

Exodus

August 29th, 2007

The world was darkness, for a time. Slowly a small sliver of light worked its way through his gummed eyelids to penetrate his pupils like a tiny knife blade. Gasping, Skynet came to in a disoriented haze. He looked around feverishly, feeling the tugging of long-unused muscles in his neck and shoulders. An IV drip stood next to his bed, the attached needle burrowing into his bruised hand like a cold worm. Blankets covered him from neck to toes in a heavy mass that he had no hope of lifting yet.

The young hacker tried to talk, but his dry throat rasped an unintelligible croak instead. Working up some saliva, he carefully raised his head and tried to look around. A bank of monitors adorned the far wall, with built-in biometric readings coursing in multiple colors across the screens. The hiss of a filtered oxygen tank to his left pumped a supply of the invigorating gas down the nose tubes running over his face and back behind his ears.

"He's awake!" a familiar feminine voice called out, disembodied and floating around the room. Skynet tried to follow it to its source, but he couldn't see anyone. Who had it reminded him of? Suddenly a memory of him looking over his shoulder at two people in a plane filtered through the morass of tangled memories. Juanita? But where...?

Exhausted, Brent Styles flopped his head back on the bunched pillows and stared at the ceiling. An upside-down face leaned into his field of vision. "Gah!" he cried, starting to thrash before recognizing the lithe Latin intruder. Tilting his head back, Brent realized she was balanced on the two-inch headboard of his hospital gurney like a cat ready to pounce. "You're a sight for sore eyes," he coughed, gathering his wits about him.

"You're not," Agent Shiv countered playfully, "you look like *basura, amigo*."

"Thanks, I think. What happened...?" Skynet glanced down at his other hand and gasped. Scars wrapped around the top of his hand and continued up to disappear into the long sleeve of his hospital gown.

"Oh, *amigo*," Juanita frowned, tears starting at the corners of her eyes, "that's not the worst of it." She tried changing tact for him, to lighten the mood. "I mean, you weren't exactly beautiful to begin with, though."

"Thanks a lot," Skynet grimaced at her, "how long have I been under?"

Shiv shifted uncomfortably. "A little over two days, this time. Before that? Not sure. Probably soon after you disappeared."

"Disappeared? What? When?" Skynet felt a memory tugging at him over the long distance of waking moments. "Oh, shit. I have to get out of here. I'm putting you at risk just by being here." He struggled to a half-sitting position before exhaustion and atrophied muscles dumped him unceremoniously back to where he started. Well, this just wasn't working.

A door opened and closed, footsteps clicking on the linoleum floor. "Damn, Skynet, you know how to give a guy a scare." His head feeling like a watermelon, the skinny hacker looked over and saw Trigger coming his way with a big fucking needle.

"Dude, get that crap away from me! Get him, Shiv!" Brent's plea went unanswered as the biological specialist stuck the needle into an inlet port on his IV drip and released the slightly greenish contents into the saline solution. Swirling eerily, it mixed in rapidly until there was no color change left in the line. But Skynet could tell when it hit his bloodstream. Lances of warmth spread from his hand, up his arm, and into his chest like an invasive root system.

"Relax, Brent, you'll be up and around in no time," Leonard Christopherson laughed, tipping up his polarized lab glasses, "especially with this little cocktail running through your system."

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Skynet relaxed, suddenly feeling much better. Fragments of memory were tugging at his mind, but it hurt for some reason. Better to let it go for now, he thought. The warmth circled through his bloodstream, doing whatever it was meant to do.

"I feel better, what was that?" he asked, finding the strength to grab the cup of ice chips off a side table. His energy was returning at a tremendous rate, and the hacker thought he'd be up for a stroll in the next few minutes. The chips of ice dissolved quickly on his parched tongue as he chewed slowly.

"It was some of Juanita's blood."

Ice chips sprayed out in a fan pattern on Skynet's sheets as his brain put the short sentence into contact.

"YOU DID WHAT!?"



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"That's right, Skynet. Not exactly like you planned when we first met, heh?" Shiv smirked, leaning over him again to smile maniacally, "I'm in *you*."

The normally perverted hacker gulped, at a loss for words for the first time in his life that he could remember. Finally he said the only thing springing to his mind. "Juanita, that's just gross."

A tittering laugh came from her perch up above him as Trigger sat on the bed next to him. "I didn't have much of a choice, Brent. Whoever the bastards were that did this to you, they did you up good. They introduced a chemical imbalance into your system, as far as I can tell. When you've undergone the kind of brain trauma you were subjected to, it's standard practice to put the patient into a barb coma."

Skynet delved into his memory banks for the association. Barbiturate-induced comas were made of pentobarbital or thiopental, and caused the person to drop into an unconscious state. While in that state, his brain would have used less blood and slowed down any metabolic processes, thereby taking up less space. So there must have been pressure on his brain from something...

