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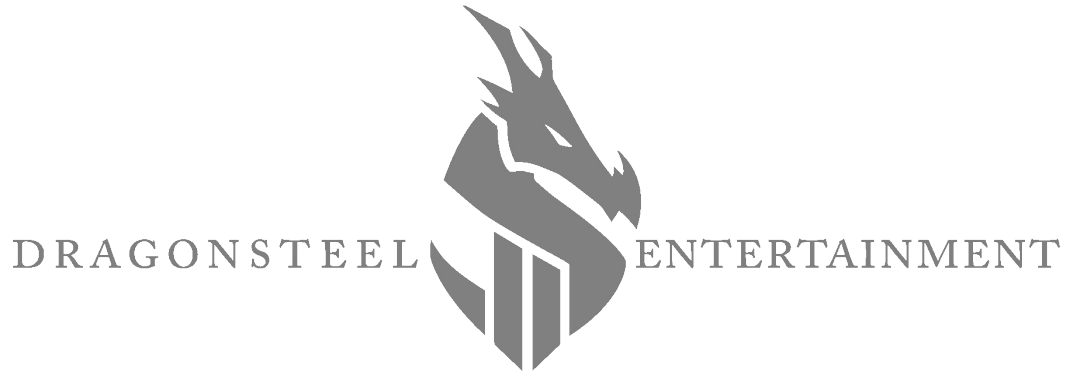
**BRANDON
SANDERSON**

**LEGION
SKIN DEEP**

"Sanderson is a master." — Library Journal

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SKIN DEEP

BRANDON SANDERSON



For Greg Creer,

Who was the first person other than myself to ever read one of my books. Thank you for the encouragement, my friend!

PART ONE

“WHAT’S HER ANGLE?” Ivy asked, walking around the table with her arms folded. Today, she wore her blonde hair in a severe bun, which was stuck through with several dangerous-looking pins.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore her.

“Gold digger, perhaps?” Tobias asked. Dark-skinned and stately, he had pulled a chair over to the table so he could sit beside me. He wore his usual relaxed suit with no tie, and fit in well with this room of crystalline lighting and piano music. “Many a woman has seen only Stephen’s wealth, and not his acumen.”

“She’s the daughter of a real estate magnate,” Ivy said with a dismissive wave. “She has wealth coming out of her nose.” Ivy leaned down beside the table, inspecting my dinner companion. “A nose, by the way, which seems to have had as much work done on it as her chest.”

I forced out a smile, trying to keep my attention on my dinner companion. I was used to Ivy and Tobias by now. I relied upon them.

But it can be damn hard to enjoy a date when your hallucinations are along.

“So . . .” said Sylvia, my date. “Malcom tells me you’re some kind of detective?” She gave me a timid smile. Resplendent in diamonds and a tight black dress, Sylvia was an acquaintance of a mutual friend who worried about me far too much. I wondered how much research Sylvia had done on me before agreeing to the blind date.

“A detective?” I said. “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

“I just did!” Sylvia replied with a chattering laugh.

Ivy rolled her eyes, refusing the seat Tobias pulled over for her.

“Though honestly,” I said to Sylvia, “the word ‘detective’ probably gives you the wrong idea. I just help people with very specialized problems.”

“Like Batman!” Sylvia said.

Tobias spat out his lemonade in a spray before him. It spotted the tablecloth, though Sylvia—of course—couldn’t see it.

“Not . . . really like that,” I said.

“I was just being silly,” Sylvia said, taking another drink of her wine. She’d had a lot of that for a meal that she’d only just begun. “What kind of problems do you solve? Like, computer problems? Security problems? Logic problems?”

“Yes. All three of those, and then some.”

“That . . . doesn’t sound very specialized to me,” Sylvia said.

She had a point. “It’s difficult to explain. I’m a specialist, just in lots of areas.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. Depends on the problem.”

“She’s hiding things,” Ivy said, arms still folded. “I’m telling you, Steve. She’s got an angle.”

“Everyone does,” I replied.

“What?” Sylvia asked, frowning as a server with a cloth over her arm made our salad plates vanish.

“Nothing,” I said.

Sylvia shifted in her chair, then took another drink. “You were talking to *them*, weren’t you?”

“So you *have* read up on me.”

“A girl has to be careful, you know. There are some real psychos in the world.”

“I assure you,” I said. “It’s all under control. I see things, but I’m completely aware of what is real and what is not.”

“Be careful, Stephen,” Tobias said from my side. “This is dangerous territory for a first date. Perhaps a discussion of the architecture instead?”

I realized I’d been tapping my fork against my bread plate, and stopped.

“This building is a Renton McKay design,” Tobias continued in his calm, reassuring way. “Note the open nature of the room, with the movable fixtures, and geometric designs in ascending patterns. They can rebuild the interior every year or so, creating a restaurant that is half eatery, half art installation.”

“My psychology really isn’t that interesting,” I said. “Not like this building. Did you know that it was built by Renton McKay? He—”

“So you see things,” Sylvia interrupted. “Like visions?”

I sighed. “Nothing so grand. I see people who aren’t there.”

“Like that guy,” she said. “In that movie.”

“Sure. Like that. Only he was crazy, and I’m not.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ivy said. “What a great way to put her at ease. Explain in depth how *not* crazy you are.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a therapist?” I snapped back at her. “Less sarcasm would be delightful.”

That was a tall order for Ivy. Sarcasm was kind of her native tongue, though she was fluent in “sterile disappointment” and “light condescension” as well. She was also a good friend. Well, imaginary friend.

She just had a thing about me and women. Ever since Sandra abandoned us, at least.

