes when you talk. It makes me wonder what is behind the words."

She started to apologize again, but he continued.

"Wait. Please do not misunderstand me. What I am saying is not bad. I love it! I have had better conversation in the last two days than I have had in years. But, my English is business English. The English-speaking people I talk to are business people. There is not much behind it. I cannot ... I do not have the skill to put the jokes and double meaning in English that I could in Spanish or Catalan. But listening to you with your jokes behind the English, it is very enjoyable. I feel that I am often lost, but then I feel that I am beginning to like being lost."

"Um, okay. Thanks, I guess. I've never had anyone tell me that thought my crazy humor was enjoyable."

“Indeed. So when I look lost, please just keep going. I will catch up.”

Xochitl laughed a bit at this. “Only if you promise to teach me some Spanish or Catalan.”

“That is only fair. In fact, that will be your first lesson. The word “Spanish” can mean many things. The people in Mexico speak a Spanish that is not quite the same as the Spanish here. They would say that they speak *Español*. To distinguish, we say that we speak Castilian: *Castellano*.”

“*Castellano*?”

“Yes, very good. When someone comes up to you and starts speaking Castilian and I am not there to translate, you would say: *Perdoni, yo no entienden castellano. Inglés por favor.*”

She did her best to repeat it back, but knew she was thrashing the Spanish rolled R sounds. “Well, it's a start, I guess. How do I say “sorry, I'm just a dumb American that can only fit one language in my head at a time”?”

“Oh, do not worry. That is what everyone will assume anyway.”

A moment later Xochitl heard Teddy's cell phone vibrating in his pocket. She immediately excused him without waiting for him to ask, and walked off to look at the tile work on another empty reflecting pool. She still couldn't quite figure out how old this place was. Some of it looked like it might have been only a year old, but then things like this tiling made her wonder if it wasn't a hundred years old. The pattern was intricate and abstract, and looked as if it had been crafted by hand. The pool was fifty feet long and six feet wide, and the tiling formed a ring around the top eight inches of the wall. She whistled at how much time it must have taken to place every eraser-sized piece by hand.

She turned around to find that Teddy was heading toward her, flipping his phone closed.

“That was fast.”

“We are needed in the lobby. Our guest has arrived.”

“Our guest?”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

The guest turned out to be the man from the computer store.

“*Señora Mary Webb, allow me to reintroduce Señor Rafael Cortés i Domingo.*” He performed the same greeting in reverse to Rafael.

Rafael extended his hand, palm up, and Xochitl took it. He

kissed the back of her hand while in a deep and respectful bow and said, "*Molt de gust.*" When he came back up for air, he looked her straight in the eyes and said a very well-rehearsed "It is my pleasure to be charmed" in a thick accent. Xochitl understood that he was communicating that his English was going to be about as good as her Spanish, but that he'd make a go of it if she would. Teddy continued.

"Señor Cortés contacted me this morning about our computers. He has completed the first one, which shall of course be yours, but will require an extra day or two for the others due to shipping-in parts." Rafael followed enough of this to bow again, this time sincerely regretful. "He wanted to bring yours to you, personally, and convey his displeasure at the delay for the others."

Rafael again nodded, then reached behind him to grab a small box from the floor. With much flourish he presented the box to Xochitl, opening the lid as he did so. Xochitl grinned, but had to keep from laughing, as even though it was just a plain black laptop, Rafael was treating it like it was a Fabergé egg. She opted to accept it with as much grace and dignity, nodding back to Rafael.

"I was so impressed with Señor Cortés' integrity that I mentioned that we would soon be looking for contractors to help us design and install a network for the hotel, and inquired if he might be in a position to help us do so." Rafael brightened up and smiled at this. "But ..." Teddy paused and looked at Xochitl.

"What?"

Rafael obviously wanted to interject a *¿qué?* but remained silent.

"Your story has given me an idea." He repeated this in Catalan to Rafael, finishing with an *un momento* and pointing at Xochitl. He turned back to her and started to explain.

"You said several times yesterday that you were uncomfortable with being here as our guest, only on holiday. You want to be able to repay us somehow, even though Miss Susie has said that you shall not. Maybe this is a compromise? Can you work with Señor Cortés and build us a network? I know it is not glorious, and you certainly do not have to say yes. You are still our guest and can spend your days laying out by our beautiful but empty pools. In fact, that is what we will tell Miss Susie you are doing."

They both chuckled at this.

"But, you seem to me like a woman that does not relax without staying busy. And, if we can use the network to fry up bacon for breakfast for our guests, well that's just less money my father will have to spend on paella pans!"

He had a good laugh over this one, while Xochitl rolled her eyes and smiled. She held up a hand and thought for a moment. She

looked up and around her, turning a slow circle while Teddy translated what he had just said for Rafael. Xochitl could hear the cash register in Rafael's brain chatter and cha-ching. When she completed her circle she faced Teddy again.

"Interesting. I mean, I'm more of a software girl than a hardware girl, but ... But I did help Bri design the server room for the new building, and that makes this look like tin cans and string. And I have picked up more since then. So ... sure. Why not? It sounds like it could be fun."

"Wonderful! Rafael was just telling me that he has an assistant, Diego, that speaks perfect English and would be able to work with you to set up whatever is necessary. The two of us will be very happy to sit back and let the propellerheads do the hard work for us!"

Xochitl rolled her eyes again, and extended her hand to Rafael to seal the deal. She overpowered his attempt at a gentle handshake and gave him instead a firm American shoulder-jerker. He laughed and half-bowed again.

"So," Teddy continued, "Diego will be here tomorrow. I will have copies made of the blueprints to the hotel for both of you. They are not perfect, as we continue to rediscover, but they will do. All I require is both wireless and wired access in every room. Beyond that," he faced Xochitl, "I have no doubt that whatever you recommend will be excellent."

— $Cn \perp cnc \geq n(C) \subset (= \emptyset) n(C) \subset (= \emptyset) c \perp 2$ —

Xochitl found herself wandering from room to room for most of the afternoon and much of the early evening. Almost all of them were in various states of disrepair and remodeling. The common areas, such as ballrooms, smoking rooms, and meeting areas, were the furthest along in the renovation. Some of the bedrooms and suites looked like they had gone unopened for a decade. The suite they had her sleeping in was by far the most complete.

She had picked up enough Catalan to greet and say goodbye to the work crews she met. Teddy had explained to her that she needed to always say both, as it was considered incredibly rude to just walk up to someone and start talking to them without it. She had likened it to handshaking in a stateful protocol like TCP, but he hadn't really gotten it. She excused herself as already being too excited about the project and having networking on the brain. He gave her a set of keys and she started on her walkabout.

She ended up back in the lobby just as the sun was going down. An older man rushed up to her and handed her a long tube without saying a word. He indicated that one end opened, then rushed off again. She peeked inside to see that it was indeed the blueprints that Teddy had promised. *Speaking of whom ...*

She turned and addressed the nearest group of workers. She thought they were supposed to be putting up drywall, but they were too busy arguing to get any actual work done. “*Um, perdoni?*”

“*¿Sí, señora?*”

“*¿Dónde es el señor Theodore?*”

They repeated the same act as the first time she had tried this two days earlier: each of them pointed in a completely different direction. This, of course, caused them to start arguing again. Someone behind her coughed to get her attention.

“*¿Señora?*” She turned to face him. “*... al lado de la fuente.*” He made a sweeping gesture with his hands and pointed toward the front of the hotel. When she didn't immediately start moving, he made the gesture a second time, this time with more emphasis and a whooshing sound.

“Oh! By the fountain! Thanks! *Gràcies.*”

She found him on his cell, which she was beginning to suspect was more normal than not. He saw her approach, waved, and quickly wrapped up his call.

Out of the side of her mouth, without officially starting the conversation, she asked, “How do I say “good evening” in Catalan?”

He looked over his shoulder then replied in kind, in a low voice. “The sun has gone down, so you would say *bon vespre*. Fifteen minutes ago you would have been more correct to say *bona tarda*.”

Again, out of the side of her mouth she said her thanks. She then straightened up and maybe a little louder than necessary said, “*Bon vespre, Theodore.*”

“*Bon vespre, señora Webb.*” She still hadn't gotten used to hearing that name, but had at least stopped being shocked every time someone said it.

“Talk to me about what kind of Internet access we have right now. Any whatsoever?”

“A good place to start. Walk with me?” She nodded and they started to head back into the hotel. “We are either lucky or cursed, and I think it will be you who decides which it is.”

“That's not a good sign, but go on.”

“The good news is that the previous owners of the hotel went to great lengths to modernize the telephone system in the hotel. The bad news is that this was a decade ago. I believe we have more than

twice the number of phone lines than we need, so I had been thinking that it would be very easy to reuse many of them for data instead of voice. However, I have not had the chance to have anyone look at them, so I cannot be sure."

"Well, I am definitely not a telco girl, so getting someone out here is a must. Maybe Diego can help with that, but I doubt it. That type of thing is normally very specialized, at least it is back in the States. There are phone guys and there are computer guys, and it's pretty rare to find someone who does both."

"Yes, I believe it is the same here."

"So how are you accessing the Internet now? I mean, you personally, not the hotel. I know you said you had laptops out here."

"Yes. We have limited cable television and have the Internet service that comes with that. I have three cable modems and wireless routers set up in the rooms where I conduct most of my business. However, I move them around occasionally when the workers move from room to room."

"Are any of them within range of my suite?"

"I will make sure of it. It simply would not do to have my networking expert without Internet!"

They had arrived back in the room that she had found him in on her first day.

Wow, that was just yesterday!

He went over to the corner, bent down, and started gathering up a wireless router and cable modem.

"You are welcome to use these in your room tonight. Actually," he tilted his head and paused for a second, "I do not think I will be needing this one again. It is now yours." He handed her the equipment as ceremoniously as a pile of tangled cables could be.

"Thanks. I'm going head off to my room for the night unless you need me for anything else. I want to get a head start on those blueprints before Diego gets here tomorrow afternoon."

"No, but thank you. I feel that I am in better hands already. Can you find your way back to the kitchen? You should feel free to take as many snacks as you would like."

She nodded and was out the door in seconds. She found her way to the kitchen and the walk-in fridge, grabbed as much food as she could carry, and mountaineered her way back out to her room.

Kami's PDA buzzed gently in his pocket. He fished it out and pulled back the cover. The screen prompted him for a password, which he ignored. He pulled the stylus free of its housing and drew a complex pattern onto the screen. The password dialog disappeared, replaced with his default workspace. One of the icons, a small picture of a map, was blinking. He tapped it and waited for it to expand.

The map still showed the same area. One dot faded from blood red to maroon, and another popped in close to it in bright green, this time at what looked like a hotel or resort. At least she was still in the area. He still had 5 hours left on his flight and would not have been happy if the dot had shown up at an airport. He was beginning to wonder if he had spent more time this week in the air than on the ground.

Luis would be okay. He'd get to her first and keep her in sight until the others could arrive. He wasn't the brightest, but he was reliable.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Teddy had left the wireless router unsecured, obviously not too worried about the plasterers and painters chewing up all of his bandwidth. She had her new laptop booted up and online in minutes, queuing up downloads of all of the applications she could think of that she would need. The cable connection was a decent speed, and the downloads finished about as fast as she could get them copied off to her iPod. She silently thanked Rafael for thinking to bring the connector cables for it when he had brought the laptop.

The largest download would take a while. It was a distribution of Linux that was specifically hardened against outside attacks, while at the same time offering a dizzying array of development environments and hacking tools of its own. It was, however, several hundred megabytes. With a great BitTorrent swarm firing data at her faster than she could download it, the cable connection was the limiting factor.

One of the applications she had downloaded was Tor. Tor set up an onion network – a bunch of regular workstations around the world that all acted as proxies for the other workstations in the network. Traffic was encrypted and bounced across several workstations before leaving the network, so tracing a person back to their access point became tricky, if not impossible. She spent a few minutes configuring it, then fired it up.

On a whim, she opened up a VNC window and tried getting into her home PC. Nope, no joy. They really had trashed it. She debated trying to get into the VPN at work. Well, where she used to work, anyway. She knew she could get in, but she didn't want to take the chance that whoever the Emperor had gotten to replace her and Brian might notice. And that ... that would be messy.

Bri?

She reopened the VNC window and typed in the address and custom port number. Her finger hovered over the laptop's touchpad for a second, then tapped it lightly. Seconds passed as she held her breath. A new window appeared and she was presented with a login screen. It looked okay, but there was only one way to find out.

She looked for the fingerprint – a graphical aberration she and Brian had set up in their VNC servers that acted as part of the authentication. She found it, clicked on it, then began to drag her finger along the touchpad. The fingerprint looked like a bug or a JPEG artifact and shifted position as she moved the login window around the screen. Depending on where she dropped the window, the fingerprint looked a little different each time, which was also part of the authentication system. She continued until it looked right, then clicked it and repeated the process until the fingerprint went away. She entered Brian's username and password, which were a mere formality if the user had gotten this far.

The desktop was a clutter of windows, each seemingly dropped in a random place. In other words, no one had touched it since Brian. He was, as far as she knew, the only person in the world that preferred to work with his windows everywhere like that.

Xochitl knew that Kami had a rootkit on Brian's system. The back door obviously allowed Kami free access to Brian's files and email, and removing it would most likely be noticed by anyone keeping an eye on the system. But, there was a good chance that Kami and his people weren't trying to scrub Brian's workstation completely. What she needed most was a pristine copy of Alfred so that she could quickly compare it to what was currently on the SourceForge servers. This would allow her to see what Kami or Perkins and his people had changed.

She opened up Brian's web browser and dug into the file cache. The odds of anyone malicious even thinking of altering the files in his web browser cache were almost zero. She knew that Brian would have been paranoid enough to double-check any files he uploaded to SourceForge by downloading them himself and making sure they hadn't been corrupted. If he hadn't done too much web browsing since then, copies of the files might still be in the cache.

Sure enough, the Zip archives of the last two minor revisions to the source tree were in there. She tabbed into another window, started a file transfer session, and queued them up. She zipped up his Alfred source working directory, the one most likely to have been tampered with, and queued it up, as well. She then queued up a download of the version of Alfred that was being distributed from SourceForge. Between the three versions, she knew she would have no problem eliminating any rogue code.

She only wanted one more thing off of Brian's computer. She frowned and felt horrible for what she was about to do.

Back in the web browser, she opened up a tab and went to Amazon. She knew that Brian had placed a number of orders through them in the past. Sure enough, Amazon greeted her with Brian's name. She clicked on one of the specials on the front page, then went in to the checkout. She made it a few steps into the process, eventually landing on the screen asking her to use an existing credit card or put in a new one. She opted to put in a new one, then closed her eyes and again asked his forgiveness for what she was about to do. On the credit card entry screen, she found the box for the card number and clicked in it. She knew that Brian had a Visa, so she locked her jaw and typed in a "4".

Brian's web browser did exactly what it was supposed to do – it popped up a window of previously-entered choices for that field. There was exactly one item in the list: Brian's credit card number. She punched the number into the brand new cell phone sitting beside her, then tabbed over to the credit card expiration field. This one took a few more tries, as his expiration date started with a "7". She did the same trick with the verification number and input both numbers into her cell.

She sighed and closed the web browser. She swore up and down that she was only doing it out of paranoia and desperation and that she hoped Brian would forgive her. Besides, she thought, the credit card company would find out about his accident eventually and cancel the card. There's no way the numbers would still be good in more than another week or two.

Xochitl sighed and closed down the VNC session. There was a finality to it that made her frown.

She looked to see how long the rest of the downloads were going to take – about an hour. She gingerly moved the laptop off of her and placed it on the bed beside her. She reached for the water bottle on the end table, and brought back with it the plastic bags full of dinner rolls and cheeses. She rotated around onto her stomach facing the foot of the bed and munched while she pored over the blueprints that

she had unrolled there earlier.

———— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 ————

Kami had just fallen asleep when his cell phone woke him with a buzz. He growled under his breath and brought his seat forward again, trying to remain calm while he grabbed his earpiece and started up the pink noise. The delay gave him the opportunity to count to three and control his breathing.

“What?”

“We got a hit on Hawser's machine, sir. Someone initiated a file transfer, and it was big enough that the techs noticed the bandwidth drop from their extraction. She didn't leave any tracks, but it had to have been Green.”

“Did you trace it?”

“Yes sir, we were able to log the connection just before it closed. The IP is in Germany. And the techs are scanning it now.”

“And?”

“One second, sir, the tech is sending on the analysis right now.”

Kami steeped his hands and tried to project his unhappiness through his earpiece. When the operator spoke again, her voice was noticeably less enthusiastic.

“I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. The tech says the hit was a dead end. Quote, “that IP is running a Tor daemon, so the real source could be anywhere”, end quote.”

Kami scowled a few choice words that he hoped would slip through the pink noise field.

Well, we didn't consider recruiting her because she was stupid.

“Should I have the tech try anything else, sir?”

“No, the tech is right. It's a dead end. What is the current timetable for Hawser's machine?”

“One second, sir, let me look.”

Kami squinted and rubbed his temples. Miss Green could be quite the asset if he could break her. But right now, she was far too much of a live wire for his liking.

“The notes say, as of an hour ago, that it will be another 24 hours at least, sir. Would you like me to get the tech handling that on the line for a more up-to-date estimate?”

“No. But ensure that the machine will be taken offline when the rootkit shuts down. I don't know what Green was after, but she cannot have unfettered access to that machine.”

Xochitl's hand flopped around in the plastic bag, searching for a roll that wasn't there. She looked up from her blueprints, annoyed. The other bag had a single cube of cheese left, that was quickly snatched up and eaten. Her face crinkled as she strained to read the clock on the other side of the dark room. It was just after midnight. She looked over and saw that the downloads to her laptop had long since completed. Her eyes flicked back to the blueprints and the pad of paper that was on top of them, covered in several manhandled pages of scrawled notes and drawings. Her eyes unfocused as she thought about what angle to tackle next.

Yeah, definitely a good place to stop.

She recapped the pen in her hand and tossed it at the pad, then rolled over to the laptop. She started the final data transfer to the iPod, then flipped off of the bed. She twisted her arms in front of her, behind her, and over her head, picked up her legs, and stretched out each of the muscles that demanded her attention. Her neck was especially cranky from the hours of laying on her stomach while trying to read. She rolled it around, feeling it pop and crack in several places. She wagged her jaw to relax the TMJ muscles that she knew had probably been subconsciously grinding her teeth for a good portion of the evening. To finish everything off, she induced a yawn and squinted then blinked as forcefully as she could.

Food.

She smiled as she realized it was Bri's voice in her head.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell me something I don't know."

He was silent for a moment.

Bathroom.

"Oh. Good point."

The bathroom for the suite wasn't as finished as the rest of the room. The sink and fixtures looked ancient, while the toilet and bath tub looked brand new. She was just thankful that the hot water worked. It had taken her several long, steamy showers to recover from the nightmares each of the last two nights. She wasn't looking forward to tonight's episode.

Sorry about that, kiddo.

"I know. It's not your fault." Her eyes dropped from the mirror, watching water run down the sink. "It's mine. I'm so sorry, Bri. I had no idea what they would ..."

You do know that I'm in your head, right? We both know that it wasn't your fault, either.

“Yeah, but –”

But nothing.

“I guess. Still ... I'm not going to be okay for a while, am I?”

Time, kiddo, wounds all heals. You'll make it. Presuming, of course, you don't crosswire some cabling and end up barbecued Xoch.

“Nice, Bri. Very effective visual. Thanks.”

That's what I'm here for.

Xochitl filled her palms with water and dropped her face to meet them. The warm water felt great on her skin. She was tempted to just jump back into a hot shower and forget about the next half hour. She frowned when she realized that it would just mean dripping water all over the blueprints later, and shut off the sink. She dried her hands and face, and stepped out of the bathroom.

She paused, surveying the room. Several boxes and bags of clothing sat in various piles around the room. Some had been unopened since they were delivered and some looked thoroughly ransacked. The running shoes, jeans, and loose sweater from her flight were sitting by the window. She imagined they were pining for their old life just as much as she was. A new pair of tennis shoes sat in a box by the bed. She grabbed the new sweatpants and a new t-shirt, flung them on, and sat down on the bed to lace up the shoes.

A walk. A walk would clear her head. It's not like any of the contractors would be working this late. They all knew her by now, anyway – mostly as the strange American woman that kept wandering in and out of all of the rooms.

Scrunchie. Where would she have dropped the scrunchie? End table. Duh.

Improperly attired, hair wrangled, and new shoes protesting their service, Xochitl headed off in the direction of the kitchen.

The lighting situation was ... interesting. One of the work crews was apparently replacing a single wall sconce per day, with each day being in a random part of the hotel. Some sections of hallway were lit with bulbs that were far too high wattage, while others, such as the one closest to the kitchen, went unlit for dozens of yards.

Xochitl realized that the whole place at night would have been shiveringly creepy to anyone who was afraid of the dark or had seen too many horror movies. She had made enough trips to the kitchen over the last two days that it didn't even occur to her to be creeped-out. The need for sustenance trumped the need to not have an axe buried in her skull.

She pushed her way through the kitchen door and steeled herself for the slalom ahead. She had been moving items out of her way with each new trip into the kitchen. Her efforts had cleared a

decent path near the door, and the men had cleared a large space in front of the fridge, but getting from the former to the latter was still an exercise in flexibility. This trip's subject of relocation was a pile of what she thought were baskets for a deep fryer. She didn't actually see a deep fryer anywhere, but it might have been one of the tarped moguls crammed around the walls of the room.

When she opened the door to the fridge she saw that it had been restocked since her last visit earlier in the evening. Her face reddened when she saw that there were now more plastic bags of breads and cheeses than anything else. Someone had figured out that they were her most frequent target. Defiantly, she grabbed several apples and celery stalks. On her way out, she wedged a pair of water bottles in the vestigial pockets of her sweats.

Getting back out of the kitchen was even trickier than getting in, thanks to the apple-celery balancing act that Xochitl now had to perform. She bobbed them toward the end of the course, and whacked her shin on a floor mixer when she twitched to regain her hold. Grimacing, she rethought her strategy and piled as much of the food as she could in the crook of her arm and against her chest. Her free hand held an apple that quickly found itself rubbed on her t-shirt then missing a large bite.

She paused in the hallway as she exited the kitchen, looking left then right. Her room was several hallways to her left, but she realized that she wasn't quite ready to get back to work yet. Her feet had figured it out a few steps ago and were already leading her into the darkness to the right. She knew that the halls branching from here led to a number of ballrooms and a small outdoor bar and café. Or, at least, what would eventually be a bar and café, presuming that she had read the plans correctly. She shuffled toward it, nibbling at the apple while looking in every direction but straight ahead.

She poked her head out the double doors that would lead to the café. There was a half-moon and very few clouds, so she had enough visibility for her purposes. She lounged in the doorway for a minute, lost in thought.

A wireless access point that existed only in her head was mounted and remounted in several different places, finally finding itself above the bartender, on its side in a corner by the hundred-dollar bottles of whatever it was that the people around here drank hundred-dollar bottles of. She smiled to herself. A hazy green field permeated every nook and cranny of the café, ensuring fast and uninterrupted Internet access for the hapless business executives that couldn't learn to relax and take a frickin' vacation.

Oh, wait. Nevermind.

She stepped backwards and let the door close in front of her, mentally marking a big green circle on the blueprints still sitting on her bed. Some of the ballrooms would be harder. They would presumably double as meeting halls, and the largest of them would probably need an access point in each corner, and maybe even one in the ceiling in the middle of the room. Seeing the designs was one thing, but she needed to be in some of the rooms to really get a feel for them.

She looked around and dropped the picked-clean apple core into a paint bucket that was doubling as a waste basket. Sorry, as *basura*. She squeezed the food close to her to hold it in place, then extracted a stalk of celery and started to walk again.

At the end of the hallway she paused. She could hear a faint echo of what sounded like violin music. A worker must have left a radio on. She rotated her head, pausing her chewing and twitching her ears to try to hone in on where it was coming from. There was a sliver of light coming from an intersecting hallway about twenty yards, meters, away, so she headed in that direction. When she stopped chewing again, the sound had gotten a bit louder, so she knew she was on the right track.

The light and sound were coming from one of the larger ballrooms, just down the hall to her right. As she got closer and finished off her stick of celery, she realized that there were also low shuffling noises and the occasional deep grunt coming from the open door. Her pace slowed and she came to a stop just on the other side of the door. She strained, but couldn't make out any more detail from the sounds. Her weight shifted, leaning her to the side so that just her left eye could see around the door.

Inside the room, two men were in undershirts, boxers, and socks, doing what she thought might have been a waltz.

Xochitl grinned and couldn't help but continue watching. The smaller of the two men was leading, but was doing poorly and had his head down, staring at his feet. The larger man had form that looked flawless to Xochitl, his back perfectly erect and his gaze straight ahead. As they rotated, Xochitl caught a glimpse of the larger man's face.

It was Eddie! But then ... yes! The smaller one was Teddy!

Xochitl giggled and lost her balance, falling into the door and dropping everything in her arms. The water bottles in her pockets felt left out and jumped ship to join the fun. She scrambled to stuff things back into pockets and crooks of arm, and reopened the door. She worked to suppress the large grin on her face, and poked her head inside the room.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Er, *bon vespre, señors.*"

Eddie, who had started walking briskly toward the door, slowed and smiled to her, nodding. Teddy was more embarrassed and didn't recover as well. He mostly just stood and fidgeted, eventually also nodding at her.

"So ... what's up?" She directed the question to Eddie, knowing perfectly well what was going on. He saw that she knew, and decided to play along, drawing out his words for maximum effect.

"Theodore has asked me," he emphasized this, "to teach him," and again, "how to dance."

"Oh really? I would have figured smooth ol' Teddy would have gotten the waltz down when he was six years old?"

"Theodore never wanted to learn, so Miss Susie only taught me. Then he was too busy in America, and so now he is here and old and has his brother teaching him."

Eddie and Xochitl leered at Teddy, who was doing his best to show them that he didn't care what they said about him, and failing miserably. To drive the point home, Xochitl again dropped all of her food and turned to Eddie.

"May I have this dance, *señor*?"

She held out her arm to Eddie and flashed Teddy a wicked grin. Eddie hesitated only for a moment before accepting and pulling her into a gentle spin.

When they had rotated around so that Xochitl's back was to Teddy, she whispered, "I haven't done this in years, sorry. Keep it simple and I won't crush your toes." They continued to rotate and Eddie winked at her, smiling from ear to ear.

The music was just slow enough that Xochitl could keep up with Eddie in a convincing way. She tried to keep Teddy in the corner of her eye, to be sure that they weren't going too far with their ribbing, but after a few spins and doing her best to not trip up Eddie, she completely forgot about Teddy and just enjoyed the dance.

Eddie could tell that Xochitl had gotten her dancing feet back and was leading more confidently, slowing working in tighter spins and more complex twirls. Xochitl wouldn't have won them any competitions, but she kept up enough that neither of them noticed.

As it was supposed to, the room shrank down to a few feet in any direction and the music faded away to a simple beat. Eddie's smile had gone from one of laughter and humor to one of simple joy and appreciation. Xochitl's eyes drifted closed and the room finished shrinking down to just the two of them. She would have followed Eddie's gentle lead off of a cliff and not thought twice about it.

For a minute, she was the silk-nightgowned, gem-encrusted arm

candy of a handsomely tuxedoed aristocrat, gliding effortlessly across the parquet flooring of a candle-lit masque. Or maybe it was Eddie who was her arm candy. It didn't even matter that the occasional misstep was still made – for that dance, nothing, nothing mattered.

The CD player in the corner of the room faded out and went silent a few minutes later. Xochitl's eyes dragged themselves open as Eddie slowed to a stop. Xochitl made a concentrated effort to let go of Eddie, her body fighting her over every millimeter of distance between them. Eddie took a half-step backwards and bowed lightly but sincerely to her.

Safety. Honesty. An almost fraternal kinship. Eddie made her feel all of these things, and wanted nothing from her beyond a wonderful dance. Instead of returning his bow, she dropped forward and buried her head in his chest, hugging him as she hadn't hugged anyone in a very long time.

"Thanks, Eddie." The words were muffled and gibberish, but he figured them out and nodded above her. "If you ever need a dance partner, you know where to find me. That was ... beyond wonderful." He nodded again, too polite to really return her hug, but also too polite to shun it.

A slow clapping sound reverberated around the room. Its volume made her flinch, but she realized that the clapping wasn't loud at all – she had been whispering. She disconnected from Eddie, maybe a little too quickly, and stepped backwards. She peered around behind Eddie to see that Teddy was standing in the entrance that she had come through what seemed like hours ago. He had obviously left and returned, as he was now wearing a pair of maroon pajama pants.

Teddy clapped a few more times then stopped. What was the emotion on his face? The bad lighting and distance obscured it enough that she couldn't really tell. His posture was limp and relaxed, so she figured it couldn't have been anything too horrible. Eddie was the first to speak as he turned and stepped backwards to allow everyone to face each other.

"This is what you have been missing out on, Theodore. I told you that you should have taken the lessons with Miss Susie."

"I can see that." He faced Xochitl. "You dance very well, and are an excellent complement to my brother."

Xochitl blushed and demurred. "No, not at all. I haven't done that since junior high when we had to choose between dance and volleyball for our Phys Ed class. Eddie is, as near as I can tell, a flawless dancer. You are lucky to have him as a teacher, and any girl would look skilled in his arms."

Eddie smiled like the cat with the canary and said nothing.

"Well, brother, I shall have to wait until tomorrow night to be the skilled girl in your arms. For now, I must go to bed. Thank you again." He twitched his head toward his brother, who returned the movement. "Good night, Mary. Sleep well." He bowed lightly and walked off, quickly lost in the shadows.

Eddie turned to Xochitl, still smiling widely.

"I must also go to sleep, Miss Webb."

"I would think that after a dance, you could call me Mary."

Eddie's smile faltered as he considered it.

"That would be very hard for me."

Xochitl squinted at him, running though how she could convince him to call her by a less formal name that wasn't even her own.

"We'll work on it. Maybe we can find a compromise."

His smile returned and he nodded to her before walking off. Xochitl couldn't help but watch him leave, appreciating the form that she hadn't noticed before.

Nope. Nothing. He's good looking and sweet, but he's more like my brother or something. Ick.

She chuckled at this, remembering that she had wanted to drag him into a dark closet when she had first met him in the airport. It might have been fun, but she'd take the kinship any day. She contemplated how it was that people became more or less attractive as you really got to know them.

Which, of course, reminded her of Brian.

"I'm so sorry, Bri."

For what?

"I acted clueless about you liking me ... but it was just an act. I knew how you felt, and I should have ..." The smile from only moments ago had turned into a deep frown. "I should have talked to you about it. Or something."

And said what? "Hey, Bri, I can never feel about you the way you feel about me. kthxbye!"

Xochitl shook her head.

Or, better yet: "It's not you, it's me."

"I don't know. But it wasn't fair to just let it sit out there, unresolved. And now ..."

Look. At least I never got my heart completely ripped out. Just bruised a little every now and then. But the dream was still there. That's better, right?

"Is it?"

The answer didn't come to her then, nor on the slow walk back

to her room.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl zipped through the web configurator for her soon-to-be new Linux install, changing only a few values from the defaults. At the end of the wizard a configuration file was displayed that she copied, double-checked, and transferred to the iPod. She rebooted the laptop and waited for the boot prompt to come up. Good. The system was now booted from the iPod and primed to start the install. She pointed it at the configuration file and let it run.

She knew the install, automatic configuration, compilation, and burn-in would take most of the night and morning. She gingerly picked up the laptop off of the bed and carried it as far as the power cord would let her before setting it on the floor. She dragged a few bags and boxes between the laptop and the bed, doing her best to create some sort of sound barrier. The hard drive and fans were going to crunch and whirl all night, and she had a long day ahead of her tomorrow.

She brushed her teeth, changed into a new pair of pajamas, and was in bed within minutes.

But sleep? Sleep would take a while.

Day 11

Luis opened the door for Kami and took his bag from him as he got inside the car. He walked around to the driver's side and got in, putting the bag on the passenger seat next to him.

"How was your flight, sir?"

He saw the rearview mirror's reflection of Kami blink slowly and rub the bridge of his nose in reply. Luis started the car and began to weave out of the airport traffic.

"Yeah. You're still getting the pings, right?" Again, no reply. "We think she's still at the hotel. It's only about 45 minutes from here."

Kami rubbed his face and finally made eye contact with Luis. Luis grimaced, seeing that he looked exhausted and even more gaunt than usual.

"Has anyone actually seen her yet?"

"No, sir. But I did not get to the hotel until after dark. Marlena is there now, outside the hotel, watching for her."

"Good. No more holes. This woman isn't an operative, but she's smart, quick to adjust, and has better luck than anyone I've ever seen." He muttered under his breath, "it's unreal."

Luis could tell that he had said something, but hadn't made it out. He almost asked for Kami to repeat himself, then realized that whatever had been said wasn't directed at him.

If he's talking to himself, that's not good. He really needs to get some sleep.

Luis racked his brain for a way to tell Kami that they could handle the watch for the night, and that he should just get some sleep. But with the mood his boss was in ... there was no way Luis was going to say anything he wasn't asked to say. He saw Kami look at his watch, then drop his head backwards into the headrest.

Say something.

"You look like you could use some rest, boss. Why don't you let us handle it and get a good night's sleep? We can keep an eye on her. We know you've been on planes almost all week."

He saw Kami's neck tighten for a second, then slowly release. He heard a rustling, then saw Kami's earpiece appear. When Kami started to speak, he knew it wasn't at him.

"Get me a room. We'll move in the morning. Who else will be there by then?"

Luis relaxed in his seat and switched lanes to pass a slow-moving truck.

"Good."

Kami's finger tapped the earpiece, disconnecting the call. He made brief eye contact with Luis, then leaned his head back again.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c1p2 —

Xochitl woke to light rampaging in through the window across from the bed. She grunted and threw a pillow at it. She didn't see it, but something tumbled and thudded several times before coming to a rest. The curtains had been thrown slightly wider and were now letting entire regiments of the warriors of the light into her room. She fought back valiantly, groaning again and swinging her legs off of the bed. Her hair flopped into her face as she sat up, and she welcomed the small amount of shade, even as the itchiness began to irritate her further.

She stumbled toward the window and saw the discarded pillow laying behind what had been a stack of boxes. The heavy drapes had been shoved aside by the boxes when she moved them all around last night. She groped around for a moment, trying to lift the drapes over the pile of boxes, but some kind of batons or heavy stitching made them resist any sort of vertical movement. She had to kick the boxes out of the way and thread the bottom of the drapes around them.

The light receded, but she could tell that she was already too awake to immediately go back to sleep. She shuffled into the bathroom, swiping on the light in the shower instead of the bright series of bulbs around the mirror.

When she walked out again a minute later, she realized that the cavellike nature of the room was again calling to her and that she wasn't nearly as awake as she had feared. She paused briefly to see that the laptop was still doing its thing, and flopped back down onto the bed. She tried to insert herself underneath the covers by swimming through them, but eventually settled for being above some layers and beneath others.

Luis handed a cup of black coffee to Kami and waited for the first sip to go down before speaking.

“Morning, sir.” He wanted to say that his boss no longer looked like death spread over a cracker, but figured that it wouldn't help anyone. Besides, there was a small chance that the boss would be in a good mood.

“What's the status?”

“We still haven't seen her. There was some movement a while ago. Marlana thought it looked like a blonde woman. But no one has come out yet.”

Kami sipped his coffee skeptically. “It's possible. She could have bleached her hair. She'd look horrible, but it's not outside the realm of possibility. We haven't had any other hits?”

Luis smiled. The boss was in a good mood.

“I'm told that we're still getting the occasional ping off of the tracker, sir, and it's definitely coming from this address.” He pointed. “There's wireless, but it's pretty bad coverage. But, no sir, we haven't heard about anything else besides this location.”

“Good. Good. We need it to be this simple.”

“What's the plan, sir? Are we going in, or are we waiting for her?”

“Have we gotten a name yet?”

“Not yet. Marlana tried for it last night, but the guy she spoke to barely spoke English, and her body language wasn't translating as well as she had hoped.” He could hear Marlana harrumph behind him.

Kami smirked and twitched his head at her. “Out of practice, Marl?” Another harrumph was the only response. “For now, we wait. There's too much activity here for us to go in. We can't afford the exposure, and we don't have enough people here yet for cleanup if things get messy.”

Luis nodded and continued to stare out the window.

Kami put his coffee down next to Luis. “What are our options for breakfast?”

Xochitl grunted and began disentangling herself from the

sailor's knots of blankets and sheets that surrounded her. There was a little light sneaking in around the drapes, but that wasn't what had woken her this time. No, it was back to the never-ending search for food.

Wait.

She stopped struggling for a second, and lifted her head to look at the night stand closest to her. Sure enough, she had left an apple there from the night before. Now if she could just get her hand free, she could feed the beast without ever having to actually get up.

No, no, that wouldn't work. She had to hit the bathroom again, and the laptop was still all the way across the room.

She snatched the apple and sneered at it before biting into it then finishing the extraction. Her legs swung out of the bed, sitting on the edge for a minute while she wolfed down the apple. It would be silly to finish it after she got out of the bathroom, only to have to go back in to wash her hands. The apple was on the smaller side, and only took a dozen bites to pick clean. She tossed the core into the trash and made a mental note that she had no maid service before plodding into the bathroom.

She reemerged, showered and finally awake, fifteen minutes later. Her eyes lingered on the pile of blueprints, then on the laptop, then on the empty space on the night stand where she had been piling her food. Priorities, priorities.

Food was non-local, and the blueprints could take up her entire day. She picked up the laptop and cradled it back to the bed. The burn-in hadn't found any significant problems, and the build was continuing as normal with just a couple of hours to go. The build application offered her a choice of generic versions of Solitaire, Tetris, and the Same Game, but she resisted and rolled away. She knew that it was for her own security that she couldn't do anything online before the build was complete, but she wanted to play.

Food it was, then.

She scanned the room, x-raying the boxes scattered about the floor. Dinner clothes, a short leather jacket for when it got chilly as Teddy had assured her it would, stacks of socks and underwear, shoes of form and shoes of function, and a few pairs of jeans and t-shirts.

It occurred to her that a wardrobe was not something one acquired, but something one built. She had never really thought of it that way. Trying to recreate years worth of slogging through dozens of stores, frowning at things that didn't look good on her, frowning on things that looked good but cost an arm and a leg, and settling for things that didn't look bad but didn't require her firstborn – this was not something to be accomplished in a single day on the town. And it

was yet another reason why the inevitable shopping with Susie would be amusing and extravagant, but most likely ultimately frustrating.

Jeans, a three-quarter-sleeved shirt, plain white socks, and plain white flats. *Shocking, Xoch, shocking!*

She double-checked the laptop to ensure that it really was going to be several hours and that it hadn't magically finished everything, frowned again, and walked for the door. She stopped quickly to grab a small notepad and pencil and the bag out of the trash can before making her way to the lobby.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Movement!”

Padded thuds marked the sound of multiple sandwiches hitting paper plates sitting on laps. Napkins rustled and faces were cursorily wiped before all eyes converged on a point a dozen yards from the side of the SUV.

A woman with dark hair stepped through the door. She was carrying a small shopping bag, with the top of her body turned around to talk to someone behind her. She beckoned for the other person to catch up with her, and turned toward them. The onlookers caught a brief glimpse of big, retro sunglasses before the wind caught her and she ducked and scrambled to keep the hat on her head, her hair whipping a black cloud around her head.

No one in the van moved. Kami spoke first.

“Something isn't right.”

Marlena moved toward the door, but Kami stopped her.

“Wait.”

The wind still kept them from seeing the woman's face, but a second later a teen-aged girl pushed open the door and walked through it, followed by a middle-aged man in a ridiculously large black cowboy hat. All three people in the SUV hissed when they saw sunlight glinting off of the rhinestones and opalescent buttons on his shirt, jeans, and boots.

Kami caught sight of something and growled. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and pulled his laptop and garment bag to him from across the seat. Both of his companions were silent. He picked through the bag, pulling out a pair of thin glasses, a photo, a plastic card, and a white iPod. He pushed the glasses on and jammed the card and photo into his wallet. He flipped the iPod over, looked for something on the back, and ejected himself from the vehicle.

"Stay here!"

As he hit the ground, his shoulders relaxed and a smile came over his face. He called out to the man in the hat. "Excuse me! Sir! Excuse me, please?"

Cowboy Hat grabbed his daughter by the shoulder and pulled her to him. She popped white earbuds out of her ears and looked at her father with complete disdain.

"What?"

Eloquent.

"I think there's been some kind of mix-up, sir."

"What?"

"Has your daughter had any problems with her iPod in the last day or so?"

Cowboy Hat rolled his eyes as his daughter started yammering.

"I told you, daddy! You didn't believe me! Didn't I tell you? See?" The mother shushed her daughter as Cowboy Hat squinted at Kami.

"She wouldn't shut up about it on the flight and all last night." He tossed his chin at Kami. "How'd you know about that?"

Kami took the iPod out of his pocket and flashed it at the girl, showing that it matched the one on her hip. She scrunched her face at it, then got a confused look. Kami took a step closer.

"Can I see your iPod for a second, young lady?" He looked at the father for confirmation. "May I?"

"Only if you tell me what this is all about, and quick."

Kami put his palms up toward the man.

"Of course, I'm sorry. I'm still trying to figure it out, myself." He faced the girl again and fished for his wallet. "Tell me, did you see this woman at the airport?"

He pulled out the photo and stepped forward to hand it to the girl. The father snatched it from him and didn't let the girl see it.

"No. We've never seen her. What does she have to do with my daughter's music thing?"

Kami took the photo back, making sure that it faced the girl for several seconds before putting it back into his wallet.

"Yes we have, daddy! That's the lady that I told you about that was running and fell and smashed my gum!"

Cowboy Hat turned his squint to his daughter. "You mean the one you tripped by spreading your stuff all over the floor of the airport!"

"Yeah, but daddy, that was her!"

Cowboy Hat looked back at Kami. "Are you going to explain what is going on here?"

Kami looked contemplative for a moment before he spoke.

"I think we're both the victims of my ex, er, my wife's practical jokes." He looked meaningfully at the father before flicking his eyes at the daughter, hoping that he'd get the message that he was going to fib a little to clean things up for the girl. The man nodded back and Kami turned his attention back to the girl.

"She was playing a joke on me and switched her brand new iPod," he held up the one in his hand, "for mine." He pointed at the one on the girl's hip. "And it looks like she might have gotten them confused when she fell down." He looked at the father with wide eyes and the father nodded again. "But I had some very important files for my job stored on mine."

The girl looked at him, the iPod in his hand, and the iPod on her belt. She wasn't sold yet.

"I'll tell you what, young lady." He fished for his wallet again, pulling out the card. It was bright pink with a black silhouette and a white iPod on it. "My wife gave me this \$250 gift card for the iTunes Store. This iPod is empty, but I really need the files off of the one you have. Would you be willing to trade that one for this one and this gift card? It would really mean a whole lot to me."

The girl looked at the gift card and was sold, but double-checked with her dad before she unclipped the iPod from her belt and handed it over. Kami gave her his iPod and card before flipping over her iPod and looking at the back.

"Yep, this is the one. I'm sorry about this, folks. My wife has a very strange sense of humor." He turned away, but then turned back.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" No one said anything, so he continued. "Did you see which way she went after she got up?"

All he got in response was a trio of strange looks, so he cut them off and started to walk away.

"Never mind, silly question. You all have a nice day!"

He walked back to the SUV before they could say anything else. He stepped inside, closing the door a little too firmly behind him. Luis spoke first.

"What was that about, boss?"

"Clever, clever girl."

Luis waited for him to continue.

"Green swapped her iPod with the girl at the airport."

Marlena cocked her head disbelievingly. "How? How could she have possibly known?"

"She guessed. Too many spy movies or intrigue novels. She had nothing tying her to that particular iPod, so she must have seen the opportunity and taken it. Lucky, lucky, lucky."

Kami closed his eyes and went over the conversation in his head. "She was running. She must have been trying to catch a flight."

He pulled out his cell phone and flipped it open, not bothering with the earpiece, then dialed without thinking and started talking as soon as the line went active.

"This wasn't her, but we have a lead. She wasn't on the Heathrow flight, but she was in the same terminal. Get a list of all of the other flights leaving within two hours before the Heathrow flight out of the same terminal."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl dropped the bag in the trash can by the door and careened her way through the kitchen. This morning's Item of Relocation was a ten-gallon paint bucket filled with more wire whisks than she had ever imagined possible – it got balanced on top of an upside-down pan in a small hand sink.

When she stepped into the walk-in fridge, she paused and surveyed the room around her. She grabbed another small apple, shrugged, and sat down on a wooden orange crate. She didn't have anywhere to be, nor anyone to meet, so why not enjoy her breakfast in here, away from the banging and sawing and paint fumes and constant yelling of the remodeling crews?

She grabbed a bag of rolls, a bag of cheeses, and a paper plate from a nearby stack. She quickly decided that walking back outside the cool confines of the fridge to get a knife to cut the bread would only further speed the heat death of the universe, and was thus a bad idea. Instead, she ripped open the bread and dropped a few slices of cheese onto it.

Looking around, Xochitl could see plastic containers of several types of meats – lamb, beef, chicken, turkey, pork, and probably a few other things she hadn't been brave enough to ask about yet. She decided on some sliced turkey, what looked like white breast meat, and some vinegar and olive oil from containers that were on the table. She prepared four mini-sandwiches and opened a large bottle of water, not bothering with a glass or ice. She settled in on a small seat cushion and a sturdy wooden orange crate.

Sandwich in one hand, pencil in the other, she began to sketch and annotate. Turkey and cheese began to vanish, apple cores multiplied, and sheets of paper metamorphosed violently into wads of trash.

She eventually looked up from the array of drawings and tables in front of her. She realized that she had no feeling between her navel and her knees and knew that it had been at least an hour since she had even shifted position. Propping her self up on the heavy racks on the walls of the fridge, she clawed her way to a standing position and forced herself to do laps around the small room. A low growl developed in her throat, just as much from the frustration at being so oblivious as it was from the cattle prods and white-hot salad forks that now pushed their way into her numb muscles. She knew a considerable amount of time had passed, but she couldn't tell how much.

Time? Why was time important?

She had something that had to do with time today. An appointment?

Diego!

She grabbed at each of the dozen pieces of paper spread out on the floor, then started chucking what was left of her lunch trash into an empty plastic bag. She turned a hurried three-sixty, looking for leftover detritus, and nearly tripped over her own still-cranky feet. The papers were folded in half and jammed into her back pocket, while the bag was knotted as she spun again and backed her way out through the door.

The rational half of her brain forced her to slow down for a few seconds and be wary of the obstacle course, as her legs were still stiff. Visions of tripping and ending up skewered in an institutional-sized mixing bowl kept her pace to a fast lurch.

She hit the kitchen door, slamming it open at a dead run. She was half-way down the hall before it occurred to her that this had been the first time since the initial lunch with Teddy that she'd come out of the kitchen without handfuls of food.

She made it back to her room, panting heavily. She tore through the boxes of clothing and found a light sweater, not even thick enough to keep her warm in an air-conditioned room but still semi-professional looking, and a pair of dress pants. Clothing literally flew across the room as she changed. She unearthed a pair of flats and threw them toward the bed, making a dash for the bathroom. The brush left the counter for all of fifteen seconds – just long enough to rake her hair back into a ponytail before she was back in the bedroom, grabbing for the flats.

She again hit the still-open door at a sprint, arcing toward the lobby.

Teddy heard Xochitl approaching before he saw her. The heavy and rhythmic thud, thud, thud of her feet down the hallway made him perk up, hoping that one of the crews hadn't done something horrible to the superstructure of the building. The thudding slowed and Xochitl appeared in the doorway. He saw her flip around backwards and hit the door jamb at a good clip, one foot in the air and both hands trying to wedge it into a small black shoe. There was a hopping blur of motion as legs and feet were swapped. It was only then that Xochitl looked up to see that others were watching her. She was completely out of breath and gasping.

Teddy moved toward her, but before he could reach her she stood up straight and fought to get her breathing under control. He slowed as she adjusted her sweater and ran her hands a centimeter from her hair, even though it was securely held back with a large black scrunchie. He saw her grimace as her fingertips hit the scrunchie, but he couldn't figure out why.

He was so amused and simultaneously frightened that he was unable to do more than arch an eyebrow at her and cock his head. Xochitl took a second before she answered.

"Sorry I'm late. I completely lost track of time." She then leaned toward him and spoke in the parentheses-wrapped subtext-language that he was only just beginning to get accustomed to. "How late am I, anyway? What time is it?"

He hunched in a bit, as was appropriate, looked at his watch, and said "Just after one."

"Oh. Very, very late then. Sorry again." She leaned back to close the parentheses, and he followed suit. "Did I miss him? I was in the fridge working on the wireless plans."

Teddy squinted, taking a second to catch up with her. "Ah! Diego! Yes, I meant to tell you earlier but I could not find you. He called several hours ago. He would like another day to look over the plans before he meets with you. It seems that Señor Cortés has said some very impressive things about you, and he wanted to be prepared. He will be here tomorrow, after lunch. Probably two-thirty, he said."

Xochitl just blinked at him.

"Um. Okay. Works for me."

Teddy saw her eyes glaze over and realized she was already out of the room and on her way back to her plans. He nodded and turned away, glancing at the screen on his cellphone and verifying that the

person on the other end hadn't disconnected yet.

Xochitl wasn't so far into her haze that she would miss such a thing, and started stammering at him. "Oh, wow, I'm so sorry. I just barged on in. And you were on the phone. That's just horrible."

Teddy smiled at her in a way that let her know that it wasn't a problem, but that he did need to get back to the phone call. "Not at all. Enjoy your extra day!" He held a finger up to her, said a quick "*un momento*" into the phone, and asked "How is it coming along?"

