\\virtually real

by angie hulme//

Thanks to

My soulmate, Angela - as always you are my excuse for doing anything.

My friends and surrogates at the Cafe

Everyone who read the work I progress, and everyone who reads it now! I love to receive feedback (critical or not) - and encourage sharing!

“Reality is a subjective fantasy - created by the stronger mind to control the weaker without their knowledge” - The Book of Wis and Witdom.

Chapter 1

"Home, Mum." Called Janna, shutting the front door and throwing her bag down in the hallway.

"Hi honey. How was school?" Asked Marice Horowitz.

"Eh…usual rubbish." Janna grinned, taking the stairs two at a time and arriving into her bedroom.

"Tea'll be ready about 5." Marice called after her, "Make sure the table's set."

"Yeah Mum." Janna replied.

Janna looked at her homework and threw it onto the floor in disgust. She turned on her computer and waited for Windows to load, humming to herself as she flipped through her PC-CD games collection. She pulled out a CD and placed it by her keyboard to play later. She rolled her eyes as the modem dialled noisily.

"Man I need DSL." She moaned for the hundredth time, wishing she and her mum weren't living quite so close to the poverty line.

Janna's Dad had left before she was born. Marice had tried since to hold down a relationship and a child, but it was hard to do. Most men didn't like to have a kid hanging around while they were trying to woo – or seduce – a woman. And Janna didn't like most of the men, so made a point of being around.

There had been a few decent ones. But for reasons she didn't want to understand for fear of ruining her optimistic outlook on life, they hadn't worked out.

Still. Janna and Marice were happy together. They had a mostly good relationship, with ups and downs like any other. But they were close enough, and Janna was old enough, to half-understand when Marice had to be a Protective Mother rather than a friend - though it had caused some arguments in the past.

Janna cheered silently as the 56k modem connected at last and the browser popped up to her homepage. She had designed it herself 3 months ago.

Marice had bought Janna the PC last year, after months of begging, to help with coursework and give her something to do. Right away Janna bought books to learn the technical languages. The basics and surface events she knew plenty about from school computers, but here was her chance to take her love of the machines a little further.

She worked weekends in a café in the town centre, and used the money she made to buy upgrades and programs for the machine, and books to learn programming. Over the last year she had begun to design games and basic programs. And recently she had decided to make her presence known with a website. On the surface, it was a fairly simple and sparse place for now, though written in XML with one or two applets thrown in. But she planned to expand with the games and programs she was designing. Already she had 3 simple games and a simple word processor available for free download, and she was getting around 100 hits every day.

Now she opened up her e-mail program and watched as they downloaded. Sighing, she shot through quickly and deleted the spam, then looked at the clock and went downstairs to set the table for tea.

“Janna, credit card bill came today.” Said Marice as her daughter lined up cutlery.

“Money’s on the mantelpiece.” Came the reply.

“Oh right. Thanks. What you get this time anyhow?”

“Ibook. Couple years old but upgradeable.”

“Ibook? That’s an Apple, right?”

“Mac, mum. Not been called Apple for ages. And yeah, ibook is the Mac thing.”

“Wow. So I’ll be expecting a laptop-sized package then. Where’d you get the money for that?”

“Birthday money. Been savin’ it for something special to treat myself to.” Janna sat down by Marice. “Wasn’t sure what till I was browsing round Ebay and saw the ibook for cheap. Figured I might as well, always wanted to have a decent mac to play on.”

Marice raised an eyebrow. “You know, Janna. I expected you to talk a different language growing up…but this is ridiculous.”

“Yeah. And all I said was ibook and Ebay. Wow mum, best not continue this compy convo any further!”

They grinned at each other. Their generation gap was a popular subject to tease each other about. And Janna had especial fun recently; dropping computerised terms into the mix and watching them fly over Marice’s head. Marice only ever used a computer at work to check stock and do other mundane things. She was a warehouse manager at a small chain of bookstores.

Janna, of course, was an extreme power-user and spent more time on her computer than anywhere else. And her weekend and evening job, plus a holiday internship at a computer manufacturer, allowed her to get inside them too.

Marice went into the kitchen for a minute, and then poked her head out. “Grubs’ up.”

Janna washed her hands and sat at the table to eat.

“Yum. I knew I smelled spag bol.” She rolled spaghetti expertly round her fork and spooned it into her mouth, laughing as Marice chopped her into tiny pieces to eat with a spoon.

Marice ignored the laughter and finished her plate. “Want afters?” she asked the waiting Janna.

“Please.”

“I think there’s some apple crumble left over if you want to microwave it, or there’s Angel cake in the cupboard.”

Janna wandered into the kitchen and stood thoughtfully between the fridge and the cake cupboard. Then she opened the cupboard and removed the Angel cake. She cut two slices, placed them on plates, and returned to her seat to eat.

When they were both done, Marice took a deep breath and began the conversation she had been drawing herself up to.

“I got a call from school today, Janna. They phoned me specially at work.”

Janna looked at her plate, keeping her face carefully straight.

“It seems you have been skipping homework, and missing classes to go…wherever you go with that dreadful Skinner girl.”

“Amy is not dreadful!” was all Janna could say in her defence.

“Oh come now. You know what everyone says about her. Do you want them to say the same thing about you? How do you think that’d make me look? Hmm? Not to mention her age, 24! 9 years older than you, what’re you doing going off with her?”

Avoiding the subject, Janna addressed the rest.

“I know I skive off, but it’s boring! And pointless with the stupid homework, I’m

teaching myself what I need to know. No big deal."

"I know you hate school, love. There's not a person I ever knew that didn't. But you're 15! You've got your GCSE's next year! You have to pull your socks up, girl and bear it, just for a little while!"

"Alright." Janna pouted moodily.

"Yeah, well. I told the Head to call me if you missed one single class. And I want you to do your homework down here, at the table, every night after tea."

"Mum!" Janna protested.

"Don't 'Mum' me, young lady. You embarrassed me, you embarrassed yourself. Now, unless you want me to ask more questions about your…friendship…with that Skinner girl I suggest you do what I tell you! No 'Buts'. No arguments. Got it?" Marice had raised her voice a little in anger and spoke firmly without shouting; the voice Janice knew meant business.

Knowing she was beat, Janna nodded sulkily, almost happy to take the punishment and avoid awkward questions about Amy.

"Ok, mum."

"Good. Now why don't you clear the table and start your homework while I wash up."

Janna nodded and slid off her chair to do as she was told.

After rushing through her homework she showed it meekly to Marice before racing upstairs to her computer. The modem connected noisily and Janna loaded up Trillian, her favourite multi-messenger program, to see who was around to chat to.

Immediately an instant message popped up from as_gamer9 - Amy.

‘hey where ya been?’

Janna replied with an angry smiley and related the recent argument and punishment.

Amy and Janna had met 6 months ago in Woolworths. Both turning into the gaming aisle, they had crashed into each other. Recognising each other, Amy tried to scurry away – knowing the attitude most on the street had towards her. But Janna said hi, stopping Amy in her tracks to look at her curiously.

“Amy, right?” Janna asked. “I’m Janna.”

“I know.” Amy muttered, half-suspicious of Janna’s friendliness.

“Wanna get a coffee?” Janna asked on instinct. Suddenly she wanted to know if the rumours were true, wanted to know if Amy was really so awful even if they were. And wanted to share her loneliness with someone, just for half an hour.

Amy nodded, surprised at the sincerity being directed towards her. “Sure, where at?”

“Uh…the coffee shop under the escalators?”

“Sounds good, I’ll buy.”

Janna nodded okay and they walked together to the café.

After that day they had become friends, Janna had asked straight out the next time they met about the rumours spreading and Amy had answered honestly.

“The rumours…oh those fun things…The stories they tell, bullshit. All made up crap to fit in with their ignorant stereotypes. But the meaning behind them? Yeah, I’m gay. Openly, happily, and not about be convinced it’s wrong by a bunch of close-minded assholes like that.” Amy spoke viciously and bluntly, but Janna didn’t flinch.

“Cool. Just thought I’d get the dish for myself.” Janna grinned.

“Look, if people see us hanging out, they might start talking about you too. I’m 24, you’re 19…”

“And they can go jump off Blackpool Tower for all I care. I like you. I’m not gay, you are, but I’m reasonably sure that lesbians have female friends too, right?” Amy laughed and nodded, Janna continued. “And as for those assholes…not that I ever cared much for their gossip anyhow, but they can go shove it. Doesn’t bother me.”

They smiled, a friendship begin and cemented. And the gossips talked, the rumours

spread. Janna and Amy ignored them, answering the curious unsubtle hints by those who dared with the truth - they were friends - and ignoring the rest.

But Marice was one of the gossips. And hearing her daughter involved made her angry and embarrassed.

“My daughter is not one of...them!” she would say firmly. “She’s just…going through a phase, rebelling by being friendly with…scum. All teens do it.” All the while quietly wishing she would simply do drugs or sleep with musicians like normal teenagers. Truth be told she was all but happy to hear reports of the normal teenage things like skipping class and not doing homework.

So far a big confrontation had been skilfully avoided. Convinced that it would only make the phase last longer, Marice used it to get Janna to do what she wanted, or simply avoided the topic altogether. But so far Janna showed no signs of getting bored with her game.

Still, she also showed no signs of being interested in girls – though the thought that Amy might convince her otherwise made Marice shudder. As far as she knew Janna showed little interest in boys either. Plus, she liked computers and football, wore baggy clothes…

What would the neighbours think if Amy turned Janna…into one of her? It was bad enough already! Every car Janna had played with, every time she had played soldiers, every Transformers video flashed through Marice’s head yet again.

“Oh if only I’d made her play with a tea set – or a Barbie! Like a real girl.” She moaned, dropping her head into her hands. “If only she’d had a Dad instead of a series of worthless idiots. Maybe she wouldn’t hate men.”

Marice shook her head jerkily. Going over it again would do no good, Janna had a brain, she knew what real people did. Amy would fade away if Marice showed neutrality; just like that unhealthy liking for hip-hop a couple of years back.

She was sure of it.

Chapter 2

As Amy was commiserating with Janna's plight, a chat invitation popped up from cuddlebear103. Janna clicked 'OK', checked that voice conference was enabled, and slipped her microphone headset on.

"Hey James." She said.

"Hiya James." Echoed Amy as she entered.

"Hello ladies, it's been so long."

"It's been 24 hours." Answered Amy, dryly.

"Ah, but every hour without you seems like a decade, my dear. So Amy, you ready to admit you're crazy about me and let me sweep you away to a deserted Island yet?"

"Only if Janna gets to come too." Amy told him, mischievously.

"Two ladies and me…" James said thoughtfully, "Sounds like a plan. Janna?"

"You see the paper, James? Guy got shot in a bar yesterday…"

"Yes…"

"Over his dead body."

They all laughed.

James was a 20 year old recluse. His family had been rich for generations, mostly through stocks and wise investment. Trusted brokers now allowed James Mason to live mostly off the interest.

James was agoraphobic. The simple thought of venturing outside, into people, open air, left him trembling.

After 4 years of therapy for his phobia (James measured most of his life in lenghts of therapy runs), James' parents had been killed. A botched robbery attempt and a scuffle had left them both shot and him cowering in a corner. He was sad about the deaths, however, growing up with a Nanny, living at the opposite end of a huge house, seeing his parents only at an appointed time once a week – twice around Christmas and birthdays. Having all the toys and books he could wish for, home-schooling, self-tutoring. These had left James somewhat cold towards them. The sadness was as for the loss of an acquaintance one hardly knew, not for loved ones.

Already 18 at this time, James had come into most of the family inheritance. He sold the house and surrounding land to the first family member that wanted it and offloaded the rest at charity auctions. His bank account was large, but he bought a small house in Dyfed, South Wales. He hired a housekeeper to clean and shop for him twice a week, every Friday leaving a generous cheque every pinned to the fridge with a magnet, thus skillfully avoiding contact. Then he purchased a computer.

While phobic to the point of collapse, James was still a lonely teenager. He used the

computer both to continue the interest he had developed in technology growing up, taking apart his electronic toys, studying computer manuals and books, but also to meet new people without leaving his safe world.

His interests soon lay in computer games. He bought and upgraded constantly, keeping a top of the line gaming machine, also having a Playstation and Dreamcast, and more recently Playstation 2, Xbox, Gamecube. He played every game he could find, online and off. He hosted endless multi-player net games.

It was in one of his marathon hosting sessions that he had met Amy.

Amy had entered his game of Quake 3 Arena and made an immediate impression by finishing off 3 opponents before 10 minutes had passed. After 3 hours of defeating all-comers and running circles around each other, they had called a truce, swapped i.m. names and begun to chat.

Amy explained that she was a game designer; she was testing the engine – widely recognized as the best yet.

James told her she was a liar with a big grinning smiley, Amy laughingly confessed to simple addiction.

They had become fast friends from then. Their interest in computer gaming meshed well, Amy wrote code while James enjoyed game design. He joked seriously that his homemade therapy lay in running around game maps. Amy joked that hers was to hang around with friends outside bars and beat up straight men as they staggered out with

the girl they had picked up inside.

They talked seriously of creating their own game, but were without a character creator. James was heavily into the design side, but his talents lay in the areas of 3D background design and fluid animation, while Amy's lay in programming. Short of a skillful artist for create the basics, they had simply kicked the around idly but never attempted to begin.

Then Amy met Janna. Discovering her varied interest and talent for computer-aided design she had quickly introduced her to James. They hit it off, and the three of them seemed to complete a rounded friendship. Janna studied character detail and design in depth and they began planning for their game.

Months had been spent working on story, characters, sets, enemies. Drawing, sketches, everything had been emailed back and forth, designs made and swapped endlessly. Finally, however, their game was ready to be made. Only now the problem arose.

"James…thing is I'm hard for cash right now. I don't have any jobs on and taking this, with only 3 of us on it, is not gonna leave me any time to make some…"

"Shit man, she's right. This is gonna take all our time. I'm doin' my GCSE's next year…Mum's already jumpin' on me."

"Amy. I'll pay, okay? Think of it as…a company. I'm the guy who hires, I wanna hire you to make code and I'll pay good money. But Janna…I dunno sweet thing. We could wait till after your exams, and then I could 'hire' you both?"

“No way! We’re all ready here! Can’t wait 9 months till I do those stupid exams. I don’t want ‘em anyway!” Janna fumed.

“Janna!” Marice yelled from downstairs.

“Hold on.” Janna sighed and flipped the microphone away from her mouth. “What?”

“There are some weird screechy noises coming from the telephone and I wish to call my sister. Wanna fix it for me?”

“Minute.” Janna groaned and flipped the microphone back in place. “I gotta go…Mum wants the phone. She’ll be on it all bloody night, I’ll talk to ya tomorrow…after my homework.”

Janna disconnected and thumped down the stairs.

“Okay. I stopped my unimportant conversation with my best friends about my future – I realize how important it is for you and Aunt Bess to gossip till midnight.”

Marice glowered. “I’d watch your mouth young lady! I pay for this telephone line – and your Internet charges, and I bought that computer. Plus you live in my house and I am your mother. I can use my telephone to call my sister any time I please – and you can grow up and stop talking back.”

Janice bit her tongue and forced herself back up the stairs. She put the CD she had

selected earlier and started up her current favourite sim game, glad to concentrate on strategy and put other things out of her mind.

Eventually it grew late and Janna's eyes began to tire. She saved and exited the game and shut down the computer.

After a quick shower, Janna dropped into bed and quickly fell asleep in the arms of her favourite stuffed toy – a worn out cow, cunningly named Cow when she was 5 years old.

She slept soundly, walking through dreams that left no memory. Until she came to a setting in her school.

She was strolling down the main corridor, the faint noise of classes being taught drowned out by the clicking of her plastic-soled school shoes.

She came to stand outside the headmistress' office, eerie moaning and squeals coming from within.

The door flew open and out flew Miss Johnson, school head. Her head cocked curiously at Janna.

"Yeas…" the voice wailed.

"I-I…" stammered Janna.

"I believe visitors need a visitors pass…" the banshee muttered and flew down the

corridor.

Janna woke and calmly sat up. “Visitor?” she mumbled, groggily.

She stumbled to the bathroom and returned a few minutes later a little more awake. She picked up her telephone – she had bought it after the line extension had been installed in her room, a splitter allowed her phone and modem to stay jacked in, cutting each other off as they were used individually.

The phone rang on the other end until an annoyed voice answered.

“This better be bloody good.” It growled.

“James. I’m really sorry, I gotta talk to ya.”

“Janna?” James was suddenly awake. “Hold on sugar.” Janna heard him turn away and click on a light, then she heard the telltale sound of a can being opened.

“I’d say alcohol’s bad for ya,” she commented as James returned, “But given that you can afford to buy a new liver every week…”

“I already did, I now have a top-of-the-line liver-o-matic, reinforced with alien metal and kitted out with ethanol-activated super-filters.”

Janna giggled.

“However, my dear…I’m assuming you didn’t wake me up at a time of the morning I’m afraid to know just to check on my future liver plans, offer solutions etc. I also assume that, unfortunately, you’re not here to beg for me to marry you and live in Jamaica. So, something’s happened to Amy or you had an incredibly scary nightmare and need my manly shoulder to cry on – am I right?”

“Um, right about the first two. Wrong about the third, half right about the fourth.”

“Aha, I knew you wanted my body!” James was hiding a laugh. He was a normal guy, a fast metabolism made up for lack of exercise, but no hunk. And while Amy was good-looking, with short black hair and dark eyes, Janna was, he had to admit, quite stunning – with long black hair and dark eyes. And all three of them possessed the indescribable attractive aura of those with a good brain.

Janna snorted scornfully. “Not likely sweetheart.”

“Well I’m crushed. So a nightmare then?”

“Not a nightmare…well not really. But it was a dream and I need your advice.”

“Very well. Does your mother have a telephone in her room?” He spoke like a true gentleman, about the only thing he had carried away from his rich childhood besides the money sitting in the bank.

“Nope.”

“Good. Allow me two minutes and I will call you back, I feel the need to put on a layer of clothing before we settle.”

Janna thought she had heard wrong. “Clothing?”

“Clothing. I sleep in boxer shorts, but it’s chilly at this time of day so I would like to put on some trousers and a shirt if that’s okay.”

“Well, only if you insist.”

James, early on, had brought out a flirty side Janna had never known existed in her before; he complimented and humbled himself easily. Amy often replied to these either by ignoring them or going way over the top. Janna simply returned the comments in the same way he threw them out, becoming embarrassed when they became too blunt.

Soon the phone chirped and Janna grabbed it immediately, hoping it hadn’t carried to her mum’s bedroom at the other end of the hall.

She described the dream to James, who instead of griping about being woken up was attentive and full of advice.

“Hmm. So you’re a visitor in your own school. Think it’s related to the earlier conversation we almost had?”

“Probably. Plus I touched on the thought of dropping out of school, just in the back of my head.”

“Well that will be where it came from then. But do you think that yourself as the visitor was meant in a good way or a bad? I think we can ignore the banshee headmistress, they tend to be like that anyway - when not in your dreams, does she still shout a lot in a shrill voice?”

Janna laughed. “All the time! I didn’t get the impression that the visitor part was a bad thing...but that’s why I need advice, I don’t know.”

“Well we’ll get Amy in on it too, eh?”

Janna heard the musical beeps that signalled James dialling Amy’s number, occasionally when bored with typing, or when the voice-chat had annoyingly bad reception they sat in a conference call with each other at James’ volunteered expense.

Amy answered. “What?!” she grumbled.

“Amy. James and Janna, we need your expert advice.”

Janna related her dream once more and they returned to the point she and James had left at.

“So nothing bad happened...how did you feel?” Amy asked.

“Comfy.” Janna replied.

“But still,” went on Amy, “You’ll be done in 9 months! You don’t wanna be without GCSE’s, Janna.”

“But in the end it’s up to you. Janna, what does your head say?” James asked.

“Uh…says the same thing Amy did, but also that this game is a way to make my life – be a designer, all three of us maybe. And it says that Mum is gonna pitch a fit…”

“And your heart?”

“Says do it.”

“And what about your gut instinct?”

Janna thought for a moment. “Says nothing. Not even butterflies at the thought of it.”

Amy joined again. “To be honest my gut is always my best bet, if it says nothing then usually it means you feel comfortable and confident with…whatever. And it’s a good – or at least not a bad – idea to do it. But still, quitting school…you can’t till you’re 16 anyway…and the GCSE’s…”

“Think about it, Janna. We are not going to sit here and persuade you to go either way,” he addressed this pointedly at Amy, “If you need a sounding board we’re here and we’ll even help you tell Mother if you should decide to leave on your birthday - which gives you a few weeks to think.”

Amy made a noise of agreement. “Think hard, Janna. And whatever you do, you know we’ll back you up.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

They said sleepy good-byes and hung up. Janna paced the room, unable to sleep. Her birthday was next month, she would be old enough to drop out, she had a job waiting for her with good pay at least for a few months – and the experience of that should be enough to begin making a living. But there was the exams…they were the most important thing when going for a job until you had a few years behind you, as every teacher since infant school had drummed into her.

But she knew she was already decided, she would leave school and go under James’ wing. She could take her GCSE’s later if she needed to, colleges offered courses for very little cost. But for now, a chance was a chance and you can’t live life without taking them.

She was not afraid of facing her teachers, or even Miss Johnson, her form-tutor. But a sick feeling came to her stomach when she thought of telling her Mum.

But a chance was a chance…if her Mum loved her she’d understand. And if she didn’t understand…well there was always Amy’s place, or a flat with her wages, or anything.

“This is my chance, crossroads begin here. Be brave, or be conventional.” She said to herself, straightening her school tie. She would talk to Miss Johnson first; beg her not to tell her mum. She would do that when everything was ready and final.

Before she left for school, she shot off an email to Amy and James telling them her decision. She felt better knowing she would have support, even if it was only in spirit.

She walked downstairs and out the door to stand at the bus stop.

“Have a nice day.” Marice called, driving past on her way to work.

Janna waved and smiled. Suddenly happy, sure she had made the right decision.

Chapter 3

“Oh no you are not.” Marice shouted through clenched teeth.

“I am, Mum. It’s all set. My birthday is next Wednesday and that’s my last day at school.”

“I think not, young lady. What exactly do you plan to do with your life without any GCSE’s? Who wants to employ a dropout?”

“I’m going to be making a computer game with my friends. One of them has money; he offered to pay us both a wage we can live on – like he was hiring us.”

“Computer game.” Marice scoffed.

“Yes. Computer game. In case you missed it they’ve become rather popular of late.”

“Well know now that the second you leave school you are not welcome in my house. I won’t play Mother to a failure, you’re an embarrassment!”

Janna stood up and began to leave the room.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I thought I’d ask one of those friends to help me pack.”

Janna had told Marice a week earlier that she was dropping out of school. That had resulted in an all-night screaming match between the two of them. Now the day drew ever closer and Janna wanted to avoid another, but it seemed Marice was determined to scream some sense into her.

“Don’t you dare walk out of this room.”

Janna stopped. “Mum. I’m leaving school, I’m gonna be a game designer. I’ll be getting paid and everything. And if you want to disown me and kick me out then go ahead. I’ll not go short of a roof over my head.”

“It’s that Amy isn’t it? She put this idea into your head.”

“Actually, no. She just helped me decide and supported me when I did – you know, like you do when you care about someone, you support them.”

“Don’t draw that card missy! I raised you, gave you a roof over your head, fed and clothed you. And now you want to go live in sin with that excuse for a girl? How can you be so ungrateful.”

“Don’t guilt trip, Mum, it won’t work. I hoped you’d be happy that I’ve found something I want to do, and friends that won’t see me down and out. But I guess not. So thanks for raising me, I’ll be gone by the time you get home tomorrow. And you may want to check on the meaning of ‘living in sin’. As I recall, it involves a relationship of a more-than-friendly nature which, in case you missed it the eight hundred times I told you, is not what me and Amy have.”

It was Friday now, 5 days before Janna was to leave school. Her headmistress and teachers had talked to her and seen she was adamant about what she wanted to do, eventually they had wished her luck, seeing she wouldn't change her mind.

But Marice had barely stopped shouting ever since Janna had first told her. If not for James and Amy, Janna would have cracked and given up on the idea. But her friends had backed her through all the way, Amy had promised in response to threats that Janna could move in with her if she had to. And James had been busy setting up a regular payment to them both. Beginning Friday next week they were both technically in his employ, with a generous wage package, and looking forward to getting started on their game.

The argument carried on in circles, Janna and Marice knowing the outcome would be the same. Eventually Marice threw up her hands and declared Janna an embarrassment to her and all she had done.

"But hey Mum," Janna threw back at her, "Least I'm not a big dyke, that'd be really embarrassing huh?"

"Hum. Living with that girl it'll only be a matter of time." Marice shot back.

"Well why not? I hear Amy gets a free microwave if she recruits one more person to the cause."

Marice suppressed a snarl. "Get out of my sight."

“Finally…”

Janna shot upstairs before any more replies could be formulated. She picked up the phone and called Amy.

“Looks like I need that place to stay…”

“No problem, I got the boxes ready. When d’you want me?”

“Tomorrow morning, Mum leaves for work about 7:30. I told her I’d be gone before she got back.”

“No problem. Get stuff ready to throw into the boxes and I’ll be over as soon as I see your Mum’s car go.”

Janna slept restlessly that night, the air vibrated with Marice’s resentment and jealousy. But she was solid in the knowledge that Amy and James wouldn’t let her down. It would be hard living still in the same street, but all she had to do was avoid Marice until she calmed down, she would be busy with the game anyhow.

The next morning Janna watched from her window as her Mum drove away. Two minutes later Amy drove up in her deep purple Land Rover. Janna ran down to help her pull out boxes and they started taping the bottoms together and packing them full as fast as they could.

Every time a box was filled it was carted down and loaded onto the car. Once filled, Amy took it away and dumped the contents in her living room before returning for another load.

Working together, Janna having only what little she had accumulated in her 16 years, the job was soon done. Janna looked a little regretfully at the house one last time before she dropped her keys on the kitchen table and pulled the door shut behind her. Hearing it click finalised the deal, and she suddenly felt sad.

“Hey kid, don’t worry about it. Your Mum’ll come round, and you always got me and James.”

Janna nodded and climbed up into the passenger seat. Two minutes later they were occupied with unpacking.

Amy had spent time last night clearing out her spare room for Janna and her things, there were spaces around the house for everything and a camp bed in the corner to sleep on.

“Sorry I don’t have a spare bed…” Amy said, “We’ll get you one tomorrow if you can deal with this one tonight.”

“Have to wait, I can’t afford one. Friday we can go buy a camp bed or something.”

“Now what kinda person would I be to have my best buddy sleeping on a camp bed when I can afford to take out a loan on a bed for her? I checked out some of the bed

stores, we can get one to be delivered next day and pay 50 quid a week. I'll stand you the first installment, you can pay the rest. That do ya?"

Janna nodded, her eyes tearing up at the kindness of her friend. "I never knew anyone who'd do that for me."

"Ah, it's just a favour for a friend." Amy played down, embarrassed.

Janna hugged her suddenly, not sure why. Amy hugged back surprised.

"Well, well, a first – I never had anyone who was just a friend hug me before."

Janna pulled away. "Uh-oh…does this mean I'm recruited?"

Amy punched her gently, Janna grinned and pulled her computer out of a box.

"Aha, that can go downstairs. The living room is my games room. There's a table for it, we can get a proper computer desk later. And also I have a DSL hub so we can both use that."

Janna grinned. "Woohoo, DSL at last!"

The rest of the day was spent mostly online, Amy and Janna in the same room on their own computers, James in Wales. Janna had watched out the window for Marice's return, she had arrived at the usual time and stalked inside. Half-expecting and hoping she would stalk back out and over to visit, Janna had restlessly watched the house. But

the lights came on, and Marice remained inside.

Amy and Janna cheered Janna up no end. “What do I need that crap for anyway?” she thought to herself. “I got the best friends in the world to take care of me.”

As she tried to get comfy on the rough camp bed she realised she was almost happy, only the underlying resentment she could still feel coming from her mum remained to bring down her mood.

“She’ll come around.” She promised herself. She was to leave school in a few days and the next months promised to be hard, challenging and hopefully fun. There was no time to worry about the harsh tongue of her only parent, Janna pushed it away as far as possible and fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Janna and Amy were awoken at 10am the next morning by a loud knocking at the door. As Janna opened her eyes and sleepily tried to remember where she was, Amy stumbled down the stairs fastening her dressing gown.

A UPS delivery man stood at the door. Amy looked at him blankly.

“I have a delivery for…” he checked his screen, “Amy Skinner.”

“Isn’t it Sunday?” mumbled Amy groggily.

“Yes ma’am, sorry to disturb you but I have a special overnight delivery package from,” he checked again, “James Mason.”

Amy nodded and scrawled her name on the LCD screen. She took the padded envelope and dropped it on the couch as she went into the kitchen. Janna already had the kettle boiling for coffee.

“James sent…stuff.” Amy told her.

“Game outline.” Janna replied.

They didn’t speak again until they were halfway through their coffee.

“Game outline…” agreed Amy, opening the envelope and taking out two document

holders stuffed with paper. She handed one to Janna and looked through hers, yawning.

It was the full outline for their as yet untitled game - characters, plot, story, scenes, cutscenes, history. James had typed their ideas together so they could see how they meshed and edit any weak corners before they began.

Characters

Henrott – Based on James.

Big bad guy.

Studied biology and IT at London University. When he left he was headhunted and became a Government scientist, working with new weapons development.

He built revolutionary smart and stealth weapons but was fired after unauthorized testing of a new formula infected an intern.

He went underground for several years, continuing his work in secret. He recreated himself as a cyborg, leaving only his head intact but coating it with metal for protection. He also built himself an array of smart weapons and a small cyborg army.

Now he plans to use his work to take over the world.

Character Choice 1:

Cydir – Based on Janna.

Skills – Super Jump

Invisibility

Heat Ray

Special – Disintegrate

Cydir was a master thief and cat burglar until she was captured through her own inflated ego when she tried to steal the crown jewels.

In jail she was promised freedom if she allowed herself to become a guinea-pig. She was programmed into a super-thief on the side of good and given certain skills to fight evil. Now her mission is to destroy Henrott, his army, and all records of his work.

Character Choice 2:

Zania – Based on Amy.

Skills – Telepathy

Transform

Shield

Special – Splitting Scream

Zania was 18 when she was employed as an intern in a secret Government project. Henrott tested his new formula on her and she was transformed into a superhuman.

Sick of experiments being performed on her by a Government who wanted to see the full effects of her transformation, she escaped in a violent battle and has been in hiding ever since, watching Henrott's movements.

Her only object in life is to destroy him and all he created.

Plot

Henrott's plan to rule the world is beginning to take effect. His cyborg's are recreating themselves and moving underground to various positions in Europe. All are loaded with Henrott's secret weaponry and implanted with a time and place to begin their destruction.

Henrott has sent his message of warning to all the Governments in Europe. He will command his robots to begin annihilation in 1 week unless they surrender all power to him.

They will try to refuse. His robots will destroy everything in any countries whop do not surrender and are unstoppable to the average human and even the army. Once Europe has fallen to its knees he will continue to take on the rest of the world, multiplying his

robots and armory wherever he goes.

As Cydir or Zania player must travel through Europe, finding nests and destroying the robots and weapons. Unofficially, Cydir/Zania is allowed to keep weapons that are of use but destroy the rest.

Once this is completed, player must find Henrott's base in England and destroy it, Henrott, his guards, armory and every scrap of information on his research.

And the guide continued, describing every scene in as much detail as possible.

It ended by setting out individual jobs for each of them. Amy was to write all code. Janna would design the three main characters, based on themselves, plus all robots, enemies and weapons. James would then take these and give them fluid movement and incorporate them into the sets and backgrounds that he was to design, alongside this he was to make the menu screens while Janna created basic intros for him to perfect.

Next, Janna and James would create each scene while Amy wrote code and pieced them together.

To finish, their jobs would be to voice the cutscenes and play the game through for bugs, fixing any they could find. The cheats that would be used for this, they would leave in.

They discussed the benefits of a tutorial and had decided to create one when the rest was finished, all agreed that it would help the player get accustomed to the game and

also assist those without a manual. It was a remote possibility that someone would jump on the finished game and give it wide distribution and topnotch promotion, but very unlikely, from this they agreed that they would simply use an FTP server to upload the game then make it available on Warez sites and file-share programs. This would get both the game and their names out to the public for future projects.

And now the details were complete and Janna was to leave school in 3 days.

The game was ready to begin.

Chapter 5

The man of metal plotted.

The man of wires and technology laid his plans.

This future-man is Henrott.

He is real.

He has become real.

He has been created.

From the imagination of three, he is born.

He hides in his underground lair, guarded by robots, surrounded by the weapons he created.

He plots to rule Europe.

Then he plots to rule the World.

His robots are in place and the Governments will soon play into his hands.

He privately calls himself Henrott the Magnificent.

Some who know of him call him insane.

Some who know of him and are honest call him a psychopathic genius.

Most just want to call him dead.

He plots in his lair surrounded by his deadly inventions.

Those who know him are afraid.

They beg for help.

Cydir sits in her home, told to remain until needed, she reads a book and waits.

The telephone rings shrilly and she answers.

Cydir listens and nods.

She speaks just once; “I will do this.”

She hangs up the phone and carefully replaces her book as the fax machine begins to receive a map.

Into her room she walks and opens her wardrobe.

Inside are clothes, they look normal but are thicker, easier to move in, quieter for stealth.

Inside are weapons, Cydir's personal arsenal. She chooses carefully.

In her hidden cave, Zania hears a footstep outside.

She transforms into a rock and waits.

Two men walk quietly past her; she changes back and grabs them from behind.

They beg for life and tell her the world needs help.

She releases them and they tell her of Henrott's plans.

Zania nods and knows, she tells them she will help.

She tells them she will help in her own way, they must leave her with the knowledge they have and think of her no more.

They agree.

Henrott knows.

Henrott knows his dreams and plans will be fulfilled.

He knows some will try to stop him.

He knows he will succeed in his plan of domination.

Those who know the threat are relieved their two champions are on the case.

Those who know the threat are more afraid. If Henrott kills their two greatest they know they are doomed.

