

The Spanish Exception

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May 6, 2007

Chapter 1

The Morning After

I woke up and instantly regretted it. I cautiously opened my eyes, knowing I was unready to see what was out there. Good. I was in my room at least. That was a start. Memory was next. It seemed to be somewhat corrupted, but it was obvious I'd been out somewhere last night. My memory spat out a cache line at me. It was a dinner. There was wine. There was port. My aching stomach and head told me I had had too much of both.

After a few minutes, the small amount of sunlight coming through the thin curtains seemed enough to bear and I opened my eyes again. Just as I was working up the strength to lever myself out of bed the door opened. This was a bit broken: I usually leave it locked overnight. As my brain wasn't capable of timesharing this morning, I didn't realise 'til I'd finished pondering that someone had entered the room. In contrast to my bleariness, he looked wide-awake, and was sharply dressed. I squinted at his face and felt recognition. Memory was being laggy again, but eventually I remembered that he had sat opposite me at dinner. He had been charming and popular with everyone else but me. If I recalled correctly — by no means guaranteed in that state of mind — I had taken a dislike to him, went on to disagree with everything he said on the principle that such a tosser must always be wrong, and had ended up talking a lot of crap. But memory didn't contain enough data to compute what he was doing in my room holding a glass, one of my glasses. I tried to formulate the question, but my mouth was far too dry and it came out as a dry croak. He proffered the glass.

“You need water.” He at least had the good sense to talk quietly. “I was rather hoping you'd be up and about by now. I know last night went on into the wee hours but I did leave you in quite late.” I looked at the clock on my bedside table and saw 1500 had been and gone. I downed the glass of water and put it down next to the clock. “Come on, we need you out of bed.” He put out an arm to help me up. I ignored it and swung my legs onto the floor. I tried to put my weight on them but ended up grabbing his arm to stop myself falling over. He smiled subtly but smugly, and I realised why I didn't like him.

“I don't recall your name,” I said.

“Yes. There's a good reason for that. I recall yours though, BigPling. Or can I call you Pling for short?”

“Feel free,” I replied coolly, but I was worried. I never talked about online stuff in Real Life – that sort of carelessness could get you into trouble – but this

guy knew who I was.

“Erm,” he wavered, “I don’t wish to seem prurient here, but you might want to put something on before my associate comes up.”

His associate? Did he mean the chick he’d been with last night? They were so obviously an item it just wasn’t funny. Anyway, it didn’t matter, as I parsed the rest of his sentence, scanned the floor, and noticed the remnants of what I’d been wearing last night among the general untidiness.

“I don’t know how you can live here,” he continued, “It’s like a pigsty.” At that, he took to picking things up off the floor and depositing them in tidy piles. I joined him, reclaiming a pair of boxers and pulling them on. A few more round-trips to the floor got me a pair of khaki denims with modded pockets and a bat-belt; a tight, dark grey, anonymous T-shirt that had once been a loose, black T-shirt emblazoned with the text “HURD 1.0 release party”; and a pair of shoes. Scrabbling round surfaces higher up I managed to claim my watch and a few other important pieces of electronics. Now clothed enough to maintain a bit of decency and kitted enough to maintain my reputation, I left my visitor to tidy up on his own and sat back on the bed hoping it would stop the room spinning round.

“I must apologize for trolling you so much last night, but I really couldn’t help myself. I must learn not to pick such easy fights: it’s bad for the character.” There wasn’t really much I could answer to that, so I spared my brain the effort of having to spin up again and remained silent. “Where was it we got up to? Ah yes, you were telling me how the migration market today makes states more communist than capitalist. I must confess, I didn’t really follow your arguments.” He paused to fold a pair of trousers over the back of a chair. “But this is not why we came here. We came to see you.” His girlfriend walked in, right on cue.

“Or more precisely, to get you.” She looked at her boyfriend. “We’re out of time. We need to move him.”

“Very well. Now, if you’d like to come with me, I’ll explain on the way.” I looked each of my visitors in the eye. They weren’t kidding. I asked the obvious question.

“Because you want to stop the Spanish Exception. Because you’re one of the few who knows what it is. And because we are the rest of them.”

There was a processing delay while my alcohol-crippled brain fought to reach understanding, and then it hit me, like a bucket of cold water over the head. I was really awake now, and knew I could not lose these people.

“Very well, Mr.— What do I call you, anyway?”

“Call me Nimrod. Not Mr. Nimrod, just Nimrod. And my associate is known as DarkMode.”

“Though everyone abbreviates it to Dark,” she hurriedly added. “Now can we move? There’s heavy activity out there and I don’t know who it is. You armed?” She was looking at me.

“Not really,” I said.

She reached down to her right shin and withdrew a gun from her long grey boot. “You just point and click. Put it somewhere you can get at it.” I nominated a spare pocket on my right thigh and stuffed it in. DarkMode walked out the door and Nimrod gestured for me to follow.

Walking between my new friends I felt boxed in, but they had just given me a gun... assuming it worked.

“Our car is parked just around the corner.” We headed, but as DarkMode rounded the corner she leapt back and flattened against the wall. Nimrod did likewise, and I thought it a good idea to copy them.

“Snipers,” she hissed. “We can’t get at it. Plan B?”

“What’s plan B?” I whispered.

“Good question,” chimed Nimrod, “perhaps you’d like to enlighten us?”

“Find a hole and sit tight ’til the others return from their mission, then get them to meet us here.”

“We don’t have that long. Besides, we need to go and pick them up. If only we had another form of transport.”

I did, and I said as much. It was only enough to take one, but if they could manage another route, I could make my own way there.

“Show me,” said DarkMode. I led them to the bike shed. When we got there I whipped off the dust sheet and grinned at them.

“A push-bike?” said Nimrod incredulously. I narrowed my eyes at him.

“This is my mobile rig,” I said. That much should have been obvious, from the boxes of electronics hanging off the thing. My pride and joy, it was. Anyone could have their box on their desk, and anyone could carry a slate around with them, but I didn’t know of anyone else who possessed such a wonderful thing as a biketop computer. I grabbed my helmet and booted the system up.

“You wear a helmet? What kind of a pansy—” DarkMode tailed off as she saw the HUD, earpiece, and microphone fold out of it.

“You built this setup? I’m quite impressed. It seems you’re everything we hoped for.” I had no idea what Nimrod was on about, but I was glad I could do something right.

“Directions?” I asked. Nimrod tossed me a datapin, which I plugged into the warbike. It pondered for a moment and then flashed a route on my HUD.

“Are you sure this is safe?” asked DarkMode.

“A damn sight safer than sitting here waiting for Christmas,” answered Nimrod. “As soon as this contraption hits the road it’ll draw troops away from the car. We can take it back and meet him there.”

“If he’s followed and reveals our position...”

“Then we’ll deal with it. Godspeed.” I wouldn’t need it. They still didn’t know exactly what my baby can do. *I’ll soon put that right*, I thought to myself, and stepped on the pedals, triggering the power-assisted acceleration. Most people are surprised to see a bicycle go from rest to 32 km/h in under three seconds, and these two were no exception. Pulling across two lines of traffic to the right-turn lane, the merc sensor beeped in my ear. I looked over my left shoulder and saw two cars desperately trying to change lanes too. The HUD highlighted their transponders as being on the database of cars known to be used by mercenaries. Tapping the buttons on the underside of the handlebars, I tuned the comms sniffer to the appropriate settings and turned on traffic control. The first of those actions failed because these mercs weren’t using any of the broken deciphering keys I had. The second was more successful: the warbike talked to the traffic light controls to let the traffic through from the other direction, leaving the mercs behind to eat my dust.