"Good, I think. I need to do some more exploring, but I think we can do almost everything without having to rip any walls down or anything invasive like that. Some of the larger ballrooms will be a bit tricky, but not impossible. With a small crew, wireless could be up in a week's worth of work. It's the cabling for all of the rooms that's going to take forever. As a conservative estimate, we're looking at five to seven hundred drops. If we want to physically segregate the meeting rooms from the suites, which I think we should, it will be even more interesting."

Teddy squinted at her again and did some mental math. "It sounds like you have been working very hard at this. I look forward to your proposal." He nodded and lifted the cellphone to chest-level. She got the hint, smiled, and walked out of the room. He put the cellphone to his ear and made the mental switch back to Catalan.

"Ho sento, señor. En cas que se'ns?"

— $Cn \perp cnc \geq n(C)c(=\emptyset)n(C)c(=\emptyset)c \perp 2$ —

Xochitl focused on the clock, then looked up from the screen and rubbed her eyes. Just after ten. This meant that post-embarrassing-entrance and kitchen rummaging, she had been coding for a little more than seven hours.

She had been so thoroughly mortified by her actions that she had been unable to think any more about the hotel wiring. She justified it by reasoning that since Diego was trying so hard to get ahead, it would be cruel to not give him the opportunity. Plus, she was beginning to hit a wall. Cabling a server room was one thing – cabling an entire campus was something else. Her theoretical knowledge of cabling was only going to take her so far. It was going to take Diego's practical knowledge to get the specs finalized.

Thus, she had ended up coding.

The analysis of the different Alfred source codes hadn't taken much time. Brian's copy had a few changes, all of which looked like

legitimate work, or at least the beginnings of legitimate work. But, with or without the changes, she couldn't get the source to compile to anything close to what was being distributed from SourceForge. Her disassembly skills had long since rusted solid, so digging any deeper wasn't an option. It meant James' group had compiled their changes and uploaded the binaries without checking the changes into source control, and without copying the files to Brian's machine.

Which, it occurred to her, meant that they didn't expect his machine to be picked apart, or didn't think they could pull off fooling anyone that got into it. She became glad she had gotten in while she'd had the chance.

Plus, of course, she'd had her secret weapon: paranoia. When she had been in the Mexican restaurant with James and had given the thumb drive, she'd only told him half of the truth. The drive did have the patches to fix the existing backdoors, but she had neglected to mention the copies she had uploaded to her old office and several servers she still had access to from her days in college.

Thus, she now had a pristine copy of Alfred that she could distribute. She had just finished the upload to the SourceForge servers, the check-in to the public source control repository, and the release notes for the changes. She hadn't mentioned anything about a possible breach, as she didn't want to send up any red flags – she said simply that a patch for a possible buffer overrun had introduced another bug, but both were now fixed. She hadn't been able to use her own name, however, so had to create a new SourceForge account and have her old account make her new account an admin. Then, for good measure, had changed the passwords on all three SourceForge accounts, including Brian's.

She was hungry and exhausted, but too wired to sleep any time soon.

She looked around the room. It was the same as last night: boxes everywhere, nothing hanging in the closet. Noncommittal. But at the same time, she wouldn't be able to pick up and leave at a moment's notice. Some part of her couldn't settle in, but some other part wouldn't think of leaving.

Her attention wandered to the night stand and the pile of fruit. She reached for it, but then thought better of it. Instead, she slid the laptop off her thighs and rotated off the bed. She'd wander around for a bit for some fresh air, and stop by the fridge in her travels.

Or, you know, I could stop by the fridge first and wander second.

Yeah, that sounded like a plan. She grabbed a pair of sneakers, jammed them on, and walked out of the room.

Actually ...

She turned around and grabbed the iPod out of her bag by the bed. She had been slowly downloading and copying albums onto it as she worked. She supposed she could have felt guilty about it, but then thought of the books and books worth of CDs that she had legitimately purchased, then suddenly lost access to because of this mess. All of which, by the way, had started because the movie and music industries couldn't play nice. Thus, not so much with the guilt.

She popped in the earbuds and thumbed the iPod to life. She swirled the menus over to Random, then changed her mind. Oakenfold. Hybrid. Yeah. Upbeat but relaxing. Her thumb slid along the wheel and queued up the appropriate playlist, twisting the music to life.

She closed her eyes and stood there for a minute as the strings started up.

Her breath slowed and her shoulders relaxed. It wasn't even conscious – she had just needed the world to go away for a second.

She walked slowly out of the room again, eyes half-open but unseeing.

Day 12

Xochitl woke to the overwhelming smell of her own sweat. Her eyes refused to open, and she quickly realized that the rest of her body was just as reluctant to move. Every muscle in her body throbbed, unfortunately not in unison. Her thighs and calves were especially vocal. What in the world?

Oh. Yeah. That's right. I jogged for the first time in years.

Come to think of it, she hadn't jogged since college.

Whose dumb idea was that, anyway?

From the way her body was rebelling against her, she would have thought that she had jogged up Montserrat or something. Really, she had only made it once around the outside of the hotel; maybe a single mile, if that.

She had taken it easy, reentering the building after fifteen minutes or so, but years of sitting at a desk for the majority of her day had taken its toll. She hadn't felt it last night – the run had ended with a warm glow. But today ... ouch.

Her eyes finally opened and she saw that there was some light getting into the room, but not nearly as much as when she usually got up. It was early, but she wasn't even going to try to focus on the laptop screen to see the time.

She let out a sigh and caught the smell of the miasma surrounding her as she inhaled. The endorphin crash had knocked her out only minutes after the jog. She had collapsed into bed without changing out of her sweats. As she moved to put her nose into the pillow, she felt the tightness of the scrunchie she had left in her hair. She squinted and concentrated, but when she reopened her eyes both the scrunchie and the smell were still there.

She moved to roll over onto her back and regretted it.

After a minute of laying in bed, attempting to breathe as shallowly as she could, she growled and bolted out of bed. It hurt, but it was still better to do it quickly than to drag it out. Her muscles were stiff, causing her to be permanently off-balance as she tried to assuage the fear of ripping something wide open. She knew it was an

irrational fear, but it was reinforced by each step she took toward the bathroom.

She turned the shower on to something she hoped would be just under unbearably hot. By the time she had stripped down and extracted the scrunchie from her hair, steam was drifting lazily across the ceiling. She stepped into the shower, avoiding the spray that she knew would probably burn her. She adjusted the temperature until she could leave her hand in the stream without yelping, then moved under the water. It was painfully hot, but not so much so that it would make her fear permanent injury.

For a full three minutes she leaned against the side wall of the shower and let the water run down her back. She felt her shoulders flush to scarlet and the muscles start to relax. The tightness receded slowly out of her back, and down out the soles of her feet. She wiggled her toes and the effort spurred her to stand up off of the wall and grab for the soap.

By the time she turned off the shower, a solid thirty minutes had passed. She said a silent thanks that the hotel was empty, giving her nigh-unlimited hot water at a moment's notice. As she grabbed for the towel rack, the entrance door to the suite shook gently from a light knock. Seconds later, she heard a light voice.

"Miss Webb?"

She wasn't sure, but she thought it sounded like Eddie.

"One second!" She leaned out of the bathroom door and verified that she was still alone. "I'll be right out! Eddie?"

She sprinted for the other side of the room, calf muscles objecting but obeying.

The voice came through the door again, this time a little louder but still hesitant. "Yes."

She grabbed the first set of underwear, jeans, socks, bra, and shirt that she could find, doing only a cursory check to ensure that all of them were wearable. As she ran back through the bathroom door, slamming it behind her, she yelled again.

"Come on in, Eddie. I'm just getting out of the shower. I'll be out in a moment."

She lost his response as she tugged the shirt down over her head. She was fully dressed in record time, but the mirror heckled her for not being in any way presentable. She forced a brush through her hair, grimacing at the now-wet knots. She tossed a glance at her shower kit on the counter, but decided to forgo the deodorant and other pleasantries until she'd found out what Eddie wanted. She turned and flung open the door to see an empty room.

"Eddie?"

The voice came from the other side of the door. "Yes?" He was still in the hall. Xochitl rolled her eyes – he was terminally cute.

"Come on in, Eddie. I'm out of the shower and fully dressed."

The door slid open an inch and stopped. She saw Eddie's eyes dart side-to-side, scanning the room in quick cross-sections.

"I promise I'm decent." She dropped onto the edge of the bed and put her hands at her side.

Eddie opened the door the rest of the way, but then continued to stand in the hall.

"Miss Webb."

"Mary, Eddie."

He looked inordinately uncomfortable with the prospect of calling her by anything other than last name. He avoided it and moved on.

"I was wondering." He paused until she dipped her head for him to continue. "Would you like to have breakfast with me?"

She smiled at him. He reminded her of some little kid asking if the bigger kid down the street could come out and play.

"Breakfast sounds great, Eddie. Now?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Give me one minute to finish getting ready. Are we going out, or is this okay?" She stood up and did a quick Vanna White.

Eddie shook his head, then nodded, then stopped, realizing that he wasn't being clear.

"I have brought some for us. It is downstairs. What you are wearing is just fine."

Xochitl looked at him. He was wearing a light yellow button-down shirt with the cuffs flared up, and black slacks that had obviously been ironed that morning. Her t-shirt and jeans weren't going to cut it.

"Hmm. Make that two minutes to get ready, and then we'll go."

She moved to the pile and plucked out a button-down of her own, as well as the dress pants she hadn't gotten to use from the day before. Nothing too dressy, but not jeans. She was almost in the bathroom again before she realized that Eddie was still standing in the doorway.

"I can't make you come inside, Eddie, but you don't have to stand in the hall." She closed the bathroom door behind her before he could respond.

When she emerged again, true to her word in under two minutes, Eddie was still standing in the hallway. She chuckled at him, grabbed the flats from next to the bed, and joined him.

"Ready?" He nodded. "Where are we headed?"

He pointed down the hall. "The room from the other night. Where I was teaching Theodore how to dance."

She acknowledged and started walking. He pulled up beside her.

"You did not need to change. Your clothes were okay."

"You looked too nice. The impedance mismatch was ... nevermind. You looked too nice." She smiled to show that it really was okay. He smiled back, happy that she had changed, no matter what he had said. They walked in silence, reaching the stairs before Eddie spoke again.

"How are your plans for the Internet? Are they well?"

She inhaled sharply, lurching on the stairs before she realized that he was talking about her job working on the hotel's network.

"They are going very well, actually. I've finished my initial plans for the wireless. But, I'll need to start poking around in the ceilings and crawl spaces before I can start any serious work on the wired part. It's all fine and good to draw colored lines on blueprints, but it's something else entirely to be ready to pull cables through walls."

They turned down another hall. He didn't say anything, so she continued.

"And I have zero clue as to what to expect in a place like this. For all I know there could be iron girders every four feet."

He was silent again and she realized that he was still processing what she had said. She felt horrible that she was losing him already, and just because she couldn't do anything better than ramble.

"Sorry. That was a lot at once." She saw him frown to himself. "It's going well. The project is just about where I want it to be."

His frown went neutral, then into a small smile. "That is good to hear."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the ballroom, she saw that he had a large circular table set up in one corner. It looked like it could have easily sat 8 or 10 people, so the two-person setup looked lopsided. However, the linen tablecloth was immaculately pressed, the flatware was shiny, and the plates were the first non-paper she had seen in the hotel since she had arrived. Islands of spotless serving trays glinted in a sea of white beneath the chandelier high above them.

"It's gorgeous, Eddie. You didn't have to set this up just for me."

He said nothing, but beckoned her to the seat most toward the corner of the room, pulling it out from the table for her. She sat and sniffed the air to try and pick out what was under the covered dishes. She couldn't make out anything specific – it just smelled like breakfast.

He didn't sit immediately, instead taking the cue to uncover each of the dishes, doing his own Vanna White. Xochitl smiled and nodded her approval with each dish: scrambled eggs, sliced melons and citrus, several types of rolls and sliced bread accompanied by ramekins of brightly-colored jams, and several dishes that she couldn't identify. He saved one covered dish for last, grinning madly and pausing for effect before he pulled away the lid.

Xochitl couldn't help but laugh out loud as she saw a pile of bacon bigger than her head escape the confines of the serving dish and overflow onto the no-longer-pristine tablecloth. Eddie put down the lid and clapped once, laughing with her.

"It is good?"

"Very nice. It's more food than even I can eat," she flashed him an eyebrow, "but I'll certainly give it a try. The month's worth of bacon is a great touch."

"That is good. It was Theodore's idea, but I thought he was joking with me."

"He was, sort of, but it's okay."

Eddie started serving her, pointing to each dish in turn. She took a little bit of everything, even the unidentifiable stuff. She asked him what the first thing was, but he looked at her with an I don't know the words look, so she took it and didn't ask again. He took some for himself, so it was obviously edible, and that was good enough for her.

The serving dishes had done their jobs admirably, as the hot food was still steaming, while the cold food still had a sheen of condensation on it. Xochitl waited for Eddie sit and lift his fork before she dove in, scrambled eggs first. They weren't quite Teddy's scrambled eggs, but they were good. She cleared a quarter of her plate before speaking up.

"Did you make all of this yourself?"

"I made most of it, but not everything. Theodore cut up the fruit while I did the cooking."

Xochitl rolled her eyes. "How thoughtful of him to be such a help."

He caught the sarcasm and smiled. "No, he was very helpful. All of the little, what do you call them?" He made a wavy sign with his finger.

"I'm sure there's a technical word for it, but I think you mean krinkle cut."

"Yes. All of the krinkle cutting takes time. If Theodore had not helped me, all of the rest of the breakfast would be cold."

"Fair enough. And it is all excellent, by the way. Have you

always known how to cook? Most American men can't cook their way out of a box of macaroni and cheese."

He took a second to translate, then chuckled. "Thank you very much. Miss Susie taught me. She said if I knew how to cook, I would make a very good husband some day."

"She was right."

Xochitl made it through another half of her plate before continuing the conversation.

"It sounds like she was, I mean Susie, like she was a big part of your life growing up? She taught you how to dance and how to cook, and did a great job of both as near as I can tell."

"Yes, Miss Susie is always very nice to all of us."

Xochitl could tell he was edging around the topic of his mother, who had gone completely unmentioned by Teddy. She changed tacks.

"Are there any more surprises that Susie taught you? You don't have your own private jet out back or anything, right?"

Eddie laughed hard enough to suck some scrambled eggs down the wrong pipe. When he finished coughing, he shook his head.

"No jet. But, if you have no work for tomorrow, there is one more thing."

Xochitl, arched her eyebrows, but Eddie wasn't going to give anything away. "Surprise?" He nodded and she squinted at him. He stopped smiling and got a scared look on his face until she cracked and grinned at him. He laughed again and nodded.

"Yes, it is a surprise. Are you to work, or can you drive with me for the day?"

"Well, Diego is supposed to be here after lunch today. Diego is the man helping me with the Internet work for the hotel? Right. I'm not sure what his plans will be, but I'll be sure to let him know that he'll have to get by without me tomorrow."

Eddie tossed a stack of bacon onto her plate to celebrate.

"Besides," she giggled as she stabbed at the thick slices with her fork, "he made me wait for a day, so it's only fair that I drop all of the work in his lap and make him wait a day for me."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Diego was Spain's equivalent of the typical American IT worker: small, shapeless, badly-shaved, in need of a haircut, and twitchy. His deep brown skin and large, thick mustache were the only things that set him apart from any other networking guy Xochitl had ever seen.

He reached a hand toward her that was covered in callouses, small lacerations, and permanent multicolored stains.

“Señora Webb?”

What had Teddy told her? How did she say that she knew no Catalan?

“Sí. *¿Diego? Perdoni, yo no entienden castellano. Inglés por favor.*”

She was sure she had heavily butchered it, but she got her point across. Diego looked back at her with the international “well duh” stare.

“Of course, Miss Webb. How are you this afternoon?” His accent was thicker than his mustache, causing a slight delay in her language decoding center. She suddenly had insight into what she had been putting Eddie through since she had gotten here.

“I am doing well. And you?” Social handshaking must be obeyed, no matter what continent.

“I am very good. It is a beautiful day outside.” One led to the other, but Xochitl wasn't sure which came first.

“Then I have a wonderful place for us to sit down and go over these.” She rattled her tube of blueprints at a similar tube he had slung over his shoulder. “Right this way.”

She led him to the outdoor café area. They sat at a makeshift picnic table and began extracting the rolled contents of their respective tubes.

“I'm not sure how long I'll last in your Spanish sun, but you are right – it's very nice out.”

He laughed. Apparently, geek humor had no language barriers. She continued.

“I'll be honest with you, this project is quite a bit larger than anything I've ever attempted. I think I've got the wireless parts all figured out, and the cabling seems straightforward enough. But, really, it's all theory for me, no practice.”

Diego nodded and steepled his hands. He looked apprehensive.

“Since you have started by being so honest, I will do the same. Señor Cortés has great pride in me, but I have also never done anything this ... involved.” He split his hands, showing her his worn palms. “I have, as you say, all of the practice but none of the theory. But Señor Cortés says I am ready to start doing more than just making cable and drilling holes.” He turned his palms toward him and studied them. “And so we are here.”

“Well Diego, and please call me Mary,” he nodded, “that sounds great. I think we'll make a great team. I have a ton of ideas that I need to make sure are practical, and it sounds like you are exactly the right guy.” She circled her finger above the papers, indicating a

dozen light pink sticky notes that all ended in question marks.

"I'd like to get the wireless up and running first. I know we need to get the hard cabling started before the work crews finish, but I figure that's more of a known, or at least deducible, quantity. I have no idea how well wireless is going to work through the walls here, so I figure that's the big nebulous thing that should be tackled first. We'll throw a few access points in the ceilings and see what kind of range we get. That'll help us narrow down how many APs we're going to need, and thus how much cabling will need to be added to support them. Sound logical enough?"

Diego nodded and visibly loosened up. This was stuff that he knew how to do. He saw that she had a plan, and was more than happy to help her pick it apart or shore it up.

Xochitl continued. "After that, we get to the really fun stuff. I'm thinking fiber." She traced her fingers along bright red lines radiating out from the center of her stack of blueprints. "Do you have any experience with that?"

Diego smiled widely and showed her his palms again.

"Oh yes."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

"What? What is it? It's not iron girders, is it?"

Diego continued to curse quickly in a language that didn't even sound like Catalan. He stepped back down the ladder, flashlight between his teeth.

"No. Steel."

Xochitl leaned back against the wall and growled. She slid to the floor, unrolling the blueprints in her hands before laying the stack in front of her.

"Well then. At least now we know what these heavy lines are."

Diego stepped off of the ladder and sat next to her. "It is all much easier when someone says to me, 'Diego! Start here, end there!' They have already figured out how to get around the things in the way."

"Right. But at least this time you get to be the one telling someone else where to start and end."

He shrugged.

"Well, logically, they ran power lines somehow. I assume that's what these are." She traced another set of thin lines that ran out of the room. "I hate to run cabling right next to power lines, but if that's

what it takes, then that's what it takes. There's no way Teddy would go for fiber to every room."

They both sat, staring at the papers.

"Tell you what. Did you bring any wireless APs with you?"

"I think so. I probably have two or three in my car."

"Let's table the cabling discussion for a while and play with some wireless. We'll worry about how to get cables to the APs later."

He shrugged and stood up. He walked out of the room, and it seemed to Xochitl like he was back within seconds of leaving. She started talking to him without looking up from the blueprints.

"You know what? I just had a crazy idea." She looked at him and saw his mustache twitch at her. "I read somewhere that the U.S. Army has these wireless packs for their infantry. Every soldier gets one, and it just fits in with the rest of his gear. When they turn them on, they start talking to each other and form a huge mesh network. Follow?"

He didn't immediately, so she made little dancing motions with her fingers to show men walking in formation and wireless data flowing between them.

"When they are out on a mission, they may not always have line-of-sight back to the base camp, or through the clouds for satellite, or whatever. But they'll almost always have line-of-sight to each other. So, these wireless packs forward all their communications throughout the mesh until they get to everyone. The networking works around the environment that might be getting in their way."

Her hands danced in a large loop around her crossed legs, zig-zagging back and forth around her knees. She saw that Diego was starting to get it.

"Could we do that here? What if we didn't have to worry about cabling for all of the suites, only for the big ones like the ballrooms?" Her hands hopped across the blueprints. We could run the suites backwards: the hard cabling would be running to the wireless APs. The backbone would be wireless, for the suites anyway, and the edges would be wired. The suites would be limited to wireless speeds, but who is going to care?"

Diego thought, electronics forgotten in his hands. "That is a different idea. And the wireless must be good for it to work. And with the steel beams ... I do not know."

"I think we can do it. We'll have to work on some decent security, but it should work. What have you got there?"

Diego lifted the mess of plastic boxes and power cords.

"Routers and access points. B, G, and N." He used his right hand to indicate one small silver box. "And this one is new. It is a," he

searched for the word, “prototype? Yes. It is a prototype.” He pointed to a small USB dongle poking out of his pocket. He obviously meant that the one went with the other.

Xochitl stood up and reached to help him set down the piles of equipment. The silver box was completely unlabeled except for a number handwritten with black permanent marker on the underside. Diego fished the dongle out of his pocket and handed it to her, a grin covering his face.

Xochitl threw him an eyebrow, but then took the dongle and walked over to her laptop. She opened it, then unplugged it from the wall. The screen faded gently to life and she logged in. She plugged in the dongle and waited. A small window appeared, telling her that a new generic networking device had been plugged in. The eyebrow stayed up.

She looked up to see that Diego had walked to the nearest power outlet and plugged in the silver device. The new network icon in her tray went active. She moused over it and her jaw dropped.

“Gigabit!”

She double-clicked the icon to open the status window. Sure enough, the dongle was reporting a gigabit link. Without another machine to test against, she couldn't be sure that the device was functioning as well as it claimed to, but a quick look at Diego removed any doubt. He was completely serious and smothered in pride.

“Where did you get this?”

He shifted on his feet before he answered. “I have some friends who are working on this.”

Xochitl started to walk away as he spoke, keeping an eye on the signal strength, but prompted him to continue.

“They tell me it is not quite ready to build yet. They say—” He stopped, as Xochitl had stopped walking and turned back toward him.

“The range.” She couldn't have been more than thirty feet away from him. She moved a few steps closer and watched the speed indicator flip back to gigabit. A few steps back and it dropped down an order of magnitude. She began to circle him, signaling him to stand still. When she had situated him between her and the access point, she slowly walked toward him while keeping an eye on her screen. When she stopped again, she looked up to see that she was now no more than fifteen feet from him. “Hmm.”

Xochitl unplugged the dongle from the back of her machine. It was no larger than if she had placed her thumbs side by side.

“That's an interesting wrinkle. I need to think about that one.”

Diego nodded and unplugged the access point, then walked over to take the dongle from her. Xochitl waved it in her hand absently.

"Do they have a few more prototypes we can use? Even just two or three more?"

Diego waited patiently for her to notice his outstretched hand.

"I can ask. I believe so."

Xochitl flipped the screen down on her laptop, half-noticing the dwindling vibration of the hard drive and fans spinning down as the laptop hibernated.

"Steel girders. Wireless backbones. Fiber backbones. Gigabit access points. Hmm." The dongle continued to wave about, inches from Diego's hand. She blinked and finally noticed it. "Sorry," she said as she deposited it in his palm. "Yeah, I definitely need to think about this one."

Diego glanced back at the entangled mass of off-the-shelf wireless access devices laying on the floor behind him.

"Yeah. We still need to do testing with the regular ones. Tell you what. Let's do some range testing for the next, say, two or three hours. That should give us enough time to check out how well they work through floors and walls and in the larger ballrooms."

Diego nodded and moved toward the pile.

"Then I'll take tonight and tomorrow to rework my plans. I won't be here tomorrow, but if you want to come back and poke around in the ceilings and crawl spaces, I'll make sure Teddy, Theodore, knows that you'll be here."

"Yes, that would be good. Thank you."

"How free are you for the next week after that?"

"Señor Cortés has made it so that this is my only job until it is complete."

Xochitl couldn't tell if this was a good thing or a bad thing. "Okay, fair enough. We may as well start here. Did you bring a power strip?"

Diego fished around in the mass of cables, extracting an end that had several female outlets. "Yes."

"Great. Let's do it."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c1c2 —

Xochitl felt her stomach grumble against the bed. Her head dropped between the elbows that were propping her up and made a shushing sound. She looked back at the spreadsheet on the laptop in front of her. Columns of data about ranges and prices and environments and brands and speeds filled the screen. She mashed

her teeth, having trouble visualizing the data.

You need to bite the bullet and make a map. You'll never see it all otherwise.

"Says you. That'll take a day in and of itself."

Look, you're already doing an amateur job here, are you trying to stay in the minors?

"Go away, Bri."

I'll take that as a yes.

"Look. I know I need a map. I'll ask Teddy tomorrow if he has a scanner. I am not drawing a dozen pages of blueprints by hand. Seriously. Scanning them piecemeal and stitching them together is going to take hours as it is."

Yeah, but it's got to get done, kiddo.

She didn't respond, and instead paged through the spreadsheet. Her stomach grumbled again.

And what about James?

That evaporated what little concentration she had left.

"I don't know. Can I trust Susie to keep things under her hat?"

You don't even know what kind of resources he has. He may not need Susie's help to find you.

Xochitl bit her lip.

"As long as I don't use the Webb passport and Susie doesn't talk, how could he track me down? I've been really careful about my 'net access. He shouldn't be able to use that to find me, either. And it's not like I've used any credit cards. I'm essentially off the grid."

Yeah, about credit cards ...

"I know! I'm so sorry! But I just thought it might come in handy. It probably doesn't even work anymore anyway."

Right.

They were both silent for a minute. Xochitl continued to nibble on her lip, the screen in front of her completely forgotten.

You still need to figure out what to do about him. He's not going to just let you go. You know that.

"Yeah. I know."

You need leverage. You've got me, but you can't prove anything. You've got the bogus versions of Alfred, but ...

"But again I can't prove anything."

What can you prove?

"Nothing."

What do you know?

"Hmm. Not much. I've met a couple of his people, but he could have two or two hundred. It sounds like a small operation, but I don't know."

What else?

"There was the ticket. Where did Faith say it had been booked to? Los Angeles, right? Could that be significant? Could he have some sort of a base of operations out there or something?"

Maybe. But you are on the other side of the world and don't have a viable passport.

"Not to mention the fact that even if I could get to L.A., I would have no idea where to look."

Right.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hang on a sec. I'm still coming at this from the wrong angle."

Go on, I'm listening.

"Why do I care where he is? It's not like I'm going to hit his office with a battalion of stormtroopers or anything."

Valid. Keep going.

"I need to focus on what he is doing. Him and Perkins. If I can figure that out ..."

Then you'll have some leverage.

"Right, right, right. So ... a million zombies. What can you do with a million zombies? Send spam, launch denial of service attacks, spread viruses." Her fingers counted off the options as she said them aloud. "But no. There's not enough money in those things. Not for the kind of cash Town Hall must be paying James and his people. And none of those things are worth killing for."

So what's bigger than that? What is worth killing for?

"Secrets. Money tied to secrets. But what kind of secrets?"

She put her head down on the bed and tapped erratically on the blanket to each side of her. She continued to talk out loud, muffled by the blanket.

"Secrets. Money. A million zombies. A million zombies is ... what? Bandwidth? Sure. But that's cheap and less risky. Computing power. There you go. Not so cheap on that scale, and a lot harder to come by. So what do you do with exaflops at your fingertips?"

She raised her head, hair drifting wildly around her in the breeze from the open windows.

"Crypto. That's the only thing you can do worth doing with that much power. And crypto is for secrets, and secrets can be turned into money. Or ..." Her palms drummed the bed faster and faster. "Or you cut out the secrets and go straight for the money: banks."

Xochitl chewed her lip and cocked her head to do some math.

"But still, you could have every computer on the Internet working on it, and you wouldn't be able to crack the crypto at most banks. And certainly not any banks worth cracking."

A flash filtered through her hair as the screensaver on her laptop kicked in. She parted her hair and moved to hit the touchpad, but paused. Images of famous architecture swiped and slid in and out, left and right in front of her. That really tall building in Asia with the tennis court on the roof. Big Ben. The World Trade Center. The Space Needle. The Eiffel Tower.

Eiffel Tower.

Eiffel Tower.

Her hand stopped beating the bed and she was perfectly still.

"No way."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c1p —

"Hello?"

"Mr. Perkins. It's nice to talk to you again."

"Who is this?"

"We had a meeting just the other day. Xochitl Green."

The line was silent.

"You gave me this number personally. We had worked out a nice deal."

"And what do you want? Our deal is off. Your actions since then have shown me that you are not someone I want to do business with."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play coy with me, girl. I was told in graphic detail about the mess you made."

"Mr. Perkins, I really have no clue what you mean. I talked with you, I hopped on a plane, and I've been laying low since then."

The line was again silent.

"What mess?"

There was a long pause before he spoke again.

"Are you telling me that you did not dispose of two people at your apartment?"

Xochitl's jaw dropped and her entire plan disappeared from in front of her.

"What? No! My apartment? Two people?"

"Yes. I have since seen the pictures. Our courier and one of our contractors were discovered in a very large pool of blood on your floor. I was told that another contractor heard the entire event."

It was Xochitl's turn to be silent.

"Look, Mr. Perkins. I know you have no reason to believe me, but you have to. That. Was not. Me. I don't even think I am capable

of that.”

“Girl, you are right. I have no reason to believe anything that you say.”

The dull background static from the line filled Xochitl's ears. James. Kami. He was doing this to her. She needed a way to flip this back onto him.

She needed to get the plan back on track.

“Alright. Fair enough. Obviously Kami is playing us against each other. That may actually explain what I was calling about. I saw that someone updated Alfred again. I haven't had a chance to look at the changes, which is why I called. Was it your people? I wanted to get a copy of the changes and start working toward our deal.”

The line was silent. He didn't have people. He had contracted everything out to James. Good to know. But Perkins didn't have to know that she knew.

“I'll take it that's a no. I can only assume it was his people, then. Why wouldn't he tell you about that? That seems a little shady to me.”

“Yes it does. I doubt it was him.”

“I haven't tried getting back in to update Alfred. I hope I still can, assuming his people haven't locked me out.”

Again, silence.

“So. Look. What can I do to show you that I'm serious? We are being played, but we don't have to be on opposing teams. Why would we be having this conversation unless I was trying to stick to our deal?”

“Miss Green, it sounds like you want to work something out. But until I know that we can trust you, I'm keeping you in the guest house.”

“Fair enough. Check into what you were told. But, if I may be so bold, go through other channels. It seems that your head man isn't telling you everything.”

“Girl, I do not need your input. When I want it, I will ask you. Have no doubt.”

“Sorry, you are right. You know what you are doing. But ...”

“Yes?”

“In light of what you have said, I think I need to stay off the grid for a while. I can't tell you how to reach me, but I can contact you again in, what, twenty-four hours?”

“I don't know that I like the sound of that.”

“Can you blame me? I don't know what he's capable of, but it's obvious that he's not weighed down by a heavy conscience. Until you can guarantee my safety, what choice do I have?”

"Twenty-four hours, Miss Green. If my information differs in any way from what you have told me, we will find you no matter how far off the grid you are."

The line went dead and the phone software on the laptop closed automatically.

What was all that about?

Time for a new plan, Xoch.

There was no way Perkins would call James, right? And even if he did, what would James say? It's not like he would own up to making her disappear. Would he?

No, no. She couldn't start second-guessing herself now. She had made the right choices and said the right things. She needed to get Perkins to trust her if she was going to derail their plans and pull off what she wanted to do.

But James. What about James?

Perkins had obviously contracted out all of the computer work to James and his crew. But that didn't make any sense. It meant that either James played a much larger role than she had thought, or that Perkins was smarter than she gave him credit for.

Or there was a fourth person involved that was actually pulling the strings.

No. Perkins was top dog. He exuded it with every over-enunciated syllable of that horrific accent of his. He wouldn't work for anyone else. She'd been right to sew the seeds of doubt about James. If James was doing all of the grunt work, and with such little oversight, then Perkins was up a creek if he couldn't trust James. She'd be able to use that in their next conversation.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

What if Perkins didn't know it was a con?

That made more sense. He didn't seem subtle enough to pull off the kind of inveigling this con would take.

So who had sold it to Perkins? And did James know what was really going on, or was he just as in the dark as everyone else?

The opportunity was there – a brass ring right in front of her. She could reach out and grab it, but it might be too much of a stretch for her to handle. And what would she do with it once she had it?

She needed to talk to James.

— c n l c n c 2 n (C) c (= 0) n (C) c (= 0) c l 2 —

Kami pulled the earpiece away from him and looked at it,

turning it over in his hand.

“Something has gone wrong.”

Marlena cocked her head at him.

“Perkins is acting strange. I don't know what, but something is going on. I need more information.”

He slid the earpiece back in place and dialed the phone in his other hand. Marlena pretended to be busy and not listening to every word, but she knew she wasn't fooling anyone.

“Have we heard anything about the presentation being pushed forward?”

“Not that I have heard, sir. Let me check. No. No, sir. The last beta we have on that was your entry from the courier: three or four days from now.”

“Has anyone from Town Hall talked to anyone other than me in the last week?”

“Um ... it doesn't look like it, sir. No one has logged any contact, and the last automated entries from them were your phone call a few minutes ago, and the one two days ago during your flight to Heathrow.”

“New protocol: no one talks to anyone from that organization except me. Any communication from them should be routed to me immediately. They are starting to get twitchy, and I don't like it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Day 13

Xochitl stared at the ceiling above her bed, breathing slowly. Her unfocused eyes twitched left and right, matching the small movements her hands made above her abdomen.

She had woken a half-hour ago, early for the second day in a row. Her calf and thigh muscles still complained about the jog from two days before, but she knew she'd be good for another one by nightfall. No, what had woken her today was the same conundrum she had been trying to solve when she finally fell asleep the night before: how to securely contact James.

She knew that she had been extraordinarily lucky in netting Susie. She had been trying for something simple like a back way out of the airport or maybe a bump to a later flight, hoping that it would have taken James a while to catch up with her. That Susie had put her on a flight to someplace completely different, then covered it up, was more than she could have hoped for. Now she was here, almost untraceable.

Xochitl was quickly discovering that being *persona non grata* was almost as much of a hindrance as it was a help. She didn't have a job, and most likely couldn't get one. She had a very limited amount of cash, and plastic that would almost certainly get her discovered. She had shell accounts or secure access to a half-dozen servers, but couldn't find a use for them. She had created new email addresses, but all of them were nameless and unlinked to either Xochitl Green or Mary Webb. She had only the Webb passport, which she doubted would hold up to scrutiny, and she had no credible way of explaining how she got into the country. She didn't remotely speak any of the local languages. Oh, and as far as the country of her citizenship was concerned, she was dead.

The only way out was to start digging. Running was not an option. She had to reach James and find out what he knew. Perkins could be manipulated, but it was going to take her best game face to do it. James was another story altogether.

But how did you find someone who made it his business to not

be found, without letting him find you?

She had to go through Perkins.

Actually, that wasn't such a bad idea. She'd already started sewing the "poor, helpless Xochitl" seeds last night. She just needed to twist it around a bit so that Perkins thought she was necessary to entrap James. Perkins certainly couldn't geek on their level, so that was easy enough.

Wait, wait, wait.

It had been James' crew that had patched Alfred first. Perkins had to trust that James had done as he had asked. But, if she could convince Perkins that James couldn't be trusted ... then Perkins could put her in a position to thwart both of them at the same time. She had less than a single day to come up with something bulletproof.

It was a stretch, but it was all that she had.

And speaking of which ...

Xochitl's eyes fluttered and focused. Her arms pushed out above her and every muscle in her body tightened then relaxed. She rattled her head, then blinked a few times before sitting up.

Bulletproof, huh?

"Yeah. Get a sexist, misogynistic creep to trust some random woman more than the guy he is paying obscene amounts of money to take care of said random woman. No sweat."

She got out of bed and walked toward the bathroom, pausing to yawn and stretch again.

Sure. Can't be any more difficult than an episode of CSI, right?

Obnoxious disco music suddenly blared from her laptop. She had set an alarm to wake her early so that she could get ready for Eddie's surprise excursion. She padded over to it and bent to close the alarm. Her thigh muscles voiced their sleepy concern and asserted that she needed to warn them before doing something so dumb as jogging again.

Okay, deal.

For now: Shower. Dress. ("Not dressy", Eddie had said.) Brush teeth. Twice.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c1P —

Xochitl arrived in the lobby at two minutes of eight. The whole on-time thing wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Eddie arrived a moment later. Xochitl couldn't help but gawk appreciatively.

"Nice." She dragged it out and nodded for emphasis.

Eddie blushed. Or, at least, she thought he did. The skin on his throat above his collar appeared to go a redder shade of tan for a second. He was wearing a sun-yellow polo and tastefully-worn jeans. He had what looked like a maroon sweater bundled up in one hand. His shoes were lost beneath boot-cut denim, but they looked like functional and comfortable boots, as she thought she saw a hint of an outline where they ended above his ankles. Both the shirt and jeans were loose enough to look comfortable, but still tight enough to remind her that the man was built.

She paused to reconsider the fraternal filter she had been applying to their relationship, but realized it had to stay in place when she caught sight of the grin that overtook his face. He was cute, but it ended there.

She was pleased to see that her own wardrobe choices hadn't been wrong. She had yet another new pair of jeans, yet another t-shirt, and the blue v-neck sweater from the previous day. She knew it might get chilly, but the sweater was more for protection from the sun if they walked around. She'd had a feeling that they might, and so had chosen her running shoes over her flats. Given how beat-up his shoes looked, she thought she had chosen correctly.

"Do I look okay? I wasn't sure ..."

"Good morning. You look very good."

"Will we be out late? Do I need to bring something heavier?" She fingered her sweater and pointed at his, which was a heavier material.

"No, not too late." He lowered his voice. "I have to be back early for another lesson." He winked, overacting badly, and she let him know that she got it. He raised his voice again and said, "It is supposed to be beautiful all day today – the perfect day to see my favorite part of Spain."

Xochitl waited for him to elaborate, then prodded him. "And your favorite part of Spain is ...?"

The big grin came back.

"A surprise!"

He turned to grab a small cooler from a nearby wall.

"No hints?"

He looked at her, twitched his nose, then jerked his head at her to follow him outside. She flipped her sunglasses down from the top of her head as they exited the main entrance of the lobby. The hotel faced south, and the sun was just high enough on her left to shine over the tops of the trees that lined what would eventually be the valet parking. Eddie's mini-SUV was parked out front, and he slid the cooler into it through the open door behind the driver's seat. Eddie,

unfazed by the giant ball of incandescent hydrogen hovering seemingly only a mile away, had not bothered to put on sunglasses, nor was he even squinting.

He jerked his head at her again, still silent, and walked diagonally away from the building. She followed a few steps behind him, doing her best to avoid the weeds and clumps of grass that had tripped her up so much during her jog. They stopped when they reached a spot that was roughly fifty yards from the entrance of the lobby. Eddie turned back toward the hotel, and pointed over it.

A large mountain in the distance sat atop the hotel, as if someone had painted a brown and grey crown, covered it in wispy cotton batting, and then placed it perfectly centered on the only building visible for a mile in any direction. The rest of the mountain range fanned out from the sides of the building like some regal popped collar.

"Wow. What is that?"

"Montserrat."

"Nice." She realized that she hadn't noticed the mountain range before, as she hadn't been outside looking back at the hotel during daylight since she had been there.

They started walking back to the car.

"I thought we could have some breakfast," he indicated the cooler, "then climb to the top of *Sant Jeroni* before lunch. After that, we will eat some lunch and then visit the *Monestir* before we see the museum."

Xochitl's calves twinged, but she nodded anyway.

"Sounds ... interesting. I've never been mountain climbing before."

Eddie opened her door and chuckled.

"It is not so bad. There is no ... what is it with the ropes and the equipment?"

"I know rappelling is the coming down part, but I'm not sure what the going up part is called. Just climbing, I think."

"Okay. There is no equipment. It is just a little walk to the top of *Sant Jeroni*."

"How high is it?"

"More than a kilometer, but less than a kilometer and a half."

"And this is a little walk?"

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl sat in the balding grass on top of her first mountain. There was a slight morning breeze that brought a little chill, but it wasn't heavy enough to drive off the banks of fog that had swirled around them as they had walked. She was winded and had the beginnings of a headache. Eddie had explained it away as the altitude, but she knew it was more due to innumerable days sitting in one place for hours on end. Now she kneeled, a tripod between her paired feet and each of her knees, hands shaking insistently on her thighs, calmly struggling to catch her breath. It was, curiously, a wonderful feeling.

While much of the view below her was obscured in fog drifts, she could still see the spine of the mountain range drawing out to each side of her. The sun was now high enough in the sky that she could look down the northeastern half of the range without squinting.

"Do I have my bearings right? That's east, toward the Mediterranean, right?"

"Yes," Eddie answered. "We cannot see it today, but straight that way," he pointed almost perpendicular to the range, "is the island of Mallorca. Behind us," she turned to see another mountain range in the distance, "all of that is the Pyrenees, and on the other side is France." He rotated another ninety degrees counterclockwise. "And that way is Madrid."

They both stared for a moment, then turned back to the southeast.

"But this ..." He sounded almost overwhelmed. "This is why I come here. If the fog was not so bad today, I could spend all day showing you Spain from the top of this mountain. It is the best way to see it. Barcelona is there, the hotel of my father is there ... ah yes, all day. I feel like from here I can see my entire world."

Xochitl could tell that Teddy would be forever disappointed in his brother's non-globalized views. Eddie was tied to this place with a bond stronger than she or Teddy could ever understand.

"I don't have a place like that." She muttered as much as one can mutter when one is also gasping for air, but Eddie caught enough of it.

"You do not have a place where you can stand to see your world?"

"Not yet. I guess I'm still working on that."

"My brother does not, either. He will never come here with me. And he will never be happy working for our father. Oh, he will be busy, but he will never see Catalunya as my father and I do. And when he is not busy, he will move to some place new and start looking again."

Xochitl would have sighed if she'd had the lung capacity. "Yeah. I think I know that song a little too well."

Eddie was silent for a while, standing tall and looking out like some kind of medieval border patrol. Xochitl's breathing had mostly returned to normal when he spoke again.

"Miss Webb. I need to tell you something."

He was deadly serious, and it caught Xochitl off-guard. "Okay. What's the matter?"

"It is about my brother and you and how you both need to be busy."

Xochitl was now too confused to do so much as respond.

"The work my brother has given you."

"The cabling job? What about it?"

"It is ... only to be busy. It is not real."

"I don't understand."

"I am sorry. Let me start again. Señor Cortés and my brother have done the work, the drawings and the plans. They have not started the ... cabling ... yes, they have not started the cabling, but the plans have been done for more than one month."

Xochitl rocked backwards on her feet, off of her knees and into a sitting position. She wrapped her arms around her shins and stared in the same direction as Eddie.

"I still don't understand. If the plans have already been done, why does Teddy have us working on new ones?"

He looked reluctant to explain further, but she pressed the issue. He looked down into the dirt as he spoke, shifting his feet.

"Miss Susie told us that you had a bad time before you came here. She made Theodore promise that you should not be left alone in a room until she came. She wanted you to think of things not from before."

"Busywork." Xochitl's head fell to her knees.

"I think so, yes. Theodore is working hard to please my father, and so does not have the time. So, when you went to Barcelona together, he saw that you know about computers and the Internet, and he planned this busywork for you. Señor Cortés thinks that Diego needs some training, so he is told to work with you. I do not think Diego knows it is the busywork."

Xochitl wanted to say that it didn't matter to her, that it wasn't a big deal, but it did and it was.

"I am very sorry. I wanted to tell you before breakfast yesterday, but you were so excited. I could not do it. But now ... I do not want you to be hurt more later."

Xochitl lifted her head and looked up at him. He was still

looking at the dirt.

"No, no. I appreciate it. You're right – it would have been worse to find out later after I'd poured a week into it. After I spent days crawling through rotten plaster, dead bugs, and mouse droppings." She snickered. "Yeah, I would have had to kill him at that point."

Eddie smiled, but still would not look at her. Xochitl stood up and stepped back so that they were shoulder to shoulder.

"Look. Seriously. It's okay. Susie and Teddy were right. I did need something to focus on. I think I'm past it now, and have bigger things to deal with, but it did help at the time. Teddy and I ... we're more alike than I think I want to admit. I know that I have to be busy and can't just relax. I hope I'm not like that anymore, but I probably am."

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"If I hadn't had the cabling to worry about, I'd probably be a nervous wreck by now. So really ... it's okay. And thank you for telling me. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to go against your own brother like that. That was incredibly selfless of you."

He finally looked up from the dirt, but only stared out at the horizon beyond Barcelona. She joined him, hand still on his shoulder, and they both were silent.

Tourists came and went behind them. Xochitl caught the occasional whisper of German or French amongst the Spanish. The fog below them swirled, and she thought that she could see it beginning to thin out in places.

"Alright, Prometheus, lets gather up your entrails and go get some grub. I never got around to my haggis last week, so I'm up to try some more down-home Spanish cooking." She looked at Eddie and laughed. "I'll explain on the way down, if you promise to explain why you have big rocks named after a dead guy, a mummy, and a pregnant lady. That's a Tarantino level of juxtaposition there."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

"Mr. Perkins?"

"Miss Green." There was a non-subtle two-by-four of exasperation poised in his voice.

"Good evening. Have you had a chance to look into my situation?"

There was a pause and the sound of an inhalation.

"I have, but you still have a problem. I was not able to

corroborate anything you told me, other than the bluntly obvious fact that you do not want to be found."

"I see. And yet –"

"And yet I was also unable to disprove anything you told me."

"Oh. Oh! Well, that's good. I guess. Right?"

"How so?" The countdown timer on his patience started with the audible question mark.

"I assume you did a whole bunch of background checks on me while I was in Scotland, right?"

"We did." Tick, tick, tick, tick.

"Did anything in any of those checks give you the slightest hint that I would be capable of not only committing murder but also then completely disappearing afterwards? Doesn't that seem a little odd to you?"

"Go on." The timer paused.

"Doesn't it also seem odd that, as near as I can tell, I'd never even met the people you found in my apartment? Or that I was on another plane that same evening? Do I strike you as the type of person that could plan both a murder and a flawless escape?"

"And how did you get away?"

"Honestly? I got lucky. Nothing more than that. Oh, and I wasn't tied down trying to figure out how to commit double homicide in my own apartment."

"And what is it that you want from me now?" She heard him squint.

"Not much. Getting my life back would be nice."

"I'm listening."

"I came to you yesterday because I thought we had a deal, only to find out that your hitman has me in his crosshairs. I've been walking around in a big hat and sunglasses since our last conversation and it's driving me crazy. I need James off my back."

"But –"

"And don't tell me you didn't put him there. I'm not in much of a position to make demands, but he is your man."

She heard immediately in his tone that she had overstepped her bounds.

"Miss Green! Again I will politely ask you to please leave your advice on my affairs to yourself. If I discover that Mr. Nakamura and his entourage are endangering you, I will deal with them. However, from all I can see, you are just being a typical paranoid little girl."

Bite it back, Xoch. Don't get into a testosterone fest with this guy. You need him.

"Alright. For now. But we'll revisit that later."

"The question of your loyalty still remains." In his voice she heard his tongue fork and his tail begin to rattle.

"I don't know how I can possibly prove it to you."

"I've had some chance to think about that, and it turns out that you can help me by attending a presentation of mine tomorrow. I'll need to email you a file to review beforehand, as you'll be speaking on my behalf. Nothing you can't handle, if my research and your ego are to be believed."

"I don't under—"

"This is when you tell me your email address. Come on, girl, I thought you web people would know what one of those was."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl looked at the folder on her desktop. She had expanded the Zip file from Perkins – it had contained a single Windows executable: "rbn.exe". It used a generic two-dimensional globe for an icon. She bit her nails and stared at it. It had passed the three different antivirus scanners she'd thrown at it, as well as two spyware and malware scanners. She could tell that it was linked to use basic networking libraries and not much else.

There is no way I'm running that thing on my new laptop.

She knew that she needed to run this thing on an Internet-connected machine, but knew she couldn't be traced back to Barcelona. She needed a Windows machine that she could get into, but she didn't want to tie it back to her old job or any of the remaining accounts that she still had open. She might need them later.

It came to her and she grimaced.

A quick web search turned up several hosting companies. She chose what looked like a smaller company based in the U.S. And made sure they had VPS hosting – virtual private servers. They did, but it was understandably pricey.

Sorry, Bri.

She opened another file from her desktop and keyed in the credit card number it contained. She hesitated before she hit the Submit button, but forced herself to do it. The page came up with an animated verification logo that pulsed for what seemed like an eternity.

She was staring so intently at the bouncing blue ball that flash from the page transition made her jerk backwards on the bed. When

she looked again, the page indicated that the card had been successfully verified and that she would soon be receiving an email with instructions for logging into her new server.

By the time she had browsed to the web page for her email access, the automated message had already arrived. She skimmed it and noted that she had an hour before the setup would be complete. After that, she would have almost complete control over the machine. Or, at least, a virtual machine on another larger server. But really, that's exactly what she needed – a virtual machine could easily be set up to completely erase its state and reboot clean. That would almost definitely be needed.

She spent the intervening hour picking apart the executable file as best she could. She didn't really consider herself much of a cracker, but she had picked up enough to learn a little. The program seemed to have an extremely simple interface with only a few dozen labeled controls. It called only very basic networking commands, as well as some basic cryptographic routines. As near as she could tell, it was just a really simple command-and-control interface.

