

Part Three

The Five of Us

23

Girl on the Moon

Foreigner, 1981. For the better part of an hour, we go very slowly. I take the lead, flipping through various controls as I try to find out how to power up. Problem is, the controls appear to be in Russian, or Polish, or something else Eastern bloc. Every switch, every button, every toggle is labeled with those weirdly dyslexic Cyrillic-alphabet letters that make everything look half-backward.

In the end, I make a leap of faith and trust in color, carefully punching the largest green buttons I can find. I get lucky the third time out, the controls flaring to life on my screen in a storm of high-tech color. On what looks like a node map, the Vindicator's systems come to life.

MITCHELL: *You're online?*

SCOTT: *Kind of.*

MITCHELL: *What do you mean?*

SCOTT: *Can you read Russian?*

MITCHELL: *Not so much.*

SCOTT: *That's what I mean. Hang on. What the [anglo-saxon]...?*

RICO: *What?*

SCOTT: *I've got a boot sequence in English. C-A-R-L heuristic server system operational.*

MITCHELL: *What's it stand for?*

SCOTT: *Computerized Autopilot and Recreational Library. Who writes this [dung]?*

On each of our monitors in the computer lab, one of the deserted computer station consoles is perfectly rendered as a baroque mass

of unintelligible controls. We fire up the presumably never-used Russian language package on another of the lab's workstations, then use Google Translate and a couple of tentative text conversions to confirm that Russian is, in fact, the Vindicator's language of choice. Then we spend an hour testing the software's ability to parse the control text, trying to assemble a manual for each station.

The system draws a blank on a lot of what must be military lexicon, so we guess at whatever we can't figure out. We apply more tape to our keyboards as we set up for the final stretch. We need to get the tank out of the complex. Me on systems, Mitchell on ops, Breanne in the engineering chair, Rico running weapons.

And then for the next four hours, we all hover around the fifth console, navigation and helm, trying to figure out how to actually make the Vindicator move. After four hours, we still haven't succeeded. It's a bit of an anticlimax to what had seemed like it was going to be a good night.

We're being particularly careful with time in the game, as we know that it's only a matter of time before the friendly folks trying to shoot us are going to figure out where we've gone. We talk and argue while the simulation is paused, trying to decode the apparently undecodable controls of the helm on the fifth workstation. We flip back into the game long enough to test another theory and watch it fail. We talk and argue some more.

After four hours, none of the Russian on the nav controls translates to anything that makes sense. Making the process even more difficult is that the controls themselves are as bizarre-looking as their alphabetic readouts. A sort of suspended floating-wing steering yoke features matched grips that each pivot independently. Both are festooned with buttons and side switches, and augmented with enough ceiling-mounted manual servo controls that the best description I can offer up by comparison is four oversized Xbox controllers welded together and put on a high-protein diet.

We try three other translation sites. We try every conceivable combination of throttle and thrust, forward and back, left and right. All we're able to do is make a lot of well-rendered engine noise. Breanne, jumping back and forth between the helm and the engineering controls, is getting increasingly flummoxed as to where the power she's generating is going.

The Vindicator isn't built right, at least according to any sense the four of us have of how such things should work. And our sense of such things is usually pretty good. Of particular annoyance is a servo system on the transaxles that the computer system is convinced doesn't actually exist. From the mechanical specs, it looks like it's supposed to disengage and roll the wheels up at some point, which makes no sense.

Two additional dead systems seem to be designed to adjust the configuration of the armor on the lower hull, shifting it into a fan-out form that can only weaken its defensive capability. Which of course is just what you want in a tank. Mitchell on ops has suggested that we're dealing with alien technology. However, Rico's got the main toggle-bank of the three-panel weapons console mapped out to the last control, and can speak confidently on what standard Soviet-Russian hardware the weapons systems are an apparent adaptation of.

It's pushing nine o'clock when we stop to order pizza. When my phone rings to tell me it's arrived, I'm trying to prove that what we thought were thrust controls are actually independent controls combining thrust and direction for the transaxles on each side. The idea comes from a pedal car I had when I was a kid, but I'm desperate. It doesn't work any better than anything else.

"Keep playing," Breanne says as I give up. "Give me the door codes, I'll go."

"You're an idiot," is the best I can do by way of snappy answer as I pause the simulation.

"That's the best you can do?" She seems disappointed. As I shrug, I'm fairly certain I can feel my brain sloshing in my skull. To anybody who watches, gaming doesn't seem like work, but it is. It's hard to explain.

Everybody searches backpacks and pockets for cash. "You know," Breanne says, "if you have a heart attack and we all get stuck in here one weekend, you're going to look pretty stupid." I ignore her because I still haven't got the energy that a proper retort would take. "He's going to look pretty stupid," she says confidently to Rico as I go.

I trudge down the hallway to the front doors. I've got the place to myself, because Wes the night custodian is always gone by eight.

He sees us there in the computer lab nearly every night, but if he's ever figured out that we've technically got no permission to be in the building after hours, he's never mentioned it to any of us. I like Wes.

How we manage to keep access to the building after hours is that I've got a spare key and the alarm code. How I've got a spare key and the alarm code is that last year, somebody in the staff room left a spare key and a copy of the alarm code by the coffeemaker as I was passing on my way to see Kirk in the counselor's office. How I tell everyone I got the key and the alarm code is that I know how to pick locks, and that I hacked the office computers while I was doctoring Mitchell's permanent record, removing a request for psychiatric assessment that the councilor before Kirk had threatened him with.

Hacking sounds sexy, I know. When it comes down to it, though, it's a whole lot easier to just depend on people writing their passwords down on the blotter next to their computer, or leaving filing cabinets unlocked that they really shouldn't leave unlocked. Someone leaving a filing cabinet unlocked is how I know that the counselor before Kirk didn't put a request for psychiatric assessment in Mitchell's permanent record. What he actually wrote was *Find out what dot-com this kid starts up after graduation and invest heavily in his competition.*

With my stolen codes, I crack the front doors and pay for the pizza. I get a grateful nod as I tip the delivery guy handsomely, because I suspect that when Seth gets the call at home telling him I've failed to graduate, I'll be doing his job. In the month or so left till then, I figure I should try to build up some karma.

Rekeying the alarm while balancing three large with the works and a pair of six-packs of Coke Zero and Fresca on my shoulder is tricky, but I've had lots of practice. However, as I'm heading back to the computer lab, I see the lights on in the library.

Wes the night custodian never leaves the lights on.

Faint on the floor that was clean an hour before, footprints track the dust of the bus lane in through the foyer and down the hall.

Through the library glass, there's no sign of anyone at the study tables. Nobody's in the librarian's office beyond. The doors are open, though, pizza and pop dropped at the checkout desk as I listen. Through the silence comes a faint buzz of music, a slightly louder creaking rising through the stacks.

As I come around the closest shelves, I see a figure sitting in the study cubicle I like in the northwest corner. Molly.

Her coat is slung over the desk behind her. The sleeves on the white sweater she always wears are pulled down almost over her hands. She's got earbuds in, bent over a notebook and writing furiously. The creaking sound comes from her chair as she gently rocks to the music, her ponytail swaying.