Cydir armours up and moves underground. She is too noticeable above, she must travel across Europe without being seen, destroy Henrott's minions and then destroy Henrott. He will find out the moment she appears in sight of his first clan, but until then she wishes for the benefit of a surprise attack. She hopes she is not the only hope for the world, she is not sure she will succeed.

Zania equips herself and walks into daylight. She looks normal, her weapons are those of a thief and lie unseen beneath her clothing. She will go to Europe and destroy all Henrott's robots.

They gave her a map with the locations of Henrott's army marked on, she forced them to tell of her fellow champion, heading to locations previously unmarked on Zania's map, now written in red ink.

Her motto, stay alone, stay alive, she is glad she is alone. She is glad she is not the only one fighting. A motto, words, they hold little protection, and her life is in her skills and powers. But she repeats her motto, it is her mantra, meditation, it gives her strength and courage.

Henrott knows they will try to fight him, he laughs. His robots are flawless, they cannot be defeated. Even when he forces them to fight between themselves, they come out alive. They are not human; they have not the weaknesses and cowardice of men. He almost wishes he could watch them destroy the world's only hope.

Henrott's robots wait patiently, equipped to battle at the smallest movement in their hideaway, waiting for their orders to destroy. They sleep soundlessly, charged and ready as the champions of the world creep closer.

Zania is first to find a lair, she creeps slowly, expecting traps, knowing they can sense her presence. She can feel their robot eyes watching her in the darkness before her. She reaches under her belt and pulls out a flare. In her other hand she reaches for an electrical rod, a stun-gun of ultra strength. She powers up the shield and places it around her.

She lights the flare and throws it high into the air, she sees the robots race for her in their lumbering run. She flicks on the power in her rod and turns around.

Robots move out of the walls. She is surrounded.

Cydir reaches the cave. It is a shallow one and she can see the robots resting, but she knows it is a trick. She holds up her hands and blasts a heat ray into the cave. The stone flies as the cave explodes. Cydir grins to herself; this will be an easy mission.

She turns to walk away and hears movement behind her. She whirls around; the robots are charred, blackened, even smoking. But they are alive and coming toward her.

She turns forward and sees more, unharmed, clean. A trap. Cydir is surrounded.

Henrott sees the visual on his screen, his robots have cameras for eyes and he watches the two champions laughing. He recognises the intern he tested on and his laugh turns cruel. He knew where they would begin and laid an ambush for each of them. He half wishes he had brought popcorn, but the thought fades as he watches the scenes before him with excitement.

Chapter 6

James paced nervously, chewing his whittled fingernails. Janna and Amy would be arriving anytime.

The game was completed and had been taken up by an independent distributor. James was paying costs in return for services and the game was due to hit sale in 4 weeks.

In celebration, in final attempt to begin overcoming his phobia, sometimes he thought in a moment of stupidity, he had asked his friends to stay with him. Just for a week, for company, to get used to people being around him.

James only really left his computer room to sleep, eat or go to the bathroom. It contained everything he needed, TV, small fridge for drinks, books, games, software. He locked himself in when his maid arrived, practically cowering every time he heard the tell-tale creak of a footstep. He only answered the phone when his call-waiting told him it was someone he knew. Even his internet chatting was restricted to Janna and Amy, plus the occasional foray into a chat-room during the off-peak hours for tips and advice on game design.

And now they would be here. In person. Both of them. In the same house. For a week.

James suddenly wished he was a true alcoholic, a smoker, a junkie, anything that would work to take the sting off the fear and the dread.

The doorbell rang.

James opened the door and saw his friends. The two people he knew and trusted as well as himself. His best friends.

He tried to stammer a ‘Hiya.’ But only a yelp came loose as he turned and bolted up the stairs behind him. The door to the computer room banged shut.

“Something I didn’t say?” enquired Amy of the stairs.

They entered cautiously. Janna found a pen and scrap paper by the phone and scribbled a note.

Good 2 c u 2

Come down when ready

Hungry, will cook

janna + amy

She crept slowly up the stairs to the computer room and slipped the note halfway under the door. As she stepped back, the other half disappeared slowly.

James read the note and smiled. They were his friends, and they loved him.

He held onto his tears as he realised they were the only ones he had ever had that didn’t run off electricity and a CD-ROM.

Amy opened the freezer and found a frozen pizza lying at the back. She wiped off the ice and held it up to Janna as she returned.

Janna opened the fridge to check for drinks and spotted cans chilling in the door. She closed it again, leaving them to be cold for when the pizza was ready.

Meanwhile, Amy had discovered the pizza was too big for the microwave and was now standing, puzzled, in front of the oven.

She glanced at Janna who shrugged her ignorance.

“Wanna order one?” Janna suggested.

Amy shrugged. ‘S’all unwrapped now, gotta eat it.” She opened the oven door and slid it inside.

“Okay. The ones with four circles with one coloured in, they gotta be for the top one you pout the pans on, right? So…there’s one that’s, like, a rectangle shape, and another that looks like big teeth – or a car grill.”

“Car grill…so that’s the bottom one then, the grill. Mum has one just like this. The bottom door is a grill, so the car grill must be for that.”

Any smiled and flipped on the other. “Makes logical sense. So…how high and long?”

“Read the box?”

“Uh…” Amy read the box, adjusted the temperature and bent down to stick her hand inside. After a minute she stood up again and nodded. “Feels warmer.” She closed the door. “Way to go team.” She grinned. “Hey, James.”

James was standing behind Janna chuckling. “Well that was entertaining. I thought ladies were born with the inbuilt ability to do this stuff.” He was pale and shaky and Janna opened her mouth to comment, but Amy rushed in.

“Nah. We learn it after we realise that the only way to live under the oppressive male rule is to make you so full you’ll give us anything. Same reason blonde hair-dye and short skirts were invented.”

Janna by now had realised she almost made a mistake in mentioning James’ condition and recovered quickly.

“Course, in Amy’s world the plan is to make you all feel inferior by shunning your advances and sleeping with women in the hope that you’ll all treat her like she was worthy. “

“Unfortunately all the work only serves to give us perverted males the raging horn!” finished James, grinning evilly. “How are you both? Good trip?”

They told him of rain, traffic jams and boredom. As they talked the colour slowly returned to James’ face, by the time the pizza was eaten he felt as comfortable as he

always did with them online.

“Oh shit, I totally forgot.” Janna hit her forehead and raced to her bag, dropped on the floor by Amy’s as they entered. She pulled out an envelope and poured out the contents onto James’ knees. “Got it yesterday, it’s the final design.”

It was the finished designs for their game. Cover, back, CD label, manual. All was now perfect and ready for sale.

After they were done grinning inanely James stood. “Forgive my rudeness, ladies. Let me give you the tour and show you to your room. I’m afraid there’s only one spare bedroom, but it’s large and will easily accommodate you both without any stepping on toes.”

They followed him round the house with their bags. Janna’s jaw dropped when he introduced the computer room and she was only dragged away with reminders that she had a whole week to play in it.

Their bedroom was certainly large and decorated with a strange collection of objects, books and paintings. There was a soft red carpet on the floor and two sofa-beds on the far wall.

“Sofa-beds. Cool.” Nodded Amy.

“What’s all the stuff?” asked Janna, looking around.

“Collectibles, dear. Everything decorating this room is worth anything from a few hundred to a few thousand. Rare ornaments, first edition, paintings…Yet all together they could never be worth as much as you, my darling Janna.” He made a comically low bow and Janna curtseyed with a giggle.

“Thank you, kind sir. Now if you would be a gentleman, I wish to unpack and change after sitting in a car for so long.” Amy nodded her agreement.

“Of course. Both bedrooms and the bathroom have a lock on the door,” he showed them the sliding lock on theirs, “And I promise to always knock before entering.”

He nodded graciously and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 7

The journalist played the game. There was something too familiar.

Cy-wars, it was called – rather dully he thought. But it played well.

Certificate 12 was its classification, he nodded at this and noted down the carefully honed lip-synch in the cutscene playing before him.

But it was so familiar. Recent rumours troubled his head; a world threat with super-heroes running to the rescue. He laughed at himself uneasily as he played, jotting down notes in scrawled longhand.

Soon he saved and exited, one of the few games he felt an inclination to return to and even finish these days.

As he typed up his notes to create a legible, reasonably neutral article, his mind wandered. He came back to earth and found he had typed in three names. The names from the game. He frowned and deleted them, but there was an itch.

Call it journalistic instinct, paranoia, telepathy, whatever it was, the journalist had it now and he knew not to ignore it.

He picked up the telephone and dialled the mobile phone number of a source he had in the Government. It rang twice and he hung up.

His source would look at who called, see it was him, and meet him at their usual out-of-the-way back-alley café.

He sat at a table in the darkest corner and sipped bitter coffee as he waited. Soon his source arrived in dark glasses and a cap.

“I dunno why you wear that stuff, sunglasses in the middle of winter, cap with a suit…lookit ya, everyone knows summat’s up just by lookin’.”

“Yeah, yeah. What do you want, Dougan?”

“Funny thing.” Dougan leaned forward confidentially. “Been hearin’ rumours, weird stories, guy made o’ metal, superheroes, plots to take over t’world. I ignored it cos it sounded daft, like a bad film or a comic. Or…” he pushed a small brown package across the table and the source slipped it quickly into his pocket. “Like this soon to be released game I was reviewin’ this mornin’.

The source stood. “Thank you for the information, I’m sure it will be very useful.”

“Don’ gimme that crap. I gave you summat, now you return the favour. It’s polite. I know there’s some weird shit goin’ on and I know you know what it is.”

“I’m afraid I can neither confirm nor deny that statement.”

Dougan laughed. “Now you sound daft as you look!”

The source leaned over and put his face close enough for Dougan to smell his mint-breath.” I’m not being funny, Dougan. Don’t ask questions. Don’t mention you ever saw me or this game. It’s best if you just forget this part of today ever existed, okay.”

“What?” Dougan’s voice shook and he tried to slide further away. The source followed him.

“Do you understand me, Dougan? I’d hate to see you involved in researching anything about this, I don’t like to harm my friends.”

“Harm…what the fuck is this? Wipe your brain or we waste ya? This is a democracy, asshole, s’posed to be anyway. I wanna look up stuff I can look it up.”

“You get caught even thinking about looking stuff up I’m afraid it’s out of my hands. Is that clear? I can do nothing to protect you.”

The source stood up and walked away before Dougan had chance to form a reply.

He jumped in his car and drove at speed back to his office, throwing his cap and dark glasses into the back seat. He half-ran up to his office, barking at his secretary to hold calls as he passed at full speed.

He put the game into his drive and installed it. As it began to play his eyes widened in horror. He picked up the phone to his left and dialled an extension.

“Boss. We have a big fuckin’ problem.”

“What is it Johnston?”

“A computer game…it…I got it from a source…”

“I don’t pay you to play games Johnston!”

But this, this one is…the plot…is the same as…with the people and…”

“You tellin’ me you got a computer game with the same plot as…”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wipe it from your machine and be up here in half an hour. I’ll get the brass in.”

“Yes, sir.” Johnston replaced the handset and set about following his orders.

Chapter 8

Henrott watched eagerly as his creations advanced on the two champions. Flicking his eyes from one screen to the other, his metal-coated face seemed to glow.

“Kill them!” he snarled.

Cydir crouched and closed her eyes, waiting for the monsters to come closer.

She could feel them closing in like a wall of cold steel. Every hair stood on end and her scalp seemed to shrink as they rattled towards her.

Summoning her power she super-jumped high into the air and looked down at the circle below her. She realised she was roaring, the energy flowing through her like hot lava.

She began her heavy descent and flipped onto her stomach, stretching her hands downwards.

From her fingers shot a bolt of silver-red stream of light.

The light encased the robots as she landed on its surface and leaped once more as if pushing off from solid ground.

She grunted once and clapped her hands.

The light glowed magnificent red and imploded, taking the robots with it.

As Cydir landed skillfully on a heap of metal she looked around for movement.

There was none.

“First batch down.” She muttered to herself.

Zania powered her shield once more and closed her eyes to think.

She grunted once, snapped her fingers and opened her eyes. The robots were made of ice, but still advancing, though staggering slightly with the weight.

“Damn waterproof wiring.” She muttered.

Zania pulled herself up to her full height, drew in a breath, threw back her head…

…And screamed!

The ear-shattering multi-frequencies echoed around the cave as each ice-bot exploded in shards.

The cave, thousands of years old, collapsed with a rumble.

The mountain itself trembled as if in fear and threw great avalanches of rock down its side.

Zania watched the ice and rock bounce off her shield with mild interest. A smile played on her lips.

As the trembling subsided and the mountain settled once more Zania powered down her shield and admired her handiwork.

She grinned gaily and began to hop from rubble pile to rubble pile, humming to herself as she hunted for surviving weapons.

Henrott gaped.

He stared at the screens before him, at the destroyed bases, at his creations now lying in forlorn pieces.

He stared at the champions, one serious, scouring the wreckage for weapons to keep or destroy. The other humming happily as she hunted too.

Henrott drooled.

The saliva trickled down the coat of metal on his face and dropped onto his thigh; it slid

down the side and fell to the floor leaving a slimy trail behind it.

Henrott roared.

He raised his fists and smashed them through the screens before him. He kicked his chair across the room and turned on his closest aide.

The robot-aide flinched.

Though made of wiring and machinery, devoid of humanity. The robot flinched.

“MAKE ME STRONGER!” roared Henrott.

Cydir hunted every part of the cave, picking up the smart weapons she could carry, piling the rest in a front corner of the cave to be destroyed.

When she was done searching, confident that the cave had nothing more, she exited the cave with her new arsenal.

The pile of weapons to be destroyed almost filled the entrance. Cydir shook her head at them, almost telling them off, and moved off to a safe distance.

She shot a heat ray out of one hand and the cave exploded, taking the weaponry with it.

She hung her new weapons on her belt and put the rest into her backpack. Once secured, she took a radio out of the front pocket.

“Cydir calling home, come in.”

“Come in Cydir, good to hear from you.”

“Base one destroyed. Robots and arsenal.”

“Thank you Cydir, good job. It was somewhat noisy I take it?”

“Yes sir, I’m afraid it was necessary.”

“No problem, we’ve just had some reports coming in, panicked citizens. Nothing you need to concern yourself about, we can deal with that, Cydir.”

“Thank you, sir. Permission to move out to the next target.”

“Permission granted, keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, sir. Over.”

“Over and out.”

Cydir took a last look around and set off again, confident she had completed her work well.

Zania stored her new weapons in a backpack and around her waist. Halfway down the mountain she remembered she was supposed to radio home.

“Zania here, come in.”

“Zania, how are you?”

“Great, gotta bunch of dead robots here. Bit of a mess though, most of the mountain rolled down itself. But the bots are dead and the weapons are atom-size.”

“Good work Zania, we’ll deal with the aftermath, go on to the next target now.”

“Aw gee, and I was hoping for a holiday. I’m already on my way. How’s my counterpart doing?”

“She’s fine, Zania, radioed in her first success a few minutes ago.”

“Good deal. Off I go then, buh-bye.”

“Over and out.”

Henrott was in his private room.

He stomped and pounded and roared.

His guards were double coating him all over, not trying to avoid being stamped on.

“More protection! Build more weapons!” he ranted, drawing up plans for inbuilt weapons.

“Protect me at all costs!” he transmitted to his robots all over Europe.

“Those...champions will not ruin my plans!” he growled, shipping off more weapons and plans to his bases.

Cydir raced underground, skipping between sewers and tunnels, eating at night, sleeping after dawn through the noises of the beginning day.

Zania strolled in the open, concealed in her identity, sleeping in motels, eating at fast-food restaurants. Moving swiftly to her next target, avoiding privacy and silence, finding crowd to hide her face in. Watching with amusement the attempts by Those Who Knew (they had told her to think of them as such, and the pseudo-name had become capitalised in her mind.), to explain away the mess she and her counterpart had made.

Henrott loaded his robots with weapons and transmitted a different ambush plan every hour until even he was confused. He forgot food and sleep, only doing either on the half-threat of violence from his aide. He created holders for weapons to be built into his robot-body, and then discarded them in favour of better ones.

He didn’t stop long enough to recognise the new emotion he was feeling, that sat heavily in his gut, gnawing away, giving him no peace.

Henrott was afraid.

Meanwhile, the Government brainstormed an excuse for the mess.

Chapter 9

"…and now to the latest catastrophes in South-Eastern Europe.

On opposite sides of Azerbaijan, two avalanches occurred within a few minutes of each other.

First there came a noisy explosion from Nabran in the North as part of a mountain caved in on itself.

As those nearby were calling for help, another explosion rocked a mountain in Astard, on the South coast. This explosion caused an avalanche of rock to careen down the mountainside.

Fortunately nobody was injured in either area. Wild speculation has been rife all day – terrorism, Government testing, alien invasion, and more!

Finally, half an hour ago, The Azerbaijan Prime Minister, Hredur Salyzade stepped out to address the waiting press. Translated, he said;

"First, allow me to express my deep apologies for any fear or inconvenience caused by today's events. This was the culmination of one series of strategies in preparation for emergency defence.

In the event of any of the recently speculated events, the public will be, in many ways, left alone. It was our aim to test the reactions of civilians in the event of an unknown threat.

I am proud to say that our citizens performed excellently, should such an unknown occur I am confident that they will remain safe and calm. There will be no more tests. Thank you, gentlemen."

The press fired questions at Mr Salyzade as he left, but he refused to answer any more.

Already the initial reaction seems to be a mix of of relief that there is no imminent danger, and anger and frustration at a Government willing to perform dangerous tests on its own people like guinea pigs."

"A little bit too much over-vague detail there I think." Amy mused.

"Detail, what more detail would you like? Did you hear what those bastards did?" James threw up his hands. "I swear, Amy, you have no heart."

"Yeah, that's cruel, what they did!" Janna jumped in. "I'd be fuckin' pissed off."

"Yeah, well, you all know the world would be better if I ruled it." James nodded.

"Better than what, Jamie-boy?" Amy teased.

"Poke in the eye with a sharp stick I'm quite sure." He conceded, drooping his head pathetically.

Amy shook her head and turned away. "Not gonna do it."

James whined like a puppy and turned big eyes on Janna.

“Me either sweetie.”

“Aw fine.” He gave up.

There was a fierce banging at the front door, all three jumped.

James let out a high-pitched yelp and flew up the stairs, slamming the computer room door and locking it.

“No, please, let me.” Amy stood and curtseyed after him, winking at Janna as she headed for the hallway.

Janna stayed where she was, leaning forward slightly to eavesdrop – it was quite obvious James wouldn’t be expecting guests, so who was here?

Amy opened the door and raised an eyebrow at the two identically black-suited men in front of her. They both wore grim faces and nodded a greeting in unison.

“Uh…no funeral here.” Amy offered.

The men ignored the joke and the clone on Amy’s left spoke. “Is this where I may find James Mason, Amy Skinner and Janna Horowitz?”

Amy frowned, her spider sense was tingling. “Obviously you know it is. And I’m

guessing you also know we're all in and have neither weapons nor any idea who you are. This leaves you quite a ways ahead of us. So who are you?"

"I'm afraid we can't answer any…" began the talkative one.

"You got about five seconds to make with the answers before the phone in the local police station rings. Who are you?"

Janna got the idea and dashed to the cordless phone, lying on a bookshelf. She found the phone book by the rest of the phone and dialled in the number for the police station. Her thumb hovered over the 'Send' button, waiting.

"Ma'am, we're higher than any police. Now if you'd just…"

"Maybe you are. But I'm willing to bet that police and media attention aren't really in your mission orders as a 'Please do.' So no, I won't 'just'. Tell me who you are.

Janna had already flipped through the TV Times and picked out the phone number of a local TV station, just in case. This number was dialled onto her mobile phone.

"We are from a secret branch of the Government, Department E. Our orders are to pick you three up and take you to the compound. Also to assure you that you are in no trouble. That is all we know."

"And we should trust you because…" Amy raised her hands palm upwards. She noticed for the first time the black van parked at the end of the driveway with a third clone

facing forward in the drivers seat.

“Because if you don not comne willingly then we are authorised to use force. And because our mission orders are to avoid police and press if at all possible, but not at all costs. And because somewhere in your gut you know something is wrong, you can feel it. And we are here to try and help.”

“My friend, James, is agoraphobic. Right now he’s locked in his computer room scared so bad he can’t even wet himself. My other friend, Janna, is in the other room equipped with phones. I don’t know how they feel. But I feel in my gut that something is wrong and you guys are taking us because in some way we’re the cause or effect. I also feel in my gut that allowing us all to be taken by you guys might be unhealthy in the long run. But whatever is causing the bad feeling, I guess I can put up with you clones till I can find out what it is. I can’t vouch for my friends.”

The men nodded as one.

“Go to your van, sit in it. Let me talk to Janna and James. If they agree and James can manage, we’ll come out. No promises, but realising that force is the other option I’d expect - for our sake – that you’ll see us soon.”

“You have half an hour.” The talking clone nodded and they both turned smartly and marched back to the van.

Janna gave up on the phones as Amy came back in to the room.

“What the fuck was that all about!”

“Can’t you feel it?” Amy paced the room. “That tiny shift in atmosphere. I can’t describe it but something’s different. And we obviously have something to do with it which is why they came for us.” James was now peeking out from the stairwell, the girls pretended not to notice and waited for him to join in when he was ready.

“Yeah, well, call me a close-minded, cynical, sceptical, old cow, but I think its bollocks.”

“Yeah, well, bollocks or not, in half an hour they’re going to come back with guns and rope and take us anyway!” Amy pointed out.

“Get the police, like you said.” Janna suggested.

“They said they don’t care, remember, the point is to take us and avoid notice *if they can*.” Amy emphasised the last three words pointedly. Janna pouted.

“Fine, whatever. But if this is all a pile of crap I’m gonna kick your bloody head in!” Janna stalked out and threw open the front door. She walked quickly to the van, holding her head up to hide her fear. Amy followed with her arm around James who had tucked his head into her shoulder, shaking.

The van door slid open as they neared and James half-fell inside. Breathing heavily he scurried to a corner and pulled his knees up to his chest, frightened eyes darting around.

Amy and Janna sat themselves on either side of him protectively. One man, possibly a new face, possibly not, sat on a wooden chair nailed to the floor on the other side, watching them unspeaking.

The van was bare apart from the wooden chair and a flickering battery-lamp that shook shadows from the ceiling.

“Where do we get off?” asked Janna as soon as they started moving.

“Can’t say, I’m afraid; orders are you can’t know.”

“And if we keep asking?” Janna enquired innocently. The man gave her a dark look.

“Authorised to use force to stop the natural human inquisitiveness in the case of kidnap, I presume.” Janna nodded. “See, I always knew ‘democracy’ was short for ‘ill-concealed fascism’. She smiled sweetly at the man. “So, who’s your boss then? Mussolini? Hitler? What’s he go by these days? I bet…” Janna was cut off by a sharp punch to the mouth. The man was back in his chair and lovingly polished his knuckle-dusters before any of them realised what had happened.

“Hey, shitface. I’m sure your wife likes it in bed but keep your punches to yourself! We have every right to ask questions and be pissed off right now.” Amy said through gritted teeth.

The man remained expressionless. “Orders. Keep you quiet. He tossed a rag at Janna

which she grabbed and held to her bleeding mouth.

“Quiet!” yelled Amy, leaping to her feet. “You drag us out of our friend’s home in the middle of the day; give us no explanation, threats of violence. You scare one of us into catatonia and punch another because she objected! And you want us to be fucking quiet! You big, dumb thug where the fuck do you get off!”

The man stood and squared against Amy. “One more word…” he warned.

“One more word? How about a sentence? Fuck you, you retarded piece of crap!” she fumed in his face and darted back in expectance of a punch. But he expected that and waited a second. When she faltered, confused, the man’s hand shot out from behind his back and the cold steel of a gun sent Amy crashing to the floor.

“Stay down and shut up.” He barked.

Amy clenched her teeth to keep from screaming in pain and balled her fists until her nails cut into her palms. Janna moved over to her, still holding the rag to her busted mouth and cracked teeth.

Another rag landed by her feet and Janna grabbed it, flashing a dirty look at the man but saying nothing. She gently prised Amy’s hand away and raised her head enough to see thick blood strolling from a deep gash below her eye which was already swollen shut and growing bigger and blacker by the second.

“So, what’s wrong with your other friend?” the man asked. “What is he, retarded or

something?”

James had slid sideways onto the floor, his head now buried beneath his arms and curled into a foetal ball.

“Agoraphobic.” Amy replied tightly. The man said no more and she pressed the rag to Amy’s face as gently and firmly as she could to stem the blood. Amy had grabbed Janna’s other hand and tightened enough to hurt. Janna glad of the distraction from her mouth, grabbed back and squeezed tight enough to take a small amount of Amy’s concentration away from her eye.

Chapter 10

Zania was curious. She worked alone, always alone, she disliked people and the feeling was generally mutual. But she was curious to see her counterpart.

She had forced the mysterious agents to mark on her own map the places where the Other was to hunt, to tell her where the Other was to begin. So she had veered off course to the second spot on the map, just to watch.

She waited for the Other to come, knowing she had not arrived yet for the lair was still intact.

Zania waited patiently. She planned to make no contact with this person, but she wanted to see her work. To know she could do the job and survive, not leave extra work for Zania to clear up.

She told herself this as she waited.

Cydir knew she was being watched. She felt no malevolence in the eyes that had watched her ever since she arrived in Armenia for her second mission. But she didn't like it.

Sneaking looks behind her left her confused. She would see – or think she saw – a shadow, a figure, a silhouette. But even as it registered, the thing would disappear or

turn into something else, a litter bin, a drain, a door she had passed but not noticed.

She had been invisible since the gaze first raised her hackles. But a tickling in her mind told her she was being read. Still she remained invisible.

Cydir stopped still, sudden realisation washed over her. A telepath? A Shapeshifter? Another like her? She turned around and the alley was dark and empty. There was no drain, no door, no bin, but underfoot there were stones, litter. Could one of these be her watcher?

“Who are you?” she asked, loudly, flickering into visibility once more. “I know you are…like me, a hero. You are sent to watch me? Or to do your own mission, which you choose not to?”

On the floor a small can rocked a little. As Cydir watched it quickly liquidised and formed into the shape of a person.

“I am Zania. Yes I am on the same mission as you, though I have my own haunts to check.”

“Then why have you followed me?”

“I knew there’d be another one, a fail-safe, I made them tell me the places you’d be. I followed you to watch you fight, I need to know you won’t lose a battle and leave a mess for me to clean up.”

Cydir frowned. “I don not believe you. But as you wish. You have powers, more than shapeshifting.”

“Yes.”

“I will not waste time trying to force any more from you. But I would appreciate if you would no longer follow me. I have work to do, as do you, I do not need distractions.”

Zania shrugged. “Whatever, babe.” She turned and started to walk away.

“Wait.” Cydir called, when Zania had turned back to her she went on. “We both have radios I presume. Mine is channel 8. We can talk, confer, now I know you exist I would like to be sure you are alive. I, too, do not wish for a mess to clean up.”

Zania laughed. “You got some guts girl. I’m channel 7, if you insist, we can check in every day. Just to say we’re still alive. No small talk.”

“You are lonely, Zania. I think you would like to talk. Even a recluse needs a friend.”

“Screw you, sweetie.” Zania smiled icily, turned again and disappeared around a corner.

Cydir watched after her, thoughtfully. “She is lonely. I believe we can be friends, if she allows me closer.”

Now she turned and walked in her own direction, once more invisible, relieved that the

permanent gaze no longer tickled the hair on her neck. Mindful of her mission, and thoughtful of her resolve to break the surface of the second assassin known as Zania.

Zania shook her head. “Lonely. Haha. She might have a power or two but her brain leaves a lot to be desired. Least she’s cute.” She grinned and looked around her. Seeing nobody she closed her eyes and felt wings grow on her back. As she rose quickly into the air she looked below her. “Invisible again.” She muttered as she escaped into the dark clouds and set herself in the direction of Georgia.

Chapter 11

Amy awoke first, forcing her aching eyes open. She remembered being half-dragged to a white room. People in white coats. An injection followed by dreamless sleep.

Looking around she saw white strip-lighting and smelled the sterile atmosphere of a hospital.

Beside her, hidden by a plastic curtain, came a groan. Even through the weariness, the terror in that groan was evident. Amy pushed herself off the bed.

Hanging onto the curtain to save her spinning head, she slipped through.

Lying on his back, James was gagged and bound by leather straps. He sensed Amy's presence and flipped his head over to see her. He pleaded desperately to be freed, muffled cries through the clothing pulling at his mouth.

Through the other curtain slipped Janna. She looked, Amy decided, as bad as she felt. Then she grinned wryly as she realized she probably looked as bad as Janna felt.

Janna pointed at James and Amy nodded. They undid the buckles holding James down and pulled off his gag. He spat with distaste and sat up, massaging his numb muscles.

James sported bandages and plasters on his face and ribs where he had been kicked into a panicked submission. All he could do was mumble incoherently, so terrified after the journey, the beating, being held prisoner, but he mimed the events well enough.

Amy, Janna and James had been hoisted out of the black van by numerous men. The girls were still too dazed to fight, but James' terror overcame him and as they tugged him out of his foetal crouch he kicked and screamed. More men had appeared and dumped him to the floor, holding him firmly with rough hands and kicks until the doctor arrived to inject him to sleep.

The three contemplated their situation in their own way.

Janna fumed inwardly, her eyes bright and thoughts jumbled.

Amy frowned, wondering their worth to some faceless Government men, why they were special enough to be taken but expendable enough to be beaten.

James' face was pale grey with fright. He listened for the sound of people while desperately hoping they would never come.

A footstep squeaked on the hospital floor, causing Amy and Janna to hold James hold gently before he fled.

"Ah. I thought I might find the three of you together." A voice came as the curtain flew backwards.

He was tall and thin, though not gaunt. The thinning hair was silver-grey, reflecting the neon lighting as he moved his head. His hazel eyes betrayed nothing, but his face was smiling.

Janna was the first to react, bitterly.

“Come to deliver some punches personally this time?”

The man smiled mildly and shook his head.

Now Amy.

“Then can we go home, pretend we were never kidnapped.”

The smile faded as the man shook his head again.

He studied James momentarily, hunkered against the metal backing of his bed, shuddering, head bowed to hide his tear-streaked terror.

The man produced a syringe of faintly blue liquid and stepped around Amy’s side of the bed.

Amy stood. “What’re you doing?”

“I thought this might do your friend better than catatonic terror. It’s a special serum that will allow him to release his fear and be his normal self again. In fact if he takes it regularly it’s practically a cure. But for now, we have things to discuss so…”

“And we should trust you…why?”

He shrugged. “There’s no reason in the world for you to trust me, not yet. But you do. So please allow me to settle your friend so we can talk.”

Amy frowned and stepped aside for the man to swab James’ bare arm.

“If he so much as twitches,” Janna reached out and grabbed the man’s arm in a steel grip, “I swear I will pull your brains through your eye-sockets.”

The man blinked in surprise then nodded. “I know.”

Janna released him and the syringe quickly released the serum into James’ bloodstream.

“Give him 10 minutes. The first dose or two might leave him a little drowsy.” He told them.

The girls feigned patience as time slowed down and reversed. But through their agitation, they could see James slowly relax his muscles and uncurl.

Just before ten minutes had passed, he raised his head heavily. His eyes were cloudy but comprehending, surprised, and unafraid.

As he saw the man, a flash of anger crossed his face but was quickly replaced by cautious gratitude.

“Feeling better, James?””

“That depends.”

“On what, may I enquire?”

“Pretentious git.” Janna muttered, darkly.

“I have been called worse. Now, James, I know you harbour the same questions and doubts as your charming friends. If you would all come with me I will answer that which I am able.”

He stood before they could reply and showed them three electric wheelchairs outside the cubicle.

“I had these brought for your use while you recover. I also apologise, my boys occasionally misunderstand the phrase ‘mild force’ when being sent on a mission. They have been punished. And, of course, if you would like an apology they would be happy to oblige.”

“Whatever.” Janna replied moodily, the three of them moving slowly to the wheelchairs.

The man walked before them, adjusting to the speed of the chairs.

The hospital was more of a compound, Amy had decided. But after a few minutes

realised she could have better described it a Ghost Town.

As they set off, doors scattered the walls, but after exiting the lift after a long descent, there were none. Just a long corridor, the same miserable grey, ending with a blank wall.

As they reached this, the man stopped, ignoring their puzzled expressions he spoke.

“Welcome to Department E.” He placed his hand on the wall which rose smoothly upwards. Moving beyond, he showed them a red dot of blood on the palm of his hand,

“DNA identification.” He explained. “A needle pricks my palm for a blood sample.”

“Wow.” James whistled in approval.

“So…what happens if someone who has the wrong DNA tries to get in?” asked Janna.

The corridor was long, but now glossy black instead of grey. Lighting beamed softly from lamps they could not see, the walls mirrored their progress.

“That is a question you never want to know the answer to, Janna.”

She frowned and reached out her hand to touch the wall. It felt like plastic, but not. Firm and soft, cool and warm.

“What is this stuff?”

“You will find out only what concerns you. The elements contained in the walls do not. Perhaps when you are settled and we are all accustomed to each other, and trusted, you may ask further. But such secrets as you learn here must never be repeated beyond the door behind you.”

“Yeesh.” Janna muttered.

She refrained from asking more as the corridor abruptly widened into a huge circular room. A round table sat in the center, behind it a large screen.

“Crap, Arthur, where’d the New Age Knights go?” Janna grinned, Amy and James laughed.

Their guide, however, walked to the other side of the table, in front of the screen, and faced them grandly.

“Pick a place. Just slide the chair away to accommodate yourselves.”

Subtly moving James to the middle, still unsure of the drug and his mildly dopey state, Janna and Amy moved around the left side of the table.

Janna, coming first, stopped 2 chairs from their guide and pulled out the third, sending it rolling gently a few feet away. Amy and James followed, the three maneuvering themselves in close to the table.

When they looked ready the man nodded amiably.

“Good. Now, first things must come first. I know the three of you, names, family, and history - all the basics. My name is Wendell Chase-Moore…”

He broke off as Janna giggled.