Given what she knew about Perkins and his goals, it had to be some kind of interface to the botnet. Her research for Alfred had led her to believe that most botnets monitored chat rooms for commands, but this program didn't include any of the standard commands for joining or starting a chat room. It didn't look like any of the networking commands used any kind of English-based commands, which most standard protocols did, meaning it operated on a custom binary protocol. There were no obvious host names in the executable, which meant that it used hard-coded IP addresses that would be almost impossible to find.

This program, whatever it was, was not the brains of the operation – it was just for reporting and monitoring. It didn't really do anything.

So what does it monitor?

Xochitl crossed her eyes as she felt her stomach growl. She checked the clock: 15 minutes to go. She had time to get food and get settled in for the fireworks.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

When she saw the first connection go active, she opened a second as a backup and minimized the window. If anything went screwy in the first window, she'd have the ability to restart the virtual

server, wiping it clean in the process.

The `rbn.exe` file was there on the desktop, where she had copied it, waiting to be double-clicked. Nothing else had been touched on the server. She had a process list up and running, as well as a network monitor and logger, and a filesystem monitor.

For the two seconds her mouse hovered over the little globe icon, the universe was deafeningly silent. She double-clicked it.

The first window popped up almost immediately: "Connecting ...". The dots in the ellipses animated, giving the illusion of work being done. A striated blue bar beneath the word filled in fits and spurts. Networking traffic spiked, while filesystem traffic was nonexistent after the initial load. Two host connections were opened, then eight, then twenty, then enough to scroll the monitor window.

The progress window disappeared at half-full and was replaced by the main window.

Its design was just as simplistic as she had figured: a single list box with only a few buttons and a status bar. The title for the window was just those same three letters in lowercase: "rbn". Righteous BotNet? Randomness Breeds Nothingness? There was no About menu, so there was no way of knowing what the letters stood for.

She took a swig of water from her bottle and looked into the status bar. She gagged and coughed as water went down the wrong pipe.

Hosts: 1,214,659.

Day 14

Perkins clicked the large button labeled “Search” and wiggled the mouse.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I know this may be a little unorthodox, but I have just started the program we are about to demonstrate. As you will find out, it takes some time to run, so I thought it would be prudent to get it going, then start our discussion while it does its thing. Just one second ...”

Perkins wiggled the mouse some more, expressing the not-so-subconscious desire that the moving pointer would somehow speed up the results that were now beginning to trickle in.

“... there we are. If you would, please indicate a number from one to five. Whichever wins, we will use that account. This will, of course, be explained momentarily.”

Numbers began to show up beside each of the faces on the multiple screens in front of him. After a few seconds enough votes had come in to see that account four was the winner.

“Four it is. One more second.” He clicked on the fourth account and clicked the similarly-large button labeled “Crack”. “Wonderful, it's running. Now, if I may start over from the beginning.”

He sat up a bit straighter and took on a more formal tone.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. By now you all should know who I am, which means that you should be relieved to hear that I will not be the one making this presentation.”

Perkins paused and listened to the translators in the background, one in some kind of Russian or Slavic or something, another in something that might have been Korean or Vietnamese, and at least two more further off that were too faint to make out. As each caught up, the looks on the faces converged to one common theme: surprised and perturbed.

“Now I know I promised that I would be giving this demonstration personally, and I will still be right here the entire time, I have someone on the line that I think you should meet. You all have heard of her work, and I know several of you asked me before we

started if it would interfere in any way with our goal here today. I believe she will be able to put to rest any of those concerns.”

He paused for effect, which was made even longer by the lagging translators.

“Miss Green, why don't you introduce yourself?”

He punched at his keyboard, adding her stream into the feed – now everyone could see her.

“Welcome, everyone. My name is Xochitl Green, and I'm the sole original designer and author of Alfred, the personal networking assistant.”

The faces on her screen flashed to disbelief and shock. She'd been told to expect this ... but the hostility was more than she had anticipated. Some of the people looked at her as if she had just confessed to being a serial killer.

“I know that there has been some controversy about the actual origins of Alfred, namely because my former coworker, Brian Hawser, was so recently in the news due to his unexpected accident. However, I am available to answer any questions before the main presentation that may help assuage your worries about my true identity and Alfred's true history.”

Perkins took his cue and hit another button, opening the floor for discussion. Many pairs of eyes shifted, each with a multitude of questions, but no one wanted to be the first to ask, and thus admit that their intelligence was not as good as someone else's. Xochitl spoke up.

“Alright. No one is speaking, but I can tell that there is a definite trust problem here. For this to work, you all need to trust me, and I want to earn that trust. How can I prove to each of you that I am who I am, without giving anyone too much information, and without any of you showing that you don't know who I am?”

She paused, but not long enough for the translators to completely catch up. She knew they'd probably want to summarize the next part anyway.

“In cryptography, we have something called a zero-knowledge proof that is for situations precisely like this. I won't go into detail, suffice it to say that you will ask me a series of questions that I can partially answer to sufficiently show that I know the whole answer, while I still may keep the remainder to myself. I might be able to trick some of you some of the time, but there is no way I could trick all of you all of the time. If you choose your own words carefully, you may be able to ask questions that you yourself do not know the answer to.”

She could see that this idea pleased some of them, as they could

now interrogate her and boast about their information networks at the same time. Xochitl hoped that they'd give enough away that she could fill in some puzzle pieces.

"I will ask."

The man had grey hair and looked like any Japanese megacorporation board member that Xochitl had ever seen. When he spoke again, it was definitely Japanese, but a translator spoke up for him. The smooth cadence of the female translator was a stark contrast to the halting English that the man had spoken.

"Miss Green, it is an honor to have you with us today. Can you provide us with detail on how Mr. Hawser's relationship with Alfred is not as the major media networks would have us believe?"

"Certainly. Mr. Hawser, Brian, was my coworker for almost seven years, although we had known each other for years before we worked together. We worked on several Open Source projects together, mostly back in college. Back when we started, it was easier for us to present a single, semi-anonymous identity on the projects we developed. This meant that we each had access to the same account on SourceForge – the account which originally posted the first version of Alfred. As I said, the shared identity was not intended to be perfect, so I'm sure some digging will show that we are both tied to it."

"I was out of the country when Alfred started to become a news story, so Brian was doing all of the online interviews and handling all of the email. When he had his accident and was found to be tied to Alfred, the reporters didn't bother to dig any deeper to see that my name is also associated. I wrote the code, but because he was doing the support when he died, it was easier for everyone to assume that the trail stopped there."

His "*arigato gozaimasu*" was followed by the translator's "thank you very much" as the head and shoulders on her screen dipped into a small bow. Xochitl returned a nod.

Another Asian gentleman spoke next, this time without the translator, but still heavily accented.

"Can you prove that the code is yours and not his?"

"Probably not to everyone's satisfaction. I generally don't put too many comments in my code, and had originally intended Alfred to be more of a proof of concept than a real application. So, I didn't really worry too much about attribution. I'm not one of those people that has to have their name at the top of every source file."

The same man was about to protest, but Xochitl continued talking.

"However ... as I wrote the code, I can answer any specific

questions about it. If you have anything specific, that is. That won't categorically prove that I wrote it, as I might have just been studying it for the past two weeks. A zero-knowledge proof isn't a mathematical guarantee – it's just to allay the worst of your fears. I can't make you trust me.”

A beautiful young Indian woman with an aristocratic British accent broke in.

“Miss Green, can you tell us how you got involved with Mr. Perkins?”

“As I mentioned, I was vacationing in Scotland when I heard about Brian's accident. Mr. Perkins contacted me upon my return to discuss my plans for Alfred, and any future development along those lines. We came to a mutually agreeable arrangement, and here I am.”

“And your relationship with Mr. Watts?”

“I'm not sure who you are referring to.”

Perkins spoke up.

“Miss Green, Bill Watts was the gentleman I was referring to earlier that developed the technology we are about to present.” He had made no such reference, but Xochitl got the message that she was to play along.

Xochitl smiled and squinted for a half-second. “Bill Watts. Of course. As you can guess, I did not know Mr. Watts personally, only his work. Since Mr. Perkins and I came to our arrangement, I have been working nonstop to review this code. I believe I am now singularly qualified to present it, which is the other reason why I am here today. Understanding Alfred as I do, it wasn't hard to take Robin apart.”

Xochitl saw a question on many of the faces.

“Sorry. I've taken to calling this application Robin. Mr. Watts left many references to something by the initials “RBN” in the code, so I thought it was a fitting title. That, and it has a nice symmetry to it.”

She got a few nods for the reference, but also a few blank stares. No one else spoke immediately, so she continued.

“I'm sure there will be more questions about my identity, but I think this would be a nice time to segue into the presentation. I think that showing my unique knowledge of this application, and how it relates to Alfred, may do more for your trust than anecdotes of my vocation.”

Several of the faces had been itching to get started, regardless of who she was, and nodded agreeably.

“Robin is the latest evolution of the botnet – a collection of more than one million computers on the Internet that are under our

control and can be commanded to do whatever we tell them. To understand Robin, you must understand where Robin comes from. The first generation of botnets were blunt instruments used to execute heavy-handed denial of service attacks against general targets. Later botnets were used to distribute new viruses and other vectors, thus recruiting more computers and increasing their own size."

"It wasn't until the third generation of botnets that we started to see them being used more like daggers instead of clubs. Specific targets could be chosen and attacked systematically and with a duration that had until then been unthinkable. The zombies, the computers under the thrall of whomever controlled the botnet, could be instructed to go into a sort of stealth mode and hide themselves until they were needed."

"But Robin takes all of this to an entirely new level. Robin represents the fourth generation of botnets – a revolution in design, scalability, effectiveness, and stealth. But, to accomplish this, Robin is not the multi-tool that previous generations of botnets were. It does one thing, and one thing only, but it does it extremely well. When I show you what that one thing is, I think you will agree that it's very impressive."

"As many of you will know, modern banking is caught between a rock and a hard place: depositors want the ability to interact with their accounts from anywhere in the world, but that kind of access comes at a price – visibility for hackers. As has been proven time and again, passwords and passphrases and biometric identification and all of the access-control technology in the world isn't enough if FedEx loses your backup tapes in the mail. Hackers then just drill away until they break whatever key is being used, at which point they have everything. To counter this threat, more banks are moving toward encryption at an account level. Even if you could gain access to the entire database, you now have to crack each account one at a time."

"As I understand it, you are all here because this level of security frustrates you."

Several of the heads nodded.

"Enough smoke and mirrors, then, it's time to get down to business. You all saw the steps Mr. Perkins went through before we started. As I'm sure some of you have already guessed, what you saw was one of the interfaces for Robin."

"Robin is the world's first megadistributed cracking tool. While the network is constantly changing, our current estimates put the aggregated processing power at twelve hundred terahertz, or a little more than one exahertz. Similarly, there is roughly one exabyte of

memory. Over one million computers in Robin's network are now working to get us into the account that was selected by you."

Perkins saw several jaws drop, multiple pairs of eyes bug out, and more than a few looks of disbelief. One of them spoke up, an oblong-headed man with a thin line of a beard down the sides of his jaw. His accent was European, maybe French.

"What does this matter? With modern cryptographic keys, every computer on the planet could work on a key for years!"

Perkins saw Xochitl grin wickedly.

"Thank you, sir, I'm glad someone brought that up. Cryptanalysts know that there is no perfect security system, nor is there a truly unsolvable math problem. Instead, the entire direction of modern cryptography is to make the math so incredibly hard to reverse as to be implausible. But think about how far computer-based cryptography has come in the last 50 years. Really, it's still a young field. New attacks are being discovered all of the time, and while they may not allow for a complete break of the system, most provide shortcuts to significantly reduce the effort needed to crack a key."

"The first step for Robin, the one you all saw, was account selection. Robin knows how to get past the entry-level security for many online banks, and can learn about new banks as new weaknesses are discovered. Once Robin has access to a bank, it begins to scan through the encrypted accounts."

"Perfect encryption makes data look like random noise, but imperfect encryption leaves fingerprints. Many attacks on cryptosystems don't look at the algorithm, but the key choice. The scan looks at the encryption and checks each account for the weaknesses it knows about. Robin marks the accounts that look weak and displays them for you."

Several faces looked like they wanted to interject, but Xochitl kept going.

"Yes, Robin can also be given a specific account number and asked to do a strength analysis."

The interjecting faces quieted and nodded.

"Which brings us to Robin's next trick: the cracking itself. For the purposes of this demonstration, we have asked Robin to scan for accounts that it believes it can, given the current size of its network, crack in approximately one hour."

More disbelief flutter across the screen.

"Of course, I'm not going to lie to you. One of the reasons there were so few account choices to begin with was our choice of key strength. Such incredibly weak keys are rare. For this bank in particular, we have seen that roughly one quarter of the keys are in

the six hour range. If we wanted to expand our choices to forty percent of the keys, we are looking at an average strength of just over 24 hours. It gets almost exponentially longer as the key selection widens, so that by the time your attack pool matches the entire account pool, you're right back at the heat death of the universe again."

"And, of course, there is no guarantee that a key that looks like a six-hour key isn't really a six-day key. Anyone who tries to sell you that kind of guarantee is lying to you. For our part, we're really hoping that the account you chose is close to an hour. And we're hoping that there are more than five dollars in the account."

She smiled thinly, but none of the faces smiled back.

"Right. Well, for reasons I'm sure you can all understand, I can't go into the details of how Robin does what it does, but I'll give you a little hint that I think will impress you. It certainly impressed me."

Perkins took his cue and added another screen to the feed. Xochitl continued to talk.

"What you are looking at now is one of the computers in Robin's network. I can't let any of you on it to play around, but I wanted to walk you around a bit to see what a home user on the network might see."

The screen showed a plain desktop. Xochitl opened a window that showed the running processes. When she showed a graph of the CPU usage, it was an almost flat line with a few spikes as she flipped from window to window. The same was true of the network usage.

"As you can see, there is no indication that Robin is running. It does not show up in a process list, and it consumes only a minimal amount of network traffic – most of the time less than a web browser and certainly less than a P2P application. Best of all, its CPU usage is almost imperceptible. But I assure you, this machine is working hard to crack our account for us."

Someone asked how, but Perkins didn't catch who it had been. Xochitl smiled her wicked grin again.

"This is my favorite part. Has anyone figured it out yet?"

The Indian woman was the only one to raise her hand. Xochitl nodded to her.

"The graphics processor."

Both women smiled widely.

"She is correct. The modern GPU is capable of processing power comparable to that of the CPU in many systems. And, better yet, they are in most cases optimized for doing the exact sort of thing that cryptography calls for: solving hard math problems with large numbers and matrices. But, how much of the GPU does a user sitting

at a desktop use? Almost none. Even with fancy window shading and transparency effects, most GPUs are idle the vast majority of the time.”

“The code that Robin uses to crack the account encryption is optimized to run almost entirely in the GPU hardware. Best of all, how do you check how much your GPU is being used? In most cases, you can’t. It’s almost undetectable, and certainly not by the types of people that have rootkits running on their computers.”

“So, what you end up with is a desktop like this.” She had opened Solitaire and was dragging cards around the window. “The user goes on about their computing experience without ever knowing what is going on under the hood. Thanks to Robin’s stealthiness, we can even use dial-up and wireless users, which are almost useless in every other kind of botnet.”

Perkins could see that the Solitaire had brought it home for most of the faces. Only a few still looked skeptical, but even they looked like they could be convinced with a few more questions. He could hear the cash register ringing continuously in the background. He rubbed his fingers along his chin to massage out the cat-with-the-canary smile he didn’t want to show everyone else.

A window popped up on his screen, causing him to jump out of his seat.

“Miss Green, if I could interrupt you for just a moment. I have some very good news.”

She nodded at him. He punched a button and the desktop with the Solitaire was replaced with the desktop with the popup window. He made a show out of checking his watch.

“I believe that was just around fifty-five minutes. Would anyone care to dispute that?”

The window on the screen showed the contact information for the account: Hermione Lollier. There was a username, a password, and best of all, a balance of just over a million dollars. Xochitl continued.

“You all can see the username and password. Once second while I bring up the account login screen for our target bank ...”

Several gasps were heard as the faces recognized the web site that now showed on their screens. Perkins saw more than one look of fright.

“I am entering the username and password provided by Robin. Of course, once you have the keys to the account, going through the web interface is just silly, but I’d like to show you that this isn’t some sort of trick. There we are, the screen is loading now.” She began to flip through the pages on the site, pausing for no more than a second

on each. "We have a current balance ... transaction history ... account preferences ... mailing address ... and everything else. Anyone want to make a donation to the Republican Party?"

Perkins saw her close down the web browser as she started to wrap things up.

"My part here is done, I think, unless anyone has any other questions for me? No? Okay. I'm going to disconnect now so that you all can talk with Mr. Perkins about pricing. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl ran to the bathroom, slamming open the door and flinging herself at the toilet. She was vomiting before she got that far, but managed to keep most of it down until the target was in range. She slammed into the tile on her knees and let loose into the opening. She moaned, and the moan turned into a weep as she continued to retch and heave until long past when her stomach was finally empty. Her arms weakened and she struggled to lift them to cross on the seat in front of her. She gasped for air, inhaling the acid stench. One hand lifted to flush the toilet and her forehead dropped to rest between her bicep and wrist.

The retching slowed as the weeping gathered strength. She continued to spit pieces of half-digested food and bile out of her mouth in long, elastic strands. The water from her tears cut paths through the saliva on her chin. She struggled to stand and flush the toilet a second time.

She pulled herself toward the sink and turned both taps on to their highest setting. She splashed her face several times and did a rudimentary job of washing out her mouth before stoppering the sink. It filled quickly, but she let the taps continue to run and the water to escape out of the unseen holes beneath the rim. She caught sight of a distorted reflection a half-second before her face hit the surface of the water. It was twisted and misshapen, even without the distortion from the turbulent water.

She was still sobbing, and was unable to stay underwater for long. She forced herself to repeat the baptism more than a dozen times until she calmed down.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl sat on the corner of the bed, fresh out of the shower and wrapped in a heavy terrycloth robe. She stared into the air between her and the wall, willing the oxygen to spontaneously combust and consume the entire room in a flash. Her light breathing was barely audible, even though the only other sounds were those of distant muffled circular saws and nail guns.

That's it, Xoch. That was the hard part. It's over.

"No. It's not over."

Yeah, but the rest is a cake walk compared to what you just did.

"Somehow I doubt it. I keep thinking that, but it keeps getting tougher."

Even Brian's voice couldn't argue with that.

"And those people! I don't even want to know who they were, but now they know me. They've seen me! I have no idea what kind of things they are capable of, but what little distance I had between me and them is now gone."

You gotta breathe, kiddo. It's gonna work out.

"Yeah. Like it worked out so well for you."

She felt the tears start again and squeezed her already puffy eyes tight to block them out. She sniffled and wiped at her face with the arm of her robe. The sound of a telephone ring trilled out of her laptop.

"Get it together, girl. It's time to make the doughnuts."

She grabbed for a tissue to blow her nose before she accepted the call.

"Mr. Perkins. How did everything go?"

"Very well, my dear, all thanks to you. How did you manage to figure all of that out with just the one file I sent you?"

Xochitl figured there was no harm in letting him think she had more skill than she did, and to tell him otherwise would give away too much too soon.

"That's just what I do."

"I had been expecting just to cash in on your name, but you didn't just sell the cow, you sold the whole farm! Any doubts I may have had about your loyalty have been erased. My group is going to make two or three times what I thought we would. Your idea to sell it as a service instead of outright will make us all even richer."

Xochitl gagged as she realized that he had been talking to her like she was his prized only daughter.

"I'm glad I could help, sir. I didn't recognize any of the faces, but that looked like a very impressive group."

"They are some of the most powerful people on the planet, and the truly powerful are very rarely seen in the spotlight."

"Of course. However ..."

"What?"

Now for the hook.

"We both know I was talking a bigger game than I was playing. I hadn't had much time to review it beforehand, and since you only gave me the program, it took a while to disassemble it into program code." As if I had the skills to even do that. "I've been reviewing more of it while I waited."

"You still did an excellent job. But what is the problem?"

"There are some parts that I'm still not getting. They look like they've been deliberately obfuscated. Is there any chance of talking to this "Bill Watts" that originally wrote it?"

She knew the answer, of course, but needed to lead him along. Jumping to the end wouldn't get her what she needed to know.

"Unfortunately, no. He tried to extort more money out of me after we had already paid him a great deal. He got into a confrontation with the wrong person and didn't survive. One of Nakamura's people, actually."

One of James' crew?

Xochitl shook her head.

"Alright. Do you know if he was working with anyone else? Robin could have been written by one person, but it might also have been a team effort. Maybe we could talk with one of them? I just want to be sure that there are no unexpected speed bumps that might trip us up later."

She could hear Perkins weighing his secrecy against his greed.

"No. He worked alone."

Keep digging.

"Can I ask how he got in touch with you? Maybe I can trace it backwards and find someone who knows something. A friend or a coworker."

"He was brought in by our previous courier. As I recall, our man had heard Watts talking on a cell phone in a bar or restaurant. Our man contacted us, and we had Nakamura coax Watts into meeting with us."

"If Watts was on the phone with someone, then there must be someone else who knows what is going on. Did you ever find him?"

"No. We had Nakamura look into it, but it was a dead end. As far as Nakamura's people could tell, Watts was just bragging to a coworker that couldn't have cared less."

"I'm just trying to get this all into my head. Your man overhears Watts in a bar. You bring in Watts for a consult, and he agrees to sell you his code. But then he tries to come back for more money. He

picks a fight with a bruiser, and ends up dead. How long ago was this? How cold is the trail?"

"Still twitching – Watts was taken out of the picture just the day before you were brought into it. He made the changes we asked for to your Alfred, then decided to get greedy. Very fortuitous for you, I'd say."

Xochitl flinched.

"I guess so. Alright, it sounds like that's not going to lead anywhere. I'll just have to see what I can come up with on my own here. I appreciate the info. If I come up with anything, I'll let you know. If you get asked any questions about Robin that you can't answer, let me know. You've got my new email address."

"Oh, I will. And Miss Green?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about our misunderstanding a few days ago. I was acting on bad information that I will get to the bottom of, but that does not excuse my attitude."

"No, no. It wasn't your fault. But about that. James is going to get wind of anyone you send to check up on him. Let me see what I can find – he won't expect it from me. How do you normally contact him?"

Perkins again thought for a moment before answering.

"I have two phone numbers. One is his office line, and the other is his cell."

"If you can email me those, I'll see what I can find out without giving us away. We'll see if there's more going on than he is telling us."

Nice. Us against them. Milk it. It worked last time.

"I'd appreciate that."

"I'll be on and off-line over the next few days, so won't be very available to chat, but I'll be sure to keep checking my email."

"It will take a few days for us to iron out payment schedules with our new investors. Take a break, you've earned it today."

"Thanks."

Xochitl disconnected the call and flopped backwards on the bed. The crying was long over, but it was replaced by something worse: terror.

Perkins had said that Watts had coded the changes to Alfred. But she knew Watts wasn't a real person – the name was a dead giveaway. And "Hermione Lollier"? *Please*. Everything led back to one place, but Perkins was too much of a Luddite to catch it.

Her email notifier dinged. She sat back up and began mousing her way back through the menus on her laptop. The email was from

Perkins and had both of the phone numbers he promised. She double-checked the onion network – it was working beautifully – and launched the dialer. It was answered on the first ring by a smooth and accentless female voice.

“Nakamura and Associates, how may I help you?”

“I have a message for James. Tell him Xochitl Green would like to meet with him. I presume you know how to spell my name. I have his direct number. I'll be calling him again in a day or two.”

“Miss Green, I –”

“That's all for now, have a good day.”

She disconnected the dialer, grinning from ear to ear.

You were the kid that stomped on the ant piles growing up, weren't you?

Day 15

“¿Señor Eduardo?”

“Café, señora.”

“Gracias.”

Xochitl walked briskly through the hallway, trying to psyche herself up for the evening. Her hands curled from flat to fist and back again, over and over. When she reached the door, she inhaled deeply before opening it.

He was talking to a worker and making broad sweeps with his arms. She waited for what looked like a break in their conversation before calling to him.

“Eddie?”

He jumped in place before turning around. She guessed she hadn't made much noise when she had opened the door. His face flashed from a frown to a wide smile and he excused himself from the other man. He trotted over to her, light on his feet.

“Yes, Miss Webb? It is wonderful to see you today. We all missed you yesterday.”

“Thank you very much. That's very sweet of you to say. I know it is short notice, but do you have any plans for the evening? I was hoping the two of us could go out for some dinner. Nothing too fancy, but some place quiet where we can talk for a while.”

He was caught off guard, and she could tell that he was second-guessing his translating abilities, but he recovered quickly.

“For you, my time is always open. And I have a very good place we can go. When would you like?”

“Is six too early? I know you eat dinner a little later here.”

“Six would be fine.”

“In the lobby?” He nodded. *“And jeans or something nicer?”*

He thought for a moment.

“A little nicer than jeans, but not an evening dress.”

She gave him a sideways look and a smile.

“Sounds good. See you there.”

As she walked back inside she thought she heard the worker

saying something to Eddie. The sound of a good ribbing was the same in any language, apparently. Poor Eddie.

She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and brought up the contacts. She chose the last name on the list: Susie. The phone rang as she walked back toward her room. As she had assumed, voice mail picked up. She turned up the Sorority Girl as high as she could go.

"Hey, Susie. This is Mary Webb. I've got a temporary cell phone for my time in Europe, so add this number to your phone! I'm still having a great time here and am so grateful that you set me up like this. Eddie and I are going out to dinner tonight, but if you could give me a call back when you get off the clock I'd really appreciate it. I'm just looking to start planning our trip. I know you're going to want to spend some time here in Barcelona, but after that can we go to Paris? I've never been, and Teddy tells me you like to shop ... so I figured it would be fun! Well, I'm rambling, so I'll just talk to you later, okay? Bye!"

She disconnected the phone and flipped through it to choose another number.

"Diego? This is Mary Webb. Right. I wanted to let you know that the next few days are going to be busy for us here at the hotel, as we've got some guests coming into town. We're not going to have much time to even think about the cabling job. We should be back to normal early next week. We'll give you a call then, okay? Enjoy your days off. Don't let Rafael work you too hard!"

She opened the door to her room and looked inside. It had been a week, but the room hadn't changed: laptop on bed, boxes everywhere, piles of clothes on the boxes.

Laptop and clothes – was that all she was now?

She pulled out a pair of dress slacks and a collared long-sleeved shirt and put them on the bed. She'd have to do laundry tomorrow.

She crawled over the clothes and sat next to the laptop. Nothing to do for the rest of the day but hack away on Alfred.

Laptop and clothes.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

The restaurant Eddie had chosen was perfect. It was a dimly-lit hole in the wall, and they were greeted at the door by an older couple that looked like they were the owners. The pair greeted Eddie like they had known him his entire life. They probably had. The little bit of the conversation that Xochitl was able to catch seemed to be the

owners inquiring about Teddy and their father. Eddie indicated that they were well, then turned to introduce her to them. He continued to speak in Catalan, but she caught the gist of it. She was, as near as she could tell, “a friend of the family”.

“*Bona vespre*. It’s very nice to meet you. Um, *molt de gust?*”

They nodded in return and took her hand. Their English was probably comparable to her Catalan. They smiled at Eddie and the wife made a sweeping gesture across the mostly-empty room. Eddie deferred to Xochitl, so she indicated a small table in the darkest corner of the room, hidden behind a few large-leafed potted plants. There was a round of nodding and smiling and polite laughter, and they walked over to the table and sat down. The husband peeled off to go talk to some of the other guests.

The wife looked at Xochitl expectantly. Xochitl guessed she was looking for a drink order.

“Tea, I guess?” She looked to Eddie for confirmation. He signaled that was a viable option.

Eddie and the wife exchanged rapid Catalan before she, too, jetted off.

“I told her that we were to be at her mercy for the evening, if that is okay. She said she will bring us a little of everything until we cannot eat any more.”

Xochitl chuckled and agreed. “Sounds great.”

They settled in, drinks appearing in front of them, along with a plate of bread and what looked like a cross between mayonnaise and butter, but had the smell of olive oil. Eddie offered her a piece, but then took the first bite in a show of safety. Xochitl decided to work her way up to the big reveal with some small talk.

“So how is the work going?”

“It is well. Sometimes it seems like it will never end, and my father is just tossing his money into a hole that is too big to fill.”

“A money pit.”

“Yes, a money pit. But there are other days when the workers will finish a room and we can all stand back and look at how beautiful it is becoming.”

“Yeah, we have the same problem in my line of work. We spend so much time on infrastructure, the parts that you have to have but that no one will ever see, so that by the time you get around to the fun and pretty stuff, everyone is ready for it to just be all over with.”

“Yes, exactly. Infrastructure.”

“But ... the nice thing about it, at least in my line of work, is that getting to the fun and beautiful stuff means that you are almost done.”

He shrugged. "I do not know if it is exactly the same, but I understand what you mean."

Xochitl was quiet for a minute, back into that same place – trying to gather everything up and jump across the crevasse.

"Eddie, I need to tell you something. It's about the time before I came here. This is going to be a little hard to understand, and it's going to take a while to explain. You have been so nice to me since I arrived, and I'm going to need your help in the next few days. But ... what I am about to tell you cannot go beyond you and me. You can't tell your brother, your father, and especially not Miss Susie. We will tell her in a few days, but not yet. Can you promise me that?"

His face dropped and he leaned toward her, nodding slowly.

"First, the basics. My name isn't really Mary Webb."

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Xochitl made it thirty minutes into the story before the cell in her pocket started to vibrate. She held up a finger to Eddie and pulled it out of her pocket to check the Caller ID.

"It's Susie. Just play it cool. We're having a nice dinner out. Remember: Mary Webb."

He agreed and she flipped open the phone, looking around the restaurant. No one was anywhere near them.

"Hello? Susie? Hang on one second. Eddie is here, so I'm going to put you on the speaker." She hit the button and flipped the phone closed, lowering the volume on the external speaker to its lowest setting. She figured that no one else would be able to hear Susie over the light background music.

"How are you, my dears?"

Xochitl indicated that Eddie should answer.

"We are very good, Miss Susie. How are you today?"

"Tired, Eddie, as usual. I just got back from Chicago. I'm ready for my vacation!"

Xochitl asserted, "I imagine it'll be nice to be a passenger!"

"Dear, when you've worked in the biz as long as I have, any time in the air is work, on or off the clock. Oh! I'm sorry. That sounded cattier than I meant it."

"No, I can understand that. When is your flight over?"

"I leave in just a few hours, and will be there tomorrow morning in time for a lovely Spanish sunrise. Eddie, are you picking me up at the airport or is Teddy?"

"It will be me, Miss Susie."

"And me!" Xochitl piped up. Eddie cocked his head at her and she shrugged a reply.

"Yes, we will both be there."

"That's good to hear. Driving with Teddy always makes me nervous. Oh, there I go again? He's not there is he? I'm sorry, Teddy!"

Xochitl and Eddie laughed. "Nope. He's back at the hotel. Something about paint colors."

"I'm sure. It's always something with Teddy."

Eddie gave Xochitl an "I told you so" look, to which Xochitl again shrugged.

"And what about you, dear, have you been keeping busy?" They both knew she had meant Xochitl. Eddie shook his head and pleaded with his eyes.

"Oh yeah. I started jogging again, actually. For a vacation, I don't know that I've been in this much pain in years."

"Well good for you. I'm sure you'll remember how much you missed it."

"Definitely. It's great for just clearing the mind, you know?"

"That's always good, dear."

"What did you think about my idea for Paris? Am I presuming too much? I figure you're going to want to spend some time here."

"I think it is an excellent idea, dear! I'm looking forward to it! I have twelve days of vacation, so a few in Paris are just what the doctor ordered."

Xochitl knew that Eddie's father didn't get back into town for almost another week, but didn't want to make Susie uncomfortable by presuming that it was okay to talk about. Susie picked up on the pause and began to wrap up the conversation.

"Well, my dears, I need to finish packing up. I'd hear no end of it from the other girls if I missed my flight. You have no idea."

"Okay, Miss Susie. I will see you tomorrow in the morning."

"I can't wait! Bye for now!"

Xochitl chimed in with a "bye!" and disconnected the phone. Eddie looked like he had been asked to sell nuclear waste door-to-door.

"You did fine. Like I said, it's just complicated, and I don't want to ruin Susie's vacation. Let me get everything sorted out and wrapped up and we'll tell her and everyone else."

All she got out of him was a half-hearted and resigned "okay".

"So where was I? Oh right, Paris. It's a strange story, but let me tell you why Paris is so important."

Day 16

Susie reached over to Eddie and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, Eddie, it's looking wonderful.”

Eddie gave a noncommittal response as he turned off of the highway.

“It is not wonderful yet, but we are working on it. We will get there.”

Susie kneaded his shoulder as she spoke. “Nonsense. You see it every day, but it's been at least three months since I last saw it, and I'm telling you it's coming along great. Now tell me, truly, is Teddy helping you out or is he driving you crazy?”

Eddie smirked as he said, “Both.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Theodore is very helpful in keeping the workers on the right jobs. I am not so good at that. I –”

“You want to jump in and show them how to do it right. You always have. I wouldn't ever change that about you.”

Eddie blushed and smiled. Xochitl watched and couldn't help but smile, herself. She could see now that the bond between them was as real as any biological family. Susie might not have brought Eddie into the world, but she had obviously done more than her share of guiding him through it.

The vehicle rolled to a stop and Eddie was out the door and opening the trunk in a flash. He had all of Susie's bags on the asphalt before the two women were unbuckled and out of their seats. He strapped them all together on the miniature hand truck and was by Susie's side as she took her first step toward the entrance. As they walked, he bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

“Welcome back, Miss Susie.”

Susie linked her arm in his, with Xochitl a few steps behind them, off in her own world.

"The work is coming along well, Teddy. Eddie tells me you're no small part of that."

Susie slid a small, carefully measure forkful of rice into her mouth. Xochitl felt like a pig watching her eat and had slowed to human speeds, which made both of the men look at her funny.

"If they teach you nothing else in business school," Teddy looked at his brother, "it is how to delegate, and then how to crack the whip." Eddie's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Susie nodded and picked up her glass of wine, swirling it almost imperceptibly and staring at it before tasting it. She seemed to savor it on her tongue for a moment before continuing. Xochitl remembered her tone of voice from childhood.

"Now, now, Theodore, don't be too hard on your brother. What would you managers do if you didn't have worker bees like us around to do the dirty parts?"

Teddy softened and raised his glass as well, tipping it to Eddie. "We would probably live in unpainted mud huts, each trying to tell everyone else what to do."

Eddie nodded, but did not raise his glass. Xochitl thought this an excellent time to look around the room.

One of the men, Xochitl didn't know which, had set up one of the family-sized round tables in the least-unfinished ballroom – the same one she and Eddie had dined in a few days before. The table was arrayed with more food than even Xochitl could believe, uncovered a dish at a time whenever the conversation paused for more than a few seconds. The rest of the room had been emptied of any remaining scaffolding, power tools, random buckets and trowels, rags, and paint cans. Unfortunately, there was also only the one table, so it felt a little too empty for Xochitl's tastes.

Xochitl picked up the glass of wine in front of her. Teddy had made a passing reference to it being a local Rioja, but hadn't said any more after Susie had recognized the label. The liquid was a deep purplish-maroon and had a surprising heft and viscosity to it. When she got it close to her nose, Xochitl couldn't smell much more than the alcohol in it, even though she knew it probably had a bouquet that a salesperson would spend hours describing perfectly. Teddy had toasted Susie's return toward the beginning of the meal, leading to the only sip that Xochitl had taken thus far. Not being much of a drinker, even in a social context, Xochitl couldn't do much more than appreciate the man-hours that must have gone into making such a visually appealing (but olfactorily appalling) beverage.

Xochitl put the glass back down and shifted focus back to the fork in her other hand. Susie spoke up as Xochitl was reducing the

size of her forkful of what she thought were green beans.

"Now, Mary, what have you been up to this last week?" Her eyes flashed to Teddy. "Been keeping busy?"

"Yeah, it's been great. Teddy asked me to work on verifying the plans and estimates the networking contractors drew up last month." Teddy choked on a piece of fish and grabbed at his water glass. Eddie's eyes were large behind the forkful of beans frozen in front of his mouth. "It's been going well. Diego, the contractor I've been working with, has been no end of help, and we've been kind of teaching each other everything we know about cabling and design. I think we have some differences of opinion from what the original contractors drew up, but it would work out either way."

Susie's eyes locked on to each of the men. Teddy was patting his chest and doing anything he could to not look at Xochitl. Eddie, too, was suddenly fixated on moving the beans around on his plate. Xochitl decided to pull out the knife and lighten the mood.

"Yeah, it really is just as boring as it sounds. I certainly didn't become a networking gal because I wanted to get men. And the men in my field ... not so much."

Susie chuckled and dropped her stare.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, dear. Even in my field, where many of my girls did get into it for the men, they are still, as you said, not so much. Being with an airline pilot may sound glamorous, but that's only until you remember that most of them have wanted to be pilots since they were little boys, and never really moved past being that same little boy."

Susie downed another measured forkful of rice to punctuate her point.

"Maybe, but you've got some nice men here." Teddy ignored the women talking about him, while Eddie grinned.

"Yes. They did turn out to be quite the gentlemen, didn't they? They take after their father."

"And speaking of the patriarch, when is it that he'll be back?"

"Four days – just enough time for the two of us to do some serious damage by strengthening the French economy."

Xochitl dangled her fork and spoke through it.

"Actually, about that. How would you feel about bringing Eddie along? I know we said it would be just girl time, but ..."

Susie looked at Eddie, who was again staring at his plate, and managed to completely misinterpret his silence.

"I think that's another excellent idea, Mary." She leaned in toward Xochitl for effect, but didn't lower her voice. "Besides, girls on the town simply must have someone to carry their bags for them,

mustn't they?" Eddie remained silent. "That is, if Eddie would like to join us?"

Eddie glanced at Susie, but then held Xochitl's gaze. Xochitl begged, despite Eddie's reluctance to be in the middle of whatever was going on, and be dragged into France no less.

"Of course." He looked at Teddy. "You will let the workers know?"

Teddy nodded silently as he continued to eat his fish, almost disinterested in the conversation. Susie spoke to him next.

"Teddy, can you arrange it all for us? Three tickets, three nights."

Teddy again nodded, but this time also gave a simple "yes".

Susie removed her napkin from her lap and dropped it on the table. This was apparently some sort of signal, because Eddie suddenly grinned widely and excused himself. Xochitl noticed that Susie's measured forkfuls had somehow cleaned her plate.

Teddy looked at Susie to see what was going on, but she wasn't telling, her face a smirk etched in stone. He moved on to Xochitl, who only shrugged and shook her head. As Eddie reentered the room carrying something bulky, Susie moved between him and Teddy and got his attention.

"I have decided," Xochitl heard a regal sort of inarguable declaration in Susie's voice, "that dessert will be postponed for a minute or two. I am going to preemptively work off the calories, and you, young man," she stared at Teddy, "are going to help me."

She stood up and walked over to Teddy, offering her hand to him. The music started up and Teddy looked at each of the women in horror. His eyes shifted back and forth between Susie and Xochitl, unable to lift himself from his seat until Susie grabbed him by the hand and pulled him out of his chair. He grabbed at his napkin as it fell from his lap and swiped it quickly across his face.

Xochitl had been so amused by the exchange that she hadn't noticed that Eddie had moved beside her and was struggling to extend his hand to her inquisitively. She tore her eyes away from the train wreck happening between Teddy and Susie and accepted Eddie's hand, standing and following him to the middle of the floor. As near as she could tell, the waltz was the same one as the night she had discovered the two men dancing. She snickered as she realized it was probably the only one that Teddy knew.

They bowed to each other, pulled close, and began to glide across the floor. It wasn't quite the same magical experience as the first night, but Xochitl still felt herself being drawn into the rhythm's simplicity and Eddie's confident strides. As the song wound down and

they parted, Xochitl looked over to see Susie grinning widely even though Teddy looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere. The couples had managed to get some distance between each other, so she couldn't tell what Susie was telling him, but she was sure it was something motherly and reassuring.

The music ended, they each began to walk back to the table. Xochitl noticed that Eddie was walking a little slower, more on an intersecting path with Susie and Teddy. He had a mischievous grin and excused himself from her company just as they heard a pop from the CD player. Susie shot a look at Eddie, who stopped walking and smiled wider.

A moment later a scratchy tango began to play. All three of them reacted immediately: Eddie and Susie locked eyes, Susie's lit up in surprise, while Teddy's rolled in resignation. Susie grabbed for Eddie and dragged him back out to the dance area while Teddy sat back down at the table. Xochitl looked to Teddy for an explanation.

"My brother is letting me know that I am still not good enough."

Xochitl threw him an eyebrow, but then moved toward her own seat. On the dance floor, the slow introductory part of the tango was still gaining speed. Susie and Eddie moved with clockwork precision, cutting wide swaths across the room.

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Xochitl clicked the big green button and the laptop began to make a telephone's ring. The line picked up after several rings.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Perkins? It's Xochitl Green."

"Good afternoon, Miss Green. I thought you were taking a few days off?"

"I'm not so good at relaxing. Actually, that's why I called. I don't know how to tell you this, but I think we've got a big problem. Both of us. Can you talk about this now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been doing more disassembly of the control program, as well as disassembly of the zombie code from one of the machines in the botnet." She threw in as much controlled panic as she could. "It doesn't look good."

"Calm down and explain it to me."

"I think we've been conned."

"Conned?"

"Yes, sir. The code can't possibly do what it is supposed to look like it does. It's a great idea, but all of the functions are stubs."

"You're losing me."

"It's like ... standing in the driveway, looking at a beautiful house. There are lights in every window and a dog house in the yard and perfectly manicured hedges, and everything looks normal. But when you open the front door, there's nothing inside but curtains and well-placed floor lamps."

She heard a thud that sounded like Perkins dropping into a couch or chair.

"Then what did we show at the demo?"

Xochitl inhaled through her teeth.

"I think it was smoke and mirrors. I've been going back through the program, and no matter what time range I put in, I always get the same five accounts back. And if I put in an account that isn't on the list, I get a strength estimate that would take months to crack. I think the accounts are all dummies, opened specifically to make the whole thing look real."

Perkins was beginning to lose his cool and revert back to the cold derision that she had first seen from him.

"How can you be sure?"

"I can only think of one way: you need to run all of the accounts. There are only four more, so it shouldn't even take the rest of the evening for you. Unless they've got each account set up with its own crack time, but that's unlikely."

The derision turned into a growl.

"And what will that prove?"

"It's almost a mathematical certainty that those accounts should take very different times to crack, but I'm willing to bet that they won't. Take each of the accounts and look at the balances and histories. I'd also bet that they aren't as random as they look. Whoever set this all up was probably lazy and just used transfers between the accounts to create the history. There will probably be a whole list of common activity between the accounts."

Perkins was silent.

"Look, I know you have made a large investment in trusting me. I need you to trust me again. That's why you need to see the results for yourself. I haven't had the chance to run them myself first to be sure, but I'm certain enough at this point to bring it to you."

"Those people ... I'm not sure of who they were, but now they know who I am. And I have no doubt that they could make me disappear or take me out just as easily as James did Brian. I'm hoping that I discovered the con in time, because if money had started

changing hands ... you and I would be as good as gone when the truth came out.”

Perkins breathed heavily through the line.

“Yes. Yes we would be.”

Xochitl let the silence linger. She had the flames to his feet, now she just needed to let him simmer for a while.

“Are you going to start the run now? Can I call you back in a few hours? I mean, I hope I'm wrong about this, but I don't think I am. In the mean time, I need to figure out who has done this to us. I'm hoping that there are some clues in the code.”

“Yes, you do that. I'll start it right now.”

“Okay. Four accounts in four hours. I'll call you then.”

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“How did it go?”

The anger in Perkins' reply made her shiver.

“As you suspected, Miss Green. Each account took almost the exact same amount of time.”

Xochitl did her best to sound hopeful.

“And the histories?”

“They looked normal individually, but when taken together showed too many similarities to ignore.”

“Hmm. I'm so sorry. I was hoping that I was wrong about this.”

This seemed to deflate him a little and take the edge off.

“As was I.” He sighed, but then jumped right back into the offensive. “What have you found in the code? Anything?”

Xochitl made noises that indicated that she didn't know if she should say any more.

“What is it?”

“As near as I can tell, ” she exhaled deeply to sell it, “I think it was James and his crew.”

Perkins clucked at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Obviously I don't have all of the pieces, but I think the con goes beyond the software. It's beginning to look like a long-term thing.”

“Miss Green, I know you have taken issues with our choice of contractors, but I believe you are mistaken. Nakamura and his associates could not be behind this. The man is an assassin, nothing more. We use him because he is quiet and clean, or was until this whole mess started. He has given me no indication that he could have the skills to pull this off.”

Careful, Xoch, too much info here is not a good thing.

"You might be right. It's just a hunch. But it's the little things here and there – the high-tech limo, the fact that he can arrange almost anything on a moment's notice. And when he was ... interrogating me in Scotland, he really knew his stuff. We ended up talking about some really esoteric concepts. He couldn't have faked it all. Maybe for a minute or two, but not for a solid day. I think he may be more technical than you give him credit for."

She could hear Perkins thinking it through and decided to help.

"Let me run through what I'm thinking so far?"

She could tell he was only half-listening, but knew the repetition would help sell him.

"You said Watts was out of the picture two weeks ago, right before we met for the first time, right? That would have put your first meeting with him, what, a month before that?"

"Close enough."

"I think the conversation that your man overheard was a setup. He was meant to overhear it. I mean, what are the odds that your man stumbled upon a guy in a bar, who just happened to be the smartest botnet hacker on the planet, drunk enough to be babbling into a cell phone but not so drunk that he couldn't hit all of the right notes so that your man would hear what he needed to hear? That sounds pretty thin to me."

"Go on."

"So if we go on the theory that someone wanted to hook your man, who would do that? Who would know that your group would be interested in such a thing? And who would know that he was your man to begin with? I'd never heard of you people before our first meeting, which may not be saying much, but it does say that you have at least attempted to conceal yourselves."

Perkins gave only a dry "one would think", accenting the last word.

"Then it's not unlikely that the people that would have all of that sort of information would already be working for you. I assume that you never came right out and gave James a handout on what it is your group is trying to do, but he's presumably done enough work to have figured it out. Right?"

Perkins didn't reply.

"What if James got greedy? Maybe he saw an opportunity to sell you your golden ticket and worked up the whole scenario with Watts and Robin. Maybe his crew coded it up, or maybe someone like Watts had coded it up before, and James stumbled across it on one of his jobs? He's smarter than you think – he would have recognized the

value of it when he saw it. Actually ...”

“What?”

“We'll never know without talking to James, but this whole situation sounds like something we run into all the time in my line of work – an IP waltz.”

“Excuse me?”

“Say I worked for a company, writing code. Inspiration hits me, and I have an idea that I flesh out over the next six months at home every night. It's brilliant and it's worth truckloads of money, but there's a problem: if I signed an intellectual property agreement with my company, they can legally claim it as their own without paying me a dime for it. If I'm smart and of flexible morals, I get a third party to sell the code to the company and then disappear with a small cut.”

“What if James coded or came across this thing while working for you? You may not have an IP agreement with him, but I have no doubt that you could make things difficult enough for him that it would be smarter for him to go through someone else.”

“That sounds, as you said, thin.”

“Not if he couldn't get it to work. He doesn't want to have a big pile of broken code worth nothing – he'd rather have a pile of broken code that's worth truckloads. If he sells it to you through a meat puppet, Watts, then makes him disappear before the ugly truth is revealed then he is off the hook and has his money. Especially if he knows that he's going to be the one tasked with tracking down what happened to his own puppet. But he must have known things were starting to go sour when he heard that you were interested in Alfred. He had to cut himself free before the house started falling in around him.”

Xochitl pushed the puzzle pieces around on the tray and waited for Perkins to make a picture out of them. The fact that she still had a few pieces hidden in her hand behind her back would hopefully go unnoticed. She took his silence to mean that he was working on it.

“You're right. I know it sounds thin. But it's the only thing I could come up with that makes sense.”

She heard the hiss of the background noise on the line change slightly to a flat emptiness for a few seconds, then snap back in. He had muted his end or put his hand over the mouthpiece. His tone of voice when he spoke told her that she probably didn't want to know what had come out of his mouth during that time.

“I will need some time to corroborate your theory.”

“Please. I may be miles off. I assume the pricing negotiations are going to be canceled?”

She had obviously made the understatement of the year.

“Oh yes.”

“Okay. I'm on a train much of the day tomorrow, but I'll call you before I leave.”

The line went dead without any further formalities. Xochitl flopped back onto the bed and exhaled slowly, pressing the meat of her palms against her eyes.

The play was moving along, but the downtime between scenes was going to give her an aneurysm.

Day 17

"Mr. Perkins? Sorry to call so early, but I'm about to leave for my train and I had an idea."

Perkins was very obviously not happy, but struggled to be civil.

"No, it's alright. What's your idea?"

"I know you don't need me meddling about in your business, but I think I've got an idea of how to wrap this all up once and for all."

"I'm listening, but I am also very sleepy."

Translation: You're only a web geek, and a girl at that. What can you know?

"I'll try to be quick – we need to get to James."

"Yes, I am well aware of that."

"Right, but we have to assume he's off your leash now. He's not just going to come when you call him."

He was nonplussed. "I would think not."

"But he will come when I call him. If I can bring him to me, can you guarantee my safety? Do you have other crews that can bring him in?"

Intrigue crept into his voice. "It could be arranged, yes."

"I'm certainly not looking forward to being the bait, but the fact of the matter is that he's been doing this kind of thing longer than I have. He's better at it. He will eventually catch up to me. The best play for me is to control that situation."

