

# Part Four

## Why We're Here

# 29

## One Step Ahead

Split Enz, 1981. I remember things. I know that doesn't sound like a big deal. But when I say I remember things, I mean I remember things that other people don't remember. I remember things better than most people.

This is part of the reason that I'm the one writing all this down, I suppose. The five of us all went through it together. We all saw it, we all lived it. But in memory, it's like I'm still living it, every night that I type a little bit more of it up as a permanent record. I'm watching it again as I write, but even without watching it, all the feelings, all the impressions and events that mark people like scars are still there.

The problem with remembering things is that sometimes there are things you want to forget.

I have a hard time doing that. Forgetting.

I remember things.

Molly and I have been in school together forever. I can remember how many grades in elementary school we were in the same class. I remember the junior high band trips we went on together and just sort of ignored each other. I can remember we were at summer camp together in fourth grade. Walking down the trail to the beach, Molly stepped on a hornets' nest one day and I was the one who ran for the medic.

Molly doesn't remember any of that. When I used to talk about things that happened to us in first grade, when I told her things I remember her doing or saying from years before, she used to laugh like my remembering that far back was the weirdest thing she'd ever heard. Maybe she was right, I don't know.

At the beginning of ninth grade, Molly got to know Breanne when she helped her survive Ms. Webb's notoriously dull English class. From that, she dropped in once in a while for the lunchtime D&D game that Mitchell, Breanne, and I were running in the year-book-club room. We had the room to ourselves because the junior

high administration had cancelled yearbook that year, after a particularly filthy limerick somehow wound up on the poetry page of the yearbook the year before.

(Confession. I was on yearbook club in eighth grade but I'm still not saying anything.)

Molly played sometimes, and she just hung out other times, and we kept ignoring each other. But then in tenth grade, Molly and I wound up partnered on the debating team together, so we couldn't ignore each other as easily as we had all the years before.

What I remember most vividly from that experience is when we were practicing for the provincials. Molly and I had gotten paired off for the one-on-one sessions, and while she was up and talking first, I realized that I was staring at her ass with a lot more interest than I was paying attention to anything she was saying.

(Confession. Even as I write that, I'm hoping it's not seen as an objectifying, sexist statement. I don't like sexual objectification. I don't like the grade-school playground mentality that pervades too many of my peers and provides a foundation for sexual objectification. Molly is a brilliant, funny, kind, caring, talented human being. She just happens to be a brilliant, funny, kind, caring, talented human being with a really nice ass.)

At that time, we were attempting to resolve that the school should or shouldn't install the video cameras they later installed in order to leave them turned off. When it was my turn to talk, the distraction of having been staring at Molly meant that I managed to momentarily forget which side of the argument I was on. After the fact, I was fairly confident that no one but Mitchell noticed me staring at Molly's ass. Still, I found myself wondering for a while whether that sort of thing happens in the House of Commons a lot.

In the end, we went to the provincials, where we all got buried under an avalanche of advanced rhetoric from a load of private-school geeks. But what I remember more than the humiliation was the celebratory dance the last night. I remember Molly asking me to dance, and me being so stunned that I didn't have a chance to tell her I don't know how to dance.

I remember that three or four songs in, the DJ stopped the endless haze of recycled top forty to play the Split Enz track mentioned at the top of this not-chapter, where it must have been hidden in

some retro dance mix collection.

I remember Molly kissed me when the song was done.

That was the start of a whole bunch more memories, all of which I've spent most of the last four months wishing I could forget.

In the ghostly green of the night-vision cameras that surround the mine site, Malkov's chopper is a dark shape against the sky. As the bay doors open, a flare of light burns the view away for a moment, the image enhancement shutting down for a few seconds as it overcompensates. By the time the monochrome green comes back into view, the doors are almost closed, the night above fading back to dark silence.

In the chopper, Karya is ready at the cabin door as we land. From the floor, all of us except Molly are watching her. As casually as I can, I push up on one shoulder to try to get a view out the window. I catch the briefest glimpse of the bay doors closing as we descend, but it's the dead darkness above them that I'm most interested in. No lights outside, no sign of civilization as we're sealed in.

I try to catch Molly's gaze as I lower myself again, but I can't. I can see Mitchell, though. He's scared. Breanne blinks back tears. She's scared. Rico is scared, which tells me I'm actually not scared enough.

In the base outside the landing bay, the alarms are quiet but the frenzy of activity hasn't slowed. People are moving, running, a sense of ordered precision in them that you wouldn't have suspected from watching the cola-and-pizza party in the ops room three nights before.

At the center of the chaos in that same ops room now, Lincoln snaps terse orders that are obeyed without hesitation. He's watching the access corridor, though. He breaks off from the systems monitor he's parked in front of when he sees Karya approach.

"Malkov?" he calls as he moves for her, but she shakes her head. She's got a locked case full of portable hard drives in hand, passing it to him.

"He's in the bunker. You need to..."

"Report," Lincoln barks. "Break it down."

Karya's tone cools just a bit. "Clean through-and-through on the

school. Malkov ordered the sweep, archive and burn. It's all on the hard drives. One encounter. He brought them back."

Lincoln's expression says he's not quite sure he heard her correctly.

"Kids," Karya says. "Teenagers. Locals. They're on the deck, but you need to see Malkov..."

With the epithet that's got no suitable brackets, Lincoln cuts her off. He's through the doors at a run.

In the landing bay, three guards with beanbag-round shotguns at their belts but Uzis in hand flank the chopper. Across from them, the corridor doors slide wide. Karya and Lincoln slip across to a monitor, Karya tapping up a security feed from inside the chopper a dozen meters away.

The five of us are still on the floor. The duct tape gags are off and we've been lifted to sitting positions. Molly's across from me, face buried in the wall. I can see the pinpoint green of the camera point above where they're watching us. Best guess, the gags are gone because they want to hear what we've got to say, but no one's talking.

At the monitor, Lincoln can only stare.

"They looked like they were working in a computer lab," Karya says. "The rest of the school was clear. They're scared [dung]less."

"They're going back. I'll fly them myself. Refuel and heat it up. Now." Lincoln gives the last orders to the deck crew watching him. They scramble as he turns away, Karya close behind him.

"You need to see what Malkov..."

"Unless Malkov wants to show me his letter of resignation and a suicide note, I'm not interested." Lincoln is livid, a dark anger churning in him, looking for a way out. "This was no high-school hack!" he shouts, loud enough that I can hear him inside the chopper. "What the hell is he..."