I don't move. I don't make a sound. But like she senses I'm there, she wheels suddenly. Her expression is dark to start, then darker when she sees it's me. She pulls one earbud out, an unhealthily loud blast of synth and guitar heard for a moment before she taps the iPod at her belt to silence.

"What?"

I have to think for a second. "I saw the light on," I say.

"Harder to work without it."

I just nod. "We're in the computer lab." No response but a rapid flipping of pages. The words in my head are turning over slowly, like they're trying to start on a really cold day. "How'd you get in?"

"You gave me a dupe key and the alarm code when you stole them last year," Molly says, like it's the stupidest question she ever heard. Until she says it, I don't remember that she's right. The tone of her voice doesn't so much say the conversation's over, as that it never actually started. She pops the earbud in, goes back to the notebook. The music comes on.

"We've got pizza," I say, loud enough for her to hear. An angry flick of her hand summons up silence again, but she doesn't look over. "If you're hungry. We're in the lab."

"You covered that."

Where the words still aren't starting, the faint twist of anger rises up in their place. And like with Ms. Bond, I shut it down. Not now. Not this way. I turn for the doors with a gratuitous fist striking the metal of the closest shelves, the sound echoing in the silence, following me out.

But at the desk, I stop. I turn back. I feel myself drawn into the darkness of the moment before the better instincts that might otherwise stop me have a chance to kick in.

"You know, I called you." My voice is louder than I expect it to be.

Molly doesn't even pretend to ignore me this time. She knocks the chair back as she rises, slamming notebook, pens, whatever else is in front of her into her backpack.

"When you didn't come home," I say, "I called you, like, every day. I mean if you didn't get my messages, I'm sorry, but..."

She spins faster than I can follow, a hardcover copy of something heavy hurled toward me with a dangerous precision. I stumble back as it hits the magazine shelf beside the front counter, a cascade of back issues spilling to the floor.

"But what?" she shouts. "What is it you need to say so badly that you won't stop following me around for four [anglo-saxon] months? Watching me at work from across the highway, staring at me in the halls and from the back of the class like you're so out of touch with reality you think I can't see you? What?"

The dark rage that's welled up in her stops the lesser anger in me like a stone wall. I'm cold suddenly. I'm back to trying to find words again.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry your mom died."

"So I guess you feel better now..."

It's almost like she knew what I was going to say before I said it. Which makes sense, I guess. I don't know how many times she must have heard it before.

I don't bother looking back as I go. Both six-packs drop as I fumble them, so I kick them ahead of me to scoop them up without breaking stride. I don't see Molly watching me, like I know she does because she told me later. I don't see her turn away. I don't see her hands shaking as she stoops to reshelve the magazines that have fallen.

In my pocket, I don't see where at some point since I answered the page from the delivery guy, my iPhone has connected a call all on its own. Above me, I don't see the green lights on the surveillance cameras flick on as I pass. I don't notice those cameras watching me as I stalk toward the computer lab. I don't notice the silent connections that caught every word, every gesture that passed between Molly and me through the library glass.

24

Who Are You?

The Who, 1978. A half-hour later, the pizza has been made the target of a tentative assault, but the high-level frustration that's become the order of the night has stolen everybody's appetite. It's increasingly apparent that we're not getting anywhere near the end of the game, Mitchell sitting at the fifth console now because that's how desperate we are.

"Shut it down," I say.

"I can see something happening."

"What's happening is you've got the wheels spinning in opposite directions. Shut it down."

As he does so, a warning in Russian flares on Breanne's board. We kick into pause mode as she assembles a translation in the Russian-language workstation web browser. Why the systems board that I'm running is partly in English is still a mystery I haven't had time to figure out, especially since any of the English menus I pull down invariably open up Russian windows in response.

"Infrared at the wall," Breanne says. "They're cutting their way in." Her voice carries a tone of finality that we all feel.

"Where the [anglo-saxon] are they cutting from?" I say. "If there was a way into this place, why didn't we find it?"

"It's sort of a moot point now."

In the simulation, we've been located. We can stay paused as long as we like, but at some point, we either need to figure out how to move or get resigned to the fact that it's not going to matter. Mitchell's already run up an impressive breakdown of the Vindicator's defensive capabilities. But even though the shotguns and sidearms we've seen in use so far have no chance of making it through the reinforced hull, the bay outside holds hardware that looks capable of peeling us like an orange at this range.

"All right," Mitchell says. "We need to think."

At the other end of the school, Molly still sits in the library, staring at the darkened windows. When she finally stands to go, it's like she only just realizes where she is, staring around her, uncertain. Her gaze settles on the clock, resigned. She zips her jacket up tight, like she's preparing for a long walk as she switches off the lights.

But at the main doors, when she keys in the code that I gave her, the lights on the alarm panel start flashing red to green in a way they're not supposed to. Normally when we're secretly occupying the building after hours, the lights are slow-flashing red to indicate that the door systems are active but the inside motion detectors are disabled. Then they go fast-flashing red after the code is input, giving you fifteen seconds to get out before the doors and the sensors are armed again. Solid green means everything's armed, so that flashing red to green makes Molly understandably nervous.

Funny thing is, the school's alarm system has no flashing red to green mode. I know this because when I stole the codes, I got to play with the system by convincing Seth he should get the same system installed at home. Part of the way I convinced him was to broadly hint that there might come a time when just locking the doors wouldn't be enough to keep me out of the house.

Where the panel flashes red to green, Carl is watching Molly through the video camera across the corridor that's not supposed to be turned on. I got to watch the footage later. The alarm panel acting up forces Molly to open her backpack, digging through it for the slip of paper where I wrote the codes down for her the year before. She wants to check out my note on what the lights mean, which is the same as I just wrote above.

It takes her maybe a half a minute. That's a half-minute in which she hears the faint sound of music and voices.

Molly thinks the sound is coming from the computer lab at the far end of the corridor, and she's half-right. It's the sound of us in the lab, but there's no way she'd normally hear it at this distance through the closed door. It's being subtly amplified through the PA speakers at the far end of the corridor, because Carl needs her to hear.

Molly finds the paper, but she doesn't key the code. Instead, she stares at the notes in my barely legible handwriting, and to the warning that this message must be eaten immediately after memorization,

and to the badly drawn heart with a knife through it that I scrawled above it.

She steps into the corridor, staring down into the darkness.

As she slowly walks toward us, she doesn't see the flare of green lights where the corridor cameras come to life behind her. Flicking on one by one, following her as she heads for the lab.

I'm more tired than I want to be. Around me, I'm vaguely aware of more variations of the same debate we've been having most of the night, trying to figure out the Vindicator's navigation controls in their coded Russian. Mitchell talks feedback mechanisms, Breanne talks power controls, Rico talks drive engagement, all of which we've already tried, none of which works.

I start to crumple and toss notes to the recycling bin. Mitchell sees. "You think we should break till tomorrow?"

I'm in a bad enough mood that I'm about to tell him he's had his hour. Then I follow his gaze where it swings past me to the door.