Perkins was silent. Either he'd fallen back to sleep or she was beginning to get through to him. In a way, this next gamble was riskier than showing her face in the demo.

"I'll be in Paris later tonight. If he's as good as he makes himself out to be, he might be able to track my movement. I'd like to give him as little time to react as possible. Can you have people there tomorrow morning?"

"As you saw, our reach is global. I'll make sure they are available. But Miss Green, I am going to need a way to contact you directly."

Xochitl paused and closed her eyes.

"I know. I have a new cell phone number that I'll give you once I get into the city. I don't want to turn it on until then. I don't know what he's capable of."

"It puts me in an awkward position ... but I can't argue with your reasoning."

"Thanks, I appreciate that you respect my paranoia. I have the outline of a plan, but I'll take the day on the train to flesh it out and run it by you tonight."

"Very well. And Miss Green?"

"Yes?"

"Enjoy your trip."

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Xochitl fell into her seat, then dropped her backpack between her feet. She twisted her ankles around the support legs and leaned forward to elevate herself without standing. She couldn't help but frown.

"I know that look."

Xochitl relaxed and collapsed back into her seat. She looked at Susie. "What's that?"

"First time on the train?"

Xochitl cocked her head. "Yeah. How could you tell?"

"Let me guess: you're surprised at how much it's like an airplane? You had visions of sleeper cars and private rooms and enough space to spread out."

Xochitl nodded, surprised that she was so transparent.

"You've seen too many movies, dear. It's a romantic American myth. You can get that kind of luxury on overnight trips, but it's more expensive than flying. For day-to-day travel, like we're doing now, it's all the same whether you are on an airplane, boat, train, or bus. The best you can hope for is a slow day when you can spread out a bit."

Xochitl craned upwards to do a headcount. The car was roughly half full, with the next closest passengers two rows away. Xochitl sat against the window, with Susie on the aisle and Eddie on the other side. A conductor entered through the back of the car and began asking passengers for their tickets.

Xochitl nodded to him and asked Susie, "So how does this work?"

Susie glanced backwards before answering. "He just needs to see

your passport when he takes your ticket. It's generally painless, unless you get an uppity one who wants to play."

Xochitl pulled her passport and ticket out of her back pocket, but shrank into her seat when the conductor reached their row. He had a stack of passports in his hand. Xochitl threw Susie a look, causing her to speak up.

"What's going on?"

The conductor was a slightly overweight Frenchman that answered as if he'd been asked that exact question hundreds of times each day. His accent was pronounced, but his English was surprisingly clear.

"Madame, there are new rules for the travel between countries. I am now to take your passport so that we may ensure your safety and that of the other passengers. It will be returned to you at your destination."

Susie looked just as perturbed as Xochitl. Xochitl couldn't help but prod her on.

"I thought the first rule about international travel was that you never let your passport out of your sight?"

Susie responded as if it had been the conductor that had proposed the question.

"It most certainly is."

Again, the conductor looked unfazed.

"Madame, it cannot be helped. It is an effect of your "War on Terror". I cannot allow you to remain onboard unless I have your passport."

"This is ridiculous. I actually feel less safe now than I did before."

The conductor showed no signs of being affected by her pleas. He held out his hand and waited. "Madame."

Susie tried to stare him down, but ultimately gave up and handed over her passport and ticket with a huff.

"Thank you, madame. And madame?" He looked at Xochitl, who still wasn't offering hers up.

Xochitl forced her hand to move forward an inch at a time and tried to hide the profound urge to scream and run off of the train. The conductor was impeccably polite and refused to snatch the passport from her. She placed it on his open fingers and lingered for a second, before withdrawing her hand. He nodded politely and turned to Eddie, who handed his over without so much as a strange look.

Xochitl spoke up. "For the record: that really, really creeps me out."

"I know, dear." Susie shrugged. "But I can't very well do what I do and then turn around and give that man a hard time. He's just doing his job, and nicely at that."

Xochitl heard her, but it was from the other end of a long tunnel full of people screaming at her that she now had nothing that gave her any sort of identity, even a false one. She was now, in her seat on a train about to speed across Europe, an ex-person.

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Xochitl looked across the aisle and saw that the rhythmic vibration of the car beneath them had put Eddie out – his head fallen forward to his chest, lolling about free of muscle control. Susie saw her glance and followed it.

"Poor dear. It's good that he's finally getting some sleep. He's been working himself to the bone for his father and brother."

Xochitl craned upwards again to verify that no one had moved any closer.

"Susie? I need to talk to you about something."

Susie put down the notepad and pen in her hands. She had been making a list of everywhere she wanted to go in the next two days. She slid them into the purse between her feet.

"Yes, dear. I've been wondering when you would."

Xochitl went on the defensive. "What do you mean?"

"You do need to talk about it, dear. If you keep it all inside it'll eat away at you until there's nothing left."

"I'm sorry?"

"You don't need to be. We've all had bad experiences with men – it's just how they are. Mars and Venus or whatever, but if there's one thing I've learned it's that you have to talk to someone."

Xochitl exhaled.

"Right. See, that's the problem. I haven't been completely honest with you."

Susie again surprised her by smiling. "Well I am very glad to hear that we're going to skip past all that messy part and get right to it. I didn't know if you'd have it in you."

"You're losing me again." Xochitl abandoned all pretext of having control of the conversation.

"My dear, I have been working people longer than you've known your alphabet. I have learned a thing or two. It took me a while to figure it out, but I have an excellent memory and plenty of time to sit

back and think.”

Xochitl blushed deeply and saw that Susie had her. Susie arched an eyebrow then smiled.

“Oh dear!” She put her hand on Xochitl's. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to come off like some kind of crazy Alistair Crowley. I haven't figured it all out, and I look forward to hearing the rest of it.”

Xochitl knew she meant well, but still had to fight the urge to jerk her hand away.

“Fair enough. As I was saying, I haven't been completely honest with you. Some of it is true, the parts that matter, but most of the surface stuff isn't.”

Susie pulled her hand away and folded them in her lap, leaning back into her seat to look at Xochitl. Xochitl started, but then stopped and restarted.

“Actually, can I borrow that pen and paper? Some of this is going to get pretty hairy, and even the first part is better written than said.” She flipped down the dray from back of the seat in front of her as Susie reextracted the items from her bag with an inquisitive look. Xochitl held up an index finger and wrote two words at the top of the paper.

“My name is Xochitl Green.” She indicated her name. “The ‘tl’ is silent. It's a long story that has nothing to do with the rest of what I'm going to tell you. Suffice it to say that I am not Mary Webb.”

Susie receded deeper into her chair, if that was possible.

“Most of the background you know is true – I am a web programmer and networking geek. I am single and probably more naïve than I should be. I did have a friend that died last week. I did have a crisis, related to that, right before I met you, and I am running from a man because of it. But I am not a criminal, nor am I dangerous. I'm just a woman trying to survive in a world that seems to be going crazy around me.”

Susie was silent, so she continued.

“The man I'm running from, James, he ... oh, this is the part that's going to sound crazy.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them saw that Susie hadn't completely written her off yet.

“He doesn't just want to find me – he really does want to kill me.”

She saw the look in Susie's eyes and quickly continued.

“I didn't do anything worth dying for, I swear! In fact, if I tell you what I did, you probably won't even understand. It doesn't even make sense to me, much less anyone else.”

“Try me.”

Xochitl sat back in her seat and thought for a moment.
“Alright. It's like this ... picture yourself at a cocktail party surrounded by a group of your friends.”
Susie threw her a look, but she held up a hand and kept going.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Shopping tomorrow is out of the question, then.”
Xochitl smiled thinly at the bad joke.
“Yeah. Sorry. But, if everything goes how I hope it should, we'll have the entire day after that to shop. Tomorrow, though ... that's going to be kindof busy.”
Susie frowned at her. “I was joking, dear. Shopping is suddenly the last thing on my mind.”
“Really, though, I'm thinking I should be able to just walk away tomorrow afternoon.”
Susie tried to hide a “don't count on it” look, but didn't succeed very well.

“I understand your plan. I don't like it, but I understand it.”
Xochitl shrugged.
“But what I don't understand is this thing that started all of this. Not your thing with the cocktail party and the butler. I understand that ... somehow. No, the other thing with the, what did you call them, zombies?”

“Yeah, zombies.”
Xochitl took a sip from her water bottle and collected her thoughts.

“Actually, it all starts in Paris. That's why I suggested it. Have you ever heard the name Victor Lustig before?”

“It sounds familiar, but I can't place it.”
“He's more commonly called “the man who sold the Eiffel Tower” when you read about him.”

“Yes! I know that story! Something about tearing it down for scrap.”

“Right, but there's more to his story than the Eiffel Tower. He moved to the U.S. after his second Eiffel sale fell through. He got involved in whole volumes full of confidence schemes and cons, the biggest of which was what came to be known as the Rumanian Box con.”

“That sounds familiar, too.”

“The con was amazing both because it was so extremely simple

and because he was able to drag it out so long and use it so successfully, even on people that had already been duped before!”

“Basically, he had wooden box about this big.” She indicated a box big enough to fill a large area of her lap, of a roughly cube shape. “It was carved and stained and, like any good piece of techno-magic, had several shiny and mysterious buttons and dials on the front of it. The box had a thin slot on each side.” She ran her fingers through the air, tracing the features.

“He found several marks, but the presentation and patter were always the same. He would set the box up on a table and make a big show about it being level and undisturbed. He would have the mark ever so gently slide a thousand-dollar bill into one slot. He would concentrate and squint and twist the knobs on the front just so, then step back and pull the mark away with him. He told the mark that special chemicals in the box were now duplicating the bill that had been put inside.”

“The whole process would take six hours. When they returned to the box, he would again make sure that the box looked undisturbed and pristine. He went through another complex series of motions with the knobs, and out would pop the two bills. The mark would take the bills and see that they had the same serial number and were indistinguishable.”

“Well that's an easy one: there was another bill inside the box.”

Xochitl smiled.

“It's easy to see now, but he was the quintessential showman. The marks never doubted for a second that he was selling them a way to make their own money. They would pay him tens of thousands of dollars, hundreds of thousands in today's money, for this little wooden box that they couldn't move off of a table in their basement.”

Susie scoffed and looked at her with disbelief. Xochitl raised her hands and faced her palms toward Susie.

“Hey, I didn't make it up. I'm just telling you the story.”

“And a wonderful story it was. But what does it have to do with zombies?”

“I'm getting there.”

She took another sip of water.

“A zombie is a computer on the Internet that is infected with a worm or a virus, but the owner doesn't know about it. More than that, though, zombies can be controlled by someone and given commands to do things. Get enough zombies together and you have what is called a botnet, and they can do a whole lot of damage. Really smart zombie viruses do a very good job of hiding their presence, so even when the zombie computer is doing horrible things, the owner

keeps playing their Solitaire or whatever, never the wiser.”

“I told you that this particular virus, and its control program, were supposedly written by someone named Bill Watts. Victor Lustig was eventually caught because the Secret Service was looking for a counterfeiter, but found Lustig instead. They found the counterfeiting plates on him, but Lustig maintained that it was a man named William Watts that had made the plates and that he was just a fall guy. But, of course, as soon as the Secret Service had Lustig, all of the counterfeit money stopped showing up.”

“What's so insidious about this virus and this con is that they are the Rumanian Box all over again. The virus is made to look like, given enough time, it can crack into any bank account. But like the box, the virus and the botnet are just for show. There's no giant floating head, just a man behind the curtain. The controller virus always returns the same five accounts, all of which were set up before the virus was activated specifically for the con. I can only presume that the money in the accounts came from the initial payment for the software, and was left there as a sort of carrot to keep the buyers interested.”

“How can you tell they aren't accounts for real people?”

“The names on the accounts and the transaction histories. One of the names is Hermione Lollier. The man that bought the original Rumanian Box was named Herman Loller. And if you look closely enough at the five accounts, you notice that all of the transaction histories are just transfers between the accounts. It's just vapor.”

Susie stared at Xochitl as if she'd grown a third ear.

“That ... that's just ... I don't even know what that is.”

“That is a plan that James might have gotten away with if he had just changed a few more of the details. I'd had a hunch early on, nagging at the back of my brain, but as I kept going there were more and more breadcrumbs. It's almost like he wanted to be found.”

“Did he? Does he?”

Xochitl shrugged.

“I don't know. I wouldn't think so. Really, I think he's just conceited and arrogant. He thinks he so much smarter than everyone else, and that no one would ever be able to figure it out. I think he thought of it as taunting them – leaving so many clues right in front of everyone's noses.”

“Typical man, it sounds like.”

“Well, if everything goes alright, I'm happy to say that you'll never have a chance to tell him that.”

The phone rang several times before the line picked up. Xochitl didn't waste any time with introductions.

"I'm in Paris. I'm about to make the call. Is everything set up on your end?"

"Yes, Miss Green. Our men will be there."

"You've got this number now?"

"I'm writing it down as we speak."

"Sorry. I know. I'm just a little freaked out here."

"It's almost over, Miss Green. You have proven yourself this far, and I have no doubt that you'll come through this in one piece."

"Thanks. I think. I'll call you when it's over."

"Very well, Miss Green. Good luck."

The line dropped, and Xochitl put down the phone on the table. She picked up the second phone that sat next to it and held down the button to turn it on. Her breathing was slow and steady, but the antenna on the phone drew arcane symbols into the air as her hand shook. She held it in both hands and began to punch in the text. It was a short message, "I need your help, call me. XG" with the number of the cell phone at the end. She tapped the send button and watched as the screen showed the email go through.

She didn't have to wait long. The phone rang less than two minutes later. She hit the button and the line went active. She stared at it for a moment, before jerking the phone to her ear.

"H-hello? James?"

"Miss Green. Well, well, well." He sounded very pleased with himself. "It's so wonderful to hear from you again."

"I need to- I'm tired of running. So tired. Can I- can we talk?"

"You sound distressed, Miss Green." His voice was compassionless and flat.

"I can't do this anymore. They- they have my passport and my money and everything. I've got a hotel room for tonight, but I don't know what- what I'm going to do tomorrow."

"Where are you?"

"Paris. I was trying to get to London so I could at least understand everyone, but- but now I'm stuck here and I can't do this anymore. I need help." She paused a half-beat. "I'm just a web geek."

"Who has your passport?"

"Some men. They came for me at my hotel this morning. I overheard them when I was using the WiFi in the lobby. They knew my name. My real name. I had to run, but the hotel still had the passport you gave me. It's gone."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know. They weren't American or French. They were

huge, James. Gorillas. I wasn't- I couldn't. I just ran."

"I am not unsympathetic, Miss Green," his voice disagreed with him, "but you have put me in a very awkward position."

"I didn't mean to. I shouldn't have. I just didn't feel safe. I didn't know what to do. I'm so sorry."

He was quiet.

"Can we just- can we talk about it? I can't live this life. It's not like I thought it would be."

"We will have a very long talk. But I can't get to Paris until tomorrow. You are safe for the night?"

"I- I think so. A woman saw me crying in a café. I told her that I had lost my passport and couldn't get a hotel room for the night. I paid her to get the hotel room for me. I never used my name, and I haven't seen anyone following me since this morning. But tomorrow ... I don't have enough money for another night. It was more than I thought it would be to get this cell phone, but I didn't want to use anything from before."

"You did it right, Miss Green. Your luck is, again, impressive."

"My- I don't understand."

"You've made it this far on luck, but you are right: you're not going to make it much longer."

"I know. I know. That's why I emailed you. You're the only person left that I know."

"Keep this cell phone on. I'll call you in the morning."

"But I-"

"Get some sleep. You sound exhausted and we may have a very active day tomorrow."

"I- Thank you, James. Thank you."

"We'll talk tomorrow."

The line beeped and went dead. Xochitl's jaw was an achy mass of muscles and her free hand was curled into a tight ball. She realized that she had kept her eyes closed for almost the entire conversation. She exhaled as much air as she could, then slowly raised her eyelids.

Susie and Eddie sat in front of her, staring at her. She didn't even want to think about what was going through their heads right now.

"That should do it. He's on his way."

She set the bright orange cell phone down on the table. She forced herself to unwind and smile thinly.

"What's for dinner?"

Volume III

Paris, France

Day 18

Xochitl dropped her fork and knife onto her plate with a loud noise. The other people in the restaurant looked at her, but she didn't notice them.

"James!"

"Good morning, Miss Green." He sat down across from her.

"How are you- how did you find me?"

"Your cell phone. That is why I had you leave it on."

Xochitl looked down at the bright hunk of plastic clipped to her belt.

"I wouldn't have even thought of that. I am so not cut out for the spy biz."

"Don't sell yourself short. You made it a week on your own. That's no small feat."

Xochitl grunted in disagreement and drained the last of her orange juice. She flagged down the waitress, who refilled her glass from a pitcher then looked at James.

"*Monsieur?*"

"*café, por favour.*"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

He looked back at Xochitl who had gone back to stuffing her face with the oversized quiche in front of her. She suddenly became very self-conscious and batted at her face with a napkin.

"Sorry. I'm spending my last twenty euros for a decent breakfast. Horrible, isn't it?"

He shrugged noncommittally. She continued.

"You got here fast. Where were you, if you don't mind me asking?"

His face dropped in a way that made her shrink into her seat.

"London, actually. Trying to find you."

Xochitl spoke through her quiche. "London?"

"You swapped out iPods with the girl from the international terminal, remember? We followed the iPod to Heathrow. Her father was ... not amused."

Xochitl's eyes went wide. She paused while the waitress poured his coffee, then pounced. "You did have something in the iPod! What? GPS tracker?"

"GPS trackers are still too bulky and require too much power and need line of sight to a satellite. And you, you're not exactly the type to go out for a walk in the sun." He pulled the iPod from his coat pocket. "It's a chip that listens for WiFi networks, then pings our server. We trace the IP back to its access point. It's more work for us, but there's less chance it will be noticed." He traced a line up the side of the iPod with his finger. "And the iPod is just the right size for a WiFi antenna."

"That's the coolest thing I've ever heard of."

She stuffed more quiche into her mouth, chasing it with a strip of bacon. The iPod went back into his coat pocket.

"So here we are again. This seems very familiar to me, Miss Green."

He was done showing her his toys, and had now gone all business. She put down her fork and took a quick sip of juice. He reciprocated by sipping his coffee while staring at her. She dropped the smile she had been wearing.

"I know. And I said that I'm sorry."

"And what is it you would like for me to do now?"

Xochitl squirmed in her seat.

"I don't know. But I can't run any more. And I need to be a person again. I miss being Xochitl Green. I'd rather be Xochitl in a dark basement somewhere than Mary or someone else running through Europe. Does that make sense?"

"It's a common problem with field agents – some people can't handle the tricks that not having a fixed identity plays on their minds. You, Miss Green, are an excellent coder, but you are not a field agent."

"Yeah. I'm beginning to see that."

He finished his cup of coffee and signaled for another one. The waitress had it refilled within seconds.

"It's too bad I don't drink coffee," Xochitl mused, "the French seem to take it very seriously."

He smirked, but his smile faded quickly. She pretended not to notice.

"So what now? Where do we go from here?"

He rubbed at his temples and shook his head.

"We have to assume that Mary Webb is completely compromised. We're working on a new identity for you, but these things take time." He started to shrug off his coat. "We'll put you up

at a hotel in the mean time, but it may be a week or two.”

“Alright. So I get at least a week in luxury before you stick me in a cave in Outer Slovenia or wherever.”

He grimaced and continued to rub his temples.

“Headache? It's probably my fault. I'm sorry.”

He shook his head at her.

“We need to ... talk about the men ... you saw yesterday.”

Xochitl looked sideways at him. “Okay, but I didn't see much. Like I said, I don't think they were American, and their French didn't seem all that great. They looked like generic muscle out of any bad gangster movie I've ever seen. Two of them. Black trench coats on black suits.”

He grunted at her. She squinted at him and he locked eyes with her, looking for something.

“Are you sure you're okay? You don't look so good.”

He didn't answer her, pulling his hand to his ear instead. When he spoke it was barely a whisper. “I've been drugged. Get me ... out of here.” He wasn't talking to her.

Xochitl jumped backwards in her seat, then leaned in close. “Drugged? James? What do I do?”

He shook his head at her, then regretted it and scrunched his eyes closed.

“Stay ... put ...”

The muscles in his neck went slack and his head thudded against the wall next to him.

Xochitl scanned the room, but no one seemed to have noticed. She pulled the cell phone from her belt and punched at the buttons.

“Hello? Hello? No, I don't speak French. English?”

Several customers looked her way.

“My friend ... we were just eating breakfast and he passed out! I think he's had a heart attack or a brain aneurysm or something! What do I do?”

The entire restaurant was now staring at her.

“We're at a small restaurant near the Eiffel Tower. I'm not sure of the name.”

Someone spoke aloud, “*La Tour Vue*”, and she repeated it into the phone.

“No, I think he's still breathing. Hold on, let me check.”

She leaned across the table and put her hand over his mouth.

“Yeah, I can feel it. He's still breathing. But not much. What now?”

The customers started to murmur loudly and look at each other.

“Okay, but what else can I do? I have to help him!”

Within moments she heard the distinctive Doppler whine of an approaching French ambulance. It skidded to a stop outside the door. The door of the restaurant slammed open, and two uniformed women made a bee line for her table. Xochitl's eyes went wide and she started to back away from the table. One of the women spoke with her as they eased him out of his chair onto the floor.

"We will help him, *mademoiselle*. You did a very good job, but for now please step back. What is his name?"

"James."

The women worked through checking his pulse, then airway, then shining a pen light into his eyes. They spoke to each other in rapid French, then the same woman from before looked up at her. The other woman ran out of the restaurant.

"We need to get James to a hospital. Are you his wife?"

"No, I -"

Xochitl looked up to see the other paramedic running back into the restaurant with a gurney in front of her. Close behind her was another woman in a nice suit and a man she recognized immediately as the driver of the stretch limo: Luis. He shook his head at her. She looked at him as she spoke.

"No, I'm not his wife, just a friend."

The paramedics dropped the gurney to the floor and began to load him onto it.

"Then I am sorry to say that I cannot allow you to join us in the ambulance. However, we will need you at the hospital." She pulled a card out of her pocket and thrust it toward Xochitl. "Please get there as quickly as you can."

The paramedics wheeled the gurney out the front of the restaurant at full speed, and had it loaded into the back of the ambulance within seconds. The siren squealed to life and they were lost in a mess of traffic.

Luis and the sharp-dressed woman rushed to Xochitl's table while the rest of the customers continued to stare. Luis pulled the business card from her hand and looked like he was about to say something when the woman stopped him. She pulled off her coat and wrapped it around Xochitl.

"Come with us, young lady. We will get you to the hospital."

Xochitl nodded and began to walk to the front. She paused when she saw the waitress.

"I didn't- I haven't paid for my breakfast yet."

Luis pulled out his wallet and shoved several bills toward the waitress, who was stunned but took them. The woman put her arm around Xochitl and walked her out, Luis close behind them. They

hailed a cab and Luis handed the driver the business card. The woman spoke first.

"Miss Green, my name is Marlena. I need you to tell me exactly what just happened."

She looked at Luis, who nodded.

"I'm not sure. We were talking about getting me out of France –"

"Yes, we heard you. What did you see?"

"Oh. Then it looked like ... I don't know. Like he was getting a headache or something. He went all pale and it was like he lost focus. Which, for him, is weird. Then he just passed out."

Xochitl bit her thumbnail.

"Does this have anything to do with those guys that were chasing me? Do you know anything about that?"

Marlena and Luis exchanged looks. The cab bobbed and weaved through traffic.

"We aren't sure, but we're going to get you out of the country tonight."

"But James said –"

Marlena nodded and cut her off.

"It's not the best way to do it, but we can't leave you here. We'll keep working on a long-term identity. Like he told you, they take time to set up properly. Anything we gave you now wouldn't last more than a day or two."

Xochitl stared into her lap, pressed in on both sides by the two of them. She wedged herself out of Marlena's coat and handed it back to her. "Thanks for picking me up. If you two hadn't been there, I don't know what I would have done."

The cab bounced into the drop-off for the hospital's Emergency Room. They piled out and Luis tossed some more bills at the driver. As they walked through the sliding doors, Xochitl caught the eye of the paramedic that had spoken to her. She walked over to them.

"Are they with you?"

"Yes, ma'am. We are all vacationing together."

Luis and Marlena nodded and smiled.

"We believe that your friend may have suffered a mild seizure." She began to lead them into the hospital, nodding at the people behind the check-in desk. "He is in stable condition, but until the doctors know what caused it, they are going to keep an eye on him. I know many of the the people here – they will take care of your friend. He is in a room this way."

When they reached the room, the paramedic look Xochitl by the shoulder. "The doctors will ask you again later, but will you talk with

me about what you saw?"

Xochitl looked at Luis and Marlena who were itching to get through the door. Marlena was ambivalent, but Luis nodded. Xochitl reassured him. "I'll be right in."

As the other two walked into the room, Xochitl began to retell the same thing she had said to Marlena before. The door clicked closed and the paramedic's hand tightened on her arm. She heard a scuffle and several heavy thuds before the woman spoke to her again.

"You did very good, Miss Green. You are very brave. We will take them from here."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl slid the key card into the slot. The lock clicked and a light near the handle flashed green. She barely had the door open before a body rushed at her, tackling her and pushing her into the wall. Xochitl pried the woman away and looked at her.

"You made it!"

Susie sniffled a little from underneath bloodshot eyes. Eddie was a short distance behind her, fidgeting with his hands.

"Yeah. It worked."

Xochitl walked over to Eddie and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back and sighed deeply.

"I made it."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

"Yes, sir?"

"It's interesting that you answer the phone that way, because that tells me you are exactly who I am looking for."

"Who is this?"

"You can call me Mister Perkins. I believe your former employer may have mentioned me before."

"But —"

"I have been made to understand that you might not believe that I am who I say I am, and I do require your complete attention. You should now be receiving a second call on this line, that one from my desk phone instead of this cell phone. I'm hanging it up now, but I trust you saw what you needed to see. A simple "yes, sir" will

suffice.”

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

“Very good – he’s housebroken you, after all. Now I need you to listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you, because I am not the type of man that likes to repeat myself. Are you listening to me, girl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have referred to him as your former employer because that man, whatever you people call him, is now another trophy on my wall. I’m thinking of stuffing and mounting him with the rest of the critters in my office. Do you understand where I am going with this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That is good to hear, because this is the part that is important: the only, and I absolutely mean the only thing that is keeping me from doing the same thing to the rest of you is that I know that you are very, and I mean very quickly going to find it in your hearts to get me my money back. Every last penny, I believe you are going to say.”

“I, uh –”

“Girl, that was my attempt at a subtle hint. You are supposed to say “every last penny”. Go on.”

“Every last penny, sir.”

“There you go! That’s good to hear. I’m glad we understand each other. We’ll chat again in a little bit. I look forward to hearing how much progress you have made on this new path in life.”

“Yes, sir.”

Perkins disconnected the call, dropped the cell phone on his desk, and sat back in his chair, staring at the three men in front of him. He spoke directly to the skinnier one, between the two linebackers.

“Is it that they are cowards, or just that you don’t inspire as much loyalty as you had hoped, boy?”

The bound man was silent behind his gag, not even bothering to acknowledge the question. Perkins looked up to address the larger men.

“Hold on to him for a few days. I’ll only need him if his people start to act up. I don’t think they will be a problem, though. But ... when you do finally dispose of him, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask for some identifiable piece of him. Some of my contractors lately have been rather abusive of my trust.”

The two men nodded, and each of the three sized up the smaller man.

“Besides, stuffing and mounting him may not be a half-bad idea after all.”

Xochitl felt the plastic hanger press against her shoulder blades. A few of the fingers from the hand holding it bobbed against the top of her arm.

"I don't know, dear. I know you said you wanted greys and whites, but they're just so drab. This red one would look absolutely stunning on you. You have such a beautiful light skin tone, and the red makes you look like a marble sculpture."

"Ha! Veins and all!"

"Alabaster is the new tan, dear. The bleach-blond beach bunnies from ten years ago are starting to look a little leathery."

"How neo-Victorian." She continued to flip through the rack without daring to turn around and look at the dress that Susie was pressing against her. She felt the older woman's eyes sweep once more before the dress was removed and replaced casually on a rack behind her.

She couldn't muster the enthusiasm to care about the dress rack in front of her. Susie had suggested they get a pair of complementary evening dresses for a night out in Paris with Eddie. It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but now it was a single grain of sand in a desert.

Xochitl's eyes only half watched the rack as the dresses in front of her migrated from right to left. Her attention was lost to the reflection of each and every person passing by the front door of the boutique. The other milling customers weren't helping, either.

The facial recognition center of her brain was working overtime to assure her primitive and skittish lizard brain that each woman she saw was not Marlana, and each man was not Luis. Her lizard brain appreciated the effort, but continued to harrumph and assert that there were probably dozens of other people working for Kami that the facial recognition center wouldn't catch, as she'd never seen them before. Oh, and that Perkins might also decide to snatch her back up at any time, too.

She caught sight of Susie's frowning reflection and realized too slowly that the frown was a reflection of a reflection of her own frown. Xochitl efforted a smile and Susie's frown straightened out a few seconds later.

"I don't know what more to say, dear."

"How about 'it's a mighty fine mess you've gotten us into'?"

"It seems to me that you've done more than your fair share of handling the mess."

"You're not going to advocate that next time I just act like an airhead and don't let the men-folk see what goes on inside my pretty little head, are you?"

She meant it as a joke, mostly, but could tell that Susie wasn't amused. She didn't respond and instead went back to flicking through a rack that Xochitl could have sworn she'd already been through. Xochitl went back to her own rack and the two women ignored each other for a few heartbeats.

"Sorry."

The response didn't come immediately.

"I know, dear."

More dresses swished from right to left. None of them were in any way interesting, and yet it's not like they were horrible. Xochitl found herself upgrading from a gentle slide to a hard thwack and stopped herself.

"This isn't working."

She heard Susie's rack settle down as she turned to face her.

"No, it isn't."

"Food and gab?"

Susie's face pinched for a half-second then relaxed.

"Yes. That should help."

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"Seriously. I cannot believe they just sell bread and cheese on the streets here. How are we all morbidly obese and these people look normal?"

Susie raised an eyebrow at her as she sipped her coffee.

"Right. "Says the woman tearing into an over-sized baguette and a wheel of Brie." I heard that."

Susie's cup clinked into its saucer as a knowing glance flew across her face. Xochitl couldn't resist.

"What? What's that look?" When Susie didn't respond, she continued to press. "Come on. We gave up on shopping to talk. Let's talk."

Susie continued to hold her tongue.

"Okay. Fine." She finished chewing before starting up again. "I know it's not over. I'm not in denial. I'm just doing my best to not completely freak out."

Susie looked unaffected.

"Yeah, I know, I really am completely freaking out."

Another several inches of baguette were torn, spread, and disappeared before she continued. She put her elbows on the table around her plate and dropped her forehead into her palms, talking at her baguette.

"Exposition time. There are two groups of people that aren't going to let me walk away. The scarier of the two are a bunch of world-traveling assassin hackers, while the less-scary guys are a shadowy organization of incredibly rich and powerful people. Somehow, this MP3-downloading American girl is the high-water mark for morals."

Susie's coffee disappeared from her view and was replaced a few seconds later.

"If I want to be incredibly naive, I can hope that the first group of people has been decapitated and ... God, what if they did? What if Perkins really killed him?" The smell of the Brie turned sour in her nostrils and she pushed the plate to an unoccupied corner of the table, far away from her.

"Anyway, I can hope that Kami's group is too scattered right now to worry about me. I don't think I'll have too long with that, though. And no amount of naivety is going to get me to think that I'll be able to lose them for any serious length of time. I'd be lucky to get another week out of it."

Susie's cup did the disappear-and-reappear trick in her peripheral vision.

"And I think I've got Perkins and his crew on my side. Maybe. But he sees himself as the sole rooster in a very large hen house. If nothing else, he's going to eventually figure out that I know far more than he should be comfortable with. He's going to come back and try to get more out of me, I can feel it."

She sighed, her chest angling her neck up and down.

"So we're back to maybe a week. I can't run. I've played just about every card in my hand."

Susie kicked her, not at all gently. Xochitl started, but forced her head to stay down for a moment before raising it, looking directly at the woman across from her. Susie's cup went to her lips as her eyes flicked across the street. Xochitl lowered her hands to the table and clasped them in front of her before shifting in her chair. She glanced in the direction that Susie had indicated, but didn't see anything. Her eyes locked with Susie's before it hit her.

The facial recognition center had lagged, working on the afterimage in her mind's eye. It wasn't Marlena and Luis, but another Latin man and Slavic-looking woman. Susie had picked them out from the description she had been given, and was close enough for

someone who had never actually seen them.

Xochitl locked her jaw and closed her eyes for a long moment before hissing through her teeth. "Not them."

Susie returned her coffee to the saucer and gave the first visible sign of reaction since they had sat down.

"I can't do this, Susie. I really can't. I'm not this kind of person. James was right – it's luck that's gotten me this far. I'm not a field agent."

Susie's guard had been broken by the near-incident. She clucked at Xochitl and her posture shifted before she spoke.

"Xochitl."

Xochitl jumped as she realized that was the first time Susie had called her by that name. In fact, it was the first time anyone had called her that in two weeks. Perkins and James only called her "Miss Green", and that was just too creepy to take as comforting. She felt her eyes water a little.

Susie's posture shifted again, as if also realizing that she'd taken their relationship to a different place.

"It doesn't seem to me like you have much of a choice."

Xochitl closed her eyes in response and to hold back the tears.

"You don't have to be a hero, you know. You may be too young to realize it, but there's no small difference between reality and all those Bruce Willis movies your generation loves so much. Not that I can blame you all, of course. He's close to my age and still a good looking man."

"I'm not looking to be a hero. For all I care, Perkins and his group can go on trying to come up with clever ways to move money between rich people. And James' group can go on being thugs for money. Both of those are way, way beyond my pay grade."

She opened her eyes and saw Susie's tilted face staring back at her, unobscured by coffee cup this time.

"What?"

"Could you? Could you let it go? Could you just walk away? Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that you could?"

Xochitl tried to, but failed. Her hands clenched and unclenched, making fists against her thighs.

"I don't know. I hope so. I'd have some serious messianic issues if I couldn't. I mean, it's not like I'm a complete layabout, right? I was smart enough to figure out the con. I was smart enough to stay alive for the past few weeks. I was smart enough to turn one of the groups on the other one. Can't that be enough?"

"I would say it was. Being smart enough isn't everything, but that's still a tall order."

Xochitl continued to dig her nails into her palms, oblivious to the sensation.

"So what's stopping me? Perkins is probably dismantling James' organization as we speak, piece by piece, trying to get his money back. Right?"

"Could be."

"So there's almost no way any of them would still have me on their radar, right?"

Susie shrugged this time. "Can you be sure?"

Xochitl's mouth twisted even further downward.

"No."

Susie's stare continued to bore into her.

"So I need a plan."

"Yes, dear, you do."

Xochitl's frustration hardened. "You're not helping."

Not an eyelash batted in response. Susie wouldn't be baited.

"Save the cheerleader, save the world? Does that make me the cheerleader?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, just babbling." She absently pulled the plate of bread and cheese back toward her and started to tear at it. "There's no way I'm going along quietly with whatever they want. I know I can't go sneaky to get myself out of this – James' group has me beat in that arena. I certainly don't have the clout or resources to bully my way out of the situation."

"Don't you?"

"No way. Both groups are dripping in money, time, and manpower. I can't compete with that. James has, or had, his ninja army, and Perkins has his zombie army."

"Does he?"

"Hello? Yeah! More than a million computers."

"As unbelievable as that number is, that wasn't what I meant."

"You're going to make me guess at this, aren't you?"

Susie smiled thinly. "You're the young lady that likes to mutter television quotes and music lyrics under her breath. Try this one: it's not the size, it's how you use it."

"What are you –"

Susie tapped herself on the temple with a finger as Xochitl began to get it.

"He can't! You're absolutely right!" The remnants of the baguette exploded into a particle cloud of carbohydrates in her hands. "He doesn't really have control of it. Bill, James, or whoever, never really got it working. It's an army without a General."

Susie's hand returned to her coffee cup for another long sip.

"That's it for me, my dear. That was my only idea."

Xochitl's eyes had already unfocused and started drifted toward the ceiling. Susie finished off her coffee and signaled for the bill as Xochitl's hands wiped at each other, feebly trying to brush off the bread crumbs. As she pulled euros out of her wallet, she knew that the words and sentences coming out of Xochitl weren't intended for her.

"How can I ... ? I mean, what do you do with them? A million extra CPUs for Seti@Home isn't going to go a long way with either of them. Well, I'm sure James or Malificent-Marlboro-whats-her-name could have thought of something nasty."

Xochitl froze.

"Oh. You have got to be kidding me."

Her eyes snapped back into focus as her chin leveled out. It took her a second to realize that Susie had either cleared the café table, or had a barrista do it for her, as even the bread crumb pile was gone. Susie was looking at her patiently with her hands folded on the table.

"Figure it out?"

"Yeah, I think so. But you're not going to like the solution. We need to call Eddie."

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"No!"

"You have to. We have to. I can't keep you safe. I can't even keep myself safe!"

"No!"

Xochitl didn't think that it was Eddie's lack of English vocabulary that was keeping him in a monosyllabic state. The two sentences of her proposal that she had gotten out before he objected weren't something she had thought he was going along with. Susie was polysyllabic, but the message was the exact same.

"No, dear, that's not how it's going to happen. Listen to Eddie."

"You have to go back to Barcelona. These people will never leave me alone. Not soon, anyway. I think we've been lucky this far, and they've been too focused on me to think about whether anyone else is helping me. But the damsel in distress card is only going to work for so long. Eventually, and sooner rather than later, they will figure out that I've got help. Then the two of you, and probably your entire family, will be in the cross-hairs."

"That's a lovely speech, but I'm not having it. If we hadn't just talked about playing the hero and martyr, I might have believed it."

Xochitl pulled her eyes away from Susie's and looked around the Paris hotel room.

I finally get to Europe, and I'm too terrified to actually see any of it.

"Susie. You're not getting it. I'm not just talking about physical harm. These business people would have absolutely no regrets about taking Eddie's father's business from him and shredding it like so much paper. He's finally excited to be an entrepreneur again. Can you take that away from him?"

Susie steamed at her.

"Don't you put that on me."

"You didn't get him involved, I know that. I did. But I'm trying to get him, and everyone else I've grown to care for in the past few weeks, out of danger. What I've got to do next cannot involve you, or Eddie, or anyone else."

"You need our help. We're already involved."

Xochitl wrung her hands, subconsciously mimicking the movements she saw Eddie making with his own hands.

"Yes, you were involved. But the truth is that I can't pull off the next part if you're in the picture. First, it's less believable if I've got help. Second, frankly ... I can't concentrate on what I have to do if I have to worry about you and Eddie."

Xochitl wrapped her arms across her chest and leaned back on her heels, digging in and staring at Susie. Eddie sat on the bed, obviously desperate to say something, but unable or unwilling to step into the argument.

To Xochitl's surprise, Susie cracked first, throwing her hands in the air and retreating to the bathroom. Xochitl took the opportunity to cross to the corner of the bed where Eddie was sitting and knelt in front of him.

"I'm so sorry. You know that right? I don't have many options here."

It took him a minute to look up at her.

"I know. You worry. But it is like Miss Susie says about me – I want to take the tools and show how it is done right. If a job is not done right, you need to do it right with your own hands. Now, you need to work with your own tools."

Xochitl took his hand in hers.

"Pretty much. If I don't take control of these people now, they're going to take control of me. And I'm too much like you, and your brother, to allow that to happen. I have to fix it."

He nodded at her, eyes returning to his lap.

"I know."

Xochitl tightened her grip on his calloused hand.

"But you know that I'm coming back to Barcelona, right? When I'm done. Definitely. You three are the only people I know anymore. And you've treated me more like family than anyone has in years. I'm not giving that up any time soon."

Eddie nodded again, gently pulling his hand away from hers and wiping his palms frustratedly on his jeans. Xochitl heard the bathroom sink run for a moment, then stop. She got up and went back to where she had been standing.

Susie came out of the bathroom, tissue dabbing at her eyes.

"What can we do for you before we head back, dear?"

Xochitl looked down at the carpet and worked through her plan.

"I honestly can't think of anything. I need to get out of this hotel – Teddy made the reservations, so anyone finding me here would lead straight back to you all. Unfortunately, the story I told James was that a woman set me up with a room when my passport was taken. Even though I told him it was a woman I met on the street, his crew could think to look into who booked the room and start tracing backwards from there."

She was silent for another moment as the plan fast-forwarded in her head.

"After that, I just need the laptop and a place with reliable Internet access. I've already got the two disposable cell phones. I'm pretty sure I have enough cash to last me for a while, and Brian's card still hasn't been shut off."

Her fingers tapped absently against her hips. She shook her head to no one in particular.

"No. No, I think I've got everything I need."

Her eyes refocused on Susie, then on Eddie. She managed a half-smile.

"I'm definitely taking a rain check on the shopping, though. I don't think it would be safe to be seen with either of you from here on out, but I have some serious wardrobe-rebuilding to do." No one laughed. "Besides, how often am I going to get to go shopping in Paris? I promised Teddy I'd try to be a girl, and I intend to keep that promise."

When no one spoke, Xochitl turned quietly and pulled her luggage bag and her purse up from the floor and onto her shoulders. She walked over to the corner of the bed again.

"Come on, big guy. Hug time."

Eddie stared at the floor between his feet, then stood and quickly and gently hugged her without looking her in the face. He sighed

heavily and hunched his shoulders as he let go.

Xochitl turned and looked at Susie, who she thought had never disengaged her stare, even when her back had been turned. "You, too. I owe you more than I could ever repay you for." The women hugged, but it was conflicted and withdrawn.

"Stay safe, dear. We're still in Paris for another day. After that, we're only a train ride away."

"I know. I will. And I promise I'll see you all in a few weeks when this is all over and done with. How many other European resort hotel owners do I know?"

The women disengaged, and Xochitl turned and walked out the door without another word or glance.

Day 19

"Miss Green. I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon."

"Really?"

"Suffice it to say that most women in your particular situation would take a few days to recover from the ordeal."

Sexist pig jerk.

"Well thank you then, I guess. I was actually just calling to check in. We had a deal, you got me out of a tight spot with James and his crew, and I figured it would only be proper for me to say thank you. So ... thank you."

"You are quite welcome, young lady."

"And ... I wanted to talk about our arrangement."

"Yes, I've been thinking about it, as well."

"To be frank, Mister Perkins, this is pretty out there for me. I'm not used to being on either end of this kind of deal. I feel like I'm in bed with *la cosa nostra* or something."

Perkins coughed and grunted.

"I mean ... um, that didn't sound right! I'm sorry. I'm just not sure where to go from here. I figure there's not much else I can really do for you. We've proven the software is a complete fake, and I obviously can't go on working on Alfred if everyone in the States thinks I'm dead, so I wasn't sure where that left us and our deal."

"If you would stop blathering for a moment, I could explain it to you, girl."

Blowhard.

"Sorry."

"My organization has been doing some digging into what you told us. You were half right. Watts was a real person, but that wasn't his real name. He turned out to be some college kid from California, of course. Nakamura and his crew got wind of what he was up to, but they thought the kid's con was too small: selling time to the Russian mafia. Nakamura erased the kid and reworked the software you saw into the banking scam that I almost fell for."

You could say "thanks", you know.

"It was a real kid? How many people have died for this thing?"

"Young lady, that is none of your business. Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No. No, I don't."

"I didn't think so."

"So where do I come back in?"

"My group would like some more answers. Nakamura didn't provide as much information as we would have liked."

Past tense? Has he become one of the people that has died for this stupid scam?

"I can try. What the Watts kid was trying to do isn't really in my area of expertise." *Sell it. He's got to think that I'm not nearly as smart as I think I am.* "But can I ask one thing first?"

"As long as it is fast. I don't have all day."

Gently.

"If James is still ali-, um ... if James is still around, and I'm not asking if he is because that's none of my business, can you kind of leave me out of conversations with him? It's just that he and his crew seem to have gotten some kind of fixation thing going on with me, and I don't need him coming after me again. That was scary enough the first time. Please."

"That will not be a problem. Is that all?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Go ahead with your questions."

"Could it have worked?"

"The scam? Or the technology?"

"The technology, girl, of course!"

"Sorry. I, uh, I have to be honest."

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about that. Now that I don't have a job anymore, I've been wondering if I could get you guys to pay me to work on it."

"Yes, we had the same idea. We know you are in a delicate situation. So is that a yes?"

Xochitl waffled.

"Well ... that's just the thing. I don't think so. What that guy said at the meeting was true – it would take more computers than are on the entire planet to break that kind of encryption, and the sun would go cold before then."

Perkins grunted again.

"Are you sure?"

"Not really. I mean, everything I said at the meeting was also true. In theory, at least. It might be the case that somewhere in the billions of bank accounts there could be some that have encryption

with flaws that could be attacked. And if you were going to mount an attack, an army of invisible zombie computers would be an invaluable weapon."

"But ..."

"Right. But the odds are stacked well against you. You'd be just as likely to crack open an account and find five bucks as five million. It's not like you could target specific accounts with this thing – it's really only useful for a certain type of weak encryption, so you're pretty much stabbing in the dark."

Yet again, Perkins grunted.

"My people said the same thing. But we were curious to see if you would try to sell your skills."

"Yeah, I wanted to. I could use the job. But I can't guarantee that I'd be able to make it work, and I really don't want to get on your bad side."

"No, young lady, you do not."

They were both silent for several heartbeats until Xochitl spoke again.

"I know it's none of my business, but have you been able to do damage control for that group I spoke to? I can't imagine they were too happy to find out that the whole thing was a con."

"You're right, it's none of your business."

"Well, if you haven't told them anything yet ... I had an idea."

Perkins was unusually silent, which Xochitl took as her cue to continue.

"I was thinking that you could say that you got an offer before the official bidding started that blew all of the other offers out of the water. Then you could be all coy about who it was. Everyone would think it was someone else, and would think twice about putting in a low bid at their next opportunity. Then just say that you're working on the possibility of opening the opportunity to other bidders, but it was still in negotiations. That leaves your reputation intact, makes them all paranoid, and ..."

"And what?"

"And I saw some of their faces in that meeting. Some of them, the smart ones I have to figure, were terrified that the software even existed. It was like they were watching the stock markets crash, or their banks go under. You could leverage that."

She paused to let him take the bait.

"I'm still listening."

"You have to figure that right now, and for the next week or two, almost all of them are going to be going over their finances with a fine-toothed comb. Odds are, some of them are going to find out

that their accounts aren't as secure as they thought. That's a lot of activity that your people can watch out for."

"So?"

"So ... it gives you two things. I mean, maybe two. It depends on how much you all trust each other."

But if every bad spy movie I've seen has been at least partially accurate, I'm hoping that no one really trusts anyone else.

"First, you'll have a clearer picture of the finances of a lot of those people. If you already trust each other, then great. But I can't figure everyone got to be a part of that group by being completely honest and squeaky clean. This even should shed a little light into the shadowier parts of your cabal."

"Let's just stick with "group", if you please."

"Right. Sorry. Anyway. The second thing is that even if you can't see where all the money is going to, you can at least see where all the money is coming from. I don't figure any of them for under-the-mattress types, and at the levels I think we're talking about, it's not like they'll be the only person with money at their particular financial institution. By watching where the money is leaving, you know that you can look at those banks, or whatever they are, for other accounts that have the same weaknesses. Then at least you aren't completely stabbing in the dark anymore."

"Interesting."

"But ..."

"But what?"

"But some of them will be smart enough to think of that, too. That Indian woman seemed especially sharp. We know that it doesn't really work, but they don't. I wouldn't be surprised to see some of them slink quietly back to their caves and start recruiting people to build their own versions of the software. That's how it worked in my industry, anyway – watch someone do a demo, then go back and build your own version for half of the price. The delay while you sort out Nakamura's crew is only going to make it more likely."

"But you're telling me that it will never work."

The implied question hung in the air.

"I'm telling you that I think it will never work, but that I'm not sure. If it could work, I don't have the skills to be that person that makes it work. I want to be, but I honestly don't."

"I appreciate your honesty, Miss Green. Your ideas, while unsolicited, also have merit. I will think about them. I believe you may consider our agreement satisfied for the time being, as long as we can agree on two conditions."

"Go ahead."

"One: your work on your previous project is complete."

"Fair enough. It was never supposed to be a big deal, anyway."

"Two: everything you have seen and heard can be traced back to you, and you alone are the first suspect should any of the information ever get back to me from outside of our group. Is that clear?"

"Completely. I'm under a non-disclosure agreement."

"If that is how you care to think of it. However, should you come to any further insight regarding our business opportunities, I believe you see that we could both profit. You are a smart woman, Miss Green, and have a lucrative future ahead of you if you so choose. I am a powerful man that prefers to keep smart people around me. I can help you achieve that lucrative future."

Shark.

"Yes, sir. I have no doubt. If I come up with anything, I will be sure that you are the first to know."

"Good evening, Miss Green."

The phone clicked into silence and a few seconds later the display backlight turned off.

Well, that went about as close to plan as I could have hoped for.

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"Um, hello?"

"Yes? How can I help you, ma'am?"

"You're not James. Who is this?"

"I work for Mr. Nakamura. May I ask who is calling?"

"I, uh ... I'm not sure about that."

"You're not sure, ma'am?"

"Not sure if I should tell you who I am. Where is James?"

"Mr. Nakamura is indisposed at the moment. Miss Green?"

"What! How do you know who I am?"

"The cellular phone you are calling from is listed in Mr. Nakamura's contact list."

"But how can you be sure that I am Miss Green?"

"We have software that recognizes your voice, ma'am."