"James." It's Lincoln's first name, apparently. I wouldn't have expected it to calm him down all that much, but coming from Karya, it does. "There's something you need to see."

Malkov is in the command center. Karya called it the bunker, which is what they all call it. He's alone, sitting at a secure terminal that he and Lincoln are the only ones who have access to. The base's

core systems are all here. Command infrastructure, secure records and logs. Everything that Lincoln's operation is about is recorded here, secure behind armor heavy enough to withstand a missile attack.

The systems here aren't hooked into any of the base's other networks. But from a Linux system running proprietary encryption code, Malkov has a single feed running out of the bunker on a secure landline. The system at the other end of that landline is what he's testing now, booting up directory and interface code that hasn't been fully booted in years. He checks security points for signs of intrusion, checks the settings on a firewall he wrote himself.

He scans a menu that comes up in Russian. Malkov can read Russian. He's satisfied that nothing in this system and its long-dormant code has been compromised, nothing's been accessed.

What he can't see is those same systems running full bore and invisibly in the space they've cut out under the base's security code. He doesn't sense the night-vision headset he's still wearing from the raid catch a wireless signal that it was never programmed to respond to, switching on to record everything that passes as Lincoln bursts into the room.

**LINCOLN:** *What the [anglo-saxon] is...?*

And he stops short when he sees the array of papers spread out across the surface of Malkov's workstation. Our papers from the computer lab. Notes, maps, schematics. Lincoln picks up the screenshot of the Vindicator in its hidden bay. His expression is dangerously cold.

**MALKOV:** *I matched the images to a proprietary cache system on the machines in their lab. We took the network and phone system apart, there's no sign of any outside staging. The hack of our network originated there.*

On the single screen that's active in the unmanned station with five jump seats, you can see the papers Lincoln flips through, caught at a weird angle by the video feed of the night-vision headset where it

hangs at Malkov's neck.

**MALKOV:** *We got wallets and ID off three of them, names and student IDs from their computer accounts. We've pulled their school records, hard copy and archived. I have a handful of hits online, but we're still putting a full dossier together.*

**LINCOLN:** *Give this to Karya. You and her. Nobody else gets told anything until it comes through me.*

**MALKOV:** *Done. Most of what's out there is the one called Scott. Lots of conspiracy blog postings under assumed names. He also looks like he's got some systems coding and network experience. I'll talk to him before...*

**LINCOLN:** *I'll take it.*

In the chopper, I've been quietly eying the camera point above us for a while now, doing my best estimate of its angle and range of view. The key-card panel at the cabin door is blinking steady red. I move carefully, making it look like my legs are cramping where they're taped tight. I twist so that I'm turned away from the camera and toward Rico, my face against the wall.

"It's going to be okay," I say. Barely a whisper, mostly to Molly, but she doesn't look at me. Rico glances over but turns away again before I can catch his eye, so I tap my foot where it points toward him. "The chopper," I whisper again. "What is it?"

"How the hell should I know?" he whispers back.

"Because you've memorized *Jane's World's Aircraft* cover to cover. What is it?"

"I don't [anglo-saxon] know."

"Guess."

Breanne's head is against Rico's shoulder, her eyes squeezed shut. He gives me a very dark look. But then he glances forward to the cockpit, assessing the controls and the darkened displays.

"Customized. Lynx AH.7," he says. "Maybe a W-3 Falcon. I didn't see enough of the outside."

"How fast? Cruising speed?"

"Fully loaded, two-twenty, two-thirty clicks. I don't know."

“We were in the air twenty minutes.”

“How do you know?” Mitchell this time.

“I could see her watch. The one sitting on us.” I do the math in my head. “That’s like seventy-five, maybe eighty clicks.”

Breanne is looking at me now. She pipes up, her voice shaking. “So we’ve all been living next to a secret air force base for the past seventeen years and just never noticed?”

I cast my eyes up to the camera point above us. The others follow my gaze. Breanne quiets down.

“They don’t look military,” Mitchell whispers.

“Their gear is,” Rico says. “The night-vision lenses are ITT PVS-Ns, classified. SAS and the SEALs use them exclusively. The shotguns they were packing had custom muzzle brakes and a mag extension. I think I’ve seen them as South African army issue.”

“Private paramilitary.” I glance to Mitchell. “Black helicopters. No markings.”

The silence that follows is broken too quickly by the thunk of a lock. Everybody jumps. Molly finally turns away from the wall to look. She isn’t blinking.

The key-card panel goes green as the door opens, a flare of light from outside shrouding the figure there. Lincoln steps up and into the cabin. He takes in the five of us with a slow glance.

“Which one’s Scott?” he says at last.

I expect that the others are all as mind-numbingly scared as I am, so I’m surprised when they don’t all start nodding vigorously in my general direction to save themselves. I probably would have thought about it.

“Me,” I say at last.

Lincoln nods as he steps back. The two sentries behind him slip in to haul me up by the shoulders.

“Walk with me, Scott.”

The sentries are responsible for most of my movement, so I’m not sure I’d call it walking. Either way, I’m out of the cabin two steps behind Lincoln. No time to say anything to the others as the door slams shut behind me.



# 30

## Games Without Frontiers

Peter Gabriel, 1980. From the landing bay, Lincoln leads me and my escort down a narrow side passage with a lot of slide-up doors. Some sort of storage space is what I'm guessing from the corner of my mind that's still working. If more of my mind was working, I might notice that this particular side-passage storage space off the landing bay looks suspiciously like a side-passage storage space off the landing bay in the virtual base when we were crashing through it two days before.

As it happens, I don't notice.

The sentries at my elbow drop me unceremoniously inside, then step back into the landing bay as Lincoln seals us in with a black card slotted to the key-card panel beside the doors. If more of my mind was working, I might notice how this key-card panel should look strangely familiar to me. However, I'm distracted by the fact that my feet are still hobbled, managing to stay upright only by teetering against a stack of unmarked crates presumably on their way in or out of one of the slide-up doors.

Lincoln steps close. He pulls a pen from an inside pocket on the black leather jacket. Before I have time to wonder why, he squeezes the pen. A four-centimeter scalpel blade shoots out from the top, a hand's breadth from my face.

I try very, very hard not to move. Lincoln smiles as his hands drop. Then I feel my own hands suddenly loosed, the tape sliced through cleanly where the scalpel pulls away.

I'm conscious of my heart hammering in my chest as Lincoln shifts one of the crates to the floor, making a seat for himself. It's very quiet in this narrow corridor, which I realize in retrospect is the point. With the amount of activity in the base, the number of people running around, this is him talking to me without anyone else seeing that I was even there.

