

3: War Crimes

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I'm going downside on Miramor Dubrovnic. It's my first field mission, and I'm tense as a wire. This is no great treat. They weave me into a dropcap with a quick briefing on local mores and taboos and a GP knife for emergencies and the right costume so I'll blend in, *only if you think it's a costume they'll click on you're a hostile and burn you before you can say 'flatline'*. Repeat, *this is normal, this is what you go to work wearing, this is the way you live, this is who you are* -- for a while. They're going to drop me right on the outskirts of a town, which would be big trouble except that the army has cordoned off the countryside around it, which is worse. If we do an external insertion I am going to be very dead by the time they get through raping and burning anything that comes their way. So ...

The dropcap is not a nice experience. It bounces about like a dying man on the end of a rope as I drop through the stratopause, shedding bits of molten heatshield and jinking about to break radar lock. I've only ever ridden these in sim before and I'm so shit-scared it's a good thing I've had no food for a day. I lie flat on my back and stare at the colours on the inside of my eyes as the giant fist of deceleration settles down across my body and then there's a **THUMP** from outside the cap that rattles my teeth in my jaws. *Shit if that's a proxfuse they've locked on got range I'm dead* -- but no. The status log in my left eye is coiling green, no angry red flare of hostile sensors bouncing off my skin. *Well, they said the ratfuckers were primitive* --

There's another **Thump**, and this time I recognise the sound of my aerobrake cutting loose and beginning to burn. That means we're nearly down so I check my display and see the last kilometre unreeling like a broken spring. There's *more* deceleration, savage this time, and a final **BANG** as the dropcap grounds. I'm down and so dizzy that I can barely see. I think I bit my tongue, and I can't smell anything ... I scrabble for the release button and then I'm free and the pod exit light is on and I can push at the front of the capsule. It falls away in a wave of silent heat to let the groundside night in. Yes, I've landed.

Welcome to Miramor Dubrovnic.

I'm standing beside the dropcap in a patch of derelict land. It's night. Trees bulk huge and ominous to either side. Rubble, a stink of decaying garbage, something torn that flaps in

the wind. I take a step forward, my heavy woollen greatcoat dragging, then turn round: the dropcap is already disintegrating, silently melting into grey cobwebs of self-digesting ceramic. Right. Now is the time to move: that's critical. If they don't come for me in the next three minutes --

I get going, nervy and on edge, left hand curled round the pommel of my powered knife, deep in one pocket. I scurry from broken wall to dying tree, hunched low, relying on passive sensors to tell me if anyone approaches. But they don't. And I stumble onto the road almost by accident, and take a moment to look up past hissing gaslights to the strange stars above.

This is real. I'm somewhere else. On an alien planet.

At this moment, even if the whole of the fucking Stasis descended on me like a ton of shit, I wouldn't be able to resist. I probably wouldn't even *notice*. It's a magical moment, something I can't explain. For the first time I am dirtside on another world and it is bitterly cold, my breath pooling in the wintry air, and I can feel leaves crunching underfoot and see heaps of rock and mud lying about and it's like I *understand* what it's all about, and it all makes sense at last.

I stand like that, mouth hanging open, for an indefinite span of time -- and then I remember where I am and go for ground as fast as my legs will carry me. *Shit! You want to get zapped? Or just captured beaten raped and carried off to a destructive-labour camp? Idiot!* There's nobody about and I figure that this side of the town is derelict, black-out husks standing jagged against the skyline. I twitch my eyes to heatlight and look around. Infra-red sense makes the grass glow puce and the sky turn dark and hazy. Nobody moves in the wasteland. I check bearings and click on where I am. It's a former industrial suburb called Vladigrad, ploughed over by incoming shells something like two years ago. The war heated up and enemy artillery got within ten kilometres of the city for long enough to turn it into a real mess, leaving only blackened memories where once there were factories and homes.

I start walking because it looks like I came down two kilometres off base and I've got to get there, avoiding patrols, before my reception party bugs out and goes to ground again. Maintaining signal silence all the way, in case the Stasi are listening. So I start walking along the rubble-strewn road, listening to the distant rumble of engines in the night, occasionally glancing up at the searchlights that pencil the clouds with a yellow glare. My boots clatter no matter how carefully I walk, and they pinch my toes -- they're stitched animal-hide and wooden soles, laced halfway to my knees. Everything I wear is black, drab as the culture that made them; greatcoat, dress, hood. It's one of those neoprimitive colonies founded by lunatics with weird ideas, atavism trapped in an ideological feedback loop. Or maybe it's something to do with their eugenics program. I shiver and check

bearings against my wisdom map, cached in the back of my head.

I'm about half a kilometre away from the rendezvous when I hear footsteps behind me. *Shit*, I think, flexing my fingers around my knife. I glance at the buildings to either side, but they're dark and cold and vacant, like bones in an ancient catacomb. I shiver and increase my pace, hunch over slightly, try to thin myself to a shadow: *like a little woman, afraid, knows she shouldn't be out like this, where's my ID card -- cunningly forged -- hope it's just militia out on patrol ...* in this land of mist and shadow anything can happen, as long as it's unpleasant. The footsteps follow me and I know they're not echoes because they don't vary in speed. They're steady, purposeful -- and there are too many of them. *Shit!* I risk a blip of EM from my knife, trying to get a lock. Yeah, there's somebody behind me. One or two people, radar's lousy at low-res -- I see it on the back of my right eye.

"Hey! Stop!" My guts freeze in an instant at the call. It takes everything I've got to force myself to stop, even though I figure I can't outrun them. I turn round, see them properly for the first time. Two men, taller than me, boots split at the sole, trousers filthy, coats half-open though the night is cold. Moustaches, stubbly beards, short hair, cold eyes. One of them smiles. "Where are you going at this time of night, lady? Isn't it a bit ... late?"

I let my gaze slide past their faces as they approach, *no direct challenge*, my heart hammering at my ribs to be let out, the knife buzzing and clicking like an angry wasp in my left hand. They look like bums but who can tell? Deserters or police, anything is possible in this wartime anarchy. They may even be regular army or Stasis, in which case I'm in trouble. "I don't have far to go," I say, pitching my voice low and even. "And I'm not looking for company."

"No?" says the one who's doing the talking: "but you never know who you might meet on a dark night! This is a lawless time, little one. You shouldn't be out like this, your man wouldn't like it if he found out, would he?"

Now I stare at him. "Leave me alone or you'll be -- " *sorry* I mean to say, but his companion lunges forward and grabs me clumsily. He's big and I'm not expecting it so suddenly and he knocks the breath out of me: moments later we're rolling on the ground and the scumbag is on top of me with one knee as far between my legs as he can get it, pinning me down. *Shit!* My left arm is trapped. He rubs his mouth against me, gnawing at my jaw with a stink of sour saliva and beer and decaying meat on his breath, skin like sandpaper. I'm half stunned because my left arm is killing me and there's a brick behind my right ear that nearly brained me; but as the thug reaches down to yank up my skirt he lifts off my left side and I manage to get my hand free.

"Easy, Pyotr! Be careful you big oaf, don't damage her!"

It's his companion, coming close and leaning over as I feel a rough, hand grope up my legs, yank down my woollen tights -- grabbing and pawing for my groin and I can *smell* his stale sweat and hatred and if he gets me disarmed I am going to be dog food by tomorrow ... I moan softly, feigning desperation, and he leans in over me.

"What -- " he grunts.

I bite his ear. I pull and pull, until it comes off. It tastes of stale sweat. A shower of metal-hot blood spatters all over my face and he howls like a dog. Everything goes red and my eyes burn. I bring my left hand up and open-palm him with the knife. It sits between my fingers and whines like a circular saw, dicing and spitting: my hand is suddenly slippery with gore, blood and splinters of bone. He convulses across me and his hand slides down between my thighs and I feel wet stickiness across my legs. "What's happening Pyotr? Hey!"

Shit! The corpse is a dead weight on top of me; no, not dead, still thrashing ... something like a steel bar whacks me in the side and I completely lose my breath. There's a crunch -- dead Pyotr took most of the blow -- " *you bitch!*" screeches his friend. He sounds like my uncle. He's dancing around in a frenzy of rage and frustration and kicking at me -- I roll sideways, still unable to breathe for the crushing pain in my ribs, and the corpse takes the next blow. Then I'm out from under and crouched around my burning lungs -- " *you're gonna die, bitch, and then I'm going to fuck holes in you* -- " trying to get air in and track; blood in my eyes so as I straighten up I rub my brow and weep tears of red and see:

Heatspoor. Footsteps echoing behind a wall. I can hear his livid breathing as he waits, the coward, waiting for me to make a move. So he can lob a half-brick at me, or a knife. My ribs are on fire, the inside of one leg is scratched, my tights are yanked halfway down to my ankles and my outer garments are torn. *Shit*. And I'm covered in blood: trouble ...