Sylvia regarded me with a stiff posture, and only then did I realize I’d spoken out loud to Ivy. As Sylvia noticed me looking at her, she plastered on a smile as fake as red dye #6. Inside, I winced. She was quite attractive, despite what Ivy claimed—and no matter how crowded my life had become, it also got terribly lonely.

“So . . .” Sylvia said, then trailed off. Entrées arrived. She had chic lettuce wraps. I’d chosen a safe-sounding chicken dish. “So, uh . . . You were speaking to one of them, just now? An imaginary person?” She obviously considered it polite to ask. Perhaps the proper lady’s book of etiquette had a chapter on how to make small talk about a man’s psychological disabilities.

“Yes,” I said. “That was one of them. Ivy.”

“A . . . lady?”

“A woman,” I said. “She’s only occasionally a lady.”

Ivy snorted. “Your maturity is stunning, Steve.”

“How many of your personalities are female?” Sylvia asked. She hadn’t touched her food yet.

“They aren’t personalities,” I said. “They’re separate from me. I don’t have dissociative identity disorder. If anything, I’m schizophrenic.”

That is a subject of some debate among psychologists. Despite my hallucinations, I don’t fit the profile for schizophrenia. I don’t fit *any* of the profiles. But why should that matter? I get along just fine. Mostly.

I smiled at Sylvia, who still hadn’t started her food. “It’s not a big deal. My aspects are probably just an effect of a lonely childhood, spent mostly by myself.”

“Good,” Tobias said. “Now transition the conversation away from your eccentricities and start talking about her.”

“Yes,” Ivy said. “Find out what she’s hiding.”

“Do you have siblings?” I asked.

Sylvia hesitated, then finally picked up her silverware. Never had I been so happy to see a fork

move. “Two sisters,” she said, “both older. Maria is a consultant for a marketing firm. Georgia lives the Cayman Islands. She’s an attorney . . .”

I relaxed as she continued. Tobias raised his glass of lemonade to me in congratulations. Disaster avoided.

“You’re going to have to talk about it with her eventually,” Ivy said. “We aren’t exactly something she can ignore.”

“Yes,” I said softly. “But for now, I’ll settle for surviving the first date.”

“What was that?” Sylvia looked at us, hesitating in her narrative.

“Nothing,” I said.

“She was speaking about her father,” Tobias said. “A banker. Retired.”

“How long was he in banking?” I asked, glad that one of us had been paying attention.

“Forty-eight years! We kept saying he didn’t need to continue on . . .”

I smiled and began cutting my chicken as she talked.

“Perimeter clear,” a voice said from behind me.

I started, looking over my shoulder. J.C. stood there, wearing a busboy’s uniform and carrying a tray of dirty dishes. Lean, tough, and square-jawed, J.C. is a cold-blooded killer. Or so he claims. I think it means he likes to murder amphibians.

He was a hallucination, of course. J.C., the plates he was carrying, the handgun he had holstered inconspicuously under his white server’s jacket . . . all hallucinations. Despite that, he’d saved my life several times.

That didn’t mean I was pleased to see him.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed.

“Watching out for assassins,” J.C. said.

“I’m on a date!”

“Which means you’ll be distracted,” J.C. said. “Perfect time for an assassination.”

“I told you to stay home!”

“Yeah, I know. The assassins would have heard that too. That’s why I had to come.” He nudged me with an elbow. I felt it. He might be imaginary, but he felt perfectly real to me. “She’s a looker, Skinny. Nice work!”

“Half of her is plastic,” Ivy said dryly.

“Same goes for my car,” J.C. said. “It still looks nice.” He grinned at Ivy, then leaned down to me. “I don’t suppose you could . . .” He nodded toward Ivy, then raised his hands to his chest, making a cupping motion.

“J.C.,” Ivy said flatly. “Did you just try to get Steve to imagine me with a larger chest?”

J.C. shrugged.

“You,” she said, “are the most loathsome non-being on the planet. Really. You should feel proud. Nobody has imagined anything more slimy, *ever*.”

The two of them had an off-again on-again relationship. Apparently, “off-again” had started when I wasn’t looking. I really had no idea what to make of it—this was the first time two of my aspects had become romantically entangled.

Curiously, J.C. had been completely unable to say the words about me imagining Ivy with a different body shape. He didn’t like to confront the fact that he was a hallucination. It made him uncomfortable.

J.C. continued looking the room over. Despite his obvious hangups, he was keen-eyed and very good with security. He’d notice things I would not, so perhaps it was good he’d decided to join us.

“What?” I asked him. “Is there something wrong?”

“He’s just paranoid,” Ivy said. “Remember when he thought the postman was a terrorist?”

J.C. stopped scanning, his attention focusing sharply on a woman sitting three tables over. Dark-skinned and wearing a nice pantsuit, she turned toward her window as soon as I noticed her. That window reflected back our way, and it was dark outside. She could still be watching.

“I’ll check it out,” J.C. said, moving away from our table.

“Stephen . . .” Tobias said.

I glanced back at our table and found Sylvia staring at me again, her fork held loosely as if forgotten, her eyes wide.

I forced myself to chuckle. “Sorry! Got distracted by something.”

“By what?”

“Nothing. You were saying something about your mother—”

“What distracted you?”

“An aspect,” I said, reluctant.

“A hallucination, you mean.”

“Yes. I left him home. He came on his own.”

Sylvia stared intently at her food. “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”

Being polite again. I leaned forward. “It’s not what you think, Sylvia. My aspects are just pieces of me, receptacles for my knowledge. Like . . . memories that get up and walk around.”

“She’s not buying it,” Ivy noted. “Breathing quickly. Fingers tense . . . Steve, she knows more about you than you think. She’s not acting shocked, but instead like she’s been set up on a date with Jack the Ripper and is trying to keep her cool.”