He spins the pen between the fingers of his left hand like he's

prepping for a drum solo. “My name’s Lincoln,” he says. “The way this usually works is, you don’t ever get to meet me. The type of business we’re in here, privacy is our primary concern. You and I talking sets a real precedent.”

His tone and his manner are so even-handed that it freaks me out even more than a riot-act rubber hosing probably would have. His southern drawl sounds downright homey, which is a pair of words I don’t use all that often. I try to calm down by focusing on peeling the duct tape from my wrists, one careful piece at a time.

Lincoln has the two-screened tablet in hand, the scalpel pen tapping out a control sequence on a virtual keyboard. But as much as I try to avoid looking where the blade has disappeared into the pen again, something else there catches my eye.

I glance up. Lincoln sees me watching.

“You like it?” With no warning, he holds the pen out to me. He waits.

Slowly, carefully, I take it. The thing that catches my eye is the silver hourglass embossed in the pen’s body of matte-black metal. I squeeze it hard. The scalpel snicks out again, gleaming in the haze of louvered fluorescents overhead. Lincoln watches me, inhumanly calm. I’m close enough that with a knife in my hand, I could try something. Thankfully, he and I both know that’s never going to happen.

I crouch awkwardly to cut the tape binding my ankles. Another squeeze of the hourglass and the scalpel is gone. Carefully, I give the pen back.

“You were Agency,” I say simply. I try to hide the edge in my voice but there’s no point. The hourglass is the symbol of that ultra-secret covert ops arm of the CIA. It’s the division that lame movies and espionage novels always say is called *the Company*. It’s the part of the CIA that kills people.

“Very good,” Lincoln says. Something in his voice suggests he actually means it, which freaks me out just a little bit more. “A little going-away present from before I embraced the private sector. Long time ago now.”

He gets back to work on the tablet. I’m close enough that I can catch an oblique view of a fast-changing array of windows. I’m not surprised to see my transcripts, my webpage bookmarks, my posts on

*Five Horsemen* all flipping past. “Your academic record says you’re a bit of a computer guy,” Lincoln says. “Multimedia, programming, network troubleshooting. I figured you might be the person to talk to about what’s happening here tonight.”

“Okay,” is all I can think to say.

“You ever do any hacking?”

“No.”

From another inside pocket, Lincoln pulls my iPhone. It got lifted while we were incapacitated in the corridor outside the computer lab, along with my wallet and everyone else’s phones and wallets. I’m quite certain that its token four-digit security took him less time to crack than it takes me to type this. He’s flipping through my emails, my notes.

“Like maybe testing denial-of-service worms on domain servers you don’t like? Taking over your school security system?”

“I know a guy in Buenos Aires,” I blurt out. “And I found the alarm code written down next to a spare key.”

I’m aware that I’m maintaining a lot less composure than I’d like. Lincoln gives me a questioning look. He taps out a few more strokes on the tablet.

“So you’re saying you probably wouldn’t be up to breaking a triple-blind comsat link running a TACLANE through a cascading IP connection? Crack a dozen admin passwords and GELI directory systems?”

I stare at him with what I hope is a credible display of complete and utter ignorance. Lincoln is thoughtful for a moment. “I guess not,” he says finally.

As he taps the tablet to darkness, he tosses my iPhone to me without looking. The fumbling grab I use to snag it shows how unexpected that particular move was.

“So tell me why I’m here,” he says.

I’m suddenly aware that my head is hurting again. “Don’t you mean *Why you’re here?*” My phone shows no bars, which isn’t a huge surprise, but I’m tapped into a strong Wi-Fi signal on a network with no name. “I mean, like, you’re asking why we’re here, right? Me and the others?”

“No, I’m asking, like, why I’m here. I know why you’re here. You’re here because my team picked you up and brought you here.

What I don't know is how much you've managed to put together about what's happening here since you arrived. So tell me."

As I'm trying to kick my brain into gear, I realize that the tablet isn't dark after all. It's showing the shadowy security feed from the cabin of the chopper, the others motionless against the walls. Molly is sitting up but still off by herself, staring at the floor now. I can see Breanne whispering, trying to talk to her, but Molly never looks up.

"If you're going to kill us anyway, what I know or can figure out doesn't matter a whole hell of a lot." The words are out before I've really thought about them, which I realize in the silence that follows is the only way they ever could have gotten said. I lock my gaze to Lincoln's. I don't bother trying to hide how scared I am.

"It's been a long time since I had to kill anybody," he says at last. "You want to help me keep it that way, Scott?"

I just nod.

Lincoln nods back. "All right, then."

In the dark computer station, the same view of the chopper cabin pulses on one of the monitors. In another pane, Carl is watching Lincoln and me in the corridor. On the transcript pane, everything gets taken down.

**SCOTT:** *You're a private industrial-military consortium. Guns for hire. Corporate espionage, intellectual property theft. Maybe political kidnapping. Definitely weapons sales. You're here because you're a long way from commercial flight zones. Any military traffic gets routed around you between Cold Lake, Esquimalt, Juneau. You can come and go, nobody sees you.*

**LINCOLN:** *Very good. You missed the convenient blind spot for real-time satellite surveillance. Plus the trout up here are superb. Do you fish?*

**SCOTT:** *No.*

**LINCOLN:** *Very relaxing. You should try it sometime, you seem a little tense.*

Like they're expecting something, all the other monitors in front of the five empty jump seats come on in a sudden flare of grey light.

In the corridor, Lincoln taps the tablet through to a new pane. A cascade of screenshot images of the Vindicator opens up. The view in the vehicle bay, schematics, controls, all of it pulled from the game.

**LINCOLN:** *So tell me about the Vindicator.*

On every pane of every screen in the dark computer station, the network assault of three hours earlier opens up again. Across all five consoles, directory traces and system control feeds erupt like a fire-storm.

As a claxon sounds in the corridor, all of Lincoln's even-handed manner drains away.

In the bunker, Malkov sees the control code he's been monitoring shred and twist away like storm-torn cloud. The dead systems at the other end of his secure landline suddenly spike active, running code that he knows shouldn't be there.

The network hack that crippled his systems base-wide three hours before is alive again. The secure system running in Russian is where it's coming from.

Even as he stands, he hears the doors of the bunker slam shut and seal with the echoing crash of magnetic bolts. The door panel goes red. He tries his card once, twice, no response. The panel's locked out, dead.