I'm on the other side of the wall without blinking, without knowing how I got to be there. I guess he doesn't hear me because he's too used to listening to the sound of his own mouth to pay attention to the silence. *Listen to the quiet woman. I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never learn.* I'm *angry* as hell, now. I want to scream curses at the moon. I want to hold his severed head up in front of crowds. I want to have him on the rack and turn the wheels! I am so angry I stop breathing and wait, cold as any snake and twice as vicious, for him to stir --

There's a rustle behind the wall. I drop to my knees as he stands up, a shadow looming over the top, carefully looking about, then down as I stand up and bring my right hand up into his face. He tries to block and flails at me and his fingers go *straight* into my left hand, which is ready and waiting. The knife buzzes softly and a spray of red blocks out his face as he howls. " *Owwooo* -- " I swing my hand again, and the knife screeches as it hits

his skull and lays him out.

I blink, stand upright, and look at what's left of him lying across the top of the wall. Then I'm not standing up any more. Even though I haven't eaten for a day my stomach is trying to heave itself out through my mouth. I have just enough self-control to switch off my knife and wipe it on the back of his shirt before I stick it in my coat pocket. Then I turn round and begin to walk as fast as I can, pausing to yank up my clothes, then scuttle across the waste land, darting from shadow to shadow like a crazed madwoman. Fear and loathing boil in me like some kind of nauseating stew and I crank up on adrenalin and switch my limbic system to speed. It feels like my skull's going to explode; I'm walking through a forest inhabited by ghouls, zombie rapists lurking in every shadow -- I've had bad times before but this is seriously evil, I know they're on my shadow and if I stop they'll rape me and once inside me they'll grow steel spikes and rip me apart piece by screaming piece. I am a killer; I am a refugee. *They didn't even let me try to talk! Shit. You talk to them they're supposed to respond, not act like you're a lump of meat on legs. What kind of shit-hole is this?* Blood on my dress, my face, my hair, my coat. It's pretty obvious what I am: I'd better find my own damned kind before dawn, or I'm in *deep* trouble. The Stasi have camps for females who they figure they can use. It's a kind of destructive labour I try not to think about. *Those pigs tried to rape me.* Yeah, and if I'd survived that, they'd have made sure I didn't live to tell anyone ...

These people are mad. *Kill 'em all ... the superbrights will sort them out!* I'm so nuts with rage and humiliation and paranoia right now that if someone handed me the trigger of a nuke I'd throw the switch on the whole civilisation. I dart through the night and mist with my left hand locked in a death-grip around a greasy, meat-splattered knife, gore all over me like a banshee. I see nothing but death on every side. Until finally I'm coming up on the RZ and there doesn't seem to be anyone there and I hit the ground, listen to the rumble of a distant freight locomotive shuddering through the soil: raise my head, feel a target pasted between my shoulder blades, and *shit, if they've gone* -- I risk a brief pulse across the derelict cityscape.

BING! Someone booms back. My senses are wound so tight I nearly levitate. "Who's there?" they call quietly.

I steel myself to reply, find my teeth chattering and my tongue numb in my mouth: "freelance," I hiss at the darkness.

"Shit! Over here. What happened?" A darting presence -- I risk a peek -- someone half-familiar, shrouded in greatcoat and hood -- "Oshi!"

"I was jumped on the way in. No follow-up. Help me -- " I stand up. The woman leans against me, supporting: she's got muscles like steel under all that clothing. I sag.

"What happened?" she demands tensely. *Eri*, I realise.

"Two men. Jumped me. Dead. I was too slow. Get me --"

"This way." And we're moving, and then there's a vehicle with canvas sides and I'm lying on the floor and it's shaking and rattling and everything is very confused because my endocrine boosters just shut down and I've been running on raw overload for hours.

"Injured?" she asks.

"No. Oh -- shit." She's holding my hand. A light gleams down at me. " *Holy fuck!* Is that --"

I try to smile but my face is frozen in a grimace. "Theirs," I say. Then I close my eyes and drift away to a place where there are no mad rapists lurking in the rubble and everything is nice and friendly. Until morning.

The debriefing; the inevitable humiliating offer. I'm staring at the wall like it's a firing squad, sitting with my hands in my lap and shaking. "Just say if you want us to aerovac you," diMichaelis offers. (diMichaelis is the dispatcher, point officer at our field headquarters. A dangerous place to stay.) My teeth are chattering behind sealed lips. "You earned it. You won't be the first. But if you're not okay for action I don't want you holding us up, you got that? Only you can say, though, so if you want to go back up, just say ..."

I nearly say *yes* there and then but something holds me back. I can smell some kind of acrid disinfectant around the house. We're in a basement; naked incandescent bulbs dangle on wires in front of a peeling paper map. They took my dress and burned it or something, I'm wearing an urban camouflage skinsuit and I sponged myself down, and if there was any hot water about I'd have had a bath. "I feel okay," I say, letting my lips deal with the words automatically. "It's no big deal." *Oh yes it is. You've never killed anyone before, have you? Not for real. And you never thought that when it happened you'd enjoy letting the rats have it ... at least, not quite so much ...* "I'll be okay. I'm just a bit shaken. Do we know who they were?"

diMichaelis purses his lips and squints at the map. I can't figure why he doesn't use wisdom, like anyone else would. "They were here -- " he points. "That's a Revenant area. Yeah, I think you got bounced by zombies. Out for blood."

"Our *allies* ..?"

I must look startled because he frowns and shakes his head. "They're not friendlies; we just have a common enemy. Don't forget that; you were lucky. Rev's don't rape; they like

their meat warm." His expression goes ugly. "Still and all, they're light compared to Stasi. It's their organisation that's the problem, or their lack of it. Which the Stasi make up for. Anyway. How're you feeling?"

I stretch. My right temple throbs and my left arm feels strained. "Like shit, but I'll do. What's my case, then?"

"Pushing ears. Your cell is Eris, Ivan and Ton Ang. Ivan is team leader. You won't see me any more ... term is four weeks clear, got that? You're going to have to pass for locals at a distance. We've got a concealed base setup in Dragulic. You've seen the heavy shit at a distance, now's your chance to get down and dirty. You pass for citizens, a Party couple and their body-servants. There's a town house we've set up and fortified for point-led ops. You get to set up the construction then wait it out until we're nice and ready, then come out and mop up to order. How's that?"

Like shit warmed over for lunch. "Great." *Why am I doing this? Do I hate myself or something?* I stand up. "Where are the others? I want to say hello."

diMichaelis grins. "They're upstairs. Hey, take it easy. You're going to have a week with nothing to do but look like a native ... you're not on your own any more."

"How many of us are there dirtside?" I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

He looks at me oddly for a moment. "You don't need to know. If they catch you ..."

"Ack. Sorry, shouldn't have asked --"

diMichaelis stands up and walks over to the door, yanks it open. Wood scrapes a tearing protest against concrete. "Enough," he says, still smiling. "Go find your team. You're moving out after lunch."

I go upstairs and it's peeling paper dripping off damp walls, plaster mouldering away from lathwork and bricks. No carpet, half the stairguards stripped for tinder long ago ... depressing. The RZ HQ is the shell of a mansion home, probably used as a billet some time after the revolution. Then it was ransacked and abandoned during the bombings. They only used conventional weapons, else there'd be nothing left. The electromagnetic pulse from nukes has funny effects on upload nanosystems; as this war is literally all about hearts and minds I guess that's why they refrained. I pass a man on the stairs in local drag and flinch until he smiles and points out a door on the landing above me: "you want Ivan and Eri, right? I heard about last night! Stay live."

I hurry past him to the door and I go in. It's bare, furnished with a yellowing air mattress

and an assortment of compact lethals. Ivan rises to meet me, arms wide, and I fall against him, trying not to sob. "Missed you," he whispers in my ear. "I was really pissed when I heard about what happened. Are you alright?" I nod. "We're all ready when you are. How about it?"

I let go of him and step back, only to find Eri and Ton Ang hugging me. "Hey! What's up?" I ask.

"You made it," Ton says simply. "Some have no trouble, and some are never seen again. But you made it." Eri just hugs me, closer than is strictly necessary.

Ivan clears his throat. "We're moving after lunch. You want to crash out first -- " his gesture takes in the mattress. "Or check out the cache? It's all we get, apart from the main installation. The Bosses aren't allowing us to carry any real heavy shit around for fear the Stasis will figure out how to clone it."

"Fine." They let go of me and I flop down in a squat on the bed. "What we got?"