I nodded at the information. “It’s nothing to worry about.” Had I said that already? “Each of my aspects help me in some way. Ivy is a psychologist. Tobias is a historian. They—”

“What about the one that just arrived?” Sylvia asked, looking up and meeting my eyes. “The one who came when you weren’t expecting?”

“Lie,” Tobias said.

“Lie,” Ivy said. “Tell her he’s a ballet dancer or something.”

“J.C.,” I said instead, “is ex-Navy SEAL. He helps me with that sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing?”

“Security situations. Covert operations. Any time I might be in danger.”

“Does he tell you to kill people?”

“It’s not like that. Okay, well, it is *kind* of like that. But he’s usually joking.”

Ivy groaned.

Sylvia stood up. “Excuse me. I need the restroom.”

“Of course.”

Sylvia took her purse and shawl and left.

“Not coming back?” I asked Ivy.

“Are you kidding? You just told her that an invisible man who tells you to kill people just showed up when you didn’t want him to.”

“Not one of our smoothest interactions,” Tobias agreed.

Ivy sighed and sat down in Sylvia’s seat. “Better than last time, at least. She lasted . . . what? Half an hour?”

“Twenty minutes,” Tobias said, glancing at the restaurant’s grandfather clock.

“We’re going to need to get over this,” I whispered. “We can’t keep going to pieces every time

romance is potentially involved.”

“You didn’t need to say what you did about J.C.,” Ivy said. “You could have made something up. Instead, you told her the truth. The frightening, embarrassing, J.C.-filled truth.”

I picked up my drink. Lemonade in a fancy wine glass. I turned it about. “My life is fake, Ivy. Fake friends. Fake conversations. Often, on Wilson’s day off, I don’t speak to a single real person. I guess don’t want to start a relationship with lies.”

The three of us sat in silence until J.C. came jogging back, dancing to the side of a real server as they passed one another.

“What?” he asked, glancing at Ivy. “You chased the chick off already?”

I raised my glass to him.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Stephen,” Tobias said, resting his hand on my shoulder. “Sandra is a difficult woman to forget, but the scars will eventually heal.”

“Scars don’t heal, Tobias,” I said. “That’s kind of the definition of the word *scar*.” I turned my glass around, looking at the light on the ice.

“Yeah, great, whatever,” J.C. said. “Emotions and metaphors and stuff. Look, we’ve got a problem.”

I looked at him.

“The woman we saw earlier?” J.C. said, pointing. “She—” He cut off. The woman’s seat was empty, her meal left half-eaten.

“Time to go?” I asked.

“Yeah,” J.C. said. “*Now*.”

“ZEN RIGBY,” J.C. said as we rushed from the restaurant. “Private security—and, in this case, those are fancy words for ‘killer on retainer.’ She has a list of suspected hits as long as your psychological profile, Skinny. No proof. She’s good.”

“Wait,” Ivy said from my other side. “You’re saying that an assassin really *did* show up at dinner?”

“Apparently,” I replied. J.C. could only know what I did, so if he was saying these things, they were dredged from deep in my memory. I periodically looked over lists of operatives, spies, and professional assassins for missions I did.

“Great,” Ivy said, not looking at J.C. “He’s going to be insufferable to live with now.”

On the way out of the restaurant, at J.C.’s prompting, I looked at the reservation list. That simple glance dumped the information there into my mind, and gave the aspects access to it.

“Carol Westminster,” J.C. said, picking a name off the list. “She’s used that alias before. It was Zen for sure.”

We stopped at the valet stand outside, the rainy evening making cars swish as they drove past on the wet road. The weather dampened the city’s normal pungency—so instead of unwashed hobo, it smelled like recently washed hobo. A man asked for our valet ticket, but I ignored him, texting Wilson to bring our car.

“You said she’s on retainer, J.C.,” I said as I texted. “Whom does she work for?”

“Not sure,” J.C. said. “Last I heard, she was looking for a new home. Zen isn’t one of those ‘hire for a random hit’ assassins. Companies bring her on and keep her long term, use her to clean up messes, fix problems in legally ambiguous ways.”

I knew all of this, deep down, but J.C. had to tell it to me. I’m not crazy, I’m compartmentalized. Unfortunately, my aspects . . . well, *they* tend to be a little unhinged. Tobias stood to the side, muttering that Stan—the voice he hears sometimes—hadn’t warned him of the rain. Ivy pointedly did not look at the series of small wormholes in the post nearby. Had it always been this bad?

“It could just be a coincidence,” Tobias said to me, shaking his head and turning away from his inspection of the sky. “Assassins go out for dinner like everyone else.”

“I suppose,” J.C. said. “If it is a coincidence, though, I’m gonna be annoyed.”

“Looking forward to shooting someone tonight?” Ivy asked.

“Well, yeah, obviously. But that’s not it. I hate coincidences. Life is much simpler when you can just assume that everyone is trying to kill you.”

Wilson texted back. *Old friend called. Wanted to speak with you. He is in car. Okay?*

I texted back. *Who?*

Yol Chay.

I frowned. Yol? Was the assassin his? *Fine*, I texted.

A few minutes out, Wilson texted to me.

“Yo,” J.C. said, pointing. “Scope it.”

Nearby, Sylvia was getting into a car with a man in a suit. Glen, reporter for the *Mag*. He shut the door for Sylvia, glanced at me and shrugged, tipping his antiquated fedora before climbing in the other side of the car.

“I *knew* she had an angle!” Ivy said. “It was a setup! I’ll bet she was recording the entire date.”

I groaned. The *Mag* was a tabloid of the worst kind—meaning that it published enough truths mixed

with its fabrications that people kind of trusted it. For most of my life I'd avoided mainstream media attention, but recently the papers and news websites had latched on to me.