He screams something in Russian that I'm pretty sure is the epithet that has no suitable brackets.

In the corridor, Lincoln has my hands behind my back and the bay doors carded open before I have time to realize what's going on. He half-pushes, half-throws me at the sentries, the Uzis up and gripped tight for safeties off.

"Keep them locked down. Don't move until you hear from me."

As he disappears out the main corridor from the landing bay at a run, I'm already being dragged toward the chopper. Even before the others can react to the cabin door suddenly opening, I'm inside and it's shut again.

In the dark computer station, base systems are under overwhelming assault. One after another, control grids go green to red as the Russian program takes over. Security, doors, lights, communications, all of it shuts down base-wide, one node at a time.

In the ops room, everything goes dark just as Lincoln sprints in. Safelights kick in a moment later but the doors are slamming shut along the corridor. Like he realizes what it means, Lincoln manages to jam a conference chair into the ops room doors before they close. Metal squeals as the chair is crushed, the door mechanism grinding down and jamming with a hand's width of space still open. Enough room to see the flare of red lock-out lights blazing on the door panels in the corridor beyond.

As Lincoln steps back, the claxon of alarms cuts out suddenly, the base shrouded by an unnatural silence. The faint hum of lights and ventilation is always there before, but you only notice it now that it's gone. The dozen people behind Lincoln in the ops room are watching as he steps back from the narrow view to the corridor beyond. Karya's one of them.

"Get this door open," is all he says as he turns away.

## Dream On

Aerosmith, 1973. In the chopper, we're whispering furtively as I frantically untape everyone's hands, trusting that whatever's going on outside is going to keep anybody from caring too much if the camera sees us. I get Molly free first, but if I'm looking for any reaction over and above what I've already seen, it isn't coming. She turns even farther away as she fumbles the tape at her feet. I try to help her, but she slaps my hand away like she means it.

I go through the others as quickly as I can, Rico first so he can help Breanne. Mitchell seems less worse for wear than the rest of us. Whether that's a result of his general Zen bent or because he was the only one smart enough not to fight back at the school, I don't know.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod. "It's going to be all right." I'm saying it mostly for Molly's benefit, but she's the only one not listening. I go to the side port to see the two sentries still at the closed landing bay doors. They seem preoccupied with hammering away at the control panel for reasons I don't understand at the time. All I know is that they're not watching us, which is good.

"What the hell is going on?" Breanne is locked to Rico, shaking so hard that he has to pin her hands in his.

"It's some kind of private paramilitary thing."

"And us getting kidnapped by them translates as *all right* in your book?"

"It's a misunderstanding. I talked to the guy, Lincoln. It sounds like they had a security failure, they thought we had something to do with it."

"Why?" Rico asks. "And why were they so interested in you?"

I don't know the answer to either question, so I can only shrug. "It was a systems hack thing. They've got our academic records, a whole bunch of other [dung]. They figured I was the technical guy, I guess."

“What did you tell them?” Mitchell asks.

“I showed off my complete ignorance. Then there was some kind of alert, I don’t know what’s going on. He was asking me about...”

Even as the words form in my mind, something clicks. It doesn’t make sense, though. Not yet, anyway.

“He was asking me about the Vindicator.”

“About the game? Why?”

Again, I shrug. Something’s nagging at me, but it can’t surface through the chaos and the general anxiety. As I’m thinking, I realize I’ve still got my phone. I fumble it from my pocket and try without much hope to fire up Skype, but the Wi-Fi network that was there only minutes before is gone.

“Hey,” Mitchell says. “Where are the guards?”

Carefully, I move up beside him, pressing close to the glass of the cabin door. The sentries who were there a minute before are gone now. The doors to the corridor are still sealed. In the intervening minute, none of us saw the panel lights under the control of the Russian system suddenly flare invitingly green again, the doors opening in response to a slotted silver card. None of us saw how the card got mysteriously locked into the key-card panel even as the two stepped warily through to see what’s going on. One step too far and the doors slammed shut behind them, leaving the card behind. Across the landing bay and inside the chopper, we can’t hear them hammering futilely from the other side.

We do, however, hear a pleasant-sounding chime and a metal-on-metal click as the lock on the cabin door goes green.

Before anybody else can think about what it means, Molly’s in motion. She’s at the door, hammering at the lock with both hands. She’s scared, out of her mind with fear, running on automatic. Not blinking.

All the time, right from the beginning, Carl knew Molly would be the most important part of it.

The door pops open. She’s through it and outside before any of us can move.

In the bunker, Malkov has his sidearm out, a Glock that he empties into the door panel with a scream. He already knows it won’t do



him any good.

In the ops room, Karya and a team of four have the conference table slammed through the gap and turned into a giant stainless steel lever. Under pressure, the door inches open slowly. Lincoln is at one of the workstations, trying to get any sort of functioning connection to his systems. All of those systems are locked down tight under a blanket of secure encryption that the Russian program has unleashed.

In the landing bay, Molly's screaming.

"Somebody help us! Let us out! Let us go home!" In her voice, the fear is tangible, visceral, echoing the fear in my voice, in Rico's, Breanne's, Mitchell's as we all call her back. She isn't listening. She's shut down, panicked, lost in a way I've never heard before.

Actually, that's not true.

I did hear it once before. The night she called me in December to tell me that her mom had cancer, and that she and her dad were leaving that night. I heard it as she told me she'd call me again, that she'd be back in a couple of weeks. When she said everything was going to be all right. In her voice, I heard the same fear of being caught up in something you can't control, something you can't get out of.

As Molly frantically spins around looking for some sign of life, some sign of anybody there to hear her, the door panel that the two guards disappeared through flashes red to green. Perfectly timed so that she'll see it.

The doors themselves stay locked, so that the guards don't come through it. I don't know this at the time, but I'm aware suddenly of the faint pounding coming from the corridor beyond. I don't know if Molly hears it or not, but she's running, sprinting a dozen meters to start frantically slamming the panel with its lifeless green lights.

Breanne is two steps behind her, breaking from Rico. Naturally, Rico follows. Mitchell follows him. I'm shouting at them all, something about the guards coming back and how we need to stay in the chopper if we want to not get shot. I break into a run because I know that physically dragging Molly back is the only way it's going to happen.

Carl is watching. Waiting until Molly notices the silver key card,

frantically pulling it out and reslotting it to no effect. Waiting until I cross an unseen line three strides from the doors. Mitchell, Breanne, Rico, and Molly are already inside it.