He points. "Bullet guns. caseless ammo, flechettes, grenades, smart sights. GP knives. Our camo suits. More microsensors than you can wave a stick at, but no heavy shit for now." He shrugs. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing. Dunno about you, but I don't like the idea of going into a city we're meant to be reclaiming with a full war load. At least not until we've prepared it for mopping up."

I shiver. *After last night ...* "the animals deserve it," I say. "Just show me the trigger!"

"Exactly." He looks at me oddly, just like diMichaelis did, and I chill out, uneasy, feeling distinctly strange. Like maybe he figures there's something wrong with me? *Shit!* Two crazed necrophiliacs tried to rape and murder me in no particular order and there's something wrong with *me* for getting angry? I smile sharply and he looks away. *Maybe there is*, I think.

"What's our cover?" asks Ton Ang. He scratches behind one ear, idling too close to the window for comfort.

"Um. Names are okay ... I've got ID's in the pipeline. You want me to dump wisdom to you?"

"That would be great!" says Eri. Her eyes sparkle. She's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed; nobody tried to kill her on her way to the RDV. I nod and wonder if she'll freeze when the crap hits the fan. Overt enthusiasm is not a noted survival trait in this vocation.

"Check. Dumping my wisdom --" A glissade of soundless light drifts down across my ears, behind my eyes, sheets and trails and flaring runes that tell me nothing until I try to make sense of it. "Oshi?"

"I'm cool," I say. Waving a hand, palm-down: "Right. So I'm ... your *wife*?" I blink at him. He looks pained. "So?"

"What kind of thing is this? Chattel-slavery or something?"

Eri glances up at the ceiling, pointedly whistles between her teeth. "Watcha, Oshi. You *trying* to spoof our cover or what?"

"No. Why?"

She rolls her eyes. "Their eugenics program is fucked, that's for starters. There are three men for every two women and the ratio would be worse if sex determination was legal instead of only a black market. This is the safest squad-sized cover story Intelligence could figure --"

"Shit --"

" -- like we go in as a 'respectable' administrator, his chattel, and two indentured servants."

I stand up: "where does this shit come from? I demand to know!"

Eri walks up behind me, puts her arms round my waist, and leans her chin on my shoulder. "What was it like where you grew up?" she asks quietly.

"I don't know! I was a blind beggar -- " I stop. They're looking at me oddly. I can feel Eri's hips poking into my buttocks, closer than I'm comfortable with. Ivan looks miserable, Ton Ang looks as if he doesn't want to know. *So I never got to worry about it*, I don't bother finishing.

"So it's a shitty situation," I say, shrugging. "Tell me something new."

The atmosphere loosens up a little. "We dress up and move out in an hour. There's a freighter, then we take the train to Dragulic. Get a cab to the house, sweep for squealers, and hole up. Our outside exposure is about four hours total, got that? After which we do whatever comes naturally."

"Fine." Ang is rummaging in a sack of props from Stuff Central. He pulls out clothing,

boots, headgear, all kinds of shit. "Hey, dig this ... "

He begins to strip and we follow suit, rummaging for appropriate gear. I make damned sure that I have a powerknife stashed in the top of one stocking and a plastic machine pistol in my bag. When we finish, I have the small consolation of seeing that the others look just as uncomfortable as I am. "Ready?" asks Ivan. We nod. Ivan sidles up beside me and wraps an arm round my waist, tries to kiss me: I turn my cheek and he backs off. The whole deal is weird: I don't like it and I don't feel like letting it get to me either.

"Let's go," says Eri, looking uncomfortable.

"Yo!" agrees Ton.

Ivan lets me go, looks at me strangely. I shrug back at him: "Lead off, boss," I say. We troop downstairs and out to the waiting truck that will take us to the monorail station. It's a cold morning, and the leaves lie in brown heaps on the ground. The clouds overhead are grey and dismal. Just right for battle.

I don't see much of Dragulic on the way in -- or of Vladigrad on the way out. I'm under cover, my hackles raised, just concentrating on not freaking when we drive past checkpoints. The guard wear grey uniforms and hold bullet guns with the nervous readiness of men who have seen too many of their colleagues shot. Our vehicle is a groundcar powered by a steam engine, dull green paint peeling from dented metal slab sides. The railway station is a looming stone edifice, fylfot banners dangling listlessly above the platforms. We make our way through on foot, Ton Ang and Eri carrying our luggage, Ivan leading. I guess my tension is totally in keeping with the environment, a loud, jabbering space crammed with stinking life and unhealthy clattering machinery. Soot drifts down from the roof like black snow as we make our way to the carriage.

Three hours later we clatter into Dragulic. Blinds cover the windows, because dusk settles early and the city is blacked out -- an optical curfew against marauding light-seekers. We don't talk much during the journey. Ivan is reading a newspaper, which is something new to me: I try not to gape at it as he blips out a steady trickle of wisdom bulletins, articles, enemy propaganda. They call us aliens and claim to be winning the valiant struggle to free the hero-race from the agents of interstellar imperialism and digital necrophilia, the usual tired litany of implausible bullshit. The rest of the news is about battles won and spies executed, factories built and nations enslaved. It's a glimpse into a repugnant view of reality: fascism has its own warped logic. I just hope I never learn to understand it from the inside.

When we leave the train we bundle straightaway into another steam carriage, this time a dull black vehicle with comfortable seats and an obsequious driver. We rumble through

the twisting streets until we arrive at a big house in a residential area. We've arrived.

The building is concrete with big floor and ceiling spaces, constructed to accommodate peacetime subsystems which this culture never quite developed. Razorwire threads the hedge like glittering dew, and my head comes alive with the mindless hum of perimeter sensors as we go inside. Stasi have no wisdom, barely got computers -- big steaming edifices of sintered glass and copper, the most advanced tools they'll allow themselves -- but can check out radiation emissions. Once the front door shuts and the car drives off Ivan gestures; we dump kit and roll through every room in regular search mode, nerves on fire and guns in hand. But there are no surprises and the microsensors Intelligence primed the place with say it's clear ... we're safe.

An hour later I'm lying in a hot tub of water on the first floor. The room's tiled with baked clay and the bath is made of tinned metal, but so what! There's a boiler to heat the water, and a flush lavatory -- luxury by local standards. I feel that if I lie in it for long enough I might make myself clean again. My gun's near enough to grab and I make a splash getting it when the door slides open and Ivan comes in. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

I don't even think about it. "Dirty. Raw. Getting better. How would you feel?"

He squats down next to the tub, avoiding the puddle on the floor, crosses his legs. He's wearing a camo suit, I realise. I put the gun down carefully. "I don't know," he says. "Nobody ever tried to rape me. Death, I guess, I've seen, but --"

It's the way he says it. I think I can forgive him now, whatever I thought five minutes ago. He doesn't understand, probably never will, but that's not his fault. "I'm sorry. I was way spooked by it. The way they didn't even wait for me to say something --"

He looks at me sharply then glances away. "We live and learn," he says. Quietly: "I'm glad you made it."

"Huh. Well so am I." I splash some more, rubbing coarse soap into my armpits. The water's hard; a thin, greasy slime floats on top of it. "We begin surveillance?"

"Ton swept the garden. Eri's shooting scenery for hologram panes. Once we've got the windows lined we can start building."

"Be a relief." The small construction robots we brought are lined up in the living room like so many silver roaches, quiescent, waiting to be told to go forth and multiply. "What's the neighbourhood like?"

He yawns. "Civilised as you can expect in this shithole. I guess we can start going out

tomorrow, when it looks clean. We're slated for a visit then, anyway -- got to link up with a supplier to keep us in food and shipments of gear, then activate. Link up with the resistance."

"The -- " Everything goes red. " *Shit.*"

"It's them. Yes. Look, the two who tried to do you ... they're dead. Look, this is a big deal, Osh. You want to punch out now?" He's next to me now: he reaches out and gently unpeels my fingers from the squashed lump of soap. "Hey, that stuff's rationed, you know that? A month's supply."

"Oh. So sorry. You just caught me -- " I blink and catch his eye. *So much waiting.* I stand up and catch him around the neck and we kiss, and don't stop. I'm dripping all over him but I can't stop, won't stop. "Damn. *These savages.* Why can't we just off them straight, without this messing around?"

"You know why," he says.

"Yeah." I let go of him, reluctantly. "Towel?"

He passes me a towel: big, soft, the first bit of local fabric I've come across that doesn't feel like sandpaper. I shiver into it because the air in the room's cold -- you have to burn carbonaceous rock to make it warm. "Leave the bathwater," he says. "I need it myself."

Some admission. I drop the towel and cast around for the clothes I dumped on the chair in the corner, but they're native stuff and I don't particularly want to feel like a local right now. "Panes up outside?"