Through the narrow rectangle of glass that looks out to the hallway, Molly is watching us. Breanne and Rico's arguing has drifted into a discussion of the probability of success if we just pick controls at random and see what happens. Both of them look up as I stand.

When I slip out to the corridor and quietly close the door behind me, Molly has moved a half-dozen steps away. In the computer lab, Breanne presses her face to the glass. "Hey," I hear her say, muffled. "Molly."

"Don't gawk," Mitchell murmurs as he presses next to her to watch.

In the silent shadows of the corridor, my footsteps seem louder than normal. A glance to the clock down the hall reminds me it's pushing eleven. Molly leans back beside the door to the girl's wash-room, sliding down to sit on the floor. I wait but she doesn't look up. The silence that hangs seems impossibly long.

"I got your messages," she says. "In Vancouver." There's no apology in her voice. Not exactly. But no anger either. She won't meet my gaze, just staring down toward the distant office. "I was with her at the clinic, then at the hospital. Pretty much all day."

"I'm usually up late," I say. She doesn't say anything in response. I can feel my own words hiding. I cross the corridor to slowly drop

down beside her. Not too close.

“I was going to come down at Christmas,” I say after a while. “Take off a couple of days before the break, surprise you or something. Then Kirk said she’d died. He said you’d called him. So I waited for you to call me, too.”

“Because whatever happens to me must be your responsibility somehow?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Yeah, it is, Scott,” she says, and I see her recognize the anger rising in her again, trying to hold it. “It is what you meant. Whether you know it, that’s something else. But everything that happens needs to be about you before it actually means anything.”

She turns to look at me. Something twists in my gut like I haven’t felt in a long while.

“Anyway,” she says. “I’m sorry. I should go.”

“We’ve still got pizza.” Not the words I was looking for, but they’re all I’ve got right now. “You should stay. If you want to.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“It’s just pizza.”

Another silence seems longer than it probably was. I push up against the wall, standing slowly. I hold out my hand.

Molly waits a long moment before she takes it, pulling herself up. She disengages quickly as she follows me. At the door, Breanne, Mitchell, and Rico are all watching. I can feel their sense of hopeful expectation as strongly as I can still feel the faint trace of Molly’s fingers across my palm.

Where my phone sits in my pocket, I can’t see it blink back to standby as the door shuts behind us.

25

Mirror Man

Prism, 1979. Split screen. Next to the static displays of our five monitors where they're paused at the Vindicator controls, Lincoln's quarters are a fractured fish-eye cube where the webcam in his laptop catches the view. Carl is watching him, just like the rest of us. It's all white walls and bookshelves, barracks-style but comfortable. On a bunk, Lincoln is reading a well-worn copy of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. He glances up to a knock at the door.

"It's open."

The door slides back with a pneumatic hiss that I thought doors only made in bad science-fiction films. Karya's on the other side of it, in yoga pants and a Cal Tech sweatshirt. "Evening, sir," she says, but the military demeanor and its stark contrast to her ensemble only lasts until she steps in to tap the door closed behind her.

"And a good evening to you," Lincoln says. "What brings you by?"

"I was looking to spend the evening with a person of rare intelligence and insight."

"Sounds like an excellent pursuit."

"I thought so, too. Do you know anybody?"

Like he's been saving it up, Lincoln laughs. A real laugh, not the cold humor of his public smile. Karya drops to the edge of the bed, an easy familiarity between them as he rubs her shoulder.

"I thought you were on ops tonight."

"Malkov wanted to stay on. Some problem with the uplink he's watching. Do you have time for dinner?"

Lincoln's hand slows, just for a second. "Yeah," he says. "What kind of problem with the uplink?"

"He didn't say. What's on defrost at the canteen tonight?"

"Go check it out for me," Lincoln says. "I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

Split screen. In the computer lab, it's the five of us. This is what we used to be.

Breanne is sharing the story of her opening combat scenario the first night we played, when she tripped across three security ops packing tasers and yellow-stocked crowd-control shotguns, her avatar armed only with a screwdriver. She beat them by jamming said screwdriver into a set of security controls and dropping a door on them. You probably had to be there.

We're all laughing. Molly's laughing. I can't remember how long it's been since I've seen Molly laugh. But it's not the laugh I remember. Around her, around me, between all of us, tension hangs like a shroud of clear plastic. We can see each other, but through a kind of muted stillness. I try to ignore it.

Molly, like me, is of the opinion that fifty thousand dollars for a single game that seems to have no PR associated with it smacks of scam. As I toast her clearly superior wisdom with a cold slice of triple cheese, I share a theory Mitchell and I have been developing, that a hidden layer of goal to the simulation requires the team to locate a hidden tow truck and have the Vindicator hauled to the closest BCAA garage.

But with Molly here, with everything paused, we take some time for the first time to actually look at the detail work on the simulation. A thing we'd all but ignored in our initial rush to map the controls and beat the game. The styling of the Vindicator's cockpit is military utilitarian, but its ergonomics have an almost zenlike simplicity to them. Everything is panel-molded and windswept-slick, designed to an aesthetic standard that speaks to a calm lethality. Nothing looks rough, nothing looks unfinished.

There's a deadly grace to the cabin's steel lines, like a wasp turned inside out. But for us, all of those lines seem to point like arrows toward the locked-out fifth console, navigation and helm. Those controls are framed by Post-it notes on the fifth monitor, where Breanne is walking Molly through how we've spent all night failing to figure them out.

That's when it happens.

In Kirk's office, Carl had been listening. Carl had always known that Molly would be the most important part of it.

"You know that's a flight helm, right?"

As she gazes at the screen, Molly's working through a second slice, chewing thoughtfully for the moment it takes her to notice that the rest of us have all stopped eating.

"Sure we know," Mitchell says confidently. "What do you mean?"

Molly laughs again. "I mean, that's a flight console. There's thrust, rudder, roll and pitch." She points to each part of the complex yoke controls in turn. In my head, I feel a vague click of understanding.

"But it's a tank," Rico says indignantly. "It specs out at twenty tonnes. What's it doing with flight controls?"

Molly shrugs. "It's a tank that really wants to fly, I guess."

"That's the wheel assembly folding in," Breanne cries out with sudden understanding. She's digging through the schematics. "The hull servos, that's a [lord's name in vain] delta wing! It's a tank that wants to fly!"

"No, wait a minute." Molly's only half-listening, pushing closer to the screen as she goes into the no-blinking stare. "That's a variable inertial-thrust system. It's like some kind of custom multimode ground-air setup. You set the main thrust level, there. Then you selectively throttle it to each transaxle, there. Then you apply servo force for turns and directional control against the main. Cool."

Mitchell, Breanne, Rico, and I all exchange exactly the same look. As one, we slide our chairs back from around the fifth workstation, which up until now has been missing the fifth member of the team that the Vindicator.org Challenge webpage says we're supposed to have.

Molly gets the drift. She smiles as she shakes her head. "No. Thanks."

"Yes," Breanne says. "Please. Look, we're totally hooped here. Once we flip out of pause, we've got like fifteen seconds before bad guys come through the bulkhead and nuke us nastily. We've been stuck here all night, I don't think we've even figured out the turn signals."

"Fabulous cash prizes," Mitchell says. "We think."