My relief evaporated as fast as an uncooled Intel chip as the alarm triggered again for two more mercs pulling out of a side-street to the right. According to the supplied directions, I was heading for the main road, with no opportunity for further turn-offs. Resigned to the fact that my legs were going to kill by the time

I got there, I ramped up to 45k and hoped they wouldn't do anything stupid somewhere so busy. Just to make sure, I also dialled up the police dispatch computer and requested urgent backup. Two minutes more of painful pedalling and three sets of altered traffic lights changed my mind and I dropped back to 40 just as another beep told me the pandas had arrived on the scene. I knew I had their keys on file so I tuned into their comms. My turnoff was just approaching but I noticed the two mercs had since been joined by the two I'd left behind. One of them suddenly bumped a gear and shot off down the road, decoying all the cop cars away. I shut off the sniffer as the last one disappeared down the road. Then the collision alarm sounded as one of the mercs sidled up behind me and gave me a good knock. My wheels are well armoured — I've had too many scrapes on this thing for them not to be — and the diagnostic told me nothing broke. I needed to do something about this, though. I remembered I had the gun in my pocket, so took my right hand off the handlebar, grabbed it from my pocket, pointed my arm backwards, and let off a shot or two. Pain shot through my elbow. The recoil on it was more than I was used to from FPSes and these things are not meant to be shot by a noob, without looking, in such an awkward position. A quick look over my shoulder told me I had broken the windscreen of the nearest, and I could stop worrying about them getting too close. Even though I couldn't shoot straight they couldn't risk a lucky shot, and they only had to wait for me to tire and slow down.

Desperate action was needed but I had to slow down for the approaching turn my HUD warned me of: the warbike has big fuel cells bulging out of either side limiting how far you can lean in. I moved to the outside lane and slowed down, but not enough. I stayed on the outside but didn't take the turn. The remaining mercs thought I was feinting and carried on. Suddenly, I squeezed through the gap in the barrier, onto the central reservation, and out into the other carriageway. I locked the back wheels and 180ed to face the way I came, powerslid into the left-hand lane, and went back the ten or twenty metres to the turn. My HUD showed me I was on the last leg of my journey, but the road I'd turned onto was narrow and quiet with no cover to either side, and my meagre shooting skillz wouldn't hold the mercs for long. The power-assisted acceleration took me past 45 as I iterated over the gears into top. I heard a rumble overhead, looked up, and saw a helifan descending. The merc sensor triggered again and I saw the three mercs rapidly catching me. It was a nice ambush they had for me. The helifan landed, blocking the whole road in front of me. I squeezed both brakes.

Now, brakes are something on a bike you really want to work. Broken brakes are a Bad Thing. So although my brakes are quite exotic, I've never really trusted myself enough to write an ABS controller for them. My back wheel locked and shot out to my left. The bike tipped to the right and hit the floor, still doing 50, and with me still on it. Together we scraped along the road into the helifan. I had not noticed its cargo door opening, so I was shocked when I actually did go inside the helifan and hit its front wall. The right leg of my denims and my right sleeve were torn to shreds, torn like the flesh underneath them. My body started to hurt even more as it was pressed down into the floor of the helifan, pressed by the acceleration of take-off. One of the fuel cells on the warbike exploded, and someone strolled over and squirted a fire extinguisher at it. My vision was starting to go blurry, and the extinguisher-wielder came over to me. When he spoke I recognized Nimrod's voice. It was the last thing

I heard before I blacked out.

“This, one might say, is my mobile rig.”

Chapter 2

The Rescue

Once we'd sent the recruit off on his geekmobile and waited for the ambush at our car to dissipate, the journey back to base was uneventful. As soon as we'd got the car in the cargo bay and reached the cockpit, we lifted off and traced back along the route we'd given BigPling. It wasn't too long before we found him, in need of support. I reached for the radio.

"Don't bother," said Nimrod, "he doesn't have our comms protocol and we don't have his public key. Just drop her down in front and be ready to lift off in a hurry."

I thought it was a bit of a daring manoeuvre and said as much.

"Not as daring as leaving him down there," he answered, and headed back down to the cargo bay.

I flew over the convoy to gauge its speed, then landed as ordered just in front. I kept the engines running on hover to be ready. I switched one of the monitors to the internal cargo bay camera and waited for BigPling to roll himself in clumsily. I didn't wait for him to stop moving before hitting the collective. Nimrod lifted the cargo door closed and I set the autopilot to head for our rendezvous with the other mission team.

A few minutes later, Nimrod came back from tending the new recruit and met me in the cockpit.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Sleeping like a babe, once again, but I've disinfected and bandaged his wounds and doped him up on painkillers. He should heal up over the next week or so."

And what were you thinking, sending him off on his own like that? I wanted to ask, but Nimrod would respond by asking if I had any better ideas for getting us all back to base, and I didn't, so instead I asked when we were rendezvousing with the other three.

"We just hang around at the objective until they radio for extraction," he yawned.

"Very well." I frowned to stop myself yawning in sympathy. "What are you going to tell BigPling?"

"What he wants to know; not less, nor more."

"And what about the thing he doesn't want to know?"

"We'll have to tell him eventually, I suppose, but softly."

“Don’t leave it too late.” I knew what Nimrod was like, and I didn’t want him to keep putting it off.

“I’d better go and check on our patient before he starts walking around naked again.” I gave him a quizzical look. “His clothes were a bit of a write-off; besides, they weren’t exactly very us. I’ll see what I can dig out for him. D’you think he’s about Edafu’s size?” With that, Nimrod went off to make a sartorial judgement. Someone who didn’t know him very well would think he was more concerned with fashion than people, but I knew it was just his way of coping. I curled up in the pilot’s seat and waited for the radio.

The comm sounded to announce an incoming call and Backplane’s voice came out.

“What’s your ETA?” he asked. There was a tone of urgency in his voice.

“Cockpit here.” I looked at the autopilot readout. “We’ll be at the extraction point in six minutes sixteen. Sit tight and stay low ’til we get there.”

“That’s a negative. There is heavy enemy presence here and we do not yet have the key. Stay close to our position once you get here: we may need urgent pickup in about eight minutes.”

“Roger that,” I said, and he ended the call. I deactivated the autopilot and punched up their position as an overlay on the main screen. This screen arced for 250° around the front of the cockpit, and extended downwards to underneath the flight console. When I was learning to pilot the hefa I thought it gave a feeling of flying free through the sky, but by now I was accustomed to it. The flight console contained all the controls necessary to fly the hefa, and a few monitors primarily for displaying engine status and the like. I flew the last few kilometres to the extraction point manually and tracked the team’s position, keeping at a safe distance to avoid revealing their position or getting caught up in a firefight. I activated the comm and sent a message to Nimrod that we were going in.

He reached the cockpit seven minutes after the call from Backplane. He was with BigPling, who was limping heavily and looked as if he’d put his right arm through a cheese grater.

“I was just telling BigPling not to take any more geological samples with his face,” joked Nimrod. “What’s the situation down there?”

“We should expect a request for pickup within a minute. They’ve met heavy res—”

I was interrupted by the comm, relaying a message from Backplane. “Cockpit, Backplane. We have transmitted the key. Meet us on the roof in one minute.”

“I don’t think we’ll have time to land. You two’d better man the hoist.” Not taking my eyes off the screen, I listened to them trooping back out behind me. I piloted the hefa over the roof and hovered. Backplane, Edafu, and Synsynacki burst out of a door onto the roof and ran to the opposite corner.

“Get us out of here,” yelled Backplane, “Now!”

I dropped down to hoist distance and waited as the three were lifted into the belly of the hefa.

“Clear to go,” replied Nimrod a few moments later. For the second time in an hour I floored the collective and sent us shooting into the sky, away from the danger below. I programmed the autopilot for the Spanish coast and headed for the cargo bay.