"When can I talk to James? It's very important. I haven't heard from him or either of his, um, agents since yesterday at the hospital. When I went back today, they were all gone. The people at the hospital are useless. They won't tell me anything, and pretend they can't understand me when I talk to them."

"You were with Mr. Nakamura at the hospital?"

"What? Yes, of course I was! I mean, they wouldn't let me ride with him in the ambulance, but the agents gave me a ride. Luis and the woman. I don't remember her name. Started with an M."

"Yes, ma'am. And when you got to the hospital?"

"The ambulance driver had some questions for me about James. She let Luis and the woman go in to see him, but not me. They told me he was resting and I had to come back later. Today. And now they're pretending they never saw him!"

"What did you tell the ambulance driver, Miss Green?"

"Not much. We had barely started talking when he got sick. The ambulance got there so quickly. We couldn't have been together for more than five or six minutes, and he was unconscious for most of that."

"Did he show you anything while he was still conscious? Point at anyone or anything?"

"Point at anyone? No. No, I don't think so. Why?"

"It's very important, Miss Green. Please try to remember."

"I can't stop remembering! He said something that sounded like 'I've been drugged' and then he passed out."

"Yes, ma'am, we have that on record. We need –"

"On record? Was I being recorded?"

"No ma'am, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that. We have spoken to some of the other patrons in the café and –"

"And a fat lot of help they were! Not a single one of them tried to help me!"

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Wait a second. Have you spoken to James since the hospital? Or Luis or the woman agent?"

"I can't go into –"

"Oh yes you can certainly go into that with me! James and I had a deal, well sort of, and we were just starting to work out the kinks when all of this happened. If you haven't heard from him, I need to know! I mean, I'm talking about my life, here! James was going to help me straighten things out!"

"Yes, ma'am. I have that on record, as well. Mr. Nakamura's notes indicate that he was also hoping to work something out. Maybe I can still help you with that? And then maybe you can help us find Mr. Nakamura?"

"Oh my ... you really don't know where he is, do you? Oh no. No, no, no."

"Miss Green. Please. I think we can help each other."

"I – I guess. I mean, I don't have much choice, now do I? What do you want me to do?"

The woman sitting across from Xochitl was dressed in a dark casual business suit. The almond-white silk shirt beneath her jacket had a large flared collar, and did not button at any point before plunging behind an also-plunging pin-striped vest. Xochitl couldn't see her shoes, but could safely assume they were heels several inches high. She was a little on the short side, with hips on the wide side of proportional, but a chest to match. She had dark, chai-colored skin, and straight hair of a brown so dark that it appeared black except where the light caught it. There was probably a strong South American heritage there.

She was just shy of drop dead gorgeous, and Xochitl had an instant dislike for her. It didn't help any when Xochitl could immediately tell that she was a severe take-charge type gal who had been told to play nice and smooth and caring. Everything about this woman was a manufactured lie – a lie meant to wrap men, and possibly weak-willed women, around her little finger.

Oh, and her name was supposedly Candice. Candi.

Yeah, right.

"I already told all this to the woman on the phone earlier."

"I know, Miss Webb."

"Webb? I –"

Candice waved to stop her then muttered through clenched teeth. "Yes, I know. But we need to stick with the plan."

"Plan? What plan?"

"For now, Miss Webb," she underlined the words with her stare, "I am trying to help you remember anything you might have forgotten."

"That's fine, but I don't know if it will get you anywhere. I was pretty frazzled when I met up with James yesterday, then everything happened so fast."

"I know, but we have to try. We all want to find him."

Xochitl gulped her glass of water like a woman who had just finished a marathon. The tap water in France tasted funny.

"I don't know. James passed out, Luis and that woman showed up, they drove me to the hospital, we got split up, then I got the runaround for an hour."

"How did you know which hospital the ambulance was going to? Did the three of you follow it there?"

"The woman driving the ambulance gave me a card. It had the name of the hospital on it, and some other stuff, but I can't remember

what else. Luis grabbed it from me. Or maybe it was the woman agent. One of them. What was her name?"

"It's not important. Can you picture the card in your mind? Were there any logos or colors that stood out to you?"

"I, uh," Xochitl closed her eyes and made a show of it. "I really don't remember. It was in French, and it was taken out of my hand so fast."

"Maybe someone at the hospital –"

"Good luck with that. I tried all morning and got nowhere."

"Some people do not like talking to American tourists. They might be more willing to speak with someone in their own language."

"Maybe. I hope so, I guess. It can't hurt to try." *And it can't hurt to hope that Perkins' crew covered their tracks well.*

A waiter walked up to the table with a tray of plates. Xochitl directed who each plate was placed in front of, and saw the waiter react when most of the plates were put down in front of her. Xochitl tried not to roll her eyes and started to dig into the bowl of vegetable soup. She spoke in between mouthfuls.

"Sorry. I'm just famished. I ran out of money yesterday and haven't eaten since."

"Yes, I heard. You poor thing. Where did you sleep last night?"

"I caught naps here and there. Mostly in the hospital waiting room and park benches."

"You went back to the hospital between yesterday afternoon and this morning?"

"Of course! I had no where else to go! They kept kicking me out and wouldn't tell me anything about James. They treated me like a vagrant or something. I went through three shift changes before I called you guys, all without anyone giving me any information. It drove me crazy!"

Xochitl hit the bottom of the bowl and put down her spoon. She picked up the turkey and cheese sandwich next to it, and used the bread to soak up the rest of the soup.

"How was your soup?"

Xochitl looked up, still chewing. She saw that Candice had a small mixed greens salad with a ramekin of some sort of vinaigrette on the side. She was picking at it, as if counting each individual calorie. She swallowed before answering this time.

"It was great, but I may not be the most objective person right now."

The two women went quiet, each focusing on their food. Xochitl finished her sandwich and looked at her own salad, pausing. Instead of picking up the fork and starting in on it, she sat back in the

booth and looked at Candice.

Time for Phase Two.

"Candice." The woman looked up at her. "Look, I'm really sorry. I've been an absolute spoiled brat to you since you got here, and to that poor woman on the phone. I can only claim low blood sugar and a crazy couple of weeks. But you don't deserve it. It's not like you people have been mean to me. I mean, I know James worked for that Perkins jerk, but he also got me out of that situation. And I'm grateful. I need to say it more, because I really, really am. I don't know what type of dungeon I'd be in right now if James hadn't come back for me."

Xochitl saw Candice's eyebrow twitch before her face went blank for the briefest of moments. She saw a too-wide smile emerge, and the woman put down her fork. She continued.

"But now I've got some food in me, and the prospect of a warm and padded bed tonight, and I'm realizing that things could be much worse. And yet again, I have you people to thank for what I have. I kind of freaked out when James drove me to the airport and tried to ship me off to some random country, and now I'm sorry for that, too. I should have trusted him more. And so here I am, asking you all for help again, and somehow I was being completely nasty at the same time. That's just wrong and ... and I don't know that I can apologize enough."

Xochitl saw something predatory flicker across Candice's face, and put on a smile to match the one in front of her. Candice reached across the table to lay her hand across Xochitl's.

"We know. It's alright. We're going to fix this. Together. Mr. Na-, James is probably just fine, and we're going to find him."

"About that ... I mean, I know you guys are the super-spies and everything, but if I've learned anything from all of my TV and movies, it's that the first question you always ask when someone disappears is who their enemies were and who they owed money to. Well, okay, first you ask if they are married, then you ask about the enemies. He's not married, is he?"

Candice gave an unreadable smirk, then shook her head.

"No, he's not married."

"Right. Anyone he owes money to?"

Candice hesitated.

"Sorry again. Just trying to help. Like I said, I know on which side my bread is buttered now."

Candice loosened a little, but not much.

"I don't know that much about what you people do, but given what little I was able to learn from James, it sounds almost like

hacker-ninjas for hire or something.” She smiled big and picked up her fork.

“Ronin.”

Oh, you have got to be kidding me. He would. What a cliché!

“Ronin? What’s that?”

“He calls us his ronin. You know what a samurai is, right? Japanese feudal warriors with the big swords?”

Xochitl nodded, though it was an effort to not roll her eyes.

“When a samurai’s lord was killed, the samurai were supposed to kill themselves as a sign that they knew they had failed their lords. When a samurai didn’t kill himself, we was considered ronin – he might be able to hire out his services, but there was always a stigma that he was a failure.”

“So, kind of like ninjas, but not quite.”

Candice got that predatory flash again.

“Not that close, but close enough, I guess.”

“I think hacker-ninjas for hire has a better ring to it. But anyway, could it be an unhappy client? Anyone in your past that wasn’t happy with the outcome of a job? Didn’t want to pay the service fees or something?”

Candice got the semi-exasperated look of “what can this woman possibly know; of course we’ve thought of that” and seemed to be about to say exactly that when she bit it back. Xochitl hid her grin with a forkful of dripping salad.

“What about that Perkins jerk? Could he have found out that James helped me to disappear?” Xochitl stopped chewing and brought a sober look to her face. “Oh no. Could he know that I’m not really dead? Am I going to be the next person to disappear?” She dropped her fork onto her salad plate. A little over-dramatic, she thought, but Candice seemed to be buying it. She reached for her napkin without breaking eye contact with the other woman.

“We don’t know yet. It could be.” She seemed to be thinking through it and talking at the same time. “We could have missed something in the extraction process. You’d be amazed at how sometimes the tiniest of things can trip you up.”

“Huh. I certainly didn’t get the impression that James and Perkins were all that buddy-buddy. Not that anyone could be friends with Perkins.”

She could see that Candice was curious and still working through it, so she improvised and elaborated.

“Just some of the things James said at the Mexican restaurant the night I was taken out. He was pretty quick to agree to get me away from Perkins, and every time I said his name he got all tight-

faced, you know? I totally understand why – Perkins talked to me like I was a grade-schooler.”

Candice continued to hold her tongue.

“But ... I don't know. It seemed like their relationship was at least civil. Business professional. As long as you guys weren't screwing Perkins over on the billable hours or something, I don't know how things could have gone that badly that quickly.”

It was Candice's turn to get a sobered look.

Do I press it, or let her figure it out?

Press it.

“Wait. You weren't, were you? Screwing with Perkins?”

Candice shot her a look both confirming and telling her that it was none of her business, before controlling her face and putting on a very thin smile.

“We'll look into it.” The smile widened. “I'm not an accountant – I wouldn't get to see the bills.”

“Right, sorry. And I'm sure you people are going through your entire client list trying to figure the whole thing out. And I only know the one guy. What are the odds it's him?”

“Exactly. What are the odds?”

“Sorry again. It's a programmer thing. We like to solve problems. It's the same reason you don't give us books of crossword puzzles for Christmas – you won't see us again until Valentine's Day.”

“I can see that.”

The women sat in silence and Xochitl went back to eating her salad. The plate in front of Candice had been untouched for quite some time. Xochitl spoke again after finishing off the last of hers.

“So, um, I don't know how to ask this ... but ... did you guys have a plan for me? Obviously, I'm not being much help in finding James, but I'm completely broke and in a foreign country where I don't speak the language and everyone is mean to me.” She kicked the bag on the floor beneath their table. “Everything I own is in one little bag. You can ship me any place where English is the first language and I'll be happy. Promise.”

Candice measured her words.

“We'll need to keep you in Paris for a few days. Wait, I know you're not enjoying it now. But here, take this.” She reached for an inside coat pocket and pulled out a very thin checkbook-sized billfold. She glanced around before pulling out several hundred Euro and sliding across the table to Xochitl. “That will help you. I have two rooms at that hotel,” she pointed out the window across from them to a decent-looking hotel and handed Xochitl a key card from the same billfold, “and 332 is now yours. I will be down the hall in 316 and

should not be seen coming or going with you. Please do not do anything to attract attention to yourself, and do not spend all of that money at once. If we get separated you may need money until we meet up again."

Xochitl nodded.

"Heh. That makes you my "handler", right?"

Candice rolled her eyes and tried to cover it up by nodding. "Exactly. Here is a new phone," it appeared from another inner pocket on the other side of her jacket, "but do not use it for any other purpose than to contact me, or our main line if you cannot reach me. You still have that number?"

Xochitl nodded again.

"My number is the one most recently dialed from that phone."

Candice dropped a few bills on the table and Xochitl noticed it was a horrible tip. The woman got up and made the billfold disappear in a single fluid motion. "Get some rest, Miss Webb. You look like you could use it. I will see you in the morning."

Xochitl nodded a final time.

"Thanks. Really. I hope I can help."

Candice acknowledged her and was out the doors of the café in moments. Xochitl signaled the waiter, handed the unpaid bill back to him, and said one word: "*éclair*".

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl pulled the curtains closed and turned to look at the room. She found it mildly amusing that every hotel room she had been in over the last month had been distinctly unique, and yet she couldn't reliably describe one as being any different than another. They just blurred into indistinct variations on bureau, bed, television, bathroom, and curtains. Traveling salespeople, and field agents for that matter, must feel this way all the time. It was very disconcerting not to have some kind of fixed frame of reference.

Well, except for the faerie-provided limeade. That was certainly memorable.

Was that the key to staying sane? Find one thing and hold on to the memory as hard as you can?

She rolled down onto the bed and snatched the television remote from the night stand. The channels flipped by, a surprising number of them in English, but she just couldn't get into it. She lingered briefly on the BBC World News, but then clicked the

television back off, deciding that the world needed to get on without her for a few more days. She was too busy with her own drama to concern herself with politics and who was busy trying to kill whoever else.

Might it also have something to do with what you saw the last time you watched the news?

“Valid point.”

So what's the plan?

“The George Carlin Cancer Plan: get them to eat each other before they can eat you.”

Interesting. Think you can pull it off?

“Maybe. I just have to stay a step ahead of all of them.”

Can you?

“As long as they don't trust each other, I have a shot. I have to keep them off balance.”

And how is that working out for you?

“Brazilian Assassin Barbie seems to have taken the bait. Couldn't tell if she knew about the con, though.”

What if she didn't? What if it was just James?

“That might actually make my job easier.”

How are you going to keep them from talking about you to each other?

“I think I'm okay with James – he shouldn't want to mention me, as he's already in hot water. As long as he believed my performance at the Eiffel Tower, I should be good to go. Perkins is too much of a sexist egotist to admit that a woman helped him out of a tight spot, much less figured out the con that he couldn't. As long as he doesn't try to dangle me in front of James like a prize, I should be okay.”

Sounds pretty thin. Runway model thin.

“Shush. Go to sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow.”

Day 20

"So you're telling me that I'm in some kind of quarantine situation with you and your crew."

Xochitl sipped her just-below-scalding hot tea – some kind of mint concoction. Mint was supposed to be good for calming the stomach. If she could get out of this mess without an ulcer, that much the better.

"If it helps you to think of it that way."

Candice had on another suit today, this one a navy and pink combo. She played with, but didn't seem to drink, a thick black coffee in an undersized cup. The fumes from it made Xochitl nauseous.

"It's for your own protection just as much as for ours. If Town Hall finds out that you are connected to us, it could end badly for you. But I will not lie to you, it would also look extremely bad for us."

Xochitl had a moment of panic.

"Town Hall?"

Candice fidgeted slowly with her coffee before continuing. She clearly did not want to be here with Xochitl, much less telling her what was going on. She was the type of person that kept her own secrets and never told anyone more than would help her out. Someone was making her share with Xochitl, which meant that someone in James' organization was calling the shots in his absence.

"We have some information about Mr. Nakamura's abduction." She finally sipped her coffee before she spoke again. "You were right. It was Mr. Perkins and his group. We call them "Town Hall" because _"

"Because of that creepy empty building?"

Candice's eyes widened.

"That is correct. Yes, I was told that you were brought there once."

"So then this is about me. He knows I am still alive."

Candice again sipped her coffee before responding.

"No. No, we do not think so. There have been other complications in the relationship between our two organizations that

I am only now being made aware of.”

She's low girl on the totem pole. No wonder she got stuck with me.

“It seems that our organization was in negotiations to sell some software to their organization. We were given an initial payment and delivered the software. The people from Town Hall had some kind of problem with the software and –”

“Felt that abduction was a viable form of tech support?”

“Something like that.”

Interesting spin.

“What do they want now? Is James going to be able to make the fix or whatever? He definitely seemed to know his stuff when I spoke to him.”

“We received a call from Mr. Perkins that I had not been made aware of before I spoke to you. They are demanding all of their money back. They claim to have proof that the software can never work and that we tricked them into buying it.”

“Seriously? This really is some kind of billing dispute? You have got to be kidding me. It's like something out of a John Grisham novel.”

Candice glazed over the reference and kept going.

“That is where we were hoping that you could help us.”

“Me?” She blew on the surface of her tea, trying to be as casual as possible. “How can I help?”

“I am told that you are quite the programmer. Mr. Nakamura's notes say as much quite explicitly.”

Oh no. This is going in the wrong direction.

“Well, I um, ...”

“You do not need to be shy. You were working out an arrangement to join our organization. I have been given the authority to complete that arrangement, if you can agree that your first task will be to work on the software to fix it.”

Xochitl didn't have to feign being flustered and confused – her autonomic system was doing a fine job of it on its own.

“You want me to work on the software? What does it do?”

“I do not know for certain. I have only been told that it has something to do with the Internet and something called “distributed computing”. You are supposed to be good at this, yes?”

“Well, um, in theory. I've done a bit of work in that area. But if Perkin's group has proof that it can never work ... what can I do?”

Candice frowned at her and tightened her grip on her cup, knuckles going white and phalanges becoming well-defined beneath her dark skin.

“You can try. We think it may be a ruse to get money from us.

We are working on other ways to get Mr. Nakamura returned to us, but you might be of help."

"A ruse? Of course, I see. Make a copy of the software then return it to the store for a full refund. Keep the copy and the money. Sure. Oldest trick in the book."

"Exactly."

"Okay. I can do that. I still have the laptop I bought with the Webb money when I first got here. And I've got the hotel room. If you can get me the software, I shouldn't need must more than time and caffeine."

Candice produced a flash drive as if from thin air and handed it across the table.

"That is good to hear. Caffeine flows like water here in Paris. But Miss Webb? You may be the only person that can get James back to us. Please keep that in mind."

"Right. No pressure."

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The reflection in the hotel's front door wasn't entirely clear, but Xochitl watched it anyway as she opened the door to see if Candice was still seated at the café table. She thought so, but was going to have to chance it even if she wasn't. She headed straight for the Concierge's desk and waited for the man there to get off of the phone. He greeted her in English that had only the smallest of French accents.

"Yes, miss? How may I help you today?"

"Am I that obviously an American?"

He only smiled widely in reply.

"Do you have a business area with computers? I want to transfer some pictures off of my camera. Your city is so beautiful! I've managed to fill up the memory card already, and the day isn't even over yet."

"Of course, miss." He pointed to an area just past the gift shop. "It is just up the hall and around the corner. Use your room key to enter."

"Do they have Internet access? I may just put them directly up on my website and not worry about putting them on another drive."

"Yes. It is provided at no additional charge for hotel guests."

Xochitl waved as she headed in that direction. "Thanks again!"

She was alone in the room, but chose the computer furthest

toward the back anyway. The computers were decent enough, which was surprising. She had been half-expecting something left over from the nineties. They even had USB ports on the front of the casing, which eliminated a lot of potential fumbling with cabling. She made sure she had several keys on the keyboard held down as she inserted the drive, in an attempt to prevent any programs on the drive from running automatically.

The root of the drive contained a single zipped file. She opened a command console window and poked around for hidden files, but found none. It looked like they either hadn't had time to prepare any nasty tricks, or thought that she was smart enough to find them. Or, maybe they really thought she was working for them now.

The zipped file was a decent size, but not so big that it couldn't be quickly emailed to one of her accounts. The web mail server didn't flag it as being infected with any kind of virus. Her eyebrows jumped in surprise. Maybe all of her paranoia had been for naught?

Xochitl popped the flash drive back out of the computer, closed all of her windows, and walked out of the room. The concierge smiled as he saw her approach.

"Did you get your photos, miss?"

"Yeah, they look great, thanks. But I have one more question."

"Certainly. How can I help?"

Xochitl leaned in close to the man and lowered her voice as she looked around the lobby.

"I know I wouldn't have this problem if I would just learn to drink coffee, but ..."

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Xochitl tried to stall, but could tell that the other woman wasn't buying it.

"Look, it's only been like six hours since you gave me the drive. I've barely had time to organize the files and set up a development environment. Even in the tech world things don't happen as fast as you are asking for."

"Yes, but —"

"I know. I want him back, too. But seriously, honestly, truthfully, things like this take time. It's like dropping a mechanic onto an empty aircraft carrier and telling him to make it run. There's a lot of ground to cover before I can even figure out what the problem is, what the program is even supposed to do at all, before I can look at

how to fix it.”

Xochitl realized that she had a death grip on the cellular phone and tried to relax. The woman on the other end was silent.

“Sorry. I don't do well under pressure. I'm still working on it. If I may ask, how are the other plans coming along? You know, just in case I can't get it to work?”

The voice took some time to answer her, and then only hesitantly.

“They are coming along.”

Xochitl sighed loud enough to be sure that the other woman heard her. “I don't suppose just giving these people their money back and calling it even is an option?”

“Unfortunately no.”

“Look, I've got a mini-fridge stocked full of energy drinks that may not even be legal in this crazy country. I'll be up all night working on it. When I know something, you'll know something. I'd invite you over, but it won't be very exciting. I'm told that paint drying is even more interesting than this type of work to most people.”

“Very well. We can meet for breakfast tomorrow and discuss your progress?”

“Works for me. I'll need protein by the morning. Talk to you then.”

Xochitl disconnected the cellular phone and tossed it onto the bed. It landed next to the laptop, as if suggesting to her that the responsible thing to do would be to get back to work.

“I know, I know. Just let me get something to drink.”

The black can she removed from the mini-fridge wasn't quite as cold as she would have liked, but cold enough that it wouldn't taste like she was drinking cough syrup. The rest would be perfect by the time she got to them. She gave the can a tiny shake before pulling back the tab and opening its extra-wide mouth. These things were meant to be guzzled but, despite all of the other foods that Xochitl inhaled, energy drinks weren't one of them.

She fished a few ice cubes out of the tub on her night stand and clinked them into the tiny water glass. A bit more than a quarter of the can made it into the glass before the carbonation threatened to runneth over. Brian had always said that this particular brand looked like antifreeze. He'd then point out that animals couldn't stop drinking antifreeze, no matter how toxic it was. Xochitl had only responded to that particular taunt once – afterwards he had never let her forget that she had never poured antifreeze into her car, or changed the oil, or checked the wiper fluid levels, or any of those

other menial automotive tasks that she could have probably done by herself but paid someone else to do anyway.

"I'd kill to be able to pay someone else to do this intrigue stuff." She frowned at the cellular phone and batted it off the bed onto the floor. The laptop, now alone on a bed with the large pile of extra pillows she had ordered from room service, continued to click and clatter.

She had been blowing smoke in Candice's direction, but not much. The code was a mess, and obviously done by a college kid as Perkins had suggested. There was no way James would ever be able to code like that. People wrote code the same way they handled their lives, as a very intense form of personal expression. You could tell a lot about the head-space of another coder by going through the code they thought was never going to be seen by anyone else. It was like reading a girl's diary.

This code was all over the place. Xochitl could tell it had been done in fits and starts and marathon sessions and by someone who was just getting an handle on the language, C++, while also trying to get something done. There were several sections of code that could have been done much simpler and more efficiently, had the original coder been more familiar with the language. But at the same time there were parts of the code that were inspired and the product of particularly vivid and helpful insight.

But it was definitely one person. Most likely a guy. Most likely no older than 20 or 25. He was smart, so the college-kid profile fit. Most likely never had a professional job as a coder, but obviously familiar with coding in general, so he must have grown up around computers. There was no way C++ was this guy's native language. Maybe there were previous versions in another language, but he couldn't get it to do what he needed it to do? That would fit some of the clumsier parts of the code – they might have been translated line-by-line from another language.

Actually ... that's a good point.

It looks like the first language would have been something with hash dictionaries as his code was rife with them. Maybe Python or Perl? He didn't seem to get the whole Object Oriented thing, so Python probably wasn't it. Perl might work. There's no way he'd want to lug a Perl runtime around the botnet to use while infecting other computers, so that would fit the need to jump ship to something closer to the metal. And there's no way he'd ever get Perl to talk to a graphics card.

But how is this helping you?

"Just trying to get into his brain. If I can understand what he

was thinking and why, maybe it'll show me where he was going.”

And ... ?

“And ... I'll go from there. Maybe Perkins gets it. Maybe Candice gets it. I don't know yet. I'll burn that bridge when I get to it.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl leaned across the pillows and reached for the glass while continuing to page down through the code on her screen. Something in the back of her brain registered an aberration in the weight of the glass, but it wasn't until she had it upside down and was miffed that her thirst wasn't being quenched that she noticed the glass was empty. It took her another few seconds to realize that the code on the screen wasn't going to help the glass be not empty. There was an echoing sensation of crunching ice cubes between her teeth.

She forced her eyes to close and her finger to stop bouncing on the keyboard, and tore herself away from the computer. The clock on the night stand showed an hour when not even virgin-slaying werewolves would still be awake. She looked at the can beside the tub of ice, but realized that she somehow knew that it was also empty.

“Well ... rats.”

She flicked at the keyboard to start another long compiling attempt and dug herself out of the pillow fort and off of the bed. The individual overpriced bottles of hotel-provided beer and wine that had been evicted from the mini-fridge shook when she opened the door below them.

To her surprise, this was only the third energy drink of the night. She closed the door and followed her shake-open-smile routine. This can was the correct temperature. At her current rate, the contents of the min-fridge would last her several more days. There was enough ice in the tub to last past breakfast, and she would have gotten some more by then. Satisfied that the universe was plodding along without too much of her help, she prepared her glass and paced until she heard the laptop stop working.

She knew the project would never actually compile. Whoever had given the code to Candice had ripped out any of the Rumanian Box code and left only the parts that had been genuine attempts to crack financial-grade encryption. This was both a good and bad thing. Good, because it meant that she was really only having to wade through one person's code, and not what some second person had hacked onto it afterwards. Bad, because the person who did the

ripping had done it in a very ham-handed manner, leaving giant black holes where code should have been.

In fact ...

Xochitl gained an evil grin as she grabbed for the cellular phone. She opened the text messaging screen and punched in “still working – code is messy” and sent it off to Candice.

Oh, I'm sorry, were you sleeping? How positively thoughtless of me!

But, progress was being made. Worlds were being conquered. Invading hordes were being routed. Damsels in distress were being rescued. She'd be fried tomorrow, but it was all part of staying one step ahead, right?

Day 21

"It looks like it's been lobotomized."

Candice looked at her over the industrial strength bilge cleaner that was her coffee. Xochitl's own tea shivered from the proximity to such a beastly thing.

"Excuse me?"

"The code you gave me won't compile. I can't build it into a working program."

"I see. Yes, I was told that some alterations had to be made before we could provide it to you. Our organization needed to protect itself, should it fall into the wrong hands."

"I thought I was part of that organization now?"

Candice sipped her coffee.

"Right. Quarantine."

"This will prevent you from fixing the program?"

"I'm still not sure. I'll know more tonight."

Candice looked like someone had run over three of her four pet rottweilers.

"Look. I know that a lot is hinging on me getting this thing fixed, but I tried to warn you that it wouldn't be fast or easy, and that I probably won't even be able to do it at all. This doesn't work like in the movies. I can't just walk into a room, wiggle the mouse, and press random keys on the keyboard until it works. It's tedious work."

Candice nodded slowly. "I understand."

"I imagine field work for you agents is the same way. I'm sure you guys watch the James Bond movies and laugh out loud, right? *Mission Impossible*?"

Candice smirked. "Yes. Mostly it is just sitting and watching and waiting. Forever waiting."

"Well, you've basically given me a Dostoyevsky novel where about a dozen of the pages were never printed, and there aren't any page numbers on the ones that were, and I'm supposed to find and fill in the gaps without busting up the story. Oh, and the entire thing is in the original Russian, and the pages are scattered all over the floor."

Candice got that cold look again. "I understand."

Xochitl sipped her tea in silence until she hit the dregs. As she put down her cup she could feel the beginnings of the tremors associated with sleep withdrawal and over-caffeination.

"Look, I'm going to get back to it, okay? I'll give you a call some time around dinner?"

Candice nodded, but this time it was Xochitl who was out the door of the café before the other woman could stand.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

The sun dipped below the roof of the building across from her window, changing the color of the ambient light in the room. Xochitl pulled herself into a sitting position and turned on the lamp next to her bed.

She had a pretty good grip on the code now. The botnet parts of it worked, and worked well. Nothing that Alfred or any recent anti-virus scanner wouldn't have been able to sniff out, but well enough. The program could scan and infect other computers, then replicate itself to the vulnerable machines, bringing them into the net and turning them loose on other machines. The part of the program that was supposed to load the number-crunching routines into the graphics card was a stub – nothing there but a placeholder.

She couldn't make it work. There were too many pieces missing, and she didn't think it was at all possible to begin with. It looked like the original coder, and probably James after him, had run into the same wall. The program was trying to do too much – it was too generalized. Sure, she could probably write a program to go after the specific encryption on a specific type of account in a specific bank, but trying to do any encryption in any bank was just too much. It was like trying to make a single bolt that would work with any size nut in the world. There was no way.

In defiance, she closed down every open window on the screen, then zipped up the software's folder on her desktop and deleted the originals. She hadn't lost any work, but she wouldn't be tempted to keep hacking at it, either.

For this, I've given up a night's sleep and pumped myself full of enough caffeine to give a greyhound a tight race? Think, girl, think! How can you use it?

No, that question wasn't well-defined enough. Who could she use it against? Perkins or Candice?

Perkins first. Could she use it against him?

Think. Think. Think.

No, the question still wasn't defined enough. What did she want to accomplish with Perkins? She needed to stop thinking about how the software could help and start thinking about what the end result was supposed to be.

I want to make him go away.

What about his organization?

Yeah, that'd be nice, too.

Is that even possible? Could the organization be taken down?

No. Not yet. She didn't know enough about it. The same could be said for James' organization. She needed intel, and she needed to stall.

But to get the intel, both sides are going to have to trust you. Not just a little like right now, but completely. Can you do that?

Xochitl cursed as she realized she was doing the hero thing.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“Are you a good news first or bad news first kind of girl?”

This time, Xochitl had made sure the tea was decaf. She was going to crash hard tonight. The coffee in front of the other woman was as impenetrable as ever.

“I –”

Xochitl waved her off. “Actually, I suppose it doesn't matter. There's only one way that makes sense.”

Candice looked worn down. Red eyes surrounded by dark, inset holes that weren't entirely due to the woman's makeup choices. There were frown lines now visible that Xochitl was sure weren't there when they first met. She reminded Xochitl of the lionesses on the Discovery Channel that hadn't been able to run down a meal for a week. Xochitl guessed the mega-coffee had been the only thing keeping her going these last few days. She wondered if she looked the same way?

“The bad news is that I can't make the program work.”

The other woman's knuckles (were they more pronounced now than a few days ago?) went white again.

“I don't think anyone can. Not quickly, anyway. Given six months and a team of people, maybe. But even then, it'd be doubtful. It's trying to do too much. It's a Swiss Army Knife when you really need a jeweler's screwdriver.”

Candice didn't say anything, nor react any more than to make the visible effort of relaxing her hands around her coffee.

"The good news is that it doesn't matter that the software doesn't work, because I have a plan."

Candice hid her rolling eyes behind a faked yawn, but continued to be silent.

"Look, it's like this. I know I'm not a field agent. I know that intrigue and super-spy stuff is not my bag. However, I told you the day I met you: I'm a problem solver. I take apart puzzles and work at them until I can put them back together. That is what I do, and I'm very, very good at it. So hear me out, okay?"

Candice straightened in her seat, sipped her coffee, and said, "Go on."

"First, I'm going to blow your socks off: I know what James and your coders were trying to do with the software."

The other woman didn't flinch, but her frown lines became slightly more pronounced. "Do you?"

"Yeah, I do. But, and don't take this personally, I don't figure you do."

The woman's words came tight and thin – the starving lioness hadn't given up yet. "That is an interesting assumption. How do you come to it?"

"You don't seem to be high enough in the food chain. I mean, I don't know how many levels there are on your group's org chart, but I don't think you were told about this part of the project."

"Really?"

"Probably not. Do correct me if I'm wrong."

"I'd like you to continue. What were we trying to do with the software?"

"Here's what I've pieced together so far." Xochitl held out her hand and raised the fingers one at a time. "One: The software was supposed to be pretty nasty to begin with. I don't think that requires any further explanation."

Candice nodded for her to continue.

"Two: James didn't write it, and neither did any of his people. I've seen the code that your group produces when you hacked on Alfred and released the compromised version. That code was very smooth and very difficult to tell from the code I wrote myself, which means you've got real professionals coding for you. This program was written by an amateur, a hobbyist."

"Three: If you didn't write it, then you acquired it. Odds are, you got it in a state close to how you gave it to me – very incomplete. But not exactly, which leads to ..."

"Four: Your people were a bit too over-zealous when they went in to remove the code, and there were pieces missing that had obviously been there before and weren't just stuff that was going to be filled in later. I think it's pretty safe to say that those places were the really juicy bits. Your people went in trying to fix or upgrade those important parts, but couldn't make it work, and it was safer to cut them out entirely than to leave them in for me to see."

Xochitl paused. Candice didn't look impressed.

"So?"

"Five: There's enough code left dangling around the holes to see that the program was supposed to be cracking into bank accounts with a whole lot of computers at the same time. It would have been an innovative way of doing it, too, if the original author had ever been able to make it work. And ..."

She held up her other hand and raised a finger.

"Six: Your people obviously never even came close to getting it to work. If they had, it would have been smarter to leave in the half-fixed code and hope I could take the ball and run with it. I'm willing to bet they realized the same thing I did, in that it can't be done. At least, not the way the original author envisioned it."

"Seven: We know you sold the software, even though it was broken, to Town Hall. But, you wouldn't have sold them something that was broken, so the missing code must have bridged the gaps somehow."

Candice was on her way to looking bored again.

"I know, I know, who makes it to Point Seven, much less Eight? Hang in there, I'm almost done." She raised one more finger and indicated it would be her last.

"Eight: Back to Point One." She touched the two fingers together. "Whatever was cut out had to have been even nastier than the rest of the code. So unbelievably nasty that it was better to cut it out than leave it in. Like, faking it level of nasty. A con. What you sold Town Hall was smoke and mirrors. That's why they're so pissed."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

"Miss Green."

"Mister Perkins. We're getting to be regular bosom buddies, aren't we?"

The man didn't respond.

"I've been thinking about your problems with the Nakamura

Group. Wait, wait, I know that's technically not my concern, but I had an idea. And you told me to call if I had any good ideas, so here I am."

He grunted at her, no more.

"I'm going to take that to mean that you haven't recovered your losses from them yet?"

"Get to the point, girl."

"Yes, sir. I was thinking about what I saw of their coding abilities, both in the hacked version of Alfred, and in the hacked-up Robin code that I was able to reverse-engineer."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c1p2 —

Candice's eyes narrowed. She hadn't known the full extent of the truth, but she couldn't disagree with any of Xochitl's logic. "An interesting theory, Miss Webb."

"Puzzle pieces." Her fingers interlocked in front of her.

"I have not yet heard a plan, only a theory."

"I needed to make sure you were on board with me."

"I am still listening." The lioness sipped her coffee nonchalantly.

"We have two possibilities from here on out: either Town Hall knows it can't be done, or they hope that it can. I don't think it's the first case, because they wouldn't have any reason to hold on to James. Unless they intend to keep him as leverage until all of the money is returned."

"A very reasonable tactic, I would think."

"Yes and no. These are powerful people, right? I presume they have other ways of putting the screws to you. I mean, if they can kidnap James then certainly they can do worse. They don't need him alive if they want to destroy your organization and get their money back."

Candice nodded to accept the possibility.

"So instead we're left with them wanting the program to work. Sure, now you've managed to irk them enough that they might want the program to work and to get all of their money back, but either way they still have hope for a complete program."

Candice nodded again.

"I racked my brain all evening trying to figure out how we could exploit that."

"And you have an idea?"

"No. Not a clue."

The coffee cup slammed into the saucer harder than it should have, drawing the attention of customers several tables away.

"Miss Webb, you are wasting my time."

This was it – the moment. Xochitl locked eyes with the other woman and pressed her palms flat against the table.

"If you believe that then walk away and figure it out for yourselves." She paused a beat, then pressed further. "No? Then stop being snide and start working with me."

Xochitl watched for any sign of rebuttal or counter-attack. The woman controlled herself more than Xochitl would have thought possible given her exhaustion.

"Continue. Please."

"My plan depends on the volume of your organization. I'm going to need details on how many coders you have and how many field agents. I know that's not information that you are going to easily want to share."

"No. It is not."

"And that's fair enough. I probably wouldn't tell me yet, either. But I'm betting that you are going to reconsider. See, it came to me last night that Perkins let something slip when I spoke with him."

Candice's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch.

Sell it, girl. You've only got one shot at this.

"His organization isn't as big or as smart as it seems to be. It's all money and contacts. It sounded to me like his group wasn't planning to use the software themselves, but to resell it to other groups. There's an opportunity there."

———— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 ————

"My point is, sir, that these are some very capable coders. And I think you would agree that James is a very capable field agent, as are the other agents you've seen. Right?"

"Yes."

"Then why are they stalling this long? Surely they could have had your money to you by now, by hook or by crook. Or they could have worked out some kind of payment plan."

"I am not negotiating layaway, girl."

———— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 ————

"Ever been to Australia?"

The other woman was caught off guard. "What?"

"I haven't. But they have a saying: go hard or go home. Your group, our group, needs to go hard. We either need to get the money to get these cretins off our backs, or we need to remove them from our path. But in order to know which way we're going to solve this, I need to know how much marathon hacking we can pull off, and how much nitty-gritty super-spy intrigue we can engage in."

"Get. To. The. Point."

"We need to hack the Gibson, honey. We need to shut down Town Hall. It's the only way to get James back. We either hack our way in and grab them where it counts, or we go around them to the people they are talking to, and get our money that way. Either way, we need to have Perkins in our pockets in the next 48 hours."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

"No sir, I know you aren't. That's precisely my point – they're stalling. They're planning some kind of counter-offensive. I think you need to prepare. And from what I've seen of this organization, they don't give up when they're beaten down. Given how quickly I've seen them move in the past, I doubt you've got more than 48 hours before something big happens. I think you need to gear up to stamp these people out before they can strike."

"Do you now?"

"Yes, sir. Just trying to earn my paycheck and ensure that future paychecks are forthcoming."

"And just what do you suggest we do?"

"I don't think you are going to be able to beat them at their own game – hacking. I'm just one person, and it hasn't sounded to me like you've got many other computer people in your arsenal, right?"

"If you're going fishing for a compliment, I'm not in the mood."

"No, sir. Just trying to ascertain what I'm volunteering for, here."

Another grunt.

"So cyber-warfare," she rolled her eyes at herself for using the term, "is off the table. Then I recommend that your group goes completely offline for the next 72 hours or so. I'm talking about pulling the cables out of the backs of the machines."

"That is not an option."

Xochitl sighed.

"I was afraid you were going to say that. I'll see what else I can come up with in that area, then. Beyond that ..." She trailed off in thought.

"Yes?"

"Well, the real world stuff is much less my forte, of course. However, you did pull off the hospital job in pretty good time and that worked out perfectly. Do you think if I could trace the physical location of their operations center then you might be able to send some people in and clean them up?"

Perkins was quiet for a time.

"Miss Green, you seem to have gotten a taste for blood in the past few weeks. Would this be a retaliation for Nakamura hunting you?"

Xochitl allowed for an awkward silence before she continued.

"No, sir. Like I said, you told me to call you if anything came to me. So here I am. If you think I'm just being paranoid, then tell me so. But I don't think I am."

"No, girl, I don't think you are, either. How do you plan on getting me their location?"

"All I need is access to the server that your fancy videoconferencing setup goes through."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Candice held up her hand, signaling Xochitl to be quiet.

"What? Oh."

The woman pulled a vibrating cell phone out of her jacket, spoke briefly into it in some impenetrably thick Spanish, and hung up.

"Come with me, Miss Webb. There has been a development. We need to get to your computer as quickly as possible."

"My computer? Why, what is it?"

It's a little black box that connects to the Internet and keeps my lap warm, but that's not important right now.

"Your favorite person Mr. Perkins is sending us a video that we must watch. He says we will not want to miss it."

"A video? Um, that could be ... a problem."

The woman paused for a second, then continued pulling her through the lobby of the hotel toward the elevators.

"Why? What is wrong?"

They reached the elevator and Candice shouldered past several guests, bodily ejecting some of them back out between the doors as

they closed.

"I, um, kind of borked the video capabilities of my laptop. I was working on the program, and you know how I said it uses the video card, right? Well one of my tests went a little wrong and it screwed up all of the video codecs I have installed. I didn't think much about it as I haven't had any time to be surfing YouTube or anything."

She could tell that the other woman had been lost as soon as she'd gotten started.

"Then we cannot watch the video on your computer?"

"Not any time soon. I think I may need to wipe it and reinstall the entire operating system if I ever want video playback to work again."

The elevator doors opened and Candice paused, one finger on the *Arrêter* button and thinking.

"Do you have a laptop? Maybe we could use yours?"

"No, I do not."

"Well, maybe we could record it? What about your people that I talked to on the phone? The ones that are kind of like technical support for you field agents. They've got computers, right?"

Candice glanced up at her, then immediately started marching them toward Xochitl's room. "It will have to do." The cell phone came out of her pocket again and she dialed a long international number from memory without looking at the keypad. Xochitl could tell that it wasn't the same number she'd been given by Perkins. The woman handed it to her as it rang. "Tell them how."

She heard a small voice from the speaker as she took the phone. She carded the two of them into her room, then activated the speakerphone. She looked at Candice for approval and got a nod.

"Um, hello? This is Xochitl Green. I'm here with Candice -"

"Si," her handler interjected.

"I understand we're about to be given a video feed. We need to record it. I can tell you how. How computer-savvy are you?"

"Miss Green, my name is Monique. I did some of the re-work on Alfred, so I think I can keep up."

Another woman coder? Really?

"Fair enough. Ever ripped a live videoconferencing feed before?"

"This will be a first for me."

"I've only ever done it once, so here's hoping I remember everything I did."

"Right."

"I think it would be smart to have several people do this, just in case. Is there anyone else there with you?"

"I've got a few other techs here, yes."

"Can you put me on speaker and have them follow along?"

"Go ahead." The third woman's voice came back tinnier and distant.

"This is going to chew hard drive space something fierce. The only software I know of that does what we're going to do saves the uncompressed stream instead of the compressed packets. Don't ask me why. If you've got a central file server that someone can be doing this on, that'd probably help make sure we get as much of the stream as we can."

Monique was on top of it and responded immediately. "I'll make sure that happens. Go on."

"Go to this web site and download the software." Xochitl rattled off a long web address from memory. "Now we're going to need the crack for it, because we don't have time to screw around with licensing. Do you still have access to the servers at my old job? I've got a copy of the crack hidden there."

"Yes. Where is it?"

Xochitl again rattled off a long address, this time for a file server.

"I see it. I'm distributing the software and the crack to the people here. One moment please."

"Sure." She looked at Candice. "How much time do we have?"

Candice looked at her tiny and expensive-looking wristwatch. "Maybe 5 minutes."

"Ugh. Okay, Monique and friends, listen up. I need someone to shout when they are ready. I'm going to start rattling off directions as soon as that first person is ready, and everyone else will just have to try to catch up."

Monique responded, "We'll keep up."

The call went out shortly – a man in the far background yelled through the speakerphone, "Ready!"

"Alright. Run the app. Go into Settings, then Network. Punch in the server address and port that Perkins gave you. Set the Protocol drop-down to Auto. Flip over to the Save tab. Use the Browse button to save the file to your desktop or some place with a fat hard drive. Do not, I repeat, do not save it to the root of any drive."

The man's voice came through the phone again. "I'm with you." Another man's voice followed quickly, "Me, too."

"Excellent. This is the tricky part. Click OK to get out of the settings, then hit the big circular Record button. I'm hoping that your network –"

The first man spoke up before she could complete the sentence.

"Connection failed!" The second man echoed the first, then Monique said the same thing.

Xochitl cursed, causing Candice to smirk at her.

"Okay. Here's the deal. Lots of videoconferencing streams embed IP information in the data instead of in the packet headers, like FTP. If Perkins is using one of those types of streams, your network might be tripping it up."

Candice interrupted. "One minute!"

"We don't have time to debug it. If you are going out through a Tor node or some other anonymizing service, you need to shut it down. If you've got a transparent proxy on the network, you need to route around it. If those don't work, you need to turn off NAT on the firewall and put yourselves on the DMZ for a few minutes. I know that doesn't sound safe, people, but it'll only be for a few minutes and you can turn it all back on afterwards."

Xochitl could hear Monique hesitate, then start giving orders for each of the techs to take one part of the work. The seconds ticked by and a series of "Done" voices came through the phone. Monique spoke again "Retrying now."

Candice's watch was moving slowly closer to the phone, as if its proximity could make the team on the other end move faster.

"Connected! Go, everyone!"

Xochitl heard another series of confirmations as Candice ripped the phone from her hand. She said something in her rapid-fire Spanish again and disconnected the phone.

"They will handle the rest and call us when they are finished."

Xochitl furrowed her brow, then relaxed.

"You didn't want Perkins to hear me."

Candice didn't react, confirming Xochitl's guess.

"Actually ... thanks for that. Having him know about me is the last thing I need."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

"Did you get what you needed?"

"Why yes we did, Miss Green. Your television drama went off without a hitch."

"Really? Wow."

"You sound surprised, girl."

"Well, it's just that we really kind of whipped that one together. I'm just feeling lucky, that's all."

“That may be so, but your track record still isn't perfect.”

Xochitl shivered from the way the man said it.

“What? What do you mean?”

“We got four different locations from the trace – not just one. This will take several days to set up and coordinate.”

“Four? Really? I didn't expect –”

“That's what I said: four. But it doesn't matter. This tomcat is getting tired of his mouse.”

Day 22

The morning light was just beginning to peek through the curtains. Xochitl pictured calamari and giant octopus eyes as she dialed the cellular phone, but then had to choke down a smile. She didn't wait for the woman on the other end to greet her before she started talking.

"It's a trap!"

Candice was wide awake now, regardless of what state she was in a moment ago.

"What do you mean?"

"Something has been bugging me since yesterday and the video feed."

"Is this going to make sense?"

"No, but you have to listen to me anyway. We need to call Monique. Right now."

"Wait in your room for me. I will be right there."

True to her word, Candice was at Xochitl's door in under two minutes. She was impeccably dressed and made up, which made Xochitl wonder how long she'd been awake. As she walked through the door she switched her ringing phone to speaker and handed it to Xochitl. Again, Xochitl didn't wait for the other person to speak.

"Monique?"

"Yes, Miss Green, how can I help you today?" Xochitl recognized the Tech Support Voice.

"It was a trap. You need to get out of there."

"What was a trap?"

"The video feed yesterday."

"What do you mean? We ran anti-virus and network sniffers the entire –"

"No, I figured you did. But it was the stream type, don't you see?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"The video stream used a really weird protocol, right? You couldn't get at it from behind your firewall. I thought it was just a

coincidence, but I've been thinking about it since last night. What if that was the entire point – to get you to point out where you were? Get it?”

“I'm beginning to.”

Candice still looked confused, so Xochitl explained.

“It should have occurred to me sooner. I'm so sorry. I think Perkins chose that streaming protocol specifically because he knew you couldn't watch the feed without poking your heads out from behind your firewalls. Your computers had to make a direct connection to his computers, without going through any intermediaries.”

Candice half-shrugged. “So?”

“So ... it means that he now knows the IP addresses of every computer that watched the feed yesterday. It wouldn't take much digging to go from an IP address to a street address. It's not like you guys are using AOL for your service provider. I figure your network is probably pretty capable – and the more advanced it is, the easier it is to track down.”

Candice spat something fast and Spanish into the phone. Monique replied in Spanish at a similar speed, but with a much calmer tone. Xochitl got the gist: Is what this crazy woman says possible? Yes, it might be. Xochitl didn't give them time to talk about it.

“What was on that video feed, anyway? Do they still have James?”

“We're still reviewing the video.” Monique sounded guarded, hesitant.

“Monique, no matter what was on the video, you need to close up shop and get out. If there's even a chance they could tie your IPs to your location, you're in danger. I mean, we're safe here because we couldn't see the video, but you guys aren't. Is there a backup site you can evac–”

Candice didn't let her finish.

“We will take care of it from here. Thank you, Miss Green.”

She turned and stormed out of the room, flicking off the cell's speaker and barking orders in her hyper-Spanish.

Xochitl lay down on the bed and smiled, breathing deeply.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl's elbows had gone completely numb. They were pressed

against the heat-leaching marble window sill, propping up her head as she stared through the glass. The world on the other side was liquid: sheets of afternoon sun showers twisting and turning their way across her view. The overhang from the floors above her kept the rain from hitting her window, so she had a clear view of the rain and had been sitting at the window for going on a half hour.

Why is it that Paris is so much more ... Paris-like ... in the rain? I've been here for days, and I didn't even get this excited when I was right across from the Eiffel Tower.

To be fair, you were somewhat preoccupied at the time.

True. Even so, a Paris drenched in rain held more appeal than a dry one. She couldn't begin to explain it.

It took her several heartbeats to realize that a rhythmic knocking at her door was almost blending into the noise from beyond the window. She dragged herself up from the chair by the window and crossed her arms in front of her as she walked, rubbing at her elbows.

There was only one person it could possibly be, but she checked the peep hole anyway. Candice. Oh yay. The ritualistic unlocking of the door apparently couldn't be done fast enough for Candice, as she could hear the woman pacing on the other side. She wasn't given a chance to fully open the door before the small woman stormed through it.