"I have to get home, actually." The smile's gone now. "Sorry to eat and run."

All of us catch the change in her tone. Breanne gives Mitchell a

look but he only shrugs. The tell that shows he cares about this but knows he can't fix it. Molly has her backpack on.

"Give it an hour?" I say.

She turns back at the door. Her eyes that are the blue I can't describe touch on everybody's, but it's mine they hold for a moment.

Molly smiles again as she nods.

Split screen. Signal traces pulse against the scroll of dialogue that records our words. On the audio feed assembled from the twin pickup points of my phone and the multimedia workstation, you can hear desks scraping as we move the fifth workstation into proper place. Mitchell and Breanne bring Molly up to speed on the game controls, their words flowing past.

MITCHELL: *You switch views, there. Toggle front and side to get the ops display in.*

MOLLY: *What's the lag?*

BREANNE: *None. This thing is freaking fast.*

At the keyboard, Molly strips our mostly unsuccessful attempts to mark the nav systems, laying down her own tape as she studies the convoluted hybrid controls. Above the navigation console on her screen, she's pulled up a view of the vehicle bay that I try to coordinate with the spreading mass of maps.

RICO: *What's the last reading on the crew on the other side of the wall?*

MITCHELL: *The wall is slag and we and the crew will be on a first-name basis momentarily.*

SCOTT: *I need to pull a tactical map, find out where they're coming from and figure out how we get out of here.*

MOLLY: *I'm ready.*

As she adjusts her chair and the angle of her screen, Molly shakes her fingers out like a concert pianist. She cracks her knuckles loudly. Breanne winces.

Molly gives a nod. "Let's play."

I key us out of pause and all five monitors lurch into sudden motion, the game back into real time as Molly's virtual board comes to life. Her hands are a blur across the keys, eyes flicking from the console view to the controls. The power readings that Breanne has spent all night trying to beat into submission suddenly level out, floating just below redline. Molly holds them there. The outside view on all our screens is slanted, the Vindicator's virtual suspension compressing as we slam around in a tight spin. Everything is a blur as we move.

Split screen. In the operations room, Malkov is alone. He's at the same workstation he was at the previous night, the same network diagnostics running on his laptop next to it. The doors open as Lincoln enters, wearing the leather jacket again like it might be some subtle sign of rank.

"Double-shifting tonight?" he calls.

Malkov replies without looking up. "I love my work."

"I've heard. Karya said you had something."

"Nothing worth bothering you on."

"Maybe tell me what's up and I can decide for myself if I'm bothered."

There's no edge to Lincoln's voice, but the video feed from the webcam shows a moment's coldness twist through Malkov's expression like he hears it anyway. He gestures to the console, punches up a series of display panes. An overlay of signal traces appears, Lincoln stepping in to see.

"Looks like a local echo," Malkov says. "Maybe atmospheric disturbance, interfering with our satellite link."

"Except if it was, you wouldn't be here watching it."

Malkov nods. "It's repeating. Staggered offsets, some manner of packet scan. I almost didn't catch it."

"A packet scan on what?"

"On our network feed."

The signal traces on Malkov's console wrap around each other in perfect synch. Lincoln's eyes don't show what he's thinking as he stares.

Split screen. In the darkened computer station, the same signal traces repeat on the data console as the view in the vehicle bay races past on Molly's console.

MOLLY: *So does anybody know where we're supposed to be going?*

SCOTT: *Hang on.*

MOLLY: *Seriously? You said you've been here all night, where's the exit?*

SCOTT: *Hang on.*

Split screen.

In the computer lab, my hands are moving across the keyboard almost as fast as Molly's. With the Vindicator's systems online, we have access to something we didn't have before — a full set of schematic plans to the base that unfold as bright lines of color on my console. However, just as we guessed when we cut our way in, the empty-space-turned-vehicle-bay at the center of the map isn't connected to anything. It makes no sense.

On his screen, Malkov punches up multiple signal traces, graphed and frozen. His voice and Lincoln's flash by in perfect transcription.

MALKOV: *Someone's feeling their way along the outside of our uplink. Matching our frequency cycling down to the second.*

LINCOLN: *You should have called me.*

MALKOV: *There's nothing to call yet. Could just be a military comsat trolling for satellite-phone signals.*

LINCOLN: *Could be somebody looking for a way in.*

MALKOV: *They won't find it.*

And like it was waiting for Malkov to say the words, the signal display on the monitor in the deserted computer station fractures like shattering glass.

On Malkov's laptop, faster than the eye can follow, a dozen process panes open up, a dozen different attack patches unfolding as they hit the local network like a pack of wolves. The base's data is a

secure system, locked down so tight that even the U.S. military's secure SIPRNet can't see where Lincoln's systems piggyback on top of its own routers and satellite uplinks. And all he and Malkov can do is watch as it falls.

26

Action

Streethart, 1978. On Molly's console, the controls are in constant motion. The virtual wraparound front viewport of the Vindicator is wired as a massive head-up display. Night-vision tech compensates for the shifting ambient light as the Vindicator screams through the vehicle bay in ever-widening circles.

The ease with which Molly manipulates the Vindicator's virtual controls almost makes it possible to forget the insane complexity of those controls. Almost. But the array of tape and Post-it notes she's using as reference speaks to the degree of technical precision in the simulation as she pushes the Vindicator through its paces.

She's essentially just joyriding now, testing the helm. She's making adjustments on the fly to how her fingers surge across the baroque arrangement of keystrokes that trigger the controls in the game. Because from where Molly's playing it, these aren't your typical console controls, or even the complexity of the most challenging PC tactical simulations. The helm she's testing, the Vindicator's fifth console, plays like it's real. Not so much the custom-browser simulation that was advertised, but more like a remote version of the full-cabin flight training systems that airline pilots and military fighter jocks train on.

The level of realism makes it hard to believe that anyone could actually work the Vindicator's controls from a standard keyboard. However, Molly makes it look easy as I try to find the way out of the vehicle bay. Problem is, there is no way out.

MITCHELL: *Say that again?*

SCOTT: *There's no way out. Do they make words of less than one syllable that I should be using here? There's no vehicle exit from the vehicle bay.*

BREANNE: *Then someone named it wrong.*

SCOTT: *The core runs all the way up to the air-access bay we got a look at before we fell back to the ops room. Everything comes in by chopper and gets craned down from up top, I don't [anglo-saxon] know.*

MOLLY: *So we just keep driving in circles until we run out of gas?*

RICO: *They're through the wall...*

As Molly virtually spins out, our screens show at least three squads of troops pouring in through the smoking remains of the vehicle bay bulkhead. A flash of automatic weapons fire ricochets off the Vindicator's armored glass in frighteningly realistic real time. The shooters fall back behind the cover of whatever gear presumably doesn't contain things that'll explode if it gets hit. From the corner of my own visual display, I can see four people spreading out with what look like Stinger missile shoulder-racks deployed.

If it were all happening for real, it would be pretty exciting. Remember that for later.

Split screen.