J.C. shook his head in annoyance, then jogged off to scout the perimeter as we waited for the car.

"I *did* warn you something was up," Ivy said, arms folded as we stood beneath the canopy with the valets, rain pattering above.

"I know."

"You're normally more suspicious than this. I'm worried that you are developing a blind spot for women."

"Noted."

"And J.C. is disobeying you again. Coming on his own when you pointedly left him at home? We haven't ever discussed what happened in Israel."

"We solved the case. That's all that happened."

"J.C. shot your gun, Steve. He—an aspect—shot *real people*."

"He moved my arm," I said. "I did the shooting."

"That's a blurring between us that has never happened before." She met my eyes. "You're trying to find Sandra again; I think you purposely sabotaged this date to have an excuse to avoid future ones."

"You're jumping to conclusions."

"I'd better be," Ivy said. "We had an equilibrium, Steve. Things were working. I don't want to start worrying about aspects vanishing again."

My limo finally pulled up, Wilson—my butler—driving. It was late evening, and the regular driver only worked a normal eight-hour shift.

"Who's that in the back?" J.C. said, jogging up and trying to get a clear view through the tinted windows.

"Yol Chay," I said.

"Huh," J.C. said, rubbing his chin.

"Think he's involved?" I asked.

"I'd bet your life on it."

Delightful. Well, a meeting with Yol was always interesting, if nothing else. The restaurant valet pulled open the door for me. I moved to step in, but J.C. put his hand on my chest and stopped me, unholstering his sidearm and peering in.

I glanced at Ivy and rolled my eyes, but she wasn't looking at me. Instead, she watched J.C., smiling fondly. What was *up* with those two?

J.C. stood back and nodded, removing his hand from my chest. Yol Chay lounged inside my limo. He wore a pure white suit, a silver bow tie, and a polished set of black-and-white oxford shoes. He topped it all with sunglasses that had diamonds studding the rims—an extremely odd outfit for a fifty-year-old Korean businessman. For Yol, though, this was actually reserved.

"Steve!" he said, holding out a fist to be bumped and speaking with a moderately thick Korean accent. He said the name *Stee-vuh*. "How are you, you crazy dog?"

"Dumped," I said, letting my aspects climb in first, so the valet didn't close the door on them. "The date didn't even last an hour."

"What? What is wrong with the women these days?"

"I don't know," I said, climbing in and sitting down as my aspects arranged themselves. "I guess they want a guy who doesn't remind them of a serial killer."

"Boring," Yol said. "Who wouldn't want to date you? You're a steal! One body, forty people. Infinite variety."

He didn't quite understand how my aspects worked, but I forgave him that. *I wasn't always sure how they worked.*

I let Yol serve me a cup of lemonade. Helping him with his problem a few years back had been some of the most fun, and least stress, I'd ever encountered on a project. Even if it *had* forced me to learn to play the saxophone.

"How many today?" Yol asked, nodding to the rest of the limo.

"Only three."

"Is the spook here?"

"I'm *not* CIA," J.C. said. "I'm special forces, you twit."

"Is he annoyed to see me?" Yol asked, grinning behind his garish sunglasses.

"You could say that," I replied.

Yol's grin deepened, then he took out his phone and tapped a few buttons. "J.C., I just donated ten grand in your name to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. I just thought you'd like to know."

J.C. growled. Like, *literally* growled.

I leaned back, inspecting Yol as the limo drove us. Another followed behind, filled with Yol's people. Yol had given Wilson instructions, apparently, as this wasn't the way home. "You play along with my aspects, Yol," I said. "Most others don't. Why is that?"

"It's not play to you, is it?" he asked, lounging.

"No."

"Then it isn't to me either." His phone chirped the sound of some bird.

"That's actually the call of an eagle," Tobias said. "Most people are surprised to hear how they really sound, as the American media uses the call of the red-tailed hawk when showing an eagle. They don't think the eagle sounds regal enough. And so we lie to ourselves about the very identity of our national icon . . ."

And Yol used this as his ringtone. Interesting. The man answered the phone and began speaking in Korean.

"Do we *have* to deal with this joker?" J.C. said.

"I like him," Ivy said, sitting beside Yol. "Besides, you yourself said he was probably involved with that assassin."

"Yeah, well," J.C. said. "We could get the truth out of him. Use the old five-point persuasion method." He made a fist and pounded it into his other hand.

"You're terrible," Ivy said.

"What? He's so weird, he'd probably get off on it."

Yol hung up his phone.

"Any problems?" I asked.

"News of my latest album."

"Good news?"

Yol shrugged. He had released five music albums. All had flopped spectacularly. When you were worth 1.2 billion from a life of keen commodities investing, a little thing like poor sales on your rap albums was not going to stop you from making more.

"So . . ." Yol said. "I have an issue I might need help with."

"Finally!" J.C. said. "This had better not involve trying to make people listen to that awful music of his." He paused. "Actually, if we need a new form of torture . . ."

"Does this job involve a woman named Zen?" I asked.

“Who?” Yol frowned.

“Professional assassin,” I replied. “She was watching me at dinner.”

“Could be wanting a date,” Yol said cheerfully.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Our problem,” Yol said, “might involve some danger, and our rivals are not above hiring such . . . individuals. She’s not working for me though, I promise you that.”

“This job,” I said. “Is it interesting?”

Yol grinned. “I need you to recover a corpse.”

“Oooo . . .” J.C. said.

“Hardly worth our time,” Tobias said.

“There’s more,” Ivy said, studying Yol’s expression.

“What’s the hitch?” I asked Yol.

“It’s not the corpse that is important,” Yol said, leaning in. “It’s what the corpse knows.”