Chapter 3

Interregnum

I left DarkMode in her cockpit and went to the men's dorm. I made my first stop at Edafu's wardrobe, he being the person closest in size to BigPling. As the latter wouldn't be in the field for a while I left the camo gear and went for something a bit less utilitarian. After some deliberation I selected a pair of dark green, convertible trousers with enough pockets to keep him happy. I thought that the ability to turn them into shorts would prove useful with his legs being covered in clingplast. I picked out a matching, olive, cotton, sleeveless top and took them across the corridor to the sickbay, where BigPling was already awake and playing with the medical terminal.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm not." He prodded the transparent clingplast, which ran from his right hand up to the shoulder, and from there, down his right side to his waist, where it was covered by his miraculously intact boxers. There was a small patch on the inside of his left thigh, and then it continued down his right leg to the ankle, below which his shoes had protected him. The overall effect was of somebody whose skin was losing its opacity. Clingplast being transparent may be useful to spot infection but looking at it requires a strong stomach. "Whatever you drugged me with, it did the trick. Is this bandagery your doing?"

I nodded. "You might have enjoyed it more if DarkMode had done it, but her medical skills are somewhat lacking." Playing to the hormones is pointless with such committed geeks, but it drew a thin smile nonetheless.

He furrowed his eyebrows in a wonderfully open expression of puzzlement. "Are you two not, erm. . ."

"We are not, though we sometimes find it convenient to travel as a couple. Living on this helifan offers neither the time nor the privacy for courting; besides, we each have enough history to warrant a moratorium on romance." I finished the sentence, already half lost in painful memory. Before BigPling could ask any more, I thrust out the small pile of clothing.

"What, no silver jumpsuit?" he quipped.

"I can dig out an orange boiler-suit if you'd prefer, but I thought you'd be more at home in something a bit more casual. Ripped denims covered in gravel are very last season." He ignored the clothes and turned back to the medical terminal. I was amazed that he could still type with the tendons in his right hand as weak as they were.

"So, you people live in a hefa? Wow."

“Yes, this helifan” — I hated the contraction — “is our home. And now, it’s your home too. Welcome to the Eagleflight, freedom’s last bastion.”

“I’m no freedom fighter.” There was an unspoken *So what am I doing here?* after that statement, so I answered it.

“We are going to stop the Spanish Exception. As we speak, our comrades are about to discover and publish the secret key-signing key used for inter-corporate communications in Spain. This will throw the whole country into disorder and allow us to carry out the remainder of our operation. In two days we will infiltrate the headquarters of the Coca-Cola Company in Madrid. We need you to run the digital side of the attack. At the moment our digital presence is weak. Backplane has been running things until now, but we need someone more experienced in these matters. Given your skills and your familiarity with the cause, you were the obvious choice, despite your demonstrated intolerance for alcohol.”

“Who was—” He was cut off by the comm.

“Nimrod, cockpit. Get up here. We’re approaching the objective.” He grabbed the trousers and pulled them on. They were a little loose but the right length. With a little wincing where the seam scraped his shoulder, the top went on too. He looked at his watch, which I hadn’t noticed he was already wearing.

“Follow me,” I said, and strode out of sickbay. Bearing in mind his injuries, I kept my pace in check, and climbed the ladder to the flight deck slowly. We entered the cockpit with just enough time for me to make a quip at DarkMode before the mission team signalled for pickup. I took BigPling down the fireman’s pole to the cargo bay, and opened the door. We extended the winch arm out of the door and waited for a signal from below.

“Cargo bay, Backplane. Ready!” I activated the winch. While we waited for them to rise, I recorded a message for DarkMode that we were clear. A few seconds later, the heads of the mission team appeared above the bottom of the bay door. I started pulling the winch arm back into the bay. As soon as their feet were dangling over the open bay door I pressed the send button on the comm panel. BigPling winced under the burst of acceleration and grabbed a handhold. I got the winch arm the rest of the way in and closed the door. With sighs of relief the mission team unhitched themselves from the winch gear.

I waited until the door had closed and the noise had reduced to a level at which conversation was possible.

“Backplane, Synsynacki, Edaflu;” I gestured at each, “This is BigPling.” Everyone shook hands. “Now, let’s adjourn to the mess. I feel like a cup of tea.”

Chapter 4

Welcome Party

I unhooked and stashed the winch gear, and introductions went round. The new guy looked as expected, apart from two details. I took Nimrod to one side.

“Why is he wearing my clothes?”

His response explained both points. Poor sod, getting cut up as soon as he gets here. I went first up the ladder to the deck we anachronistically call the fo’c’s’le; new guy followed, struggling slightly but less than he might have done. He quickly glanced back down, then turned to me with an air of urgency.

“Where’s the bog in this place?”

I pointed. “That one. Just explore; Eagleflight isn’t big enough to get lost in.”

Synsynacki was next out, followed by Backplane. Nimrod emerged last, as a nod to naval tradition. DarkMode slid down the pole to join us.

“Come to the mess,” Synsynacki invited her, and we all headed on. “BigPling’s going to tell us all about himself. Hey, where did he get to, anyway?”

“He’s meeting us there,” I answered.

Nimrod cut in. “I wouldn’t count on it. Telling us all about himself, that is. He’s still feeling a bit delicate, and I don’t think he’s a very talkative chap at the best of times.”

“Delicate?” I asked. “From his landing?”

“Judging from his condition last night, that’s the least of his problems.” DarkMode rolled her eyes in corroboration of this assessment, so I left it at that.

We walked into the mess and sat at the table. Only an outfit as loose as ours would use the same room for eating and briefings; perhaps also only an outfit as tight on space. I headed for the kitchen, poured some boiling water, and brewed the tea.

BigPling rejoined us at an opportune moment.

“Milk and sugar?” He accepted both.

“I think we all need to introduce ourselves properly. I’m Synsynacki; I double as purser and armourer. I provision the ship and count everyone’s ammo. Nimrod bailed me out when I couldn’t afford the fee to be released from Italian citizenship, and I’ve been with the gang ever since.”

I poured the tea.

“I’m Backplane. I used to be a merc, but a job went sour and the client had enough whack to kill my career. I’m general technician, but now you’re here

I can concentrate on the mechanical stuff and not get distracted by computers any more.”

It was my turn next. I sat down at the table. “I’m Edaflu, and once upon a time, I used to be one hell of an information theorist.” The ideal answer in the circumstances, I thought. It was short, it was true, and it added no information to that already available.

“Which is to say,” finished Nimrod, “that his immense talents are nowadays wasted on cryptanalysis and finance.”

“Finance?” asked BigPling. “I don’t see the connection.”

I sighed, having explained this too many times. “There is only one way to win at gambling: know which horse is going to pass the post first. Similarly, there is only one way to win at share and futures dealing: know what announcements companies are going to make before they make them.”

“Isn’t that illegal? Wouldn’t it sound alarms in the stock exchange?”

“Everyone who realises that’s what we do tries to get a piece of the action by tracking our purchases. Such people can be easily misled into backing the wrong horse.”

“I’m DarkMode.” She terminated the discussion before BigPling had a chance to mull it. “Nimrod and I started up this little army when... well, when we realised it was the only thing left to do. I fly the hefa when the computer isn’t doing it; I thought I drove like a maniac until I saw you on that push-bike.”

He grinned, felt his right thigh as if to reassure himself that his crash had been real – with whatever Nimrod had fished out of the drugs cabinet it must have seemed a world away. “I’m BigPling, as you all seem to already know. I woke up this morning with a hangover, and the day has been going downhill since.” He fiddled with the watch on his left wrist. “But I’m cool with you guys,” he added on an afterthought. “Where are we going?”

By way of an answer I flicked on the table display and tapped out a few commands to have it show our position on the map.

“Wow,” he said, “you people have holodisplays? I didn’t know they were on the market yet.”

“They are,” said Nimrod, “but only to people with more money than sense.” He left that opening deliberately, the tricky bastard.