In the base buried beneath an abandoned Hendrix Lake mine site, the scene is pandemonium. On the night-vision feeds, recon teams are scrambling through the cover of boulder and scrub forest, watching the skies. On the interior feeds, a silent claxon pulses at every security point, red lights flashing. Lincoln is racing along the corridors, shouting orders as security teams jump at his command.

The doors into the ops room are sealed, two sentries standing stone-faced on the corridor side with pump shotguns. Real shotguns, not the bright yellow nonlethal crowd-control models with their beanbag rounds.

Inside, Malkov is at his workstation, quietly directing the half-dozen frenzied techs taking secure systems and databases offline by cutting through the room's cable bundles with fire axes. But on the webcam feed that Carl captured for me to watch later, as Malkov punches his way through a dozen different panes of network diagnostics, you can see him smiling.

By piecing the video together with the network logs Carl recorded, I managed to get the general gist of the attack that hit Lincoln's network that night. It came through a cascade of overloaded feeds,

hammering through every clandestine connection the base data systems were ghosted through. Primary satellite feed, secondary feed, backup piggybacking off of civilian telecom feeds, everything. A military-grade assault. Something so perfect that calling it hacking seems insufficient somehow.

But there at the center of it all is the single fatal fingerprint that's the cause of Malkov's good mood. It's an encrypted address node, a sixty-four-bit burst of identification that Malkov's military code splits like a guillotine. By the time Lincoln bursts back through the ops room doors, Malkov's system is on fire, cutting its way through layers of intrusion as it traces the assault back to its starting point.

"I ordered total shutdown!" Lincoln shouts. Even in the security feed, there's an edge of dangerous anger to his voice.

"I'm tracking them back," Malkov says, a great deal calmer. "If you shut down, we'll lose them." He's working the laptop and the ops workstation at the same time, flipping through windows too fast to follow.

Split screen. The space with the five jump seats is awash with light, inset displays monitoring Malkov's network trace as the main screens echo the action of the game. Rico's defensive board is lit up red, Breanne's controls screaming at her in an endless flow of Russian text.

LINCOLN: *How long?*

MALKOV: *Already there.*

In the window mirroring Molly's workstation in the computer lab, she's keeping the Vindicator and the guys with guns on opposite sides of a wall of crates, weapons racks, and armored personnel carriers under camouflage netting. A half-dozen channels of transcript are running alongside it all, color-coded text jumbled together and shooting past like some 4chan flamewar played back at high speed.

MALKOV: *Trace is locked. It's a local staging point.*

RICO: *[Dung]! HMG fire, seven o'clock.*

LINCOLN: *Local? How close?*

BREANNE: *We're losing power.*

MALKOV: *Hang on.*

SCOTT: *Pause it.*

MOLLY: *Hang on.*

On the security feed from the ops room, you can see Lincoln and Malkov staring with the same mix of shock and uncertainty. On Malkov's laptop, a reverse-out map of the coordinated assault on the base's network and systems has traced its way back through six satellite links to a local router in a small town eighty-odd clicks away. A whole bunch of numbers and IP traceroute info obviously means something to Malkov, but tucked into it all is a single line of text that sums it up.

SD 27 OGDEN SECONDARY

"[Anglo-saxon] me," Lincoln says finally. "Shut down."

"Core systems are locked down, they can't get any farther in."

"Whoever this is shouldn't have gotten this far. We've been compromised, shut down."

But Malkov is on the laptop, pulling up satellite imagery as an area map overlays itself with a flurry of keystrokes. The lines of the town that Lincoln might have seen from the chopper that night when it started superimpose themselves over the satellite feed. A blur of tactical data scrolls past as Malkov zooms in to a high-resolution aerial shot of the school grounds. There's the building. There's the wall of forest rising to the west, nothing else beyond it. There's the empty expanse of the truck yard across the street, sheltered from the sight of the highway.

"Doesn't get any easier than that..." Malkov says quietly.

Lincoln understands. "No chance."

"They're twenty minutes," Malkov says. "We can be in and out before anybody..."

"Security is shot to [dung] as it is, and you want to go trolling for high-school hackers? Shut down!"

But as Lincoln turns away, Malkov is up to follow him. “This is no high-school hack. For someone to set up a network this local as a staging point for cutting back into our satellite feed, they need to already know where we are. We need to know who’s running this. We need to know what they’re looking for.”

On one of the flatscreen displays behind Malkov, Lincoln watches a map of the virtual assault play out like some high-tech version of Risk. Network nodes and core data systems are mapped out and broken down by status — offline, disabled, compromised. The intrusion is still cycling through nonessential data, the unencrypted core systems left open to keep the hack inside for as long as possible. Malkov is making whoever’s on the other end think they’ve gotten in clean, while they search for the secure data they’ll never actually find.

Split screen. In the computer lab, Molly’s having too much fun to pause the simulation. She’s taking it to the troops now, charging them before they can set up firing positions. The missile squads are scattering, afraid to shoot as the Vindicator comes between them and their compatriots on the other side of the vehicle bay.

MOLLY: *So this is fun and all, but...*

SCOTT: *I’m on it.*

BREANNE: *You were on it five minutes ago.*

SCOTT: *And I’m still on it.*

In the ops room, Lincoln nods. “One team. Trace the hack back as far as you can, then take the local lines out. It’s six months before anybody in that [dung]-heap town can so much as send an email.”

Malkov acknowledges the order with a salute as he runs. He calls to Karya as he hits the corridor. She takes a moment to look for Lincoln, but the ops room doors are already closed.

In any strategic simulation, in any game, you can take it as written that you’ve got three ways to overcome any obstacle. In classical terms, you can fight, you can parley, or you can retreat. There are no right or wrong tactics overall, but in any given moment, one set of tactics will always be more right than any other. Three options, choose one.

The better the game, the more complicated the options get. Different ways to fight, to parley, to retreat. However, it usually doesn't move much beyond those three basic paradigms in some form.

Problem is, as long as you're only ever hitting the marks that the person who designed the scenario has set for you, the only game you're ever really playing is guessing. You're spending your time trying to think your way back to whatever the person designing the challenge thought of in the first place, so that the game is always about the person who set up the scenario and put it into play.

Finding the fourth option that was never meant to work is what makes the game your own.

"Hey," I say as Molly does a sideways slam into a stack of crates marked *LIVE ORDNANCE*. They scatter toward a panicked squad trying to set up an M2 heavy machine gun beside the shattered wall. "How tall are we?"

"Are you thinking we can make a human pyramid and reach the roof?" Breanne asks. But she digs through the stack of notes in front of her to toss the Vindicator's engineering specs across to me. Because as I've been frantically scanning the internal maps of the base that the systems console gives me access to, I see it. Finally.

There is a vehicle exit from the vehicle bay. Barely noticeable at the edge of map, the entrance to some sort of emergency evacuation tunnel is a convenient meter higher and wider than the Vindicator in both dimensions. Disconnected from all the other levels, it breaks through the surface four storeys above us and a half-click away.

Across the bay, animated troops take cover. Molly lurches forward and I swear they all virtually duck back. A spray of gunfire glances off the viewport, but she noses the Vindicator into an armored personnel carrier that flips toward the would-be sniper. I finally lean across to tap her terminal into standby. We all take a collective breath as the simulation pauses.