“Sorry, it just suits you so well.” She forced her face straight with an effort.

Wendell looked puzzled.

“As you say. Do call me Wendell, first name terms are all the rage down here in Department E.” He smiled as if he had made a joke, but after receiving only blank looks he moved on. “This,” he motioned largely, “Compound is named Department E. We are a part of the Government, though a silent one, only the Prime Minister, the Vice Prime Minister and the Treasurer know of our existence – although even they do not know our location or most of what we do here. For this reason, secrecy and protection, I must ask you to sign an agreement binding you to silence about anything you see or do here.”

He produced a briefcase from under the table, unlocked it, and pulled out 3 booklets of paper.

“Please read carefully, your mere entry inside, I’m afraid, means you must sign.” He laid a booklet and pen in front of each of them.

“Or what?” Janna asked, stonily.

“The same as will happen should you break the agreement.” He replied.

“Contract.” Corrected James.

“Ah, yes, contract if you prefer.”

There was a silence as all three bent to read.

“Hold up!” Janna snapped, on the final page. “’breach of agreement punishable by instant termination’?”

Wendell nodded.

“Well what the bloody hell does that mean?” chimed Amy.

“It means as it says.” Wendell leaned forward, his eyes suddenly full of acid. “If you break the contract, breathe a word of Department E to anyone. Ever. You will be executed. Believe me, we have permission.”

Wendell leaned back and watched his fingernails.

“So…you would know? How?” Amy asked.

Wendell simply smiled at his hands and said nothing.

“I won’t sign.” Janna told him, throwing down the pen and folding her arms.

“Then you must be terminated now.”

“You won’t.” she told him.

Wendell snapped his fingers. Out of nowhere three guards appeared. They looked identical to the suited thugs who had brought them here, only these held guns.

“Janna. Sign the thing! You can keep a goddamned secret! You’ve read it, that’s all they want.”

Janna looked at Amy and shook her head. “No.”

A guard stepped forward and pointed a gun at the back of Janna’s head. The two others stepped closer, ready to grab Amy and James.

The gun cocked with a deafening click.

“Janna!” Amy begged. “Please.” Her eyes shimmered.

James’ eyes suddenly cleared and he grasped the situation. He dropped his pen and grabbed Janna’s arm.

“Sign or I die too.” He told her firmly. “I’m not about to live with this on my conscience. And I’m not…” he swallowed. “I’m not about to live without you, Janna.”

Janna looked from Amy to James. Her face shook and her head fell. She reached for the pen and scribbled her name.

Sighing back tears, Amy followed. James looked at Janna for a moment and smiled, then he signed his page.

Like apparitions, the guards were gone.

“How touching.” Wendell smiled, an honest smile, Amy could see. “I remember being in love.”

“Wow. For a heartless ape you sure are good at pretending feelings.” Janna told him. “Course you’re crap at recognising them too…”

James’ head drooped into his shoulders. Wendell noticed and looked sadly at Janna.

“I think I different.”

He collected the papers and pens, snapping his briefcase shut after removing another file.

Janna looked round at James who raised his head and smiled lamely.

“Yeah, crap at recognising feelings.” He agreed.

Amy studied them closely, remembering the look she once saw of herself in the mirror. A pang ate into her stomach and she pushed it away without trying to realize what it was for.

“Well then. Are we done with the niceties?”

Wendell nodded. “To business.”

Chapter 12

“The chances of a single person existing with the particular…talent that the three of your have are…well most everyone would say negligible.” Wendell began his talk. “Working at Department E, however, I would raise that to 1 in 8 billion. The chances of this one person then discovering, or realizing, his or her talent are about the same. “However, I have in front of me 3 young people – you – with the same talent, and no idea of possessing it. You are 3 in 24 billion! And you are from the same country! And you met, befriended and your talents seem to have…worked without your permission, shall we say.”

He spoke carefully, choosing each word to be as vague yet full of information as possible.

“What talent?” Janna frowned.

“Ever the skeptic, Janna.”

“Yeah, well, I never made anything happen with my mind. Sorry, oooour minds.”

“Oh, but we believe you did. Please, allow me to finish.”

“Whatever.” Janna sulked in her chair impatiently. James patted her gently on the shoulder and listened thoughtfully. Amy listened less than patiently, fidgeting in her chair.

“The video game you created together,” Wendell continued his lecture, “Three special minds, working, picturing, and creating. Making what you saw in your heads into graphics. But as you did that, you also drew a blueprint for reality.

“Your three extraordinary minds imagined, pictured and devised characters and events real to yourselves. And your talents melded without any of you knowing to create in this world what you programmed in your fictional reality.

“Friends, you have the gift of life, of creation. And you, following your game, have created a man who will destroy the world unless your two heroes can stop him.”

He finished with a dramatic gesture and waited.

Janna burst out laughing. “You’re a bloody loony!” she spluttered, wiping tears as she guffawed.

James frowned, trying to think before Janna’s laughter infected him also.

Amy spoke, ignoring the other two. “So…we three have this power to make things from our imagination.”

Wendell nodded encouragingly.

“And even though we didn’t know about it…when the three of us worked together, our minds kinds joined and created what we imagined.”

Wendell nodded again and moved around the table to stand by her. He bent to her ear and spoke quietly.

“I am glad you trust the truth, Amy. You must show the others. I will lead you to your quarters – talk to them. Use your mind to create – a pencil, a glass of water. Whatever you can imagine you can create, remember that. We must have you all on our side, trusting, for we need your help.”

Amy nodded, remembering the bad guy in their game. “I’ll do my best.”

Their room was large, although the same black walls made it look duller than it really was.

Three beds were already made in one half of the main room; Wendell informed them they would be served food in their kitchen-cum-dining room to the side.

The kitchen was cramped due to the table and chairs seated in its center, it also sported a microwave, sink and fridge-freezer stuffed full of drinks and snacks for them.

The bathroom was more spacious. There was a large bath with shower overhead, sink and toilet. On the wall was a full-length mirror. Immediately outside was a second sink and toilet room for when the bathroom was occupied.

Bookcases lined most of the remaining walls, filled with books, videos, DVD’s, CDs and computer games. One wall was mostly taken up by a huge entertainment center, a large TV, DVD players, vcr, stereo, computer, gaming consoles.

But for once, the three self-confessed geeks were not interested in the things they loved, not even glancing at the titles of books.

“Its bullshit!” was Janna’s favourite argument against Amy.

“I don’t know, Amy. I want to trust him – I have this feeling like I should. But I don’t trust the feeling.” Was James’ mostly confused reply.

Amy was almost ready to give up. For 3 solid hours she had begged and argued, through their meal and beyond. Still her friends refused to budge.

Yet she trusted Wendell. Her instincts told her to on this point, though they also told her not to like him or trust him about much else – and she had never known them be wrong. But it was more than that. Memories came to her; a guy who had hassled her until a friend had punched him out cold got a huge break-out of pimples on his face after Amy laughingly imagined it with her friends. Desperately needing money to pay her rent, once, a cheque had arrived in the mail proclaiming her the winner of a competition she had never heard of – much less entered.

And more besides, all of them she had shared with her friends. She saw the recognition in their eyes, quashed stubbornly by Janna, frowned at indecisively by James.

Amy realised she had only one option left. She gave no warning, only begged her mind to help her just this once. She stared in the direction of the carpet, eyes glazed, imagining a pencil. Yellow and black striped, like the ones she had used at school years

ago. A notch or two down the sides, her name scratched by penknife at the top.

She was concentrating on seeing it so strongly that she jumped when Janna yelped.

“A pencil! There wasn’t a pencil! Where the fuck did a pencil come from!”

Amy looked at her and smiled.

“Amy did it.” James said, falling over to her side at last. “She imagined it, didn’t you?”

Amy nodded.

Janna jumped up and paced the room, arguing with herself.

“No, no. It was there before, just didn’t see it. Maybe it rolled. Maybe we’re blind. Hallucination, mass hypnosis. THINGS DON’T JUST FUCKING APPEAR!”

She grabbed Amy roughly.

“What did you do? It was a trick, right?” Janna gave a high-pitched giggle. “Haha, you nearly got me. Admit it was a trick!”

Her eyes pleaded, fingers dug into Amy’s arm until she gasped.

James took Janna’s shoulders gently and pulled her away. Janna turned to him and he hugged her, stroking her hair, talking softly.

“Janna, you know the truth. It’s hard, I know.”

“Things don’t just appear cos you think them.” Janna begged an affirmative through tears.

Amy quietly motioned to James that she would leave them alone and take a shower. James nodded and turned back to Janna.

“Janna. I know it’s hard.” He spoke softly, rocking from side-to-side, soothing her. “But some things aren’t logical, not everything is computers. Admit you saw it, just to me, it won’t hurt, you can trust me.”

Janna sobbed. “I saw it.” She whispered. “It appeared…from nowhere.”

“We can do that too. You want ice-cream? You can make it appear, doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“Yeah…ice-cream…chocolate. We can do cool stuff, huh?”

“Yeah. Good girl, Janna. Well done. I’m proud of you.”

Janna raised her head from his shoulders and smiled.

“Nobody ever said that to me before.” She whispered.

“I’m proud of you.” James repeated, wiping away her tears with his thumbs. “You’re smart and brave and funny and beautiful and amazing and I’m just as proud as punch ever was. Of you.”

Janna grinned and blushed. “Aw shucks…”

“It’s true.” James promised.

“Gee…” Janna grinned. “Anyone’d think ya fancied me.”

James grinned back. “Maybe I do.” He kissed her forehead.

Janna kissed his cheek.

James kissed hers.

For a long moment they looked at each other in dumb realization, aware of the pool they were about to jump into. Then they kissed.

Lost in each other, it took a moment to realize the painful screams that came from the bathroom.

The door was lockless so Janna and James raced in and full speed.

James yelped and backed out quickly, blushing fiercely and turning his head. Remembering the intercom telephone he raced to it and called for help.

Amy was doubled over in the bathtub, naked, moaning in pain, arms over her stomach.

Janna turned off the shower and climbed in close to Amy, she stroked her hair gently. “Amy, where does it hurt?”

“Stomach.” Amy gasped. Janna forced her arms away long enough to see a large purpling welt, then Amy pulled them back again, curling up and squeezing her arms in tight as if that could stop the pain.

James knocked on the open door. “Uh…help is on the way.”

“Hear that Amy? The cavalry is riding to your rescue.” Then to James, “There’s dressing gowns and spare clothes in the wardrobe, I saw ‘em earlier.”

“On it.” James called and was halfway to the closet when the door opened and two paramedics rushed in.

“Sorry, sir.” The man apologized as James jumped, “We got an emergency passkey.”

They raced into the bathroom.

The woman knelt on the outside of the tub and staunchly took a punch or two before injecting Amy in her stomach with a local anaesthetic.

“We’ll examine her in the ward.” She told Janna. “Get her into the robe and on her wheelchair, we’ll take her up.”

Up in the hospital, Janna and James had paced until they were exhausted, watching Wendell come and go with a small parade of doctors, nurses and random people. Now they leaned against the wall in soft, low-backed chairs, holding hands without thinking about it.

James nudged Janna and smiled wryly. “Guess this is a really crappy time to tell you I’m in love with you. He whispered.

Janna tilted her head. “Actually, I can’t think of too many better ones.” She kissed him. “I love you too.”

Hours or days later, a red-haired woman in jeans popped out and invited them inside.

Amy was dressed now, in Department E clothes that fit her perfectly. Her eyes were clouded from painkillers but she was smiling and otherwise fine.

“James.” The red-haired lady handed him a bottle of blue pills. “For your phobia. Take one every 6 hours – or when you get nervous – no more than 8 a day. You’ll never be

scared again.”

Amy smiled and waved as she left.

“Now, now, Amy. Flirting with the nurses is it?” James grinned.

“What can I say, good-looking women start poking around me while I’m in my birthday-suit, I get a little flirty – it’s a natural reaction. Anyway she says she’s not a nurse, some sort of psychic paranormal investigator type I think.”

James shook his head. “Can’t take you anywhere, can we.”

Janna smiled slyly. “So…was she flirting back?”

Amy matched her expression. “She’s 23, single, from around here, loves computers and not exactly unfamiliar around another woman’s body.”

Janna laughed and whooped.

“Speaking of such things…” James interrupted, reddening.

Amy nodded, forcing away the pang that tried to lie in her stomach. “You two got it together at last, huh? And all it took was a magically appearing pencil. Yay me.”

Janna hugged her.

“How long before they let you out?” James asked.

“Yeah, and what the bloody hell didya do to yourself!” Janna added.

“Well. The nurse wants to keep me in overnight, though my new friend Sara tried to let me go. I’m all painkillered up so it doesn’t hurt much. And I didn’t do anything! I swear, I was in the shower and it just…really, really hurt!”

They nodded.

“Wendell came a few times, you saw I‘m sure looked all worried and said he had a theory but he’d tell us later.”

“I am never gonna like that guy.” Janna muttered.

“Aw, he’s okay. Pretension doesn’t always mean evil y’know.” Amy told her, sternly, pretending she believed it.

“Yes mum.” Janna stuck out her tongue.

“Haha, funny girl. Anyhow, you two get on back to our room. I’m kinda tired – those pills. Come see me in the morning, ‘k?”

“Sure?” Janna asked.

“We can stay if you like, no trouble.” James agreed.

“Nah. You two get gone.” Amy’s sly grin surfaced again. “Got the room all to yourselves…”

James and Janna reddened immediately. Amy giggled evilly.

“Sorry. Go on, I’m fine. There’s nurses around all night if I need anything.”

“Alright sweet lady.” James bowed and backed out. “Goodnight.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite.” Janna warned, hugging Amy before she left also.

Amy’s stomach panged again, forcefully. She knew it wasn’t her new injury.

She tried to laugh at herself. “Jesus, I’m jealous. I’m happy for them, but I’m jealous.” She sighed. “And lonely.”

It had been almost two years since Amy had been out with another girl. And living where she had left her all but friendless until James then Janna had shown up in their different ways.

Now they were together, Amy was happy for them, they were still her best friends and she had no attraction to Janna beyond that. But now they would share something more than they could with her. Something Amy had all but forgotten.

Amy thought of Sara, red hair, twinkling green eyes. They had flirted lightly and

chatted most of the time Amy had been in the hospital – though Amy knew she was no longer the charmer she used to be, lack of practice left her with butterflies every time she tried.

Musing, she didn't hear the footsteps. Her curtain opened and a red head popped inside with a small smile.

"Wanna come see a film with me?" she enquired shyly, "Gotta big TV…"

"Didn't the nurse say I had to stay here?" Amy asked.

"Yep. But I just promised her I'd take care of you so she moaned a lot then said you could go."

Amy smiled nervously.

"Don't be afraid, I promise not to bite."

"How about if I ask nicely?" Amy's heart jumped into her mouth as she spoke, apparently she could still flirt a little.

Sara gave an evil grin. "Well…maybe if you asked real nice…"

Amy laughed. "A film you say? How can I refuse an offer from such a vision of loveliness?"

‘Vision of loveliness!’ Amy hit herself inwardly. But Sara laughed.

“C’mon, hot stuff.” She winked and helped Amy to her wheelchair.

Back in their room, James and Janna had on a film of their own.

But none of the four saw much of their TVs that night.

Chapter 13

“I will be engaging in approximately five minutes.” Cydir whispered into the radio.

“Good luck. Radio when you’re done, then it’s my turn.” Came the crackled reply.

“Okay. Take care, Zania.”

“You first, sunshine. Over.”

“Over and out.”

Wendell pushed the stop button on the tape recorder.

“This was the last we heard from Zania until 4 hours after Amy collapsed.
“They’d disobeyed orders in communicating, but we allowed it, Zania is one of our more…impulsive operatives. And Cydir seemed to be doing the job we could not by keeping Zania in check, so as long as they remained simple acquaintances we decided we would allow them to talk.”

“Why?” Janna asked. “Long as they do their job, who cares if they natter?”

Wendell gave her a patronising smile.

“Janna. They were not told of each other to begin with for a reason – that being, if they were captured nothing could be given away. But our loveable Zania forced my men to

tell her about Cydir and give her the locations she would be checking, then she made contact.

“If they got close, as people tend to, there is a risk that the missions could be compromised should one be injured.

“However…in this one case, it seems that when Cydir radioed Zania and there was no answer, she contacted us – though of course we were already on the way – and Zania was discovered relatively quickly.”

“So it’s good that they knew each other, cos Cydir saved Zania – and Amy – when you lot woulda left them to die.” Janna finished. “Ok, please finish the story.”

“Okay, thank you. Well, you know the story, you wrote it after all. Zania and Cydir were chasing two bases in Russia. It seems that Zania simply got in too close and when Cydir radioed back, the signal was captured and a guard sent. Zania was taken by surprise and sustained the injury before she destroyed the robots. Then she fell unconscious.

“Our operatives found her there, injured but alive, and brought her back.” Wendell gave Janna a pointed look. “So, it was the mutual contact that had Zania in trouble.”

Unable to resist, Janna stuck out her tongue and him and giggled when he looked away in disgust.

“Zania is currently inside Department E receiving treatment before she returns to the field.

“Meantime, Cydir has added a small amount of locations to her map so we do not fall behind while Zania recovers.”

“Wait, wait.” Amy held up her hand. “You’re sending her back out again? Half-healed, more than likely?”

“Yes. It is her duty, and she knows it.”

Amy leaned back in her chair, wincing as her injured stomach complained.

“Y’know…Zania is actually a person – created in a rather unique way, yes, but still human!” Amy spoke forcefully, Zania was modeled on her after all.

“I gotta agree, Wendell,” Sara said, “Sending out any operative at half-strength is never good planning. But Zania is even more important to us as a cause because of her powers. And she has to battle artificially creations with those powers that sap strength. Plus, Zania’s injury was mirrored at about 80% in…”

“Yes, yes.” Wendell cut her off hurriedly.

“Woah, wait.” James cut in. “Mirrored? In Amy, right?”

Wendell sighed. “I was getting to that. Yes, Zania was stabbed in the stomach – in the same spot you have your injury, Amy.”

Amy’s hand went to her stomach. “I want to see her.”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t…”

“I made her.” Amy stared at Wendell icily. “We made her, based on me. I suffered her injury. There is a connection between us that you can never understand.”

“Amy, I wish I could permit it, I really do. But Zania and Cydir – and, we must conclude, Henrott,” James shrunk in his seat, recognizing the name, “do not know of their origin. They have the stories you created, and anything before that they don’t remember – nor do they seem to think it strange. If asked something their memory does not contain, well, it is an experiment untried quite to this extent, but they will likely create memories which will become 100% true to them.”

“So tell them! Let them know, my God they are fighting for a world they don’t even know! Or probably belong in!” Janna argued.

Sara shook her head. “I dunno guys. Something like this could…seriously unhinge a person. I know where you guys are coming from and I totally agree. But we can’t afford to lose your good guys – they’re all we have to stop your bad guy taking over.”

James shrunk a little further in his seat.

“Wait till Henrott’s been defeated, okay? Then we’ll sort something out.” Sara suggested.

“Alright.” Amy nodded and kissed Sara’s cheek.

“Fine.” Janna agreed, grudgingly. “But believe that I will hold you to that, bodily if I

have to."

James grinned and whispered something in Janna's ear, they giggled.

"Are you two done?" Wendell interrupted. "It's bad enough that my staff," he looked at Sara, "are at it. I don't need everyone to go losing their heads here."

"But isn't that what'll happen to Henrott?" James countered quickly.

"Ah, James, you have to understand…"

"Yeah, yeah, evil guy. We made him, remember. But you can't hurt him without hurting me. So…your plan?"

Wendell looked flustered. "Um, well, we…"

Sara shook her head. "We don't currently have one, James. It was originally to kill Henrott, but knowing what we do now…well we have to change that to capture at all costs with as little injury as possible, and it's still not good enough, I know this."

"Why can't we imagine him away?" Janna asked.

"We don't know if you can. You made him without knowing. But now you know he exists…it's a lot easier to create something in your head than to destroy or change it. The mind likes to play tricks." Sara took Amy's arm. "And there's the whole risk that deleting him might, say, leave James without much in the way of a brain."

“Yeah.” James pondered. “But if it comes down to me as a veggie or evil robot guy ruling the world…”

“No!” Janna cut him off with a small punch to the arm. “Don’t even bloody say it!”

“Janna, what James is thinking is…tragic but also, in a way, honorable, and…” Wendell tried to say more but Janna shoved back her wheelchair and stalked out.

“Janna dear, you forgot your hotrod.” Wendell called after her.

“Shut up.” Sara told him. “James, leave her for a bit.” James was halfway after Janna, still in his wheelchair. “Give her a few, James, she knows why you said that. But…”

“I know.” James sighed. “I-I’m gonna go for a walk – sorry, ride.” He smiled apologetically and rode out.

“Screw you, Wendell.” Sara said sweetly as he opened his mouth. “The plan is to capture Henrott unharmed if hum-superhumanly possible.”

“Dear Sara, I do believe you could have some interestingly crude conversation with Janna, if only…”

“Don’t say it.” Amy warned.

Wendell smiled. “Sorry. Sara, you really must learn to treat me with respect, this is my

case after all.”

“Yes, your case. But I am still your equal, not to mention twice the human you’ll ever be, so respect is due both ways. Plus, this isn’t a ‘case’ to most of us involved. Janna and James are in love, they are both mine and Amy’s friends-“

“And of course you and Amy are undeniably…close.”

Amy winked. “Jealous.”

Wendell laughed. “Hardly, my dear. You’re welcome to anything my esteemed colleague has to offer.” He forced an icy smile.

“Oh, go hump a wall.” Sara told him, rising. “Let’s face it, it’s the only excitement you’re gonna get.”

Amy turned her wheelchair quickly and beat a walking Sara out of the room. In the corridor she burst out laughing.

Sara joined in and they laughed their way back to Sara’s room.

But once inside Amy turned quickly serious, walking painfully over to the bed and sitting down she asked. “So, what’s the deal with you two anyway?”

Sara sighed and sat down by Amy, slipping an arm around her waist.

“Well…you know he’s not the nicest cookie in the tin. I came here because they chose me, pulled me out of my life before I got halfway through University actually. I excelled somewhat in studies of unexplained and paranormal phenomenon.

“So, they put me in with Wendell who’d been here a few years. He’s an expert on…well a lot now, but not in my field – we were meant to compliment each other as a team I think. He’s more logical than me, no imagination, more up for study and infiltration, management and the like.

“Anyway. I liked him well enough, he was serious and there was always a hint of something behind his eyes, but he was friendly and smart and we got on well enough.

“But…once my induction finished he asked me on a date.

“Now, I was single and quiet about....well me in general, I don’t usually open up quickly to people – apart from you babe – especially at work, so I’d kept to myself a lot. So, y’know, it was okay that he asked, it happens.

“I told him I was gay, not interested, liked him as a friend, you know the deal – tell the truth, right? Best policy. And he seemed okay with it, said he understood and smiled.

“So…he asked for me to work with him on his next project a week later – I’d been floating around, getting to know the place and the people and all, and I was about ready to set my mind to something, so I said yeah. I thought he saw my potential or something, and the project was a good mix of both our talents. Um, using mathematics, formula, equations and the like to create force.

“But, my first day I walked into the lab and on my locker ‘someone’ had written ‘man hater’ in big red letters.

“That was the start. One time he saw one of the newbies – an intern – I was working with glance at…I dunno, my legs or my bum I guess. He spent an hour extolling on harassment and ‘rug-munchers’ and…other insulting names.

“Now, dunno ‘bout you, but if someone decides to look at my legs and appreciate them

that's cool, male or female, it's a compliment, right? Doesn't mean I like them…and if they do it all the time it's a bit much, but a look…I mean come on…

"There was other things – my work'd be moved or wrecked, things written on my locker. He gave me an awful review for no reason, things like that – the kinda thing everybody calls you a whiner for caring about.

"I tried to ignore it anyway, cos the work was good – I learned a lot – and the others working on it were good people.

"Anyway, he did this one last thing…I was working late with a guy called Brian – math whiz-kid. We were computing and all, trying to make a piece of chalk move (we did, by the way) – but it's weird and complicated.

"Wendell came to watch and after a bit hinted to Brian that maybe he felt like a walk. Brian went, kinda wary, but Wendell was the boss and all…

"So Wendell came around the table now there was just us and grabbed my bum.

I shoved him away and told him to bugger off, and he grabbed my breast.

"So, I punched him, heh, right in the mouth. And I shot off double-time and straight to our boss' room.

"Wendell nearly got sacked and we've not worked together since.

"When we meet at meetings or in the corridor, he kind of averts his eyes like I'm not there. I generally want to run and hide.

"But now…we're both the seniors in our areas, and they both came together with you guys. This is something that needs us both."

Sara rested her head on Amy's shoulder.

"Aw, baby, that's awful. That bastard Wendell!" Amy stroked Sara's hair with one hand, the other clenched into a fist.

“It’s okay, sweets. Look, I’m still kinda…nervous around him, but…”

“Hey, don’t ever be alone with him, alright?” Amy took Sara’s face in her hands. “Have me – or Janna, or James – around. Okay?”

Sara nodded, her eyes filled with tears. “Okay. But…I am, nervous around him, but not afraid. Like, I can stand up for myself. Least I seem to be able to when you’re around.” Sara smiled shyly.

“Then I’ll be around.” Amy promised. “And not just when Wendell is either.”

“My hero.” Smiled Sara.

“Just call me SuperAmy.” She grinned.

“Maybe I’ll just call you SuperSexy…” Sara kissed Amy softly.

“Mm…and maybe I’ll just…” Amy kissed back, not quite as softly.

Janna walked slower now. The initial reaction of fear and anger had caused her to storm off, but amongst those now were understanding knowledge and love of who James was. Also, an almost physical longing to talk with her mother.

They hadn’t spoken since Marice had thrown Janna out of the house, and Janna feared

any conversation – especially one in which Janna could not tell Marice where she was – may widen the breach. But to repair or forget, there was only one way to ever know before it was definitely too late.

Amy spotted a tall, brown-haired, brawny man in a grey suit wearing an eye patch.

“Excuse me, sir.”

“Mm? Oh, hello there. Which one would you be then, Janna?”

“Yeah.” Janna was unimpressed – random strangers knowing her name were currently the least spectacular thing in her life. “Um, do you guys have any phones here?”

He laughed. “Took me 3 weeks to brave that question! And yes we do! The intercom in your room works as a phone. Press 9 for an outside line. Oh, but it can’t accept incoming calls – Department policy.”

“Oh, intercom, duh. No incoming?”

“Secrecy and all that gobbledygook. There’ll be a number under the receiver, give that out, someone’ll pass on the messages. Just make sure you call ‘em first with a cover story so they don’t confuse anyone.”

“Okay…” Janna nodded slowly.

The man laughed.

“I’ll walk you back if you like, talk you through it. My name’s Zeus, by the by. Actually me real name’s Brannan and I’d appreciate if you wiped that from memory. Zeus they call me, cos I got crackly fingertips.”

They were walking by now. Zeus stopped and showed Janna a blue spark on the end of his finger.

“I’ll do you a burger later.” He grinned, setting off again.

“That’s so cool – in an ‘I’m never going to get on your bad side!’ kinda way. Looks like the old British Gas ad, where they click their fingers and a blue flame jumps up on their thumb.”

Janna shook herself inwardly, talking like Zeus, fast and hopping around, was not a habit she wished to fall into. She made a mental note about that.

“That’s exactly how I like to see it!” he roared with laughter. “But I don’t have a bad side – and I only shoot my lightning bolts at bad mortals! This is your room, right? Got your name on it.”

Janna realized they were, indeed at her room – the metal door distinguished by a small sign with three first names on. She took her passkey from her back pocket and swiped it.

They entered and the door closed smoothly behind them.

“Hmm. Looks just like mine.” Zeus concluded, looking around. “Different titles though. Anyway, the phone, pick up the receiver.” He was suddenly back by Janna’s side.

Janna picked it up and saw, as described, a phone number.

“This is the message service for you three. Now, you can either make up your own story – where you are, why, all the things people ask – and tell them, or call them blank and let them give you a story that relates with who you are - so it’s believable. Either way, they’ll have the info on a computer and when someone calls they’ll answer and take a message – could be the same person every time, a different one – or an answering machine, depends on your story.

“Obviously you can keep in touch by e-mail too. And these guys’ll pass on mail if you ask them to make you a PO Box address. There’s a book with all this stuff in, and more, probably in the computer desk.

“So anyway, give out that number and the address they’ll tell you and you’ll get all your messages. Dial 9 to call out, remember your story – I wrote it down and stuck it on my wall – then have fun.

“I’ll leave you to it – I’m Zeus you know that, my room location is in the book too along with extension numbers and all that rubbish.

“See you ‘round, might pop in to say hi if that’s okay.”

Janna could only nod, still halfway through processing the information.

“Thanks Zeus.” She managed to say a she opened the door. “We’ll do that burger soon, right?”

“Sure thing.” He gave a small wave and exited.

Janna shook her head slowly. “What an interesting fella.” She muttered. But she liked Zeus, fast and confusing he may be, but friendly and helpful too.

She dialed 9 and called the message center.”

James had found the Department E gardens.

It was an enclosed but expansive space. One-way glass let in the dark clouds, but the rain stayed outside and the garden bloomed with well landscaped flora, fauna and vegetables. Light came from nowhere James could see.

He had left his wheelchair at the exit – or was it the entrance, he mused – and strolled about, smiling.

“It’s been too long since I just enjoyed the outside.” He talked to himself as he strolled. “Flowers are nice, relaxing.”

In his years inside, James had learned about plants through idle research borne of desperation to connect through his fear to the outside world. He could name every plant in this garden, the best watering methods, growth heights and more.

“Maybe I could help in the garden while I’m around…” he wondered aloud.

“I’d love to ‘ave you if you know about plants and stuff.” A voice spoke from his right. “Sorry mate, didn’t mean to make you jump. I’m t’gardener – Stan.” He held out a gloved hand.

“Good to meet you – I’m James.” He shook the hand. “I’ve never worked on a garden before, I’ve been agoraphobic most of my life. But I learned everything I could. I’d love to give it some time for real.”

“Well, mate, it’s a big garden. There’s me and a few others, I’m all over the shop, but the others have their little specialties. Adder’s got a corner for experiments, Sonja does the veggies, Phil likes the wildflowers, Adyll does topiary – damn good ‘e is – mebbe you’ll find a fave bit of t’garden made just for ya. Shed’s in t’middle, find all the stuff you need in there.”

James smiled warmly. “Maybe I will. Thanks Stan. I’ll be out when I can.”

“No doubt we’ll knock trowels then, see y’round lad.”

Stan turned back to the bed he was tending and James kept strolling.

“Hey mum, that you?” Janna spoke shakily into the phone.

“Janna?!” Marice almost shouted. “By the Gods girl where the bloody hell are you! You

and Amy left town ages ago and never came back! I've never been so…"

"Mum." Janna interrupted. "I'm fine, we're fine. We're in London with our friends."

"So…you're okay? Doing the video game?"

"We're all fine." Janna purposely emphasized the 'we'. :We're not doing that game though, we're working as consultants for other people's software. Ours took a wrong turn, we put it on hold for a while. This is fun though!"

"Shame. About the game." Marice sounded decidedly un-mortified. "So you're coming home soon? What's your address? How do you mean, consulting?"

"Um, not coming home – I'm going to stay here. Me and James are…together. And Amy found this really nice new girlfriend who lives with us." She gave her phone number, preferring to keep her address t herself for now. "And consulting…well, Sara – that's Amy's girlfriend – is our middle-leg. She gets the games and software from companies, me and the guys play with them and all then send Sara back to them with recommendations."

"Hmm. So this James…"

"He's very nice, kind and wonderful."

"And this…other…of Amy's…"

“The word is girlfriend, Mum, it won’t kill you to say it. She seems real nice, only known her a bit though. But she’s sure crazy about Amy.”

“Janna.” Marice said in her ‘I mean business.’ voice. “I want you to stop all this rubbish and come home, right now. You are 16 and living in London with some guy and two…other people…”

“Lesbians, mum.” Janna reminded her, dryly.

“I don’t care if they’re space monkeys! I am your mother, and-“

“I won’t come home.” Janna’s heart pounded, refusing her mother was something she had never done before. Even a smart remark would usually earn her at least a slap on the cheek. “I’m living with the man I love, and my best friends – who happen to be lesbians, horror of bloody horrors. I am happy, for the first time in my whole damn life, and I am not coming home. And we can turn this conversation to nicer subjects or it can end now.” Janna finished and waited tensely, breathing hard.

“I am your mother! I raised you! And you are still too young-“

“Mum!” Janna shouted, then paused for control. “If you were a mother who gave a crap you would love me for who I was – not try to squash me cos I’m not all the things you want me to be. You would understand, trust me, support me, love me, accept me and my friends. Not constantly criticize and nitpick and moan and yell because I, with my free mind, made my own decisions!”

“Janna stop.”

Janna ignored her mother. “Stop complaining. You raised me to think for myself, be my own person, don’t whine because my mind and person don’t conform to your close-minded, tunnel-visioned view of the world! Accept who I am or leave me alone.”

Janna was crying now, tears silently tracing her cheeks. But she kept her sobs in check and waited.

“I’m sorry Janna. I cannot accept that. You are under 18 – still legally in my care. You are too young and too…young to know what you want – or what’s good for you. And you are associating with bad company, you used to be such a good girl…”

“I’m not too young, and I’m certainly not too…young” Janna deliberately showed her mother she knew the avoided word. “And you don’t even know my ‘company’. Oh, look, I’m not gonna do this anymore.
“Right here and now – will you accept me for who and what I am or will you not?”

Marice sighed. “Not.”

“Then goodbye, Mum. I’m sorry I couldn’t be everything you wanted.”

Janna hung up the phone and sunk to the floor. Soon she was sobbing, her chest heaving painfully, letting out cries of anguish. Her throat was sore and her eyes red, but she sobbed until her tears dried and her voice lost it’s power.

She slid sideways to lie on the floor, exhausted.

Chapter 14

James swiped his door key and entered, humming to himself.

A voice spoke from behind him.

“James.”

He whipped round and saw Janna on the floor, red-faced from crying and cramped from her dead-rest.