“Do you have more money than sense?”

“Yes, on account of it all belonging to other people.” A less subtle man might have licked his finger and marked a point in the air, but a less subtle man would not have won it at all. DarkMode explained how to interpret the triagram. I looked carefully at BigPling. Although he looked as if he wasn’t really listening, in reality he was paying careful attention. As soon as she had finished, he looked through the display to Backplane.

“Is that a sword you’re wearing?”

“Yes, it is an *itomaki no tachi*.”

“May I see it?”

“No. Nobody sees my blade.”

“And lives, you mean.”

“No. Nobody sees my blade.” Glances of repressed amusement went around the room.

Nimrod took pity on BigPling and explained. “Really. None of us has ever seen Backplane’s blade. He moves so fast it is back in its scabbard before anyone

realises it was out.”

“Don’t you ever sharpen or clean it?”

“I only ever sharpen my antique blade. This one has a glass-diamond surface over a foamed ceramic core. It is lighter than old swords but hard and strong enough to cut sheet steel without blunting. The *koshirae* automatically clean and disinfect the blade after each use.”

“Wouldn’t you be better off with some proper weapons, like a BFG or something?” Damn quakers.

“When you only have one kind of weapon, you can only fight one kind of battle.”

Before an argument could start, I reminded the participants that their tea was going cold. Conversation was replaced by the usual slurping noises, themselves followed by the tinkle of cup on saucer.

I avoided starting my next utterance with “Come on, BigPling.” If I knew Nimrod, Pling had heard those three words too often already. I merely looked at him and said, “You’ll be wanting to see the console.”

He nodded eagerly and followed me into the corridor. We ascended to the flight deck and entered the console room.

“Have a seat,” I said, gesturing at console. I sat down in the observer’s chair. Backplane had built and designed the console, I explained to him. The most obvious interaction hardware was the three keyboards, each with an integrated pointing device on each hand. Each half of each keyboard swivelled independently on low-friction sliders, allowing the user pointer control while typing. Although this ability was very useful during cracking runs, it really came into its own when playing tank sims. The way BigPling’s face lit up told me he worked this out on his own. The keyboards were all connected to console, and I had hacked up the window manager to support three types of window focus to match, which I coded as red, blue, and green, each colour matching one of the keyboards.

The other obvious piece of interaction was the main display, which stretched above all three keyboards. Between these was a row of small touchscreen displays, each usually dedicated to a particular system: intercom, external comms links, flight status, surveillance. Each had red, green, and blue buttons to connect it to the desired keyboards. The buttons lit up to indicate keyboard focus.

There were other less striking but equally important features. The pedals near the floor controlled the pitch and yaw of the chair. Video input was handled by a camera below the middle of the main display. A microphone next to it dealt with sound input; output consisted of a few speakers around the room. The stylus between the middle and right-hand keyboards could be used on any area of the worktop as a drawing tablet.

“Does it do handwriting recognition?”

“No. Typing is faster, more reliable, and better suited to the kind of work we do up here.”

“Which is?”

“Pretty much what you’re accustomed to. We eat people’s data.”

He nodded, and I continued by pointing out the datapin interface on the front edge of the worktop. From here one could, of course, also access datapins connected in the mess or the hold.

“The hold?”

“Yes, that’s quite a recent addition. We only put in a datapin interface there after a few missions where we had to retrieve data in person and had to nip up the ladder to the mess to get it into the computer.”

I didn’t think he was ready to hear about the cockpit override button under the worktop, but I had left the most useful feature to last: the gimbaled food tray attached to the right of the chair. It meant that one could stay on console without getting crumbs all over the keyboards and without having to go below to eat or drink, as long as someone kept the food supply topped up. The bladder was looked after with a catheter, a device I had mercifully never been required to use.

BigPling screwed up his face, but relented. “Actually, that’s quite sane. There’s a few times I’ve ruined a good run by having to go fill the bit bucket.”

I went on to explain about our weird comm system, dreamed up by Nimrod on a cold Winter night when he was feeling particularly misanthropic. As was becoming the fashion by then, it used a generalised system that worked equally well for one-to-one conversations and broadcast discussions, but it generalised further to cope with both asynchronous messages, which could be recorded and then retrieved at a later date, and synchronous calls, which required all the participants to interact at once.

“Try it now,” I invited. “On the intercom panel press that button” – I pointed – “to set up a call and then pick the mess from the list of locations.” Calls could be routed either by person or to a location. The surveillance screen lit up with a view of the mess.

“Mess. I see you’ve got the comm panel going. We’re just entering Spanish airspace now.” That was Nimrod’s voice. DarkMode’s followed.

“Hold on, I’m picking up some bogeys. Can you identify them up there?”

BigPling pulled a datapin out of his pocket and plugged it in. “This is a list of transponder codes. Let’s see if they’re on it.”

I let him get on with it.

“These are Ejército del Aire fighters — the Spanish air force,” he revealed.

“Ah,” said Nimrod. “That’s new.”

BigPling stood the silence for a few seconds, and then, “Don’t you lot have any battle stations to go to?”

“No. We aren’t in the habit of being shot at. Most organisations with enough resources to raise arms against us realise it’s not in their interest to do so.”

DarkMode cut in. “I do. I’ll be in the cockpit.”

“Do we have any weapons?”

“Only sidearms,” I said. “Nothing useful for air combat.”

“Lose, lose,” he mumbled, then his eyebrows shot up his head. “There was a report on the Spanish air force recently. Their IFF systems are vulnerable to a chess grandmaster attack.”

I hadn’t heard about that. It meant that we could resend the interrogation from one ’plane back to another, and repeat the reply to make it look like we were on their side. It would provide useful confusion.

“See if you can get it ready,” said Nimrod, “but they’re not in range yet. They should try to contact us before doing anything silly.”

BigPling set to the terminal. As he was typing I noticed he habitually fiddled with his wristwatch.

“I’ll keep hold of that if it’s uncomfortable,” I offered.

“Hmm?” he said without taking his concentration off console.

“Your watch.”

“No thanks.” And that was that, for the external comms panel burst into life.

“Unidentified aircraft, you are inside Spanish airspace. Drop speed to one hundred knots and prepare to follow us.”

“Let’s see if we can talk our way out,” said Nimrod. He patched himself through to the radio and said something in Spanish in a very cherubic voice.

The lead pilot responded in Spanish. He sounded more forceful.

Nimrod spoke again, in a calming voice. It sounded like he was offering to compromise.

The pilot said something else, levelly.

Nimrod shut off the intercom. “So much for that plan. BigPling, how are you getting on?”

“Standing by. This is a dirty hack but it should work.”

“Soon as you can.”

BigPling hit enter. There was no noticeable effect, other than him punching the air.

“Pwnage! Now they won’t be able to get a missile lock without disabling the IFF. It should give us a minute while they decide what went wrong.”

“Then we’ll have to use it. Backplane, Synsynacki, get to the hold and shoot at them. Throw sticks if you have to, as long as you do something. DarkMode, stay on your toes and make sure they can’t use cannon. BigPling, good work, do what you can.”

There were three rogers and more mumbling from BigPling. “Do what I can, he says. These things take non-zero time, you know. Well, let’s see.” I was starting to feel like a spare part, but stayed in case I was needed.

The comm opened up again. “This is Synsynacki in the hold. We’ve still got that RPG left from the Glasgow affair.”

“*The* Glasgow affair?” asked BigPling incredulously. “That was you lot?”

I nodded and gestured him to be silent while Synsynacki continued. “We only have one shot, and then it’s back to bullets.”

“DarkMode, can you get them a clear shot?”

“I doubt it. ’Planes don’t tend to stay still for long.”

I reached over to the surveillance monitor and brought up the hold. Synsynacki had hoisted the RPG to her shoulder, ready for an opportunity. Backplane had a machine-gun set up and was standing by the door control. I don’t think any of us rated our chances very highly. DarkMode spoke again.