"Yes." Ivan is undressing. I pick up my gun and head out the door. I'm naked and it's chilly, but the telltale spectral blur on the windows tells me that Eri's been through, got the bedrooms camouflaged already. The hologram panes in the window make the place look empty from the outside, even if you've got an army stashed away indoors. I wander over to the bags we dumped on the bed and unroll one of them. *More* native junk. Gaah. I jump on the bed -- sprung with iron, I figure -- lie flat on my back, close my eyes, and try to think of wisdom. It pours through my brain like water, depositing an ugly silt of memory on the way. And yes -- the whole thing is as bad as I ever dreamed it could be. *Now* I see why the Bosses have such a big presence here, are sending down a whole blasted army: it's more of a mess than I could begin to imagine. All the death cult nonsense ... there's a reason for it. And it's dirty. A nasty little secret thing that's happened before on half a dozen worlds-turned-cancer, and is trying to happen again here.

It's the Stasi, of course. Power corrupts, and the promise of absolute power leads to

absolute corruption. They know what they want, and that's why they're fighting us. They don't have enough power yet, even though their slave-camps are full and they're slaughtering the other peoples on this hapless world like a demented shark loose in a school of swimmers. No indeed. They know what they're trying to do: and Distant Intervention, dedicated to maintaining Dreamtime access for everyone without prejudice, must *always* oppose that course of action. The Stasi are trying to cut Miramor Dubrovnic free of the afterlife. Because that way lies absolute power ... the power of total death.

That night I set up the Von Neumann machine and get it breeding. It's a baroque design, a myriad of metallic cockroaches that whisper and scutter against each other, sensors tapping and pinging, searching for corners in which to go sessile. I think someone decided it would be less obtrusive than the usual, robot bulldozers and a solid-volume renderer the size of a blast furnace. (How's that? A stealth factory?) The thing will go off underground and start breeding, copying itself with mechanical enthusiasm.

I kneel on the floor barefoot, wearing a native dress, my hair bound up in a ponytail, locked into my wisdom so tightly that I can barely see the room around me for information. That's okay: I can feel what's going on around me, the humming whisper of activity, drones spawning in the shadows. Raw shapes splatter across my field of view, graphs constructing themselves to my command. With only limited intelligence the constructors need guidance. They cluster into turret shaped machine-hives, three of them, then dig down through the floor and tap ceramic roots into the city ducts that run beneath the house. We're on top of a granite escarpment, rich in uranium isotopes. A draft blows through the room when they tap a sewer, then stops abruptly as they plug it. It's obsessive work; I only break concentration when I develop a bad cramp in the muscle of one calf.

Some time after midnight, Eri joins me in the room. The click and titter of the machines is fading as they enter sessile phase, cannibalising their own bodies to make the big underground placentories that will spawn the next generation of constructors tomorrow. Eri kisses me on the cheek: "go to bed now," she whispers in my ear. "I'll look after them."

"Watch?"

"Mine. Check. Go now ... " I rise silently and pass her my gun. Jagged red lines bisect my field of vision. I tumble upstairs and undress in the chilly bedroom, crawl under the covers next to Ivan. He's snoring softly. I lie on my back and dream of troubled metal machine nightmares that snip and whirl a lethal gavotte beneath the sewers, while overhead the tumbrils roll towards a bloody hill on the horizon.

In the morning, Ivan wakes me with an urgent, speechless demand. I make him put in the contact lenses and we make love like beasts, clawing each other as we scrabble towards a

dislocated climax. I stare into empty eye sockets as he comes, the hologram contact lenses masking his expression. Afterwards I feel depressed, empty, gutted by a deep lassitude like a swamp-driven fever caught from a windswept marsh. I feel as empty as his eyes look. Judging by his brooding silence Ivan is disappointed, possibly angry with himself. Or maybe it's me he's angry with: it's hard to tell when I can't see his eyes. I've been called sick and worse, but I've found the lenses are the only thing that makes it possible for me to lie with a man and enjoy the experience. For some reason, men seldom appreciate this.

He stands by the shrouded window, looking out across the city: I lie on my side facing the door, hands wedged between my thighs, knees drawn up. I don't know why it's got to be like this, I really don't, and I don't think Ivan does either. It wasn't like this upstairs, on the station, in the training camp where we met. He must be under a lot of stress. That must be

--

"Hey, look at this."

I'm too demotivated to demur. Shedding a trail of twisted bedding I arrive behind him, stare past his shoulder at the prismatic distortion of the chameleon panes. He passes me a pair of wire-framed spectacles and I fumble them onto the bridge of my nose, fingerprinting one lens with a mousy smear.

The windows clear as if by magic and I see the sun rising across the stony grey landscape of factories, brick houses, and the rising red gantries of the Stasis engineers. The ground drops away beneath the window and I can see buildings all the way to the horizon. I gasp when I see the hill in the distance, the building that squats at the crest like a monstrous toad. "That's what we're here to deal with," he says, pointing. "Death's embassy. I didn't realise we'd be stationed so close ..."

I prop my chin on his shoulder and it's as if what happened five minutes ago was never, an un-event, just another aborted nightmare consequence of our locale. For who could feel good, living in the shadow of that monolith? Death's embassy, indeed. "The Politburo, out there on their hill --"

"Don't say it." He touches a finger to my lips. "Time to get dressed. We ought to check the constructors. And then there's Fiancre to meet ..."

We dress in silence, native costume and hidden weapons. Downstairs, Eri and Ton Ang are eating breakfast in the kitchen. A great bowl of stewed grain sits bubbling on the cast-iron range. The floor is stone beneath my boots. "Today is a working day," says Eri. "I guess we'd better check out the market if we're going to look real to the neighbours. We could eyeball the escape options while we're about it."

"I say we have enough sensors in place," says Ang, shrugging. "We don't *need* to go out ..."

"If we stay here we break emcon briefly every time we download from the surveillance remotes. I'd rather minimise that risk. Also, we'd look odd to the neighbours. We want them to think we're ordinary people. Oshi --"

I flip my wisdom: "constructors have about a day to go before they get enough mineral sources to go exponential and start filtering for U-235. Once that happens we should reach criticality in something like," *one hundred and twenty kiloseconds* "forty hours. Then all bets are cancelled, is that the idiom? We'll have a live reactor. Enough power to wrap up our end of things."

"Three days," says Ivan; "don't forget that, Ang. We've got to look normal for three whole days -- " he leans over the bowl and scoops porridge into a cup. Sips at it carefully. "That clear?"

Ang shrugs. "As you say. Who gets to play native?"

I sit down at the table. "You and Eri, our cover says you're servants?"

He half-smiles. "As you like it. But isn't the mistress of the household meant to go out and supervise her slaves?"

I stare at him coldly until Eri intervenes. "It's not so bad, Oshi. Why are you so worried? It's daylight, you're armed, there're civil constraints in this place. They're only human --"

"That's what worries me!" I stand up and walk about the kitchen, legs itching because there's no room to stretch them; "they aren't logical! Not like a fucking machine! The best way to avoid suspicion is not to be seen in the first place."

"To hide in full view," says Ivan. "So, Oshi. How do you feel about coming shopping with me?" He smiles lop-sidedly and I feel my ears burning until I clamp down on peripheral circulation and twitch myself into combat-ready focus, furious at being so clearly outmanoeuvred on all sides.

"Why?" I demand, standing still.

"Because," begins Ivan, rubbing his chin, "you're afraid. Is that good for you? At least tell me this, what would you do if it was someone else? What should *they* do?"

I stare at him for a moment. "Okay," I say. "But it had better not interrupt the constructors."

That's what we're here for --"

"It won't," Ivan says. And because I can't think of a sensible objection I shut up.

It's nearly noon and Ivan and I walk arm-in-arm through the bazaar that sprawls across a greater portion of the valley below our residence. He wears a gaudy outfit, gold frogging and epaulettes and a high hat. At his belt hangs a primitive bullet-gun, licensed by the laws of this place. My dress is characteristically dark and I carry no weapon -- at least, not openly. Scrawny shopmerchants beckon from the doorways, trying to attract us: costermongers wail and warble their wares in the street in tones that remind me of funerals, the paid mourners of the rich who haunted the gravepits of Ditsan Kok, where I spent my festering childhood. Small urchins scamper and twitter in the gutters, and a police station -- concrete, mirrorglass, razorwire and pointed rooftops to deflect mortar fire -- bulks over the concourse at a prominent intersection. "We could do with a new carpet for the dining room, don't you think?" Ivan asks me, one eyebrow arched, evidently getting into the spirit of things.

"I suppose so," I say morosely. "If you think the one we've got isn't good enough ..."