The sound of metal on metal comes down in an earsplitting slam. Along the unseen line I just stepped across, the floor splits and fractures, dropping out beneath us. Then the five of us are falling into a well of shadow that has no end.

In that first split second of timeless terror, all you can think about is that you're going to die.

You know how some people talk about hoping they go quick when the end comes, so that they don't have time to think about it? Forget it. Based on my own limited experience, the less time you have to deal with the fact that you're about to die, the more time seems to slow down to make sure you get in your full quota of paralyzed terror.

Also, that bit about your life flashing before your eyes? Doesn't happen. Or maybe I just don't have enough of a life to flash yet, I don't know.

But even over the frenzied sound of all five of us screaming, there's a sudden twinge of faint understanding. Because the time-slowness-as-you-drop-into-darkness thing has been replaced by the realization that we're not actually falling but sliding. The plunge through the disappearing floor has dropped us into a smooth tube, pitch black and twisting. An emergency chute, carrying us down in longer and longer arcs that keep our gravity-assisted acceleration under control.

One quick slide later, the insane amusement park ride opens up without warning and we're unceremoniously dumped out onto a cold concrete floor. Somebody's foot cuffs me in the back of the head, but the temporary crescendo of pain just becomes a thankful reminder that I'm not actually dead.

All around us is shadow. I can't see the others, but a wave of nausea keeps me from getting up off the floor to look for them. Where I lie prone, I can see the long neoprene tube we've fallen out of, my vision shaky as I follow its twisting length up into the darkness. A failsafe escape route from the landing bay above to wherever we are now.

If you were taking it intentionally, you'd probably go feet first

and know to tuck and roll when you hit bottom. I have to claw my way up past the ache in my head and a sharper spike of pain that tells me I've twisted my ankle. I make it to hands and knees after what seems like hours. I try to focus, try to find the others, try to see Molly.

She's there with the rest of them, just behind me. Where they've been scattered unceremoniously by the sudden stop, they're facing away from me, all of them staring out at one spot in the center of the shadowed space around us. Mitchell is putting his glasses back on where they popped off at some point. No one else moves.

I see what they see.

My head is spinning. The vehicle bay is so quiet I can hear myself breathing, can hear Breanne sobbing quietly where Rico's shaking hand clutches hers.

A dozen meters in front of us, a line of portable lighting rigs and heavy tools forms a cordon around the Vindicator. For real. Six meters long, three high. Antennas and weapons racks bristle from the top and sides, though unlike in the simulation, those racks look empty. The tight umbilicus of cable runs from the distant wall to the belly of the tank, six wheels spread wide below a hull of high-impact composite armor. The *M* on the side panel gleams in the half-light.

I whisper the epithet that's got no suitable brackets. I stare with the rest of them for what seems like a very long time.

## Live and Let Die

Paul McCartney and Wings, 1973. In the ops room, the doors finally give way with a shriek of twisted steel. The table is bent nearly in two, Karya standing on it to wedge it down into the space it's managed to open up for her. At one of the systems consoles behind her, Lincoln has managed to patch into a security feed that's inexplicably still open, a regularly cascading series of static images flashing in from key camera points across the base. Shot after shot shows people sealed in throughout the complex, most of them trying to batter their way through the doors with a uniform lack of success.

"Orders, sir?" Karya steps up behind Lincoln but he isn't answering. Instead, he stares at the one image he was waiting for. The landing bay, empty. He can see the chopper cabin door wide open, can see where one of the landing bay's emergency access chutes has been deployed and is sealing again even as he watches. Karya sees it for the brief moment before it's gone, cycling through to the next view. When Lincoln turns to her, she's gone very pale.

"We hit the closest weapons cache," he says. His voice is ice. "Use it to cut down to the emergency evac tunnel. The floors will be easier going than any of the doors between here and there. Load up on heavy ordnance from stores. We take them alive if we can."

Karya nods, but Lincoln can read the grave reservation in her look even before she speaks. "James, they're kids. This can't be..."

"Move," he says.

In the vehicle bay, we're all standing but I don't remember getting up. I try to move for Molly but she's already limping away, rubbing her hands like she hurt them when she hit. From the corner of my eye, I note that Mitchell is bleeding from a cut on his cheek. Even in the shadows, Breanne is paler than she should be, Rico practically holding her up as they shuffle closer to the circle of lamps ahead.

The vehicle bay we're in is the vehicle bay we saw in the game.

Only it's real. The stacks of crates marked *LIVE ORDNANCE*, the row of Humvees under white tarps. Jet fighter spare parts, missile racks, all of it. Floodlights up high cast long cones of white along the walls, trailing away to shadow toward the center where we stand. The ceiling is fifteen meters above us, four storeys of interior space carved through the center of the complex.

In my head, fatigue and fear twist together in a way that almost makes it possible to tell myself I'm dreaming. Almost.

Lincoln's team are moving, demolition-carving their way down through four floors of interior space on their way to find us. The security feed that I saw it on earlier tonight scared me just watching it.

They move like a machine. Lincoln's in charge but he doesn't need to say a word as they advance. There are too many locked-down doors to deal with, so they ignore them. One level at a time, they cut through the steel frame of the floor instead, shaped-charge explosives pulled from the weapons caches we opened in the game. The smoke is thick but they're all in environment masks and night-vision goggles. Each time, Karya and three others are the first ones down. One level at a time, they sweep each identical section of sealed-off corridor below. When Karya motions the *all clear*, the rest of the team drops down.

On the bottom level, Lincoln waves her back, taking point himself. Where a section of wall and floor disappears in a blinding flash, he counts to ten before he drops down into the mouth of the evac tunnel, which has lights blazing and weapons lockers lining the walls. Ahead, one section of wall is actually the back of a concealed double door, its controls pulsing blood-red in the shadows.

As the rest of the team drops down behind him, Lincoln's already got one locker open, a half-dozen packs of C-4 explosives ready to be prepped. Karya and the rest strap on Uzis and shotguns, two crews assembling M2 heavy machine guns. Nobody says a word.

"Everything we've got on the evac door." As he says it, Lincoln senses Karya coming up behind him without looking. His voice sounds unnaturally loud in the silence. "We'll hit the seal, try to crack the wall frame from the inside, then blow the bolts. If that doesn't work, we'll cut through with the big guns."

“The wall supports won’t hold. You’ll bring all four floors down.”

Lincoln shakes his head. “I designed the [anglo-saxon] walls. They won’t come down till I tell them to.”

