

[1]

THE F*CKENING

“There are three ways of doing things: the right way, the wrong way, and my way.”

- LYNN REID, 7-315 CTR-3

“WHAT’S THE HOLD-UP, CHIEF? THIS PLACE STINKS LIKE the south end of a north-bound—”

“No movement yet. Stand by.”

The comm went dead, but not before Rachel blew a raspberry to let us know just how she felt about “standing by”.

Nikki didn’t comment on the breach of protocol. We all felt the same way, I suspected. So far, my first mission out in the field was death by boredom with a side dish of yesterday’s catch. Even my gun smelled of anchovies.

Then again, I did have the privilege of smelling dead fish on another world, which was something, I supposed. Far be it from me to complain too much.

My team and I were tracking a Blank—an artificially rendered human that could carry vast amounts of data

embedded in its Code (or, in the undying words of Tony Cassidy, genius, a living, breathing memory stick). What this Blank was doing here, in a small fishing village just off the coast of N16 Italy, was anyone's guess. Our orders were to copy any data it contained, then quietly dispose of it.

The Blank had the kind of face you'd flounder to describe if it were right in front of you. The word "plain" might have come to mind, if your mind even made it that far. It was currently gawking at a stall of pastries in the village market and hadn't moved from its spot for the past half-hour. Zack, who was closest to it, was stuck nibbling on fish-on-a-stick a couple stalls over. If he didn't already hate fish, he probably would after today.

The comm clicked again. "*How's that scan coming along, Tony?*" Nikki asked.

"*Slow.*"

Tony was the kind of guy who answered a one-sentence question with a three-paragraph dissertation, footnotes not included. A one-word reply meant he was in a sour mood.

"*Lynn?*"

I looked in Nikki's general direction and gave a thumbs-up. "Still here, chief," I whispered.

Not that he couldn't see me from where he was leaning against a whitewashed brick wall, his arms loosely crossed. His studied pose wasn't fooling anyone, though. The black suit was a dead giveaway in the Mediterranean heat. He might as well have put up a sign that said, "I'M ON A MISSION, DON'T LOOK AT ME".

A beetle strolled up to my shoe, poked it with the tip of its antenna, then waddled back the way he'd come. A clump of glyphs trailed behind it, looking like someone had tried to sketch another beetle out of tiny words and symbols that gave off a faint glow. I recognized some of them, even

though I was only just starting to learn their meanings. Years ago, in another life, I'd called them firebugs.

"Blank's carrying a time-delay Code bomb, chief," Tony said over the comm before I could dwell too much on the before time. *"Nasty one, too. Something like that could wipe out the whole place."*

"Are you sure?" I asked. I remembered time-delay Code bombs from basic training. They weren't just bad news. They were we're-all-gonna-die news.

Tony scoffed. *"Of course I'm sure. I had to work through the mother of all encryption keys just to be sure. Whoever wanted to hide this thing knew exactly what they were doing."*

"There a shutdown switch?" Zack asked. Watching him mumble into his sleeve was mildly amusing, like seeing a toddler fall over.

"Not yet. I did find a timer, though. There's plenty of time left, but..."

"But?" Nikki prompted.

"This whole thing, it's built all wrong. The most important bits are practically hanging out, so to speak, and the basic stuff is buried deep."

Rachel chuckled over the line. *"Thanks for the visual, Tony."*

"Guys," I said. "Something's happening."

The Blank jerked up, like someone had pulled on an invisible string. It froze like that for a few seconds, back straight, arms half-raised. Then, just as abruptly, it turned and walked my way. I flattened myself against the wall and pretended to be interested in something across the square. The Blank strolled past, staring straight ahead. A string of afterimages trailed after it, like sketches from an old animation reel. That was new.

“We should probably move in,” I whispered.

The Blank stopped. It might have heard me, or maybe a different facet of its programming had kicked in. Its head turned towards me until our eyes met. There was no humanity in that stare—only darkness and, beyond that, a mass of glyphs cycling so fast they were almost a blur. I felt myself falling forward, even though I knew my body hadn’t moved. The Blank’s inner Code swirled and multiplied in hypnotic patterns, shapes melding and reforming into other shapes, like an ever-expanding kaleidoscope that threatened to engulf everything.

I blinked and found myself staring at an empty space. The Blank was sprinting away with no trace of its earlier clumsiness. I took off after it, fumbling for my gun. We’d been issued projectile weapons for this one, so I couldn’t risk taking a running shot. If a stray bullet so much as grazed one of the locals, Civilian Affairs would have all our—

I slammed into a woman carrying a wicker basket almost as big as she was. A torrent of fish spilled to the ground. I tripped and fell, then floundered back to my feet and raced on as a storm of curses erupted behind me and someone screamed, “*Pistola!*” Explaining this was going to be *fun*, assuming we lived that long.

My comm crackled. “*I found the switch! I just need one more minute...*”

“Make it a quick minute, Tony!” I said. My lungs were on fire.

The Blank ducked into an alley so quickly I would have missed it if not for the trail of glyphs. I turned the same corner just in time to see it slam against a door with a white crucifix embedded in the middle. The door was made of solid wood; it didn’t so much as creak.

I pointed my gun straight at the Blank. My hands were shaking, but I knew I couldn't miss. Not this close.

"*Oh, no,*" Tony said.

I felt a hard lump in my throat. "Oh, no' what?"

"*I think I might have set it off.*"

Oh, *no.*

The Blank turned and spread its arms, fingers curled inward. Its mouth opened inhumanly wide, but no sound came out. Tendrils of Code flickered in all directions. We were out of time.

I took the shot.

The Blank toppled forward, its face registering no expression other than mild surprise. Time slowed as I watched it fall. The shimmer of Code around it scattered like broken glass when it hit the ground at last.

The door opened, and an ancient woman in white robes walked out, a ray of sunlight glinting on the silver crucifix around her neck. She saw me and screamed—or, at least, it looked like she did. The shot was still ringing in my ears. Someone's hand covered mine and pressed down with gentle urgency, then I felt the weight of the gun leave my hands.

There was a faint clamor now. Above it, I heard Nikki telling me it's time to go. I finally tore my eyes away from the almost-human form on the ground, which was slowly fading into nothing, string by string.

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