“Whatever you’re doing, do it now. Infra-red just picked up two more headed our way.”

“No, wait,” interrupted BigPling. “Nimrod, signal the fighters we surrender. They’ll fall in alongside us to escort. I can jam the IFF and other comms to make it look like they’re our wingmen. When the other two fighters arrive, they’ll attack these two before us. That should even the odds a bit.”

Silence fell over the comm, almost as if the radio blackout had started early. If everyone else was like me, they were trying to decide just how stupid a plan it was, and whether they could come up with something less stupid. Eventually Nimrod spoke, his voice heavy and commanding as it always was when he felt he was committing himself to a bad idea.

“Do it. Stand down weapons until the confusion is over and we have nothing to lose by firing. BigPling, can you make it so that I can talk to the newcomers but the other two can’t? I need to rub the salt in if we’re going to bring this off.”

I admit, a small snort of contempt escaped my nostrils before I started to explain. “Radio jamming doesn’t work like that. It’s either on or off.”

“Bah,” contended BigPling, “I’ve been scanning their enciphered traffic and they’re using some horrible cipher feedback implementation to generate keystream. If we inject some plausible-looking packets it’ll screw the whole thing up.”

“You have about twenty seconds. No pressure.” Nimrod could be sarcastic when he tried, and even worse when he didn’t. It was becoming apparent my best course of action was to keep out of BigPling’s way, so I went back down to the mess.

When I got there he was speaking aggressive Spanish over the radio. When he signed off, he made a logical deduction that was no less impressive for being wrong.

“What couldn’t you tell me with BigPling listening?”

Nothing, I nearly said, for that was not the reason I had come down here, but I changed my mind. “His ideas are too dangerous.”

“You think it won’t work?”

I shook my head in dissent. “It’ll work alright, as long as we resolve this before they realise what’s up and start talking on the open channel, but more generally, Pling seems to be having very outré ideas. Are we sure he’s what we were looking for?”

“He’s proved himself useful so far.” Thanks for not answering the question.

“But will he be able to do what’s required of him, when the time comes?”

Nimrod leaned his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. He was one of those few people who liked to think before he spoke: that was how he impressed me to join this outfit in the first place. “We spent some time looking for a chap like him. We checked him out thoroughly, even set up a few challenges for him. I was satisfied then that he had exactly the abilities we were after, and I have seen nothing to change my mind.”

DarkMode spoke from the cockpit. “The newcomers have just fired on our supposed wingmen, who are breaking formation to attack. I’m giving us some extra height to avoid the crossfire.”

“Very good. Well done, BigPling, your plan seems to be working.” He didn’t respond, but I imagined him doing a little dance at console. Nimrod and I continued to watch the battle on the holodisplay until only one fighter was left: one of the originals.

“Missile lock,” screamed DarkMode. “Hold on down there.”

“Synsynacki, Backplane, open the door. Fire as soon as you have a shot.”

The bottom dropped out of my stomach as DarkMode piloted us through some turbulence. We had been lucky so far, but I still didn’t think going head-to-head with a heavily armed fighter was likely to result in a good outcome.

“DarkMode, can you keep our course steady? He’s just coming in behind us to use cannon.”

“Roger,” was the only response.

Chapter 5

Finished Off

“Oh shit, we’ve still got that RPG.”

“That RPG?” said Backplane. He had no idea what I was talking about. “Oh, *that* RPG,” he exclaimed as he looked round and saw what I was holding. “Where did you get that from?”

“The cupboard I keep all the useful stuff. Hold on, I’ll let Nimrod know.” I reached over to the comm panel and made my report. I still thought we were shafted – we had one rocket and two targets – but one shot is better than none.

“Can you get a clear shot?” asked Nimrod. Yeah, right. Combat speed for these fighters is four figures of kph, but he was always optimistic. I dashed his hopes and hit the button to open the cargo door. I wished I’d tied my hair back as the roaring current blasted the hold. I got down on one knee in a firing stance, noticing that Backplane had already got the trusty machine-gun on its tripod and looked as if he wanted to outgun the fighters single-handed.

DarkMode spoke over the comm, saying we were now up to four targets, but BigPling came up with an plan.

“Wow,” exclaimed Backplane once BigPling had explained it, “that’s so unlikely it might even work.” I wasn’t sure how enthusiastic to be about the idea, so I stayed at ready until Nimrod ordered us stood down. I closed the cargo door again, not wishing to stop a stray bullet, but kept the RPG to hand.

“Glad we found him now?” I asked.

Backplane considered. “I’ll tell you when we get rid of those planes.” Bloody male antler-bashing. BigPling had only been with us for a few hours, looked as if he’d only just made it in once piece, and was possibly just about to save the ship, but he’d get no sympathy or congratulations from the ex-merc. I glared at him, and he just raised his right hand. His fingers were crossed.

“Don’t play too rough,” I said.

Before he could reply, we heard a nearby explosion. The plan was working after all.

“What’s the score?” asked Backplane of the comm.

“Two down,” reported Nimrod.

“Make that three,” corrected DarkMode, “there’s no way he’s coming out of that loop without getting his tail shot off.”

“Yes, I am,” admitted Backplane, before hugging the floor as DarkMode warned us of her evasive action. DarkMode’s piloting would make a hummingbird sick, so I quickly grabbed a handhold too as we hit a handy patch of

turbulence and dropped a few hundred metres out of radar. Nimrod signalled to fire when ready, so I elbowed the door control as I swung past. The last plane sped across our field of view and banked round to come at us from behind.

“The stupid fool,” I said, “He’s not used to fighting someone who can only shoot backwards.” We lurched to the right again. I swore as I almost lost the RPG.

Backplane hit the comm and (more politely than I would have done) asked DarkMode not to jog us about so much so I could get a shot.

“Brace me so I can use both hands,” I said. He put one arm around my waist, leaving the other wrapped around the nearest handhold. Trusting him not to do anything stupid, I hefted the RPG in both hands and lined it up. The poor sap was finishing his bank and closing in fast. I bided my time, knowing I had only one chance. A series of clinks told me he’d sent a line of bullets across our hull. The most worrying noises were those coming from behind us, at the opposite end of the bay. Finally satisfied with the shot, I squeezed the trigger gently. Looking away from the sight I saw a neat line of smoke linking us to the fireball in the middle of the sky. I closed the door and lay down on the deck in relief.

Backplane, ever the professional, was already folding away the tripod and stowing it for its next use.

“Next time we put down near a pub,” he said, “I’m buying you a drink.” He helped me back to my feet.

“Thank you,” I responded. Even after all this time, I still found Backplane’s sense of chivalry out-of-keeping with what else I knew about him.

“Don’t thank me,” he replied. “Thank Pling.”

I didn’t, though the opportunity came when we were all back in the mess, this time to eat.

“It’s just occurred to me,” piped up BigPling when he saw the plates of food. “I haven’t eaten today.”

“Technically, you have,” disagreed DarkMode, “but from the size of that kebab you had I wasn’t surprised you haven’t felt hungry yet. In fact, I even laid fifty with Nimrod you’d be sick.”

“And?” he asked, worried about what he’d done to his reputation.

In reply, Nimrod held up a fifty. BigPling grinned as though eating too much while very drunk was an achievement. Perhaps it was where he came from. I had already tucked into mine, and BigPling, sensing that he might miss out if he didn’t hurry up, started forking things onto his plate.

“So what’s this I hear about a push-bike?” DarkMode had tipped me off that would get the conversation going.

“Oh, you mean my war-bike?” corrected BigPling with something that nearly passed for tact. “It’s a bike, yeah, and then it has a small motor for a bit of a turbo when I need to split, comms to interface me to nearby buildings and traffic control, enough computing power for some serious cracking, and a head-mounted display.”