"*In here. Action.*" I don't even blink at his signal, but my pulse seethes and my fingers are itching for the knife in my concealed pocket and I'm trying not to look over my shoulder as he dives into the shopfront nearest to our left. A flutter of wings startles me, but it's only a pigeon, red eyes incurious as it fumbles overhead to roost. For an instant I'm alone outside; then I turn and follow Ivan, holding my breath in an effort to control my tension.

"Ah, sir and madame. How may I help you?"

The small, bald man smells of cheap emollient and boiled cabbage. He grins like a monkey, squeezes his palms together, ducks his head as he steps out from behind his high desk. The shop is suffocatingly dense, crammed with intricately woven rugs. I nearly cough when I draw breath.

"We're interested in your wares," Ivan says casually. "May I ask where they come from?" "*Checkout the door,*" he sends me, anonymous wisdom-pulses that only my nervous system is equipped to receive around here. (The Dreamtime nanomechs normally only transmit; it is not for the citizens of interdicted worlds to receive, as well, to hear the dreams and fears of their machines.) I turn round slowly, check, smell, feel the drafts -- the only door is up front, and my knife is in my pocket -- and nod.

"They come from all over, good sir, but especially from up North, from Dragulic, from Nasribad, from the cis-sylvanian treelands ... can I especially interest you in a masterpiece of the Dragulian design, from a workshop lost since the beginning of the unfortunate

unease -- an example of what is virtually unobtainable today, executed in the original hand-woven hair in that legendary cradle of the tapestry weaver's craft?"

" *Cover now.*" My hand is in my pocket and the knife clicks faintly, warm and angry. I slip into deep focus and the knife becomes part of me, not a thing in my hand any more but an extension, part of my body. "You can interest us, but only if the rug is *intact*," Ivan tells the shopmerchant. "What is the price of decay?"

"Ten groats," the small man retorts instantly. "You are -- ?"

"Your wholesalers." I can hear his cheeks stretching as he smiles. The dust motes before my eyes are as large as boulders. Everything feels like ice. "We've come to town to ensure the effective delivery of your new tool. If you'd care to make the invoice for the carpet out to my demesne and see to its immediate despatch I'm sure collection of the device can be achieved ..."

"That will be satisfactory, sir. Madam?"

I turn round, force my face into a neutral expression. "Yes?"

The little man looks puzzled, a trifle perturbed. "It is true that when you -- leave -- you will not hand us over to the superbrights?"

"Does it worry you?"

He grimaces. "If you know of them -- "

I turn away. "Please let's go," I say to Ivan: "I don't feel well." I shiver slightly and he looks concerned. But it's not fear that's making me feel unwell, it's something I didn't realise I had, until now; a violent rage, burning fit to make me kill if I stay here another instant. A rage against this little man: this fellow of the zombie rapists in the rubble --

"Sure," he says. "Hey, you wait outside and I'll just give this man my card. That'll be satisfactory?" he asks the shopmerchant.

"Oh assuredly." The carpetseller is grovelling as I duck through the awning and stand on the pavement, looking up at the afternoon sky. It's pale blue, streaked with wisps of cloud. The heavy air rubs grit against my cheeks and my nose itches from the pollution. But my pulse is winding back down and I'm breathing deep gasps of relief because I know at least one thing now, even if I can't stop my fingers from itching for death: I'm not a coward. Next time I meet some of our estwhile allies, nothing is going to save them.

Down in the basement, the big machines twitter to each other like deranged sparrows. Carmine and gold bubbles shimmer like the iridescent scum on a cess-pit contaminated by heavy metals: the fingers of the Von Neumann constructors expand like damp rot, creeping through the damp earth, robot kilns pouring out a steady stream of venous blue ichor that climbs the walls of the subterranean space and spreads into a spiderweb of hot, corrosive glue.

The system is booting through complexity levels, bringing itself up slowly -- each stage fabricating the next generation of micromachines in turn -- and is not yet ready for our purposes. That's about five hours away. When it's functional, when we have a network stretched beneath the entire city, we will take control of the Dreamtime nanoencoders in everyone's brain and forcibly upload their personalities into the Afterlife. This is our part of the preparations for the strike against the Politburo, a preliminary stage. For the second stage we are collecting interesting isotopes from the granite intrusion beneath our feet. I sit in the room above, curled up in a soft armchair, my mind fixed on the smells and tastes and sounds of the city. A river of senses swirls past me in soft currents of synaesthesia.

Up on the big hill, I can hear the grind of the anti-aircraft radars as they scan the horizon, searching for intruders. The Politburo is a constant hum of activity, Party delegates pouring in and scampering away under constant escort by faceless hordes of Stasi soldiers. The civil war grinds on in the distance, Revenants -- the living dead, death cultists who believe in the Dreamtime -- chewing away at the edges of the Partei. They work in uneasy alliance with the local democratic resistance and the distant fighters of the unconquered territories. I hear the sound of gunfire in the distance: I know where the unmarked graves lie by the roadsides. I feel omniscient. The network of sensors lies thin upon the city, but it is a technology so advanced that the Partei barely understands its existence. It fills them with a nameless dread and horror, angst made physical at the thought of the terrible judgement which, in their guilt and hubris, they believe will be visited upon themselves when they die.

This thought pleases me. I don't *like* these grim-hearted fanatics. Their obsession with procreation, their manic dream of *ubermensch*, their vicious xenophobia and phobic materialism: all these things repel me. I don't ask why Distant Intervention takes such an interest in them as to wish to destabilise their conflict-riven entire society ... but I have no reason to ask such questions, any more than a fish asks why it swims in water. All I look forward to is their downfall, so I can go home and forget about the lunatics in the midnight wasteland, revenants of a dark pursuit.

Somewhere far away a door slams. I glance up, shift my attention to my eyes: Ivan stands before me. "Yes?"

He sits down in a chair opposite me and smiles. "We did it clean," he says. "The magic

carpet is coming. When the delivery van takes it away again it will be carrying a cleanup device to take care of the stink afterwards. Indigenous manufacture, of course -- made from local materials."

"Huh. Good. What then?"

He looks nonplussed. "The constructors --"

"Yeah." I yawn and stretch, feel joints pop and muscles ache acutely -- I've been in this position for hours and all of a sudden my limbs are screaming at me. "They'll do the job. One more day and the entire city will be wired for Dreamtime. We can go to full flood whenever the Boss gives the word."

He clears his throat. "I'm not sure he will," he says.

I'm on my feet before he can shut his mouth. "That's crap and you know it! We're here to do a number and -- " I see his expression.

"Even if death is part of the process?" he asks, drily.

"What do you mean?" I'm confused. "It's quite simple. We get the net installed and bounce them all into --"

"Uh-huh. There's a hitch." He waits.

"Well?" I'm getting mad, now, mad with the kind of internal irritation that makes me want to scratch the source of the itch until it's raw, bloody, dead.

"Uploading the city is fine. It would get the Stasi's population base out of the way, sure. But there's a problem. Their eugenics program --"

"What's wrong?" I lean over him.

He closes his eyes. "For the past two generations they've been gene-splicing without telling anyone. There's some seriously whacked-out immunological engineering going down; it's too widespread to contain." He tilts his head back and I lean closer until I can see the tiny veins in his eyelids, feel his breath on my throat. "It's in about sixty percent of them, Oshi. They're immune to the Dreamtime nanocoders -- I guess it's what they've been looking for all along. They've got immunoglobins that stop the upload bodies before they cross the blood-brain barrier, stop them encoding neural connections, stop them period. If we go ahead and Upload the entire city, we got problems. There's a word for that kind of problem. Whether it's the Partei's fault for fucking them over or ours, someone's

responsible as shit for it. Let me spell it out for you; the word I'm thinking of is --"

"Genocide."

The situation is simple and infinitely horrible.

There have always been political organizations predicated on the search for ultimate power. National socialists, communists, whatever -- once their leaders realise that they're riding a tiger and will be eaten if they fall from the saddle -- clamp down hard, seeking for reins that will hold their monster in check. Night and mist swallow their enemies, vomiting them out into unmarked graves. Secret police forces proliferate, other engines of terror modulated by their fearsome enquiries. But all the same, no matter how hard they react, the leaders can't sleep easy in their beds. They know that sooner or later their opponents will realise the predicament they stand in and fight back. And now there is another fear for the leaders of totalitarian regimes: the afterlife.

Rich worlds can afford reincarnation clinics, cloned bodies prepared for the recently dead to be reborn into. But rich worlds don't get that way under merciless juntas. Rich worlds become rich by trade, learning, self-knowledge, respect for their human riches. The dictators and petty tyrants know that when they die they will live on in the Dreamtime; and what happens to them *there*? An old adage about camel-hair ropes and the eye of a needle springs to mind. The fascists fear that they will be judged beyond the grave, and found wanting: or that their subjects will take comfort from the proximity of immortality, and throw themselves upon the bayonets.