"Why have you not answered your phone?"

Xochitl almost moved to get the phone from her night stand, but caught herself as she realized that the phone in the night stand was the one she used for talking to Perkins. The one Candice had given her was –

"It's in the bathroom on the charger. I didn't hear it ring." She took the steps to grab the phone and rejoin Candice who was still standing just a few feet inside the door. "Hmm. Yeah, it says I've missed calls. That's weird, why wouldn't it ring while it was on the charger?"

Candice grabbed the phone from her, jabbed her way through the menus, then thrust it back at her. "It will now." She fumed at Xochitl until the phone was taken back.

"Sorry. I had no idea. What's up?"

"You. You are what is up."

Xochitl was taken aback, but motioned for the other woman to move further inside the room. When the other woman didn't move, Xochitl stepped around her and went to sit in the chair by the window, this time facing into the room instead of out.

"Me? What about me? Have you all decided whether or not I get

to come into the tree house?"

Candice eyed her, still furious. Xochitl refused to bite.

"Look, you're obviously upset about something. I'm here. I'm listening. Let's talk about it. I'm not going anywhere." She motioned toward the corner of the bed, and then to the chair by the desk on the opposite wall. Candice didn't move.

"You cannot be trusted."

Xochitl's head jerked backwards. "Excuse me? That's certainly one way to start a conversation."

"You heard what I said. I cannot trust you."

"And yet, here we are."

Candice continued to stare, so Xochitl continued.

"So that gives us at least two things to talk about. First, why you don't think you can trust me. Second, why we're even having this conversation if you can't trust me. Care to tell me why you can't trust me?"

"You have attempted to evade us once already. You are not one of us, and would do so again."

"You're right on the first two, at least. I did try to get away. But do you know why? How much detail is in those reports about me that you've read? Let me tell you a little story. Three weeks ago I was on vacation in my happy and naïve little world. Your boss comes along and tries to charm me off of my feet, although I later find out that he was just digging for information. Your boss delivers me to someone that wants me to pervert every good thing about what I do for a living. I have no choice but to ask your boss to get me out of the situation, but he double-crosses me – I'm yanked out of my life and thrown onto an airplane going to some random country where I don't know anyone and will be slave labor."

Candice didn't soften, but she also hadn't interrupted her.

"Seriously, who wouldn't try to run?"

No reply.

"I'm not saying it was the best decision. And obviously I've since realized that I'm completely out of other options, so here I am. I think that I have been an exceptional sport since I contacted James a week ago. I've done everything that you people have asked me to do and more. The only thing keeping me from being an absolute nervous wreck is the small hope that Perkins and his cronies didn't figure out that it was me with James at the Eiffel Tower. Oh, and the slight possibility that you all won't just pack up and leave me stranded in Paris with no money, identity, or hope for ever having a normal life again."

Xochitl knew that Candice wasn't going to break down and give

her hugs and tears of compassion, but she'd said her piece. She hadn't even had to act – all of the anger at James and his people had come right through – the fact that Candice would mistake it for the exact wrong thing was just a bonus.

“Would you care to cross-examine the witness, Council?”

Candice was too stubborn to give her a real response. “You still cannot be trusted.”

“Fine. Whatever. Don't trust me. Let's just keep our relationship on a mutual respect sort of level and roll with it. But that brings us to the other half. Why are we having this conversation? I figure it would be much easier to disappear out from under my nose than glare at me.”

“There are others in my organization,” she stressed the possessive to differentiate the statuses of the two women, “who think they can trust you.”

“James seemed to think so. I couldn't be here otherwise.”

“That is the problem. These people trust him, and think that he would want them to trust you.”

“But you don't think so?”

“I do not. I think he was watching you.”

Xochitl paused. “Keeping his enemies closer than his friends?”

“Yes.”

Xochitl shrugged. “There's nothing I can say that would convince you otherwise, so I won't waste your time or my breath. I just have to hope that my actions will do the talking for me.”

“We will see.”

“Speaking of which, did everyone get out of the operations area, or data center, or whatever you call it?”

“NOC. Network –”

“Operations Center. Yeah, I know what a NOC is. Did everyone get out okay?”

“I believe it is still in work.”

Xochitl made a production out of looking at the bedside clock and looking back at Candice.

“I'd put dollars to doughnuts that you're going to see some action in the next 12 hours or so. I don't suppose that would work in my favor as far as the trust issue is concerned?”

“We will see.”

“Are you all,” she corrected herself, “are we all capable of running without the NOC?”

Candice stared at her, betraying no emotion beyond disdain.

Xochitl put her hands up in submission. “Alright. Fair enough. I'll leave it alone. So what's the plan, Chatty Cathy?”

Candice shifted her weight, conflicted and unsure of how to proceed. Xochitl bit her tongue, deciding that it was better to shut up and let the other woman work through it. Instead, she rotated slightly in her seat so that she could look out the window. Thanks to the rain darkening the sky and the lamp on the far side of the room, she had a clear view of Candice's reflection in the window.

So? You afraid she's gonna go all ninja on you? Would seeing her come at you give you absolutely any sort of edge in a fight?

Shush. I'm trying to look contemplative yet uncaring.

What felt like several minutes passed before Candice again shifted her weight and spoke. Xochitl made an effort to not turn around and look at the woman expectantly.

"There is another reason I came to talk to you."

Xochitl turned slowly, attempting to maintain her relaxed and mildly-disinterested manner. "Yeah?"

"I have been told what was in the video."

Xochitl couldn't help it – she perked up and stared at Candice. Perkins hadn't told her what was going to happen in the video. She assumed it had something to do with James, but had decided it would be easier to sleep if she didn't ask. Candice's stare all but confirmed this.

"He is dead." She couldn't even say his name, but the sentence still came out harder than steel.

Puzzle pieces fell into place around Xochitl and she, too, became conflicted and unsure of how to react. It did explain the trust issues that Candice was having – there was no longer any chance of finding out what James had really been planning for her.

"Ugh. Really? No, sorry, of course you're serious. It's just – well, being told that someone you knew is – it's just not something I hear very often." *Other than two weeks ago when I heard it on an airplane and wanted to scream for the next two hours but couldn't.* "I, uh, I don't know what to say."

She wanted to say that she –

"I can't believe Perkins did it. I mean, are we sure? It's not some kind of trick?"

Candice looked like Xochitl had asked if she had always been female – the revulsion on her face couldn't be masked by any sort of stony expression.

"It is not. He was –"

Xochitl threw up her hands and jammed them around her ears. "Please. Please don't tell me. I can't. I can't know how. If I do, I ... I just can't have the image in my head for the rest of my life. I'll never be able to un-see it."

Candice nodded as if she understood. "It is certain."

It was hitting Xochitl like a blow to the head. Her breathing quickened and deepened at the same time – she began to hyperventilate.

It had been her.

She had come up with the plan for the video.

She was baiting the two bears against each other.

She had been the cause of James' death, even if she'd been on the other side of the world when it happened. She was no better than him.

It was now twice in three weeks that her actions had caused a man in her life to be put to death. It didn't matter in the slightest that one of them had killed the other – both were still tied directly to her.

"Sorry." She spoke between gasps. "Give me a minute."

It took her several, but she eventually managed to get her breathing under control.

"So, uh, what's the plan?"

Candice was unreadable.

"For now, we stay here. As you said, we must hope that Mr. Perkins did not find out it was you at the Eiffel Tower. And we must hope that he has done all he is going to do."

Xochitl continued to work to control her breathing.

"Somehow, I doubt it."

"Why?"

"It doesn't make any sense. He wouldn't ki-, he wouldn't do what he did unless he didn't fear retribution. He knows that you people are smart and capable, so he must be thinking that he's smarter and more capable. If he thinks that, then he must have something up his sleeve."

Candice thought about what Xochitl was saying.

"I'm in the middle of a gang war," Xochitl sighed.

"You think Mr. Perkins will do more against us?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. But I hope I'm wrong."

Candice swore in a language that didn't even sound like Spanish. Some kind of Russian or Slavic, maybe. "What? What do you think he will do?"

Xochitl looked at Candice in horror. "How should I – ? I mean, I'm just a computer geek. I'm not a strategist. I even hate the History Channel!"

Candice's eyes narrowed. "Our NOC has been compromised. Our resources are limited and scattered. If you want to stay alive, you should think very carefully. Solve the puzzle."

The woman turned and walked out of the hotel room. The door closed and Xochitl ran for the bathroom. She vomited several times and was dry heaving when it occurred to her that she'd done this twice in as many weeks. What would it say about her if and when she stopped vomiting?

I am so not cut out for the spy game.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

"I was calling to see how it all went? Were you able to do what you needed to do?"

"Miss Green, do we need to continue to have discussions about what is and is not your business?"

"No, I know. But it's not an entirely altruistic question. I just wanted to know if I was ... safe yet."

Perkins grunted at her. It occurred to Xochitl that his grunts had a lot of different meanings.

"My people are still working on it. I am told that your trace led to the right places, but that they had all been abandoned in the last 24 hours."

"What?"

Perkins growled.

"Sorry. I'm just ... surprised. I mean, I know you didn't hire them because they were stupid. But they're definitely smarter than I gave them credit for."

Grunt.

"I don't suppose I could hope that they closed up shop and went back to their knitting or something?"

Perkins actually snorted with laughter. "Somehow I doubt that, Miss Green."

"Hmm." Xochitl let the line stay quiet for a moment. "You don't think they'd reorganize and come back after us, do you?"

He snorted at her again. "With what? They are cockroaches, girl. I turned on the lights and they scattered."

"Maybe. But they are very smart and very well organized cockroaches. I mean, you said you didn't catch a single one of them. Doesn't that worry you at all? Do you even know how many of them there are? Two or three might scatter and never look back, but what if there are dozens of them?"

It was Perkins' turn to think quietly, except he growled a little bit when he thought. Xochitl continued.

"Look, I'm not trying to second guess you or anything. I want to hope they are gone for good. But I just don't think I can be that naïve. Not anymore." She let that sink in.

When he spoke, she wasn't entirely certain he was speaking to her.

"This man and his people have cost me too much money."

Xochitl decided that now was another good time to shut up and let the other person work through things on their own. When he did speak again, she wasn't ready for it.

"Are we done here, girl?"

"I ... I guess so. If I come up with anything else, I'll call. I need to take some time and figure out what to do with myself."

"You do that."

He disconnected the call and she stood in the hotel room, staring at the cell phone. She wasn't sure what to think. She wasn't just walking the razor's edge – she was walking two of them. She knew it, and a large part of her mental processing was being dedicated to quelling the fear-driven need to run and hide that her primitive animal brain was screaming for her to do. She turned the phone off and stowed it back in the night stand.

The other phone was on the desk. Her tongue rolled around inside her mouth, the phantom taste encouraging her to brush her teeth one more time before she made the next phone call.

————— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —————

"You are either very stupid or very crazy."

Xochitl had noticed that Candice's opinions of her were getting less and less reserved as time went on. The woman had at least been professionally cordial when they first met a few days ago. Since then, her edit button had started to go almost unused.

"Thanks. I'm glad to hear that we're on the same wavelength."

Candice had also stopped being amused by her references, euphemisms, and in general her speech patterns. The frown of exasperated mistranslation hadn't left her face all day.

"Why do you want to leave the city?"

"Actually, I want to leave the country."

Candice waved the quibble aside.

"I've been cooped up inside this hotel for almost a week now. Before that, I got to see my potential boss abducted. Before that I was living hand-to-mouth on the street. Oh, and I got here because I was

dropped on a random airplane. Oddly enough, France doesn't hold all that much appeal to me. It doesn't help that I'm not even allowed to get out and see the sights. I just get to sit in my room and watch the traffic pass by."

Candice shook her head. "Do you want the people of Town Hall to know where you are?"

Xochitl tightened her fists, then made a conscious effort to not rise to the woman's baiting. "No. Of course I don't. That's why I was suggesting that we," she waved her hand between the two of them, "both of us, should skip the country. Go to Germany or Belgium or something. Heck, I'd settle for one of the Where-ever-slav ex-Russian states. Finland, even!"

Candice still didn't get it.

"At least out of the country I'd feel like I could walk around. I. Am. Going. Stir. Crazy. Do you get that?"

Candice sighed at her and rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything.

"Yes! I know! I am not a field agent! I'm not cut out for this! I get it!" Xochitl dropped onto the corner of the bed before she realized that she might be laying on the petulant child vibe a little too thick. "Sorry. But I really am over Paris. Italy? Rome? Vatican City?"

She wasn't sure, but she thought the other woman might be considering the idea. She perked up and caught Candice's attention.

"Hey, why don't we meet up with Monique? Is she local? She's on the run, too, right? We'd be like a really dysfunctional Charlie's Angels or something!"

Candice rolled her eyes again, but had now moved to seriously considering the idea. Xochitl took the hint that it was shut-up time again. She was beginning to realize that social engineering wasn't just about knowing when to say the right thing, but also when to not say anything.

"I will talk to Monique and see what she thinks. For now, do not leave this room."

Xochitl waffled. "Um, I appreciate that, but I need food. I've been killer-hungry since this whole thing began. My energy level is burning through calories like I never thought possible." She whispered the next part. "I think I may be losing weight. What a thing to think about at a time like this." She thought she saw the corners of the other woman's mouth curl a bit.

"Here or the café. Nowhere else."

"Deal."

Xochitl realized that she'd grown to loathe the café just as much as she had the hotel room. She hadn't had to fake the feral cornered-animal need to escape – it had been a very genuine emotion. Nor had she been exaggerating about her energy-level. She hadn't had an energy drink since the all-nighter, but she was still jazzed as if she'd been mainlining the caffeine. Having to stay on top of the situation was burning her up from the inside out. She sipped her decaffeinated tea and wondered just how long her body would stand up to the strain.

The sandwich-on-a-croissant on her plate sat mostly uneaten, however. Her mind, while racing, hadn't been focused enough for her to lose herself in her meal. There simply wasn't anything for her to work out right now. Perkins was going to do his thing, without letting her in on it as usual. She just had to hope that his thing was to continue to try to eliminate the Nakamura group. Similarly, Candice was going to keep doing her best to keep her in the dark – she enjoyed it.

So, for now at least, there was nothing to do but sit in the café and sip her tea and nibble on her very mediocre chicken and cheese sandwich.

She looked around the café and realized that there was no difference between this place and any random café on a New England college campus. Everyone was dressed in black, or at least very drab monochrome, high-necked sweaters. Everyone seemed to have intelligence-adding slim glasses. Everyone was in pairs, except the few using their laptops. The laptop-using customers all had in conspicuous white headphones that went to out-of-sight audio devices. She snickered as it occurred to her that, just like in the States, the people here didn't want to let anyone see that they didn't have the newest model iPod or whatever – just displaying the earbuds was enough of a statement.

Other than the fact that she couldn't understand a word of the ambient conversation, she could have been drugged and flown B.A. Baracas-style to any café stateside and woken up unable to tell the difference.

She continued to smile and flicked at her own iPod until she heard something a little more upbeat. Now that she wasn't having to use the device as a portable hard drive, well not much anyway, she'd had a chance to get some decent music on it. The little device had done wonders to preserve her sanity over the past few weeks.

Xochitl looked at the remnants of the sandwich and scowled, pushing it away from her. She looked at the laptop on the other side of the table and did the same thing. Her elbows parted on the table and her chin fell into her hands, her eyes fixated on the road beyond the café windows. The street was packed with people milling, walking from Point A to Point B, and ...

And jogging.

What a great idea. She'd hurt tomorrow, but it would be mind-numbing for at least a half-hour.

How American are you? Can't even jog for more than a mile or two.

Yeah, well. I'm not proud of that.

The waiter was flagged for the check and she was out the door within minutes, crossing to the hotel. The concierge was the same man from the other day, and recognized her.

"Good evening, Miss. You look like you have had a wonderful day in Paris."

Xochitl wondered what that was supposed to mean, but then brushed it off as him just trying to keep his guests happy with their vacations.

"Yeah. Hey, does the hotel have a gym? A workout room?"

The concierge smiled widely, yet again gaining pleasure from his ability to provide for his guests.

"*Mes oui, Madame.* The spa and gym," the word sounded very foreign coming from him, "are on the fifth floor. You cannot miss the signs from the elevator. You may use your room key to enter. The gym is of course complementary to guests, while the spa has very reasonable rates for their services."

Xochitl nodded and was about to walk away when she frowned and turned back to the man.

"I'm going to need some sweats. Workout clothes." She had left the only pair she had back in Barcelona. "Is there a store close where I can get some?"

The man smiled widely again and reached behind his desk. He produced a photocopied sheet of paper with a very grainy pre-Google map. He also grabbed a pen, and pointed to a discolored square in the center of the map.

"We are here, and when you go out those doors," he pointed to the main entrance, "you will face this direction. Turn left," he made a curling motion with his hand, "and go to the next busy road." His pen scratched lines along a perpendicular path. "Turn left again, and you want this building here. You can get your gym clothes there. You need not even cross our busy streets." He handed her the marked-up map.

"Thanks. Back in a few." She threw him a smile that he returned, then did the same with a wave as she walked across the lobby and back out the doors.

Within seconds of exiting the front doors and turning left, the phone in the pocket of her hoodie began to vibrate. It had to have been Candice, as the other phone was still turned off in the night stand in her room. She pulled it out, confirmed the number on the front, and answered the call. The woman didn't wait for her to speak.

"Where are you going? I told you to stay in the hotel!"

Xochitl stopped dead in her tracks and did a three-sixty. More than a few passers-by swore at her in French, several of them deriding her American heritage from the sound of it. Candice was nowhere in sight.

"That's just creepy. You know that, right?"

"I asked you a question."

Xochitl found her pulse ratcheting upwards and her words came through her teeth.

"Since I'm going to be stuck in the hotel for the foreseeable future, I thought I'd get some time in at the gym. But to do that I need some clothes, as I don't intend to jog in rayon and polyester."

She started walking again, defiantly. Candice scowled.

"Did you want to babysit me while I run to the store?"

"You are not listening to me! How can you say I should trust you when you will not do what I tell you?"

Xochitl continued to try to control her voice, transferring anger into snark.

"I promise I won't kiss him on the first date, Mom. Okay, well maybe first base."

"I am not here to amuse you!"

"Good thing. Look, I'll be back in five minutes. No more. I just need to get some sweats. Unless you'd like to start running errands for me while I sit in my hotel room?"

Candice cursed her in that strange non-Spanish and disconnected the phone.

So this is what having an older sister is like?

She jammed the phone back into her pocket and kept walking, taking a left at the intersection and looking for the building that the concierge had indicated. She was expecting something with a name irreversibly mangled in French, so she wasn't looking for the name.

It turns out that the French word for "jogger" is "jogger".

Go figure.

She grabbed some running socks, a blue and white shirt, and some mostly-matching white and blue shorts, handed the woman

behind the counter a large bill, and was out of the store in under 5 minutes. She was back inside the hotel in another 5, and was sending Candice a text message as she walked through the elevator doors: "Dear mom, no first base."

She changed quickly in her room. She glanced at the phone now on the desk, for Candice, and the drawer of the night stand. She narrowed her eyes back toward the desk phone and sighed, snatching it and starting another text message. "Floor 5 gym for 1 hour. Phone in room." She turned the phone off as soon as the message left the Outbox, set it on the table, grabbed the iPod from next to it, and walked back to the elevator.

To her chagrin, the button for the fifth floor had an extra little symbol by it: a stick-man with a barbell over his head.

A tiny perky Frenchwoman greeted her as she stepped off the elevator. The fifth floor appeared to be partitioned half into office space for management, and the other half for the gym and spa. The blonde with the severe hair wrap was the gatekeeper for it all.

"Good evening, Miss."

Why does everyone keep speaking to me in English? Do I really look that American?

"Hey there. I was hoping to do about a half-hour's worth of jogging?"

The blonde nodded and pointed toward the frosted glass doors to Xochitl's left.

"If you will be back with us again, your room card can be used to track your time on the machines."

Xochitl made a surprised face.

"Really?"

"But of course. Use your card," she made a swiping motion with one hand, "before you start the machine. If you would like, come back to see me before you check out, and I can give you a lists of your time here. For your records."

Xochitl was impressed and a little surprised. The blonde misread it.

"Of course, if you would not like to have your time kept by us, you do not have to use your card."

She nodded slowly, underlining what she had said, then found something else to occupy her attention behind the desk. Xochitl's earbuds were in and her iPod was glowing to life before she made it through the glass doors.

The gym on the other side was a modest size. There were a half-dozen treadmills and a matching quantity of ellipticals, a pair of stair machines, several Torquemada-inspired weight machines, a rack of

free weights in metric increments, and a pile of yoga mats.

And Candice.

Xochitl fumbled her iPod. It jerked one of the earbuds out of her ears and tugged painfully at the other when it hit the bottom of its arc. She grabbed at the wire with one hand and juggled the iPod with the other. The walls were lined with mirrors, so she knew the other woman had seen her enter, but there had been no visible response.

Candice was on a treadmill that was mostly center to all of the others. There would be no way for Xochitl to also be on a treadmill without being right next to her.

And her outfit ... which was a bit of a misnomer, Xochitl thought, as it in no way “fit” her, even though it did leave plenty of the tiny woman busting out. Candice had foregone the skin-smarter option of loose-fitting wicking clothing and instead had on a babydoll t-shirt stretched precariously across a sports bra, and jogging shorts of a shiny material slit so far up her legs that they had to have been made in the late eighties. She also had her own iPod strapped to her arm, and from the rigid military cadence she was keeping, Xochitl guessed that the music in the headphones was fast and driving.

Candice's eyes stayed focused on the television above the equipment opposite her, still not acknowledging Xochitl's gawking presence.

Fine. Whatever.

Xochitl grabbed a hand towel from a pile by the door and walked to the closest treadmill, balancing the towel across the bars. She spun the iPod to something easy to start with, and punched the tread speed up to match. She couldn't help but notice that Candice hadn't broken a sweat, despite the pace she was keeping. Xochitl was relieved to find that, due to the way the machines were angled, neither woman would be able to see the other's display panel.

If she hasn't started to sweat yet at that speed, she couldn't have gotten here much before me. She skipped her warm-up, just so she could show off.

Unless that was her warm-up speed?

Nah. No way.

Xochitl cranked up the volume on her iPod, as Candice's speed was causing her feet to slam into the tread. She saw that the panel on her machine included an add-on for controlling one of the television's channels. She punched her way through several movie channels until she found something she had seen before. The closed-captioning was in French, but she'd seen the movie enough times to have a pretty good idea what the actual dialog was.

Between her iPod and the television, Xochitl's focus gradually narrowed to just wider than the tread and the handle bars in her

peripheral vision. One minute turned to five, and to ten. Somewhere around the twenty-minute mark, a faster song came on. She cranked up the tread speed to match, then left it there even after the song had ended. Some part of her registered that Candice hadn't slowed down and was still making a mockery of her speed, but she didn't care. This run was exactly what she needed.

Some time later, she started to lose her concentration. Her breathing had become labored and hard to synchronize with her footsteps. She looked down from the French closed-captioning and saw that she'd almost hit forty minutes. Certainly not a record, neither in speed nor in duration, but it was enough – her head was clearer than it had been for several days.

Xochitl punched down the speed on the treadmill and fell into a moderate walk. As her breathing came under control, her focus widened and she realized that Candice was still going. As near as she could tell, the woman was going at least as fast as she had been a half-hour ago.

Even micro-sized, a decent figure doesn't come for free, Xoch. Gyms may well be a second home to her.

She had, at least, finally broken into a full sweat. Xochitl smiled at this, but lost it as she caught sight of her own reflection in the opposite mirror wall and saw that there were fewer dry patches on her clothes than sweaty ones.

Xochitl made an effort to drag her eyes away from the other woman, and punched the button to stop her tread. The machine slowed to a stop, and Xochitl stepped gingerly off of it and over to a pile of paper towels. She wiped down her machine, tossed her towel into a bin, and walked out without a look behind her.

The same blonde was at the desk as she left. Xochitl gave her a thumbs-up and a smile, as the earbuds were still firmly in place. The blonde smiled and went back to whatever she was reading. Would it be a French fashion magazine? Or would that just be silly? Xochitl snorted and coughed as a vision of an *Us Weekly* came to her. The blonde looked up, and Xochitl waved her attention away as she got on the elevator.

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Xochitl had just turned the phone back on when it started to ring in her hand.

“And how was your run?”

"My run, Miss Green?"

It wasn't Candice. Xochitl panicked and spun around in her hotel room, pulling the cellular phone away from her ear and staring at it.

No. No. It was the right one. She hadn't picked up the Town Hall phone. But this voice was a man's. She heard him calling to her and returned the phone to her ear.

"Miss Green? Miss Green, are you there?"

"Who is this? How did you get this number?"

"My name is Gilbert. I work with," he paused, unsure of himself for a moment, "with Candice and Monique."

Xochitl didn't catch up quickly enough, so just repeated his name back to him. "Gilbert?"

"Gil, please. No, my last name is not Sullivan, and no I did not grow up wanting to be a Pirate or a Pilot. Well, that's not entirely true. Every boy wants to be a pilot at one time or another."

The accent was a thick British. She didn't know enough about British accents to place it with a region, but she knew it wasn't Cockney, and it wasn't the one from the new *Doctor Who*. Cardiff? Yeah, it wasn't Cardiff. And it wasn't wherever that Naked Chef guy was from.

"A British agent? On top of agents from South America, Central America, France, Russia, and Japan. Was James following the *Heroes* handbook of ethno-diversity when he assembled his team?"

No wonder he hadn't killed her when he'd had the chance – a Scots-Mexican would only qualify him for more Government tax credits.

"Oh, I'm not an agent."

"Okay." Xochitl didn't really have anything to say, so the line went quiet for a moment. "So ... what's up, Gil?"

"Do me a favor, and do not tell Candice that we have spoken. I am not supposed to contact you directly – only through Monique and Candice."

He was a –

"Tech. You're not an agent because you're a tech." Gil was quiet. "It's okay, your secret is safe with me. We geeks can spot our own."

"Right. Of course." He seemed impressed at something, but Xochitl couldn't figure out what. He went quiet again.

"Gil? I'm sure we don't have all day to chat like a pair of schoolgirls. Why don't you start by telling me what's on your mind?"

Xochitl could hear Gil sucking his breaths through his teeth.

"Right. Okay. It's like this. I was one of the techs in the NOC ...

when ... when we saw the video. When he was –”

“Please don't. I can't know.” Xochitl squinted her eyes and shook her head.

“Right. Sorry. Well, I was also there when you phoned again later and warned us about the, um, the trap.”

“I should have figured it out sooner, I know.”

“No! We didn't, either! We're right glad that you did, though. We were all too busy trying to get our heads around, well, around all of it.”

“I'm sure Perkins was counting on that. He's a jerk, but he's a smart jerk.”

“Well, I was also one of the techs that worked on Alfred.” He paused again. “Okay, I didn't get to write anything, that was all Monique, but I did help.”

“Find any bugs?”

He laughed. “Not really. We didn't have much time with it, you see?”

“Not really. What's going on, Gil?”

“I know, I know. I'm getting off track a little. You're right. Well, we were talking. The techs. About you.”

“About me?” Xochitl stared at the door, worried that Candice might barge through it at any time. This phone call was obviously not above board, but the man refused to pick up the pace.

“We figure you've got a good track record, see? And what with everything being what it is right now, we're trying to figure out what to do.”

Xochitl turned and flopped into the desk chair.

“You're kidding me.”

Gil's voice was meek.

“Well. No. Not really. We're ...” He trailed off.

“You're running out of options.”

“Right. Exactly.”

“You do know that I'm not a field agent, right? I'm not trained in all of this double-oh-seven stuff.”

His reply was deflated. “Well. Yeah. We know. But ..”

“How many is “we”, Gil?”

“Four. There are four of us.”

Xochitl's sweaty head fell gently against the desk.

I've got four techs that want me to be their babysitter.

“Gil. Look. I just got back from the gym and I haven't even showered yet. Can you call me back in one hour and we'll work on it then?”

“I, um, well ...”

"One hour, Gil. Let me just get my head on straight. I'm no good to you distracted by my own body odor."

"Right. One hour. Bye, then."

Xochitl disconnected the phone and dropped it onto the desk next to her head.

"Un-frickin-believable. The agents want to wring my neck ... but the techs! They trust me!"

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl stood facing the shower head, leaning against the wall with her palms and stretching out her calves, letting the hot water run down her neck and back.

"Four techs. Monique. Candice. There have to be a few more field agents out there somewhere – I can't believe Candice is the only one. So six total left at a bare minimum, and probably not more than ten or twelve. Plus Luis, Marlana, and James, and that would have been nine to fifteen, originally. That's certainly plausible. James could have handled that."

And what about Perkins and Town Hall?

"Roughly the same size? But that's an entirely different scale. That was more like independent groups working together. Cells. Perkins' team ... I don't know."

Think Candice knows? Or Monique?

"Gil. If James was as obsessed with his little black book database as I think he probably was, it would be in there. And Gil might be able to get to it."

Can you still pull it off? Is there enough left of James' organization to take down Perkins?

"I ... I don't know." Her head shook, hot water hitting new parts of her neck.

What's the point? James' group is -

"They'll never let me walk away." A chill ran down Xochitl's back, despite the hot water and steam. "Candice would Tony Soprano me without a second thought. Just to make herself feel better."

"Yes, I would."

Xochitl jumped and flailed at the shower curtain, trying to keep herself upright. Several rings popped loose, but the curtain mostly held. She'd bumped her knee hard against the soap tray, but at least she hadn't taken a header into the wall. She couldn't see much of the other woman between her wet hair and all of the steam that had

collected, but it looked like she was back to her smiling-predator-in-a-fitted-suit look.

"Get out!"

Xochitl knew that she didn't have any leverage to back up the yelled threat, but Candice had enough decency to turn around and at least walk past the threshold. Her back remained turned in some defiant mockery of common decency.

"We need to talk, Miss Green."

"And it couldn't wait until I was out of the shower? What is wrong with you? Seriously!"

Candice had a laugh in her voice and did nothing to try and hide it. "Did you not have sisters? Have you never talked to each other in the shower?"

Xochitl rushed to get all of the soap and shampoo off of her.

"We are not, and I mean not in any way, that close. We need to have a serious discussion about limits."

Candice's back shrugged. Xochitl probably would have felt flushed, had she not been standing in hot water for the last twenty minutes. She turned off the taps and gave her hair a few too-quick wrings before she reached for a towel. She wrapped it around herself, decided to ignore the decimated curtain for now, and stepped out of the shower, glaring at Candice's back.

"What? What do you want?"

Candice's arms came up in a question. "May I?"

"Yeah, whatever." Xochitl snatched a comb from the counter top and raked it through her hair.

Candice turned around and walked toward her. Xochitl started and stopped combing her hair, death grip on the chunk of plastic. Candice's smirk widened, but she raised her palms in a sign of non-hostility, and walked past her into the bathroom, sitting on the toilet lid. Xochitl gawked at how the other woman was managing to maintain the air of being her best girlfriend.

She regained a small measure of her composure and went back to combing her hair methodically, the mirror being too fogged to do anything deliberate with it.

"Go ahead. You obviously have something to say to me."

Candice lost a bit of her smirk. What remained was predatory again, not amused.

"What you did today was foolish."

Xochitl gave up and put the comb back on the counter top, turning to face the woman who had invaded her bathroom.

"So you said."

"I do not think you understand. There are things you do not

know. There are –”

Xochitl made the logical connection as the woman was talking.

“Agents. There are agents keeping tabs on me.”

Candice raised an eyebrow, but continued.

“Yes. Have you seen them?”

“No, but it's the only thing that makes sense. You've been trying very hard to make me feel like you haven't been in my hair all week. The illusion of freedom. The only way you could do that is to keep a good eye on me the entire time. You couldn't do that by yourself. There has to be at least one more agent with me in their scopes.”

“Yes. Can you tell me why your walk today was a very bad idea?”

Xochitl crossed her arms and thought about it.

“You've already told me you don't trust me. Believe me, I got that message. So I can assume that the other agents here don't trust me, either. So they're watching to see if I'm playing for another team.”

Did I ever call Perkins from outside the hotel room? Or with the window curtains open? Would they have seen it?

“Yes.”

“And if I do anything to make them twitchy, then the consequences might be very bad for my health.”

Candice nodded, predatory smirk rock solid.

“Yes.”

Xochitl thought for another moment, then laughed and turned to walk out of the bathroom. Candice called after her, then got up and followed.

“What is so funny?”

“You.”

Candice's smirk leveled out, eyes narrowing. Xochitl knew this button – she had pushed it before, and would probably push it again. She pretended to not notice, continuing to walk around the room and gather clothing. Candice glared at her, waiting for her to continue. Instead, Xochitl made a twirling motion with her hand and countered the woman's stare.

“Tell me how I am funny, Miss Green.” The woman spun slowly to face away.

“You came in here trying to make me feel bad about running to the store today – like if bad things had happened it would only have been my fault. But, it seems to me that anything bad that happens to me would have consequences for you, too. You're the babysitter. You're supposed to be keeping me safe. That's why you were so mad at me earlier.”

Xochitl let that sink in while she got on enough clothing to consider herself mostly decent.

"I was a babysitter when I was a kid. I know the guilt trips."

Candice was silent. Xochitl didn't know why she couldn't stop herself from baiting the woman.

"And I'm done."

Candice turned back around to face her.

"We –"

Xochitl interrupted her.

"How long are we going to keep doing this?"

"We are trying to –"

"No. Not the organization." She waved her hand between them. "You and me. The two of us. Are we going to keep sniping at each other like a couple of schoolgirls?"

"I did not start this –"

"Look. I'm just tired of it. It's amusing and all, but I don't have the energy for it. You know what? You win. I'll play nice from here on out. But let's do something. I've already told you that I'm going stir-crazy here. I mean, I went to the gym today! I haven't done that in years! That alone should be proof enough that I'm not entirely at my sanest."

Candice eyed her.

"Can we just call a cease-fire for a while? I won't pick at you and try to undermine your authority. Maybe you could stop reminding me that lots of people with guns are always watching me?"

"That is the reality of the situation, Miss Green."

"Yeah, and so is cellulite, but it's not something I need to be reminded of every four hours."

"You must be more careful."

"Fine! I'll be more careful! But give me something to do to keep me busy! If you're not going to get us out of the country, you can at least do that much."

Candice thought about this. "What do you suggest?"

"Got me. Are we going to retaliate against Perkins? Or are we going with the hope that he's done with us?"

"That is none of your concern."

"Why not? Why can't I help? I'm smart enough to have figured out that if Perkins got to James, he probably also got to Luis and Marlena, right? How many more people do you have to lose before you decide that I might be of some use?"

Candice continued to glare in silence. Xochitl pressed on without thinking.

"Or do I just need to wait a bit? Maybe the next babysitter will

trust me more?"

Candice moved two blurred steps toward Xochitl, hand raised aggressively, before she caught herself and froze in mid-stride. She inhaled deeply and slowly reset her body to her standard nonchalant pose.

Xochitl took a slow step backwards toward the window and raised her open hands in front of her.

"Whoa. Sorry. That was out of line." She could see the tendons and muscles in the other woman's jaws working beneath her skin. "Really. I didn't mean it. Tell you what ... I've got a deal for you."

Candice didn't respond vocally, but shifted into an "I'm listening" pose.

"Let's table the trust issue for now. Let me continue to work out some ideas, and maybe if I come up with something good enough, you might find yourself trusting me a bit more."

The other woman blinked at her, no more.

"But, here's the thing. This needs to be a two-way conversation if I'm going to come up with anything that has any hope of being grounded in reality. See? And you know I think better when I'm eating. So let's get out of this room, go get some food, and see what we can come up with together. Deal?"

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

The two women exited the hotel together. Xochitl started to move toward the café across the street, but the other woman stopped her by grabbing her elbow. As Xochitl looked back she was signaling the doorman, who signaled another person, who flagged down a taxi. The taxi came to a stop in about the same time it took Xochitl to stop herself and turn away from the café. They climbed into the tiny white and black vehicle.

"Whoa, that was fast. These people take their transportation seriously."

"Yes, they do," Candice said, leaning forward to speak in rapid French with the driver. *Rue d'something*. He nodded and had them in the river of traffic before Candice's back hit the seat. Xochitl grimaced as the taxi slid from opening to opening in the traffic.

"So ... what's the plan? Where are we headed?" The other woman said nothing. "Am I appropriately dressed, at least?"

When the other woman didn't even glance at her as she nodded, Xochitl knew that the question had been a silly one. Candice was not

the type to have let her get out of the hotel room without having appropriate clothing. Xochitl had been miffed that all of her jeans were in need of washing, and had ended up in a pair of black slacks and a medium-weight grey sweater. She'd chosen semi-nice shoes more out of a need to avoid putting her sweaty running shoes back on, and less because they would have looked horrible with her outfit.

Candice, as always, had on one of her power-suit combos, this one with robin's egg blue complements.

Xochitl opened her mouth to push the issue, but was quickly silenced with a look. The fifteen minute drive went by in silence as the driver was smart enough to not try and break the tension between the women. Xochitl watched the city pass by, noting that the businesses with well-known, international and touristy names were giving way to smaller places that looked more locally-owned.

The taxi came to a fast stop, wedging itself between two parked cars up against a curb. Candice looked unsurprised, so Xochitl extricated herself from the car as the other woman handed the driver several bills.

Xochitl stood on the sidewalk and did a three-sixty. As near as she could tell, they were now completely outside of the wanderings of tourists – the few other people she saw on the streets looked very much like native French. She scanned the skyline, now darkening from the setting sun, but the buildings were still too tall to see anything significant. Had Candice gotten a wild hair and decided to jump back into the taxi and speed off, there was zero chance that Xochitl would be able to find her way back on foot.

"All of those movies where people just wander around Paris all night ... they're all lies. Lies, I tell you."

Candice was walking past her as she muttered to herself, and grabbed her arm again. Xochitl shook herself loose, falling into step beside her. They walked up a block, then over a block, and Xochitl was inclined to ask why the taxi hadn't dropped them off in the right place. It occurred to her that it as probably some super-spy thing as Candice ducked into a stoop and down a half-flight of stairs.

Xochitl tried to take one last look around, for some kind of signage or anything for some reference as to where they were, but Candice had her arm again and was pulling her into the building. Xochitl came to a dead stop as her eyes tried to adjust to the dim light. Her nose kicked in before then: onions, cheese, and alcohol.

"You mean it really is a restaurant?"

A squeeze on the elbow told her to shut up for the time being.

Four or five small two-person tables red-shifted into focus in the middle of the room. Candice pulled her into motion again, leading

them toward the back of the room. As near as Xochitl could tell, the only light in the room came from the tealight candles on every table – there were no wall sconces, overhead lamps, or any real primary source of illumination.

They came to a stop at a small C-shaped three-person booth on the back wall. Xochitl looked around and realized that there were several more spaced along three of the walls, bringing the seating capacity of the room up to maybe three dozen – if no one got too full from dinner. Thanks to the candles, she had a hard time seeing every table and booth, but it looked like only one other couple was there, seated on the opposite side of the room.

A short man appeared at Xochitl's right as she slid into the booth. He had a pair of wine glasses placed in front of the women and was uncorking a bottle of wine before Xochitl could say anything. He poured each of the women several inches of translucent red liquid, and disappeared again.

Xochitl stuck her head out from the booth and looked behind her. The man dissolved into a set of black cloth curtains that were tucked away behind another of the booths. A second later, a fresh cloud of the onion scent hit Xochitl. She turned back to Candice and saw that the woman had an unobstructed view of the kitchen entry from where she sat. Ever the super-spy.

“Am I going to start an international incident if I ask for a water or a tea? It's a bit early for me to start drinking, especially on a gym day.”

Candice only frowned at her and nodded in the direction that Xochitl knew must have been the kitchen. The small man reappeared with a pair of water glasses and set them in front of the women. Candice made a show of smelling and then tasting the wine, smiling after. She paid the man or the wine some kind of compliment. The man smiled in a way that made it clear to Xochitl that he owned, or at least ran, the restaurant. Xochitl couldn't understand what they were saying, but could follow the pattern:

“Ingratiating compliment!”

“Demure denial.”

“Restatement of compliment, plus additional niceness.”

“Modest acceptance.”

Smile.

Smile.

“Let's get down to business.”

The man listed off what Xochitl figured was either the specials, or possibly even the entire menu for the day. She glanced around and saw that there were no menus or table tents, or anything with any

sort of writing. Even the bottle of wine was unlabeled.

Candice didn't hesitate, and repeated two of the items from the list. The man nodded and was off.

"And what are we having?"

Candice lifted an eyebrow and sipped her wine.

"Come on. Chicken? Steak? What?"

"Fish. I thought it most appropriate given our time running today."

Xochitl bobbed her head noncommittally. She wouldn't have chosen fish, but it might not be too bad.

"Yeah, about that. How fast were –"

Candice smirked and waved away the unfinished question. Xochitl tried again from another tack.

"Those machines went up to twenty kph, right? That's, what, twelve miles an hour?"

"Yes. But it is not good for more than short runs."

Xochitl continued to pick, trying to get the woman to open up.

"Maybe, but you were still making pretty good time. I might have gotten a total of maybe five K in. I can't believe you kept up that pace for forty-five minutes."

"I find thirteen to be comfortable."

"Thirteen ... five-eighths ... that's like eight miles an hour! Are you telling me you did six miles at the drop of a hat?"

Candice's eyes twinkled with the implied compliment. "I have always loved to run, since I was a small girl."

"Yeah, but that's like Olympic speed."

"Not quite."

"Eh. It is to me. I don't run that often, maybe once every few months. I had a friend in college that would always try to get me to go run with her. She said it was the only thing that kept her sane during exam weeks. I only took her up on it once, and it was a disaster. She could have run circles around me. Literally."

Bread appeared on the end of the table. Xochitl had an impulse to grab for it, but didn't want to interrupt the conversation.

"If you do not like it, why do you do it?"

"I don't know. It's not that I don't like it. Well, not any more than anything else at the gym. As I've gotten older I have started to see that it can be very calming. It's just that I hurt for days afterwards."

Candice rolled her eyes and snorted at her. Xochitl knew what was coming, but played along. At least now she could act on the bread.

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"You are American." The woman sipped her wine with a finality – no more needed to be said.

"Yeah, and?" The bread was hot enough that even Xochitl wouldn't attempt to eat it.

"You think that you can get on the machine and that is enough. You go to run once a week for an hour and that is "working out"." The woman shook her head and twirled her glass slowly by the stem.

"I never said that."

Candice snorted at her again. Xochitl almost responded, but stopped herself. She waved her palms in front of her.

"Okay, you're right. We do that. Most of us can't even be bothered to go once a week, and I was one of those people. I am one of those people. We do want it to be easy. We're spoiled."

Candice's smile was thin and smug.

"It's not that I don't know that if I went every day that it would eventually stop hurting so much. I get that. And I'm sure that, in a few years, I'll get to a point in life where I not only can go to the gym every day, but maybe even want to go to the gym every day. As long as I'm not going to the gym because I'm a hundred pounds overweight, that sounds okay to me. But ... but you have to give us credit for one thing."

Candice continued to twirl and waited.

"Those of us that aren't sitting at home watching *The Price Is Right* all day are pretty good at what we're doing for our day jobs. Until this whole thing started, I was surrounded by some of the smartest people in my field."

Candice snorted again.

"Hey, wait. Seriously. It may not be field work, but it's something. And that something is obviously significant, or I wouldn't be here with you having this conversation. Granted?"

Candice paused in her twirling and thought about it. "Yes," she nodded.

"Right. So, about that ... wait," she lowered her voice and hunched closer at the same time, "we can talk here, right?"

"Yes. The man and his wife do not know any English, and we will be undisturbed by other guests for several hours."

"Really? But the sun is already down. When does the dinner crowd hit?"

Candice waved her hand at the empty dining room and went back to twirling her glass.

"That doesn't even make sense. Logically, the restaurant has to make money to stay in business. No people means no business."

Candice again waved her hand, this time at the implication. "It

is not your concern. Please focus.”

Xochitl bristled visibly at the chiding, but reined in her reaction.

“Whatever. Anyway. I'm trying to figure out how many chess pieces we have on the board. On our team, I figure, what, a half-dozen techs and maybe that many agents, as well?”

The woman looked bored already, but didn't deny the question. Xochitl tried to be nice about it, but didn't entirely succeed.

“Remember what I was saying about a two-way conversation? It's a trust thing, I know, but I'll be worse than no help if I've got the wrong information. For techs, there's Monique plus three to five under her, right? Do you know what their skill levels are?”

Candice continued to stare at her glass. Xochitl could only assume that the candlelight was doing interesting optical things with the wine.

“Why do you think there are that many?”

Xochitl took the question and grabbed it with both hands.

“Valid question. I don't know, it's just a guess based on what I've heard.”

She lifted her hand to delineate points with her fingers, but thought better of it.

“On the phone with Monique, it sounded like a small enough team to where she didn't have to do much coordination. And I figure that was quite the event, so probably everyone was on the line. And you were able to shut down and clear out pretty quickly. And James doesn't, didn't, seem like the type to want a huge team. I figure he'd go through Monique for most things, and she'd use the techs to do the grunt work. Less than three and it would be hard to get around the clock coverage. More than five and it would start to get bulky and cumbersome. Am I in the ballpark here?”

The other woman seemed satisfied with the answer, so she continued.

“As for field agents ... that's an even wilder guess. There's you, plus at least one guy tailing me. But there's got to be more than that, as you're obviously not calling the shots.”

The other woman frowned, and Xochitl tried to recover.

“Well, let's be honest, you aren't. If you were, I would have been history a long time ago. And it can't just be Monique that is trumping you, as you two seem to be pretty eye-to-eye. And there would have to be more than just my tail, as it would have to be enough to overrule you and Monique together. So ... that's at least two more at a bare minimum.”

“Luis and Marlena showed up at the same time at the café. Then there's you and my tail. You seem to run in pairs. Given that James

seemed to like multitasking and being everywhere at once, I'd be willing to bet that he had several teams in several locations. One team left here in Paris, and presumably at least one in the States, and one more someplace else. That's an even half-dozen. Eight originally, in four teams, which would have been about the size that James would have liked."

Candice nodded slightly.

"So I'm close?"

"Very good work, Miss Webb."

Xochitl noticed that she had gone back to using her assumed name. How the woman could flip back and forth when in private and in public was beyond her.

I'd put money that there's one more team - she's sandbagging, trying not to show her entire hand.

"So, let's say five techs and eight agents?"

Nod.

"Then there's the other side of the board. Do we know how many pieces they have?"

Candice shook her head, but Xochitl realized that it wasn't what she thought. The little man appeared with a pair of soup bowls. It looked and smelled like some kind of leek-based chowder and went a long way toward explaining the smell of the place. Xochitl assumed it was some kind of house specialty. Candice thanked the man and he zipped off again. The soup, like the bread, was nuclear-hot and required some time to cool.

"You tell me."

"What? Oh." Xochitl tore her eyes away from the soup. "I was just trying to figure that out when you busted in on my shower. They seem like a conglomerate or cabal or something - a bunch of groups working together, not just one big group. And going after all of them is probably more than we want to bite off."

Xochitl tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the bowl. When she smelled it she got exactly what she was expecting: a nose full of leek and seafood.

"So if we assume that we'll be just going after the Perkins group ... I have no idea. I've only ever spoken with him the once, and he gave me no indication of how many people he might have working for him."

She took a bite and decided that while she would probably be nutritionally satisfied by tonight's meal, it wasn't something she'd ever come back for a second time.

"But I think we can assume that it's not many. Well, not in coordination with his Town Hall role. I mean, I presume he owns a

company or something that is only marginally related to Town Hall, if at all. But for Town Hall ... it may be just him."

Candice had made a serious dent in her soup during Xochitl's monologue.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, how many people would he need? Maybe an assistant to handle calls for the organization when he is unavailable? He did all of his work remotely via videoconferencing, so he wouldn't need security or agents. And, the fact that he hired James backs that up – if he had in-house people, why get James to do his wetwork? No, I think he's an outsourcing kind of guy. It's him and maybe one more. That's it."

Xochitl had been working it out as she spoke, and the conclusion left her dumbfounded.

Just him? And I know that the assistant is out of the picture, as that's the guy that I supposedly killed. I ... I might be able to do this.

She saw that Candice was having a similar reaction. She might have been told by her people that Perkins was a one-man show, but she obviously hadn't entirely believed it until just now.

The two women were still quiet when the man showed up with a pair of plates. He set a fillet-o-something-grey in front of Xochitl, and a fillet-o-something-white in front of Candice, took both of their soup bowls, nodded, and vanished again. Candice gave her fish a look like she was analyzing its composition at a molecular level, then picked up her fork and started to eat.

Xochitl looked at her own fish. It was covered in a thin glaze along with lemon slices, capers, and a twiggy herb that she didn't recognize. The smell confirmed her earlier suspicion that she'd be able to eat the food, she just wouldn't really enjoy it. She took her own fork and started to pull apart the entrée. Beneath it, she discovered a bed of leeks.

What is this place, "The Leaky Cauldron"?

By the time Xochitl had swallowed her first bite, the other woman's fish was half gone. Xochitl figured she'd make it through about half of the fish before she succumbed to the temptation to start pushing it around her plate.

"You do not care for the food here." It wasn't a question.

"Eh. It's not horrible or anything. It's just not my bag. There's a reason I was suggesting Italy – I'm much more of an Italian kind of gal."

"What did you think of the food in Scotland?"

Xochitl was distracted trying to figure out the leek-to-fish ratio and work backwards to the size of the delivery truck required each

week just to bring in the leeks. Her response came out as a mumble. "I wasn't worried about getting violently ill from it." She snapped back into focus and realized what she had said. "Sorry. I'm just generally untrusting of fish. Between bones and scales and mercury and the potential for bacterial infection ..."