Molly grabs the last slice of pizza as I start digging through maps, trying to figure out what we need to do. All I can say is, "There." I point a lot.

She leans in to look. "So the plan is to drive a twenty-tonne tank out of a secure military base via the back hallway?"

"Yeah," I say. We're in that zone where we're all thinking like one person.

“Just checking.”

Split screen. A night-vision surveillance feed is cut by a sudden flare of light. In the mine face along the mountainside, the landing bay doors slide back, a chopper powering up on the pad beneath.

Inside, Malkov is plugged in at the controls, Karya and three others in the back. They're all in night gear, goggles on and backpacks open where they're checking weapons. Malkov sets up for night-vision flying, a wash of green light filling the cabin from the head-up displays. He punches clearance confirmation, then shuts down. Radio silence.

On his board, a straight-line course is plotted across the endless sea of forest that spreads to all sides. On Karya's board where she sits behind him, the satellite plan of the school is pulled up, architectural schematics laid over top of it. She's marking doors, windows, power lines, security points.

As it lifts off from the pad, the chopper is some kind of featureless corporate craft, no markings. As the turbines kick in, the fuselage suddenly splits along a dozen different lines. From beneath its matte-black skin, surveillance and weapons systems unfold like the legs of some sleek steel insect disappearing into the night.

Bat Out of Hell

Meat Loaf, 1977. The emergency evacuation tunnel is almost invisible in its simplicity, which I realize is part of its design. Before, when we couldn't figure out where the assault troops were coming from as they cut their way in through the wall, we couldn't see them dropping down along the outside of that wall, into this open space that doesn't even have a door in the vehicle bay to mark its location.

Cranes in the landing bay above are the official access to the vehicle bay, along with a half-dozen points of tightly packed fabric that look like emergency chutes of some kind. A failsafe escape route from the landing bay above to wherever we are now. If the upper bay is ever attacked, it's one quick slide to a backup ground escape plan, courtesy of blowing through the wall in the opposite direction that our friendly shock troops have done, then zooming to safety in the Humvees and the APCs sitting under tarps in the simulation.

One small problem is that the Vindicator is a fair bit heavier than even an armored personnel carrier. The interior schematics of the complex are short on engineering details, so all we can do is guess at the strength of the evac tunnel's floor supports. In the end, we have to trust that it'll hold.

We're all watching the clock. It's after midnight. We're close enough to the end that we can almost touch it through the fatigue. I've got the maps spread out on the table. Like all our decisions as a group, consensus is immediate.

"You can't be serious," Breanne says.

"Am I smiling?" I'm smiling.

"Where are the big guns?" Molly asks. She's at my shoulder, close enough that she's becoming a distraction I almost wish would go away. Almost.

"Looks like they're moving to center." Rico's sketched out a plan view of our position in the still-frozen simulation, troops and munitions marked out with little arrows like some kind of play-by-play

analysis. “They’re going to try to catch us in a corner. They need us not moving and all of them on the other side of the bay to safely unload on us.”

Molly takes a last look at the map before she slips back to her own chair. We all follow suit. We’re done thinking.

“Let’s play,” she says.

In the ops room, Lincoln is watching a security monitor that logs a cascade of directory intrusions as the hack continues to spread within the still-running bait systems. On a larger monitor overhead, a military grid is superimposed over satellite imagery, 100 Mile House marked out in lines of white light. Hurling toward it, the chopper is a single point of red, five minutes out.

In the deserted computer station, every monitor is on. The satellite feed is split-screened against the night-vision view from the chopper’s belly camera as it pushes toward a faint scar of light on the horizon. The directory trace that Lincoln watches is sliding past beside the interior view of the chopper, where Karya checks the tasers clipped to her belt. On the five main screens, the view of the game that we see in the computer lab erupts from motionless pause to full action.

RICO: *Fifty-cal fixed and mobile. They’re setting up four different fire zones.*

MOLLY: *Not for long.*

On the display panel mirroring Molly’s monitor back in the lab, the vehicle bay rockets past the virtual viewport as she banks us hard. In the lab, she’s sitting straight in her chair, fingers flying across the keyboard without looking. She isn’t blinking, connected to the simulation in that way I can’t describe. The rest of us are frantically trying to sort out the info flashing past in Russian on our boards, but when it comes down to it, we know we’re just along for the ride.

I watched the game again earlier tonight, when I’m writing this. Mitchell was over, because he’s come by to watch select bits and pieces. It was all logged and video-archived along with everything else. Even a second time through, Molly moves so fast that it’s all a

blur. The guns are pulling back toward the smoking hole in the wall where we don't want them, Molly pushing the Vindicator through a hairpin right turn and between the Humvees to draw them off. Rico calls fire points almost as fast as they erupt around us, Molly making subtle adjustments to our erratic course. We slam through the Humvees like a well-bowled cannonball, turning the racks of spare parts they spin through into a shrapnel cloud that crashes down to all sides.

I'm working on putting together a tactical map, stitching together the hand-drawn version of our escape route on the simulation's systems board. From under the desk, Molly kicks my leg.

"Pull up real-time tactical," she says. I punch a half-dozen keystrokes, a map of the vehicle bay popping up on my monitor. The Vindicator is at the corner farthest from the shattered wall, penned in by the setup of the M2 heavy machine guns.

Through the virtual viewport on Molly's screen, we come to a full stop. The image of the vehicle bay is motionless, the others craning over from their own workstations to see.

"What are we doing?" Mitchell asks.

"Stopping," Molly says. "Make them think we've hit a dead end. Give them a chance to lock and load."

"Any part of this plan you want to share with the rest of us?" I say, but Molly's fingers are already flexing above the keyboard.

"Hang on."

Three hundred meters overhead, Malkov's chopper is circling the school. On Karya's board, radar and a real-time satellite feed show that they've got the sky to themselves. She nods to Malkov. The chopper pitches forward, dropping fast for the ground.

In the computer lab, the virtual viewport on Molly's computer lurches as she slams the virtual controls straight in. It takes us a moment to realize that the Vindicator is heading off backwards at high speed. We slam into parked APCs behind us, watching them punch out and ricochet off each other like fifteen-tonne ping-pong balls. Where they spin out across the vehicle bay in a shower of sparks, they give us the cover we need, three-point M2 fire blocked as we sail through it.

Molly slides her chair back, pulls her keyboard off the desk to lean back to where I'm sitting. She's watching my screen, ignoring her own as she navigates off the tactical display. The Vindicator surges in reverse, dodging vehicles as weapons fire follows us. Molly's monitor takes us through a high-speed three-wheel skid and straight for the shattered wall where the troops blasted their way in. Then suddenly the wall isn't there any more, and the virtual paramilitaries shooting at us are all leaping out of the way as we smash through into the space beyond.

All our boards are going crazy, our screens a jumble of Russian warnings and alarm claxons. No one's watching. We've all got our eyes fixed to Molly's monitor as the virtual viewport shows the boxy lines of the evac tunnel emerge from the haze of smoke that's followed us from the vehicle bay. Rico's board shows heavy fire following us, but he lays down a burst of sonic cannon in response that sees the closest troops hit the ground flailing.