“Fancy taking me out for a spin some time?”

He stopped chewing for so long I thought he was going to choke. Finally he got himself together and said, “We’d have to stick a pillion seat on it, but yeah, sure.” He turned to Nimrod. “What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“We prepare for the big event tomorrow. The target is heavily defended in both meatspace and cyberspace, and we must have full control in both planes if

we are to succeed. You and Edaflu will make ready for the cyberspace assault; Backplane and Synsynacki will ready our arsenal for the meatspace assault. DarkMode will perform maintenance on the helifan to make sure it is at peak performance; I will oversee operations and help out where necessary.”

“What do you mean, ‘make ready for the cyberspace assault?’ ”

“While we are in there,” explained Nimrod, “you will need to distract them the best you can. You need to stop them communicating, counter-attacking. You need to make sure we can get through any doors. By tomorrow, you must be ready to have the target building under your complete control.”

There was a moment’s silence. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“I know, and you join us at the toughest time, but just do your best, and I’m sure you’ll be alright once you knuckle down to it.”

Yeah, if you say so. BigPling didn’t say it, but I heard it.

BigPling blinked slowly. “My brain is fried. I’m going to down for a few hours.”

“You’ve only been up six hours,” protested DarkMode.

“Is that all? Last night seems like weeks ago.” He got up. “Goodnight peeps.”

“I might hit the sack myself.” Nimrod got up too. “I’ve been up for somewhat longer than six hours, thank you very much, and I think we could all do with plenty of rest for the morrow.” He turned to BigPling. “Come on, let’s check that dressing before you go to bed.”

With that, they left, Nimrod’s hand on BigPling’s uninjured shoulder.

“Like the son he never had,” said Edaflu drily.

“Well,” said DarkMode, “if Nimrod has confidence in him that’s enough for me.”

And after that, the conversation passed onto more mundane matters. One by one, the rest of us drifted to bed. After I’d followed suit, I lay there thinking about the bullet holes in the bulkhead of the cargo deck. We’d had plenty of tough scrapes before, but that was the first time Eagleflight itself had come under attack. It brought home to me how close was the culmination of Nimrod’s plan. We were moving forward into a new, much more fragile, manner of existence. Nimrod would be feeling guilty about bringing BigPling in at such a dangerous time. It was foolish, but it was his concern for our welfare that gave me so much respect for him as a leader. I just hoped it wouldn’t stop him making the hard decisions when the time came.

Chapter 6

Blast from the Past

Another day, another party. He moved in those social circles back then. His host for the evening was holding forth to a group of trapped guests; politics again, no doubt. The old fool was known as the Statesman — when he wasn't listening — but his parties were lavish, so people just tried their best not to get caught without a means of escape. Ah, there she was. Tonight was to be the night. He had seen her at these *soirées* before, but excepting pronounced body-language from across the room he was yet to speak to her. That was all to change, though. He adjusted the lace on his cuffs nervously.

“Good evening. I don't believe we've been introduced.”

“An oversight we shall have to remedy somewhere a little quieter.”

That was a good start, and it got better from there. She turned out to be Emily von Carowitz, a title that would have been more fitting had she spoken with even the slightest trace of a German accent. Not that it meant anything, these days. He introduced himself as Michael Gunnridge.

“The economist?” she asked. He was surprised but flattered. His work on higher-order economics had passed under most people's radars. “How very interesting.” It wasn't until their fourth or fifth date that he found out she had looked him up in advance. The Internet knew more about him than he knew himself, and she was starting the dance of love one step ahead. Although he took it with humour and good grace, he promised to himself that he wouldn't be outfooted like that again.

A year or two passed and they were wed; he took German citizenship. After that, they never appeared other than in matching attire. He enjoyed introducing her to people as “my wife”. They weren't outspoken in public, but made statements through their dress and their presence or absence. He made more of a name for himself academically, and like all great economists became well-off by testing his theories with other people's money. It was through his work that he got to know Marie Pensenby. She was going places in economics too, but, without the advantage of social position, she had started at the sharp end. She was married to a French mechanic named Didier and drove a car that she'd given up waiting for him to soup up and had done it herself. Without the mathematical background to understand higher-order economics, she had struggled to read his papers, but had felt intuitively that she agreed with them, and with the unspoken conclusion they were coming to. Once she had managed to meet Gunnridge (Gunnridge of the von Carowitzes, as he had become known) at a

conference, they became rhetorical sparring partners.

A dinner party at Schloss Carowitz. Michael and Marie were arguing loudly over a point too abstract for her to understand and too close to the working class for him to relate to. Their spouses gossiped quietly without appreciating the irony: one pair was using their shared knowledge to bridge the class barrier, the other their shared ignorance.

“But look at the lessons from history! Until a good is commodified, people don’t need to have it, and only specialists feel the need to steal it.”

“People will steal anything that’s not tied down.”

“But only if they think that having it is their right. Take nationality as an example. Fifty years ago, international migration was something fairly rare, a special event. False nationalities and papers were something only possessed by people who really needed to hide in another country.”

“But that’s because moving around the world was still seen as the preserve of the rich. It’s the cheap travel that changed that, not any kind of commodification.”

“In that case why didn’t the change occur after the denationalisation of air travel? No, it was later: less than two years after the UN Migration Accord, when you could almost pick up your passport with the groceries. After that, people found a new ‘need’ to change nationality, and forgery became just another source of supply in a competitive market.”

They went on in this way for another five minutes before Marie forgot herself and shouted, “But what are we going to do about it?”

Michael picked up his napkin and dabbed delicately at his mouth before answering. “Why, nothing, my dear. You need politicians to change that kind of thing and the status quo makes governance so much easier nobody will lift a finger to change it.”

She didn’t answer, defeated by apathy, but Emily had pricked her ears up.

“Somebody will change it,” she asserted. “Sooner or later people will realise they’ve been done over yet again and they will unite behind a strong leader and put something else in its place, and you can argue about that instead.”

Michael leaned over and kissed her. At once naïve and wise, idealistic and cynical, determined and resigned, the remark was a pleasant, if unnecessary, reminder of why he loved her.

“Very true. The sweet should be ready.”

A month later, Michael was leaving for a conference.

“Oh, don’t bother with airport parking. I’ll give you a lift.” He piled his bags into her Escutcheon — the car the other half bought for their other halves. She pressed the starter. Apart from a noise like a handful of change stuck in a coffee grinder, nothing happened. They tried a few more times with roughly similar effect.

He tutted. “I’m going to miss the flight at this rate. I’ll drive myself, and you can email Didier and get him over to fix it. He should be glad of the trade, the way things are over the border right now.”

“Don’t be silly, you know the dear won’t let me pay him, and I would feel like a scrounger fetching him over when he has proper customers.”

He finished transferring his light luggage into his vintage Rolls-Royce, and smoothed an imaginary crease out of his jacket as if he’d been lifting masonry for the Pyramids. “You would rather slight him by hiring a stranger to do a job you know he would do as a friend?”

Her shoulders dropped. “I know, there’s no way out of it. This is why one doesn’t usually make friends with tradesmen.”

He quickly kissed her goodbye and got in the Rolls. The old-fashioned engine started without complaint, and his disc of the Enigma Variations started to play. It was a last vestige of patriotism in a world in which everyone was an ex-pat. “It’s too late to start pretending you’re a snob. Make him a cup of Ceylon and tell him about Fraulein Böller and the increasingly noticeable bump. I’ll see you in three days.”