“If you start blasting fifty-cal in an access corridor, you’re going to kill somebody,” Karya says. “The walls on the dormitory level are thinner, we can cut through them. Send down a couple of people small enough to not be seen.”

“That’d be including you?” Carefully, Lincoln presses the first slab of C-4 into the gap around the frame of the door. Karya is silent. “We’re out of time,” he says.

Fifty meters away on the other side of that door, which looks like just the wall from this side, Mitchell paces slowly up to the line of lights that circle the Vindicator. Because he has to try it, he fiddles with the controls like he did in the game. Like they did in the game, the lights arc on with a pulse of blue-white and a faint hum.

“Get the [anglo-saxon] away from it,” I whisper, hoarse.

Mitchell turns back like he’s just remembered I’m there. Even with fast-drying blood streaking his face, he wears a look of abject wonder. “Don’t you see what’s going on?”

“Shut down the [lord’s name in vain] Syfy-channel feed to your frontal lobes and get real.” As Mitchell takes two steps toward the tank, I take four steps, ready to head him off in case he’s planning on doing anything stupid.

Breanne and Rico step up behind me. Breanne is shaking her head, lost. “This is insane...”

Mitchell kneels suddenly to pick something up in the shadows. The silver key card that Molly had in hand when the floor gave way. It must have come down with us, gleaming where he holds it to the light, wide-eyed.

“Insanity is the belief in what can’t be sensed or the denial of what can be sensed,” he says. “What’s real can only be embraced.” He smiles. A special smile I recognize, a smile he reserves for moments of what he calls ultimate understanding. More than I have at any point in our four-year friendship, I want to hit him. “The game is real,” he says. “We’re in it.”

From the corner of my eye, Molly hasn’t moved. Still standing

next to a stack of unmarked crates, she's staring at the Vindicator where it rises from the haze of floodlight. I shift toward her, which is all Mitchell needs to move. He slots the card to the recessed panel on the side entry portal, beside the *M* on the Vindicator's side.

The clank of magnetic bolts sounds out, impossibly loud in the silence.

All of us watch as the hatch seam along the hull separates from the armor and snaps up. Like it did in the simulation, the ladderway folds out at the same time with a pneumatic hiss. From within comes a haze of faint light. Before I can do anything, before I can say anything, Mitchell is up the steps and inside.

All I can think about is wanting to wake up.

All I can think about is that this dream has gone on long enough, and that it needs to stop now. All at once, I'm remembering those stories you always used to hear when you were a kid. About how if you dreamed you were falling and you didn't wake up before you hit bottom, you'd die in real life.

Standing in the corona shadow at the edge of the Vindicator's floodlit floor space, my mind and my senses are twisting so that the floor feels like it's pitching up against me, gravity pulling me along toward the shadowed portal in the Vindicator's hull. Rico and Breanne are already ahead of me, Rico looking like he's feeling it too, like he's going to hold Breanne back. In the end, he lets her slowly lead him up the steps.

I fight it. I move for Molly instead. I don't get to see what Mitchell and the others see, at least until I watch the security feed later. The three of them are standing in a darkened space, five jump seat workstations set up beneath staggered banks of consoles and displays. Because you've been seeing all this through my half-assed description, you'd recognize it as the dark and deserted computer station that's been following our every move since it all started. The computer station from which the game was run, from which the hack was run that brought Lincoln's network down.

This is the Vindicator cabin. This is where it all begins and ends.

Mitchell, Breanne, and Rico gaze wide-eyed through a haze of faint light given off by a thousand different controls, all the boards on dim standby. At front sits the combination flight console that only Molly could figure out. The systems post with its two pillared banks

of monitors sits adjacent. The viewport of translucent polycarb wraps around them both, the lights of the bay a faint gleam beyond. Toward the back, the other three consoles sit within the same bewildering array of controls that the simulation showed us.

Because he has to, Mitchell scans the boards in search of the same big green button I pushed in the game to bring the onboard systems to life. Because he has to, he pushes it.

A faint hum rises, the power plant coming online somewhere within the hull. Chimes sound out as all five consoles come online. Just like in the game, controls flare on one of the systems screens in a storm of high-tech color. Only that screen doesn't show a systems node map this time, but a security monitor feed. It shows outside, where I kneel next to Molly. I try to meet her gaze but she won't look at me. She's still rubbing her hands together inside the overlong white sleeves of her sweater.

As the monitor next to that flares suddenly to life, Mitchell, Breanne, and Rico can see a fixed security video point showing a half-dozen packs of C-4 set into place around the evac door. Mitchell and Breanne don't recognize the explosives, don't know what it means. Rico does.

From the bay, I hear him shout. Focused on Molly, I can't make out what he's saying.

Lincoln is the last one up to the safety of the top level, barely through before he hits the detonator. Karya and the rest are along the walls, the pulse of the explosion four floors below slamming up a split second ahead of the blast of smoke and flame that licks the ceiling. Even before it fades, they're moving.

In the vehicle bay, the concussion knocks me flat. Ahead of me, Molly slams against a stack of crates that spills as she falls. From beyond her comes a surge of searing heat and a split-second glimpse of plate steel buckling like tinfoil, the door seal shattering to leave a smoldering outline behind.

I'm dragging myself toward Molly, head spinning, fingernails tearing against the concrete floor. I can see her moving, conscious suddenly of a hissing sound that it takes me a second to realize is shrapnel raining past us. As she tries to rise, I pull her back down behind the crates. I hold her tight. I feel her screaming because I can't hear it, still deafened by the blast.



To both sides of me, there's movement.

At the Vindicator, Rico is stumbling down the ladderway, screaming for Molly and me. At the now-unsealed door, Karya and four others smash through with portable rams, creating enough of a gap to slip through. Something else is moving behind them, but I'm distracted by a scattershot burst of small arms fire that lashes out above my head. Somebody on the other side of the door is shooting high, protecting the point team. They're nowhere close to hitting us.

That's with the benefit of hindsight, though. At the time it happens, all I'm aware of is that somebody is trying to kill me.

I move. Or at least I try to move, but Molly won't. She's frozen, flat on the ground, clawing at me as I try to drag her up.

From above comes a hail of sparks as someone at the door sees me. A hail of Uzi fire sprays into the girder-works above. Warning shots.

It's a dozen strides to the Vindicator. I don't remember running it.

I remember grabbing Molly around the waist. I remember seeing Rico waving us on. Then the next thing I remember is pushing Molly ahead of me through the hatch, Rico and Breanne grabbing her as I slam the outside panel. I have no idea how that panel works, except to note that its lights have stayed green since Mitchell activated it with the key card. The ladderway snaps in, tossing me up and inside as the hull seals behind me.