“INNOVATION INFORMATION INCORPORATED,” J.C. said, reading the sign outside the business campus as we pulled through the guarded gate. “Even *I* can tell that’s a stupid name.” He hesitated a moment. “*I* is a stupid name, right?”

“The name is a little obvious,” I replied.

“Founded by engineers,” Yol said, “run by engineers, and—unfortunately—named by engineers. They’re waiting for us inside. Note, Steve, that what I’m asking you to do goes beyond friendship. Deal with this for me, and our debt will be settled, and then some.”

“If a hit woman is really involved, Yol,” I said reluctantly, “that’s not going to be enough. I’m not going to risk my life for a favor.”

“What about wealth?”

“I’m already rich,” I said.

“Not riches, *wealth*. Complete financial independence.”

That gave me pause. It was true; I had money. But my delusions required a lot of space and investment. Many rooms in my mansion, multiple seats on the plane each time I fly, fleets of cars and drivers whenever I wanted to go somewhere for an extended time. Perhaps I could have bought a smaller house and forced my aspects to live in the basement or shacks on the lawn. The problem was that when they were unhappy—when the illusion of it started to break down—things got . . . bad for me.

I was finally dealing with this thing. Whatever twisted psychology made me tick, I was far more stable now than I had been at the start. I wanted to keep it that way.

“Are you in personal danger?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” Yol said. “I might be.” He handed me an envelope.

“Money?” I asked.

“Shares in I3,” Yol said. “I purchased the company six months ago. The things this company is working on are revolutionary. That envelope gives you a ten percent stake. I’ve already filed the paperwork. It’s yours, whether you take the job or not. A consultation fee.”

I fingered the envelope. “If I don’t solve your problem, this will be worthless, eh?”

Yol grinned. “You got it. But if you do solve it, that envelope could be worth tens of millions. Maybe hundreds of millions.”

“Damn,” J.C. said.

“Language,” Ivy said, punching him in the shoulder. At this rate, those two were either heading for a full-blown screaming match or a makeout session. I could never tell.

I looked at Tobias, who sat across from me in the limo. He leaned forward, clasping his hands before him, looking me in the eye. “We could do a lot with that money,” he said. “We might have the resources, finally, to track *her* down.”

Sandra knew things about me, things about how I thought. She understood aspects. Hell, she’d taught me how they work. She’d captivated me.

And then she’d gone. In an instant.

“The camera,” I said.

“The camera doesn’t work,” Tobias said. “Arnaud said he could be *years* away from figuring it out.”

I fingered the envelope.

“She’s actively blocking your efforts to find her, Stephen,” Tobias said. “You can’t deny that. Sandra doesn’t want to be found. To get to her, we’ll need resources. Freedom to ignore cases for a while, money to overcome roadblocks.”

I glanced at Ivy, who shook her head. She and Tobias disagreed on what we should be doing in regard to Sandra—but she’d had her say earlier.

I looked back at Yol. “I assume that I have to agree before I can know about the technology you people are involved in?”

Yol spread his hands. “I trust you, Steve. That money is yours. Go in. Hear them out. That’s all I’m asking. You can say yes or no afterward.”

“All right,” I said, pocketing the envelope. “Let me hear what your people have to say.”

I3 WAS ONE of those “new” technology companies, the kind decorated like a daycare, with bright walls painted in primary colors and bean bag chairs set at every intersection. Yol popped some ice cream bars out of a chest freezer and tossed one to each of his bodyguards. I declined, hands behind my back, but he then wagged one at the empty air between us.

“Sure,” Ivy said, holding out her hands.

I pointed, and Yol tossed one in her direction. Which was a problem. Those who work closely with me know to just pantomime, letting my mind fill in the details. Since Yol *actually* threw the thing, my ability to imagine broke down for a moment.

The bar split into two. Ivy caught one, sidestepping the other—the real one—which hit the wall and bounced to the floor.

“I didn’t need two,” Ivy said, rolling her eyes. She stepped over the fallen ice cream bar and unwrapped hers, but she looked uncomfortable. Any time a flaw appeared in my ability to mediate between my imaginary world and the real one, we were in dangerous territory.

We went on, passing glass-walled meeting rooms. Most of these were empty, as one would expect at this hour, but every table was covered in small plastic bricks in various states of construction. Apparently at I3, business meetings were supplied with plenty of Legos to accompany the conversation.

“The receptionist at the front desk is new,” Ivy noted. “She had trouble finding the visitor name badges.”

“Either that,” Tobias said, “or visitors are rare here.”

“Security is *awful*,” J.C. growled.

I looked at him, frowning. “The doors are key carded. That’s good security.”

J.C. snorted. “Key cards? Please. Look at all of these windows. The bright colors, the inviting carpets . . . and is that a *tire swing*? This place just screams ‘hold the door for the guy behind you.’ Key cards are useless. At least most of the computers are facing away from windows.”

I could imagine how this place might feel during the day, with its playful atmosphere, treat bins in the halls and catchy slogans on the walls. It was the type of environment carefully calculated to make creative types feel comfortable. Like a gorilla enclosure for nerds. The lingering scents in the air spoke of an in-house cafeteria, probably free, to keep the engineers plump and fed—and to keep them on campus. Why go home when you can have a meal here at six? And since you’re hanging around, you might as well get some work done . . .

That sense of playful creativity seemed thin, now. We passed engineers working into the night, but they hunched over their computers. They’d glance at us, then shrink down farther and not look up again. The foosball table and arcade machines stood unused in the lounge. It felt like even in the evening this place should have born a pleasant buzz of chatter. Instead, the only sounds were hushed whispers and the occasional beep from an idle game machine.