That was the last thing he ever said to her. He never found out the full details, but he was able to imagine the whole grisly affair, night after sleepless night. Didier had been in the area on another job so he soon arrived. He started on the car while she made the tea. He asked her to turn the engine over while he adjusted the sparking sequence. He sipped the tea and tuned the timings one last time. He asked her to try the engine again. She pressed the accelerator gently, and the car exploded. As Gunnridge drove down the Autobahn humming to Elgar’s spirited minims, his wife was being engulfed in a fireball. As he enjoyed Champagne in first class, Euro Fire Response GmbH was cutting her out of the wreckage so the doctor could declare her dead. As he left the luggage reclaim, Emily called and told him to sit down.

Three days later, the fire investigators revealed that the explosion had been caused by a design flaw in the engine. After that, matters were taken out of their hands.

In every country in the world there is a distinction between real people and corporations: between ‘natural’ and ‘legal’ persons. Although legal persons have a lot in common with natural persons, there are some important differences, the most noticeable being that although corporations can be sued, they cannot be prosecuted in the criminal courts. Every country, that is, except Spain. While Michael and Emily were saying their wedding vows, rioters were precipitating the biggest restructuring of human rights laws in a century. At the end of it, Spanish law had changed in many ways, one of which blurred the distinction between natural and legal persons. Escutcheon International was headquartered in Barcelona, and the faulty car was designed there. The Spanish police claimed jurisdiction, and a criminal investigation started.

It soon emerged that the design flaw was known about when the car was launched, but it had been decided that it was an acceptable risk and the cost of the engine redesign would squeeze profits too much. The case came to court, and in a prosecution mysteriously absent from the news headlines, the company was found guilty of double manslaughter and fined the maximum penalty of a hundred million euros. Of course, no custodial sentence was possible because there was no way to lock up a company. In rare circumstances, guilty corporations had been dissolved but the product recall and repair — at a cost of 150 euros per unit, deducted from the fine — was deemed to show sufficient remorse to prevent applying the death penalty. In any other country, the officials responsible would have been imprisoned for their disregard of human life, but since none of the company’s employees had individually done anything illegal, there was nothing to be done.

It is said that the most dangerous thing a man can do is comfort a grieving widow. Michael and Marie were no exception, but not for the usual reason. They weren’t satisfied with the outcome, and he was not used to being dissatisfied. A bit of political digging soon told them that the criminal responsibility provision

was regarded as a coup for corporations, snuk in with a host of more popular reforms no one was courageous enough to object to. More worryingly, they found out that, following the Spanish example, similar measures were planned in other countries. At first they thought to warn the world that they were about to put companies effectively beyond the law, but they soon found out that the media were also run by corporations, corporations that enjoyed the privilege of flouting secrecy and privacy laws.

One evening, as they cried together once again, he promised her that they would seal this black hole of justice, by fair means or foul. The next day, Michael was talking to an aeronautical engineer friend of his, and he realised how they would go about it. It would mean becoming outlaws, always on the run; arming themselves heavily and learning how to kill; in all, sending their lives to ruin. He thought it was a fair trade.

“Just us two?” asked Marie when he explained it to her. “You and me against the world? I don’t think so.”

He nodded slightly. “We will need some other people to help. But there must be others out there, others who have as much reason as we to hate the status quo; maybe more,” he added with a shudder.

“And we will find them how?”

“You can find anything on the Internet these days.” He paused, picked a bit of fluff from his tie, the one that looked incomplete without anyone wearing the dress that matched it. “We shall need handles, though. Everyone uses them on the Internet; besides, if we are going to see this through to its conclusion anonymity will be important.” He already knew the name he would use. It would mean nothing to anyone else, but to him, every time he heard it or spoke it, it would remind him of Emily’s horrible death, of his enduring sorrow and of his relaxed ignorance during those fateful moments that brought it about.

Chapter 7

The Prepared Mind

“Nimrod.”

He had woken first, but his mind was still in that place it often went during the night. He heard and looked at me. Too late he made a show of rubbing sleep from his eyes. He rose, went to the bathroom, and splashed some water on his face. He was a strong leader, despite his geniality, and knew that he needed to keep it up. He quickly dressed and went to the mess to make breakfast. I stayed in my bunk for a few minutes, 'til I heard new boy stirring below me. He did a good job on console yesterday, but I was still glad he'd be out of my way when the fighting started. I leaned over the side of the bunk and wished him good morning. He seemed a little stunned, but when he tried to turn over onto his right side and yelped in pain he soon remembered what had happened.

“Nimrod's in the mess. He'll tell you what he gave you yesterday and you can get another dose from sickbay.”

“I already know what he gave me. I looked it up in the medical terminal, but it's not killing like it was yesterday. I'll just get two aspirin and bear it.” He got up.

“Get dressed first. Dark and Syn'll be up by now and I don't think they can cope with nudity before breakfast.” Besides, they wouldn't be impressed with what he had. Come to that, neither was I. From the state of his muscles, I was even happier he'd be up here rather than trying to swing a sword in the thick of it. I guessed poor little Pling didn't get the girls very often.

He squinted at me, still asleep, and then picked up the clothes from the rail at the end of the bed and gingerly started to pull them on. Always keen to make someone feel inadequate, I joined him in this, starting with the yards of cotton needed to contain my huge equipment and completing the job by mounting my *tachi*. Suppressing many ouches in an attempt to make up for his lack of machismo, BigPling completed his outfit. Actually, it looked better on him than it had on Edaflu. Edaflu had never managed to pull off the geek chic thing, and always looked as if he'd be happier in a tweed jacket with chalk marks on the sleeves. As if alerted that I was thinking about him, he got out of his bunk, yawned once, and went to the wardrobe. BigPling and I left him to it. I pointed out the aspirin in sickbay, and we went to the mess for some tea to take it with.

When we reached the mess, breakfast had already happened. Nimrod and DarkMode had gone to the cockpit to map out some safe airspace for our approach, and Edaflu was already tucking into his toast. It wasn't until we had

done likewise that Synsynacki appeared, slate in hand. Evidently she had got an early start on checking the weapons manifest.

“Anything in particular you want to take with you?” Ostensibly the question was aimed at both Ed and me, but she was looking at me.

“Everything,” I answered. “It’ll take more than a sword and a smoke grenade to get into this fortress.”

She rolled her eyes and pretended to note down ‘everything’ on the slate, then sat down to eat. Pling rubbernecked at the slate while putting on an air of nonchalance a cat would have been proud of. Syn ignored him. Not wanting to disrupt the geek inside just when we’d be needing it, I picked it up off the table and passed it to him. He looked at every side of it, then grunted sneeringly and passed it back.

“Oh,” he said, disappointed, “it’s just a normal slate. After spending the night in this place” — he corrected himself — “aircraft, I was expecting it to be booby-trapped, or remotely control the cockpit, or something.”

“I only use it for inventories,” Synsynacki said defensively, “We really don’t need anything fancy. I liberated it from a lawyers’ office we raided once.”

Pling tutted heartlessly and carried on munching.

“You fancy a quick bout of exercise downstairs?” I asked Ed. I knew I’d feel cooped up by the end of the day and a bit of a run around the cargo bay’d sort that out.

“A bit later. First off I’m taking BigPling through what we need for tomorrow.”

“Besides,” piped up Syn, “I’m working down there, and I won’t have you two getting in the way with your swordplay. I have to load and pack the munitions yet, and as you say, we’re taking quite a lot target-side.”

“Well, I might as well give you a hand,” I said. “I’ve got nothing better to do until Ed’s ready.”

Pling changed the subject completely. “What’s the rc for this attack, then?”

Edafu answered. “Nimrod’s going to go over it later. The general idea is: DarkMode pilots, you take their computers out, the rest of us go in and introduce them to some lead.”

Simple, really. As if. In all my experience of combat, I’ve never known a plan to survive contact with the enemy. That said, Nimrod tended to think ahead better than most officers, and we always managed alright.

“Take their computers out,” said Pling with measured indifference. “Won’t that require our act to have an amount of togetherness?”