“Janna! Oh fuck, Cydir got hurt. Where is it babes? I’ll get help.” He knelt beside her and laid a cool hand on her forehead.

Janna reached up and touched his chest. “Mum…”

“Mum? Oh, you spoke to your Mum?”

Janna gave a small nod.

“Oh no, Janna. What happened? What did she say?”

Janna curled her head down and her shoulders shook with fresh tears.

James helped her up and she curled around him, letting him half-carry her to the bed.

He left a moment to get a cold drink fro the kitchen. He opened it and held it to her lips, tilting it until the liquid moistened them. Then she drank deeply.

Wiping her tears with her quilt, he waited.

Eventually the tears slowed, then stopped, and Janna raised her head heavily.

“I…she…”

“Shh, babe, you don’t have to.”

“I want…” Janna took more drink and forced herself to composure.

“I rang her.”

She explained the intercom, cover story and message center, working and twisting her way painfully to the core.

As she told the conversation, her jaw clenched and her throat tore with unreleased anguish. James held her close, listening in silence.

When Janna was done, they stayed that way awhile. James had no advice to give; instead he rocked her a little and stroked her hair to comfort.

After a while Janna sat up again.

“So…I guess I’m all orphaned now. I know she’ll never find me here.”

Give her time…” James suggested, knowing it was useless.

“Time!” Janna gave a harsh laugh.

“Sorry.” James was cowed a little.

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. Maybe I’ll give it a little – or a lot – of time, what else can I do? The things I said…maybe by the time I get over it a bit I can forgive myself.”

“Uh…no…not quite right. You spoke that mind of yours, remember that one? As far as my opinion counts, every word was valid and true. Time, maybe, but it’s for you to forgive her. And for her to do some of that growing up she claims to know so much about.”

Janna nodded and sighed. “I guess I know that. Doesn’t make it easier though, Mum plays martyr so well.” She sagged into James’ arms again and closed her eyes.

She slept soundly before long, and James slipped her gently under her covers before racing to the sink to swallow another blue pill. The panic had been trying to rise for a while, but he fought it for Janna.

“Hoo, boy.” He sighed at nothing in particular as the pill kicked in.

The door slid open breathlessly and Amy entered with Sara.

“Guys!” James almost flew to greet them.

“James, what’s wrong?” Amy asked after he had hugged them both.

James cocked his head at Janna and motioned to the kitchen. They followed quietly.

He related Janna’s story and she subsequent small conversation they had. The faces opposite him grew grimmer.

“Oh God, poor Janna.” Sara shook her head.

Amy frowned deeply and said nothing.

“What can we do to help?” Sara asked.

“How about knocking some sense into that banshee mother of hers.” Amy suggested tightly.

Sara slid an arm around Amy’s shoulders and hugged.

“Yeah, wouldn’t mind that.” James agreed. “But…I think the best legal and feasible action is to…just be her friends. If she cries, hug her, if she talks, listen, if she says nothing…say nothing. Try not to leave her alone for a day or two, she needs someone around, she needs to know we care.”

Um. I should clear off a while, huh?" Sara added. "She doesn't exactly know me…"

"No." Amy told her.

"Stay." nodded James. "You're a friend, deal with it!" he gave a feeble smile. "I'll stay most of the time though, seemed to work and…"

"You're her fella." Amy agreed. "And you don't wanna put me and Sara through any extra effort. Not that it would be, but you're all considerate and stuff."

"And…" Sara hesitated. "Well, new lovers, good guy. This is the first big thing where you both need each other, really, and you therefore wanna be the one to do it, the rock, the wall, the anchor…"

Amy looked surprised "Woah. How'd you do the analysis thing? I missed that bit!"

"Well, I did more than paranormal studies at college and University…Always had a fancy for the 'ologys."

"The what's?" James tilted his head.

"Psych, soci – interesting stuff."

"Oooh, thooose ologys!" James nodded knowingly.

Janna slept until early morning. Amy had left with Sara, to give James some time with Janna, promising to be back first thing.

James had watched Janna for a while, sleeping restlessly. Now he sat in the kitchen reading one of the books provided for them. He almost jumped up, startled, when Janna appeared in front of him, pale as an apparition.

“Hey, handsome.” She smiled a little. “Whatcha readin’?”

He showed her.

“Ah, I read the first two of that series.” Janna pulled a chair close and snuggled into his neck.

“Mm. It’s good.” James put his arms around her. “Nice sleep?”

“Had better. Kept hearing Mum and me…we never argued before, y’know? Well, she argued, but I always just did like she said cos, I dunno, she was the smart one, she was older. I don’t think I ever spoke to anyone like that in my life.”

“Well, it’s done now. Obviously you needed to say it.”

“Yeah. And I’m trying real hard not to feel guilty.”

“Good, you shouldn’t.”

She kissed him. “Thank you. For being there when I needed you.”

James took Janna’s hand and looked into her eyes. “Always will be.”

She smiled and patted his cheek. “Now, what say you lemme beat you at one of them games they got for us.”

“Dream on, sister.” James proclaimed, grandly.

“Haha! Your ass is mine boy!” Janna replied.

Sara and Amy closed the door quietly.

“Hey, Martin.” Sara said. “Thanks for this.”

“No problem.” The doctor replied. “I’ll be back in a while, just remember she can’t know who you are.”

“Sure thing, doc.” Amy waved as he left.

Sara pressed a blue button on the desk in front of them and a section of the wall slid upwards with a whir.

Behind was a pane of one-way glass.

Amy looked through and gaped.

In front of her sat a figure she knew well, only here was a version so different from the one she saw every day.

There was a new look in the eyes that Amy had never felt before, her hair was shorter, her body trimmer and stronger. Even the skin looked tougher.

Zania paced the room, resting her arm protectively over her stomach. She wore faded clothes, clean now, but empty of tools and weapons.

“Wow.” Amy breathed. “That’s…not me.”

“In a way, she is.” Sara looked at Amy. “But she’s suffered in more ways than you’ll ever have to see, thank Christ.”

“Yeah.”

“Here, talk to her.” Sara showed Amy an intercom.

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. She’s brusque, she has a lotta walls. But she’s genuine.”

“Amy flipped the switch from Listen to Talk-Listen and spoke hesitantly. “Zania?”

Zania stopped pacing and faced the screen, almost in a battle stance.

“Yeah. A new voice, gotta name?”

“Amy.”

“Amy, nice name. You another doctor?”

“No.”

Zania relaxed a little and nodded approvingly. “Cool. So what can I do for you if you’re not here to prod me about?”

Hey Zania.” Sara rescued Amy with a smile.

“Sara, what’s with your talkative friend there?”

“New here. Thought we might introduce you both, what with you out saving the world and all.”

“Damn right I am – or I was.”

“You will be again, soon as you get better.”

“Yeah. So how’s the other?”

“Cydir’s good.”

“Got no radio waves to give her away right?” Zania grinned, “So, Amy, what they got you here for then?”

“She’s telekinetic.” Sara answered.

“I coulda sworn I said Amy…”

Amy fumbled. “Like she said, I’m tele-telekinetic.”

“Secret huh, fair dos. So, you Sara’s new piece or what?” Zania winked and gave an impish grin.

Amy laughed. “I guess…”

“Good deal, the girl’s a babe.”

Amy looked sideways at Sara and raised an eyebrow.

“Watch it lady.”

“Aw, wassa madda Sara?”

“Zania…” Sara warned.

Zania shrugged idly. “Whatever. So, you comin’ in today or did I catch some deadly disease here in my airtight jar?”

“Not today. You’re fine, but we can’t stay. Martin’ll be back soon.”

“Suit yourself’. So Amy, where you from? Up round my neck of the woods by the accent.”

“Yeah, Blackburn.”

“No shit? Me too. Go Rovers, eh?”

“Damn right!” Amy agreed, grinning.

The door opened and Martin came back in smiling. “How is everyone?”

Zania heard. “Aw Doc, you come to interrupt our cosy little chat? Amy was just tellin’ me how her ‘n’ Sara got it on…” she wiggled her eyebrows.

“Zania!” Sara groaned and went red with embarrassment.

Amy tried to conceal her laughter. “Oh, don’t be mean. I tell you, where I’m from, hearing talk even as crude as that makes a change from being ignored or stomped on.”

“Yeah, well.” Sara pouted slightly. “It’s not nice, Zania.”

“Aw, gee, you gonna take away my barbie doll and all my privileges?” Zania stuck out her bottom lip.

“Enough.” Martin said firmly.

“Oh, alright Doc. No offense, eh girls? Come again.” Zania waved blindly just past Amy’s shoulder.

Sara and Amy said their good-byes and left.

“Sorry about that, like I said she’s nice, but…”

Amy threw herself on Sara’s bed lazily and shrugged. “I like her. She was just having fun, how much of it can the poor girl have, stuck in that room or fighting robots – and god only knows what else. It ain’t the ideal place to develop clean, upper-middle-snob sensibilities.”

Sara poked her. “You callin’ me a snob?”

Amy spread her arms. “If the shoe fits…”

“Yeah? Commoner…” Sara stuck her nose in the air and looked down at Amy.

Amy laughed and pinched her gently.

“Ooh, good comeback farm girl.” Sara dodged another.

“Got more where that came from.” Amy stood up and held her fists in the air.

Sara gave an exaggerated yelp and ran into the kitchen.

“Woohoo, I am the greatest!” Amy made bows.

“So, seriously.” Sara came back with a drink for each of them. “What went through your head?”

“Man…it was so weird. Like looking into this warped mirror of something I could have been. She was me in every way she wasn’t.”

“Gotta be pretty surreal…”

“Mm. So when can we go again?”

“Before she goes. Martin tells me the new prototype Chiron3 is almost ready to play with; she’ll be good as new in less than an hour once it is.”

“Chiron3?” Amy dropped back onto the bed.

“Chiron was a Greek god, he was a Healer.” Sara joined her girlfriend on the bed.

“Cool. So she’ll be all better in a few days?”

“And no doubt raring to go.”

“Wow. Shame the rest of the world doesn’t get a Chiron3”

“There’s too many things the world doesn’t get…” Sara replied, darkly. “Things most of the world could never accept or trust.

“I know.” Amy nodded, excusing Sara from explanation. “And after seeing Zania, I get why we need to keep a secret for a while. I mean, I was looking at her as a creation of me and I could feel it trying to rip me in two. She’s strong alright, but it’ll screw with her head and we need her.”

Sara nodded. “When the world is safe again, then we’ll see. Promise.”

“Yeah.” Amy sipped her drink and stared intently at the wall for a few minutes. A painting appeared over the white and Sara clapped her hands.

“What is it?” She asked, jumping up to examine it.

“Going To The Match – Lowry.” Amy told her.

“Wow…you just made it appear?”

“Yeah. I’ve been practicing a little. It seems I don’t need to know every atom of the thing

I want, just be able to focus on it well enough…or something…”

“Wow…” Sara took the painting off the wall and laughed at the hook it hung on “Well done. The other guys do any of this?”

“No, we haven’t really talked about it either.”

“You should…there has to be some way to put it to good use.” Sara put the painting back and joined Amy on the bed once more.

“I suppose so. I’ll talk to them when Janna feels better.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They sat for a while and watched the figures on the picture.

Chapter 15

“You may all be glad to know,” began Wendell, “that Zania is now fully recovered and eagerly on her way back out into the field.”

Amy looked at Sara who raised a confused eyebrow.

“Sorry Amy.” Wendell caught the look. “We could not risk another security breach by allowing you more contact. You were expressly forbidden to do so, if you recall.” He turned to Sara. “And certain people are disappointed that you were a part of this.”

“Actually I cleared it with the bosses first, promised we wouldn’t tell or allow face-to-face contact. What I’m sure you meant to say was that you are disappointed I neither obeyed you nor received punishment for it.”

Wendell scowled. “Well, be that as it may. Zania is on her way back out. It was suggested…that she and Cydir join forces - double the attack and defence so to speak.”

Sara smiled smugly at him. “This’ll take longer, but is ultimately safer. And as Henrott seems to be sitting tight instead of doing anything…I simply suggested that safety in numbers might be a good idea – especially after one injury, we don’t want to risk more.”

Wendell took hold of the thread as soon as he could leap in. “They have a Chiron3 unit in case of injury and orders to move as quickly as possible. Henrott is no doubt plotting, and the less he has to eventually move with the better off we are.”

“So, how can we help? I mean, Henrott has to be caught, right?” Janna asked. “So we can help somehow.”

“No.” Wendell told her firmly. “I choose to keep you updated and informed because of the obvious connection-“

“When he says ‘choose’, hear ‘am ordered’.” Sara interrupted.

Wendell scowled again and continued. “But there is nothing you can – or will be permitted – to do.”

“But-” Amy tried.

“No.” Wendell cut her off sharply.

“Wendell, at least listen to the guys. Maybe they can help – or at least bring in another perspective, they did create those three after all.” Sara stared him down easily.

“Okay, then what?” he fumed.

“Well, we got the mind-power thingy – we can make things. I made a painting on the wall a coupla days ago. Can’t we…I dunno…make more people to fight?”

“Yes, or create a cage around Henrott to keep him from doing any harm.” James offered.

“We could at least imagine him useless.” Suggested Janna.

Sara nodded. “You guys have to practice, but anyone of those is possible when you put your heads together and work a bit.”

“No, no, no!” Wendell snapped. “Orders are for you to remain here, be informed of events but not to participate. When the world is safe from the mess you created, Zania and Cydir will be told the truth, and if their minds remain intact we will put them to work elsewhere. While you three, when the crisis is over, can work on your powers in the safety of Department E.”

“You wanna make us lab rats and our creations undercover killers.” Janna concluded.

Wendell was flustered. “Ah, well, not quite like that…”

“I think,” Sara took over, “You will given the choice to stay and explore – in your own time – what you can do, whilst being free to leave and return at any time, or to leave and live a normal life away from here. Zania and Cydir will be given similar options.”

“Okay. See, you need to explain stuff more often, Sara. You don’t make it sound like an exercise in torture just to tell us something. Plus it usually makes sense and all…” Janna smiled innocently and Sara stifled a laugh, nodding a thank you instead.

Wendell gathered his papers huffily. “Very well. From now on Sara has control, I resign from this case.” He stomped to the door.

“Wendell!” Sara ran after him.

“What?” he pouted like a child.

“Best tell the bosses that, before you go sulk in your cot. Ok?”

Wendell bared his teeth and slammed the door.

The four left in the room collapsed in giggles.

Zania landed gently, the wings on her back creating a small breeze. As they shrunk to nothing, Cydir bounded over and enveloped Zania in a hug.

“Woah, who changed your programming?” Zania escaped, surprised.

“I apologise, I am simply glad to see you well.”

“I’m fine, this Chiron3 works wonders.” Zania held up a small device, oblong and squared off at the top. It blinked when she turned it on and Cydir took it, awed.

“Chiron3…” she breathed.

“Yeah, well, don’t go getting hurt just so you can play with it. Where’s our first hit?”

“Yesterday I eliminated the base here in Romania. Now you are here, we travel south to

Bulgaria.” Cydir showed her map.

“Alright, let’s saddle up.” Zania pounded a fist into a palm. “Been dying to deck me some killer robots.”

Cydir regarded her. “You have just landed from England. Do you require rest?”

“Sleep when dead, sugarcheeks. Let’s go.”

Cydir nodded and Zania grew her wings once more, adding extra length to carry Cydir’s weight.

“Wanna use your invisibility? Air up there above the clouds gets kinda thin, best to stay lower if we can avoid being seen.”

Cydir nodded and Zania strapped them together with rope and fastened an arm around Cydir’s waist.

“Up and away.” Zania warned and they shimmered into nothing as she took off.

Back at the room in Department E, Janna found messages awaiting her in the mailbox outside the door.

She read them, expressionless, and then threw them into the kitchen trash disposal.

“From Mum.” She confirmed their thoughts as she returned. “She keeps calling, getting madder.”

“I’m real sorry, Janna.” Sara told her sincerely. “I never had a family, so I can’t pretend to understand. But I know what pain is.”

Janna smiled gratefully and turned sideways to James. “Hey, didn’t you mention gardening a day or two ago? Why don’t you go get mucky?”

“Well, I could, but-“

“Bye then.” Janna grinned and gave him a kiss. “I know you’ve been around cos I needed you, but you’ve earned some time off. Besides, these two’ll make sure I don’t have a mental breakdown before you get back.”

“Or at the very least, we’ll come get you real fast if she does.” Amy agreed.

“Okay, I guess…unless you’re persuadable…”

Janna stomped her foot, poute= playfully and pointed at the door.

“Okay, I’m going…” James opened the door. “I’ll just go for an hour, okay?” he blew Janna a kiss and was gone.

“Phew!” Janna sighed and sat down. “Thought he’d never unattach himself.”

“Been a little over-protective?” Sara guessed.

“Just a mite!” Janna rolled her eyes. “Aw, I love him for it, I really do. But I’m a big girl.”

“He’s just worried, you watch he’ll be gone till teatime, see you’re well in his absence and relax a bit.”

“Yeah, I s’pose.” Janna nodded.

The intercom buzzed loudly and Amy got up to answer it.

“Hello?” she listened. “Oh, er, okay sure.” She hung up. “Guy called Zeus? Says he promised you burgers, courtesy of British Gas.” Amy gave a puzzled shrug at Janna.

“Oh, cool. I never told you ‘bout him, I forgot. He’s got electricity; he can shoot it out his fingers.”

“Hence Zeus.” Any nodded.

“Yeah. Anyway, he helped me phone Mum and all that stuff. He’s really nice, but he talks really fast and excited all the time. It’s contagious too!”

A bell sounded and Amy stepped back to open the door.

Zeus walked in smiling. His suit today was blue with matching eye patch. Under an arm

was a package of frozen burgers.

He peeked past Amy and smiled warmly at Janna.

Janna, how are you? Did the phone call go okay? Course it did or you would've called me. So which one's Amy? Oh, wait, I know you Sara," he shook her hand, "How's tricks? Amy, good to meet you." He pumped Amy's hand too. "No James today?" he spoke directly to Janna, ignoring the other two even when greeting them.

"He's in the garden." Amy answered. Zeus' eyes flitted to her for a millisecond then back to Janna.

"The garden? A flower fan I presume, very soothing hobby. I have burgers like I promised, you have buns? I can go get some if you don't." he took Janna's arm and led her into the kitchen.

Amy strolled over to Sara. "Okay, ignore the hyper-speech mode. Did I just feel a really chilly shoulder?"

Sara frowned. "He's one of Wendell's Boys Club, so probably you did. This Department is big, but rumours fly…"

"Great. Janna's got herself a fun new friend." Amy curled her lip. "I don't trust him.

"Oh, he's trustworthy enough I think. To most people anyway. Actually, I'm a little surprised he's allowed anywhere near us – Wendell's Club usually avoids his enemy list

like they had leprosy.”

Amy smiled sourly. “Yeah, now I trust him even less.” She thought. “I have an idea…”

“Ooh, it is a bad one?” Sara’s eyes lit up.

Returning from the kitchen with burgers in hands, Zeus and Janna stopped in confusion. Sara and Amy sat on the floor eating from McDonald’s containers.

“Wha-“ Zeus was speechless for once.

“Where’d you get that?” Janna not so much.

Amy tapped her temple. “It’s all in the mind, Janna dearest.” She smiled and chomped contentedly on her Big Mac.

Zeus scowled and shoveled his own burger down. “Nice party trick.” He mumbled at the wall beyond Amy. “Sorry Janna, I gotta go. Just thought I’d do the burgers like I said. Got meetings and experiments and things, no rest for the wicked eh? See you soon.” And suddenly he was out of the room.

Amy and Sara laughed, trying to swallow their food without choking. Janna simply stood where she was, puzzled.

“He would’ve made you burgers.” She said at last.

“Yeah, either burned black ones or cold and raw in the middle ones.” Amy agreed.

“Why would he do that?”

“Sit down.” Amy told her. “Wanna hear a story?”

Sara took a breath and told of her history with Wendell and the Boys Club he had formed.

When she had finished Janna frowned. “But Wendell hates me too.”

“Yeah, Zeus must’ve grown a backbone.” Sara shrugged. “Or he’s up to something.”

“Oh, right, like what?” Janna scoffed. “He’s a nice guy, he helped me, he promised me burgers and came to do them. You’re going mad, the pair of you.”

“Just be careful with him, okay?” Amy asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Janna shook her head.

James whistled softly as he turned the soil. Stan had set aside a section of the garden for him and he toiled happily in his own world. A few people had strolled by and nodded a pleasant hello, otherwise it was quiet. James thought it a little disturbing at first, the garden had no birds to chirp background music, but as he worked he forgot the

strangeness and enjoyed the afternoon.

Along the path now came Wendell, breaking his pleasure.

“Good afternoon.” He smiled pleasantly. “Nice day for a spot of gardening.”

“Can’t see as you’d know.” James favored him a glance and returned to his soil.

“Ah, no, gardening is not an activity I enjoy – more the fruits of it.”

“Enjoying the fruits of other people’s hard work…should be a concept a guy like you knows all about.” James agreed amiably.

“My boy, some were made to toil for pleasure, some to enjoy the product.”

“So, I break my back working so you can stroll down and feel superior about it? Wow, equal rights are fun, huh?”

“I see we hit a cross-purpose. Shame. So tell me, how is the lovely Janna?”

“Lovelier than ever.”

Mm. Made any new friends since she arrived? Anyone to, say, have a burger with?” Wendell looked on smugly.

“Huh?” James stood and brushed dirt from his gloves.

“Nothing really. I must get on.” Wendell patted James’ cheek and strolled away.

James wiped his cheek absently and looked at the rose bed. It was almost done. He shook his head at Wendell’s disappearing back and kneeled to finish.

Once the soil was all turned and aired, James returned his tools to the shed and said goodbye to Stan.

“Good job, lad.” Stan commented as he waved his trowel. “Decided what to plant yet?”

“Um, not properly. Gonna mix some annuals together, just for my first time. That way if it looks bad or I do it wrong they only grow one year.”

“Good choice, son.” Stan nodded and bent to his own work.

Back in the room he found Amy and Janna involved in a hectic game of Quake.
“Hey.” He called and went over to watch.

They soon finished, Amy the victor.

“Hey, how was the garden?” Janna asked, after mock-beating a grinning Amy with her gamepad.

“Good, though I might give you a different answer in the morning.” He stretched, joints crakling and Janna winced.

“Poor baby.” She led him to the bed and knelt behind him to massage his shoulders.

“Well I’ll head off and visit my girl, eh?” Amy winked. “Think we all got the same idea for this evening’s activities.”

“Where’d Sara get to anyhow?” James asked, resisting the polite urge to insist she stay. “Dunno why you don’t just move in with her, you’re always together.” Janna added

“She had work to do.” Amy answered James. “Move in? But how could I ever leave you guys.” She answered Janna. Waving as she exited she told them; “Be good little boys and girls while I’m gone.”

Janna giggled. “Oh, we will be.”

James opened his mouth to add on but Amy was gone.

“Wanna play ‘massage parlor’?” he suggested instead with a toothy grin.

Sara looked up from her computer as the doorbell rang.

Coming out of her work, she realized who it was and opened the door.

“Hiya.” Amy managed to say before Sara pulled her in and kissed her deeply.

“Wow…you should do work more often!” Amy told her, stunned.

“Sorry…” Sara blushed. “First time we’ve been apart since…”

“Don’t you dare apologise! I know I’m early, but those two kids’ hormones don’t seem to tell time. I’ll be quiet and read a book till you’re done.

“No, no, I’m glad you’re here. They booted you out?” Sara asked, surprised.

“Not really, though Janna decided it would be an opportune time to tell me I should move in with you. I think she’s sick of me.” She smiled and studied Sara. “What’s up?”

“Move in? Why not? I’ll talk to the bosses. You have to see this!” Sara tried to pull Amy to the computer desk.

“Woah, wait a sec. You want me to move in? Cos the J’s don’t really want me out, I can be scarce when they do the bunny thing. I mean, don’t feel pushed.”

“No, Amy, I would love for you to move in here. I wasn’t sure how I might ask, I mean it’s only been a few days…” Sara looked down shyly.

Amy raised her head and looked into her eyes. “Yeah, but I knew everything I needed to the second you walked into my cubicle.”

“Me too.” Sara whispered.

“And I would be honoured to move in here if the bosses agree.”

“I’ll talk to them tomorrow, get us a bigger room so we can fit in both of us plus your stuff when it gets here.”

“Stuff? I can get my stuff sent here?”

“Yeah…you didn’t read the Bible?”

“The Bible says I can ship my stuff here?” Amy raised an eyebrow.

“The Department E Bible, big white book in the computer desk. Gives you a company that’ll ship and an address they’ll ship it too, from there Department E guys drop it off – they pay too.” Sara handed Amy the book from her desk.

“Oh, wow. I need to read this…” Amy said.

“All the crap they put in your rooms is just to fill it up, so you feel like you got a room not a box. It’s just till you can get the company to pack up and move your crap.” Sara explained. “God they need an induction to this place!”

“They bloody well do – all I got was a contract singing at gunpoint.”

Yeah…not exactly the world's most friendly trusting place, this. Which reminds me, you have to see this!" This time Amy followed to the computer.

"That work I had? Figured I'd research Zeus. I never dealt with him much, never studied him or worked with him at all. So after today, I thought I'd check out his file." Sara nodded at the screen.

Amy sat down and read with widening eyes.

"The boring bits…his name…likes to be called Zeus…shoots electricity…was born with replenishable stores of extra electricity in his body, overflow can be concentrated into stream via extremities…" Amy skimmed the folder, reading aloud to James and Janna the next morning.

Sara continued in narration. "He started calling himself Zeus when he realized what he could do – took two fried teachers, one lost eye and a mob running his family out of town before that. Department E got the rumours, took him in and helped him control his power for, say, making burgers."

"Woah, wait." James cut her off. "I knew the guy came round, but he made burgers?"

"Yeah…" Janna cocked her head. "Why?"

"Wendell…in the garden…he asked if you'd made any new friends you could have a burger with."

“He’s spying on us.” It was not a question.”

“Amy, he’s not spying – you’re paranoid.” Janna told her. “He probably told Wendell, his good friend, that we met and he promised me electrified burgers.”

“I don’t believe so.” Sara interrupted. “But let me finish. He’s made great progress, got the electricity 100% under control, even when he’s angry - though that took a while and a lot of quick medical help. But, the rest of his record isn’t so impressive. He’s a long-time buddy of Wendell, and the first to join his Boy’s Club. He’s been disciplined for harassment – verbal and physical, once he ‘accidentally’ fried someone who won a promotion Wendell wanted the day after he started his new job. He’s been mostly vegetation ever since. He’s been suspected of sabotaging experiments and research, planting bugs, and more – but that’s all been impossible-to-prove.”

“Bugs?” Janna repeated. “Okay…just tell me you’re takin’ the piss and we can all go home happy.”

“No piss-take.” Sara dropped a print out of Zeus folder on Janna’s lap. “It’s all here, dates, times, names, the whole caboodle.”

“So…you think Wendell sent him, to spy on us?” Janna thumbed shakily through the paper.

“I think so.” Sara replied, sadly.

“Great. Well, next time somebody is nice to me I’ll be sure to remember there’s no way in hell it’d ever be because either of us are decent, friendly people.” Janna dropped the paper with a thump at Sara’s feet.

“Janna, that’s not-” James tried to put his arm around her but she shoved him off.

“Don’t, James. I just wanna…” she gestured and walked to the door.

“Janna, I’m sorry.” Sara told her.

“Yeah, everyone’s always so sorry.” Janna forced a sad smile. “I wish I could believe anything anyone says anymore. Don’t wait up.”

And she was gone, leaving only the hiss of the closing door.

“Damn.” Muttered Sara.

“Not your fault.” James reassured. “You know how she works, she’s just hurt. She’ll walk a lot, fume a bit, calm down, feel pain, think a lot, and she always sees the truth in the end.”

“She’ll come round.” Amy agreed. “Logical thinking is her best game, she’s just mad at herself for stuff that isn’t her fault. Like her mum, like feeling stupid…:

Sara nodded. “I guess we better leave her to it and get on a bit. I’m worried Zeus bugged us.”

“Seems likely.” James agreed.

“We need to find out how, get rid of them, then discuss how we can help capture Henrott.” Amy concluded.

“Discreetly, of course.” James added.

“Well…only till we put the wheels into action.” Sara finished. “Trust me, once you get some practice and set the wheels of a plan turning…nobody can stop you three.”

Chapter 16

Wendell hit the desk. “Blast it all to hellfire!”

He threw down his headphones and stomped up and down his room.

“They’re going to get rid of the bugs. And! And, against orders they are going to try and help their damn superheroes! If I could tell those idiot bosses that. Damn! I need legal proof.”

He sat down heavily. “Damn them!”

He rose again and jabbed a number into his intercom.

“Zeus. Get Carl, Ray and get over here sharpish!”

Wendell slammed down the handset before he received a reply. He paced the room, a little gentler this time, trying to form a plan.

Soon the three men arrived, breathless and anxious, and the doorbell rang.

“So…how do we check for bugs?” You guys have some security scanner?” Amy asked.

“Yep. I can go get it now, you guys wait here.” Sara stood.

“What about…I mean, whoever’s listening knows we know and everything…” James frowned.

“Doesn’t matter, Wendell can only get mad. He can’t stop me checking out a scanner - or anything else for that matter. I have level 1 Security clearance just like him.”

“What do we have?” Amy wondered aloud.

“Level 5 – if it was Wendell’s choice, you’d have none. You are allowed to hear of most projects – and everything about your own – but you can’t participate, experiment, influence, etc.”

“Wow, that’s really crappy. Are there any lower ones?” James was now curious.

“Level 7 is the lowest, that’s your basic Street Civilian, like you guys once were. Level 6 is a civilian who came into contact accidentally with one of our projects, knows about that and no more, and of course everyone had signed the secrecy agreement”.

“Ah.” Amy nodded.” “Do we get to move up?”

“If you stick around and behave, you can gain levels as you become a ‘trusted asset to the cause of Department E’ or something like that.” Sara quoted. “Basically, be good and do your homework.” She opened the door “I’ll be back in a few.”

The four men were gathered in Wendell’s room. Three of them sat in various tense

positions.

The fourth walked up and down before them at a dizzying speed.

“So, let’s recap.” Wendell barked. “Zeus, you are a useless moron. We no longer have bugs and we will not get close enough to them to plant more – not now that bitch has driven me out of my position. Besides, they will be protected and probably expecting us to move again. Carl, you can read minds. Ray, you can walk inside another’s body against their will.

“But, with Sara around they will be protected from both of you as well. So give me ideas, boys. Show me you are not as worthless as I think you are!”

“If…” Ray began carefully.

“Go on, go on!” Wendell snapped.

“If they are scanning for psychic activity, won’t they be moving the meter themselves? If we get the records…”

“I thought of that, Zeus. Only these days they do not need to scan, there is a way to simply protect from bugs and psychics without messing with meters and records.

“Any of you have another suggestion, one that might work?”

They looked blank.

“Damn you. I’m surrounded by fools and jesters! Get out, all of you!” he made as if to hit

them.

They scrambled and scurried out of the door before he began to rant, much preferring to remain out the way of backlash.

Sara returned with a thick briefcase.

“Sorry it took so long. I met one of my bosses.”

“Bad?” Amy asked with a greeting kiss.

“Well, Wendell did tell them of the change in leadership – I have news for you guys after we finish up. And he promised to order a room readied for next week, so get your stuff ready to be shipped Amy.” Sara grinned shyly.

James looked blank. “Huh?”

“I’m moving.” Amy told him. “And…if you read that manual thing in the computer desk you’ll see you can get all your stuff packed and shipped.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “Okay.”

“Anyway, like I said I have other news. But first I wanna get this done.”

Sara put down the briefcase and opened it. Sara placed a small chip on Amy’s head.

“Ok, now, if you’re bugged it’s probably one that’s diffused into your skin – Department E special. This is the Bug Hunter Mark 4 – it places a microscopic element into your skin which detects the slight activity caused by the Bug. Then it shoots to it, forces it to diffuse back out and regain it’s colour, then goes home.”

“Uh…sounds like fun.” Amy grimaced.

“I promise you’ll feel barely a thing, just a slight tickle as the bug reappears. I’ve tested it myself.”

Amy nodded and Sara tapped the center of the chip. It blinked red for a few seconds then stopped.

Amy felt a slight sensation in her palm and opened it. As she looked a small, stamp-sized square of black appeared just off-center.

The Bug Hunter blinked once more as it returned home and Sara placed it back in the briefcase. The bug she snapped in half . “Bastard.” She told it as she stored it in a small pocket in the side. “It’s useless now to try on anyone else, it adjusts to your body and runs off the chemical reactions you make. Once used it can’t realign. Breaking it in half shuts it down completely, and most of it gets recycled eventually.

James rose. “My turn.” He allowed the Bug Hunter to rest on his forehead and dropped his jaw as he felt a small black square appear on his cheek.

“Wendell!” he exclaimed, taking the bug and snapping it. “He patted my cheek; I thought he was just…being weird.”

“Would you be willing to accuse him in front of the big guys?” Sara asked, taking the second bug and dropping it into the same pocket.

“Testify against Wendell? Where do I go first?” James hopped around.” Tell me when to point!”

“Point at what?” Janna had appeared silently in the doorway.

“Um…Wendell bugged me.” James said carefully, watching her. “And Amy had a bug on her palm, like someone shook her hand…”

“Zeus you mean.” Janna nodded. “Hey, Sara, I’m really sorry. I know you’re right, I knew it all along. I shouldn’t have been a bitch. I just-“

“I know.” Sara interrupted with a smile. “Bug check?”

“Um, okay.”

Sara explained the process and removed a bug from Janna’s palm.

“He bugged me…that bastard actually bugged me!” Janna’s face darkened. “He bugged me, and he bugged you guys. What kind of a sick fuck would do that to a practical stranger?”

“I dunno Janna. Wendell and his boys have some sort of moral code that seems to apply only to them.” Sara shook her head.

“Yeah? Well maybe it’s about time we turned it back on them.”

“We will.” Amy promised. “So, somebody said she had some news for us?”