Ivy looked to me, and seemed encouraged that I’d noticed all of this. She gestured, indicating that I should go farther. *What does it mean?*

“The engineers know,” I said to Yol. “There has been a security breach, and they’re aware of it. They’re worried that the company is in danger.”

“Yeah,” Yol said. “Word should never have gotten to them.”

“How did it?”

“You know these IT types,” Yol said from behind his sparkling sunglasses. “Freedom of information, employee involvement, all of that nonsense. The higher-ups held a meeting to explain what had happened, and they invited everyone but the damn cleaning lady.”

“Language,” Ivy said.

“Ivy would like you not to swear,” I said.

“Did I swear?” Yol asked, genuinely confused.

“Ivy has a bit of puritan in her,” I said. “Yol, what *is* this technology? What do they develop here?”

Yol stopped beside a meeting room—a more secure one, its only glass a small, square window on its door. A handful of men and women waited inside. “I’ll let them tell you,” Yol said as one of his security guards held open the door.

“EVERY CELL IN your body contains seven hundred and fifty megs of data,” the engineer said. “For comparison, one of your fingers holds as much information as the *entire internet*. Of course, your information is repeated and redundant, but the fact remains that cells are capable of great storage.”

Garvas, the engineer, was an affable man in a button-down shirt with a pair of aviator sunglasses hanging from the pocket. He wasn’t particularly overweight, but had some of the round edges that came from a life working a desk job. He was building a dinosaur out of Legos on the table as he spoke while Yol paced outside, taking a call.

“Do you have any idea of the potential there?” Garvas continued, snapping on the head. “As the years pass, technology shrinks, and people grow tired of carrying around bulky laptops, phones, tablets. Our goal is to find a way to do away with that by using the body itself.”

I glanced at my aspects. Ivy and Tobias sat at the table with us. J.C. stood by the door, yawning.

“The human body is an incredibly efficient machine,” said another engineer. A thin man with an eager attitude, Laramie had built his Legos into an ever-growing tower. “It has great storage, self-replicating cells, and comes with its own power generator. The body is also very long-lived, by current manufacturing standards.”

“So you were turning human bodies,” I said, “into computers.”

“They’re *already* computers,” Garvas said. “We were simply adding a few new features.”

“Imagine,” said the third engineer—a thin, arrow-faced woman named Loralee. “Instead of carrying a laptop, what if you made use of the organic computer already built into you? Your thumb becomes storage. Your eyes are the screen. Instead of a bulky battery, you eat an extra sandwich in the morning.”

“That,” J.C. said, “sounds *freakish*.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” I said.

“What?” Garvas asked.

“Figure of speech,” I said. “So, your thumb becomes storage. It looks like, what. A . . . um . . . USB drive?”

“He was going to say ‘thumb drive,’” Laramie said. “We really need to stop using thumbs as an example.”

“But it’s so *neat!*” Loralee said.

“Regardless,” Garvas said, “what we were doing didn’t change the look of the organ.” He held up his thumb.

“You’ve had the procedure *done?*” I asked. “You’re testing on yourselves?”

“Freaks,” J.C. said, shifting uncomfortably. “This is going to be about zombies. I’m calling it now.”

“We’ve done some very initial tests,” Garvas said. “Most of what we just told you is just a dream, goal. Here, we’ve been working on the storage aspect exclusively, and have made good progress. We can embed information into cells, and it will stay there, reproduced by the body into new cells. My thumb doubles as backup for my laptop. As you can see, there are no adverse effects.”

“We keep it in the DNA of the muscles,” Laramie said, excited. “Your genetic material has tons of extraneous data anyway. We mimic that—all we have to do is add in a little extra string of information, with marks to tell the body to ignore it. Like commented-out sections of code.”

“I’m sorry,” J.C. said. “I don’t speak super-geek. What did he just say?”

“When you ‘comment out’ something in computer code,” Ivy explained, “you write lines, but tell the program to ignore them. That way, you can leave messages to other programmers about the code.”

“Yup,” J.C. said. “Gibberish. Ask him about the zombies.”

“Steve,” Ivy said to me, pointedly ignoring J.C., “these people are serious and excited. Their eyes light up when they talk, but there are reservations. They are being honest with you, but they *are* afraid.”

“You say this is perfectly safe?” I asked the three.

“Sure,” Garvas said. “People have been doing this with bacteria for years.”

“The trouble is not the storage,” Lorelee said. “It’s access. Sure, we can store all of this in our cell—but writing and reading it is very difficult. We have to inject data to get it in, and have to remove cells to retrieve it.”

“One of our teammates, Panos Maheras, was working on a prototype delivery mechanism involving a virus,” Garvas said. “The virus infiltrates the cells carrying a payload of genetic data, which it then splices into the DNA.”

“Oh, *lovely*,” Ivy said.

I grimaced.

“It’s *perfectly safe*,” Garvas said, a little nervous. “Panos’s virus had failsafes to prevent it from over-reproducing. We have done only limited trials, and have been very careful. And note, the virus route was only *one* method we were researching.”

“The world will soon change,” Laramie said, excited. “Eventually, we will be able to write to the genetic hard disk of every human body, using its own hormones to—”

I held up a hand. “What can the virus you made do *right now*?”

“Worst case?” Lorelee asked.

“I’m not here to talk about ponies and flowers.”

“Worst case,” Lorelee said, looking to the others, “the virus that Panos developed could be used to deliver huge chunks of useless data to people’s DNA—or it could cut out chunks of their DNA.”

“So . . . zombies?” J.C. said.

Ivy grimaced. “Normally, I’d call him an idiot. But . . . yeah, this kind of sounds like zombies.”

Not again, I thought. “I hate zombies.”