“Which is why we are off to console as soon as you’ve finished. We need control of the security systems, plans of the building, comms systems, road traffic control, and, if you can manage it, control of their AA batteries. With them on-side we can both protect our exit and stop anyone else interfering.”

Pling stood up, his mouth full of toast. He didn’t bother trying to speak, and just waved impatiently in the direction of the door. Ed glanced over at me and rolled his eyes, and led the way. I drained my teacup and waited in comfortable silence for Synsynacki to finish her breakfast, then we went together down to the cargo bay.

It was a while until we finished sorting out inventory and Edafu joined me. I had already started drilling with my old blade; Ed picked up his usual staff and cut in immediately, timing his approach to not interrupt the flow of my movements.

“How’s the lad getting on?” I asked, giving an evasive opening.

“You have no respect for him.” Under cover of an attack, he strengthened his position.

“I can respect the skills he has,” I shifted my weight, “but not those he doesn’t have.”

Edafu aimed a cut but I parried cleanly. “When we first met, you thought the same of me.” He was right. When Ed first came aboard, I saw only the far-off academic, divorced from the more strenuous aspects of life. I started to teach him, and he learned fast. Perhaps it was his mathematical brain that allowed him to absorb the positions and the forms, but he had very strong innate poise. Now, it was only his lack of experience that held him back.

I saw through his stratagem, changed my attack posture to neutralise it. “Do you respect him? Do any of us?”

He shifted to favour his left foot, and I made a cursory swing to keep him on his toes. “I have a higher opinion of him now than before,” he said. “Whatever happens, we are committed now. We always knew that recruiting him was irresponsible. But soon our task will be complete, and we will have to learn to live again.”

I nearly let him score a hit on my arm, but sacrificed my balance to avoid it. I came down hard on my right knee, rolled, and faced him again. He was right about our mission coming to an end. I didn’t know what I would do after that. I had originally joined up with Nimrod after being driven out of the mercenary business. Though our mission would allow me to get them back for that, there would still be no way back for me. Absently, mechanically, I parried two direct thrusts and counter-attacked. “Live again, you say. Can any of us live again? I remember what my old teacher used to say about revenge: it is a double-edged sword. It consumes both the avenger and the one he revenges himself upon.”

He fell back under my renewed attack, but thought he saw an opening. “You stayed with him even though he spouted platitudes like that?”

I took a pace back, allowing him to think that the longer reach of the staff gave him an advantage. “It wasn’t a platitude to him. Before he became a teacher, he was an assassin.” I idly fended off thrusts, all the while closing the gap. “Once, one of his clients refused to pay him for a job. He asked most insistently, and the client, who was a big triad boss, had his wife killed to set an example.”

“He eschewed revenge?” He still hadn’t noticed my approach, and was fighting fiercer than ever.

“Of course not. He knew the cost of revenge, and paid it willingly. He fought his way into the gang’s headquarters and killed the leader, though it cost him his right arm. After that, he could no longer fight, and had to take up teaching.”

“Then it is true: the pupil always repeats the mistakes of his teacher.” I felt a surge of rage overcome me. He swung the staff at my head, thinking he had a sure victory. Without thinking, I made a half-turn to the right, grabbed the staff from below, twisted him towards me by the arm, and hacked at his exposed flank with the force of my whole body. Only his surprised howl of pain brought me back in control. I stopped, flung the sword away from me like a deadly viper.

Ed bent double, clutching his side. “You would have killed me.”

He was right. I was disgusted with myself. The first lesson you learn is to always stay in control. When sparring with exposed blades, any slip is crucial.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. It was totally inadequate, but it was all I could say. “Let me see your wound.”

He lifted up the side of his tunic, now torn and drenched in blood. I examined the evidence of my indiscipline. Luckily it was only a scratch. Strange how even the most superficial wounds bleed rivers.

“You’ll be fine. I”—I faltered—“I really shouldn’t have lost concentration like that. You were fighting well. I hope that you can still trust me to teach you.”

He looked at me accusingly. “You have always been stronger. Each time we sparred, you have always held back, always kept your strength to yourself. You could have killed me at any time.”

“There is no shame in losing to your teacher. Besides, how often have I told you that brute strength is nothing to technique?”

He looked away sulkily, like a child smacked by his mother for the first time. “I’d better go to sickbay, spray a coagulant on.” He passed me his staff and started to leave. I whistled to him, and as he turned his head to look, I made a killing thrust at his neck.

Edaflu moved his right foot, bent his knee, lowered his weight slightly, being careful not to raise his shoulder. At the same time he made a quarter turn so his left forearm protected his neck and he was ready either to strike or to retreat.

“I may be stronger and faster,” I said, retracting the staff, “but your perfect balance allowed you to avoid the blow. You dodged with every part of your body, but your weight barely moved.”

He left for the sickbay. I let him go, thinking he’d probably rather be without my company for a while. Instead I called Nimrod on the comm and had him meet Ed there.

Left with my own thoughts, I remembered a request Pling had made of me earlier, and went to the stores to fulfill it.

Chapter 8

Infinite Connectivity

I came out of that half-trance state and returned to real life. Edafu's hand was on my shoulder, and he was speaking to me.

“BigPling? Hello?”

I blinked a few times. “Yeah?”

“We've all been together long enough that we no longer bother, but I wanted to wish you luck before setting off. I bet I'm the only one who has, too.”

That was true, but I didn't see why he mentioned it. He gripped my shoulder again, then disappeared back down the hatch.

It took me a few moments to settle back into deep hack mode. Although I could still perceive my body's existence and the environment around me, it felt distant, less real to me than the environment of the computer. The text, images on the screens became my world. I was no longer in Eagleflight, but the traffic control systems of Madrid. Just as the brain can interpret reflections on a pool of water as discrete ripples, I could see the information flowing around the system, the interactions between subsystems, as clear as if they were tangible objects. Using the keyboards, the commands and menus, as an extension of my hands, I could manipulate them, as easily as I might skim a stone.

Except I couldn't actually skim stones. It had never seemed a profitable use of my time.

For almost as long as there have been computers, sf writers have been imagining futuristic virtual-reality interfaces that would allow the user to enter the world of the computer, to interact with it directly. But what they have never realised is that we already do that.

Although I was in complete control of the town's traffic control, I left it happily running its usual program for their journey towards the target. Overriding the rules on traffic signals had long been a hobby, and given the potential generativity of chaos I'd always wondered why security on them wasn't tighter. Even after seeing *The Italian Job*, people hadn't realised how easy it was to redirect traffic for fun and profit. Penetrating the system had been easy given my previous experience, easier than preparing the scripted signal changes that would ensure a clear escape route for Nimrod and Edafu when the time came. Without my supervision, it was a good 20 minutes before they signalled that they had pulled up in the car park and were going in.

It was only a few minutes after that that their visitors' tags showed up on my plan of the building. We'd been fortunate that the building had a positioning

system installed. Everyone authorised to be in the building had an ID badge with a small transmitter in it, which would keep track of their position. In the real world, this was a brilliant security measure: anyone without a tag would be immediately spotted on CCTV or IR detectors. In the digital arena, though, it was a massive vulnerability. The system gave great power to whoever controlled it: power to trace the security guards, to find which offices were unoccupied, and many other things. But, as companies often do, they failed to make sure that nobody else could control it, leaving the door wide open for us to subvert the system.

So it was that I could track Nimrod as he was escorted to the office of some senior businessperson in the company: the most senior person he could fake an appointment with using the stolen encryption keys.

DarkMode spoke over the comm. "Console, cockpit. Status?"

"Exactly as planned."

"Very good. Is target anti-air still down?"

"Yep."

"Lifting off."

There were a few tense moments as we entered SAM range. The SAM itself was a hardened, secure system, but the radar feeding it had one or two holes. I had enough control over it to make sure the targeting systems wouldn't be able to lock onto us.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14