“Oh, by the way, Amy’s moving in with Sara next week.” James remembered. “And if we read the big manual thing, we can get all our stuff packed up and shipped to us.”

Janna looked bemused. “Oh, wow, congratulations you two. And I can get my stuff?” she grinned. “Good, I miss my stuff. Anyway, news you were saying?”

“Hold on, first I need to give you guys two more things.” She produced two pill bottles. “Pill A is a bug repellent. All bugs are made with a certain element-“

“What element?” James asked.

“Trust me, you don’t know it.” Sara shrugged. “I’m not much clearer myself; this isn’t my area I just know this stuff works. Anyway, a Bug is placed on you, but before it has time to diffuse and set itself to your rhythms…well this pill contains another element that the first is kind of allergic to. It basically stops the bug from working and pushes it out of you.”

“Cool, good job we trust ya.” Janna held out her hand.

All three took the first pill.

“Pill two heads upstairs and works on your brain a little. Nothing you will ever notice, it simply builds up a resistance to psychic attacks. Anyone who tries to get inside your head without your permission has to basically thump their way in, an hour after taking this you’ll have a solid steel resistance which alerts you when an unwanted probe tries to enter.”

“Gives a whole new meaning to personal firewalls…” Amy grinned and the three took the second pill.

“What about you?” James asked.

“I’m often one of the human guinea pigs, I already tested these in the same formula they have now. So I’m good.”

“So…can we do the news thing now?” Janna insisted.

“Alright. I’ll tell you a little story.”

“Zania looked around, bewildered. “Where the bloody hell did they go?!” she yelled back to Cydir at the cave entrance.

“Perhaps we have arrived at an incorrect location?”

“No, we’re in the right place – I can smell the bastards. Plus this place is recently lived in. Rocks piled up out of the way, ground smoothed from walking…”

“I concur.” Cydir admitted. “I will radio the base to apprise them of our discovery.”

“Yeah, don’t you ever speak normal English?”

“My speech offends you, Zania?”

She sounded hurt and Zania looked up, surprised as she always was when Cydir expressed obvious emotion. She walked over to Cydir and patted her shoulder.

“I was just teasing, Cy. I like the way you talk. I never knew anyone talked as well as you do.”

Cydir smiled slightly and bent over to her radio.

“Calling Base. CyZ calling Base, come in.” Cydir spoke their joint call signal and waited.

“Base. What is your situation?”

“We have arrived at our target in Greece. No hostiles in area.”

“Your location is correct?”

“Yes. There are signs of recent habitation; however there are no longer any hostiles here to be found.”

“Please hold.”

A few minutes passed impatiently.

“Come in CyZ, this is Base.”

“Receiving.”

“Proceed to next location and report situation.”

“Proceeding, over.”

Over and out.”

Zania kicked a rock. “Off we trot then.”

Croatia was their next location. On arriving they could see immediately that this was as deserted as the last.

“Base, this is CyZ, come in.” Zania called in this time.

“Base. Report situation.”

“Landed in Croatia, same deal. They were here, but now there’s nothing.”

“Received. Please hold one moment.”

A few moments passed.

“Proceed to next target and report situation.”

“Report what? Nothing?”

“Please proceed to next location.”

“No. First I wanna talk to the guy you take your orders from.”

Static silence, then;

“Zania. This is Mike Hammond. I have noted your report, please now go speedily to your next target and report in.”

“I’m not your messenger girl. I have this feeling there’s nothing left in any of our locations. I have a feeling you think that too. And I have a very strong feeling that the same people who gave you these targets in the first place can damn well go back and look again.”

“I see your points, Zania. But if this is a trap-“

“If this is a trap you’d rather kill the only two people who can help rather than some random nobodies?”

“Zania that is not my point. If it is a trap, only you two can take it to the cleaners without us having to lose any bodies, random or otherwise.”

Cydir took the radio. “I must agree with Zania, sir. We cannot waste our time and energy hunting for missing robots in a trap that may not exist. We could, however, be attempting to locate and follow them to Henrott allowing us to complete our main objective by terminating him.”

“Well, about that. There’s been a small change in plan. But I agree, I will send out my agents. You two are to remain in Europe while we coordinate new plans.”

Zania grabbed the radio back. “Wait a sec.”

Cydir took it again. “We are not to terminate Henrott?”

“No. There are reasons and circumstances, classified ones, which have led us to change our plans. However we will discuss this and find a way to approach and capture him with as little injury as possible.”

“Yes sir. Over.”

“Over and out.”

“Those bastard are up to something.” Zania growled as they prepared for travel. “And I bet it’s nothing good.”

“I believe you underestimate people sometimes.” Spoke Cydir’s invisible voice.

“Yeah, yeah. I think you’re too damn trusting.” Zania replied and pouted.

“So the robots are gone.” Janna concluded after a moment’s silence.

“They are. Zania and Vydir are staying in Europe, wandering around and trying to pick up clues basically.When we figure a plan we’ll get them back here to meet with me and Morgan – my boss.”

“But we can’t be involved.” Amy sighed.

“We’ll see. I’ve set us a meeting with Morgan in,” she consulted her watch, “3 hours. Hopefully you’ll get a more active role.”

“Me too?” James asked. “I mean, I am basically the bad guy.”

“You too. And you’re not the bad guy. Remember, these three people are only based on you – in looks and little else. Yes you created them, but not in the way any other person is created, you share no DNA. These are your children in some ways, but in many others

they are total strangers."

James nodded. "I need to remember that."

"I never thought…" Amy realized. "How weird it was to see her – Zania…I knew at least, no matter how similar and different she was…at least she was a good guy."

James nodded sadly, Amy continued. "Henrott was made for a world where consequences, conscience, everything is programmed. You can die a hundred times and nothing changes in the real world. We didn't mean for him to be here, in a place he doesn't belong."

"Yeah. Ain't life a bitch?" James grinned and sent Sara off into fits of laughter. Soon the other three had joined her, releasing tension in guffaws and holding their stomachs till they could laugh no more.

Eventually they composed themselves.

"James." Sara remembered. "I totally forgot, you need more of your medication, right?"

He nodded.

"Visit the hospital, the doctor on duty is Alvin, he's expecting you. He'll give you a check-up and prescribe a regular dose."

James nodded. "Wanna come?" he asked Janna. "You know how uncomfortable I get

when strangers strip me naked and examine me.”

Janna grinned. “Sure.”

“Actually you don’t even have to take off your shoe.” Sara told them.

“Ooh, lemme guess, Alvin is a ‘special’ doctor?” Janna feigned surprise.

“Yep. He can diagnose any illness with 100% accuracy. He’ll look in one eye to check for physical stuff, then the other for mental stuff. Then he’ll give you a complete rundown of the wear and tear on your body – and many illnesses and things you’ve had in the past if you ask him nicely.”

“Wow.” James raised an impressed eyebrow.

“He’ll give you a check while you’re there, Janna.” Sara told her. “I’ll take Amy up tomorrow, I’m due a check-up myself.”

“Okay then. The hospital it is…I think I saw signs on the walls?” James ventured.

“Yep. Just read the letters then follow the pointy end of the arrow.” Sara waved them goodbye. “And as for you,” she kissed Amy, “What you said before was…well my head damn near popped open I was so impressed.”

“I didn’t say anything special!” Amy protested.

“Well maybe I’m just impressed because everything you say is special to me.” Sara decided.

“So, hey,” Amy changed the subject to fight her blushes, “We get a room all for ourselves in a week?”

“Or less.” Sara tried to hide a goofy grin.

“I can’t wait.” Amy moved closer and smiled back seductively.

“Me either.” Sara thought for a second. “So, wanna come back to my place for a bit?” she winked in exaggerated suggestion.

Before Amy could reply the intercom buzzed annoyingly.

Amy sighed and let Sara answer.

“Hello?”

As Sara listened her face dropped and grew anxious.

“This is confirmed?…Damn…You’re really sure about that?…But who, I mean…Well, maybe…Yes we will…Goodbye.” she hung up slowly.

“What happened? Who was that?” Amy was up and by Sara’s side.

“Was Morgan, she called me here. Some…news. Looks like we might need more help from you guys than we thought.”

“Why?”

“Not now. Morgan’ll tell us all later, I only got the basics.”

“It’s Henrott?” Amy guessed.

Sara nodded. “Let’s go to my place, I think I need a little alcohol therapy, maybe more.” She almost pleaded with Amy to be with her.

“I get the feeling we’ll be counseling each other. Let’s go.” Amy led Sara gently out of the door.

Chapter 17

“Please, sit down.” Morgan gestured towards comfortable chairs.

Amy, Janna, James and Sara sat.

Morgan stood in front of her desk and puzzled how to begin.

Amy apprised her. Shortish, about 5 ft 4, she guessed. Dark hair and complexion, light hazel eyes. Wearing a trouser-suit that would have looked forced on a figure with any more or less curves.

Morgan finally spoke. “James, Janna, I trust the doctor gave you all clears?”

The two nodded, solemnly.

“Good. Amy, how are you?”

“I’m good, I think.” Amy smiled easily.

“Sara?

“Don’t ask.” Sara lowered her head slightly.

Don’t worry.” Morgan told her. “My friends, I originally invited you here so we could discuss any part you may wish to play in the current situation. Also, to try and strike a

rapport between us so I could stop talking like a textbook! Sorry, it's a nervous thing."

"Phew, almost thought we had another Wendell." Janna rolled her eyes

"Oh, God - please don't say that!" Morgan grimaced playfully. "I do make an effort to be as little like him as possible. At the same time I can only assume it takes a tremendous effort to become the type of person he is, so hopefully we're all safe."

Janna giggled.

"Continuing on…" Morgan said, hiding a grin, "I'm afraid the whole thing took a turn for the worse. A very serious turn."

Morgan stepped aside and revealed a large TV screen sunk into the wall. She picked up a remote and pushed a button.

The screen flickered, then stabilised. In front of them was a dull metal mask, shaped into a face. It rippled into a horrible smile and seemed to pulse with energy.

"Henrott…" The three creators chimed together.

The face spoke in a grinding, off-human, monotone

"I'm afraid you were too slow with your little super hero friends. And entirely wrong as to their purpose.

"My robots were not in those godforsaken places to prepare themselves for attack.

“No.

“They were there to prepare the countries themselves in case I should feel the need to...wipe them from the face of the earth.

“Know this. There is a massive bomb buried under every European country. Filled with the deadliest elements I have created, each loaded individually with a calculated amount which will take the country it is set in, and only that country, leaving it’s neighbours with a frayed, smouldering edge before the ocean rushes in.

“In one week I will randomly begin to ask each country one question, moving along at the rate of one country a day. If the answer I receive is incorrect, the country will be no more.

“If you try to evacuate via land, sea or air, you will see my power as my army destroys all who try to flee.

“If you try to communicate for help, or communicate at all(!) outside of Europe, I will intercept the transmissions and destroy the country next-door to you.

“The question I will ask you is; ‘Do you allow me, Henrott, supreme power of Government over your country.’

“Please be assured that the annihilation of some or all European countries will cause me no displeasure. Others will bow before my power out of fear, jealousy and adoration.

“I intend to rule the world.

“This message has been sent to every European country.

“Remember, contact outside of Europe will result n the death of the country lying next to you.

“I will return. Until then, have a nice day.”

“He’s long-winded, but serious.” Morgan told them as she stopped the recording. “Our

resident locator-”

“A what?” James interrupted.

“Locators - they find things.” Sara replied quickly.

“Yes. And out locator has scouted the locations we had in every country and x-marked the location of the devices in each one. We sent a team in to Russia to scan the elements, they couldn’t get within 100 yards of the X.”

“So you don’t know for certain that the devices are dangerous.” Amy argued. “They could tubs of ice-cream!”

“No. But we do know who and what Henrott is. We know his robots are deadly and could take over a country in a few hours, but they are instead simply keeping all citizens from moving between countries.”

“You know this how?” Amy ventured.

“People go in and out constantly, on foot, in cars, on ship, by air…And it takes time to institute and complete emergency shutdown. Some people…died because we were too slow.”

“Oh God.” James gasped.

“But he could be bluffing!” Amy protested.

“Well, Amy, James, Janna.” Morgan held out her hands palm-up. “You made him, what is he capable of?”

“He’s not bluffing.” James dropped his face into his hands. “Hey look, guys, we get to destroy the planet.”

“Not if we surrender.” Janna pointed out.

“What!” Amy shouted. “You want to surrender to a half-formed Demon who doesn’t even belong in this world?! I’d rather die!”

“Have fun then, send me a postcard from the grave.” Janna muttered.

“I agree.” Sara said. “To give in would be worse than to die fighting, we’d’ve doomed more than just ourselves. Henrott could do so much more than Orwell or Huxley or the like ever dreamed.!”

James gave a gloomy half-laugh. “If we give in…it’s twice as bad. Big Brother didn’t create elements by sneezing in the right direction, or build big bad robots. Our little creation seems to be rather good at these things.”

“So what?” snapped Janna. “We all just…blow up and go ‘Oh well’? Without even pretending to fight? Come on - we’re human! We kill each other for having the wrong skin colour, or attraction or belief! We can at least fake a rebellion against an out-of-this-world half-robot madman!”

“Janna, please.” Morgan radiated a calming effect, even through her own agitation. “This came in a few hours ago, the reactions to it are overwhelmingly to refuse. We can’t ask for help without losing our neighbours, and if we try and do it ourselves we’re likely to be stormed by massive piles of circuitry, but there is no way in hell we’re going to go down while there’s still one of us alive to try. I need to know that you four are willing to be with us on that.”

“Damn right we’re with you.” Amy nodded.

James nodded too.

“You know I am.” Sara put in.

“Hey, at least Europe finally found a common cause that wasn’t each other! You got me all the way.” Janna suddenly jumped and shook Morgan’s hand.

Morgan shook and when Janna sat again she continued.

“Good. Everyone in Department E is now on board, and we have an idea we’re about the only ones who might punch through this thing. We’re split into smaller circles that only interact on the highest level - it’s a precaution we had to take for secrecy, and it makes it easier to work this way. And you guys and me are the main force. James, Janna, Amy, you’re the best hope we have. I need you to build your power. It’s already huge, but uncontrolled. Normally we’d take it slowly over a period of weeks or months, but we only have time for intensive work here. James and Janna, work together as long as you

can, you should feel stronger together then because you're feeding from each other and that's good, so stick together.

"I'll see you all whenever I need to, but make sure you eat sleep and rest. And if you have any bright ideas, I need to know. All I'm here for is to be your messenger between the other groups. You two go."

James and Janna rose shakily and exited.

"Sara, can I see Amy a moment?"

Sara nodded. "I'll be in my room." She kissed Amy, waved to Morgan and left.

"You, Amy, have the strongest belief in your ability. That makes you the strongest link. Stay with Sara, she'll give you any strength she has, don't practice with James and Janna. Their power comes from each other and I need that link."

"Sure thing." Amy half-rose.

"Wait," Morgan sat in the chair next to her. "Sara has been my best friend for a long time now. We arrived almost together, I saw her through Wendell, she saw me through other things. I can see you make her happy."

"She makes me happy." Amy glowed.

"Good."

“Point of interest…” Amy enquired. “Which way do you go?”

Morgan grinned. “No need for jealousy, me and Sara were never that close.”

Amy shrugged, embarrassed.

“I…experimented some, before I came here, and it was nice - in fact it was very nice. But I still came away finding myself attracted to guys rather than girls.”

Amy grinned sheepishly. “I was just wondering…”

“That’s cool, cause now you know there’s no need. Just be good to my gal.”

“I promise.” Amy nodded seriously.

“Great. Now you get off. I’ll be around.”

Amy rose again. “I guess if we make it all the way we could be friends too.” She asked the floor.

“I think we will.” Morgan agreed as Amy closed the door.

As she sat behind her desk the door opened and in walked Wendell.

“Morgan.” He greeted, icily.

“The doorbell’s on your right as you stand in front of the door, for next time.”

He ignored her and sat down. “How was the meeting? Cosy, I presume.”

“Very. Can I help you?”

“Are those brats going to be ‘helping’ you?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your concern. If I recall an earlier conversation, you absolved yourself from their very existence.”

“Yes, yes, but now my existence is at risk and I believe I have a right to know how badly they can ruin it.”

“Off the record, quite badly, and if it was just you there’d be real danger - but it’s not, so they won’t. Now get out of my office.”

He placed one hand gently over the one Morgan had resting on the desk. “Please, Morgan. I don’t want to die.”

“Oh look, emotion, you’ve been practicing - almost makes you seem less-than-demonic. Go play tiddly winks with your buddies.”

Wendell stood and made to storm out. Morgan stopped him.

“Wendell…” She held up a small, black square. “I think…you’ve been a very bad boy.”

Wendell snorted. “Oh no, bad, bad Wendell.”

The door opened again, this time two dark-suited men entered with stony faces.

“What, you think your men here will lay a hand on me? Gentlemen, I believe we know who the real criminal is likely to be.” He laughed.

The two guards stepped forward and imprisoned Wendell by his arms.

“What the-” he struggled uselessly.

“Sorry Wendell, some people just do their job as it’s meant to be done - without prejudice. Thanks guys, I want him in his room twenty-four hours. Put two men outside the door and don’t let anyone in but me or Zeke.

The men nodded uniformly.

“You black bitch!” Snarled Wendell as he was dragged away. “I swear you will regret this!”

When the room was empty again, Morgan let out a harsh cry of frustration and composed herself quickly. She picked up her intercom, pushed three numbers and waited.

“Hello, Zeke?...Yeah, Morgan. The meeting went fine, they’re hard at work as I speak.

But I need to talk to you about our good friend Wendell…Okay, be right up.”

In his room Wendell pounded his feet furiously as he stomped up and down the carpet. He repeatedly shoved his left index finger into his mouth and bit until pain exploded in his hand and his jaw ached with the metallic tang of blood.

He muttered incoherently to himself on occasion and threw with force anything moveable he found to hand.

Eventually he seemed to come to a decision and clamed down. He punched numbers into his intercom and listened impatiently.

“Hello. It’s Wendell…I know you said not to call but there has been a spot of trouble…yes, more trouble…That Morgan bitch was protected. I am locked in my room…Hey, look, I was only trying to…No, no please, don’t do that. I will make it all okay. I did get some information, the brats are definitely working on the project…Yes that’s all, I-…I am sorry…Now wait, you promised me! I have delivered more than…Look I will get more, okay? I can wrap those morons around my finger…I know I am an imbecile…useless…worthless…But you still have a deal with me…Good. I will be in touch.”

He ground the handset into it’s cradle and mopped up the blood from his finger with a tissue. Then he sucked on it, absently relishing the pain, as he hunted for a plaster.

Morgan rang the bell and the door opened almost immediately.

“Morgan, my dear, lovely to see you as always.” Zeke kissed her cheek and gestured to a chair. He sat himself opposite and leaned slightly forward.

Zeke looked tall and wiry through his white shirt and khakis. His hair was brown and his eyes normally matched his mouth in an endless smile.

Today, however, he was more sombre - although few would have been able to note the difference.

“Hi Zeke. How are you?” Morgan asked.

“Oh! Not awful, but not good. How are you , dear?”

“Petrified.” She confessed.

“Mm, don’t worry. We’ll get him - and when we do I promise to give him a punch in the nose just for you.”

Morgan smiled. “You do remember his nose is…made of metal, right?”

“Oh tush! No metal is strong enough to resist my charms!” Zeke posed. “I will melt it and then pound it into amusing shapes.”

Morgan giggled and Zeke smiled inwardly.

“Good, good. Now we’re all relaxed and happy, tell me stories of dastardly deeds done by depraved Wendell.”

“Well…quick version. He bugged our three newcomers, argued with Sara, quit his assignment, blamed Sara, tried to bug me and pump me for info at the same time, then called me a ‘black bitch’ as he was dragged back to his room where he is now locked and under guard.”

Zeke whistled. “Wow. That’s certainly excessive, even for him! I suppose we could leave him where he is until we have time to deal with him at our leisure. Then I’ll pull him up and charge him with 3 counts of spying, one attempted spying, 1 racism, and add a general feel of disrespect and harassment to the whole proceedings. I’m not sure what else I can do…except keep him away from every assignment he might possibly like to do until I die. But that’s about it…
“And how are our newcomers? The rumour mill tells of romance for the lovely Sara.”

“Damn right, and with a damn good woman too - Amy. James and Janna are a couple too as far as I know. I’m already having a room made up for the girls, put them in together and leave the other two where they are.”

“Good thinking. Is this in any way helpful to our current situation? I’m afraid I can’t do much of the ‘congratulations Sara’ thing until I’m not sure we’ll all be dead - or as good as - fairly soon.”

“Actually, yes. The way people do all the time, these four seem to be feeding from each other. The J’s have their combined power of course, and I have them working together - I think they’re very in sync so we could have something big from them. And I’m getting a sense of a heretofore latent Transmitter talent in Sara. I suppose we never tested her too hard for anything because she came here to do the research and all, not be researched on. But, she seems to be feeding Amy that way.”

“Excellent! I love when couples get to mesh with each other on a psychic plane - it’s such a fabulous extra, don’t you think?”

Morgan shrugged. “So I’m told.”

Zeke flinched. “Oh - I’m a complete ape! I apologise, I meant no offence.”

“I know, it’s okay. Just gets a little trying sometimes, knowing there’s all these things going on between people in a place I can never reach outside of books.”

“Yet being one of the world’s foremost experts on these subjects gives you, in many ways, more insight than any of us could ever have.”

“Yeah. But sometimes…I’d almost give everything I know just to feel the connection for one moment.” Morgan sighed. “Just sometimes, there’s not many people here with no ability at all - it gets a little lonely out in the cold.”

Zeke came and knelt by her chair. “Sweetling, I’m sorry. I know how hard it must be. If it helps even a little though, in many ways it can be the crappiest thing in the world to

actually have these talents."

Morgan looked at him doubtfully.

"Oh c'mon!" Zeke stood. "How'd you like to know every single white lie and half-truth someone tells in your earshot? To spot on sight every poser trying to be what they know they're not, everybody who thinks they're something they can never be..."

"I can't imagine that pain." Morgan admitted, resigned. "And I think I'd go crazy if I tried. You and Maggie...must have bulletproof minds."

Zeke's wife of 18 years, Maggie, was an incredibly sensitive empath - able to feel every thought and emotion, good or bad, in every person.

"How is Maggie anyways?"

"Not bad recently, at least compared to before." Zeke replied. "She's been very active around the room. She even called the lab the other day and didn't hang up when Donny answered!"

"Wow!" Morgan was astonished. "You give her all my love and tell her I think I hit a breakthrough the other day, and hopefully will have a prototype soon."

Maggie had not ventured from her quarters in three years, though even before that the world had barely ever seen her face. The empathy she had for people was crushing, darkness in people, strong feelings and emotion, inability to even turn the volume

down, had left her on repressive medication in a locked, soundproofed room in the Scottish plains before a friendly district nurse called Zeke, had started dropping by to check on her.

Department E had picked them both up twelve years ago and Maggie, though initially forced out of solitude, had eventually withdraw again. For the past three years or so, since Maggie had isolated herself, Morgan had been working on a retardent for the empathy.

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard in a long, long time! I’ll tell her as soon as I get back! But, to return to Wendell…I have to add to your list of things to lock him up for. Only this happened after you put him under guard. He made a call, to a place we can only track as far as ‘It’s in Britain somewhere’ - outside of the compound this person’s scramblers mess the code so much it could take us a month to decipher it.
“Anyhow, we’ve been watching Wendell for a while - as you know - and randomly screening his calls. We’ve heard one or two iffy things, but nothing concrete. However…the circumstantial coming from what he says this time is probably enough to hang him - especially with the whole bugging thing. Why, I see your face cry? Because we think he was talking to Henrott.”

Morgan’s hand flew to her mouth. “He wouldn’t! I mean…he’s a slimy bugger and certainly an evil prick, but…”

“We thought that too…but we’ve been screening him randomly, like I said, caught one or two suspicious chats but nothing as close to concrete as this. And this time, well,…see for yourself.”

Zeke took a transcript from his desk and gave it to Morgan.

“That piece of shit!” Morgan cried when she finished reading. “I’m gonna kick his ass through his skull!”

Zeke soothed her. “Don’t worry. His line is cut off, he’s locked away - we can deal with him when we have the time to savour it. Right now we know what Henrott knows and that’s a big help in knowing what we can do.

“So now, my dear, we must talk cunning plans.”

He sat again and Morgan leaned forward to discuss.

Chapter 18

The doorbell chimed and jerked Amy out of concentration. A half-formed object lay in front of her.

“Shit.” She muttered as Sara went to answer.

“Hey Morgan. Come in.”

Morgan entered. “Hey you two. I have news.”

“Figured as much.” Amy said, grumpily.

“Uh…should I come back later?” Morgan frowned.

Amy looked up and smiled. “No, sorry. I didn’t mean to be a grouch. I’ve just been working real hard on things, you came in at just the wrong time. But it’s cool.” She added quickly.

“Oh? Well I see from the clutter you’ve been otherwise successful.”

“We’re so cramped in here right now…” Sara agreed. “But look, it’s only half done but I think she can return to it…” Sara picked up a tiny model with indistinguishable features.

“It’s going to be a model of Henrott.” Amy informed Morgan’s confused glance.

“Oh, wow!” Morgan was impressed.

“Well…I figure I can work up to making actual people appear if I can ever find a volunteer.” Amy grinned. “But you said you had news?”

Morgan nodded. “First, I have a room ready for you two. I know I said a week, but I slave-drove like hell and it only took 3 days to make it liveable!”

“Excellent” Sara almost hopped, Amy simply nodded and concealed a big grin.

“And,” Morgan continued, “I did the same with the moving company. Your stuff, Amy, and the other two’s, will be arriving shortly.”

Now it was Amy who almost hopped. “Wow. All my stuff AND I get to officially live with a gorgeous lady. If you have bad news now, I swear I’ll barely even notice!”

Morgan sighed. “I’m afraid I actually do.”

“If I tell you I lied and I have noticed…will the bad news go away?” Amy asked, dully.

“I wish.” Morgan replied. “Let’s go visit our absent two. I’m really not up for repeating this stuff.”

“All right. I could probably use a break anyhow.” Amy said.

James and Janna were sleeping when the door chimed. James opened the door and blinked groggily at his visitors.

“Didn’t mean to wake you.” Morgan apologised.

“But we figured at 3pm you might be awake.” Amy added.

James yawned and moved aside to let them in.

Janna was out of bed and wide awake. “Give him a few, he’ll open his eyes soon. Coffee?”

She started the kettle and when all were served and seated, James began to awake.

“So, you have news?” He guessed.

“I do.” Morgan agreed. “I thought I’d tell you four together.” She waited a moment for ‘I’m ready’ nods. “Well, to begin with I have news from yesterday about Wendell.”

The rest were silent as they heard of Wendell’s attempt at spying and his subsequent phone call.
Then;

“I’ll kill the slimy little bastard!” Janna growled. “Who the fuck does he think he’s

playing with?!”

Morgan placed a hand on her arm to calm her.

“Don’t worry.” Sara put in. “I’ll be kicking his ass just for what he said to Morgan. Then I’ll do it again for good luck.”

“Nobody is kicking Wendell - on his ass or elsewhere.” Morgan scolded. “He’ll be dealt with - properly - when this is over. And I promise he won’t be treated lightly - or even humanly if I can swing it.”

“He better get what’s due this time.” Sara said, darkly.

“He’ll get the lot.” Morgan promised. “But right now there’s nothing more he can do and we have other things to worry about.

“See, we were hoping that the rest of the world would notice things amiss and send in the cavalry…

“Well, they barely had time to wonder anything. Henrott got in touch with everyone outside Europe today letting them know the situation, and promised to blow things up if they o much as look in our direction. It’s all over the online news - they’re pretty much as scared as we are.

Henrott also, lovely guy that he is, has now decided that contact between the countries is too risky. He’s ordered complete radio silence across the borders.”

“Can’t we e-mail somebody?” Janna asked, incredulous

“You’re the computer guys, you tell me.” Morgan answered.

James thought. “All traffic goes through phone lines, pipes etc. If Henrott has any sense he’ll be tracking net traffic that way. He can intercept things going between countries, and that means the end of the country next door.”

Morgan nodded. “That’s basically what I hear. And I’d love to say we’re smart enough to circle around him somehow, but the problem is that we really aren’t. Trying to is only going to kill a lot of people.”

“Then tell me how we’re going to stop him.” Amy said. “Tell me how I can help. And don’t tell me there’s nothing.”

“We have some sketchy plans, nothing workable yet” Morgan replied.

“Why can’t we just create a shield around the bombs, so when they go off they just makes a small hole.” James suggested.

“Or,” Janna tried, “Do something to Henrott - immobilize him.”

“We can use our minds to bring him here, into a cage.” Amy added. “Or make the bombs disappear - or not work.”

“Or we could out our heads together and un-create him, or kill him. I can take the risk.” James said quietly, looking at Janna.

“That’s not an option.” Janna told him tightly. “But any of the others…”

Morgan nodded. “We’re trying everything. But unless we get something we can be sure of - or a combination…We’re trying, I promise, practice hard. We’ll have something before he starts with the questions.”

“Kinda you have to.” Janna agreed.

“Kinda do.” Morgan said. “I’ll let you get on with it.” She left quietly and the four sat for a moment.

“We could always do something anyway.” Janna whispered.

“And if it goes wrong?” Sara asked. “We start losing whole countries. This is not a game, Janna.”

“As I recall, that would be our fault.” James said, mostly to himself.

“Exactly!” Janna pounced in it, “Which makes us responsible for doing something about it!”

“Do you want to be responsible for destroying countries full of people?” Amy interrupted, “Strangers, sure, but still people - with feelings and thoughts and everything you have. And who’s to say he won’t just blow us lot to Kingdom Come if we try anything? That’s all of England you have in your hands - that’s you!” She forced her voice down some decibels. “You can get the blood on your hands, but you’ll only be

murdering me because I won't do it."

Without waiting for a reply Amy half-ran out of the door and into a long trailer coming up the corridor. Driving was an Department E Guard.

"Delivery." He said.

"Shove it." She told him and stalked past.

Sara was just behind her. "James and Janna are in, drop off theirs then come see us."

He nodded and drove the trailer up to the still open door.

"Delivery." He said to one incredulous face and one thunderbrow.

The incredulous one spoke. "Hey, thank you. Just drop the boxes anywhere, we'll unpack later." James moved Janna out of the way.

"I need time to think." He told her. "Leave the stuff till I get back, get some rest - maybe think a little too."

"Where're you going?" The thunderbrow faded and Janna was vulnerable.

"Garden. Come out later if you like - but first I really think you should sit down and turn the cogs a bit."

Janna nodded. “I think Amy hates me…I know I can be brash and all, but…”

James hugged and and stopped her words with a kiss. “No, you’re both a lot brash. But both your basic points had grounding.”

“I didn’t mean like she said…I don’t wanna be a murderer. I just feel so…” Janna shrugged, limply.

“I know sweetheart.” James kissed her. “I’ll be back - unless you come out to see me first. It’s a real nice garden.”

Janna nodded. “James…”

He turned back.

“I love you.” Janna took his hand. “Whatever happens at the end of all this, I really do.”

James smiled. “I love you too.”

He nodded a greeting at the Guard as he left. The Guard nodded back, stiffly.

“Enjoy your day, sir.”

Janna watched him deliver his current load then set about helping him.

“What’s your name?” She asked, feeling better once the adrenaline began to flow.

“Marcus Sprint.” He replied.

“Marcus - would you like a drink when we’re done?”

“That is very kind of you, ma’am, but I should finish the delivery.”

“Aw, they can wait.” Janna smiled. “You deserve a rest - besides, I’m curious about you guys in the dark suits.”

Marcus thought for a moment. “No, ma’am, I really should keep working. Thank you for the kind offer.”

Janna nodded. “Your choice.”

Marcus nodded and continued unloading the boxes.

Sara followed Amy’s speedy movement back to the room and entered, out of breath. Amy barely seemed to have exercised.

“Good God, woman, don’t move so fast!” She panted. “I need so much exercise…”

Amy forgot she was angry and grinned at her girlfriend.

“Quit it.” Sara pouted.

“Any grinned wider.

“What?” Sara was breathing normally again.

“I have an idea for exercise.” Amy put on a lecherous smile and Sara collapsed in laughter.

“Well it might be worth it to put an expression on our delivery guard when he arrives.” Sara blurted and Amy joined her in helpless laughter.

Janna waited until he was gone before opening several boxes. A glassy sound as one fell made her groan and stop to investigate.

Looking inside, she sighed with relief as she saw nothing broke. Intact, though lying sideways on the floor, was her favourite Coca-Cola glass.

Inside, however, was a folded piece of paper.

“Mum…” Janna knew at once.

She opened it slowly and read.

Janna,

I know this is your glass, you left it here so I am giving it to the removal men I see

now at her house.

I have not forgiven what you said. I gave you life, clothes, food, you owe me everything you are and I do not appreciate being criticised on my parenting skills.

Apologise or you never enter this house again. I know it was the influence of those so-called friends of yours. Come home now before they corrupt you for good.

Love,

Mum.

Janna crinkled it and tossed it across the room.

“I owe you nothing.” She told it. “You chose to have me, then you did your perceived duty and kept me alive until I could do it myself, never anything more. I have no home now. And my family is here.”

Feeling no better, she gave a disgusted look at nothing in particular and made her way to see James in the garden.

Morgan let out a deep breath and turned on the monitor in her office. On the screen appeared a digital image of a familiar robotic face.

It smiled. “Morgan, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“It is good to meet you.”

“I wish I could return the sentiment. What do you want from me?”

“I want...three things.” He waited patiently for Morgan to understand.

“No.” She said firmly.

“No?”

“Like I said. No.”

“Hmm, I was warned you would not let them see me without...persuasion.”

“Wendell told you.” Morgan told herself. “Well, he did one thing right then.”

“I simply wish to talk to them. I offer you a request in exchange.”

“Go rust yourself?”

“Haha. You amuse me. I shall rephrase my offer - you may have any reasonable request.”

“I want some answers.” Morgan said immediately.

“If the questions are reasonable. I know you have lie-detectors, so I will answer

truthfully.”