Candice crunched up her face and started on the last quarter of her fillet. "Fish is very good for you."

"Since you asked, Scotland was interesting. What's the old joke about all Scottish food being based on a dare? Really, it was pretty much the exact opposite of this – all of that stuff had no danger of being undercooked, and was more about sticking to your bones than being very good for you."

She almost said something about Spanish cooking, but caught herself. She sucked an unchewed caper down the wrong pipe, which sent her into a coughing fit that worked her through the other half of her glass of water.

Candice continued as if nothing had happened. "Would you go back to Scotland, then?"

"Well, with Brian's ... with what happened, I did kind of cut things short. I got to wander for a day, but then James showed up and I got off track. So yeah, I'd go back and see more of Edinburgh. And I suppose a day or two out at one of the drafty castles would be a cool experience."

Candice finished off the last bite of her fish and looked across the table.

"And yet you do not get this excited about France. You only want to leave, but here there is so much more history. The Tower, Notre Dame, the Bastille, the Louvre. Or, since you are American, maybe you would be happier to see Maginot, or Cannes."

Xochitl used the statement as an excuse to put down her fork and stop pushing around her fish. She had a half-impulse to offer the remainder to the other woman, but quashed it. Instead, she leaned back in the booth and folded her hands in her lap.

"I've been wondering about that, too. I can't figure it out. Every school girl wants to visit Paris, and meet a Frenchman that wants to sweep her off her feet, and walk down the *Champs Élysées* at night. But for whatever reason, it's just another city to me. Yeah, from what I saw of the tower, it was tall. But the Mona Lisa? Eh. I wouldn't be able to get anywhere near it, so I'd be able to see it more clearly sitting at my laptop."

"Would it not be wonderful to be in the presence of the real painting?"

Xochitl paused again to think.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not."

Candice swore at her in her Slavic whatever it was. Xochitl could guess what it translated to.

"Yeah, I know: spoiled American."

The woman was clearly done with the small talk. Xochitl jumped back to the previous conversation without introduction.

"So if he's the only one ... how hard could he possibly be to take down? And if we take him down, isn't that good enough? I doubt the other groups had anything to do with what he did to James."

Xochitl was surprised with what she saw on the face across the table from her.

"You're kidding me. You mean we actually agree on something?"

Candice almost snarled, but went back to twisting her wine glass instead.

"As you said, I am not in charge."

"But if you come to them with a decent plan, they'd have to at least listen, right?"

That's why we're here - not because she's humoring me, but because she hopes I can come up with something good enough.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then order me several desserts that don't have leeks in them, and let's get to the planning. In the meantime, does this place have a restroom? Whenever I go to the gym I leak like a sieve for the rest of the day."

Candice rolled her eyes, disgusted at both statements. "Behind the curtain to the kitchen, on your right."

The restroom was a tiny, closet-sized unisex affair next to a metal door that Xochitl assumed went to the walk-in fridge. Comforting juxtaposition. She pulled out her cell phone as she sat on the lidded toilet. Sure enough: several missed calls from the same number. She tucked her hair behind her ear and redialed the number.

"Miss Green!"

"Gil, shh!" In the confined space, it sounded like he was standing next to her yelling. She thumbed the volume control to its lowest setting, but still wasn't comfortable with how loud he sounded. "Sorry I'm late, and I don't have much time. We're out to dinner, and I couldn't get away until now."

"Right. We were worried."

"Yeah, Candice finally owned up to the fact that her partner is tailing me." The silence from the tech confirmed this. "I don't suppose you could tell me what he looks like so that I'll be able to

avoid him?"

"Well, I, um ..."

"Don't worry about it, Gil. I didn't think so." He was way too skittish. He needed to be calmed down before he'd give her any intel. "Hey, look, I have good news. Candice and I are working on something right now that may help get all of this straightened out."

"You are? She is?"

"Yep. I think she's still too paranoid about me to give me straight answers, so I'm a little worried about the details, but we're nailing down the generalities right now. I'm sure she'll be calling Monique in a little while telling her all about her brilliant plan."

"That sounds more like her."

"Tell me one thing, Gil. Candice is being hazy about personnel. She's trying to let me believe that there are only 3 teams of field agents active, now that Luis and Marlena have gone missing, but I think she's sandbagging. There are four, right?" Again, the nervous man was silent. "My plan needs four teams. I won't tell her you told me, but I have to know for sure. Eight active field agents, right?"

"Yes," was the meek response, "four teams."

"Great. Perfect. Thanks, Gil. Look, I need to get back to the table or she's going to get suspicious. Call me back in two hours? We'll have the whole thing worked out by then. I'll give you the real version of the plan, minus all of her additions."

"Right. Two hours."

"Thanks, Gil. Talk with you then."

She disconnected and stowed the phone, flushing the toilet for appearances, and ducking back into the underlit dining room.

"Even the bathroom reeks of leeks. It's like someone saw the leek episode of *Iron Chef* and decided to run with the idea."

Candice was disinterested in the conversation. Leeks apparently didn't bother her in the slightest.

"Your desserts will be here soon. But is it not strange to eat desserts after running so hard?"

Xochitl wasn't keen on being called on it. "Eh. Yeah. But unless you want to stop for fast food on the way home, I need something without leeks or fish to digest. And running always makes me hungry for carbs and sugary stuff."

"If you fed yourself properly, you would not be so," she made a paint-the-fence maneuver with her hand.

"High-low. Sugar rush and sugar crash. I know, thanks. I'm not completely ignorant."

Candice blew off the rebuttal. "What is your plan?"

"Go to the gym by myself next time."

The other woman stared at her, like Xochitl was some kind of misbehaving child.

"Yeah, I know what you meant. I'm still thinking about it. I don't suppose you have a mailing address for the guy or something? Check stub? Self-addressed stamped envelope?"

The short woman tilted her head forward and looked at Xochitl through her hair, hands folding into each other and onto the table.

"I didn't think so. Well, we'll just have to do to him what he did to us – Lojack him and figure out where he's hiding. You all have at least started looking into the building he uses, right? The Town Hall?"

"Of course we have."

"Right. Of course you have. And, of course, you found nothing. What about the Internet access for the building? Billing records? With that kind of videoconferencing setup, there's got to be something."

"As you said, we have not found anything yet."

"What about the people that originally installed the system? It didn't look that old, so they're probably still in business. It's worth a look."

Candice produced her cell phone from the magical coat of hers and sent a quick text message. "I will have Monique find them."

"Beyond that, how much of a plan do we really need? It sounds like there are a dozen of us and only one of him. Find him, surround him, take him out, game over."

"Possibly. But unlikely."

"Why do you say that?"

"It is never that easy."

Xochitl shrugged and noticed that some kind of glistening fluff pastry had popped into existence on the far edge of the table. From its golden color and its smell, Xochitl guessed that several sticks of real butter had gone into its making.

"As long as we don't go all Blofeld on him and start explaining our master plan while he escapes from under our noses, how hard could it be?"

The other woman took a small bite of the pastry and gave a half-frown. Xochitl couldn't tell if she didn't like it, or didn't like that she did like it. Either way, Xochitl felt very okay with taking the plate and pulling it toward her side of the table.

"It sounds like I didn't miss out much by not having sisters, but the way. No one invading my shower time, and no one to steal my desserts."

Candice snorted at her and laid her fork on the table.

"I'll see what I can do to think of some kind of scheme to get an address for him. I don't think the reverse of what he pulled on us would work for him. We'd just get the IP address for the Town Hall building, and we know where that is. Hey, do you think that could be of any use to us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the building has been the white elephant that we haven't talked about. We know exactly where it is. Can we use that somehow? Use the building to draw him out?"

"How?"

Xochitl stabbed at the pastry. "Seriously, we need to have a discussion about what exactly constitutes a two-way conversation, and what just makes for a talking head. Help a girl out, here, I can't come up with everything myself."

"I am not a tech."

"Yeah, but you've still got to be able to improvise, right?"

Candice gave her her best "of course" glare.

"So if you were standing in that videoconferencing room in the building, what could you say to him to make him come out of his hidey-hole?"

"Do you think he would respond to threats against the building?"

"I doubt it. It would only get him madder."

"Anger is one of our weapons. Angry men do careless things."

"Right, but we've seen what this one does when he is angry. Do we really want to do that again?"

Candice's knuckles went white, and Xochitl could see her perfectly-manicured nails dig into her palms. "We will not be intimidated by that man again."

"I know. That's why I'm trying to get you thinking."

Candice did pause for a moment, knuckles regaining some color. "We must take something that he loves."

"I'm sure we probably don't know about any relatives. And I doubt he loves the building. So what does he love?"

"His money."

"True, true. Do you think we could take his money away from him? Can we trace the payments he has made to your people?"

Candice was already punching another text message into her cell phone. "I believe the courier always brought us cash. But I will have Monique look into it."

Xochitl picked the flakes of her dessert apart with her fork. Each layer kept getting thinner and thinner, but each time she thought she'd gotten down to a single layer of thickness, she'd see that it

could be split still further. Someone must have spent hours kneading and twisting the dough, overlapping layer upon layer.

Xochitl zoned out in mid-poke. Her fork didn't have far to drop to the plate, so it didn't clatter and disturb Candice's text messaging. She began drawing circles on the table with her other hand's index finger. Had Candice had Xochitl's taste for bad movies, she would looked up and thought the woman across from her bore a striking resemblance to a blind fortune teller from every bad werewolf movie.

"The con." Xochitl's voice came out as a whisper.

Candice gave her a look to continue, but Xochitl was still too out of it to notice. "Excuse me?"

Xochitl held up a hand to ward off further questions. She quite obviously had not been speaking to the woman who had interrupted her thinking. Candice didn't have Brian's patience.

"What?"

Xochitl shushed her and continued drawing circles with lines between them. Candice saw that all of the lines crossed in the middle, like the spokes on a bicycle wheel. She tried to get the woman's attention by grabbing at her wrist, but was flicked away like a housefly. A second effort yielded the pastry dessert being pushed toward her as some kind of placating measure. When the other woman spoke, it was not directed forward, but in a kind of surrounding voiceover that made Candice's skin crawl.

"Eat it and be quiet for a minute."

"I will not -"

Xochitl didn't look at her, but grabbed at the fork across the table and thrust it in her direction. "You will. Eat. Quiet. Now."

Candice took the fork and stared at it as if it were a warp drive coil or something similarly foreign. She mimicked Xochitl's earlier motions and poked at the flaky, half-dissected dessert.

"You really should have more than just a bite." Candice heard the change in the woman's voice and looked up. Xochitl was indeed looking at her again. "It's really good. And it'll help you digest the crazy plan I'm about to throw at you."

"I will not eat this."

Xochitl squinted at her even more than the low light levels required.

"No. You know what. I'm going to be obstinate here. You certainly will eat it, or I won't tell you how we're going to get out of this not only in one piece, but rich enough to retire. No more field work. You can spend of the rest of your life in the gym if you want. But right now, you'll eat and enjoy a dessert."

"I -"

“Shh! Take fork. Use fork on dessert. Put fork in mouth. Remove fork. Swallow. Repeat.”

Candice sneered at Xochitl, who thought she might have even heard a low growl coming from the woman. But eventually the fork went into the pastry and came out with more than just air.

“Good girl. It won't kill you, I promise. Now. Now I need information. No more games and riddles and guesswork. We're going to take your con to a whole new level. And to do that, I'm going to need to talk to the people that were in on it.”

Candice paused and stared at her.

“Yeah, I'm not kidding. Get Monique on the horn and have her get the players together. This is going to take all of us.”

Day 23

“Good evening everyone, or morning, or whatever is appropriate. You all probably know who I am, but just in case, my name is Xochitl Green.”

Well this is familiar.

“Candice and Monique have been kind enough to get you all together for me, because I'm pretty sure I have a way to eliminate the Perkins and Town Hall problems in one go. But it's going to take all of us, and there's more bad news. If it works, it will mean that this organization is over and done with. But the good news is that not only will everyone walk away very well compensated for their time and effort, but we'll have given James a pretty great send-off.”

There was silence on the line. Not a cough or sigh or shuffling of papers was heard.

“Having said that, I am fully aware that I'm still considered an outsider here. We've done nothing yet to commit ourselves to the plan that I'm about to lay out. I'll be leaving the room for a while after I've said my part, so if you don't like my plan then you can tell me to go away and never darken your doorstep again.”

More silence. Xochitl assumed everyone was doing what Candice was doing on the other side of the room: sitting with arms crossed and waiting for this chatty person to get to the good stuff.

“No more disclaimers. Let's get started. I'm willing to bet that if I said that James was running a con with Perkins as the mark, only one person would know what I was talking about. Right, Monique?”

The woman responded coolly, “Go on.”

“My plan requires that everyone be aware of what has come before. Objections?”

“I can correct any misunderstandings you might have as you go.”

“Deal. From what I can piece together, James sold Perkins a rather powerful piece of software. Luis and Marlena were in on the scam, but I'm not sure how. Monique?”

“The details are unimportant.” Still a cool cucumber.

"But there was a problem: the software didn't work. I'm pretty sure that James knew it didn't work when he sold it to Perkins, but the nature of the software is such that it would be difficult to prove that it wouldn't work. That was the con. Where James seems to have miscalculated, though, is that Perkins wasn't just going to buy the software for himself. He was intending to take the software and resell it to his cronies within the Town Hall organization."

She paused, but Monique didn't correct her.

"James was taken when Perkins figured out that the whole thing was a con. Perkins demanded all of his money back, but we know how that turned out. So here we are. I think that the pieces everyone has gathered here and there should fit what I'm just said, yes?"

No one spoke up, leading Monique to say, "that is correct enough for now."

"Right. We'll need to disseminate details to the agents later, but here's the plan: we need to up the con. We think Perkins is alone in his dealings with the Town Hall organization. I'm willing to bet that if we cut around him and go straight for some of the people he was going to resell it to, either Perkins will come after us to try and shut us down again, or, better yet, we can probably get one of the other Town Hall members to expunge him for us."

Someone cleared his throat.

"Was there a question?"

The voice was instantly familiar. "Miss Green, my name is Gil. I'm a tech with Monique. I'm trying to understand how we could get one of his own people to, as you said, expunge him."

"Easy – none of those people are his own. We don't know this for sure yet, that's part of the discovery process, but our best estimate says that the Town Hall organization is just a loose conglomeration of like-minded business people. We don't think they will be loyal to Perkins *per se*, inasmuch as they will be hungry to jump at a chance to make some money. We'll give them that chance."

"How?"

"That's the fun part that we're going to need the agents for."

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

"But, and I know I'm harping on this but I hope you can understand why, you cannot mention my name. Perkins thinks James has taken me off the board, and if he knows that I'm helping you, he'll see what's coming and you'll be up a creek. Like I said, you'll hear my

name bandied about, but you need to feign complete ignorance. Seriously. It will only get you hurt, otherwise.”

She paused to breathe and let the point sink in.

“Any more questions?”

The line was silent.

“Alright, then. I promised you all that I would present my case then leave you alone. Thanks for listening to me. I hope I didn't sound too crazy. Good night, everybody.”

Candice flicked the speaker off on the cell phone and said something into it in rapid Spanish as she walked out of the hotel room.

Xochitl fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. That ... was ... it. She'd told them everything that they needed to do to bring the con to a close. Whatever happened from here on out probably wouldn't involve her. She'd underlined how risky it would be for them to have contact with her while they played out their parts. She knew Perkins would never call her for help. No matter who won, she'd be out from under all of their thumbs. She just had to wait.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

The phone vibrating on the desk across the room woke Xochitl from the deepest sleep she'd had in weeks. She sat up, fighting the grey sweater that she'd fallen asleep in. She realized that she hadn't moved from where she'd hit the bed when Candice had left.

Was I really that tired? This running for your life thing is harsh.

The phone continued to vibrate. She continued to blink her eyes and try to get both of them working in tandem again.

“I'm coming, I'm coming. You ungrateful little ...”

The desk was several unbalanced steps too far away. She picked up the phone and answered it, all too aware that she was still more asleep than awake.

“Yeah?”

The trip back to the bed seemed much shorter. She collapsed face-down and missed the first part of what the voice was saying.

“Who? What?”

“I know it's late, Miss Green, but we need your help. And, well, we wanted to say thank you.”

She yawned out each word. “Oh. Gil. Really. You shouldn't have.”

“You really brought the team back together. Everyone was all

every which direction until your call. Brilliant. We never would have believed it if Candice had tried to sell it to us.”

Xochitl muttered a thank you into the blanket. “S’great. Glad I could help.”

Gil was silent.

“Gil? You said you needed something?”

“Right. Monique has gone home for the night and we’re still going to be here for a few hours, so we were hoping you could give us more details on how you wanted us to track down the other people in their organization?”

“Their ... ? Oh, yeah. The vidcon.”

“Yes, well, we’ve tried that before. It’s encrypted, you see.”

“No. The DNS resolver cache for the reflector.”

“Oh! Brilliant!”

He continued with a list of adjectives, but Xochitl didn’t bother to wait for any of them to be meaningful. “G’night, Gil.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl jumped and rolled backwards as the chair was dropped a little too forcefully next to the bed. When she had disentangled herself sufficiently, she saw that it was Candice. The woman was sitting backwards in the chair, smirking at her.

“Seriously. We have got to talk about limits. We’ve gone past creepy at this point.”

“You are awake, yes? What is the problem?”

“You aren’t really asking me that, are you?”

The woman fluttered her hand beside her head to end the useless conversation.

“You impressed many of the agents last night.” She fidgeted and straightened her back before continuing. “Even me.”

Xochitl gaped from behind wild hair, doing her best asphyxiating fish impression. “So, are we, like, girlfriends now? BFF?”

Candice’s smile thinned – she had tried being nice, but Xochitl wasn’t awake enough to play along. Her jaw tightened and relaxed.

“It is a good plan.”

“... and it could make people quite a bit of money.”

Candice’s mouth turned into the lioness smile again. “I am sure that helped convince some of us.”

Xochitl didn’t think she’d get a straight answer but had to ask,

“You?”

The lioness didn't flinch, and didn't answer the question. Instead, her fingers fanned out in lazy patterns from where they were hanging off the back of the chair. Xochitl avoided looking down directly at them for fear she might see shredded chunks of zebra or gnu caught between them.

“So ... what's up? I figured I'd be pretty useless for the next few weeks.” She glanced at the clock pointedly to underline the subtext. When she looked back, the lioness was sizing her up, slinking toward her along the grassy savanna. She bunched the sheets tighter around her. “What?”

“I know why you do not wish to be involved.”

Xochitl's heart jumped and shuddered its way to full speed. Her jaw muscles worked, but her mouth would not open. She couldn't speak, so the other woman continued.

“It is good that you do not want to be involved. As we have said, you are not an agent. Yesterday I thought that you would try to be in the middle of it. You think very highly of yourself. But I looked into your eyes as you spoke to us. I saw the fear. You could not be an agent with that fear.”

Xochitl couldn't see where the woman was going with this. Her heart continued to race.

“I did not see why he was interested in you.” They locked eyes and both knew which man she was talking about. “Now I can.”

Xochitl exhaled slowly through her teeth. “Thanks. I think?”

The woman ignored the question. “You have the fear, it is true, but you are like him in other ways.” She smiled, remembering something. The smile was lopsided, but still showed too many teeth. “You think big.”

Xochitl worked a hand up to pull the dangling hair out of her face to behind her uncovered ear. “And that's a good thing?”

The woman's fingers started fanning again and her eyes looked down, unfocused but in the general direction of empty half of the bed between them.

“We did not know how to recover from what had been done to us. He was always the one to make the plans. What you suggested last night was very ... big. His plans were also big.”

Figures that James would surround himself with agents that weren't independent enough to ever try anything that would take them too far out of his control.

The woman's eyes finally caught the wringing motion that her hands had started to make. They stopped immediately, intertwining to prevent them from starting again. Xochitl found her discomfort

calming, for reasons she couldn't get a grip on. Xochitl saw the woman's posture shift and solidify again, and their eyes locked.

"Thank you, and I am sorry."

Xochitl saw that the five words were sincere, and had taken a level of effort that she had always associated with dragging yourself to a standing position after having a leg blown off by a land mine. She blinked at the woman, unsure of how to respond. Seconds passed, and the other woman was a marble statue with eyes drilling into her.

"Um. Well. You're welcome?"

With that, the woman looked down and went still again.

No wonder she was all over the map. She's probably been shot at more times than she's had to apologize to someone.

"Hey. Candice. Look." She waited for the other woman to look up at her. "You are welcome, seriously, but you're also right. I'm so not an agent. You are the ones that have to pull off that crazy plan. And I don't know how much credit I can really take for it – I just kind of built on the groundwork that he'd already set up." She refrained from using James' name, unsure of why the other woman never did, but willing to respect it.

She nodded, and Xochitl noticed that the lioness aspect was gone. Now she just looked like a professional businesswoman. Which of them had changed?

"So ..."

Candice smiled, and for once it didn't look fake or predatory. She got up from the chair and walked over to the desk. The phone laying there was pocketed and another one, newer and thinner but also larger, was proffered toward the woman in bed. Xochitl fought her arm free of the knot of sheets and took the phone. Her eyebrow went up in question.

"You will find this one much more useful. You now have direct access to all of the agents and techs. There are also other things on there that will be of use to you."

Xochitl was again struck into a gape. "Is this one of his?"

Candice nodded. "You must be very careful with it. We can replace it, but you will not be able to explain it if you are caught with it. And if you lose it ..."

Xochitl saw that the woman wasn't threatening recourse, but warning that it would be a major problem for all of them if the unit was lost. She was more awake, but apparently not quite awake enough. "I don't get it."

"We will need your help, Miss Green. You are in."

Xochitl heard the door close behind the woman and sat up, fighting herself free of the sheet cocoon. It was more difficult than she would have expected, as one of her hands wasn't working like it should have been. She looked down to see why, and saw that it was because of the smartphone that she had a death grip on. She gasped and dropped it to the carpet, pushing herself along the bed away from it.

No no no no no no.

There was a moment in time frozen in her head and playing over and over, backwards and forwards, slow and fast, again and again – a silver blob dropping from Candice's hand into her own.

Something nagged at her. She knew that time had passed between the moment and now, and that Candice must have spoken to her, and that she must have replied. It was gone. Her short-term memory had stopped working when the plastic had hit her hand.

No no no.

Her knees drew up to her chest, while her eyes remained fixed on the object on the floor. She felt her full bladder pressing into her stomach. Her stomach. Something was happening to her stomach.

She was up and out of the bed before she knew what she was doing, racing toward the bathroom. She didn't make it to the toilet, but did at least make it to the tile before the vomiting started.

The steam rushed out of the bathroom door as it opened. Xochitl leaned out and craned her neck around the door to suck in a gulp of cool air. Her closed eyes fixed in the direction that she knew it would be.

Get over it already!

Yeah. Bite me.

Enough steam had escaped that the cooler room air was beginning to make ground against the warmer bathroom air. Xochitl shivered and stepped back inside to finish toweling off. The bathroom mirror would be too fogged to see anything for the next five minutes. She felt her tight jaw and unsteady hands and decided that she didn't want to see her face.

The comb on the counter had collected condensation from the

steam, and was slick to the touch. She dragged it through her hair, absently watching the vague blob in the mirror do the same thing.

The knock on the door caused her to jump and slip a bit on the wet tile. She wrapped the towel around her and padded lightly to the door a few feet away.

Candice. Knocking?

Xochitl's eyes shot back to the phone – it was still on the floor. She ran as stealthily as she could to it, snagged it shuttle run style, slid it on to the nightstand, and ran back to the door.

Calm down!

She inhaled, counted to five, exhaled, and opened the door to let the other woman inside. The other woman looked amused that Xochitl was fresh from the shower, but did not say anything about it.

“What's up?”

Candice walked to the phone on the nightstand and picked it up. Xochitl saw her jaw twitch. She powered on the phone on and turned back toward Xochitl.

“We have a call with the techs in ten minutes. They will tell you how the phone works.”

The clock next to the phone showed that it had been forty minutes since Xochitl had been woken up. She nodded to the other woman and walked back into the bathroom to finish drying off, not trusting herself to say anything just yet.

Candice poked her head into the bathroom doorway.

“You are quiet. What is wrong?”

I'm freaking out! Duh!

Xochitl pulled the comb through her hair one last time and laid it back on the counter. Her other hand followed the first and she leaned forward, stepping back with one foot and putting her weight on the other.

“I'm freaking out, girl.”

Candice stepped forward and squeezed Xochitl's left hand. “Why?”

Because every time I try to get away from you people, I get pulled in deeper.

Xochitl's mind raced to come up with something that wouldn't lead to her stabbed and bleeding out on the bathroom floor.

“The phone.”

Candice looked down at the unit in her other hand, raising it and her eyebrow to Xochitl at the same time.

“Why?”

Xochitl shook her head and leaned further forward. Her arms, which had been trembling slightly before, had gone into full-on

spasms and were making her wrists jerk back and forth under her weight. Candice saw this and moved her hand up to Xochitl's arm. It was then that she looked around the bathroom, sniffing the air.

"Have you been sick?"

Xochitl nodded slowly with her eyes closed, arms beginning to shake all the way to the shoulders. Candice's gentle touch on her arm turned into a grip that pulled Xochitl's weight off of that wrist.

"Come. You must sit down."

Xochitl expected Candice to go for the closest flat surface – the toilet lid or maybe even the bathroom tile – but instead the shorter woman ducked under Xochitl's arm, put her hand around Xochitl's opposite side, and lifted her to walk her out of the bathroom.

They dropped as one onto the end of the bed. Candice slid out from under Xochitl's arm and moved to crouch in front of her.

"It is because it was his, yes?"

Xochitl nodded again, eyes still closed. Candice took each of her hands.

"In my work, we are taught to not feel while we are working. Feelings can get in the way. But when we come home and have time to think, we must feel."

Xochitl opened her eyes to look at the woman in front of her. Candice placed Xochitl's right hand on top of her left and produced the cell phone from one of her many pockets.

"I gave this to you and left you, and you had time to think, and time to feel. It was his, and you remember him, and you feel for him. This is okay. It must be."

Candice set the phone down on the bed next to Xochitl and took her hand again.

"But now you must put your feelings aside again for later. We have work."

Xochitl nodded. "I, uh ... Just give me a minute to get dressed." The other woman cocked her head. "It'll help get my head on straight. Trust me."

Candice looked at the tiny, expensive watch on her tiny, and probably also expensive, wrist. "Yes. Of course." She stood and walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Xochitl threw off her towel and grabbed the first set of clothes out of the bureau that she found: a grey tee and jeans. She pulled them on and went to knock on the bathroom door. "Done."

The toilet flushed and Candice opened the door. Her eyes flicked across Xochitl's outfit. Instead of the disapproval Xochitl half-expected, Xochitl saw something more like disappointment or pity.

"Do you feel better?"

Xochitl have her a small smile. "A little." She reached past the other woman for the deodorant on the counter. Her smile got a little larger as she put it on. "There we go. Now I at least feel human."

A curious look swam across Candice's face, but she moved on and stepped past Xochitl back out of the bathroom. Xochitl replaced the deodorant and heard the tones of a phone being dialed. The mirror was still too fogged to see anything, and even her blob has hard to pick out now that she was in grey.

"Good morning, Miss Green." Monique's canned voice bounced its way into the bathroom. Xochitl flipped the light switch and stepped back into the room.

"Good morning, Monique."

Candice handed her the silver phone, and it was only then that Xochitl realized that the call wasn't going through that phone. Monique's voice came through Candice's phone in her other hand. "Candice, this will take about an hour."

Candice acknowledged her, and handed her own phone to Xochitl.

"You're not sticking around?"

Candice smiled and shook her head. "I would not be able to use the phone as you would. And I would get bored too easily. Instead, I am going to get breakfast."

Xochitl's too-empty stomach rumbled at the mention of food. Both women noticed.

"I will bring you something light."

"Thanks." Candice turned to walk away, but Xochitl caught her by the hand. The women shared a moment and Xochitl mouthed a repeated thanks. Candice nodded to her, and walked out of the room. Xochitl flopped backwards onto the bed and dropped Candice's phone next to her head, the other held above her.

"Alright, Monique. Hit me."

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Xochitl disconnected the cell phone and handed it back to Candice, simultaneously popping the last of the roast beef sandwich into her mouth. True to her word, Candice had lost interest within minutes of returning and had occupied herself by filing her nails to perfection over the last half hour. Xochitl suppressed a shudder to think that the nails were long enough to be used offensively, but not long enough to easily break or snag. Her eyes moved to the

smartphone between her folded knees.

"I did not think it would take the entire hour. I was wrong."

Xochitl looked up at Candice. The nail file had disappeared to whatever alternate dimension things popped into when the woman got her extensively-manicured hands on them.

"Yeah. He, uh, modified the phone pretty heavily. It's impressive, actually. I didn't think one of these would do the sort of gymnastics he's been able to make it do."

Candice lowered her eyes. "It is good you can use it."

"You all, you agents ... you don't have your own?" Xochitl thought she already knew the answer, but asked anyway.

Candice's mouth tightened, and she still would not meet Xochitl's gaze. "No. We are not technical enough. It would only slow us down."

Xochitl figured as much. "Better to have a tech on the line and have them providing instruction. I get it."

"Yes."

"Sounds fair enough to me. It's not like I could just go buy a gun and suddenly know how to use it. Everyone has their own strengths."

Candice nodded, obviously still reminded of James.

"So ... one thing Monique didn't go into? What is it that you think I can do?"

Xochitl saw Candice try to figure out how to say what came next. It made her curious about what could vex the woman so.

"Monique is very good with computers, but ..."

Xochitl wanted to be able to fill in the blank, as she could tell that it had rough, raw edges for the other woman. "But?"

Candice couldn't complete the sentence, nor answer her directly. Instead, she came at it from another angle. "We are – the agents – very good at reacting quickly. But we need, as you said, a good tech on the line."

Xochitl knew that the techs were still around. Gil and his crew had done an admirable job covering up their attempted mutiny when the rest of the crew had come around. So what was Candice getting at? She already had techs, and Monique, and more agents.

"Okay. I'm thick. I'm just not getting it."

Candice's fists tightened and the blood left her lips around her already thin smile. "He made us read a book." She said this like it had been some kind of dirty act forced upon them all at gunpoint. "Do you know *The Art of War*?"

"I've never read it, but you're talking about Sun Tzu, right?"

"Yes. It is," her hands groped and articulated, trying to find the words, "many little stories. They are all about how to fight in a war."

"Right ..."

"One of the stories is about how an army must have a good leader. We have the army, but we do not have the leader." She silenced Xochitl with a look before she could interject. "We do not need you to take his place, but we do need a person to make decisions quickly. One person."

Xochitl's eyes went wide, and there wasn't a need to act.

"Whoa."

Candice's eyes dropped back to the space between them.

"And since it's my crazy plan, I make the most sense to be the one calling the shots."

"Yes."

"Candice." She waited for the woman to match her stare. "I'm not this type of person. I have zero training at this."

The dark woman hardened at this. "You must be. We cannot finish this if you cannot help us." She paused, and pulled from some place even deeper. "He brought you to us for a reason."

The room was completely silent, but Xochitl couldn't hear the breathing of the woman an arm's length away over the blood screaming through her veins.

Crap.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

The fan in front of her on the elliptical machine was a blur. Her legs passed each other with a swish of momentarily-panicked air. Somewhere overhead, an air conditioning vent was brushing her shoulder blades lightly. The hot air expelled from her lungs somehow managed to disperse enough to cool down before she inhaled much of it again a second later. The air in the room moved around her in patterns and opposing forces that should have fascinated her, but she was oblivious to all of it.

Everyone finally stops trying to kill you and you go to the gym to celebrate?

"Shut it!"

If I'd known that this was all it would take to get you to work out, I would have -

"Knock it off!"

Xochitl punched up the resistance on the machine and felt it vibrate and catch. Her legs burned briefly with the added exertion. The cord for her headphones snapped left and right, forward and

backward, trying to wrap itself around the arms zipping by it several times each second. The dull thud of each step on the elliptical was grossly outraced by the tempo of the music, but Xochitl chased it nonetheless.

So what's the plan, oh Great and Mighty Gerbil?

Xochitl pulled back hard on both arms of the machine, dragging it to a stop. She ripped the earbuds from her ears one-handed, unplugged them from the iPod, and flung them across the gym. Too late, her head rotated left and right to see that there was no one else in the room with her. A growl percolated in her throat, shredding her vocal cords.

Her breath came in uncontrolled gasps. She stepped off the machine when she thought that she would be able to stand upright, and regretted it immediately. The muscles in her legs shot lightning bolts up and down their lengths, protesting the last half-hour of being overworked.

Feel better?

She clawed at the armband holding the iPod, but was too exhausted to correctly maneuver her arms into the entangled position required to reach the Velcro strap and undo it. The face of the iPod blinked persistently at her, chiding the aberrant behavior.

Her left thigh buckled beneath her, cramping. She grabbed for and caught the fixed support of the elliptical, but felt that her right thigh would give in soon from the extra strain. She stepped clumsily to the nearest treadmill and rotated to fall into something that resembled a sitting position.

"Miss? Are you well?"

Xochitl bolted upright and nearly fell off of the tread. The blonde woman from the front desk had her head stuck through the doorway and was looking at her with concern.

"Yeah, sorry." She faked a smile, clumsily. *"I just pushed a little too hard and got a cramp. I'll be okay in a minute. Thanks."*

The blonde nodded and stayed in the doorway just long enough to express the appropriate amount of concern, but not so long as to make that concern appear fake or saccharine. A vision of a gym full of panting, stumbling, and collapsing overweight Americans hit her and faded – the woman had seen this type of thing plenty of times.

Xochitl massaged her twitching thigh, wincing but rubbing as deep as she could.

Don't forget your earbuds when you slink off – it'll just drive you crazy later if you leave them here.

She grimaced at the voice in her head. Like so many other psychopomps, this one was shift and ethereal – she couldn't tell if it

was her mother's voice or Brian's. Well, the cynicism and vocabulary were definitely Brian's, but the tone was pure mother.

Having thrown enough things for the time being, she ignored the voice and continued her massage. *Oooh, massage.* What she wouldn't give for a real massage. She couldn't begin to justify one given her current situation, but that didn't mean she couldn't use or wouldn't appreciate one.

The spasms slowed to a gap of several seconds, and Xochitl could feel the warmth of blood permeating the muscles in her leg. She angled her foot downward to be flat against the ground and put some pressure on it. Her thigh tingled distantly, but held. The handlebars of the treadmill allowed for a good gripping surface to raise herself with, and she hobbled from machine to machine in the direction she thought the white cord had flown.

She missed them at first, and only caught them after she had turned around and doubled back. The wire had wrapped itself bolo-style around a set of treadmill handlebars, and had slid down to the junction with the running surface.

Nice. Someone could have tripped and hurt themselves. You gonna show the same level of care with Candice and her people?

She used the bending and disentangling as an opportunity to continue to ignore the voice, and instead stepped lightly back to her original elliptical machine. She gave it a half-hearted toweling dry and pulled the water bottle from its slot. It was cold, and she was still breathing heavy from the exertion, and had sweat considerably, but she couldn't drink it. Her stomach was in knots again, and she didn't want to risk vomiting all over the expensive equipment.

The bathroom at the exit of the gym was a small, single person deal intended to encourage guests to go back to their own rooms to do anything more than the bare essentials. Xochitl turned both the hot and cold taps to full and dunked her face below the lip of the sink. She couldn't, and didn't really want to, block the water from flowing freely down the drain, but she was able to deflect the stream enough to rinse away all of the salt trails of dried sweat. The perspiration running down from her hairline mingled with the fresh water on her face, eroding what she had worked for, but it was good enough for the time being.

The blonde at the desk waved goodbye to her on her way back to the elevator. Xochitl didn't have to exaggerate her limp. The doors closed in front of her and she spoke aloud to herself.

"Alright. Out with it."

Nothing.

"Come on. You couldn't shut up in the gym. Let's hear what you

have to say.”

The voice in her head was vague and slippery.

You still don't have a plan.

“I had a plan!”

The voice grew bolder, but still sounded like a petulant elementary schoolgirl.

Doesn't count – you need a new one!

“Um, yeah. I noticed, thanks. Got any great ideas?”

The doors opened before the voice could answer. Xochitl opened the door to her room and saw that her laundry had been delivered. Some part of her was happy to have some clean clothes, but the girl spoke again.

You need to send the bag back. Your gym clothes are gross.

“Seriously, is anyone else in there? Someone with something to say that might actually be helpful?”

The girl was quiet as she dropped the folded laundry into the bureau. The phone on the desk next to it blinked gently. The silver smartphone. She bent over it without touching it. There was a new text message. She took a deep breath and picked it up, tapping it lightly.

LUNCH AFTER GYM?

Candice. Her attempts to come up with a Grand Unified Plan would have to wait. Maybe something Candice would say at lunch would trip and the pieces would fall into place. She replied to the message: OKAY, HERE IN 20.

Shower. Need shower.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“The techs were able to locate several of the members of the Town Hall organization.”

Xochitl paused her chewing and blinked at the other woman. The statement had come, unbidden, after a twenty minute silence. She had begun to wonder if the other woman was going to talk to her at all. Her reply came out through lettuce and some kind of cheesy-creamy dressing.

“S'good?”

Candice nodded. “It will take them some time to find more people, which will give us,” by which she meant the agents who did all of the real work while everyone else sat around and played Solitaire, “more time to work the targets.”

Xochitl swallowed and put down her utensils.

"The presentations will be coordinated?"

Nod and casual bite.

Xochitl pulled out her new phone to check the time. "When do they start?"

"Tonight. The first three are in Europe and North Africa."

Xochitl found herself suddenly no longer hungry, despite her calorie deficit for the day.

"Tonight? That's fast. But lucky, too, I guess. It'll get harder to coordinate as we find more of them and they are further apart. Time zones and whatnot."

Another nod and casual chew.

"But maybe we won't need more than a half dozen?"

"I believe we will not." She took a drink of water, calm as a winter night. "I believe the other agents will be able to convince their targets. These first three may be enough."

Xochitl knew that no one could hear them, as they had been to this café enough times to know exactly where and how to sit, but she found herself whispering anyway.

"Where are the others that the techs have found?"

Candice scissored her way into the thickest, reddest part of her steak. "One in Beijing, one in Mexico City, and one or two in South Korea, I believe."

None in India? If we could get that one woman on our side ...

"Wow. Diverse group. I was half-expecting most of them to be in the States."

Candice snickered, but kept eating. Xochitl played with the salad in front of her, but couldn't stomach more than a few olives and carrots.

"I, uh, I'm not starting the old cut-and-run discussion, but is the plan for us to stay put throughout all of this? I'm fine with it now, but I'm just curious."

"Paris is safe."

Xochitl waited for more, but the woman did not continue – that was all the answer she was going to get. She picked some more at her salad, then realized that the other woman had stopped eating and was looking at her.

"It is easy to get from Paris to London or Italy or Germany, or even to Africa. We will need this flexibility if anything goes wrong. For now, we know that they do not know where we are. If we move now, they may notice us before we are ready. We wait."

Xochitl gave her a quick series of agreeing nods. "Right. I could see that."

More fidgeting silence.

“Are we going to be tapped in real-time to what is going on with the agents? Does it work like in the movies?”

Candice smirked at her. “It can, yes, but it will not today. An agent who knows she can be heard does not act the same as one who knows she is alone. It is very difficult.”

Xochitl pondered that, nodding slowly.

“We need them to trust us, so we’re going to be on the up-and-up.”

Candice got quieter, matching Xochitl’s low voice, almost speaking to herself.

“We will be telling them many other lies. We do not need one more thing to lie about.”

“Really? I would have thought lying would be pretty much second nature to an agent.”

The woman sighed and went back to slicing up her steak.

“Lying is easier when you do not have to tell the lies.”

Xochitl clearly didn’t get it.

“We must be very careful of what we say, and how we say it, and what the target thinks of what we say. If we do not have to think about what is true and is not true, then we can spend more time thinking of how to stay alive and how to convince our target to trust us.”

“The best lies are ninety percent true.”

“Yes.”

“It sounds like agents have to be pretty good salespeople.”

Candice cocked her head to think about it. “Yes.”

“And here I was thinking agents were a bunch of karate-chopping assassins.”

The small woman looked up at her while still facing her steak.

“Yes. We are that, too.”

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

“So how is it playing out?”

Xochitl clicked on the speakerphone. Monique’s voice came through like smooth granite.

“Each team is making an on-site visit to a target’s place of business.”

“We didn’t want to use a video link?”

“Our teams are better in person, and it promotes trust in the

targets.”

“Of course. Is it one or both of them going in?”

“Both. Again, it promotes trust.”

Candice interjected. “And the agents work well with each other and can help each other.”

Xochitl wanted to argue that it multiplied the chance that the agents might contradict each other, but didn't feel it was an argument she could win. Maybe that's what Candice had been talking about over lunch?

“Alright. Sorry. Go on, Monique.”

“Our hope is that the meetings will go as you directed. The agents will tell the targets the story that you suggested, and offer each target the opportunity to contact the others. The agents have a common disinformation portfolio regarding Mister Perkins, and will be reciting from it liberally.”

“How does it feel?”

Xochitl saw that Candice was giving her a confused look, and imagined that the silent Monique had the same look on her face.

“Do the agents feel comfortable with their jobs? We set this up pretty quickly. How do they feel about what they'll be saying and doing?”

Monique started to say something, but Candice spoke at the same time.

“When I spoke to them, they were very confident. Lately, we have been too busy to work as a group.” She paused, and then smiled at Xochitl. “And they like the ... you called it “the big con”, yes?”

Xochitl couldn't help but smile, albeit too briefly. “Yeah. How long do you figure before we hear back from the agents?”

“Fifteen minutes at the earliest, out to forty-five minutes if they decide to talk to each other,” replied Monique.

Xochitl saw that it hadn't even been five minutes. “How do you stand the wait?”

Candice bowed her head and answered, “It is difficult.”

Xochitl leaned back in the desk chair, now understanding why Candice had suggested that she seat herself for the call. They were making themselves available in case the agents needed anything, and the next half hour or more was going to crawl by. Xochitl was unable to stay silent, with random questions and small talk marking the time. Most of her questions were directed at Candice.

“How much of a super-spy's luggage is taken up with chargers for cell phones and other gadgets?”

Candice chuckled, but took the question as rhetorical. Xochitl really wanted to know, but didn't know how to press it without

sounding dumb or too nosy.

"How many passports do you have? A whole stack, or just a few, or just one? Are they really that easy to fake?"

"Do you enjoy traveling all over the place, or do you get tired of it?"

"Ever been tempted to do field work, Monique?"

"How do you go about getting recruited as a clandestine super-spy, anyway?"

Both women deflected each question with a non-answer, or stayed quiet and refused to say anything on the subject. The mood was somber enough, and the conversation so staccato, that they could get away with it without seeming too tight-lipped.

A warble of another ringer came through the phone. Candice and Xochitl sat up in their chairs as they heard Monique answer it. They heard a click and the two calls were linked. A man with a slight New England accent was speaking.

"- we'll see. He was playing his hand pretty close to his chest, but we gave him a lot to think about."

Xochitl started to say something, but a look from Candice silenced her. Xochitl cocked her head, and Candice held up a finger that told her to wait. Monique spoke.

"He did not want to talk to any of the others?"

"We gave him the six contacts we had, and that scared the crap out of him. He clammed up even tighter after that. But he's got our cell numbers. I think we'll hear from him by the deadline."

Xochitl started again, but was again stared down. Candice held up four fingers and mouthed "four hours".

"Thank y--" The click unlinked the lines as Monique spoke.

Xochitl had a million questions, but waited for Candice to speak.

"Too many people asking questions is distracting. We need to talk to one person at a time." Xochitl interpreted that Candice was again using "we" to mean herself and other agents, not the entire organization.

"One handler. Got it. So ... is he going to tell us what happened? Or is Monique going to summarize it?"

"What more do you need to know?"

Xochitl paused, dumbstruck that the woman was asking her that. But as she thought about it, she couldn't seem to justify any of the things she wanted to say. Really, would knowing what the contact looked like help her or the team in any way?

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know."

"You want to be told the story."

"Well ... yeah. I was expecting some kind of debriefing, you

know?"

"If the agent thought something happened that we should know, he would tell us. For now, we know that his meeting went as planned. And we know that he expects the target to meet the deadline. Those are the important parts."

Xochitl was reminded of cowboy coders – programmers that believed the act of coding was enough, and documentation was a superfluous waste of their time. If the code worked, then their job was complete. It sounded good, unless you happened to be the girl that game along after the cowboy and had to do the clean-up work or any sort of maintenance.

These agents were the cowboy coders of the spy world. It went a long way toward explaining why they weren't working for a government agency or something more reputable. They might have been great in the field, but they lacked the ability to truly see through all parts of the job. They wanted to do the fun and dirty stuff and call it a day before all of the paperwork was done.

Monique came back on the line. "That was our agent in Egypt. He will be flying to South Korea tomorrow night, assuming his current target does not require any more work."

Xochitl repeated her question from a half hour ago: "How did it feel?"

"He did not express that to me beyond what you heard."

"Hmm. Well, he didn't sound negative. I guess that's good."

Another ten minutes passed before the next call. Xochitl heard one warble, and then a second before Monique was through her bonafides with the first caller. From what little Xochitl could hear, it sounded like Monique identified both parties, verified that both were okay, and told one of them something that caused the line to go dead with a click. Xochitl's jaw dropped, surprised that Monique would do such a thing as disconnect either of them.

A second later, Candice was speaking into her phone. Xochitl hadn't even seen the woman pull it out of her pocket. She chided herself when she realized that Monique hadn't just dropped the line, but had transferred the call to Candice's phone.

Candice got up from the corner of the bed she had claimed, and was now pacing back and forth in front of the closed and curtained window. Her voice was low and in the hyper-Spanish that Xochitl had no chance of decoding. But, it was still loud and/or distracting enough that she was unable to hear Monique's low voice as she talked to the other agent. She wasn't bothering to link the calls this time. It took Xochitl a few moments, but she eventually figured out why: Monique wasn't speaking English. She couldn't make out what the

language was, but it had far too many consonant combinations.

Xochitl fought every restless instinct and sat perfectly still for the five minutes it took the two women to wrap up their respective calls.

Candice finished and disappeared her phone just before Monique came back on the line. Candice said something in hyper-Spanish that was confirmed by Monique before the line clicked and went dead.

Xochitl stared at Candice, refusing to ask the question. For a moment she thought that Candice was going to play along and refuse to start on her own.

"The target in Germany chose to contact the target in Switzerland."

Xochitl's grip tightened on the seat cushion of the chair beneath her. "And?"

"The targets will discuss their options and will contact our agents before the time tonight."

More waiting? Come on!

"So ... that also sounds non-negative."

Candice only blinked in response.

"Hey," she rapped her knuckles on the desk, "at least no one got shot, right?"

Candice nodded and began to walk toward the door. Xochitl managed to stay seated, nearly jumping up when Candice turned to say something else.

"I can see you are excited, but you should try to take a nap."

"What? Are you kidding?"

"No. The targets will not respond until the time is almost over. That is how it is done." She shrugged in acknowledgment of Xochitl's obvious frustration. "You have more than three hours, and the night will be very long."

Xochitl was incredulous that the woman could even suggest sleep at a time like this, and yet she knew that the woman walking out of her room would be back in her own room and asleep within five minutes if she really wanted to be.

The chair beneath Xochitl bounced and shook, while the digital recreation of an analog clock on the face of the smartphone crawled slowly in its endless digital approximation of circles.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl, of course, had no chance of catching a nap. She'd managed enough willpower to keep herself from cracking open any energy drinks since her all-nighter the previous week, but spikes of adrenaline had been her constant companion since then. Instead, she sat in her room and played with the smartphone. Monique had said that James had been in the process of transitioning to the smartphone from his PDA, and Xochitl could see why – the thing was wedged full of technology.

Most of the programs were just thin control interfaces to applications that would actually be running on remote servers, updating the smartphone with their status. Other programs interfaced with the phone's GPS capabilities and a map interface to allow her to track just about anything that could be tracked – from FedEx packages, to other GPS units, to some other cell phones. If she wanted to get really down and dirty, there was even a program that gave her command lines on several UNIX shell accounts on servers around the world.

Punching commands in with the tiny keypad while looking at a fraction of a remote screen wouldn't be much fun, but she couldn't think of anything that the laptop could do that the smartphone couldn't. The smartphone would also fit in her pocket and not be given a second glance by anyone that saw her playing with it, pretty much no matter where she was. The laptop would be faster for many tasks, but was much more cumbersome and took time to boot up and shut down, and had a far shorter battery life than the smartphone.

Xochitl exhaled smoothly.

If I wasn't constantly in fear of everyone around me, I could get into the spy biz. The technology is amazing.

If she had wanted to get rich quick, she could think of entire convention halls full of technophile network and server admins that would shell out thousands for the little hunk of plastic and metal. If those people would pay \$600 for a first-gen iPhone ... the money involved might even dwarf what she was looking to make if the Town Hall deal went as planned.

Not that it would. Things never work out that simply.

No, she'd probably end up running again. Oh, she'd try to get to some place where the people around her at least spoke English, but more likely than not she'd end up in Malawi or Thailand or something.

Straw hats. She didn't even know how to weave a straw hat. Isn't that what American expats did? They'd set up little huts on a beach in Thailand and sell woven straw hats, right? She tried to come up with other saleable skills, and found her list rather lacking. If it

didn't involve a computer, she didn't have much chance of being very good at it.

How about survival skills? Jungle? Neolithic tool technologies? Could she make an arrowhead by banging a few rocks together? For that matter, could she make a bow or some arrows? Probably not. She'd be the only person in the world to starve to death in a lush tropical rainforest teeming with fatted and furry come-eat-me animals. Archaeologist tourists would find her dessicated remains a hundred years from now and think she was Amelia Earhart or something.