The steadily rising half-klick between the vehicle bay and ground level races past on Molly's screen, her hands flying across the keyboard. Somebody's shouting inane cheering gibberish like an idiot. It takes me a moment to recognize my own voice.

In the chopper, Malkov's night-vision displays show the darkened truck yard adjacent to the school. A wide-open space beyond a half-dozen parked trailers marks his landing spot.

On Molly's screen, everything is a stuttering blur of white walls that we bounce off without slowing down. Actually getting outside is going to be trickier, however. According to the tactical info that came with the new base maps, the doors that seal off the far side of the straight-through evac route are triple-layered slabs of carbon-steel reactive armor whose controls we have no access to. As a potential weak point in the defenses of the complex, they're built to withstand any attack that an enemy might throw at them. But only from the outside.

Rico's already prepped antitank ordnance. We've agreed to hit at a hundred meters. Mitchell is watching the speed-and-distance reckoning, counting us down.

In the deserted computer station, the images from the chopper's cameras play out above the view on Molly's monitor. The virtual doors at the end of the corridor loom up like a bank vault with a glandular disorder.

Mitchell marks it at a hundred meters. Rico has his hands locked to the keyboard as he hits it, like he's afraid it might try to get away from him otherwise. On Molly's front-view display, we watch four arcs of fire and light lance out from beneath the Vindicator's nose. Then a senses-crippling explosion rises ahead of us, which will either take the doors out or catch us in a back-blast just before we execute a high-speed pile-in against a half-meter of immovable instant death.

If it were all happening for real, you'd be scared out of your [an-glo-saxon] mind.

Remember that for later.

On Molly's monitor, the flash of the fireball shreds as we pass through it. The doors are gone, a gaping hole opening up to darkness where the concrete around them has torn away.

It's a moment of perfect exultation.

It's late. We're exhausted. We've been here for three days straight.

We've won.

And none of it matters as much to me as the fact that it's the five of us again. Where Molly and Breanne have me trapped in a bear hug, Mitchell and Rico piling on behind them, I know they all feel the same.

On Molly's monitor, from the corner of my eye, I see her web browser quit.

One second, the window's there. The next, it's gone. An empty desktop sits where it used to be.

By the time I twist my head around, the simulation windows on the other computers are gone as well. I break away from Molly, the others watching me as I drop into her chair. Her browser's not running. I open it again, the school home page coming up like normal.

I key in *vindicator.org*. Network access churns for the few seconds it takes to tell me what's coming.

Safari can't open the page "http://vindicator.org" because Safari can't find the server "vindicator.org".

Behind me, the others are watching. Breanne pipes up as I slide Molly's chair across to my own workstation. "What the holy hell?"

Out front of the school, the truck yard stands in shadow. Traffic noise is faint and sparse from the highway, but over top of it, a dull thumping sound rises fast.

Malkov's chopper drops from darkness, rotors flaring in the half-light of the truck yard's distant loading-dock floods. Stealth dampeners mute the engines to a staccato pulse as five figures bail out almost before the skids have touched the ground. They're armed to the teeth, masked behind night-vision goggles. Karya is first out, Malkov bringing up the rear, but he quickly takes the lead as they head for the school at a run.

In the computer lab, I try to pull the Vindicator site up on each workstation in turn, each browser flashing the same message.

"It's probably just a network glitch," Mitchell says over my shoulder, but I ignore him. I grab my notebook from my backpack, flipping back through the careful record I made of my attempts to get behind the Vindicator's wall of anonymity two days before.

"There can't be a glitch," Breanne says, defiant. "We won. Glitches at this point are not allowed."

I key the site's fixed IP address. Nothing. I run a traceroute that stalls out almost as soon as it starts. It makes no sense. I have no idea what's going on, but I can feel something twist in my gut as I call up a WHOIS site. I key in *vindicator.org*. I wait for the same ID page to pop up as last time. The domain name, the registration info, the address of the mail-drop law office.

I whisper an epithet that's got no suitable brackets.

No match found — This domain available for registration.

28

If You Want Blood

AC/DC, 1979. Outside the school, Karya is picking the lock at the main doors. Behind her, the rest of the team are fanned out and holding point with beanbag shotguns and tasers. Malkov cuts past her as the doors open, popping the alarm panel and shutting it down with three precision snips from a pair of wire cutters. He checks the settings to note that it was only partially armed, motion detectors disabled. He motions the others inside without a word.

Inside, the library, the office, the main stairs are all dark. Down the hall in the opposite direction, light streams from the computer lab door.

In the ops room eighty clicks away, Lincoln can only stare in disbelief as the intrusion into the base's network shuts down. The diagnostics windows that are monitoring the hack show it backing out of the system. One second, it's there. The next, it's gone without a trace. Process monitors mark the dozen different intrusion fronts sweeping through the system shutting down, one by one.

In the deserted computer station, all the monitors except two have gone black. No light, no movement. On the transcript console, the steady pulse of words slips past.

SCOTT: *No, you don't get it. The site is gone.*

MITCHELL: *So the network went down...*

SCOTT: *The network is live. See? The domain name registration, there, it's been wiped. Two minutes ago, we were on it. Now, it's like it never existed. This is [anglo-saxon] voodoo.*

On a video feed across from the transcript console, the camera by the library catches Malkov's team as they slip down the corridor.

The closer cameras are all off, Karya checking them carefully as she passes.

In the computer lab, three arguments are breaking out at once and I'm at the center of all of them. I'm up, pacing. All right, I'm not pacing. I'm kicking chairs. Breanne is shouting at me where one just misses her. "Hey, don't make this some sort of federal-case freak-out, all right?"

"Meaning what?" I shout back.

Rico steps up to diplomatically right the chair that missed Breanne. "I think maybe we're missing the point, here."

"Meaning your rant is getting old." Breanne tries to kick the chair back at me, but Rico hasn't let go of it yet.

"The point being what?" Mitchell says as he tries to interpose himself between me and the rest of the furniture.

"We won," Rico says.

"We didn't win because there was nothing to win!" I say. "I told you this was wrong."

"Sorry, did I miss the gun to your head?" Breanne snaps.

"I haven't got the time to keep track of the things you [anglo-saxon] miss."

As irritated as we all constantly make each other, we don't really fight all that much. We're fighting now.

My getting into Breanne's face causes Rico to get less diplomatic in a hurry. "Hey, what's your damage?"

"My damage is I knew this was [anglo-saxon] up, but why would anybody bother listening to me? When has anybody ever bothered shutting up long enough to [anglo-saxon] listen?"

I haven't been watching Molly. She's silent, watching the rest of us. I don't notice her moving until she's actually at the door, backpack and jacket in hand.

Suddenly, I have a great desire to calm down.

"Look..." I start to say, but she turns back on me with all the anger, all the animosity from the library four hours before. It hits me like a well-placed brick.

"Do you remember what I said outside?" she asks quietly. The others all look away.

"Yeah," is all I can say.

"Good."

And she's gone, the door slamming behind her. I stand in silence for a moment, Mitchell looking like he's going to say something. I know I shouldn't follow her. I know I'm going to anyway.