“Why did you contact us?”

“You are the most powerful combined force on the planet. And I knew the Three were here.”

“The Three - capitalisation?”

Henrott nodded.

“I see. Why?”

“They are my creators, my parents. Though they now wish to destroy their child, I still pay them due respect.”

“You know of your creation, then? Tell me.

“My memory banks tell me I was created from nothing. There is an empty space dotted with sketchy past, and no more. A human mind can fill in the blanks or learn to ignore them, my mind is more than human. I knew I was created from nothing injo what you see now, I considered some all-powerful crestor - or God, but my logical mind rejected it. So I sent spies and learned of your existence soon enough. Wendell told me the rest, who my parents are and why.”

“Why? What did you promise him?”

“To be like me. To have his name etched forever in history. All a human really wants is to be noticed and remembered. It is the basic desire of the ego to long for this, I simply dangled it in front of Wendell, a man who’s ego is far greater than his willpower or conscience, and he barked like a puppy.”

“So you know…your beginnings. You know you are meant to do…all this, try to rule the world, everything is pre-ordained. Most when confronted by this would try to rebel. But not you, you simply changed the rules of the game. Took out the robots and put in explosives devices, left the robots around the outside for crowd control.”

“I do hate to be predictable. I thought you might enjoy the challenge.”

“Why can we not approach them?”

“Radioactive forcefield. It is 100% impenetrable.”

“I believe you. So then, how would we, say, disarm the bomb - we can’t get close so I see no harm in furthering our interests.”

“I am no Hollywood villain. I make no foolish mistakes to trip over. Do you have more questions, or will you bring me the Three?”

“I might have more - the Three’ll be asked to come, if they do they will bring quetrions. Those I asked just now, think of them as a non-refundable deposit. A sign of your good will. I can’t guarantee the Three will see you, but I’ll try.”

“If they do not come…my finger may slip on a button. How would the United Kingdom of Great Britain look if it were say…cut in half? The fate of Scotland lies in your hands. I will return.”

He vanished, leaving Morgan grinding her teeth. Zeke stepped out from where he was concealed in the corner, out of the line of vision from the monitor.

“You already know this, but he’s being honest. Get the Three - I mean get the guys. Give them questions to ask, warn them not to make him angry. Maybe we can trick him, find something useful - it’s a long shot but worth a go. At least we can save Scotland.”

“For now.” Morgan reminded him, gloomily.

“Zeke nodded.” Yes, for now. But ‘for now’ could conceivably become a very long time, my dear, if we manage to grab onto an idea or a scrap.”

“Well…we better.” Morgan sighed. “Or ‘for now’ gets to be ‘farewell’.”

Chapter 19

Morgan handed out four beepers.

“Normally these are for off-site treks, but I figure this is preferable to chaining you to your rooms. Just make sure you come running when I call.”

The four nodded in unison and Morgan giggled.

“You look like something out of a bad sci-fi.”

“The whole plot these days sounds like a bad sci-fi novel to me,” Janna agreed.

“So when we arrive…then what?” Amy turned them back on topic.

“Well - I can’t tell you what Mr Cyborg 2003 wants, but whatever it is I know I trust you not to give away anything you shouldn’t. And then…just ask as many questions as you can think of, anything, if we can extract one tiny piece of info that will help us, then we need to do so. It’s pretty much our main hope right now.”

“Can we ask him riddles like Blaine the Mono?” James smiled.

“Like Who the What now?” Morgan asked.”

“Stephen King - Dark Tower three and four.” he explained. “Big train,. lots of riddles…long story. Forget I spoke.”

“Ask him why the sky’s blue if it comes to mind.” Morgan told them. “The more you ask the more chance we have of a slip-up. And if he lets out a piece of the puzzle that helps, can I borrow those books after we melt him into silver bullets?”

James grinned. “Sure.”

“Thanks. So anyway, for now go on doing what you were. If you think of questions - remember to ask them.”

“And when the beepers sound, come running like the Hound of the Baskervilles became real and materialised in front of me.” Sara finished and looked around. “Thought I’d let you know I read books too.” she gave a big grin.

“Wow…” Amy looked impressed. “And can you colour inside the lines and everything?”

“Almost!” Sara punched her gently.

“Ain’t she a big tough thing.” Janna chimed in.

“She’s gonna grow up to be such a bratty likkle girl…” James cooed.

Morgan reach out and pinched her cheek. “Awww…lookit de fuzzy-wuzzy-buzzums.”

That was enough, Sara tried to push the hand away but was laughing too hard to find

the strength. Morgan's hand soon fell of it's own accord as she and the rest laughed too.

"Something about this situation brings out a very strange set of mood swings and humour." James thought aloud as they returned to their rooms.

"I think it'd make an interesting study if we weren't all occupied with trying to live." Sara agreed.

"I think, the amount of stress this situation causes simply let's itself loose in irrational ways." Janna said, almost confidently. "We go from sudden anger to stupid laughter, to try and release the fear and anxiety we really feel before it begins to eat away at our heads." she stopped now, embarrassed at the others practically gaping at her. "What? I do have thoughts occasionally y'know…"

"Yes, my love, but you normally don't give us the pleasure of hearing them." James told her in a puffed-up 'my girl is so smart' voice.

"Yeah. You need to speak what's in your head more often." agreed Amy.

Sara studied Janna for a second. "But it's hard to believe anyone wants to listen."

Janna nodded slowly. "I don't remember ever being asked for my opinions or thoughts by someone who actually wanted to hear them."

"It's hard to learn a new lesson, it's been a long time. Unconscious conditioning from

childhood is probably the most damaging complex an adult can have." Now it was Sara's turn to flush. "What? I took the 'ologys, remember."

"Ain't she a smartie." Amy hugged Sara.

"Yeah, so smart I just walked right past our corridor." Sara realised and hit her forehead.

"Oh, look, so we did. They all look the same though!" Amy protested.

"Which reminds me." Janna tested the walls. "What is this black stuff the walls're made of?"

"Not totally sure myself. It's called elioecyrin. It emits light, comfortable heat - though it's heat resistant too, it repairs itself, repels bullets, lots of fun things like that."

"Department E made?" Amy guessed.

"Only the best." Sara confirmed. "Anyway, we'll get off, get some training in." Sara and Amy turned down their corridor. James and Janna walked on to theirs.

Morgan left the lab in a hurry and half ran to Zeke's office with a large smile on her face.

The door opened to her ring and she entered to find Zeke talking into his headset.

When he was done, he put them down, hung up, and turned to Morgan. “Hi Morgan. You look happy?”

“I am!” she told him. “Anyone important on the phone?”

Zeke grimaced. “Not really, just the usual boring update on the brain-scratcher squad. No plan of action yet.”

“Damn. Zeke, see, I’m really in doubt about whether we can get anything out of Henrott.”

“We pretty much all are. Nobody’s resting many hopes on it, just relying on it a whole lot.” he shook his head. “The guy’s just too clever. Under any other circumstances I’d be congratulating our young...creators - is that the proper name? - on their work. If only he was the good guy.”

Morgan’s face almost lit up. “Well...never mind.”

“Never mind nothing, what was your thought?”

“Well, I just thought why don’t we have them make a new Henrott, only better...and good.”

Zeke’s mouth dropped open. “I cannot believe we never thought of that! Morgan, my darling, I love you!”

Morgan stepped back in surprise. “Um…thanks.”

“I’ll call back and discuss it in a moment. don’t tell our creators just yet.”

“Ok. Creators is the right word, by the way, you can capitalise it if you like but you know we don’t do that with most of the talents in here.”

“Ah, okay. Now, what was it you arrived so happy about?”

Morgan’s smile returned. “I did it!” she took a small box out of her trouser pocket. “This is the empath-repressor Mark 1 - gotta get a more catchy name for it, but…”

Zeke took the box. “It’s ready for…?”

“Tested over and over - I did it myself. Found no adverse effects to the simulations, no annoying side effects…and E-Branchers can even get one without prescription!”

Zeke opened the box and stared at the tiny chip inside. It was fragile-looking, wafer thin, lined by circuitry and curved slightly inwards to grip once placed in position.

“It takes a minor surgery - noninvasive thanks to that diffusing technique the guys perfected a few months back. Attaches to the brain stem at the base of the skull. “Basically, it cuts down on certain impulses before they reach the brain. I used Maggie’s scans to set it to allow hers, but she will be blocking the other pulses that she picks up by 80% or more.”

“So she’ll still be an empath, only the noise won’t be so loud?”

“Correct. And…also from our tests on her, we’ve been able to repress the receiver that picks up emotional signals from all over the shop. Now, it only lets through the pulses from eye or body contact.”

“Wow…” Zeke stared from Morgan to the chip in amazement. “So my Maggie…she’ll be able to…live again?”

“That’s the plan. And I have a room and a surgeon ready for her right now. She can have the chip in place in ten minutes, and it’ll be active immediately.”

“So why are we standing here? Let’s go!” He started for the door.

“Well…you should call back first, like you said.” Morgan reminded him, apologetically.

“Oh, yeah.” his face dropped. “Okay.” he picked up his headset again and pushed numbers.

“Hey Kevin, it’s Zeke…yes, again…Morgan had a light bulb…”

He explained Morgan’s idea quickly then left Kevin to expand it with a rushed sentence about where he was going.

When done, he all but threw the headset off, tugged Morgan along and raced to his and Maggie's room.

Maggie was lying on the bed in the dark wearing a cold cloth on her forehead. When Zeke and Morgan entered she sat up, a trifle meekly.

She looked disheveled, thought Morgan, kindly. Her once - black hair was now grey with spots of white, lines etched her face as she smiled a tired greeting.

"Don't panic Morgan, I'm okay. Why so happy?" she asked quietly.

Zeke rushed over and hugged her tenderly. "She did it." he told her softly and held out the box containing the chip.

Maggie looked at it, at Zeke, and finally Morgan. "It works?"

Morgan nodded and explained it's function as she had to Zeke earlier.

"So we can go get it in right now!" Zeke ended.

Maggie nodded. "No pain, I won't ever feel it?"

"Never even notice it's there." Morgan promised. "Just a ten minute diffusion and you're all set."

“And if something does go wrong?”

“It won’t.” Zeke chided.

“But it could.” Maggie was still talking to Morgan.

“It’s always a possibility.” Morgan admitted. “I know I can guarantee 90% of safety, but…”

Maggie nodded. “It’s worth it. If I have one chance of being human again…I’d rather die than know I didn’t try.”

Zeke frowned. “Hey, don’t say that.”

Morgan rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m ready to go.”

Morgan and Zeke helped her to the wheelchair sitting in the corner.

On the way, Zeke pushed and Morgan ran ahead to keep people behind doors as they passed, as far away as possible so as not to disturb a cowering Maggie.

Zeke and Morgan sat impatiently a few paces down the corridor from Maggie’s door. They both leaned against the wall, feeling the gentle heat but unable to relax.

“I feel as if I should be doing something.” Zeke said.

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure.” he shrugged. “Aren’t we meant to be…praying or something?”

Morgan smiled wryly. “I suppose, traditionally.”

“Heh. Sometimes life just makes you wish you could believe in some big Daddy figure.”

“Looking down, making sure things work out how they should. Good guys win and everyone ends up happy.”

“The world is black and white, instead of various fuzzy greys…” Zeke trailed off.

“My parents would be laughing to hear me say that.” Morgan confessed.

“They religious?”

“Roman Catholic.”

“Wow.” Zeke sounded amused. “I’m betting they just love your career choice.”

“Yep. They argued for a week straight when I told them I was off to study forms of ESP and psychic phenomena.”

“But you get on all right now?”

Morgan nodded. “Sure. They know I lost any faith I had when I was a kid. And they know it doesn’t automatically make me a bad person.”

“But they’d laugh?”

Morgan nodded again. “If I told them I could sometimes understand a need to believe someone is watching over us? Yeah.”

Zeke smiled sadly. “That’s nice - they sound nice.”

“They are.” Morgan agreed. “What about yours?”

“My parents? I couldn’t say, never met them.”

“Oh.” Morgan repressed an urge to kick inwardly, reminding herself that there was no reason to. “You were adopted?”

“Left in a side alley on a dirty mattress in Croyden, more like.”

Morgan’ mouth dropped. Zeke just shrugged.

“I spent 8 years living with a junkie. I came in handy to get pity money in the street, and to test out new batches of junk she didn’t trust. Then I guess I got too big, started eating too much, generally got too much trouble, and she left me in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, no, Zeke that’s awful.” Morgan tried hard not to pity him, making a point of remembering the person he was now.

“Yeah, well. I got picked up by the cops and shoved into the nearest drug ward to go clucking. Then they sent me to a home - I left when I was 16, didn’t bother finishing school.”

“So how’d you get here?”

“Well, about the only thing I could ever do was spot lies. So I ended up doing odd jobs around most of Scotland, not sure how it happened really. I went there, just to escape, and ended up jobbing on both sides of the blue line - anyone who’d pay cash basically. It got nasty once or twice when the cops paid me to spot lies on an old boss, but generally I was left alone when I wasn’t working. And if I was ever stuck for cash, there was always a girl somewhere who’d pay me for a night out.”

“Freelance lie-detector and escort?” Morgan looked at Zeke, seeing a new place in him that rarely opened for anyone.

“Yeah. It wasn’t so bad. I got respect being a detector cause I was always honest and kept business private, had a couple of scraps but nothing serious injuring. And the girls were always nice. Lonely, sad, in need of some of the good kind of attention. I’d eat, dance, play boyfriend…once in a while I’d stay a night if they asked. Got me some extra cash, and was never exactly unenjoyable.

“Anyway, I eventually realised I was making enough to finish school and get an actual job, or something. So I went to college, finished my GCSE’s then took some A-Levels. I

got interested in home care, so I steered in that direction and planned for University. But I found a decent job at an agency, so I left Uni and started doing the visiting nurse thing. That's how I met Maggie, and you know the rest."

"Zeke that's…amazing. In many bad, and many more good ways."

Before they could say any more, a door opened and Maggie walked out with a doctor.

Zeke and Morgan leapt up.

"Maggie, you okay?" Zeke asked.

Maggie nodded, smiling widely. "I never knew the world could be so quiet."

"She's fine." the doctor agreed. "I never did a more successful operation. I want to see you once a week for the next few months, Maggie, I'll do a few check-ups. And I want you to come running if you get so much as a twinge." he shook hands all-round.

"Thanks, I will." Maggie called after him.

"I think it's Morgan deserves the thanks. I just did the jigsaw, she gave me the pieces." the doctor inclined his head and returned inside.

"Oh, yes, Morgan thank you!" Maggie visibly tried not to gush.

Morgan blushed. "It's okay."

“No, no! I will repay you somehow. You gave me my life back!”

“She’s right.” Zeke squeezed Morgan in a hug. “Anything you ever need, honey, you got it in a second.”

Morgan looked shy for a moment. “Well…Maggie if you’re totally sure you’re 100%…”

“I’m sure, name it.” Maggie touched her arm.

“Well…see, I could do with both a lie-detector and an empath for when our youngsters meet Henrott. If you both feel up to it.”

“All right, I feel useful already. I‘m yours.” Maggie replied.

“Great!” Morgan smiled, relieved. “I need you, Zeke, to be in the room again when it happens. And Maggie, cause you now need to be looking at him, I’ll play it all back to you afterwards - I’ll record the questions and everything and play back the video.”

Maggie nodded. “I’m completely there.”

“We’ve gotta make him think we’re stupid.” James suggested to Janna. “Ask…dumb questions, make him explain simple things.”

“And that’ll help…how?” Janna asked. “James, he knows everyone else is going to see

everything. He'll be answering based on how smart he thinks they are - not how dumb we can act."

James groaned in frustration. "I know, you're right," he studied the sheets of paper in his hand. "So, you're sure we have all the questions we can think of?"

Janna nodded. "It seems so. And all four of us have them memorised, so the chances are we'll remember to ask them all."

James nodded. "Good, so we're all ready."

"Yeah. I just wish he'd come back! It was, what, yesterday? We don't have time for this waiting crap!"

"He's probably doing it on purpose." James decided. "Give us as little time as possible to act on anything he might let out."

"Yeah…just in case he accidentally lets slip the way to disarm those nasty little bombs of his…" Janna's voice was bitter. "Let's face it, he's fucking with us because he can. Because there's no way we can do anything to him."

The doorbell chimed before James could reply angrily, he answered it thankfully.

"Zeus." he said curtly to the figure in front of him.

Janna jumped in surprise. "Zeus?" she peered round James and saw him. "What the

hell do you want?”

Zeus stammered slightly. “I-I, er, I came to apologise…for what I did…with the bugs…” he looked at them, desperately begging for an interruption. The pair simply stood and looked back, stonily. “It was wrong, and…I’m sorry.” he ran out of words and looked at the floor.

“That’s all you came to say?” Janna asked, shouldering her way in front of James to confront Zeus.

“Well, I…yes. I’m sorry for what I did.”

“Okay. Thanks. Bye,” Janna reached for the button to close the door.

“W-wait!” Zeus begged. “I hoped you could forgive me.”

“Forgive you.” Janna repeated, incredulously. “You betrayed my friendship, my trust and my friends. You can’t even stand up and confess to doing it of your own accord because you didn’t. And you come ringing at the door to ask us to make you feel better? I think you can take your apology and stick it.”

This time it was James who shouldered his way in, nudging Janna aside before she could shut the door.

“If you really are sorry…” James said. “And you truly want forgiveness for it’s own sake, not just to ease your conscience - then you’ll help us.”

Zeus looked afraid. “Hey, I’ll do what I can. But don’t make me do anything to Wendell.”

James shook his head. “You won’t have to touch him, or even testify against him - not yet anyhow. It’s Henrott we have our sights on.”

Zeus’ ruddy cheeks paled. “I never spoke to him - I didn’t know Wendell did. Look, Wendell can be real scary, real persuasive. But I didn’t know he was that bad - I just did what I was told. I swear, I know nothing about him and Henrott!”

James allowed him to finish rambling then nodded indulgently. “But...you know now. And you’re Wendell’s oldest and dearest.”

“You said...”

“I know what I said, Zeus. And all I want you to do is talk to Wendell, not harm him. We need a way to contact Henrott, make him think he’s got another informative - someone close to his old one, perhaps...someone who can pretend to be his spy, while feeding us anything you can get from him.”

Zeus was now so pale his skull almost showed. He gulped heavily. “Oh, god.”

“It’s not up to him.” James smiled sweetly. “It’s up to you. You have my forgiveness, though I can’t speak for everyone. And if you really wish to be one of the good guys...” he let his sentence trail, his eyes glinting.

Janna stared open-mouth behind him.

Zeus nodded. “I’ll do it. I’ll come back when I’ve seen Wendell. I’ll see Wendell after I’ve drunk a lot of alcohol…” he nodded to himself and forgot to wave goodbye as he plodded away.

James closed the door and turned around with a satisfied smile.

“Wow!” Janna exclaimed. “When’d you get so devious?” she hugged him.

“Ah…it’s nothing…” James managed to balance satisfaction and modesty in a single expression.

“Wait’ll we tell Morgan and the guys!” Janna was dialling numbers before James shook his head. She replaced the receiver.

“What?”

“Wait.” James told her. “See if we get anything first. No use giving everyone a hope until there’s a point.”

Janna sighed. “Fine. Is it all right if I admire your brain silently then?”

James pulled a face. “Yuk.”

Janna grinned. “Pleeease? I only wanna poke it with a small twig…”

“Ewww…” he gave an exaggerated grimace.

Janna flipped the conversation back. “So, do you think Zeus’ll do it?”

James sighed. “I don’t know. I think he’ll try, Wendell’s had a hold on him a long time. He only wants redemption to feel better, not because he really did something wrong. But, if he does do it, then we’ve got him doing good and maybe it’ll catch on.”

Janna applauded silently. “Well, you’re certainly a better person than me. I was all set to send him down the corridor with a few well-placed kicks. And you spent two minutes with him and made him a good guy.”

“I hope I made him a good guy. There’s many ways he can go right now.” James gave a half-shrug. “But we can’t be much worse off than we are now. Besides, people can surprise you sometimes.”

Janna eyed him cynically. “Bloody optimists.”

James eyed her back. “Bloody pessimists.” he kissed her.

Wendell’s doorbell rang. He growled and ignored it, but it rang again insistently.

He muttered under his breath and hit the door open button hard.

Zeus pushed his way in and closed the door, giving Wendell no more than a glimpse of the two bodies lying at awkward angles on the floor.

“Zeus!” Wendell cried.

“Hi Wendell. I can’t stay long, those guys’ll wake up soon. I made sure they didn’t see me, so if I get out before they get up I’m safe. Listen, I know you’ve been colluding with Henrott and I want to help, now you can’t. Let me know how to contact him and I’ll feed him info.”

Wendell stared. “Why would you want to do this?”

“You’re my friend, Wendell. know you made some kind of deal with this guy - good things for you and your mates, eh? I wanna help.”

Wendell’s eyes shifted to one side. “Yes, indeed. I got an excellent deal.”

Zeus caught the shift and guessed it’s meaning, but he repressed anger and pressed on. “So, I’ve been sucking up to the kids and I think I can help feed info. You can’t, not in here, so let me know how and I can give Henrott what I know, and tell these guys a few porkies, let our man have an easy run.”

Wendell considered. “You know it’s incredibly serious to do a thing like this?”

Zeus nodded. “Yes, but there’s no way Henrott can lose! I need to be sure I’m on the

right side of the fence."

"Okay." Wendell nodded. "Feed him information. Tell him you are my most trusted companion. Do not mention the deal. Simply pass on what you can and speak of nothing more. Is that clear?"

Zeus nodded, the beads of sweat trying to escape his forehead shivered. "I understand, I can do this."

Wendell nodded and wrote quickly on a piece of paper.

"Dial this. The scrambler only starts outside the compound - my one mistake was not knowing this - give them no reason to suspect you, but always call from a telephone box outside."

Zeus nodded and slipped the paper into his pocket.

"If you ruin this, Zeus," Wendell was no more than an inch from Zeus' nose, "Believe that I will tear every appendage from your body and beat you with each one."

Zeus paled. "Y-yes, I know Wendell. You can count on me, you know I'm always your man." he forced his babbling to half at the back of his throat and attempted and grotesque smile.

"Good. Now go. And I will know if all is less than well." Wendell warned.

“I know, Wendell I know.” Zeus practically scrambled out of the room and moved up the corridor as fast as he could walk.

Once back in his room, sparsely furnished and with very few personal touched, he sat and studied the number on the slip of paper.

“You can go either way, Zeus, old boy.” he told himself. “Where would you like to be tomorrow? And which set of guys can put you there?”

He fanned himself absently with the paper as he pondered the pros, cons and probabilities of each side.

Chapter 20

James and Janna arrived last to Morgan's office. Making quick apologies they sat in two of the chairs hastily assembled for the meeting.

Once greeting were exchanged and all were settled, Morgan rose.

"Okay, thanks for coming on short notice. I know you're never all that far away, but I appreciate it just the same.
"First, I'd like to introduce Zeke and Maggie Dannersmith. Zeke's my boss, he's been my contact with the top levels. And basically he's decided to eliminate all the crap and go-betweens and sit down here where he can tell us himself. So thanks for that, Zeke."

Everybody murmured greetings.

"Zeke's also a very talented lie-detector, he'll be coming in handy later I hope.
"Maggie, here," Everyone murmured more greetings. "Maggie is…well, the most talented empath we have on record. She's only very recently re-entered the world of the working class, and you should all know that she has a chip implanted in the base of her neck to tone down the sheer intensity of the empathy. So, if anything seems off at any time then she needs to be whipped off to the closest doctor."

Morgan gave everyone a second to digest this before pressing on.

"Second. Henrott has been in touch again, briefly. He's going to be back to meet our Creators in just under 2 hours.

“Zeke, you’ll be standing in your blind corner again - so you guys need to try real hard not to pay attention to him. And we’ll be recording both Henrott and you three so Maggie can do her stuff afterwards.”

Everyone nodded their understanding and assent.

“Okay, now we’re done with our impression of well-trained nodding dogs, the real reason we came here. We have a…sketchy idea or two to talk about.”

“Talk?” Janna interrupted. “Oh goody, more talking…We’ve done nothing but talk since we got here!”

“I know, Janna.” Zeke replied. “But I’m pretty sure this talk will be followed by some action.”

Janna inclined her head apologetically and forced herself to simmer down.

“You mean the brainiacs finally discovered the grey stuff between their ears?” Amy asked.

“They certainly did.” Zeke answered. “With the help of a suggestion from our lovely assistant Morgan, we have a basic plan complete with alternate endings to put to you.”

“Excellent.” James nodded. “So what’s the dish?”

Zeke looked around the room and saw open faces. “All right, well Morgan’s idea was basically from an idle comment yesterday. She said why not make another Henrott, only good? The brainiacs managed to not hit on this one themselves, so I passed it on and they apparently pounced right on it and pulled an all-nighter for us.

“We think making another Henrott for us is the only chance we have. If we can team him up with Cydir and Zania, all the better. We’ve narrowed down the signals from Henrott’s calls to about a five-mile radius up in Cheshire, if we can pinpoint by manual scouting then we can send in a force.

“Thoughts before I go on?”

Sounds promising, but flawed.” Janna said, after a silence. “If we make him wrong, if we can make him at all, if you can’t pinpoint, if the ‘force’ isn’t forceful enough…do I go on?”

“But at least we have ifs - as a pose to…well, nothing.” James pointed out.

“That’s about the best we can do - a handful of hopeful ‘ifs’ against an otherwise inevitable die or surrender.” Amy agreed.

“And we truly believe that you can create another - maybe even a better one - because this time you’re doing it consciously. And you aren’t making him eventually defeatable.” Morgan added.

“Which reminds me.” Sara suddenly sat up. “How does Henrott get killed in the game? Maybe we can exploit it.”

“No.” Morgan shook her head. “He’s too well tuned, any vulnerability he was made with has been corrected and secured better than Fort Knox by now.”

“I suppose.” Sara sighed. “Never mind then, sorry.”

“But it’s still worth something though.” Amy argued, patting Sara’s hand. “ He’s still partly human, after all, so he’s gotta have a soft spot somewhere.”

“That’d be great, because right now we’re stuck with the old fashioned kick-the-door-down-and-beat-things-up stratagem.”

“But not Henrott.” James countered. “No beating up Henrott.”

“As far as possible he won’t be harmed.” Zeke promised.

“Just let me know when to take myself off to the infirmary and wait to be in pain.” James grinned, resignedly.

“No, no infirmary.” Janna told him firmly. “If one hair on my guy’s head gets hurt…”

“Your guy?” James grinned, bringing a blush to Janna’s cheeks.

“Janna.” Maggie said. “I swear to you that Henrott will come to as little harm as can possibly be helped. But the fact remains that he’s very unlikely to roll over and beg to be taken away, now is he?”

Janna muttered to herself and frowned darkly at the wall.

“James.” Morgan pretended to ignore the sulk. “If you like, before our team goes in, we can sedate and anaesthetise you, you won’t wake up till it’s over and you’re already being treated.”

James nodded. “We’ll see. Thanks.”

“Okay, so we make another life from nothing. Bypassing the moralistic part…for now it sounds workable.” Amy looked for agreement.

“Moralistic part?” Morgan asked.

Amy shrugged. “We didn’t mean to bring the other three into the world, our conscience, technically, should be clear. But knowingly bringing a third being from nowhere into a place it doesn’t belong is kind of a basher.” Amy explained.

“James nodded. “Yeah, but given as this one sentient being is basically our only hope to save a world of people, logic needs to argue against the personal conscience. One being, to save billions.”

Morgan stared for a moment. “Right…okay I get you. So, we’re all clear?”

James shrugged. “One to save billions, I’d say so.” Amy and Janna nodded.

Zeke took over again. “So now we have choices, three of them in fact, that the brains gave me - hear them all before we make any decisions.

“Option one is to make a new Henrott from thin air - basically what you already did, only consciously. That ‘consciously’ part, by the way, is hopefully what will give us the straight advantage whichever choice you make.

“Choice two - find a willing participant and simply add onto him or her. It should be easier, faster and surer for success, but we need somebody willing to take on that risk. Now, the third comes right from the second. Same thing, only the volunteer is James.”

“What!” Janna cried. Zeke held up a hand and she sat back.

“Hear it out, Janna.” He asked. “If we take James and make him into our newest comic-book hero, we believe that the differentiation between the James that Henrott was based on and is linked to, and the change that makes him the new improved James will break that connection. Therefore…Henrott gets his ass kicked by James, who feels no pain.” he finished, spreading his arm to invite Janna’s tirade.

Instead Janna was silent, too horrified by thoughts to speak.

“I don’t think I could kill him,” James said quietly, “But apart from that I’m voting option three.”

Amy spoke next. “If James is willing, and if only so he has a chance to not suffer. I guess he’s in the same kind of danger either way, so I’ll back him up on three.”

Zeke nodded. “Well, it’s 100% up to you three. Janna, now would be the time to-”

Janna scoffed. “Sounds like they already decided to send the man I love on a suicide mission. What’s to say?”

“Janna…” James’ voice was pleading. “Either way it’s practically suicide! I stay here and send out our volunteer or our newly created person, and I’m probably going to end up dead or comatose anyway! You know Henrott will fight! If I go, I at least tried. Even if I don’t come back, I’d prefer death to being a cowardly vegetable.”

Janna tried to hold back tears. “But I don’t want to lose you. If you stay, you might not get hurt so much…we can make a guy with a paralyzing ray or something!”

Zeke made a signal and the room emptied quickly, leaving only Janna and James.

“Janna, I’m scared, okay? I’m scared to stay here and wait, I’m scared to go out and fight…but I can’t send someone else out to do it for me. And I feel responsible for Henrott. I know I shouldn’t, but he’s made from me and I can’t help feeling something. And if I can at least face him and try, I think that’s what I have to do.”

“But…I don’t want you to!” Janna pleaded, squeezing his hands and trying to swallow the painful lump in her throat. “I want you to be with me. Where you belong.”

“But, baby, if I win, think about that. If we bring Henrott back, captured or dead - it won’t matter if it doesn’t hurt me - think…”

“Yeah? You’ll be my Super hero comic-book guy! Not James, not the guy I’m crazy in

love with."

"I'll still be me. Just…altered. And I can be changed back, just don't forget what I was and if I return we can make me…myself again."

Janna shook her head and sobbed, soundlessly. "Please…"

James felt a salty taste in his mouth and wiped his tears. "Please, Janna. I love you so much, but I have to do this. But…if it's the only thing you will accept, say so and I won't go."

Janna wiped her face dry. "You…would do that?"

James nodded.

Janna gasped for air. "I…I'll be waiting…for you."

James smiled lovingly and dried her tears. "And I swear I'll be thinking of you every second, and every move I make will be done with thoughts of coming back to you."

Janna threw her arms around James, sure she could not speak. He hugged her back, tightly, whispering words of love into her ear.

When Morgan's bell rang, a long eternity and a short moment later, James and Janna were still in each others arms.

James rose and opened the door to Morgan, Zeke and Amy.

Morgan smiled apologetically. “Sorry, but Henrott…he’ll be calling through any time now.”

James stepped aside and they entered. Janna stood and forced a smile.

“So, as I was saying before you all took a siesta - I vote three if it’s what James wants.”

Amy stepped over and embraced her. “I’ll be here, me and Sara, okay?”

Janna nodded and bit her lip to hold back more tears. She was grateful when the phone rang on Morgan’s desk.

Morgan answered. “Yeah?…okay, give us 60 seconds then put him on.” she hung up and pushed a few buttons on the control panel secreted under the desk. “Okay, all set. I’ll be back - everything’s being taped, all you three gotta do is ask the questions and pay attention to Zeke in the corner. Without actually looking at him…” she smiled.

Zeke was already in his corner, trying to blend, and he gave a friendly nod as Morgan left them alone.

James, Janna and Amy pulled chairs into a rough line and sat down; trying not to visibly shake; trying not to look at Zeke; trying to remember questions.

When Henrott appeared on the screen;

James eyes widened to see his own face in dull, grey sheen in front of him;

Amy suppressed the gasp of horror that Henrott's image churned inside of her;

Janna forced herself not to spit curses and keep her face amiable, or at least blank.

"Ah." Henrott's metallic drone grated in their ears. "My parents. Good afternoon."

Janna nodded stiffly.

Amy forced a smile. "Afternoon, Henrott. I am Amy."

"Yes. The other female is Janna. And," he seemed to hesitate with relish. "The young man is…James."

James waved weakly.

"I hope, my parents, you are not under any illusion of a family reunion?"

Three heads shook.

"Good. And you realise I have no sentimentality, no emotion, that trying to plead with me due to our tenuous connection will not work?"

Three heads nodded.

“Good.” Henrott seemed to smile, though no movement was obvious. “The reason I asked to meet with you was simple curiosity. Mine is now sated, however I did make a bargain. Ask any questions you have, I retain the pleasure to turn away any that probe my weapons or my plans. Are we ready?”

Three nods.

Silence.

“That, I believe, was your cue to ask questions.” Henrott prodded.

Amy broke out of semi-trance first. “Henrott.” her voice brought back the other two. Zeke gave a silent sigh of relief.

Henrott inclined his head slightly to tell Amy to continue,

She did. “We deserve to know, I think, why you are doing this. Why you want to do this to us all. We know you have free will, so why?”

Henrott cocked his head in a thoughtful position. Janna winced, trying not to imagine the process his half-computerised brain must be going through.

“Because…how better an irony than to rule the World I can never truly belong in?”

James spoke next, following the same line. “Surely more irony to enter a world you do not belong in, a being created to bring forth evil, and make it a better place?”

“Possibly.” Henrott agreed. “However I was not created, programmed, to know the pleasure of goodness, it is not a part of me, therefore I cannot.”

Janna spoke now, slowly, examining every word of it’s tone and meaning before letting it through. “You changed the original plan, and I’m sure you made many other improvements to yourself and everything around you. I don’t accept that you could not change the inherent evil you were created with.”

“Yes, Janna, I could. However, programmed as I was to be so ‘evil’,” he seemed to smile again at the word, “I have no wish to be ‘good’, however ironic that may be.”