(Actually, nobody waits to judge the tyrants. Superbrights are not gods in any moral dimension, however powerful they might be. As the Dreamtime expands, new worlds being added to the network, so the dead diffuse into the distance -- I think. That's what they told me. Anyway, the point stands: the fears of the oppressors are misplaced. But that doesn't stop them from waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the dark night, all the same. And that makes me glad, at least.)

The Stasis, the party of changelessness, think they have an answer. It's an abomination of a secondary order, not as bad as the worst excesses of the genocidal fringe, but bad enough all the same. They want to abolish the upload tools, making their subjects mortal and ignorant of perfect wisdom. We can remove the Stasis, but only by killing them forever. They are gambling upon the fact that we will not do this. Their worst viciousness is expressed in their contempt for our moral system. I'm not sure who are worse; them, or their death-worshipping opponents. But the Stasis think they can defy the agencies of the Dreamtime, the servants of the Superbrights.

They will have to be taught a lesson. And Oshi and her companions are here to build the

tools that the teacher will wield.

It's tomorrow morning already, and I'm feeling vicious from lack of good sleep. When the door gong booms I scoop up a knife, shove it in one pocket, and scramble downstairs. Wisdom blinks a steady glow in my eye: no explosives, no Stasi breaking down the door with hammers. But there's a cart pulled by some animal standing in front of our gate, bright red and gold scrollwork running down its sides, and there are men standing beside it. "*Action downstairs*," I call, adjusting my dress. Eri is already there: and she opens the door.

"The House of Anaya Voslic? Your-humble-servant Pyotr Malzruth of Sclotcik and Son, the house of Fine Carpets. Ah, madame Voslic! Your estimable purchase awaits you on yonder wagon: which has been brought hither for your perusal. Should everything be to your satisfaction --"

I cut him off. "Bring it in. Let's see what it looks like, yes? Eri, show this man --"

Pyotr the verbose is not alone. He's brought his son along, a teen-ager who gawks at me as if he's never seen a woman before. Maybe it's just his age, maybe it's the culture -- it makes me feel uneasy. I keep my expression neutral as Malzruth and his brat manhandle a fat roll of oilcloth-wrapped fabric up the steps, in through the door, into our hallway. I back up to make room for them. "Unroll it, please," I say. "So we can see what it looks like in here."

Eri's got her hands buried deep in her apron, holding some concealed comfort. I cross my arms and watch as Malzruth slashes the cords binding the carpet with a sharp knife. "Go outside," he tells his son.

"But papa --" the kid glances at me, shuts up and does as he's told.

"Now," says Eri. Pyotr nods and folds back one corner. We stare at the carpet for a long time.

"You can go now," I say. "Return tomorrow to collect the old one. It will weigh rather a lot. You have been told how to dispose of it."

He looks up, and I see he's red-faced and breathing hard as if he's seen his own death warrant signed. "Y-yes," he stutters. "Good-day." He scrambles for the doorway and Eri doesn't have to pull it to as he hops away towards his cart and the security of not having to think about the ghastly task he's just subscribed to.

"You think he knows what he's just done?" she asks, taking her hands out of her apron

pockets. She rubs them together as if to dry them, mopping clean some imaginary blood.

"I think he might *guess*," I shrug. "But understand? Who could?"

She shrugs, bends to take one end. "Give me a hand with this."

"Ack." Together we carry the carpet through into the empty dining room, floored in polished wooden tiles and windowed with deceiver panels. The primitive tactical nuke is almost finished; the Von Neumann constructors are leaching the necessary U235 out of the ground at a ridiculous rate. "Wish they could make the gadget a bit lighter."

"Go tell it to the foundry." She drops her end of the rug and together we unroll it in the centre of the floor, taking care not to look straight at the design on it. "Can't say I'm too bothered. Not as long as we've got our insurance."

"Yes, but for how long?" I stare at the window frames until she comes up behind me and puts her arms round my waist and leans her chin on my shoulder.

"Think of it as evolution in action, that's what I always say," she whispers in my ear. "Howsat for a cute option?"

"Nice," I admit. She nibbles my lobe delicately, brushing a strand of hair out the way; I sigh and turn round, breaking her grip. "But no thanks. Please Eri. We've got to get out of here first, haven't we? I don't want to spent one minute more with that thing than I have to --"

She looks slightly agrieved. "Of course. What do you think I am, some kind of suicide fool? I'd just like to see it when it goes off. Make a pretty picture."

"Sure."

I blink at her, sense a curious repugnance that's almost like lust. She blinks back at me then laughs. "Come on." We leave the dining room behind, its deadly package waiting in the middle of the floor. And then the door is closed and it's another house -- and Ivan is coming down the stairs with a gun in his hand.

My memory flashes back to yesterday:

Chiaroscuro patterns ripple across the great square, jackboots prancing high beneath the scrawl of fylfot banners. Great crude missile launchers trundle behind the crunching ranks of militia, phallic tubes towed behind steam-huffing carriages. On the balcony high above the square, members of the ruling junta stand in stiff-armed acclaim above their legions.

Behind the missile launchers, a convoy of armoured crawlers rattle along on deisel power, gun turrets pointed forward in salute. A middle-aged man is intoning strange grey slogans as the monitor viewpoint pans back to take in the mobile might of the People's Army. I wince and rub at my tight-closed eyes as the bird-watcher rolls head-under-wing and blinks furiously before looking back at the scene. Behind the crawlers trails a single carriage, a high-barred flatbed holding a score of dejected figures. The scaffold awaits them, hydraulic rack and primitive TV cameras on the gibbet to send a chilly message to their allies: *so perish all enemies of the nation.*

I don't want to watch any more. I open my eyes and the scene fades to grey, livid shadows that overlay my visual field, staining the world with retinal violet. "I don't see the point," I say. *Really, I don't.* Why should they do it? It makes no kind of sense to me.

"The revolution always devours its children," Ivan says patiently. "It's all about total power, always has been. As long as there's hope of escape -- even if the escape requires death as a passport -- the Partei will be vulnerable to subversion. Only by eliminating all rational alternatives, by reducing resistance to the level of insanity, will their reign be justified. At least that's what they think -- they're too primitive to take the more subtle approaches, manufactured consent and false freedom. They're trying to jam the stable doors shut before the horses bolt. It's not an easy job, with the limited tools they have.

"A Dreamtime uplink from a real-space world is a fragile beast. It depends on massive fine-grained parallelism -- an invisible, submicroscopic world in parallel with our own, just a heartbeat away.

"It's designed to be resilient, of course. Cultural drift can render whole populations unable to handle such a high technology artefact, even conceptually; myths of a deity-created afterlife proliferate, even among the sophisticated inhabitants of high-level systems. At the other end of the scale, the ignorant but educated might try to destroy it unintentionally. Worlds where it has been forgotten, but other knowledge has been retained. Use of some weapons, for example -- nukes are a classic case -- can distort or compromise the process across a wide area."

The logic of the situation is circular and I don't want to close the arc, to admit that there's a reason for this if you look at it from the right angle. "You're very cynical."

He huffs, almost a laugh. "If you'd grown up where I did --"

"So Newhaven was a luxury world, then?"

"Not exactly." He stretches, eyeballs the whitewash wall to let the shadowplay run to its

conclusion without shut-eye projection. "Newhaven was only stabilised by massive and subtle manipulation. They restricted the scope for rebellion by giving everybody a stake in the profits: prosperity breeds. So does discontent. The people here have none of the former and lots of the latter -- the only way to keep a lid on it seems to the Partei to be the maintenance of a state of total terror. I suppose --" he stares at the wall and I shudder, thinking of the screaming absence of light in which I spent my childhood -- "they're right. If they ever let up they'll be dangling from the street-lamps within days."

"Huh. What did diMichaelis say about our policy, then?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He *smiles* at me as he stands up, the sarcastic swine. "Even if he were to say anything to me I'm sure I couldn't tell you because I wouldn't presume to understand it -- he can be very obscure when he wants to be. Positively gnomic. Almost as bad as one of the Bosses. Leaves us poor shits to figure it out for ourselves. So you have trouble with the idea of wiping a city and re-drawing it from scratch?"

I shrug. "Seeing we've already built the bomb ..."

"Ah, the magic carpet syndrome again. The bomb. Like it's going to end all our problems. Bring the fucking stasi to our way of thinking, you know? Whoever dreamed that one up was not entirely sane."