I'm a step away from the door when it slams open from the corridor side.

Faster than any of us can react, four figures in black are inside the computer lab with shotguns drawn. Though I don't recognize her at the time, Karya's the one grabbing at me, even as I trip back across an upturned chair left in the middle of the floor by my previous rampage. She gets a piece of my shirt but nothing else, then I'm upside down and under the table in the chaos.

All I can see is legs. All I can hear is voices screaming, telling us to hit the floor, hands on heads. Where I scramble toward the door to the chem lab, I see Mitchell pinned fast to the wall. Rico pushes Breanne behind him as he raises the chair he was holding, lashing out instinctively at the closest figure. The blow lands well enough but Rico is distracted as he follows through, so that a boot to the stomach from the other side puts him down.

In that one moment, time slows down. I understand that I'm more scared than I've ever been.

In that one moment, all I can think about is Molly.

I'm through the chem lab door at a dead run, slamming it shut behind me. It doesn't stop Karya where she's hard after me, but it slows her for the second it takes me to drag down the wheeled whiteboard standing against the closest wall. That slows her down long enough for me to wrench down the fire extinguisher beside the corridor door as I burst through.

Time's still moving slowly. To my left are the west-side fire exit doors, maybe twenty strides to get out and away. I'm not thinking about running. Not with the others still there. I'm thinking about whether I can get into the woods fast enough and long enough to call 911 before the guys in black catch me, because I'm already resigned to the fact that they're going to.

But to my right, Molly's on the floor. She's got duct tape across her mouth and around her wrists. A goggled figure that I learn later is Malkov has both her hands in one of his as he drags her roughly toward the computer lab door, already silent beyond.

I don't know how Molly knows I'm there, but she looks up. She

catches my eyes, just for a second.

As Karya bursts from the classroom behind me, I spin to catch her hard with the extinguisher. Pain shoots up my arm where the impact knocks her back, the taser in her hand flying free. I don't have time to grab it. I'm running for Molly, running for Malkov.

I've got a second of surprise. It's nowhere near enough.

Where I hurl the extinguisher straight at his head, Malkov manages to catch most of it on his shoulder, rolling with it to lessen the impact. Then he keeps rolling, spinning to catch me with a backhand shot that makes everything go black for the second it takes me to hit the floor.

When I manage to look up, I've got Karya sitting on my chest running tape across my mouth. She's already bound my hands, not that I could have moved them anyway. Pain up my neck and through my chest is a white-hot knife. Malkov's goggles are down and hanging sideways around his neck, like the extinguisher must have caught some piece of them. He's got a gash bleeding on his cheek where he watches me, cold.

Karya looks like she's going to say something as she stands, but Malkov waves her to silence. He leans in to grab me by the wrists, lifting me like I weigh nothing.

"It's generally better for you if you don't see my face," he says quietly. He's pressed close enough that I can see the tattoo below his left ear, Cyrillic letters against a death's head. I have no idea what it means, but especially in the context of how much Russian we've been wading through the past three days, any part of my mind that isn't already terrified gets there in a hurry.

Karya follows with Molly. We join Rico, Breanne, and Mitchell on the floor, all of us bound and gagged. Malkov's team is working in a silence that's far more frightening than any threats would be. From where I'm sprawled, I get to watch them pull laptops and electronics gear and high-density portable hard drives from their packs. They're patching into the computers in the lab and the network panel behind the router. Malkov is pacing, watching their progress.

And then he stops dead. Stares.

I can't see the top of the table where he's standing, but I know what he's looking at because I left it there. It's our map of the virtual base, Rico's sketch plan of the vehicle bay beside it. All our maps, all

our notes are stacked and spread across the table and the workstation desks. Malkov is shuffling papers, flipping through pages of printout.

From under a pizza box, he pulls a printout image whose outlines I can see where they bleed through to the back side of the page. It's a screenshot image of the Vindicator itself. The light in the lab isn't good, but I'm pretty sure I see Malkov go pale.

None of it means anything to me. Not yet.

Malkov flicks his gaze down to meet mine. The eyes so dark they look black.

"I want this network pulled down and packed," he says to Karya, voice hard-edged in the silence. "Here, the office, the library. Drives, servers, backups, everything. Get it all."

Karya nods.

"Then get the five musketeers ready to go. They're coming with us."

Across from me, I catch everybody's eyes in turn except Molly, who isn't looking at me. Breanne is shaking. She squeezes her eyes shut, Rico managing to lean in so his shoulder touches hers. But the look on Karya's face tells me she's only a little less shocked than we are.

"Repeat that, please?"

Malkov hands her the image. It takes her a second to recognize it. When she does, she stares with the same shock.

"Move," Malkov says.

The lights of the truck yard are a haze of sodium yellow, no breeze stirring the ever-present dust. The black chopper is barely visible in the shadows as its engines suddenly power up, Malkov keying them by remote. The pulse of turbines and the dull thump of rotors raise an impromptu storm in the distance as the five of us are herded to the school's main doors.

I get to see the trophy case come off the wall as I'm hauled past. We're all wearing duct-tape hobbles that are loose enough around our ankles that we can move under our own power. They're tight enough that I'm not going anywhere except where Malkov at my back is directing me, the five of us pushed out across the asphalt at a run.

The school is left open behind us, Malkov's team spending their

last minutes doing precision damage to make it look like a smash-and-grab vandalism. Once things are cleaned up, it'll take the cops a couple of days to figure out that nothing's actually been stolen. It'll take the district tech guys a little longer than that to wonder how a school's worth of ransacked computers managed to all get their hard drives fried by a mil-spec point-blank EMP pulse.

In the truck yard, I have to squint to see through the haze of rotor-driven grit that lashes us like a cloud of stinging insects. The chopper's cabin door is open ahead of us, Malkov and his team practically throwing us all inside.

We land in a heap, someone underneath me that I can't tell is Mitchell until I roll off him. Just in case I'm thinking about rolling too far, one of Malkov's guys perches in the closest jump seat with an implacable expression and a short-barreled shotgun. I'm assuming it's packing beanbag rounds because he isn't stupid enough to risk putting a hole in the side of his own chopper while we're in flight. However, its position a half-meter from my face makes the concept of nonlethal ammunition suddenly moot in my mind.

All of them have lost their goggles now. I don't like what that might mean.

Even as Karya jumps in and pulls the cabin door shut behind her, we're in the air. She takes the place of the shotgun guy, motioning him to the back as she settles down to watch us with a look I can't decipher. She keeps her own gun down, at least.

Light from the truck yard shifts as we climb, then it's gone, the town below us. We pull a tight looping turn, the elevator feeling of a hard climb pushing us down for what seems like minutes. Then we level off as the turbines ramp up with a roar. Karya fitted us all with earplugs as we were herded out of the school, but the noise is still deafening.

Molly lies behind me. If I twist my head far enough, I can see her. Her eyes are shut tight, body shaking. No tears, though. If I twist a little more, I can reach her hands with mine, but when I make contact, she flinches away. She opens her eyes long enough to meet my gaze, and the anger there is like something alive inside her. Then she turns away as we sail on through the dark.