Amy moved along slightly. “So what do you plan to do with the World when you own it, unopposed due to deadly weapons and blown-up offenders.?”

Henrott hesitated minutely. “I plan to rule, what more do you need know?”

In the corner they saw Zeke give a double thumbs-up, a sign to press further.

“How will you rule?” James asked. “Dictatorship? You plan to rule the entire world alone - or recruit yourself a Gendarme? Clone Army? Robot Troopers?”

“I do not see that I need to-”

Janna interrupted. “So you’re, like, a fascist - or do we underestimate your understanding of the human condition? Gas camps - or equal rights? What’s your notion?”

“I repeat, I see no need-”

Amy jumped in loudly. “And do you have any specific plans for us as a whole? In general? Individually?”

James now, before Henrott could open his mouth. “Will you be a King? Prime Minister? President? Will there be a Parliament, or just a small group of advisors? Do you truly believe you can rule like this forever?”

“Stop!” Henrott growled as well as his limited tone would allow. “I see no need or reason to discuss my future plans with you. Move on, please.”

Zeke gave a single thumbs-up, ‘good job, next line’.

Janna considered for a moment. “How many countries do you expect to remain after you take Europe?”

“Most. After two or three attempts at brave resistance, the natural human tendency toward cowardice and service to the stronger will out.”

Amy covered a pending snort with a slight cough, all the same Henrott tilted his head indignantly as if he knew. “And then the rest of the world will fall in line?” she asked.

“Possibly minus another few rebels, yes.”

James chose a new line. “So, call me curious - how many of these robots do you have around the continent? Covering a lot of area…”

Henrott gave a sound that may have been a laugh. “More than you ever wish to see. My army is over one hundred thousand strong, all but one hundred are placed across the borders of Europe. Abandon thy plan, young man.”

“Plan?” queried James, honestly confused.

“Whatever plans of escape and smuggle you try to hatch. My robots are too numerous.”

Janna broke in now with a mischievous wink at James. “So that other 100 - all guarding you are they?”

Henrott seemed to jump. “Quite so. That, plus all the advanced weapons you could ever dream of creating. Even if you could find me - which you cannot - there are defenses here which would leave you babbling incoherently if I tried to so much as explain their purpose-”

Amy interrupted him with a bored sigh. “Ok, so you got defence.” the thumbs-up sign from Zeke told her to move on. She quickly picked another question out of her head. “What happens if the country you’re living in doesn’t surrender?”

“And you assume I am living in a European country? You have an entire planet, most covered by water - and that is only the surface of the crust.”

Zeke raised an eyebrow and gave a ‘wrap-it-up’ sign.

“Henrott.” James stood. “It has been a pleasure meeting you. I think we are done, and the bargain has been fulfilled. However I would like to beg a kindness.”

Henrott tilted forward slightly, his whole body seeming to move and glint in the barely-adequate light of wherever he was. He raised his metal hands invitingly. “Go on.”

“What ever your plans may be, could we - your parents - ask that Department E remain open and in your service?”

Henrott threw his head back, and this time the laughter was clear, though grindingly painful. “My parents, I will grant your request. When I own this country, all in Department E will pledge me their service, or die. And you, for I develop a healthy respect for those who made me, you are worthy, you three may sit by my side as my advisers.”

James made a half bow. “You are most generous.”

Amy tilted her head and shoulders in a grudging politeness.

Janna forced her head to jerk down and up again in stiff formality.

“We shall meet soon, I hope.” Henrott told them. “God-bye, my parents.”

The screen flickered blank.

“What the hell was that?” Janna rounded on James immediately.

“Janna, down girl!” Zeke was out of his corner and tugging on her arm. “I think I understand - James?”

James smiled gratefully. “Well, first of all I don’t believe for a second that he’ll be picking randomly. He’s on this island, so he wants us near the end to be reasonably sure of our surrender. Plus, I just get that feeling…”

Zeke nodded. “I’ve heard him say the random selection part - it’s crap. He has them picked.”

James nodded. “Thanks. So, all I did then was give him a reason to think we’ve already decided on surrender! I asked to join him - made it sound like the decision is already made. So, he’s feeling pretty secure and happy, and those slips that I think we caught won’t be on his mind.”

Janna breathed an ‘Oh.’ sound. “I’m sorry…that bastard just…”

“He feels evil.” Amy confirmed. “Even just on a screen, he made my guts wriggle.”

“We really made him well, huh?” James laughed feebly. “Hope we can make me better.”

“No problem.” Zeke patted his arm. “I think you guys could make damn near anything.”

“So those slips he made.” Janna gave a smug grin.

“Will be analysed by me and Maggie before anyone discusses and takes them to mean anything.” Zeke told them, sternly.

“Right.” Janna agreed with a smile. “Just what I was about to say.”

Chapter 21

Maggie turned and nodded at Zeke. “I think we got him. Definitely an anxious moment or two.”

Zeke smiled. “I presume we have the same moments, but just in case?”

“Well, he really has no plan for after the conquering - he seemed slightly rattled at that line if questioning. And he has 100 robots for home defence, probably little else, that rubbish he spouted about advanced defence systems was, well, rubbish.”

“Yes!” Zeke clapped. “We got him.”

“He might be able to make weapons and elements of the like we never saw before,” Maggie mused, “But he knows absolutely nothing about social interaction.”

“Well, he is a computer game…” Zeke hugged his wife. “We tell the guys now?”

“Well, we could wait a few days, but by then we’d all be dead or enslaved, still it’s your choice.” Maggie said dryly.

“Well…it’s an option.” Zeke shrugged.

“Come on, me laddie. Let’s go see our brave heroes with the good news.”

Zeus looked around nervously and stepped inside the telephone box.

“Preferred the bloody red ‘uns.” he grumbled at the newer, grey plastic-metal construct as he fumbled for change. “Less see-through.” he scowled at the BT man on the window and lifted the handset.

His fingers trembled as he dialled and his first attempt only earned him three sharp, rising tones and a robotic female voice.

Slamming down the cut-off, he tried again carefully.

He was so surprised to hear the ringing coming from the receiver - such a normal sound for such a guilt-ridden event - that he almost dropped it. Instead, he held it tighter to his ear, fanning his face absently with a small card advertising ‘Hot massages, hotter babes’.

“Wendell.” the low, grinding seemed to say when the ringing ceased. “It has been too long - I was, worried.”

Panicked, Zeus opened and closed his mouth quickly.

“Wendell.” the voice was sharper, like steel.

It snapped Zeus out of petrifaction. “Not Wendell - I’m a friend.”

“If you lie, then you die.” the voice warned after a pause.

“I know. I’m Wendell’s friend, Zeus, he got caught, he’s locked away. I thought I could-”

Wendell guzzled laughter. “You wish to help him, by helping me?”

Zeus swallowed and dabbed at his forehead with a sleeve. “Yes. I know you made a deal with Wendell, I want in.”

“You realise you were never a part of the original deal.” Henrott said, then continued before Zeus could reply. “I believe we can be friends. I offer you a deal. Take Wendell’s payment, and help me. Wendell…may be allowed to live once Department E becomes mine.”

“Y-You want me to sell out Wendell?” Zeus almost choked on the words, not sure who he was most afraid of.

“He sold you.” Henrott reminded. “All you need do is exact a justified revenge. Say yes.”

Zeus suddenly needed to be far away from the phone box; whose sides were slowly closing in to crush him.

“I-I can’t do that!” he cried, losing balance and leaning heavily on a window. Somewhere he heard a knock on the glass, a voice.

“Nevermore.” he whispered and laughed, crazily.

“Indeed…” Henrott’s voice seemed to drawl for hours. “Choose.”

“Why can’t you keep it how it is? I’ll surrender - I promise. And I’ll just take Wendell’s place as informant, but he still gets the big prize.”

“No, little man. And I regret to say that as you refuse me and yet have my contact details, I must kill you before you betray me back to those you betrayed first.”

There was a scream, heard vaguely from a hundred miles away. Zeus whimpered.

“Don’t worry.” Henrott told him. “As you attempted to be of assistance I promise it will be painless. As for the man who turned his coat and gave you my contact…I am sorry to say that his death will be rather more…” he paused, Zeus heard him pull in a breath his body did not need. “…messy.”

Zeus dropped the telephone, hearing tinny laughter as he tried to find the door. He found it and pushed, it weighed like his conscience.

Zeus ran into the air, and into a cold, hard body.

He screamed silently, his mouth turning slack as he slid to the floor. A line of blood escaped the grey spike sprouting from his throat.

“Good news.” Zeke told the group gathered once again in Morgan’s office. “We have

confirmation of Henrott's slip-ups!"

A small cheer from Janna, smiled and nods from the rest.

Maggie spoke up. "Both Zeke and me, separately, came away thinking two things. First, he has no idea what comes after he owns the world, and no real idea why he wants it - when fighting him this may be a distraction to use." she looked at James who nodded. "Second, he has 100 robots, probably minimal other personal defence - confident as he is that we'll never find him. But, he's probably a pretty formidable fighting machine himself..." she looked at James again for a another nod. "But...it looks good to me." she smiled a little and the natural sternness in her aged face softened.

"Alright!" Janna again. "So now what?"

"Well," Maggie raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it's time to super-fy James. You three take Sara - from now on she's a part of the group."

Sara coughed. "I am?"

Maggie nodded. "I'll explain to you later. So, the four of you take an hour or two to figure out exactly what you want to do to James." she emphasised the word 'exactly." Then we can put you in a proofed room and let you work your magic."

"Now?" Amy asked. "I mean, I have no idea of the time, and I know it had to be done - but I'm pretty tired..."

Maggie looked at her, expressionless. “Don’t be a Moaning Minnie. Make a design, then rest.”

Amy stared for a moment, open-mouthed. then she saw Zeke laughing and turned on him. “Did she just call me…”

Zeke nodded between giggles. “She does like to play the tyrant.”

Now Maggie’s straight face cracked into laughter, taking everyone but a bewildered my with her.

“Iron Lady my ass.” Amy griped then raised her voice to the others, “We gonna go do that design then?”

Sara pulled herself together and came over. “C’mon, babe. She didn’t mean it.”

Maggie came over and patted Amy’s arm in apology. Her face was gentle, but her eyes still laughed.

Janna put on a ridiculously posh accent. “I hardly believe the Baroness herself would apologise, Amy. Do be a sport.”

That sent everyone back into laughter. This time, Amy joined them, holding Sara’s shoulder and trying to stop long enough to think of a belated comeback.

“Fascist old bag.” she finally spluttered into Maggie’s ear, bringing guffaws so loud they

ended in tears.

Eventually they were collapsed to the floor, or hanging off chairs, holding ribs and stomachs to stop the pain.

Wendell rose sleepily as his door opened to reveal two Guards and Zeke.

“What the hell-” Wendell began, self-consciously smoothing his hair and suit.

Zeke interrupted him. “Wendell. I have a question.” he said, mildly.

“I already told you people I do not know who attacked my Guards. The bell rang, I ignored it.”

Zeke nodded. “I know your story, I have something else to ask you.”

Wendell frowned, defensive already. “What might that be?”

“Was it you who sent Zeus to talk to Henrott?”

Wendell froze. “Zeus. What did the fool do now?”

“He got himself killed.” Zeke’s voice was softer now, anticipating some kind of emotional reaction - even Wendell must have a heart, he reasoned.

Wendell gasped. “He did. How?”

“We got reports of a machine - one of Henrott’s. Lot of people scared, one or two got injured when they tried to stop him. In the phone box behind Zeus, the phone was off the hook. Plus we have it from a few witnesses that he was in there. He ran out, straight into the ‘bot.”

Wendell sat heavily on the bed. “It was Zeus who knocked out the Guards.”

Zeke sat by him. “We know. James…tried to help. Zeus asked for forgiveness, James suggested he redeem himself by getting information out of Henrott.”

Wendell’s brow darkened, but he said nothing.

“It wasn’t James’ fault, Wendell.” Zeke guessed what the frown meant and stood, suddenly angry at the unflappable ego of the prisoner in front of him. “You were leaking to begin with. For years you’ve had Zeus and your other cronies doing the things you had no guts to do. And now, well now I’m afraid you pretty much got Zeus killed. He’s not dead because he felt bad, or because James gave him a chance for redemption. He’s dead because you are a double-crossing son of a bitch. We can’t charge you for what happened to Zeus, but I swear I will throw everything I possibly can down on your head. Once we save the world.”

He turned, cutting off Wendell’s reply, and stalked out. Wendell stared after him as the door closed, furious, stunned, and still sleepy.

“That prize fool!” he muttered, angrily. “If he wasn’t already dead…” he shook his head and lay back down on his bed.

Maggie called Sara back and fell into step with her on the corridor.

“I said I’d explain why I want you working with them.”

“Yeah.” Sara bobbed her head shoulders in a shrug. “I figured it’s as support, control. And I have a close relationship to, well with all three really.”

Maggie nodded. “There is that. But also, you seem to have a latent Transmitter talent. Somehow your bond with Amy woke it and has been allowing you to unconsciously strengthen her power. That sets up a nice double-pairing. James and Janna bounce well off each other too.”

“I’m a transmitter?” Sara was astonished. “I was tested when I came here, they found almost minimal psychic activity.”

“Yes, that’s why I said ‘latent’.” Maggie winked. “Later we can explore it more fully, how it woke, how it works - if it can strengthen anyone other than Amy. The whole deal. But for now, I’ve told you of it so you can try to channel it to Amy as much as you can. Just to Amy, mind, I don’t want you getting distracted trying to help James and Janna as well.”

“Wow.” Sara blew out air. “So Amy awoke that in me too.”

Maggie suppressed a lewd joke and instead patted Sara's shoulder. "About that, I'm really happy for you both, Sara."

"Ditto - for other reasons, obviously." Sara motioned towards Maggie's neck where the chip was implanted.

Maggie scratched at it absently. "Thanks. Now you get off. Get the finished designer James on paper - then sleep some. I think Morgan'll be calling us all back in about seven hours or so."

"All right, on my way." Sara gave in to impulse and drew Maggie into a quick hug before vanishing around the corner, leaving Maggie smiling in a newly-discovered tier of friendship.

Sara arrived last to James and Janna's room. Janna was excitedly reading a booklet taken from a game newly delivered to their mailbox. James and Amy lounged comfortably, listening to Janna prattle on about her newest toy.

"You forget, dear." James interrupted, "You are in the company of fellow geeks, who also, happen to have played and loved the first two.

Janna's face dropped. "Oh, yeah."

"Not me." Sara piped up, settling herself by the wall. "Do tell."

“Later.” Amy interjected. “Later, I’ll grab the first two and borrow this one, and then you can be attacked by all the winged beasties and zombie-babies and other grotesques till they fall out of your ears.”

“Good point.” Janna wistfully put the game away. “So, what do we get to do with James then?”

“Well, you got paper?” Sara asked.

Janna rummaged and came up with a ream of paper, from which she grabbed a handful of sheets, and a pen.

Sara took them. “Okay, so what do we think he needs? We can make a list.”

There was a noisy silence. All had thoughts, firing and spitting by the second. Yet none wanted to take the first step down that particular road.

James cleared his throat. “Well, why don’t we go in stages. Defense first, take all the body parts one-by-one and equip me.”

“Alright.” Sara scribbled. “So, what do we need to protect your head?”

3 hours later they were as satisfied as the circumstances would allow. Now, tension and anxiety having been twice relieved by love, they slept.

James dreamed of night, of squeaking metal and excruciating agony of the soul. He moaned in his sleep.

Janna woke, not sure where she was, disoriented by the cold, damp body by her side. It moaned, she remembered.

“James.” she shook him gently.

“James!” harder this time as he tried to hit out sleepily.

He hit out again, this time hard, catching Janna a painful blow on her cheek.

The impact disturbed him, the cry woke him.

His hand felt the blow still. He saw Janna hold her cheek and look at him with momentarily fearful eyes. He realised what happened and his face broke.

“Oh fuck, Janna.” he took away her hand, kissed the reddening bone and stroked it. “I am so sorry, I swear I didn’t mean to. I had a dream, I was afraid. Oh man, that’s no excuse! Please, baby, please forgive me.”

Janna stopped him with a smile. “Shhh…” she covered his mouth with a finger. “I was trying to wake you up, you were making moany noises. I think I scared you more.” she smiled and winced minutely,.

James, attuned to her, saw the pain and felt it. He maddened at himself though he knew - logically, factually knew - it wasn't his fault.

He tried to speak, but found his mouth covered by another,

This time, love only asked for closeness. James held Janna in the dark, afraid to see a bruise, welcoming the small sting in his hand that helped assuage his guilt.

Janna lay on his chest, swollen cheek shining in the dimness. Throbbing, yes, but with an accident created from caring for another; not malicious violence.

Together, their beepers sounded on the table.

Amy lay awake, bathing in the warmth of Sara's fire-hair, splayed across her chest.

She relaxed, unknowingly joining their breathing until they rose diaphragms as one.

Sara was a Transmitter, come alive, maybe just for Amy.

Amy concentrated, feeling a power connecting then. Real or imaginary, it did not surge but flowed with a steady hum from one to another.

Sara slept, peaceful, blissful. For now, there was no Henrott, no robots, no Department E. The world was but two, and they were them.

Any drifted to sleep where, unknowing, Sara’s dreams joined hers and lifted them both into starry skies.

Both awake, smiling in thoughts of secret dreams that both hearts knew and remembered.

A kiss, a hug, gathering clothes in laughter.

Twin beepers, like twin hearts, sounded as one.

Chapter 22

Cydir awoke quickly at the first crackle of the radio. Zania awoke grumpily at the second.

Cydir picked up the handheld radio and mouthed a quick ‘Morning.’ at Zania.

“Cydir here, come in.”

“Cydir. Both you and Zania can hear me?” came the voice of the Commander - their only contact with the base after demanding his presence a few communications earlier.

“Yes, sir.”

Zania moved closer, forcing her eyes away from the curve of Cydir’s neck.

“Good. Now listen close. We need you to return to base. You did a good job on panic control over there, but we need you home.”

“Sir. The borders are crowded with robots at every possible exit point.”

“So take an impossible one. Dig a tunnel. I don’t care - just be here by twenty-one hundred hours tomorrow.”

“That’s less than 24 hours.” Zania grumbled. “Wadda jip.”

The Commander's voice was steely. "Yes, well you said you wanted to help save the world. We need you here."

"Can you tell us the plan, sir?" Cydir asked, nudging Zania to silence.

"Not over air. Just get your asses back here as fast as you can. You need to be briefed and rested before you head back out again."

"We'll do our best, sir." Cydir promised.

"Do better. We need you two. Over."

"Over and out." Cydir dropped the radio back into it's pouch which she fastened onto her jacket. She helped Zania gather up their small number of belongings.

Zania stuffed packets of food and liquid into her pockets. "So, tunnel?"

"Well, we tested their range. We cannot go high enough and still be able to breathe. And they can see us coming 6 miles away."

Zania nodded. "Tunnel it is then, I'll think on what to make a digger out of. Drill of some sort I suppose. We better go diagonal down, I'd say a coupla miles."

"So if we begin about 10 miles out that gives us room to make a slope. Then we can tunnel back up 10 miles past them."

“Sounds like the start of a plan - but 20 mile tunnels at every border? Plus getting into England…”

Cydir pulled a bulky atlas out of the pack Zania was hefting onto her back. “Look,” she said turning to a map of the German border and pointing to a spot. “We’re here, that’s probably 18 miles from the border into France. We go there, tunnel under and come up on the edge of Strasbourg, then we can fly most of the way across, come down again out of range of the ‘bots but in Sangatte, so we can fly through the Channel Tunnel. We’ll have to fight to get past either side, but it’s that or make another tunnel of our own…

Zania considered. “Okay, Chunnel sounds workable. Let’s face it, we’ve no other choice. Though, that second time we can probably actually fly in and land right on top of their heads - we have to fight them anyway.”

Cydir shrugged. “Good point. We’ll do that.”

“Alright.” Zania clapped her hands once. “So let’s backtrack to the used car lot I saw back there and grab us a ride.”

Cydir looked doubtful. “I know you have no money, nor do I. So I must assume you are suggesting theft, which I frankly cannot be a part of.”

Zania shook her head. Cydir was - as far as she could admit it - the best friend she had yet had, but sometimes…

“Look, you stay here. I’ll be back, I’ll even sign my name to a statement that says I did it

and you had no part.”

Cydir shook her head. “No, we are partners, we stay together.” Misinterpreting the slight backstep Zania tried not to make, she smiled. “Only until the end of this mission, then we can split if that is your wish.”

Zania tried to open her mouth, tried to say ‘No - I want to be partners, you’re my friend and I’d like to work together.” but found herself unable. Instead she shrugged, “Nah, maybe I’ll kick you around for a bit longer.”

Cydir raised an eyebrow - a habit she had picked up from Zania after slowly beginning to drop her shield of formality and procedure. “Whatever you say.”

Zania grinned, “C’mon then.” she shifted the weight of the pack on her back and began to walk.

After a mile or so, Zania threw over a pack of food and a carton of water and ripped open her own morning ration. Watching Cydir wolf down hers with uncharacteristic speed, Zania tried not to think what her heart screamed at her.

‘Fool!’ it cried, ‘You oafish, blundering fool! Allow yourself to feel!’

‘Allow myself to feel?!’ cried back her brain, even as Cydir caught her watching and smiled shyly - thus setting of a hundred fantastic and terrible reactions. ‘Feel what? Why? My heart belongs in my chest, not crushed under some bimbo’s foot.’

Yet she winced at the word ‘bimbo’, kicking herself for using that word to describe Cydir.

“You okay?” Cydir asked, kindly.”

Zania realised the wince had been more of a jerk. “I’m fine, just a small cramp.”

“Oh no, in your foot?” Cydir stopped.

“Yeah, it’ll go in a minute.”

“Well, sit.” Cydir motioned to an embankment. “Let me help.”

“Zania fell to a sitting position before she could object.

Cydir knelt before her, smiling reassuringly. “Which foot?”

“Er, foot?” Zania replied, distracted. “Oh - foot, yeah. Erm, the left one.”

Cydir took off the left boot quickly and bent to it.

“Doesn’t feel tight,” she murmured. “Must be up inside. I’ll get it out.” she began to massage rhythmically.

Zania resisted, trying to pull her foot away, but Cydir held it.

“Don’t squirm. Sorry if it tickles.”

Zania forced a grimaced smile. “Yeah, ticklish.”

But it wasn’t ticklish. Zania was lulled into a near-hypnotic trance, her skin tingling at the warm touch of Cydir.

Too soon, Cydir stopped and stood. “Better?”

Zania snapped awake. “Hmm?”

“I asked if the cramp had gone.” Cydir repeated.

“Oh, yeah. That was fantastic.”

Cydir blushed and Zania kicked herself inwardly.

“I mean the cramp’s gone, all better, yep.”

Cydir frowned. “Are you okay? You seem a little…strange. Do you need to rest?”

“Maybe I’m a little dazed.” Zania admitted, ‘though not for lack of rest.’ she added silently before she could stop it.

“You must eat.” Cydir reached for Zania’s hip pocket to remove a ration pack. She drew back quickly as Zania tensed.

“Sorry.” she raised a defensive hand. “I will let you sit for a while. In peace.”

Zania opened her mouth to say - ‘To say what?!’ she scolded herself and shut it again.

Cydir flashed a polite smile and sat down a few metres away.

Janna and James raced into Morgan’s office, out of breath.

Before they had a chance to sit, however, Amy had leapt up and grabbed Janna’s arm. “You know I could’ve sworn all that side of your face was skin-coloured a few hours ago.”

Janna lifted her hand to the purple-blue bruise on her cheekbone and winced. James hung his head. “It was an accident. James had a nightmare - I was trying to wake him up, he hit out in his sleep.”

Amy gave James a lopsided grin. “Next time, hit the wall.”

James mumbled into his chest. Amy patted his arm. “Hey, it was an accident. Not a one of us would ever think you did it on purpose.” she glanced around the room for agreement. Morgan, Zeke, Maggie and Sara nodded and murmured.

Amy raised James’ chin with a knuckle. “Chin up, chuckle-chops.”

That bought a smile to his face as he placed himself in a seat by Janna, and placed his hand in hers.

Morgan smiled a greeting and quietly handed Janna a packet of aspirin and glass of water. She ruffled James' hair slightly as his face pointed downwards again.

"You guys all set?" Maggie asked, taking back the empty glass once Janna had swallowed painkillers. "Keep the pills." she told her, "There's plenty more where they came from." Janna nodded, gratefully.

Sara waved a few sheets of paper in the air. "All done. Sorry we didn't have time to do a pictograph - but it's all here.
Maggie flipped through quickly and handed them back.

"Well, I think we can all trust that you thought of everything - it is one member of a somewhat small inner-circle going into the battlefield after all." she waved Zeke in.

"Zania and Cydir are returning from Germany - where they were when Henrott put the lockdown on. They've been helping the authorities control the panic, mainly for lack of anything else to do.
"However, they are on their way back - probably via tunnel. But they're clever - and they have their own special powers - so we expect them by nine tonight."

"Which reminds me." yawned Morgan. "What time is it now? I don't actually have a clock - just a small noisy thing that goes off X amount of hours after I set it."

Zeke laughed. “It’s about two am, my dear. Time and routine has kind of taken a back-seat over the past few days. Regular sleeping hours will resume when all is well once again. Promise.”

“So anyhow,” Maggie continued, “The back-up crew will be here before James has to head out. In the meantime, we’ve prepared one of our proofed rooms for you. Food, drinks, energy supplements. You have until 11pm tomorrow night to have James ready to meet his strikeforce - that being Zania and Cydir.
“We’re close to pinpointing the location of the base, so no problems anticipated there. So, we’ll be doing a quick meet and greet then sending our three heroes over there.
“How does that sound to everybody?”

James stood. “So let’s go make upgrades.”

“James two-point-oh coming up.” Janna followed.

“Two-point-oh Beta.” Amy corrected.

“Not really.” Janna countered. “We don’t have time for testers, betas and bug-fixes. Gotta be Gold first time.”

“Holy crap - I hope we do better than Microsoft then.” James groaned.

“Gonna be a Linux.” Janna promised.

“Stabler and better - yes. But slower and harder to use? We can’t do that.” Amy shook

her head.

“Win XP.” James suggested. “Ok, not overly backwards compatible - but stabler than the 9x’s, faster than Ancestor NT and easy as crap to use.”

Janna groused. “But it looks like a cartoon till you customise. How about Max OSX - after the SE.”

“All right so can we go start now?” Sara finally stood and interrupted. “You can argue in weird languages later.”

Amy grinned and slipped an arm around Sara’s waist. “Sorry hon. You’ll learn the language.”

“Ah, but which one?” Janna grinned, mischievously.

“Well, are we talking net language or program?” James asked. “Course it could be both - for example, XML.”

“Nah, not for a first-timer.” Amy argued. “Net languages are easier though. Go html - still works with everything, easy to read. Okay it’s not that fancy but it’s a building block with which to understand the more complex-”

“Okay, okay, stop!” Maggie came between them this time. “I’m going to take you to your workspace. We’ll hear no more of this useless prattling. Ad you will work and make the best James-machine you can - and I don’t give a crap which system of language you do it

with!”

The three geeks shuffled meekly out of the door. Sara followed, in step with Maggie. She offered a ‘Help me.’ look.

Maggie patted her on the arm and whispered. “Good luck…have fun.”

The room was close by and soon the four were shut in by a thick steel door. The walls were the same black as the main compound, the floor was colourless-grey, decorated only by a food-filled table in a corner. It gave a sense of claustrophobic isolation from the outside world.

“Wow.” James intoned. “This place…is really boring.”

“Yup.” Janna agreed, heading straight for the table. “But lookit all the eatables.”

Zania laid her foot down as far as she dared, having rarely driven a car before. Fortunately, the presence of robots close by - and the air of impending doom - had left the road all but empty.

Beside her, Cydir watched the world go by from her window. Still hurt from Zania’s sudden coldness towards her, she spoke little.

Zania sensed it and knew it was her own fault. But, not knowing how to apologise, she troubled herself inwardly and said nothing.

Cydir finally roused herself. “We’ll be there soon.”

Zania nodded. “Yep, time go rabbitin’.”

“Rabbiting?” Cydir frowned. “What?”

Zania grinned. “We gonna burrow down into the ground - like rabbits. ‘Cept we don’t have to use our paws.”

Cydir laughed. “Well that’s good. So you have an idea?”

Zania nodded, glad to hear the laugh for it meant forgiveness, and made her feel absurdly good. “Gonna turn me into a big, Zania-sized drill.”

Cydir stared at her. “You…sorry, did I hear you right?”

Well, I said I’m gonna turn me into a drill. What did you here?”

“That…” Cydir admitted. “But…why?”

“Well.” Zania stopped the car. “This’d be it I think.”

They were in a large, empty, tree-surrounded field.

“I would guess so.” Cydir agreed. “So, why?” she repeated.

“Well, we need something big to drill the hole - right? And we need to get both of us through, right? So, you crawl through, pushing me in front - I’ll try to keep my arms so I can help with that bit - my head drills a hole that fits us through. I can make myself quiet, so the ‘bots won’t hear…”

Cydir shook her head. “I’m not sure how I’d feel, shoving you ahead of me to drill a hole in the ground. It seems a little…disturbing.”

Zania nodded. “Not ‘alf as disturbing as it’s gonna be for me. But it’s the most efficient way to get us both through quickly and quietly.”

Cydir sighed and bobbed her head. “Okay…but first we rest and eat.”

Zania nodded and climbed out of the car. “And we hide the car. Grab this.” she heaved the backpack from the back seat over to Cydir who turned and laid it on the ground. When she turned back, there was nothing but a large tree.

“A tree?” Cydir mused.

Zania shrugged. “Good as anything else - long as it ain’t a stolen - sorry, ‘borrowed’ - car.”

Cydir frowned. “I’m not 5 years old - you can say the word ‘stolen’…”

“I just thought you didn’t want the reminder.” Zania said, slightly huffy. “I was trying

to be thoughtful."

Cydir tried to apologise, but Zania raised a hand to ward it off. "Forget it."

"Zania…" Cydir wanted to ask why she stuck around if she was so easily irritated by her. Why she could be so nice one moment, so moody the next. But she held her tongue. "Time to be a drill?" she asked, instead.

Zania studied herself for a second. "Y'know, I have a better idea…I'm too valuable. Plus we have a free car, er, tree."

Cydir looked at the tree. "I can tell you I would much prefer that to be altered than you."

Zania's heart jumped, but she controlled it fiercely. 'It was a friendly remark - you agree for fuck's sake! Calm down.' she screamed at herself.

Cydir had turned away, a hurt frown grown from another cold silence.

"Cydir." Zania took a step closer, tried to touch Cydir's shoulder but stopped herself. "I'm sorry." she jerked her own head up in surprise. "I never said that before…but I am. I don't mean to be a bitch, I'm just…kind of afraid."

Cydir's face softened.

Zania all but got behind herself and pushed to continue. "See, I've been feeling these

things I never felt before, recently - with us fighting together and I suppose me being me…" she faltered and Cydir jumped on the loose threads.

"You never fought something this big before. And now you gotta watch out for a partner too."

Zania looked nonplused for a moment, then realised her escape. "Yeah - used to doing small, lonely things or sitting in my hovel."

Cydir clasped Zania's shoulder. "As for fighting together. This is my first time too. But while you watch my back, I watch yours, remember that. You can trust me.
"And to the whole situation - it sounds like they have a plan. And it is probably one made just for us to do what we do best."

It was all Zania could do not to cry out with the unfamiliar feelings that rose in her, friendship and…something else she was still trying to hide. She managed an embarrassed smile and turned back to the tree.

Cydir wandered a short distance away and waited for Zania to do her work. It was a complex change, requiring concentration and quiet, so Cydir kicked small stones around until there were none left. Then she simply kicked her heels.

Eventually Zania was ready. "Cydir." she called. "Check this out."

Cydir turned and gaped. In place of the tall tree, stood a black drill. 6ft high, it stood. The base 3ft wide, the drill itself beginning 5ft wide and tapering to a point.

As Cydir moved closer, she spotted four handles on what must be the underside. There was a red On/Off switch on the side, within easy reach.

“Wow…” Cydir clapped gleefully. “That’s incredible!”

“Aw, not really.” Zania tried a modest smile, inwardly flustered.

“It is! Zania, you are amazing!”

Zania almost leapt in the air. “Nah, you’re amazing.” she said, earnestly, before she could halt her tongue.

Cydir laughed, misunderstanding. “You made a drill from a tree! Does it really work?”

Zania shrugged and punched the red button. The ground vibrated as the massive drill-bit whizzed around. Yet it remained impressively quiet, with nothing but a narrow rumble. Zania punched the button again and stood back.

Cydir was, again, amazed. “Well it’s quiet enough so we won’t be heard.”

Zania nodded. “Got mufflers up to it’s chin, this thing. If anyone feels the movement - though I doubt it two miles under - they’ll think it’s a freak earthquake. It happens.”

“Excellent.” Cydir’s face suddenly grew worried. “We forgot something. How are we ever going to know where we are?”

Zania grinned and reached into her pocket. She drew out a device that fit comfortably in her hand, though it was somewhat larger. “That car place - they had portable GPS too…”

Cydir shook her head - half in disbelief, half in mock-disapproval.

Zania went on. “This girl will tell us where we are on the planet, where we are on our route - that I already programmed in - see.” She held it out and Cydir moved closer. “Temperature, clock and all the usual fanciables. Plus, it has a light. And I brought spare batteries.”

Cydir took it and fiddles a little. “This is…”

“A really cool toy? Sure is.” Zania had no heart to take it back and begin just yet. “So you’re a closet gadget-geek then?”

Cydir smiled. “Apparently.”

Zania thought it was somewhat adorable, though she scolded herself for the very thought and said nothing.

Cydir gave the GPS back and grinned. “I’ll play later. Time to drill?” But Zania seemed to be in one of the fugues Cydir had noticed lately. They usually coincided with the mood swings, and from experience she knew that forcing Zania out of one would only result in a bad mood. Cydir had already decided to take Zania to a doctor if they kept on.

Zania, however, was once again involved in a battle between brain and heart. And, as usual, neither was winning. Eventually she escaped and saw Cydir standing a few feet away, pretending to look casual.