The engineers all gave me baffled looks.

“. . . Zombies?” Lorelee asked.

“That’s where this is going, isn’t it?” I asked. “You turning people into zombies by accident?”

“Wow,” Garvas said. “That’s *way* more awesome than what we actually did.”

The other two looked at him, and he shrugged.

“Mister Leeds,” Laramie said, looking back to me. “This is not science fiction. Removing chunks of someone’s DNA doesn’t immediately produce some kind of zombie. It just creates an abnormal cell. One that, in our experiments, has a habit of proliferating uncontrollably.”

“Not zombies,” I said, feeling cold. “Cancer. You created a virus that gives people cancer.”

Garvas winced. “Kind of?”

“It was an unintended result that is perfectly manageable,” Laramie said, “and only dangerous if used malignly. And why would anyone want to do that?”

We all stared at him for a moment.

“Let’s shoot him,” J.C. said.

“Thank heavens,” Tobias replied. “You hadn’t suggested we shoot someone in over an hour, J.C. I was beginning to think something was wrong.”

“No, listen,” J.C. said. “We can shoot Pinhead McWedgy over there, and it will teach everyone in this room an important life lesson. One about not being a stupid mad scientist.”

I sighed, ignoring the aspects. “You said the virus was developed by a man named Panos? I’ll want to talk to him.”

“You can’t,” Garvas said. “He’s . . . kind of dead.”

“How surprising,” Tobias said as Ivy sighed and massaged her forehead.

“What?” I asked, turning to Ivy.

“Yol said a body was involved,” Ivy said. “And their company is about storing data in human cells so . . .”

I looked to Garvas. “He had it in him, didn’t he? The way to create this virus? He stored the data for your product inside his own cells.”

“Yes,” Garvas said. “And somebody stole the corpse.”

“SECURITY NIGHTMARE,” J.C. said as we made our way to the office of Panos, the deceased gene-splicer.

“So far as we can tell,” Lorelee said, “Panos’s death was perfectly natural. We were all devastated when he had his fall, as he was a friend. But nobody thought it was anything more than a random accident on the ski slopes.”

“Yeah,” J.C. said, walking with my other two aspects just behind him, “because scientists working on doomsday viruses dying in freak accidents isn’t *at all* suspicious.”

“Occasionally, J.C.,” Tobias said, “accidents *do* happen. If someone wanted his secrets, I suspect killing him and stealing his body would be low on the list of methods.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?” I asked Garvas, who walked on my other side. “It could be some kind of hoax, part of an espionage ploy of some sort.”

“We’re very sure,” Garvas replied. “I saw the corpse. The neck doesn’t . . . uh . . . turn that way on someone alive.”

“We’ll want to corroborate that,” J.C. said. “Get coroner reports, photos if possible.”

I nodded absently.

“If we follow the simplest line of events,” Ivy said, “this is quite logical. He dies. Someone discovers that his cells hide information. They snatch the body. I’m not saying it couldn’t be something else, but I find what they’re saying to be plausible.”

“When did the body disappear?” I asked.

“Yesterday,” Lorelee said. “Which was two days after the accident. The funeral was to be today.”

We stopped in the hallway beside a wall painted with cheerful groups of bubbles, and Garvas used his key card to open the next door.

“Do you have any leads?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Or, well, too many. Our area of research is a hot one, and lots of biotech companies are involved in the race. Any one of our less scrupulous rivals could be behind the theft.” He pulled open the door for me.

I took the door from Garvas and held it, much to the man’s confusion. If I didn’t, though, he was likely to walk through while my aspects were trying to enter. The engineers entered. Once they’d gone in, my aspects went through, and I followed. Where had Yol run off to?

“Finding out who did this should be easy,” J.C. said to me. “We just have to figure out who hired that assassin to watch us. What I don’t get is why everyone is so worried. So the nerds accidentally invented a cancer machine. Big deal. I’ve got one of those already.” J.C. held up a cellphone and wiggled it.

“You have a mobile phone?” Ivy asked, exasperated.

“Sure,” J.C. said. “Everyone does.”

“And who are you going to call? Santa?”

J.C. stuffed the phone away, drawing his lips to a line. Ivy danced around the fact that none of them were real, but she always seemed—deep down—to be okay with it, unlike J.C. As we walked along this new hallway, Ivy fell in beside him and began saying some calming things, as if embarrassed for calling out his hallucinatory nature.

This newer area of the building was less like a kindergarten, more like a dentist’s office, with

individual rooms along a hallway decorated in tans with fake plants beside doorways. Garvas fished out another key card as we reached Panos's office.

"Garvas," I asked, "why didn't you go to the government with your virus?"

"They'd have just wanted to use it as a weapon."

"No," I said, putting my hand on his arm. "I doubt it. A weapon like this wouldn't serve a tactical purpose in war. Give the enemy troops cancer? It would take months or years to take effect, and even then would be of marginal value. A weapon like this would only be useful as a threat against a civilian population."

"It's not supposed to be a weapon at all."

"And gunpowder was first just used to make fireworks," I said.

"I mentioned that we were looking for other methods to read and write into our cells, right?" Garvas said. "Ones that didn't use the virus?"

I nodded.

"Let's just say that we started those projects because some of us were concerned about the virus approach. Research on Panos's project was halted as we tried to find a way to do all of this with amino acids."

"You still should have gone to the government."

"And what do you think they'd have done?" Garvas asked, looking me right in the eye. "Pat us on the heads? Thank us? Do you know what happens to laboratories that invent things like this? They vanish. Either they get consumed by the government or they get dismantled. Our research here is important . . . and, well, lucrative. We don't want to get shut down; we don't want to be the subject of a huge investigation. We just want this whole problem to go away."