Of course, there was the chance that she'd run into a super-intelligent ape species and they would want to upgrade their treehouses to gigabit ethernet. Hey, it could happen.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Her list of ideas for extricating herself from the organization was just as short as her list of survival skills.

The basic plan was, in theory, easy. Techs hacked into the Town Hall server and traced its members back to their places of business. This wasn't as easy as it sounded, as each member had their own security and abstracting countermeasures in place to prevent exactly that sort of thing from happening. It was slow going, and only returned targets one at a time, maybe totalling a few per day.

Given enough targets, pairs of agents coordinated meetings with the targets. The coordination was important, as the agents would offer the targets the opportunity to talk to other targets. This gave the targets a measure of confidence that they weren't being conned, as who would be stupid enough to try to con more than one Town Hall member?

Not only did the agents provide the opportunity for the targets to contact other targets being given the same offer, but they were also given a short list of all of the other members that the techs had been able to uncover. This showed the targets that the agents meant business, and lent some credence to what the agents had already told them.

Of course, the key was the story that the agents were telling. The story had been what had come to Xochitl in the Leeky Cauldron. Candice had been on the same track that Xochitl had: the more truth there was in the story, the better. Candice had been thinking in terms of the agents that had to sell the story, while Xochitl had been thinking about the targets that had to buy it. Nearly everything that the agents told the targets was completely true.

Day 23, Egypt

Nick walked up to the receptionist. The early-twenties woman behind the counter was of indefinite ethnicity – too dark and with a face too small and rounded to be white, but not dark enough to be considered black, and not smooth-featured enough to be considered Asian. He wondered if the woman knew that it would only take a few minutes of makeup and the right clothes to make her fit into any of those categories. She had the nonspecific and forgettable features that the people in his line of work had plastic surgery to obtain.

Of course, she was also perfectly suited to be the front desk receptionist at a multi-national corporation.

“Good evening, ma'am. My name is Nicholas Gentry.” He didn't introduce his partner standing to his left. “I have an appointment.”

The receptionist didn't look away from him as she nodded – she already knew he was expected. Nick mentally adjusted his estimation of her age to a very young-looking late twenties, if not early thirties. Her words came with a slight Arabic accent, but like her features it was rounded and calming.

“Of course. Your escort will be with you in a moment.”

“Thank you.”

He turned to his partner and swept an arm toward the table a few steps away. The tall woman strolled casually to it and turned to face him, completely silent. She was a block of ice on the outside, but he knew she didn't like being here and was a raging fire inside. Egypt wasn't exactly known for its hospitality to women, especially white ones.

The two of them had been the closest and so drew the assignment when the techs had uncovered the Town Hall member in Cairo. The male-female pairing of agents usually worked out positively, as they could be more flexible than a pair of same-sex agents. Both Nick and Renata would have been more comfortable if there had been time to swap out partners, but that hadn't been the case.

Renata stood almost a head taller than Nick, and that was just as

much because she was tall as it was because he was relatively short. Relatively, of course, as he was still five-eight, which was a perfectly respectable height. It just so happened that she had the frame of a runway model – that wasn't his fault. Still, he always felt short and stocky, despite his average build, when standing next to her as he was doing now.

Today she had her bright red hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. He'd watched her spend almost a half-minute futzing with it and trying to pick a style, which was a half-minute longer than it normally took her. Her dark and simple business suit was accompanied by only the slightest traces of makeup today – again unusual, as she normally preferred to buff the edges off of her sharp-edged Eastern European features. The total effect was that she looked the least feminine that he had ever seen her, and they had worked together long enough to have seen each other in just about every getup imaginable. It made sense, and he couldn't blame her, but it was still jarring.

Renata flicked away his attention with her eyes alone. He'd been staring. He smiled a little more theatrically at her to try to encourage her to do the same. The edges of her mouth curled up a little, but the skin around her eyes didn't move.

Three bald, dark-skinned men rounded the corner behind the receptionist's desk, almost in lock-step. They wore expensive-looking suits, but still looked like bruisers. Nick nodded almost imperceptibly at Renata, a shared laugh at the overt and unnecessary show of force.

"Nicholas Gentry." It wasn't a question, or really even a greeting.

Nick nodded and introduced his partner. "And this –"

"Please come with us."

The man hadn't cared to even hear her name, and from the look of it neither did his cronies. Renata, to her credit, didn't flinch.

The lead man set off toward the elevators. Nick and Renata followed, with the two other men stepping into place behind them. The lead man slid a card from his pocket into a slot by the closest elevator and the doors opened. He did the same once inside the car and punched a button at the very top of the panel.

Every second of training Nick had ever undergone screamed at him. He could almost hear Renata's inner voice doing the same to her, but both of them stepped into the car and continued to smile.

The acceleration and deceleration might have been imagined, they were so slight. The doors opened again faster than Nick had been expecting them to.

Another two men stood about ten feet from the elevator. Each

had a detector wand in one hand and rubber gloves on both. The polished stone flooring beneath their feet was clear enough that Nick could read the letters for the brand name on the reflections of the wands.

The lead bruiser stepped out and aside, gesturing Nick and Renata forward. They knew the drill. Renata slowly and carefully removed her coat and handed it to the lead bruiser, who immediately started going through the pockets. Nick had opted for no jacket, and this had been one of the reasons, but he also wasn't facing millennia of sexism and misogyny by trying to hide his figure.

Nick pulled his cell phone out of its hip holster and passed it to another of the bruisers. He walked to one of the men with wands and held his arms up in the classic pose he knew all too well. He knew that the wand would squeal at his belt buckle and nothing else – the clip that held his cash was high-strength carbon fiber and wouldn't set it off. Handing it over to the bruisers was not going to happen.

Renata got the same treatment, with the exact same results. The men with the wands switched places and checked them again. Nick hadn't been expecting them to be this thorough, and was glad they had decided to not try anything that might have gotten caught.

One of the men handed his wand to the other and held up his gloved hands to Nick. Again, Nick hadn't been expecting a pat-down. He held up a finger on his still-raised arms, and slowly pulled the money clip out of his pants pocket. He did not offer it to the man, but turned it slowly so that it could be seen to be harmless. Renata followed his lead and did the same.

The man looked at the other one, who nodded, and moved in to pat Nick down. When he finished, he moved to Renata and made it clear that he was going to do the same to her. Renata had been expecting it, but the man moved gingerly and with a detached respect. He half-nodded at her when he was done, and moved to take the wands from the first man who stepped up to Nick and indicated that the process was going to repeat.

Nick was starting to get impressed – these people were serious. He looked at Renata, and the glance between them was understood by both: the techs hadn't given them nearly enough information about their target. He had been painted as a wealthy businessman and not much more. The techs had ascribed his membership in the Town Hall organization as being primarily because of his wealth, and not much else. Clearly, there was more going on than that.

The wand-carrying man nodded to the lead bruiser, then pulled a credit card-sized remote from his pocket and aimed it at the frosted glass doors at the end of the hallway.

"This way," said the lead bruiser.

The two agents and the three bruisers fell back into the same formation as before, walking through frosted glass doors, and then a second set of glass doors that were completely transparent. Nick and Renata both noted that each set of glass doors was more than an inch thick on the side and probably would have stopped a tank mortar.

The office beyond looked like it took up a good chunk of the floor's total area. It was decorated in warm autumn colors and had tasteful and, again, ethnically-neutral art and abstract sculpture arranged around the room like a small gallery. The furniture, with the exception of the plush leather chair behind the desk, was utilitarian but in no way inviting the guests to stay for extended periods of time.

The man behind the desk was probably in his late sixties, with brick-brown skin and black hair. He did not get up to greet them. When he spoke, his accent was heavy.

"Mr. Gentry, I am very busy. Please get to your point."

Nick held his hands up to show that he was agreeable and here in supplication.

"Yes, sir. We are here to discuss an organization that we are both familiar with." He looked pointedly at the bruisers.

"My business deals with many organizations."

"Yes, sir. I believe we have a mutual acquaintance: Mr. Perkins. You can understand why we did not want to go into details when we set up this meeting."

The man's face twisted. He wasn't surprised, but frustrated that the people in front of him weren't just bluffing. He flicked a hand at the bruisers and slid a hand beneath his desk. The transparent glass doors opened, and the bruisers left the room.

Nick and Renata took two of the seats closest to the desk. They were just as uncomfortable as they looked.

"What do you want?"

"I believe you were present at the demonstration a few days ago?"

The man's eyes narrowed, acknowledging that there was even less of a chance that the two people in front of him were wasting his time. "Continue."

"You may be wondering why Perkins has not started taking bids on the technology."

The man's hands steepled in front of him.

"If you were given a reason why the auction has not taken place, we can show you that those reasons are lies. Our organization is the reason."

“What?”

“Sir, the software that was demonstrated to you does not work.”

The man was skeptical, but did not argue.

“We know, because our organization wrote that software and sold it to Perkins. But he did not make good on our deal. He refused to pay for our services or our software. He then kidnapped one of our men, the head of our organization, and had him killed in an attempt to keep us silent.”

Nick couldn't tell if any of this sounded familiar to the man.

“How does this concern me?”

“Mr. Nakamura, the man I referred to, did not trust Perkins. The version of the software that he delivered to Perkins was not complete.”

The man squinted and smiled.

“That name is not known to me, and I have been told who provided the software.”

Nick didn't twitch.

“The name you were given was Bill Watts.” He saw the man's smile snap back into a straight line. “Mr. Nakamura worked with Mr. Watts to develop the software, until Mr. Watts also disappeared. We have not been able to link Perkins to his disappearance, but I think you would agree that it's not a far stretch.”

The man's wrinkles and scars writhed in frustration.

“It does not work?”

Nick knew he had him, but didn't allow himself to show it.

“No, sir. The software corrupts itself after the fifth account is broken. Mr. Nakamura built it in as a security measure to ensure that Perkins delivered. But Perkins had him killed before he could tell him about it. Or maybe he was able to tell him, and Perkins killed him because of it. We can't be sure.”

“Why are you here?”

“Sir, we spent a good deal of time and money developing this technology. And we've now lost two very valuable men to it. We are heavily invested. You're a businessman – you can see that we just want a return on our investment.”

Nick opened his hands again.

“We know that your organization is interested. And we know that your organization will pay us what our time and effort has been worth. We could go other places, other governments in fact, but that would be starting over. We're coming to you, and several other members in your organization, in the hopes of salvaging something from the deal we've already started.”

“Others?”

"Yes, sir." Nick pulled his money clip from his pocket and removed a sheet of loose paper from it. He suppressed a smile when the man reacted visibly to the short list of names on it. "We don't intend to go to everyone in the organization, just a few people we believe would be amenable to an arrangement, such as yourself."

"What sort of an arrangement?"

"Basically, the same arrangement we tried to set up with Perkins. We'd like to sell your group the technology and grant you control over the computers that we now control. The software and the computers would be yours, free of any strings. In return, we know your organization is more than capable of meeting our price. We're not asking for much – just enough to recoup what we have invested and fund us for the years to come while we develop some of our other ideas."

"What is your price?"

Nick handed the man another small paper. He knew that the man could afford to pay it out of his personal assets, but he provided a disclaimer anyway.

"I know that's not a small amount, sir, but it would be split by the members of your organization that would like to be in on the deal. You would be free to work out how to allocate the network's time according to who paid how much."

The man fidgeted.

"Sir, I believe I know what you are thinking: why are we asking so little, when we could just use the technology to get more money than that from the accounts by ourselves?"

"Exactly."

"We're not a big group. There are barely more than a dozen of us left. We don't have the infrastructure or contacts to be able to pull off those kinds of jobs. Nor do we have the security to deal with the consequences. And, frankly, we don't need that much money. It would only draw attention to us. The number on that piece of paper will keep us comfortable while we work on other things."

The man grunted at him.

"But there is one other thing we would ask of your group. And I'm afraid I must insist on it."

"Perkins."

"Yes, sir. The man has violated our group. We require that he be dealt with in a similar manner."

"Do you expect us to do your work for you?"

"Yes, sir. In this case, we do." Nick stared at them man. It wasn't aggressive, but he showed that he wasn't going to budge.

"I will need to think about your offer."

"Of course. We would also like to give you the opportunity to talk it over with the other members of your organization that are being approached at this very same time."

The man sat up straighter.

"The others? Right now?"

Nick nodded and removed his cell phone from its hip holster. "Yes, sir. We felt that, given our track record with your organization, it might be safer for us to approach several of you at the same time. I can put you in contact with one or both of the other groups that are meeting right now. Or, you can call them yourself – they are the first two names on the list."

The man looked back down at the list and sneered.

"No. I will contact them myself. Later."

"Of course, sir. We haven't had a chance to talk to the other people on that list yet. Depending on how the first three of you would like to work with us, we may not have to. As I said, we're not greedy – just trying to continue our business."

Nick stood up and Renata followed his lead.

"We've taken up enough of your time, sir. But there are two small things before we go. First, I'm afraid we must put a time limit on our offer. We require a decision by midnight tonight." He handed the man a third and final sheet of paper, with his cell phone number on it.

"What? Why?"

Nick deflected the question. "My partner and I will be in Cairo through tomorrow night, but I must insist that we have an answer within four hours. We gave Perkins too much time, and he abused our trust and used that time against us. We must protect ourselves, sir."

The man scowled and looked back down at the list of names.

"Second, sir, we must insist that no matter who else in your organization you contact about this, Perkins must be left out of it. He's already done enough to my organization, and we can't trust that your group can keep him under control. Until he is dealt with, we expect to hear no more from him."

The man wanted to retort, but instead looked down at the list of names and the dollar figure.

"Very well. Four hours."

Nick nodded to the man, who had stopped paying attention to them.

"Thank you for your time. We look forward to hearing from you."

The man grunted and slid his hand under his desk. The

transparent glass doors opened and Nick and Renata were shown to the elevator by the lead bruiser.

Day 24

Candice's knock at the door didn't need to be answered – she let herself into the hotel room and sat down in the desk chair. The clock on the night stand next to Xochitl showed a quarter to ten.

“You did not sleep.”

Xochitl looked up from the smartphone. “Nope. I wish.” She dialed the main line and Monique answered. “What happens if they try to stall?” She looked at Candice, but had asked the question loudly enough that Monique answered through the speakerphone.

“The agents made it clear to them that more members would be contacted tomorrow evening in the same manner. Stalling for time would bring more members into the deal, which would reduce the utility of the network. It is in their best interest to decide tonight.”

“Right, I get that. But what if they stall?”

Monique's voice didn't flutter, like an elementary school teacher having to repeat herself for a slow student. “Our agents will proceed with the next three names tomorrow night.”

They're really doing it - they're sticking with the plan I gave them.

“And if they've already gone straight to Perkins?”

Both women were silent, and Xochitl didn't know this part of the plan. They did have an escape route, right?

“We do not believe he can reach us.”

Xochitl saw that argument for the Swiss cheese that it was.

“They've got the agent's phone numbers. Can't they just track them through their phones like James did to me?” The software on the smartphone in her hand was proof enough that it was certainly possible.

Candice spoke up. “The agents know this. They will be moving around the cities and difficult to find.”

Monique continued. “If the agents believe that they are being tracked, they know what to do.”

Xochitl didn't want to second-guess the people that had been doing this sort of thing for a living, but it still sounded pretty thin.

“So now we wait?”

“Not for very long. One of each team will call me, and I will tie the calls together. The agents being contacted will be able to hear us in one ear, and the targets in the other. We will not be able to hear—”

A warble in the background interrupted her and the ambient noise over the speaker dropped as the line was muted.

“Not long at all, I guess.”

Candice smiled and pointed at the clock, which showed scant minutes until ten. “They always wait. It is how it is done.”

Monique's line was silent for those few minutes. Xochitl assumed she was getting status reports, or sitreps, or whatever they called them. A click and resumed low background static alerted them when the line went active again.

“I have all three teams tied in.”

Candice put her finger to her lips, eliciting a nod from Xochitl. The line static was a little different – more chaotic – and was all that Xochitl heard for several more minutes. One at a time, she heard three distant and muted cell phones ring, and three voices answer them. It sounded like all three agents that answered were men. One of them had the slight New England accent that she had heard a few hours earlier.

The agents were talking over each other, so Xochitl couldn't make out what any one of them was saying, except a few words here and there. As near as she could tell, they were answering questions about terms of payment, how the agreement would be considered fulfilled, and how the technology would be delivered. She had personally briefed the agents on the last two, leaving the first one up to Monique to handle.

The New Englander said something that caught her attention: “conference right now.” She focused and tried to pick out what he was saying.

“Yes, sir, they can hear me ... make sure that we hear the same story ... so far.”

She had suggested that they play this as open as possible. That had meant telling the targets exactly what the agents were doing in collaboration with each other. The up side had been that the targets would be pressured into playing by the rules, as they couldn't risk contradicting each other. However, there was also the possibility that one or more of the targets might use that knowledge to get a better fix on the agents, should they decide to not play fair.

Xochitl thought they would have thrown that idea out the window and come up with a better plan. She was surprised to see that they were actually doing it.

The New Englander sounded calm and professional, as did the

other two men. No one had started screaming and no explosions or revving engines could be heard in the background, which meant that things must not be too bad.

There was a beep and one of the men went silent. A female voice came on the line – was that a Dutch accent? Swedish, maybe? – and said something that was drowned out by the other two men. Her voice was also calm. Xochitl heard Monique reply, still unable to make out what was being said. The static on the line changed.

Xochitl looked up at Candice, expression full of questions. Candice pointed toward the phone and made a pinching motion with her hand. Xochitl muted the speakerphone.

“What just happened?”

“One of the targets says he will pay if the other two pay and no more. Our agent told him that we will contact him when the other two are satisfied with the agreement.”

“They know we're talking to each other, but they aren't doing the same?”

“It does not seem this way.”

Untrusting group of people. Not surprising, but still.

Xochitl shrugged and turned back to the phone. She left it muted, figuring she'd have more questions. It was easier to make out what the men were saying now that there were only two of them.

One agent, with a deep voice that had a slight accent and British English idioms, was providing assurances concerning the security of the payment. As he paused, Xochitl realized why she'd been having such a hard time picking apart the conversations – the third agent was speaking in German. The syllables were close enough that she couldn't have edited them out, while at the same time being gibberish enough that it broke up the other two speakers.

Monique came on the line.

“Miss Green? One of the agents is being asked technical questions. Please provide assistance while I monitor the other line.”

Xochitl started to say something, but couldn't unmute the speakerphone before she heard the British agent drop out, leaving the German one in mid-sentence.

“– einer der Programmierer. Ein Moment, bitte.” He transitioned seamlessly into lightly-accented English. “I have made assurances to the gentleman, but he insists that we provide proof that we are in control of the network. Can we oblige him?”

“Yeah, no problem.” Xochitl waved at Candice to grab something to write with. “Tell him to give you an IP address for a computer that he controls that faces the Internet.”

She grabbed her laptop off of the nightstand and woke it from

hibernation. She lamented that if they had used Candice's phone to dial in, she could have used the smartphone to do this. The agent went back to speaking in German while Xochitl logged in to the laptop.

"Oh! And tell him to make sure it's not an important machine."

The agent didn't acknowledge, but came back out of German as Xochitl was bringing up the window that she would need.

"He understands. Ready?" The man listed off an IP address. Xochitl paused before submitting the instructions to the network. She quickly brought up a terminal window, fed it a command, and chuckled at the results.

"Please inform the gentleman that we will not be messing around with the White House's public web server. He needs to give us a real address. In Germany."

The agent relayed the message, maybe with a hint of chiding in his tone. There was a pause and he read off another IP address. Xochitl checked it and it was indeed for a German IP address. She couldn't take the time to verify that the target's company owned the IP address, and doubted if she would be able to prove it in any case. Instead she punched the IP address into the control interface and submitted the instruction.

"Done. Give it a few seconds."

The line went silent before she heard a shuffling. The agent was chuckling.

"He is cursing like I have not heard since my grandfather. Thank you."

The line shuffled again, and the agent's voice was a soothing, but slightly condescending, German once again. A click faded him into the far background as Monique came on the line.

"What did you do?"

"I told the entire swarm to try to infect that IP address. Even if they couldn't get in, that's still about a million computers trying to talk to just one computer, all at the same time."

Candice cringed.

"Well, I didn't want him to think that we couldn't deliver, right?"

"If that is not sufficient, I do not know what would be," said Monique.

The line static changed again and they were back to listening to the competing British English and German. Xochitl closed down the windows she had opened and re-hibernated her laptop, setting it back on the nightstand. She re-muted the speakerphone and turned to Candice.

"Do you know if it was these two targets that talked to each other earlier?"

Candice cocked her head to think.

"That is likely, but I do not know for sure."

"It makes the most sense, but I can't figure why they aren't talking to each other now."

"Those men can not trust each other, and they know this. We force them to work together, but they do not want to. It is not how they think."

"So why call each other in the first place?"

"They do not trust us, but they must be sure we can do what we say. One called the other to see that we are not bluffing, and now it is each on his own."

"Do you think they are trying to finagle their own side-deals?"

Candice got her predatory smile back. "Of course."

"But the one guy didn't try. He bowed out and left it up to the other two."

"That one is not as powerful as these two men. He knows he could not hope to get a better agreement than these two, so he shows that he is loyal and trusting."

"Sounds like some kind of medieval royal court with Barons and fiefdoms."

"It is the same. The Town Hall meets to share protection and money, not because they are loyal to any king."

Xochitl whistled. "Twisted."

The line changed and the German agent was speaking in English again. Xochitl unmuted her end.

"The gentleman is insisting that we provide at least one person to support them. He says there can be no agreement otherwise."

Xochitl looked at Candice. She was a statue, leaving it up to Xochitl to handle.

"No. Not gonna happen. They get the software and control of the network, and that's it. He's not paying for tech support, and we're not offering. He can take that deal, or we can go to someone else in his group." Candice looked like she was about to interject. "And, if he wants to try and play hardball and get us blacklisted from his organization, tell him that we'll move on to a different group or government. This is a one-time sale."

The agent again did not acknowledge, but immediately went back to German. The line went back to the two men continuing to talk.

Xochitl again looked to Candice, who supported her with a nod. Xochitl's plan meant an end to their organization, but it also meant a

clean break. There would be no dangling commitments. The web had grown too complex and the risks were too great. It was time to cut their losses and get out.

"Monique?"

The men's voices faded further into the background. "Yes?"

"Do we have an ETA from Gil yet?"

"When I spoke with him an hour ago, he was still reviewing the program and did not want to provide an estimate yet."

"Can you have him give me a call when this is all over? I want to see what I can do to help speed things up."

There was the fast clickety-clack of keystrokes in the background. "Of course."

"Thanks."

Xochitl muted the phone as the men's voices faded back in.

"What'll still be open to eat after this? I am wicked famished. And no Leeky Cauldron!"

"No what?"

"The place we went to the other night. With all of the onions and fish."

Candice rolled her eyes. "This is Paris. I am sure we can find something to your liking. A Happy Meal from MacDonalds?"

Xochitl glowered at Candice, which only made her snicker and smile wider.

"Isn't France the red meat capital of Europe? How about a big, juicy fillet, or a steakburger?"

"Thirty minutes ago you could not sleep or eat."

"That was when I was worried that my crazy plan was going to get people killed. But now, it looks like everything is going to work out."

Candice's eyebrows pinched together. "You do not know that."

"I'm trying to be optimistic. Stop harshing my mellow."

Candice shook her head and turned to ignore the insane American woman on the other side of the room. Xochitl tuned back in to the speakerphone in time to hear a female voice, not Monique's, say something with finality. There was a click and the line static changed again. Only the German-speaking agent remained.

"Do you speak German? Can you understand what he's saying?"

The agent frowned. "Very little. He is repeating what he has already said."

"Reassuring the guy?"

"Yes."

"But it sounds okay?"

Another frown. "I cannot be certain."

"Did you catch what the woman said before she disconnected?"

"No. You were speaking."

Xochitl rolled her eyes and unmuted the phone.

"Monique? We've got a German deficit here. How's it going?"

"Of course, I cannot hear what the target is saying, but what I can hear sounds like he is being very cautious. Our agent has said the same things several times, in several ways. I believe the target is unhappy with the terms of the agreement."

"The tech support issue?"

"I believe so."

"And the other target?"

"He, too, has deferred to the German."

Xochitl thought about it for a moment.

"Screw it. Monique, can you pass a message on to the agent?"

Candice stood up from the chair and folded her arms, eyes fixed on Xochitl.

"What is your message?"

Xochitl noticed that the woman hadn't answered the question.

"We're done. No more negotiating."

"You want me to –"

"Our man needs to tell the German that the deadline has passed. We're not going to stay on the phone all night. We need a commitment, or we need to move on. Right now. It's time to man up."

Monique was silent. Xochitl locked eyes with Candice and seconds passed.

"Yes. She is right."

Xochitl did her best to hide her surprise at the woman's support, but she doubted that it had been missed.

Monique was hesitant, but complied. "One moment, please."

They could hear another female voice come through the speakerphone. The man's German was reduced to a dull whisper in the background. Monique instructed the woman to have the man end the conversation. The female agent didn't pause before acknowledging, confirming that it had been done a few seconds later.

The man's voice faded back in. Xochitl couldn't understand what he was saying, but she could hear the change in his tone of voice. He seemed slower, lazier, and less concerned. The pauses between his sentences got longer, and it sounded like he was getting interrupted more and more. Xochitl began to wonder if she had made the wrong call.

No.

Even without understanding what was being said, she knew that

the target was just trying to worm his way around and get a firmer grip on the situation. They could have spent all night trying to make him happy.

No.

It had been the right thing to do.

And what about the pairs of agents? Had she been right in hearing that the second voice on the phone had consistently been a woman? It would make sense, she guessed. And it sounded like something that James would do.

That meant there was a good probability that Candice's partner was a man. She had assumed as much before, but now had at least a semi-plausible reasoning backing her assumption. She'd have to keep an eye out for him.

Wait. Wait. Wait.

Something was wrong. If she was being so helpful –

“Where's your partner?”

Candice had been concentrating on the voice coming through the phone.

“Excuse me?”

“Where. Is. Your. Partner? Why have I not seen him yet?”

Any sort of friendship that the two women had built dried up and iced over.

“Not right now.”

Xochitl didn't drop her gaze. She realized that Candice didn't look mad, so much as hurt.

“We will talk about it later.”

“Whatever.” She looked down to unmute the phone again, only to see that the line was already open. Monique had heard the exchange. “Monique? Are they wrapping it up?”

“Yes.”

“How does it sound?”

“I believe we will –”

The man's voice faded out and was replaced with the woman's again. Xochitl could hear her clearly this time.

“Looks like we're golden.”

Xochitl gaped. It sounded like the woman was more like a girl – Xochitl would have put good money on her not being out of high school. Her S sounds were off a bit. Did she have a tongue bar?

Monique replied, “As we planned?”

“Yeah. He was hella mean, but we talked him down. Loser.”

“Thank you both.”

The line static changed for the last time, and Xochitl knew it was down to just Monique on the other end.

"So we're good to go?"

"Yes."

"Alright. I'll talk to Gil and we'll see how long before we can close escrow."

"Good night, Miss Green. Candice."

"Night, Monique."

Xochitl disconnected the phone and fell backwards on the bed, arms stretched above her head. After staring at the tiny two-by-three inch screen for the last forty-five minutes, the plain white boxy geometry of the hotel room ceiling was disconcertingly simple. The change in focus made her head spin, which was compounded by the dropping adrenaline and low blood sugar.

"Food. Dear God, let's get some food."

Candice didn't reply. Xochitl tilted her head up to look at her, but didn't expend the energy to do more than that.

"What? Oh, the partner thing? Hey, I'm sorry. It just struck me that it was really weird. I've been in Paris for days now, and haven't seen the guy. Other than you making reference to him ventilating me, you haven't even mentioned him.

Candice's mouth twisted.

"You are right. Let us go eat."

———— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 ————

Gil called as the two women were walking out of the hotel. Xochitl put on her brainy cheerleader voice.

"I was just checking in. I know you've got Monique riding you, so I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help."

Gil sounded like he hadn't slept in quite some time. Xochitl's red-eyed, unshowered mental image of him was probably pretty close to the reality.

"Thank you. We could use it. Your skill with cyphers should be very useful."

"Candice and I are heading out to dinner, but if you want to text me a list of which sections of the code I can look at, we should be back in about an hour. When was the last time you ate?"

"Do crisps count?"

"No. Flat food definitely does not count."

He chuckled, but even his chuckle seemed exhausted.

"Get some real food, Gil. The code's got to ship complete and mostly bug-free, and you can't do that on chips or crisps or anything

like that.”

“Right. Very true.”

Xochitl paused to climb into the taxi that Candice was indicating.

“Anything in particular that looks like it'll be a problem?”

He snorted at her. “Figuring out how to spend several million pounds without alerting Inland Revenue?”

“That's the spirit!”

“Honestly, no. While we would welcome your review of our work, the lads and I can handle it. It might very well be easier than the last go.”

Last time, they had coded an elaborate fake that made the program look like it had worked. This time, they had to make the technology work. They knew it would never be practical or in any way useful, but it would work. Xochitl had likened it to selling someone a garden hose to tunnel through a mountain – it was all about how good your salespeople were. Lucky for them, Perkins had already done the selling. Gil was taking down the elaborate fake high-pressure hydrodrilling system façade and patching up the holes in the plastic hose.

The agents were careful about not promising anything about the capabilities of the technology other than the fact that it would do exactly what it was intended to do: use a giant network of computers to try to crack encryption keys. They weren't lying – the technology would do exactly that. But, it wouldn't do it quickly. In fact, it would probably never break a single encryption key. The math that the Town Hall members had been so doubtful about, telling them that a single key could take until the heat death of the universe to crack, was spot on.

This was the reason why the crew was being disbanded. There would be no extended support contract for the technology because there couldn't be. There was nothing that anyone could do to speed up the process. Well, there were maybe a handful of über-elite cryptanalysts around the globe that might be savvy enough to chip away at the problem here and there and cut the timeframe down to just several thousand years instead of several billion. But, it wouldn't be Xochitl or Monique or Gil or anyone else on the team that took on that challenge.

What else could they do but scatter to the four winds?

Still, the technology needed to be functional. This would give the targets the hope that it could be improved, optimized, or extended. The theory was that they would spend time and resources doing that instead of trying to find members of the team.

It was also the reason why the team was asking for such a relatively small amount of money – it would be enough that they could disappear quietly. Any of the agents could make similar sums of money with just a couple of years of working for another agency. The techs could probably hack their way into that much cash.

Money wasn't the goal.

Perkins was the goal.

Xochitl snapped out of her reverie as the taxi swerved around a corner.

“Are we still on track for going gold tomorrow afternoon?”

“We believe so.”

“Alright, Gil, sounds good. Let me know what you need. I can always FedEx you some Italian.”

“I'd take a pint of stout, instead.”

“Deal.”

She disconnected the phone and turned to Candice.

“He says that we should be good for tomorrow.”

Candice nodded and returned her gaze out the window. She was back to giving Xochitl the silent treatment.

“So ... where are we –”

Xochitl's jaw dropped.

The taxi had turned another corner. The street they were on was lined with trees on either side, threaded with a literally dizzying array of lights, and a lighted archway at the opposite end.

“Whoa.”

Candice smiled, but Xochitl missed it. “*Avenue des Champs-Élysées*.”

Xochitl knew it had to be close to midnight, but the road still teemed with vehicles. And what a road – she tried to count the lanes, but kept losing count due to the weaving flow of traffic. Five, maybe six lanes to a side? It looked as wide as a football field was long.

“Is that the ...” Xochitl pointed and gaped like the American tourist she was.

“*Arc de Triomphe*, yes.”

They were driving toward the Arc, but Xochitl was having trouble gauging the distance. The car moved at a decent clip, but the Arc didn't seem to be getting closer as fast as it should have been.

“Whoa. It's got to be huge.”

“More than fifty meters.”

Hundred and fifty feet. Fifteen stories? An arch that could fit most office buildings inside of it?

“Wow.”

Xochitl tried to pay attention to the stores and restaurants and

other buildings that they were passing, but her attention kept being drawn back to the arch. A ring of solid light marked the top of the monument, which she began to lose sight of as they got closer to it.

"I met him in Paris, not far from here."

It took Xochitl several seconds to assimilate what the other woman had said. She dragged her attention away to look at her.

"What? Him who?"

"James."

"Oh. Oh! Really? On a job?"

"Yes. A few years ago."

Xochitl gasped when she finally figured it out.

"You and James? Together?"

Candice nodded, staring out the window. The next piece fell into place.

"He was your partner! I mean, not just your partner, but your partner!"

Candice blinked rapidly and nodded again. The puzzle started solving itself. Why Candice had such a chip on her shoulder in the beginning. Why she never said his name. Why Monique, who otherwise seemed to run the show, still deferred to her. Why she had been in Paris when James was taken. Why Xochitl had never seen the absent partner, and why Monique and Gil never mentioned one. Why her attitude had suddenly changed as soon as Xochitl had come up with a plan to get rid of Perkins.

"Whoa."

The taxi followed the traffic circle around the Arc and turned off in a new direction that seemed to be perpendicular to the direction they had come from. He probably hadn't needed to take the *Champs-Élysées*, and it would have been faster to go another way. Candice must have asked him to take that route specifically.

She had a million questions, but couldn't bring herself to speak. She guessed that odds were pretty slim that Candice would open up and start on the epic tale of their history together.

No, that was it. Candice had shared her secret.

The remaining fifteen minutes of the drive passed in silence.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

The pause between the knock on the hotel room door and its opening was longer than usual. Xochitl was almost up to answer it when it opened. She'd gotten used to the random early-morning

visits from her handler. Enough that she had gotten her shower in beforehand, this time.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.”

The softer Candice from the night before was hidden away again. She hadn't gone back to the lioness or cast-iron versions of herself, but this one was still all business.

“You are ready to go?”

Xochitl pointed to the single black carry-on-sized suitcase on the floor next to the desk. “Yep.”

“And the program?”

Xochitl hefted the smartphone that she had been working. “Checking on it right now. It looks good, as near as I can tell. Monique and her boys did nice work. I owe Gil several drinks, apparently.”

“Have you spoken with the other agents?”

“No. I was thinking about what you said about them needing a single point of contact. You're right, of course. Monique can handle it. She knows the plan. I'm back to being an underling after my fifteen minutes in the spotlight.”

“Good.”

The plan was simple: the pairs of agents would download copies of the software, documentation, and access codes, split them into two zipped files, and burn them to two discs. The Town Hall members had chosen one of their own to provide the proof of Perkins' fate, and another to provide proof of payment. Each part bought them one of the discs, and all three teams would snail-mail the appropriate discs at the same time. If Town Hall wanted to gamble and not fulfill one of the terms, they had to take their chances that they could recover what they needed from only one set of discs.

“What did you think of your time in the spotlight?”

“I'll be taking stomach antacids for a few days until the ulcers clear up.” Xochitl pointed to her guest, “Agent”, then back to herself, “notsomuch”.

As far as everyone was concerned, friend or foe, the agents vanished the second they dropped the discs in the mail. Monique would disburse the payment across the appropriate bank accounts, shut down the servers and accounts used by the crew, and disappear the techs with her.

That left Xochitl with Candice.

Over dinner the night before, for which Candice provided Xochitl with a fillet mignon larger than both of her fists together, they had agreed that the women would go their separate ways.

Monique had been working on shoring up the Webb identity for Xochitl while Gil and his team completed their part of the code. She had assured Xochitl that it would hold as long as she kept her head down and didn't start a world tour.

Again, Xochitl had been struck by the finality of admitting that she'd never be able to use her own name. She wouldn't be herself.

"So how is this going to work?"

Candice pulled a money clip out of her coat pocket. The silk shirt underneath today was tangerine, which accented her dark skin and hair nicely. The bills on the outside of the wad were brightly colored, as well – not American dollars. She handed it all to Xochitl. Even without counting it, she could tell that she was now holding several thousand euros.

"That money will be enough for now. I suggest you use the train to London."

"And after that I'm on my own. Gotcha."

"You are an American tourist. You have saved that money your entire life for this trip. You were supposed to see many great things in Paris, but were too afraid to leave your hotel room. Now, you go back to London where everyone speaks English."

"Ouch. That's a little close to home."

Candice raised an eyebrow, not to question her but in mocking.

"Yeah, I know. The best lies are mostly true. I got it, already."

"But there is a problem with the rest of your money."

It was Xochitl's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"It would be unsafe for Monique to put the money in an American bank. There would be questions."

"You're not going to hand me gold bricks or a suitcase full of cash, are you?"

The woman pointed to the money clip.

"There is a card." She waited for Xochitl to fish the business card out of the wad. "You have begun to create an account with that bank. There is an office in London. They are waiting for you to sign the papers and deposit the money."

"Is this a numbered account? Do they really work like in the spy movies?"

Candice actually smirked at this.

"No. You can open such an account, but this is not one. The name Webb is on the account, so you will need your passport. Monique will transfer the money tomorrow afternoon, so you must sign the papers before that."

"So you guys just use regular banks? That's a bit disappointing."

The smirk stayed firmly in place.

"No. This is for you. Our banking is much more complicated."

"Oh. Right. Hey, won't someone wonder why a secretary suddenly has a ton of money dropped into her account?"

"Only if your identity is discovered. Do not attract attention."

"I don't suppose I'll be able to just get an ATM card for this account?"

"No. You will need to withdraw an amount and store it in a different bank for that. When you do this, do not deposit more than one or two thousand at a time."

Xochitl stared at the card, head trying to wind its way through all of the hoops and hurdles she was going to have to jump to get to money she didn't even want. She tore her eyes away from it, sliding it back into the wad.

"What about you? Have you decided where you're going yet?"

"Yes."

Xochitl blinked. That was, apparently, that.

"Are you coming as far as London with me?"

"No."

"Oh."

To her surprise, Candice elaborated.

"We will go to lunch, because I know you enjoy it. Monique will contact us when the agents have completed their jobs. I will pay for the food, and we will not see each other again."

So calm. Detached. Clinical.

"Presuming, of course, that everything goes according to plan."

"Yes."

"Do you think it will?"

"There is always a surprise."

"So ... no, then?"

"We will see."

Xochitl still couldn't wrap her head around the fact that she was holding enough money in her hand to keep her in comfortable hotels for several months, not to mention the orders of magnitude more that she was going to have access to tomorrow evening.

"What's the plan until lunch?"

Candice's eyes narrowed and she became unreadable. "I am going to the gym to run."

Xochitl laughed and rolled her eyes. "Of course you are. This is the first time I've managed to catch my morning shower before you got here. What else would you do?"

Candice returned her smile.

"Yeah. Okay. Shower again later. Let's go."

The smartphone vibrated in Xochitl's pocket, causing her to fumble and catch her water glass. Candice tensed, ready to jump out of the way of the spill, but relaxed when she saw that she would stay dry. Xochitl made apologetic motions as she answered the call.

"How goes it?"

Monique wasn't perky, but nor was she morose. Xochitl wondered if the woman ever showed any sort of excitement. For now, she seemed mostly busy and distracted. This was just a courtesy call for her.

"We have received confirmation of the deposited funds. I am in the process of disbursing it, which will take me about the next twenty minutes. I have taken the liberty of dismissing the other techs."

"Last one out of the building turns off the lights?" She rubbed her fingers together and Candice nodded that she understood.

"I have also started purging the servers and closing the open accounts. That will take the better part of this evening."

"And the other matter?"

"We have not yet received confirmation on that."

Xochitl noticed the woman's word choice and refusal to use any of the euphemisms that had been running through her own head all morning. Elimination. Liquidation. Ventilation. She drew a capital "P" in the air and shook her head. Candice frowned.

"So we're in a holding pattern until we get it. How long do we wait?"

"The agents will not wait for more than another thirty or forty minutes. These matters do not often go according to plan."

"That's what I hear. There are always surprises."

"Yes."

"Well, I can tell you're busy. I won't -"

"One moment," the voice interrupted.

Xochitl held up her finger to Candice and waited.

"We have confirmation. We've been shown--"

Xochitl ripped the phone from her ear before she heard what the woman was going to say. She handed the smartphone to Candice, who identified herself in her hyper-Spanish.

Her conversation with Monique was short. She disconnected the call, then flipped over the smartphone and slid the backplate off of it. She pulled out the battery and SIM card in a maneuver that was all too familiar to Xochitl, then dropped them into an inner coat pocket.

"It is done."

Xochitl blinked, unsure of what to say. The pair stared at each other for several beats before Candice spoke again.

“Good luck.”

She moved to get out of her seat, but Xochitl grabbed her hand before she could turn away.

“Thanks. Seriously. And ... and I'm sorry. For all of this.”

Candice nodded, then withdrew her hand and walked away without another word.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=O)n(C)c(=O)c12 —

Xochitl sat in the terminal, just another American tourist. The clock on the wall said that she had another hour before her train. She fumbled through the outside pocket of the suitcase in her lap, trying to extract the iPod. Her hand hit something hard and plastic, but when she pulled it out she saw that it wasn't an iPod.

It was a phone. A bright orange phone.

She'd forgotten about it completely. It was the phone that she had used to keep in touch with Perkins. It was still on. And it indicated she had missed several calls.

The little battery in the corner of the screen was flashing at her. She hadn't had it on the charger for the last couple of days because Candice kept coming and going from her hotel room at whim. How long, exactly?

Next to the flashing battery, another icon began to flash. This one had two abstract arrow shapes surrounding an antenna. There was some kind of data transmission. The screen flashed and the message changed from a count of missed calls to a notification for a new text message.

Xochitl looked around, as if she would somehow be able to pick the person out of the crowd that was sending her a text message on a phone that only one other person in the world had the number for. And he was supposed to be dead.

She was frozen, unable to decide what to do. Should she unlock the phone and read the message? Look through the list of recent calls to see who had been calling her? Or just pull the back off of the phone and throw away the battery and SIM card?

She looked around again. Kids played on handhelds. Teens and adults played with their music devices. Adults spoke into cell phones. No one seemed to be paying attention to her.

The screen flashed and caught her attention. Another text

message arrived while she had been looking around.

She punched in the key combination to unlock the phone. The flashing battery in the corner turned from orange to scarlet. She looked up and saw her salvation: a café. She was on her feet in moments, suitcase trailing her. Her walk wavered as she ducked and bobbed to try and spot an open power outlet. A far corner had a few people running laptops, cables dangling conspicuously. She pushed her way through the mass of people waiting in line and slid into a seat at the back.

Sure enough, there were floor outlets beneath the table. She fished some more in her suitcase pocket and came out with the charger for the phone. The phone screen brightened considerably when she plugged it in. The battery icon now had a cute stylized lightning bolt flashing over it.

Her fingers shook as she brought up the list of recent calls. Her teeth ground together. There were several missed calls from the number she recognized as belonging to Perkins, but they had been from days ago.

But at the top of the list was a series of calls from a new number. From this afternoon. After lunch. It was an international number, and she didn't recognize the country code.

She punched her way out of the list and into the text message inbox. Two new messages, from what looked like that same number. Her thumb refused to hit the button to view the message.

She looked around, her teeth still gnashing, jaw beginning to ache. The phone waited.

Fine.

She hit the button. It was a page – an automated message telling her to call a number. Again, the number looked like the same one. She flipped to the next message and it was the same.

The clock on the terminal wall had barely moved. She couldn't just throw the phone away and get on the train.

She closed her eyes and hit the key to call the number. The phone rang and moved slowly up to her ear.

"Good afternoon, *Fraulein* Green."

"Who is this?"

"My name is not important at this time."

The man's German accent was thick, but he did not have any difficulty with the words. She knew exactly who it was.

"How did you get this number?"

"Through a mutual acquaintance of ours. Herr Perkins."

She really, really hated it when she was right.

"You've got the wrong number. I don't know anyone by that

name.”

“Don't you.” It wasn't a question.

“What do you want? Where is Perkins?”

“Herr Perkins is no longer with our group. I am settling his affairs. Imagine my pleasure to find your number.”

“What. Do. You. Want?” She tried to keep her voice low as not to attract the attention of the other people in the café, many of which were speaking English. Her mind raced, trying to figure out how to get herself out of this.

“You have done some work for our group in the past. I was there for your demonstration. It was very impressive. Our group would like to have you consult on similar matters.”

Xochitl knew she had one shot at this. Go hard or go home, girl.

“You say that Perkins is no longer with your organization?”

“That is correct.”

“And you are his replacement?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“And you were there for the demo?”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to help you with that software?”

“Yes.”

“So you bought it, then? You actually bought it?”

“Is there a problem?”

Careful, girl. You're not supposed to know what's going on.

“Can I infer from the fact that Perkins is no longer around that you've figured out that he sold you a program that doesn't work?”

“His departure is an internal matter. We are aware that the program he showed us was flawed.”

“But here you are, asking for my help.”

“We did not obtain the program from him. I will not bore you with the details, but to say that the software we have purchased is in working order.”

“Is it now? That's interesting.”

“Unfortunately, it will take my people some time to understand how the program works. When I found your name, I was overjoyed. We can pay you very well to help us understand it faster.”

Xochitl's voice seethed with a rage that wasn't acted.

“There's just one small problem.”

“What is that?”

“Do you know what Perkins did to get me to do that demo?”

“What?”

Her voice dropped to a red hot whisper.

“He had my best friend killed. He had me hunted like a rabbit.

Then he threatened to kill me if I didn't say what he wanted me to say. He shredded my reputation to make a buck. He destroyed my life."

The German was silent.

"I'm not exactly sure what kind of money you were expecting to pay me, but I can tell you right now that it doesn't matter how many zeros are on the checks, it'll be a cold day in Hell before I do anything more for your organization."

"*Fraulein*, please. I am sure we can come to an arrangement."

"No. We. Can't. And one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I suggest you forget you ever spoke with me. I survived Perkins. I survived his assassins. I will survive you. You do not want to mess with a woman that has nothing to lose. Especially not one that knows what I know about your organization."

"But -"

"No. We're done. Burn this number."

She disconnected the phone and had the battery and SIM card out before the screen's backlight dimmed.

Restroom. She needed a restroom.

— Cn1cnc2n(C)c(=0)n(C)c(=0)c12 —

Xochitl raced against the traffic in the terminal. She had her suitcase trailing behind her in one hand, her laptop in the other. She hated to use the expensive device as a battering ram, but too many people were swarming past her. She flipped the laptop open, cursing that she hadn't left it hibernating and had shut it all the way down instead.

The main concourse area found the throng thinning out. She spotted what she was looking for: one of those little news stand type shops that sold overpriced books and audio CDs. The laptop continued to boot in her hands, and she winced at the thought of what her running was doing to the seeking hard drive.

The postcards were by the cash register. Eiffel Tower, Eiffel Tower. There it is. She grabbed a pen from beside the register, drawing the scorn of the cashier.

Wait. What do I say?

I DID IT. I'M OKAY. X.

Yeah, that should do it.

She logged into the laptop and brought up the address book.

Her memory of the address was close, but not quite right. She was glad she had double-checked. She thumbed a bill off of the outside of her clip without taking it out of her pocket. The pen went back into its cup. She turned back to the cashier, pointing at the empty space on the postcard and the euro note in her hand.

“And a stamp?”

After

The jumbo jet touched down just as the sun kissed the horizon. The landing was maybe a little rough, and maybe the pilot was a little twitchy on the brakes. As is the usual for such a long flight, the passengers pretended not to notice and sighed collectively. A half-dozen deities and avatars were thanked in one hundred and thirteen different but similar ways. The disembodied voice of a flight attendant came from everywhere to multilingually remind the passengers to remain buckled and seated until they had reached the terminal. Again, the passengers pretended not to notice.

The plane taxied along performing turns that might have been too sharp, playing havoc with the people inside who were farthest from its center of rotation. As the final gate came into view, more and more metal clanked and unlatched, then dropped and thudded. A brave few passengers stood and pivoted toward the overhead compartments before the plane had come to a full stop. The flight attendants mustered up the energy to squint and frown, but not much else.

A jerk brought everything and everyone to a stop. The pandemonium of a transoceanic deplaning quickly overtook the suddenly-too-small cabin. Someone in First Class marveled at how many people could move themselves out of a confined space so quickly, while someone in Coach scowled at how slowly everyone in the front of the plane was moving.

The door hissed hydraulically on its forward-in-out-back track, waltzing open. The sun had since disappeared, but the faintest of rays of ambient light striped the floor in front of the exit. Most of the passengers did their best to pretend that they weren't desperate for a life outside of the aluminum cylinder, but nearly all of them moved a little faster as they crossed the threshold back into the world.

Xochitl sat in her seat, stretching and bending vitality back into the exsanguinated parts of her body. She hadn't turned off the iPod yet, eschewing reality for the parallel of the downtempo trip-hop in her ears and the barely-caged humans in her eyes. She sat and

watched everyone else work their way through the door.

The door.

She couldn't see out of it from this angle. The port-hole windows within a few rows her her had remained closed through the entire flight. The windows on the opposite side had been closed to block out the then-strong rays of the setting sun. She was a bacterium in a petri dish, unable to see beyond the curved walls surrounding her.

The door.

As the last passenger exited, the flight attendants did a quick scan of the cabin, frowning to see that they hadn't completely divested themselves of their charges just yet. Xochitl took the hint and grabbed her backpack from beneath her seat. The earbuds came out as she walked toward the front exit. She focused on her iPod, thumbing it off and dropping it thoughtfully into her bag.

Still without focusing more than a foot in front of her, her hands went into her hair, groping it backwards into a comprehensive ponytail. The scrunchie was wrapped in place without thinking, and a moment later she would have been unable to tell you which wrist it had originally been on.

The door.

Xochitl Green inhaled deeply and turned out of the aisle, raising her eyes for the first time to see what was beyond.