“Cy.” Zania said.

Cydir looked around and smiled. “Ready to go?”

Zania nodded, wondering as usual why Cydir made a point of ignoring the fact that she often vanished inside herself.

It was light enough for both to carry, though they could tell it would grow heavy sooner or later.

“When we get going on flat ground - this thing gets wheels.” Zania promised from the back, GPS hanging around her neck. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Cydir replied.

The drill was angled at a downwards slope, ready to travel two miles that way. Then, it would be levelled out, sent 16 miles in a straight line over the border, and sloped upwards once more.

Zania and Cydir had hefted their packs onto their backs, and each had grabbed two handholds. “It will get hot down there.” Cydir had warned Zania, changing out of her

jacket and jeans into shirt and shorts. Zania had turned away in a hurry as Cydir changed and self-consciously followed her suggestion.

At the speed of themselves - going at a trot - and the drill. Plus a few minutes to rest and rehydrate. Plus the estimation of how hard the earth would be.
Cydir had estimated their journey at approximately three hours to travel to the full 20 miles.

Zania nodded, mostly to herself. “Set to trot.” she called and hit the switch with her right hand.

Chapter 23

Zeke pulled Morgan into his office and closed the door.

“I just had a call.” he said, without preamble. “Jessica and Stannis had a vision.”

“Oh…shit…” Morgan dropped into a chair.

“Yeah…they can’t tell us exactly what they saw - Department policy, can’t change the future, cause an imbalance, all that crap. But they managed to persuade the pencil-pushers to give us a non-specific warning.”

“Which was?” Morgan chewed her nails nervously blanching at the taste of just-dried polish.

“Our attack - James, Cydir, Zania. Something’s gonna go wrong.”

“That’s it!” Morgan wailed, on her feet now.

“That’s what I said.” Zeke muttered, gloomily. “My messenger reeled off the policy for precognitive visions-”

“We see, we analyze, we tell no-one, we check accuracy after the event.” Morgan surmised a novel’s worth of explanation.

Zeke nodded. “When I tried to beg, the git on the phone hung up!”

“So what do we do?” Morgan looked all set to run around the farmyard screaming that the sky is falling.

But Zeke stopped her with a gentle touch on the arm. “What can we do? Warn them of imminent danger? They already know that part. All it’ll do is make James and Cydir too cautious, and Zania too bold.”

“But we have to say something! The precog visions are only shadows of what might be - like the Ghost of Christmas future. Maybe…maybe it’d be good if two got more cautious and one got more bold, might throw the current version off-track some.”

“Or it might help it along.” Zeke pointed out. He took Morgan’s hands and squeezed them. “We’ll say something, as they’re leaving, give them no time to ask more, not much time to think on it…I only hope we’re not going to be assisting the current path by doing so.”

Zania and Cydir high-fived and shouted out their tension over the smoking remains of a small horde of robots.

They had made it back home. Under the ground, through the air. Tired, injured, but the adrenaline still lingered from the battle-lust, so they celebrated for now.

As the excess energy wore thin, both finished up on the floor, leaning against newly cracked tiled walls.

“We did it.” Zania confirmed, needlessly.

“I think we are a good team.” Cydir smiled through the grime on her face. Tunneling through the ground had covered them both from head to foot, they seemed to sport the dirt and dust as if it were a trophy of their achievement. Besides, there was no time to wash - not until they reached their way-station.

Though neither spoke, they both rose at the same time and walked outside.

It was eerie, empty. Between Germany and here they had seen barely a soul. But confronted with their home-country, a usually bustling street, and a moment to reflect, the desertion seemed to speak of untold plagues and nightmares.

Zania jumped as a bird flew by, squawking. She looked sheepishly toward Cydir. Saw her looking sheepishly back. Realised she had jumped too.

“Where is everybody?” Cydir spoke in low tones, not quite a whisper, unable, unwilling to disturb the stillness before her.

“Hiding?” Zania guessed, matching the quiet voice. “Probably cowering right now, if they heard our little scrap.”

“We had no time for discretion.” Cydir said, with confidence. “And now we have no time for idleness.”

Zania nodded, stretched in preparation of growing her wings, and winced in just-noticed pain. “I think…we should go by car.” she said, panting slightly from the throbbing on her back.

Cydir looked around. “There is no-one here to see you grow wings. And while we fly, I make us invisible.”

“Yeah.” Zania turned her back to Cydir. “But I think it might really hurt.”

Her back was slashed in a deep, diagonal most of the way across. It seeped blood steadily, visible even through the dark clothing.

Cydir gasped and rummaged through the bags.

“Leave the Chiron3 thing. I’ll get healed when we get safe. You drive.” Zania ordered.

Cydir kept rummaging. “If you insist, but take these.” she tossed over a packet of strong painkillers.

Zania swallowed three as Cydir stood and tested herself for injuries. A gash in her right thigh was already clotting, but no more serious injuries were evident.

Still, when Zania passed back the painkillers she swallowed two , needing to dull the pain of darkening bruises.

They walked a short distance, by request of Cydir, until they found a driveway housing

two cars.

In her backpack, Zania found pen and paper, pushed a note through the letterbox, and ran painfully to the car.

Cydir had wrenched open the door and was already gunning the engine. “What did you say?” she asked, accelerating away.

“Um, we need to borrow the car to help save the world. Sorry for any inconvenience. It’ll be returned unharmed - or replaced - with money for compensation.”

“Do you think that will happen?” Cydir glanced over.

“Well, I’ll tell the Department guys when we get back from kicking the shit out of a bunch of robots and an evil mastermind. They can deal with it.”

Cydir shrugged, accepting. “You have an unusual way of doing things.”

Zania grinned, feeling the annoyingly familiar tug in her chest and stomach. “Comes from being an unusual person I guess.”

Cydir laughed and sped through a red light.

“You’re a rebel.” Zania said, approvingly.

“You taught me.” came the reply.

“Missed my calling, eh?”

“What’s that?” Cydir, concentrating on driving very fast, missed the joke.

“Headmistress of my very own school of anarchy. Dedicated to the collapse of governmental control and coercion by a nonviolent social revolution, thereby replacing the current system of majority capitalist rule with individual choice and true freedom..”

Cydir forgot about driving for a moment and gaped at Zania.

Zania pretended innocence with a big grin. “What?”

Cydir looked hard at the road. “I don’t know much about Anarchy. Or freedom. Or-”

Zania cut her off with a pat on the back, remaining calm herself though her chest seemed ready to explode.

“It’s not hard to learn things - I can teach you how and where to look if you can develop it from there.”

Cydir tried to look at Zania, couldn’t bring herself to show the strange tears that sprung from nowhere and pulled to a stop instead.

“I’d like to learn.” she said and looked Zania in the eyes, surprised to see a heretofore

unknown tenderness.. “After all this. If you’ll help me.”

Zania swallowed. “I’ll help.” she promised and tore her gaze away. “Hey, we’re here.” she cried.

Cydir nodded absently, still touched by the new depth of her friend.

Zania tried to ignore the eyes still looking at her, unwilling to look back. Feeling herself on the edge of revealing something she couldn’t allow herself to reveal. Not if they were to remain partners, friends.

Cydir watched Zania climb from the car, seeing the indifference for the shield it was. Not knowing, though, what truly lay beneath it.

“Time to rest up, beef up, brief up-” Zania began

“Then go out and kick the shit out of a bunch of robots and an evil mastermind.” Cydir finished, shutting her car door.

Zania nodded, risking a quick glance and smile at Cydir as they walked into the office building that served as a cover for Department E.

The telephone rang in Zeke’s office. He and Morgan were still fretting over the warning, deciding the best way to pass it on without overexciting or over-worrying their three fighters.

He picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Sir,” came a young male voice. “They’re here, Zania and Cydir just arrived.”

“Are they injured?”

“Yes, sir. Zania has a bad cut, she seems to be-”

“Treat them.” Zeke ordered. “Use Chiron3. Bring them food and drink and put them in a room to sleep.” he glanced at the clock, “Give them a refresher pill each, they only have three hours. At 9pm sharp, I will be waiting for them in room P3. And send a Chiron3 model to P1 with instructions on how to use it - I think we have an injury or two in there. Drop it in through the hatch in the ceiling - do not enter the room!”

“Yes sir.” replied the voice, then a click as he hung up.

“How finished is James?” Zeke asked Morgan.

“No idea. The room has no one-way glass or cameras. And I didn’t want to use the intercom or walk in.”

Zeke nodded. “Yeah, could be bad to disturb them, if they lose their thread it could be a disaster. Let’s hope they can figure out how to use Chiron3 easily. They have until 9:30.”

Morgan nodded. “Sure thing.”

“So, we have three hours until we brief. Are we ready?”

“I think so. Zania will be the one asking questions - but if it’s one we can’t answer then she’ll have to accept it.”

“Well, hopefully those two rubbed off on each other the right way. We need Cydir to have some of Zania’s fire and confidence. We need Zania to have some of Cydir’s control and imagination.”

“I think James’ll help with claming Zania down. We can’t afford her being reckless, this time it might kill more than just her.” Morgan sighed. “And hopefully those refresher pills will work properly. they’re gonna need to be at peak level.”

Zeke nodded. “Those pills will do it, love, no doubt there. They’re new and improved now, too, so they should give an extra kickstart. Plus, we added it to all the drinks in P1 for the other three to drink - I left a note to tell them, it was only fair - so they should be raring to go too.”

Morgan paced anyway, worried about every detail that could go wrong. Zeke was calmer, a little more confident that the hand of the Fates was due to finally give them a good deal.

At 9 o’clock, as promised, Zania and Cydir were led - healed and fully alert - into room P3, where Zeke and Morgan already sat waiting.

They sat themselves after greetings were exchanged, and waited - Zania somewhat impatiently - to be briefed.

Eventually Zeke spoke. “My friends, it’s certainly good to have you back here in one piece, and on our team for this.”

Cydir smiled. Zania eyed him suspiciously.

“I’ll skip the Beginners Guide - you know who Henrott is, what he’s doing and that you’re here to stop him. Soon you will meet your third team-member. He is called James, and is currently undergoing certain…improvements which will make him as good - if not better - than Henrott.”

“However, you need to know some things.” Morgan went on. “James and Henrott bear a striking resemblance to each other. This is because Henrott was created from the combined imagination of James and two friends, he was meant to be part of a computer game, the character’s physical appearance based on James. The three had no idea of their power, and that is why he is here and why he will look like James. The friends, you will not meet now. But rest assured that there is neither love nor loyalty between James and Henrott.

“James is no fighter, though, he is being modified because a connection between the ‘normal’ James and Henrott would have left him suffering from any injuries that Henrott sustained.”

“This sounds all…a little strange to me.” Zania said, raising a cynical eyebrow.

“It sounds strange to me too, my dear.” Zeke told her. “Nevertheless, I assure you it is true.”

Morgan continued. “We move on now. Henrott’s lair has been found underground, just outside Devon. We will shortly transport you within two miles of it and wait there for your return. If possible, bring Henrott incapacitated but alive. However, if you have to, bring him dead. You must also find and destroy all robots and disable all perimeter protection. This will allow Department E to take over the base and learn from what he created.” Morgan looked at Zeke.

“That’s basically all you need to know. If you have questions, I will answer any of those that I can.” he spread his arms invitingly.

Morgan stood. “And I will return with James.” she inclined her head and marched out of the room.

Cydir said nothing. Zania ground her teeth, but said nothing either.

“You have no questions?” Zeke was surprised.

“Yeah, but none you’ll wanna answer.” Zania spat out. “You want us to go risk our lives, but god forbid you tell us anything just outside your teeny little circle of need-to-know.”

Zeke was taken aback. “Zania. I would like to answer all your questions. If - when! - you

return I will be able to answer them all. But, for reasons I cannot tell you until you do return, right now I can only give you some."

"What kind of defence does he have?" Zania asked.

"100 robots. That's all we know - we dared not get close enough to test for auto-defence systems. But we can assume land mines, cameras, watch out for things in the walls..."

"Typical. Leave that bit to us, right? We're expendable."

Zeke opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Morgan's return.

She held open the door dramatically, ignoring Zania's rolling eyes.

"Ladies, meet James."

James walked through the door, causing the other three to simultaneously drop their jaws.

James was now 6ft tall and half-robot, as was Henrott. Only James's metal was solid white in colour, so bright it seemed to give off a light of it's own. He was covered from head to foot in it, though it was less a covering than it was his own skin. It moved as his muscles did, his face and body clearly defined. He gave off an aura of invincibility, but there were no visible weapons.

Morgan nodded at him and he raised his right arm.

As the three stunned observers looked, it changed from arm to machine gun, to scanner, to shield and back to arm again.

He spoke. “I have more weapon choices, though just the one scanner. I can ask it to scan anything, so I have no need of more. Also, my left hand is now able to fire lasers and electricity, and can temporarily paralyse any person I touch.” his voice was now smoothly, tunefully metallic. Unlike the grating agony that came from Henrott, he seemed to soothe the ear and lull the listener into a sense of security.

“My voice hypnotizes.” he confirmed. “No known weapon penetrates my armor.” he indicated the white spread. “I can jump 80 feet and run at 100 miles per hour.” he stepped forwards and held out his hand to Zania and Cydir. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I know together we can stop Henrott.”

Cydir simply sat, stunned. Zania shook his hand, regaining her sense of self with an inner shake.

“I’m Zania. Cydir is my partner.” she nudged Cydir who leapt to her feet.

“Yes, I am Cydir. And you are a magnificent creation.” she smiled.

Zania heard, saw and misunderstood the praise. She all but threw down his hand and switched to confrontation mode.

“So, you’re Henrott’s Daddy huh? Gonna be a bit hard to kill him innit?”

“On the contrary.” James told her smoothly, “I can’t wait for him to die.”

“Only if you have to.” Zeke chipped in, coming forward. “My, James, they did a wonderful job.”

James smiled. “And now they’re all pretending to get some rest. Janna went to Amy and Sara’s room-”

“Sara?” Zania interrupted. “And Amy? I spoke to Amy. Sara’s new girl, right?”

James nodded. “And Janna is my girlfriend. They are keeping her company until I come home.”

Zania softened a tiny amount, still unhappy with Cydir’s apparent fascination. Also unhappy at her own jealousy, but powerless to master it.

“So,” she barked, “you leave behind a lovely girl to go on a suicide mission that you created in the first place.”

James dropped his head, looking shamed and agonised.

Cydir dragged Zania over to the other side of the room.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, as quietly as she could.

At the other end, Zeke silently ushered Morgan, James and himself out and closed the door.

“What?!” Zania set her chin, knowing she was being stupidly stubborn, but unwilling to confess why.

“Stop confronting him like he’s the enemy! He is our ally - our friend. He wishes to capture or destroy Henrott just as we do - more, maybe, because he made him.”

“Well I don’t trust him.” Zania growled. “Though you seem to have fallen right under his spell.”

Cydir hesitated a second before grasping the full meaning. “What? You think I have a…crush on him? Not that it is really your business if I did, but I do not. He is to be our ally - and he is made fantastically. But that is all. Now tell me what this is really about. Do you simply wish to protect me or is there more?”

Zania turned away, eyes burning. “Of course I wanna protect you, but…”

“Yes?” Cydir’s voice was iron. “And aside from that - plus the fact that I can protect myself?”

Zania lost her thick-skin. Suddenly she was just a girl, lonely and in love with someone who would never love her back. She desperately fought the tears, but said nothing.

Cydir saw her shoulders slump and shudder. She stepped forward, still not

understanding, but realising her friend was somehow in pain.

She hugged Zania who let herself fall into it.

“Zania,” Cydir tried to find a way to speak. She remembered the sudden mood swings, the occasional unexpected kindness, and dragged herself to the only conclusion she could see.

“Zania. I do not wish to join another partner, or go on alone. You are my friend, now, my best friend. I will help you lose your insecurity. I will help you trust me, but I cannot do so if you are not willing to try.”

Zania pulled away, half-laughing. “Sure, Cy.” she forced calmness and drew back her walls.

‘I will do this right.’ she told herself. ‘I will be the friend she needs, and I will use my love to help her, not to push her away.’

“I’m sorry.” Zania said. “I’m insecure, and a bad friend.” the small lie felt like a brick on her tongue - but what else could she do? Tell the truth and alienate her only friend, and the only person she ever loved?

No. She was better and stronger than that. If keeping Cydir close meant concealing the way she felt, meant forcing a smile and breaking down some barriers. If that was the only way she could be around Cydir, then it was worth it.

It was time to come to terms with her emotions.

“I’m sorry, Cy. I guess I need a little practice at the friendship thing.” she smiled hopefully.

Cydir grinned back and gave her a quick hug. “It looks like they decided to let us fight in private.”

Cydir opened the door and waved timidly at the group of three across the corridor.

“Sorry, James.” Zania went to him as he entered. “Start over?”

“Never happened.” he agreed and held out his hand. “I’m James.”

Zania shook it, grinning. “I’m Zania.”

Zeke cleared his throat. “Everyone ready to go? Time passes…”

Cydir nodded.

Zania nodded.

James nodded.

Morgan shook hands with all three as they filed out in tow of Zeke.

“Be safe.” she warned, as planned. “There’s a high possibility that one of you comes to a bad end. Make sure you change that future.”

Before they could ask any further, she was down the corridor and almost out of sight.

“Come on, my dear.” chirruped Zeke. “Time to board the Save the World bus.”

The three of them followed, side-by-side, raring to go. Afraid, but ready to risk themselves to save all.

Chapter 24

James was first out of the van, looking around warily though logic told him they should be safe as long as Department E dared send anyone else here.

Next came Zania, followed closely by Zania.

They were in a field stretching farther than they could see. There was grass, long in places, brown in some, weeds grew in clumps around the way. All three were armed, not only with their own powers, but a belt of explosives and grenades, plus a Chiron3 unit.

One Guard stepped out with them. “I was asked to convey a message.” he told them. “Though most of the world may never know what you do here today, those who do will forever keep you in their hearts. Whether you succeed or not, the three of you are among the greatest in mankind. Do all you can, if all fails escape with your lives if possible. But do not be captured.” he gave them a small half-bow and stepped backwards. “We will remain here until you return, or for 24 hours - barring discovery.” he stepped into the van and the door slammed shut like an exclamation.

The three turned and began to walk.

“How soon are we looking for perimeter weapons?” James asked.

“Any time.” Cydir told him. “Look where your feet go before you put them there, if you

feel resistance or hear a noise, remain still. Once in sight of the compound, we are being watched and must be alert for anything coming from in front of us."

James nodded. "Is it okay to be afraid?"

"Zania patted his arm. "Long as it doesn't freeze you, it's okay. But we all watch each other's backs, if any of us gets still or injured, we help. Okay? You heard the man - if all else fails, we get the hell out alive."

"We need a plan of attack." Cydir decided. "Nothing rigid, something to keep us all in the same place doing the same thing."

Zania gave a harsh intake of breath and skipped over a small patch of ground. She turned and bent to look. "Mine." she told them. "Probably a highly sophisticated one, but not so much that it blows me up just for noticing it."

"Watch where you stand even more closely." Cydir advised James, needlessly.

Zania straightened up again. "So the plan of attack - we all stay close - that's within sight, watch each other for danger or injure, and kill as many things as we can. Leave nothing behind us, check every room, count the robots so we know when they're all gone."

"And Henrott?" James' voice trembled slightly.

"He won't jump in until there's nothing else to save him." Zania guessed. "And he'll be

armed, like you James, but we'll have a three pronged attack. James, you have to take main offensive. You're the one who can hold him off and distract him. Me and Cy, have one or two special moves to play with."

James nodded stiffly, pretending that was new to him, and clenched his hands.

They walked on in silence until they could no longer ignore the wall looming upon them.

"God, even the wall looks evil…" Zania muttered, peering closer.

'Eyes peeled.' James told himself, taking slow steps, studying the ground and the space in front of him.

"'Bots!" Cydir pointed.

6 robots were moving towards them at speed, visibly powering up weapons.

"You ready James?" Zania asked as the three spread out for space.

"No." he whimpered, but prepared himself for attack with one arm stretched out to shoot, and the other morphing into a blaster gun.

"Two each!" Cydir called. "Take the two closest to ya, finish first and help out!"

Zania cracked her knuckles and created a shield around her, knowing it could only

stay until she was forced to attack.

Cydir almost turned invisible, then remembered the need for eye-contact and grimaced. She flexed her legs and powered up her heat ray.

The robots were upon them, firing lasers from a distance.

James suddenly lost his emotion and moved into attack. He steeled himself against the lasers, which bounced painfully off his quickly-dented armor. Moving forward quickly, keeping his two enemies in sight but moving from side to side, he shot out blasts of his own laser. The robots ignored the hits, smouldering a little but no more. Then one shot hit a robot in the face and it hesitated, distracted. James threw out his right arm and fired a blast. The invisible force shot outwards and disintegrated the robot before James had hit the floor, thrown by the recoil.

The second robot advanced steadily, blocking the laser with a shield. James tried another blast, but realised too late it needed a moment to recharge. He scuttled backwards, trying to remember what else he could morph, and suddenly hit on an idea.

He jumped to his feet, accelerated backwards across the clear field until the robot was little more then doll size. Then he dug in a heel and loosed his full speed. He hit the robot body-on at 100mph, sending it crashing backwards almost out of sight. But not so far that James missed the pieces flying in the air as it landed.

Zania, more practiced, transformed into a huge wall and lowered her shield, moving to intercept her chosen foe. They both ran head-on into her, but not before loosing some lasers into the brick.

Ignoring the searing pain, she noted their disorientation, let loose an arm and grabbed one of the laser guns, turning it round and firing directly into the eyes of one.

The other had recovered already and they began a stand-off.

Cydir blasted out two rays of heat on the grass in front of her. The robots hesitated by the fire and stepped backwards. Cydir crouched, let out a scream and leaped upwards. From above she saw Zania in trouble and landed badly, missing the robot and twisting an ankle.

James saw both his partners in trouble and panicked. He shook his head, recovering from the impact of himself into the robot, and checked his blast gun. It was charged.

Seeing Zania was closest, he almost flew over and shoved her hard out of the way. Facing down the robot that turned towards him, raising a laser point blank into his face, James lifted his morphed arm and let loose full in it's face.

He flew far enough away to be out of the action. But Zania pulled herself up, holding her stomach and left arm where the lasers had penetrated, and hobbled speedily to where Cydir was being held down by a robot.

Zania kicked it hard in the head, knocking it to the ground. Cydir looked up, gratefully, and saw her friend was injured. Zania shook her head, pointing her towards the robot. Amy leaped to her feet, wincing at her twisted ankle, and looked at Zania for help.

James shouted from far back in the field. “Use a bloody grenade!”

Zania heard and pulled one from the belt she wore. “You right to jump?” she asked Cydir.

Cydir nodded and grabbed Zania, ready to leap.

Zania pulled out the pin and dropped it. She rolled the grenade gently over to where the robot was rising to his feet.

“Now!” she muttered. Cydir bent a little and leapt up and back.

The grenade blew, taking the robot with it. Cydir landed hard, unable to take the force on her ankle. She and Zania fell to the ground a few feet in front of James.

“Holy fucking crap…” Zania breathed and dropped flat on the floor, bleeding.

James pulled himself over to them, testing his bones for breaks, but finding only aches.

Cydir moved her ankle gingerly, feeling nothing more than swelling.

James pulled out his Chiron3 and gently turned Zania over.

She opened her eyes and moaned hoarsely. Her stomach bubbled blood and her left forearm streamed steadily.

Cydir spoke. “You know how?”

He nodded. “When you guys got injured earlier-” he broke off, realising he couldn’t reveal that part of their partnership just yet.

Cydir looked expectantly at him.

“We, found out how you were healed so I asked how to use one.” he averted his face, looking carefully at Zania’s injuries, hating to lie.

“Okay. Heal her.” she told him, pulling out her own Chiron3 and ripping the leg of her trousers open to get at the swollen ankle.

James nodded and, trying to fight embarrassment and long-held morality - pulled up Zania’s shirt. The stomach was worse, he decided, risk of internal bleeding and in general a bad place to have been shot with a laser. So he switched on the Chiron and aimed towards the center of the puddle of blood..

“Is he just gonna leave us here?” Zania wondered, once healed. She was training the Chiron3 in a wide ark over James’ body.

“Henrott?” Cydir asked. “He is probably amused.”

“We need to find a better way to do this.” James said. “We can’t go through this after every attack, Chiron heals but doesn’t pull us back up to full power. Nor do they last forever. Besides, what if we get 10, 20 robots? 6 nearly had us, it was too close!”

Zania switched off the healing unit and handed it back to James. He sat up, testing his body, amazed to feel what he had already seen.

We need to destroy the whole building.” Zania decided. “We got grenades, I have the Scream, James you have the blaster-thing. Cydir, you can make us invisible so we can plant the grenades-”

“No.” Cydir shook her head. “He will have sensors, I can make us invisible but not untraceable. How powerful might be the Scream and the Blaster together? Could you put a large hole in the building?”

“Maybe.” James said. “I don’t know about the Scream. But my Blaster at full power is pretty damn hellish.”

They sat quietly, allowing themselves time to think - sure Henrott was simply sitting inside, watching them but not sending out more attacks.

Zania watched Cydir for a moment. ‘I almost died.’ she thought. ‘I almost died and…never told the one person who means something to me that…well, they mean

something to me.’

James caught the glance, and smiled inwardly despite the situation, recognising the longing.

Cydir stared hard at the ground, turning her brain over and over. Finally she sat up.

“I have it!” she half-shouted. “I know what we can to do!”

Amy, Morgan, Zeke, Janna, Sara and Maggie could be mistaken for a group of friends in a party. They sat in front of the PS2, playing in twos. Tekken, Twisted Metal, the scene could indeed be taken as a gaming party.

But in the minds of all, even as they punched out combos, raced each other, more, there was not a mind in the room that did not constantly ask ‘Where are they now? Are they okay?’

Once, the intercom had rung to tell Zeke the van had arrived and dropped off the three heroes. Since then, nothing. The short time had felt like n eternity.

James and Zania stood at opposite sides of the building. Cydir stood, now, with Zania. The compound was small, compared to their expectations - James at one end could shout loudly and still be heard at the other - but heavily armed. They had stopped their perimeter just before the land mines became too hazardous, but still they knew that

anything else could be sent at them from inside.

“Ready?” Cydir asked. Zania nodded, powered her shield, and took deep breaths to expand her lungs. Cydir nodded. “James was good about 5 minutes ago, he is probably impatient by now. So we begin. Remember the signal.”

Zania grinned. “You in the middle of the air.”

“Right.” Cydir grinned back.

“Cy.” Zania stopped her as she turned to leave. “I-I have to say something. For if we don’t make it.”

“No. We will make it. Tell me then.” Cydir turned and left before Zania could say more.

Cydir jogged around to the side of the building, halfway in-between Zania and James. She took a deep breath, crouched, and leaped up and forwards!

James saw Cydir appear in midair, waited, judging for when she hit the center. As the reached the pinnacle and began to descend to the other side, he gritted his teeth, steeled himself, and shot from his Blaster.

On the other side of the building, Zania took in her breath as Cydir appeared. When she reached the center, Zania threw back her head and let loose a planet-destroying

Scream.

On either side, the building seemed to implode. Cydir landed safely, turned and pulled off her grenade belt. She grabbed the string that looped through all the pins and leaped again. In the center, she jerked the string and dropped the belt into the destruction below her.

She heard the explosion as she landed.

On his side, James climbed to his feet, waited for his blaster to recharge, looked for Cydir's signal - a leap with her arms held towards the sky.

On her side, Zania wobbled and let down her shield. The Scream, the greatest she had ever loosed, seemed to rob her of all energy.

Cydir turned and leapt, checking either side for her partners. She saw James, nodded, saw Zania, nodded - realised she was falling.

She landed and raced around to the front.

Zania was in a heap on the floor, awake, panting, but weak. She was attempting to grab the Chiron3 from where it was secured to her belt. Cydir arrived at speed and pulled it

loose for her.

“What happened?”

Zania shrugged limply. “The Scream - didn’t occur to me that a giant one like that would take everything from me.”

“Use Chiron, it’ll help. I’ll go tell James to head on round. We can go through the wreckage - I doubt much is left though. Henrott if anything - he might be out soon.”

“Get him.” Zania smiled weakly.

Cydir squeezed Zania’s shoulder and crouched.

James saw Cydir heading towards him from height and backed off to give her room to land. She did so, gently, not breaking stride before walking over to him.

“Scrap the three-way scavenger hunt, get round to Zania - the Scream took most of what she had. The Chiron’ll help, but we need to be with her.”

James nodded and took off. Cydir sighed, crouched and leapt yet again.

Zania saw Cydir arrive and waved, quickly stronger from the Chiron unit.

She both waved back as she reached her.

Zania pointed frantically to the rubble behind her.

She turned round and saw Henrott emerge, scratched, dull, but looking very much at full strength.

He raised an arm and pointed it at Cydir.

Zania threw down Chiron and summoned the last burst of energy she had, leaping to her feet and barreling into Cydir shoulder-first.

Cydir hit the floor in shock as Henrott fired his laser repeatedly in killing pattern.

For the second time, Zania was hit by multiple blasts. She fell to the floor.

James, coming around the corner, screamed intelligibly and fired off a powerful shot from his Blaster.

It hit Henrott from the side and he dropped to the floor. James threw himself to his feet and moved in, using his own laser to keep him down.

Henrott raised his arm as James drew close. “Father. What happened to our partnership? Our relationship? We are family!”

James scoffed, buying the time for his Blaster to charge. “You don’t know much about

human families, do ya son?" he raised his arm one last time and fired, from 5 feet away, at Henrott's head.

He scowled grimly at the pieces that remained and ran over to Zania, being held by Cydir.

Cydir was training both hers and Zania's Chirons on her, running it up and down over all the smoldering holes. She wept silently.

James knelt beside her and added his own unit to the battle.

Zania opened her eyes and tried to speak, but her neck was black from a shot and she could not.

In Cydir's mind came a familiar voice, faint, weakening, but there. "Cydir. I needed to tell you before…I tell now…"

Cydir shook her head. "You'll be fine, we have 3 Chirons. Just rest."

James looked between them, momentarily confused before remembering the telepathy he and his friends had given Zania.

"No. Cydir, I won't make this. I have to tell you…"

Cydir lowered her head, hiding her tears, and nodded.

“Cy…I love you. As a friend, as a partner, as more - as everything I ever wanted and needed to have. Don’t go to the wrong side now, okay? I leave you my heart, so you never forget what we did, the three of us.”

Cydir let out a wail. “Noooooo…”

Zania’s body grew heavy in her arms.

Chapter 25

The van returned to a welcoming party of two - Zeke and Maggie waited at the door.

Immediately the van pulled in, they ran out to greet the returning heroes.

James stepped out slowly. “Zeke.” he greeted.

“James, it’s Amy.” Zeke panted out.

James stopped in horror and let out a stream of expletives.

“Hospital.” Zeke pointed and James took off at high speed.

Cydir stepped out and looked after him.

“What-” she began, then shrugged and gave up. She turned to Zeke and tried to speak.

“We know.” he said. “How we know...is something you can find out whenever you’re ready to ask. Is she…here?”

Cydir nodded and reached back into the van. She came out once more with a lifeless Zania, half black and scarred from the laser. “Henrott..” she forced out. “In a bin bag.” she jerked her head behind her at the van and Zeke nodded understanding.

“Bring her to the hospital.” Maggie said, not bothering to signal to the stretcher she had

waiting out of sight - knowing Cydir was not ready to let go yet.

Cydir nodded and trailed after Zeke. Maggie said nothing, but walked beside Cydir, resting her hand gently on her shoulder.

In the hospital, James found Sara and Janna behind a curtain, by an unconscious figure.

“Amy!” he gasped.

“James! You’re back!” Janna grabbed him and held him close. “Oh God, Amy just…”

James looked, removed the sheet covering most of Amy, backed away in shock. “Was…Zania really that bad?” he moaned. “Oh…”

Sara spoke, not looking up or letting go Amy’s hand. Her voice was thick with tears. “Good to see you back, James. We know Cydir got hurt, but got better. And Zania did once…but then…” she paused and wiped her face. “The doctor says it’s a coma. The injuries are gonna be healed in a couple of days.”

“Department E tech…” James nodded. “And then?”

Sara shrugged, almost lifeless herself. “Dunno whether she’ll wake up…or who she’ll be if she does.”

The noise of people disturbed them and James opened the curtain to Cydir, Maggie, Zeke and Zania. Cydir laid her on a bed and sat down. James walked over, closing the curtain behind him - even now mindful of Cydir and Amy coming together.

“Cy…” he breathed.

She looked up, stood, and pulled him close. “She said…” she whispered, “She said she loves me. She said her heart is mine.” Cydir could say no more. She fell back into the chair and her shoulders shook violently.

Epilogue

And they all lived happily? Maybe.

Sara, James and Janna - with regular visits from anyone else who could come along - spend their time almost endlessly by Amy's bedside, reading, talking, begging her to wake up. It took three months, but one day Sara sat by her, reading from a newspaper. Amy's eyes opened.

The doctors told nobody to get too excited, coma patients often move, mumble, open their eyes. This could be nothing more.

But Janna and James, in secret, imagined Amy waking, being herself.

And eventually she did.

James was gladly changed from the white killing machine back into himself - minus agoraphobia, "No more li'l blue pills for me!" he said.

Zania was buried in the Department E garden. Cydir leaves flowers every day.

And Cydir asked eventually about why Zeke knew of Zania's demise. She took it rather well, already knowing of Henrott and James, she simply took some time to think. Cydir

and Janna became friends. And Cydir still races off now and then to do Department E missions, but now she always does it knowing she has two hearts.

Henrott's remains were helpful, he was pieced together - though never brought to life - and examined.

And Department E continued in secret, developing, creating, learning, recruiting psychics from everywhere they might appear.

Oh, and Henrott's bombs still lie dormant underground, the force field still stands so nobody could get close even if they knew how to disarm. So don't jump too hard…these things can get unstable when they get old…

The End

I must give credit to Brian Lumley for the basic idea behind Department E - I was inspired by his creation 'E-Branch' in the wonderful Necroscope sagas.

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