From the floor, I see Mitchell frantically pushing buttons on what I dimly recognize from the game as the communications board. The roar in my ears means I can barely hear him shouting into a headset mic plugged into the arm of the jump seat, a lot of variations on *Please don't shoot*. His expression tells me he isn't getting through to whoever's on the outside.

At the front of the cabin, Breanne is trying to get Molly to calm down, but her own near-hysteria doesn't make it any easier. Next to her, Rico is trying the systems console, madly hitting controls at random. As I try to move for them, my ankle gives way, dropping me to the crash seat in front of what would have been Rico's weapons console in the simulation.

With my elbow, I manage to hit a mess of controls on the arm of the chair. With a blinding flare of light, every console in the cabin

suddenly comes to full life. Breanne trips backwards where she cries out, even as an exterior view flashes across the flight control screen in front of her. The vehicle bay is crawling with troops, Lincoln's forces moving into position with lethal efficiency. On the screen by Breanne, I can see four of them break out Stinger missile shoulder-racks from a weapons cabinet. In front of me, three guys with unreadable expressions have the destroyed doors open wide enough to move a heavy machine gun through, the same view seen on Mitchell's screen. Rico's console shows a squad dropping behind cover, Uzis trained on the Vindicator's side hatch.

On the systems board monitor in front of Molly where she sits, a schematic map unfolds. Russian alphanumeric scroll past a gentle pulse of blue light at center. I don't need to stare long to recognize the image.

It's us.

It's the endgame from three hours ago. There's the vehicle bay. There's the rest of the base wrapped around it, a perfect echo of the map from the simulation.

There's the emergency evacuation tunnel.

Molly stares, not blinking.

Carl knew that Molly would be the most important part of it.

Without a word, she climbs across Breanne on the floor, pulling herself into the front jump seat. A mess of g-web safety harness hangs above her, Molly slipping into with an instinctive grace. She takes less time to scan the insane complexity of the board than it takes me to describe it here. I can almost feel her matching up what she's seeing in front of her with the controls she remembers from the game, her fingers hammering down.

I can hear myself screaming at her to stop, but Molly's not listening to anything except the howling turbine pulse of the Vindicator's drive engines as they come to life. The interior of the tank starts to shudder as she grabs the nav console controls.

"Hang on," is all she says.

# 33

## Don't Fear the Reaper

Blue Öyster Cult, 1976. In the vehicle bay, everybody freezes. Farthest from us, Karya is with the guys laying down cover fire from the shattered wall. She's listening to Lincoln screaming orders from the point, directing the setup of the heavy guns. Then he's suddenly shielding his eyes against a flare of blue-white that eclipses the floods overhead, a haze of running lights erupting along the Vindicator's undercarriage.

Whatever Lincoln's people were expecting, whatever they thought the systems hack and the lockdown and the police action in the bay was about, this isn't the way it was supposed to go.

From inside it, the Vindicator rings out with a sudden clattering. It's the sound that heavy machine guns make when they're being fired at close range into armor plate and solid-core bulletproof tires and the hopefully more extremely bulletproof viewport glass of the viewport directly in front of us all.

Breanne screams.

Molly slams the suspended floating-wing steering yoke straight in.

With a guttural shriek, the Vindicator's six wheels hit maximum torque in an instant, tearing chunks from the concrete where they spin out against the floor. We slide in place for a split second before the tires find the friction point and kick forward. One long moment of uncertainty, then Molly takes us out. A half-assembled missile rack closest to us is abandoned a split second before we plow through it. Across the vehicle bay, Lincoln's troops fall back in panic.

In the bunker, Malkov sees the landline break as the cables trailing out from the Vindicator's belly are torn away. His last data connection goes dead.

A momentary surge pulses through the safelight as the thrashed base systems are suddenly freed up to reboot. Damage control kicks

in, getting the lights back online but keeping the doors locked. The security system that Carl cut through starts the slow process of putting itself back together again.

Malkov holsters his empty Glock. He sits in silence, waiting.

Inside the Vindicator, Mitchell, Breanne, Rico, and I are trying desperately to claw our way into the closest jump seats. We're pulling g-force like some hyperactive rollercoaster, the walls of the cabin slamming into me every time Molly cranks the controls. Through the viewport, the vehicle bay is a blur of motion and tracer fire, the steady staccato ping of bullets ricocheting off us as we sail through it.

Molly is locked tight to the yoke, fingers a blur as she adjusts throttle at all six transaxles independently. She's feeling her way through a twisting path from wall to wall and back again. Testing the controls, matching them to everything she learned from the simulation as she stays clear of Lincoln's forces where they scatter and regroup.

I manage to drag myself up to the systems chair as Mitchell clammers into the ops seat. Breanne and Rico roll into the engineering and weapons stations on a particularly hard turn. As we twist and tear our way through the vehicle bay, it would be easy to assume that Molly is pushing the Vindicator at random, fighting for control. But I'm watching where I sit next to her, and I see the perfect simplicity of her plan.

She's tracking a path between the heavy guns so they can't shoot us without shooting each other, keeping the troops on the ground scattered so that nobody knows when it's safe to move. It's an almost perfect reflection of the tactics she used in the simulation. But all the while, she's scanning the schematic on the systems board in front of me. Searching for something.

When she cranks hard and cuts a suddenly clear course for the shattered wall, I know she's found it.

The force of impact when we send the blast-shattered door through to the far side of the evacuation tunnel slams me face first into my console, which is alive suddenly with Russian alerts flashing red. When I claw my way back to a sitting position and finally feel my g-web snap tight, the viewport shows the walls of the evac tunnel as a fractured blur of white. At upwards of a hundred and fifty km/h,

we're ricocheting back and forth between them, Molly trying to hold the Vindicator steady inside the half-meter space to both sides.

On the schematic map, the pulsing blue dot that marks our position at center is headed straight for the double line of solid black where the map ends. That double line is a half-meter of reinforced armor that stands between us and outside.

"Molly, pull it up! We can't do this!" My hearing is almost back but the roar of the drive engines and the scraping shudder of our passage is deafening.

Molly makes no sign that she even knows I'm there.

I strain against the safety harness holding me tight, reaching out to touch her shoulder. In response, she straight-arms me away. We lurch dangerously, the single split second of Molly's hand leaving the controls almost piling us into the wall.