He pulled open the door and revealed a small, neat office. The walls were decorated with an array of uniformly framed, autographed pictures of science fiction actors.

"Go," I said to my aspects, holding Garvas back.

The three entered the office, poking and prodding at objects on the desk and walls.

"He was of Greek descent," Ivy said, inspecting some books on the wall and a set of photos. "Second-generation, I'd say, but still spoke the language."

"What?" J.C. said. "Panos isn't a w—"

"Watch it," Ivy said.

"—Mexican name?"

"No," Tobias said. He leaned down beside the desk. "Stephen, some aid, please?"

I walked over and moved the papers on the desk so Tobias could get a good look at each of them. "Dues to a local fablab . . ." Tobias said. "Brochure for a Linux convention . . . D.I.Y. magazine . . . Our friend here was a maker."

"Speak dumb person, please," J.C. said.

"It's a subculture of technophiles and creative types, J.C.," Tobias said. "A parallel, or perhaps an outgrowth, of the open source software movement. They value hands-on craftsmanship and collaboration, particularly in the creative application of technology."

"He kept each name badge from conventions he attended," Ivy said, pointing toward a stack of them. "And each is signed not by celebrities, but by—I'd guess—people whose talks he attended. I recognize a few of the names."

"See that rubber wedge on the floor?" J.C. said with a grunt. "There's a scuff on the carpet. He often stuffed the wedge under his door to prop it open, circumventing the auto-lock. He liked to leave his office open for people to stop by and chat."

I poked at a few stickers stuck to the top of his desk. *Support Open Source, Information for Every Body, Words Should Be Free.*

Tobias had me sit at the computer. It wasn't password protected. J.C. raised an eyebrow.

Panos's latest website visits were forums, where he posted energetically, but politely, about information and technology issues. "He was enthusiastic," I said, scanning some of his emails, "and talkative. People genuinely liked him. He often attended nerdy conventions, and though he would be reticent to talk about them at first, if you could pry a little bit out of him, the rest would come out like a flood. He was always tinkering with things. The Legos were his idea, weren't they?"

Garvas stepped up beside me. "How . . ."

"He believed in your work," I continued, narrowing my eyes at one of Panos's posts on a Linux forum. "But he didn't like your corporate structure, did he?"

"Like a lot of us, he felt that investors were an annoying but necessary part of doing what we loved." Garvas hesitated. "He didn't sell us out, Leeds, if that's what you're wondering. He *wouldn't* have sold us out."

"I agree," I said, turning around in the chair. "If this man were going to betray his company, he'd just have posted everything on the internet. I find it highly unlikely that he'd sell your files to some other evil corporation rather than just giving them away."

Garvas relaxed.

"I'll need that list of your rival companies," I said. "And coroner's reports, with photos of the body. Specifics on how the corpse vanished. I'll also want details about where Panos lived, his family, and any non-work friends you know about."

"So . . . you're agreeing to help us?"

"I'll find the body, Garvas," I said, standing. "But first I'm going to go strangle your employer."

I FOUND YOL sitting alone in a cafeteria, surrounded by clean white tables, chairs of green, red, yellow. Each table sported a jar filled with lemons.

Empty, yet decorated with perky colors, the room felt . . . as if it were holding its breath. Waiting for something. I waved for my aspects to wait outside, then walked in to confront Yol alone. He'd removed his garish sunglasses; without them, he looked almost like an ordinary businessman. Did he wear the glasses to pretend he was a star, or did he wear them to keep people from seeing those keen eyes of his, so certain and so wily?

"You set me up," I said, taking a seat beside him. "Ruthlessly, like a pro."

Yol said nothing.

"If this story breaks," I said, "and everything about I3 goes to hell, I'll be implicated as part owner in the company."

I waited for Ivy to chastise me for the curse, bland though it was. But she was outside.

"You could tell the truth," Yol said. "Shouldn't be too hard to prove that you only got your shares today."

"No good. I'm a story, Yol. An eccentric. I don't get the benefit of the doubt with the press. If I'm connected in any way, no protests will keep me out of the tabloids, and you know it. You gave me shares *specifically* so I'd be in the pot with you, you bastard."

Yol sighed. He looked far older when you could see his eyes. "Maybe," he said, "I just wanted you to feel like I do. I knew *nothing* of the whole cancer fiasco when I bought this place. They dropped the worst of it on me two weeks ago."

"Yol," I said, "you need to talk to the authorities. This is bigger than me or you."

"I know. And I am. The feds are sending CDC officials tonight. The engineers are going to be quarantined; I probably will be too. I haven't told anyone else yet. But Stephen, the government is wrong; they're looking at this *wrong*. This isn't about a disease, but about information."

"The corpse," I said, nodding. "How could I3 let this happen? Didn't they consider that he was *literally* a walking hard drive?"

"The body was to be cremated," Yol said. "Part of an in-house agreement. It wasn't supposed to be an issue. And even still, the information might not be easy to get. Everyone here is supposed to encrypt the data they store inside their cells. You've heard of a one-time pad?"

"Sure," I said. "Random encryption that requires a unique key to decode. Supposed to be unbreakable."

"Mathematically, it's the *only* unbreakable form of encryption," Yol said. "The process isn't very practical for everyday use, but what people were doing here wasn't about practicality, not yet. Company policy insisted on such encryption—before they put data in their bodies, they encrypt it with a unique key. To read that data, then, you'd need that exact key. We don't have the one Panos used, unfortunately."

"Assuming he actually followed policy and encrypted his data."

Yol grimaced. "You noticed?"

"Not the most interested in security, our deceased friend."

"Well, we have to hope he used a key—because if he did, the people who have his body won't be able to read what he stored. And we might be safe."

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