"Bad security and too much spare uranium floating around." Over on the kitchen table a gunlauncher is spilling its guts, half-cleaned. Ivan works on it intermittently, whenever he remembers it's there. I wander over and check it out. "How many of us are there in this town?"

"Hmmm ..." He winces and blinks. " *You don't want to know that, officially,*" he sends via wisdom link. " ... my guesstimate is maybe as many as twenty cells. All with significant firepower. I mean, the Stasi are tough but they're not sharp. I would expect us to have as many as six gadgets ready to go off, then drones ready to come down and decontaminate the fire zone afterwards. Half a million corpses must raise a hell of a stink. But you heard what I said. Think of the resistant individuals, immune to the afterlife nanoencoders. The Partei doctors use prions --"

"What's a prion?"

He looks startled. "You don't --"

" *Wisdom is off-line for the duration, I've only got stored battle-knowledge for now.*"

He looks abashed. "Ack. A prion; sub-genetic virus, I guess. You twist a peptide alpha chain that propagates, maybe loops through some ribosomes and replicates without DNA or RNA. You click on nucleic acids? Genetics?" I nod: my education is patchy but not defective. "Good. Prions are rare. they're not much use to us, but the Partei ... They can't even build a gene spinner, let alone decode a homoeobox, but they slaughtered enough seniles that they found the infective agent for sponge-brain syndrome. Turns out there's an isomer that propagates -- slowly -- and can be modified to block the nanotech uptake route, some kind of synaptic protein. So guess what our friendly Junta decided to use on their own population?"

"Ack." I can see the headlines in one of the newspapers; *By order of the Politburo, life after death is decreed to be a Partei privilege* . "It sucks, but --"

He picks up the gunlauncher and slots the barrel into the breech pump with an oily *snick*. "That's why we're here. Insurance. In case the carpet bombs don't work."

Here-and-now:

The door blows in without any warning, a deep juddering thud pulsing through me like a blow. I dive for the floor, pushing Eri away from me as something thumps me a light blow on the forehead and I grab at my knife, clothes getting in the way but tearing cleanly as I flip the trigger. Someone shouts: I've got a handful of fabric wrapped around a purring death in one hand. I aim it at the door and wave it around as my right eye goes red and sticky and when I blink all the light is gone. *Blood*. Damn. A graze on my forehead. I trip the knife to full power and brace myself. There's a scream and a sudden crackle of small-arms fire and I switch off the knife and frantically roll for cover. *More* gunfire. I wince, blink my eye to infrared and get ghost-sight back: something lands on my neck, a gravelly scattering of plaster from the ceiling.

" *Back room! Go! I'll cover!*" It's Eri. She's got a gun, some kind of machine pistol, trained on the doorway with finger jammed tight on the trigger. It's smart: it only fires when it sees a target in its sights. I scramble on hands and knees, backing away from the chaos out front. It's on fire now, flames licking the doorway and the hedge beyond -- don't know what kind of shit's happening but we're lucky to be alive -- and kick the door behind me so hard my ankle feels like it's on fire. It slams open and I wave my knife at an empty room -- I go to ground and Eri sprints past me.

"Ivan?"

She looks harried. "Come *on*. Your head -- are you injured?"

"Not badly --" she grabs my wrist and drags me towards the back, over the home-brew

nuke, into the servant's pantry where the staircase is. My head is spinning. *Where's Ivan?* Eri covers as I scramble down the steps into the cellar, where the stalactites glow and shimmer with a heat like death. *What about Ton Ang?* They were careless -- I don't hear any covering fire from behind. I cast around, see the tunnel beside the great pile of weird gadgetry that dominates the floor. It gapes open beside the constructors that pour tendrils down into the city sewers endlessly, to extract the uranium-235 bomb fuel.

"S way," I mutter.

Eri's behind me. "Make for ground one," she whispers. "They'll know where to find us if they get free." There's a colossal **thump!** from overhead that rattles the ceiling. "You first. Go on. *Get down!*" She shoves me towards the hole. I scramble down into it feet-first, slide down the buzzing hot constriction into darkness, my heatsight showing me a waterfall of silver nightmares coruscating over my shoulder -- then I drop, jarring my ankle again, land with a splash in something cold and soggy and nearly lose my footing. The tunnel's too low, so I duck and waddle a bit, then Eri's down beside me and I can nearly see her. It's pitch-black in here but the heat of the web that covers the ceiling lights her up like day for me. "Can you see anything?" she whispers.

"Ack. Right eye's splashed. Scalp's bleeding, can't see except in heatlight."

"Heatlight -- oh, yeah. *Yeah.*" She shakes her head. "I can -- should do -- "

She's not making sense. "Follow me now." I carefully don't think about anything in particular, just hobble along with my head ducked to clear the luminescent slime and my hand clutching a knife in a death-grip. "Do you think they --"

THUMP.

My ears nearly pop. Water sprays across my back; there's a gravelly rumble that lasts for seconds, then silence.

"*No.*" She doesn't say anything more. Doesn't need to. We stand there, motionless, for several seconds while the wave of sewage ebbs around our ankles. I feel a great rift form in my life.

"Come on," she prods me, finally. "Let's go. Ground one or bust. Make them pay for that."

The sewer is a concrete pipe, round-bore and wide, less than two metres high. Slime wreaths it three-quarters of the way to the ceiling; every so often we pass pipes and vents high in the ceiling of the sewer. It's why we chose the house; why we're still alive. "They have tunnel-runners," Eri mutters. "Specially-bred animals, some kind of native predator.

Haul ass, Oshi. Or they'll --"

"Fuck it, I'm fine." I bite down on my tongue in anger. I put one foot in front of the other, knife out front, eyes fixed on that lucid vanishing point of darkness where the scum rises to meet the roof and there's no hatred and the ghosts of lamentation aren't rising to the surface of my mind. I can still see Ivan on the staircase, looking ever so surprised, a gunlauncher clutched in his hands as the door comes in off its hinges -- I shouldn't think about it any more, unless I want to join him very soon. Death and upload is not a ticket back to base: our masters do not appreciate failures. "I'll take point. Cover me. Check?"

"Yo." She's behind me and I think she doesn't take it so hard but I feel very bitter, very numb. I can't stop seeing him again, wishing I hadn't been so tough on him since we came downstairs. I want to kick myself, so I slosh forward instead -- sewer wading as a substitute for mourning. I want to find those Stasi goons and, and --

"Maybe they were careless, but maybe they knew they didn't need to block out the back," she whispers over my shoulder. Then: "*eyeball! Contact!*" I see what Eri, with her clear eyes and cool head spotted while I was off in the clouds of angst. Cry havoc! and set loose the dogs of war. It's the tunnel-runners, great fat-bodied walrus-things with huge eyes that shine red in the dim sewer-light. They flop and weave around one another, sloshing and foaming in a morass of beast-hungry aggression. The nightmares have seen us, and now I know why the Stasi didn't bother waiting in the sewers; I duck sideways, knife useless at this range, to give her room to open up ... and lurch head-first into the wall.

I come awake shuddering with cold and fear and I don't know where I am or who I am or how I got here. *Wet. Hurt.* One foot is a mass of pain, twice its normal size. My bladder aches. The side of my head is throbbing like a red-hot boiler where I thumped it on the sewer wall. I'm cold. I try to open one eye and it comes back to me. "*Where are we?*" I send, twitching wisdom access on a low-bandwidth channel. "*Who's here?*"

"Awake." It's Eri. I feel her, now, leaning against my back -- that's the dry, warm side. She sounds hoarse. "What's your condition? Can you talk?"

"Ack. Leg feels like --" I take stock. "Those animals. What did you do?"

She moves, uneasily. She's sitting, I can feel her presence, sitting cross-legged with her back to me. There's stone beneath my cheek -- no wonder I feel sore. This is some kind of platform. It's dark and it reeks of ancient sewage. "I took the roof down. This is a dead-end spur, Oshi. If we want to go home, we've got to dig our way out first."

"They were --" sudden panic yanks me bolt upright in spite of myself, both eyes open in the dark. My left eye stings; I can feel blood and mucus crusted in it, and my head's sore.

I can't see anything, it's so dark. "Buried alive. Aren't we? *What about Ton and Ivan?*"

"No contact," Eri says absent-mindedly. "So I dragged you in here and brought down the roof behind us. Anything to keep the guardians out." I can feel her shudder as she says it. Perversely, this gives me hope.

"Guardians? Is *that* what you call them?" I'm too exhausted for the hysterical laugh I feel bubbling up inside me. "What are they?"

She talks quietly, slowly, feeling her way around the words as if they're strange boulders in a dark landscape. "Some kind of rodent-analogue. Pre-terraforming, so they're marginal in this ecosystem. Stasi feed them trace nutrients and use operant conditioning to keep them down here. Until they got them, the zombies held the sewer system."