In her expression as she straightens us out, in the white-knuckle set of her hands on the yoke and the thin line of her mouth, I see something I've never seen before. Something I don't ever want to see again.

In her eyes that are a blue I don't have the words to describe, I see that Molly isn't afraid to die.

I scream Rico's name.

Behind me, he knows why I'm screaming. His weapons board is a kaleidoscope of lights, messages in Russian scrolling down four different monitors.

Earlier, during the game, I said that if it was all happening for real, you'd be scared out of your [anglo-saxon] mind.

Rico is shouting that same bracketed text over and over again as he hammers out the control sequence that he practiced while we ate pizza and joked about how we were going to spend our prize money. That all seems like a long time ago now.

I remember with a sinking heart that from the outside, most of the Vindicator's weapon racks looked empty. I don't even know if we have missiles. But from beneath my feet comes a sudden roar straight from the 5.1 surround soundtrack of the apocalypse. The viewport goes nearly opaque for an endless split second, protecting us from the flare of four Spriggan missiles as they erupt from the Vindicator's

belly and straight-line down the corridor in front of us.

The back-blast hits us a split second before the sound. A wall of white fire washes across the viewport to black it out again, no way to see how much of the doors are still in front of us. No way to tell if we're going to die or not.

Timelessness again. I'm hanging there, waiting for something to happen. I'm conscious suddenly of the fact that I'm not actually looking to the viewport anymore, but to Molly.

Something changes in our movement. But even as I realize we've gone airborne, my safety harness sucks me back into the seat as we hit again.

Through the viewport, everything is black sky and starlight, the lines of tall trees blurring past. We're on a deserted mountainside, slewing past the edge of a cloud of fire and shredding steel. I get a glimpse of a stand of poplar and a length of chain-link fence before they both disappear, the Vindicator tearing through them like they might be balsa wood and balloons.

The landscape is suddenly daytime-bright, the viewport turning night-vision green as it pulls the light from the shadows. Just as suddenly, a boulder the size of my house looms directly in front of us. Molly is already slamming the Vindicator into a half-reverse, sliding us past it sideways before straightening out again.

The faint shape of a mountain switchback road winds out and downward ahead of us, a rock-strewn stretch of washed-out gravel. We should be bouncing uncontrollably, but I can hear the servos hammering in the wheel wells beneath us as we soar over rubble like it was fresh asphalt.

I glance back to the others. Breanne is straining against her harness to reach across Rico's console, her hand locked tight to his. Mitchell is grinning again, but the urge to hit him is rapidly fading beneath the undreamed-of joy of just being alive.

"Find me a map!" Molly has to shout to be heard, her voice hoarse. "Tell me where this [anglo-saxon] road is going!"

I hear her but I can't move at first. When I can move, it takes me less time at my console than I expect to find what looks like a GPS display laid over a government survey map. The Vindicator is still the blue dot pulsing at center. It's a real-time feed, so it's in English for a change.

“Got it,” I say. “We’re way northwest of town. If you stay on this track, it looks like it empties onto Hendrix Road...”

From the back, Mitchell calls. “If they come after us, the main roads are where they’ll be looking.”

He’s right, but I’m too stressed out to care. “It’s a [lord’s name in vain] road, all right? Everything else is all rat[dung] logging trails between here and the highway...”

“I’ve got it,” Molly says coldly, cutting me off.

“Look, just stay straight until you hit a side-grade...”

“I’ve said I’ve got it!” She’s staring past me to the console, scanning the tracery of twisting white lines laid out ahead of us. Because there’s nothing else I can say to her, I call back to Mitchell instead.

“Get on ops. Find out if they’re following us before we assume they’re following us.” Like it’s the most normal thing I’ve ever asked him, he nods as he focuses at the controls on his board.

They aren’t after us. Not yet, anyway, though it takes all of us working together an uncomfortable couple of minutes to figure that out. Rico’s got radar, Mitchell’s got visual, I’ve got remote monitoring that shows us where the base’s systems are still struggling to get fully back on line.

We’re free and clear. We’ve got a whole lot of back road between us and safety.

No one says a word as Molly takes us home.

# 34

## No Quarter

Led Zeppelin, 1973. A half-klick from the base, Lincoln stands in the shadowed remains of what's left of the evac tunnel doors. Ahead of him, a swath of destruction has been torn through the scrub trees and fencing that surround the mine site, fading into the dark downward slope of the mountain where the road disappears. Karya is at his side, no emotion betraying her expression. Lincoln's look is more weary than angry, but when he speaks, the malice is the only thing that comes through.

"We're shutting down. Give the order. Any personal effects, collect them. Light ordnance and battle gear on the choppers. Two teams. Malkov flies second unit, you're with me, everybody else re-groups in North Dakota. Anybody not ready to move at 0330 gets left behind."

"Shutting down? Why aren't we..."

"Because this site's been compromised. Depending on who they might be working for, I don't know how long we've got before they get here. We're not leaving them anything to find."

"But they can't get anywhere, we're ten minutes behind them..."

"And if they've got air transport waiting, that'll be enough. If they stick to the ground, the forty-minute head start won't hinder the op. Give the order."

Karya is thoughtful, choosing her words carefully though she knows it won't do any good. "And what exactly is the operation?"

"They just burned down our [lord's name in vain] security and data systems and drove a half-billion dollars worth of stolen tech out the [anglo-saxon] side door. We're going to get it back."

"James, there's something else going on here. They were kids..."

"Give the order."

Lincoln turns from her. He gets a half-dozen steps down the ruined evac corridor before he realizes Karya isn't following. He turns back. "What?"



“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

The coldness in Karya’s voice cuts Lincoln more than he wants to show. He just nods.

“You said the tank was offlined. Power systems disabled, everything stripped. How did they...?”

“Where’s Malkov?”

Karya is silent a moment. “Door systems are still locked down. We’re cutting our way into the rest of the command core now.”

“Tell him to find me.” Lincoln turns again, disappears into the haze of smoke still twisting along the ceiling of the corridor. Karya watches him go.

In the bunker, Malkov just sits, the sound of a team cutting their way toward him with torches coming faint through the still-sealed doors. He’s computer-blind, offline, all monitor feeds dead. No way to see what’s happening, no idea what’s been going on all around him. No way to tell what we’ve done. But in his expression, in the cold grey eyes as he stares at the blank screen where he watched the Russian code run from its secure space, he already knows.

When I watched the security feed that showed him trapped there, this is what I saw. Malkov already understands what’s happening.

Malkov has already figured out how it has to end.