"*Uck.*" I lean against her and she puts an arm round my shoulders. "Look, we got to get out of here. If the Stasi find the gadget they'll run and before that happens diMichaelis will pull the plug. I give it maybe six hours. How long was I out for?"

I feel her shrug. "How should I know? After you put yourself out things got busy for a while. That was a bad one. What happened?"

"Dunno. Disorientated by the bomb, I guess. Ears go pop, vestibular whatsits go dizzy, which way is up? So I guess I slammed my head by accident. Now what? Think they're still waiting?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I can't shift the rubble, though. Fluid's backed way up, we'd drown in shit. All we can do is start digging. Got a shovel?"

"No, but I -- ah, shit." I try and pat myself down but I can't find the knife. All I find is some more bruises plus me, wearing a wet wool dress and wet animal-hide boots and a too-tight belt and wet vegetable-fibre undergarments. No hidden zap guns, concealed micro drones or Secret Agent pocket gatecoder. "I lost my knife."

I hit bottom then. Everything is dark, inside as well as out. Maybe Eri senses this because she squeezes my shoulder and says; "no worries. Not your fault. No problems -- I've got mine here."

"You -- no. If we had one we could --" she fumbles around my lap, finds my hand and forces something round and cold between my fingers. "Cut the stonework out and maybe we can crawl ..."

"Would be way too tight. Have you figured out how much room we've got, yet?"

"No -- " I try to stand up. I don't do it very fast, which is a good thing because the ceiling is very low indeed. Poured concrete. My stomach lurches. I've just remembered: there's no echo in here. "This is a tube tunnel, right?"

"Ack." quiet, now.

"And it's terminal?" I shuffle forward, hands stretched out in front until I graze rough rock with my knuckles. Turn round, shuffle back, step over Eri's legs, fumble my way to the mass of rubble at the other end of the tunnel. "Damn. four, five metres. Couldn't you have found something bigger?"

Even though it's pitch black I can sense her watching me. "It was the best I could do. They were behind us, Oshi. They can strip a horse down to bonemeal in under a minute. Teeth like a man trap."

I sit down again, feel my way across the floor towards her. The first thing I catch is her fingers: we hold hands for a minute as I try to make sense of this cold coffin burial she saved us for. "If we're more than about five metres under we won't make it. Damn, I hope we've got enough air. Or maybe Ivan and Ton will dig us out. You never know."

"Depends," she says quietly. "They might not be around."

"You figure that?"

The silence hangs guilty over my head.

"I wish you hadn't asked," she says.

"Oh --" I squeeze her hand. Feel self pity and anger wash over me. And loss, angst, hatred. *Maybe they'll make it* -- and maybe I'll stop kidding myself.

"Is it murder to hand a toddler a loaded pistol and tell them it's a toy?"

The silence is gravid. Something rattles, a long way away. I lean against her shoulder. "If the web's set up right we can maybe capture those who're still hooked for Dreamtime upload. Thus removing the Partei power-base at a stroke. You suppose diMichaelis will wait before setting off the carpet bombs?"

"No. You're being optimistic. I think it all smells wrong, Oshi. The Partei are very tough people. That can't be what the Boss is planning."

"But ..." I stop and think. A vision steals into my eyes: Eri strokes my visual cortex with a low-level wisdom burst. Nukes wrapped in carpets. The carpets are upload webs, holographic tracking nodes capable of spitting souls wholesale into the afterlife -- the real bomb, more terminal than any nuke. A weapon designed to subvert the minds of the people it is used against. "The idea was that if we got turned over the Stasi would mistake it for a nuke job. And you don't need more than one nuke per city, do you?"

"Wrong-o, Osh. You can't rely on ignorance -- that's underestimating the enemy. *Think* about it." She leans against me. "I'm too tired to say. It's real bad. We don't have much longer, I guess."

"Huh? What's --" *going on*, I was about to say, but it all clicks together and suddenly makes a horrible kind of sense, like a thermite explosion going off behind my eyes. "But the Stasi don't *have* nuclear demolition charges! Even if they knew how to use them."

She strokes my shoulder. "They have them now. Thanks to us. And they know we're planning something for the city. They're opposed to the Dreamtime in a serious way, some kind of political control-meme that's taken over. If they figure we're going to upload the entire city they might just --"

"Don't say it." I shake her hand off angrily. "Nobody could be that cruel --"

I'm lying across her legs and she's moaning. I'm dizzy from the noise that goes on and on like an earthquake. Everything creaks and shudders around us. The floor tips up and the angry giant shakes us some more, but the roar is dying away. My ears hurt. "What's that?" I say, unable to hear my own voice. "I say what's that?"

She sits up and clutches at me desperately, "the fuckers did it, they're mad, gave a pistol to the paranoids, like a scorpion that stings itself to death if it sees itself in a mirror and can't kill the reflection --"

A hot wind blows through the tube. The floor tilts some more and the pile of rubble slides towards us and a cold horror bathes me in cold sweat. Shuddering, I roll over and shake her, drag her down on top of me, " *lie still, open your mouth, hope the overpressure doesn't --*"

A shower of gravel bursts over us and round us and we kick and shove against a slurry of rocks and hot stinking shit-churned mud. " *Oh heaven oh hell what have we done --*" The cloud is choking us and it's hot, too hot to breathe. With a groaning roar the end of our coffin pokes out of the seared ground; overhead, the noon sky is the colour of an angry sunset. We slide down the gravel heap towards the back end of the tube. "Got to get out," she says aloud, very clearly. There's a ringing in my ears that at first I think is real -- then I

realise it's my wisdom, listening to raw microwaves torn from a bleeding sky.

Moments later, without really understanding how, I'm standing on top of the cracked pavement outside. Eri is with me, propping me up; my ankle throbs. The pavement is hot, almost too hot to stand on. There's rubble everywhere. Something like a broken stick, on fire, protrudes from a shattered car with half a house lying across the front of it. Flesh runs molten. There's a sickly meat smell in the air that makes me want to salivate and throw up simultaneously. And a continuous rumble of fire, drumming desolation across the wasteland that only a minute ago was a city.

I look up. From this close -- only a couple of kilometers away -- the cloud looks nothing like a mushroom. It's more like a great angry pillar of fire that merges with the red sky, a bridge between earth and gehenna. I'm deaf, wisdom cut off abruptly by the magnetic storm triggered by the dying fireball. I don't think anyone around us can have survived.

"We did it," Eri sobs. "Handed them a pistol and showed them, 'if you don't use it now we'll do it for you.' And they believed it. They fell for it. Like a scorpion faced with a mirror ..."

I slap her face, turn and hobble away. *Ivan and Ton Ang are dead, I tell myself. Dead forever.* They died shortly before the blast: it takes time to be packet-shifted out to the gatecoders, up to the great afterlife processors in the sky, and nukes are notorious for scrambling uploads. Feeling something nameless and unimaginable, I concentrate on going anywhere, just so long as it is away from the rumbling tower of death that casts a shadow over us. *Why couldn't it be me?* In the distance, over the hills and far away, the sky is still blue; it seems like such a monstrous injustice that I'm alive to see it. *I don't need this kind of guilt.* Nuclear sunburn prickles on the nape of my neck as the city smoulders. I stop, look down at an obstruction. A body lies at my feet, blackened like a log in a forest fire: no face, just a grinning cinder suggestive of eyes and teeth. *diMichaelis must have told the Stasi where to find us. Then planted both devices at just the right time, with just enough information to tell the Partei leaders what we were doing. Which made them--*

"Wait for me." I feel her presence behind me. "Wait, please. Oshi. You shouldn't be running. Slow down. Don't leave me alone here."

I stumble, stop in the shadow of a stone building with windows that lie in the street outside, frames blistered and scorched. She trudges up behind me. For the first time I realise she's limping worse than I am. Face covered in grime, native costume ripped and smeared and scorched, blood on her hands and face. "It's not my fault. They had to destroy their own city in order to save it for their ideology," she explains. She looks like a madwoman, eyes staring from a soot-smudged face, grimy blonde hair turned to fire by

the setting nuclear sunburst.

"I know," I say. "But if it's not our fault, why did we give them the means to do it?"

She stares at me open-mouthed: tears pool in the corners of her eyes. "But we *didn't* know," she repeats. "They never told us. We just followed orders." She sounds as if she's trying to answer a question, but I never asked her it. I doubt that I could.

"Come on." I hold out an arm. She catches it and clutches it to herself, holds me tight: we stumble forwards. Echoing from the distant hills, I hear the throb of an approaching helicopter. Meanwhile, overhead, the new sun is dying.

We have sinned; and soon the black rain will begin.

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