"But in your case," Trigger continued, "another interaction of drugs was putting you at risk of a short time-induced allergy to barbiturates. I think it was done on purpose, to kill you if anyone tried to rescue you or the others."

The others? Skynet thought, but it wasn't coming back yet. "Okay," he said, shaking his head slowly, "whatever. Get back to the part where you stuck me with a vial of green goo out of a genetically-enhanced teenager, will you?" He could feel the glare boring into his skull from above and behind him. "Um, no offence, *chica*," he hurried.

"None taken, *pendejo*," she shot back warningly.

Trigger broke the slightly uncomfortable silence. "So anyways, I tried counteracting the allergy with other combos, but nothing was working fast enough. I have to tell you," he looked down, "we almost lost you again, `Net. We couldn't risk it, and my research on Juanita has shown that her mutation has a clearing effect on your biological system. It was keeping the allergy in check while the barbiturates did their job."

"Besides," Shiv piped up, "if it weren't for what you did to help save me, I wouldn't have lived. Only seems right to return the favor, amigo."

Skynet scratched his arm, noting the deep lacerations. The scars were healing, so the original incisions must have been made some time ago, the hacker thought. He looked up suddenly. "This is going to sound very Terminatorish, but what's the date?"

Trigger looked uncomfortable, glancing at his watch and shuffling his feet.

"Um, you might want to lie back," Shiv leaned over him again, one delicate hand pushing his shoulder back to the pillows with deceptive force.

"I *am* lying back!" Skynet spat, "What's the goram date, people?"

"August 29th," Shiv muttered, "2008."

Skynet sat bolt-upright, sending blankets flying. "2008! You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

Trigger grimaced at Shiv in frustration. "Damn it, you she-devil!" He turned to gather the blankets and cover up his patient. "She's messing with you, it's August 29th, 2007. We pulled you out of an installation a few days ago, and got you here the day before yesterday. You've been MIA for a while, Brent."

Skynet reviewed the calendar in his head, not liking what he was seeing. "She's going to kill me," he said, almost to himself, "I'm a dead man."

"Who?" the scientist asked, perplexed.

Skynet sighed heavily. "Rodeo."

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Two days later the scientist watched his hacker friend pack up his meager belongings and get ready to get the hell out of Dodge. Or in this case, Los Angeles. It was the new home of Trigger's baby, GEHM-Tech. With a little funding from some of Shiv's illicit black market trading, he'd started with some Agency loans to get the ball rolling on the perfect headquarters to monitor Shiv's increasing mutations. Neither of the two founding members of the company thought they'd see the day when they'd be taking care of one of their dearest friends.

"I was never here, Trigger," Skynet threw over his shoulder, stuffing a new pair of pants into his equally-new backpack, "you got me?"

Trigger sighed. More questions than answers were coming from the hacker these days, but Trigger knew the skinny dork was planning something. It was irritating that he and Shiv couldn't be included, but he realized that it had to do with Noray. And anything about that voodoo-practicing asshole creeped him out. It was said that the man from Haiti could read minds, or worse, and Skynet seemed to be convinced of that.

It was a simple plan, really, Trigger told himself; I can't tip Noray off if I don't know what the hell is going on.

Shiv's disembodied voice floated through the air. "I want to go with you, Brent."

"Will you quit doing that?" he asked grumpily, "come out where I can see you."

A wall grating popped loose. Within the depths Skynet could just make out two eyes peering out at him, faintly bioluminescent.

"Wow, your eyes are really creepy in the dark." He shook his head and got back on track. "You know you can't come. Trigger can't work on you well enough in a transitory mobile lab. You know that." The words came out harsher than they were supposed to.

The eyes disappeared as the woman looked down in the dark. "I know that, *amigo*, I just want to help."

Skynet smiled to break the tension, feeling the scars running across his skull tighten with the simple effort. "You might even be able to help me, too. It's going to be a long road to track down one of the most invisible women in the world. But your place is here. I've got a plan tickling my brain, but I'll need you two for something else down the road. I'll be in touch when I can."

Hoisting his backpack, the hacker followed Trigger down a short corridor to a spacious janitor's closet. The scientist tugged on the cleaning chemical rack with some effort, swinging it out on oiled hinges. The drywall behind it also separated from the wall, staying tacked to the backside of the rack. Behind the new opening, darkness yawned.

Trigger brushed his hand through his spiked hair unconsciously, and then looked the hacker in the eyes. "Don't get yourself killed, Brent. I've been collecting a bunch of data on Shiv's condition that I need you to go through one day. And if you start coming down with any symptoms..."

"I know where to find you," Skynet finished, "Don't worry about me right now. Just stick to the plan. And get rid of that body." He shook the hand of the man that had pulled him safely from the claws of a brain-jack into a military computer system gratefully, knowing that if his plan paid off he'd be paying Trigger back in spades. With everything said between them that was going to be said, he ducked into the hole and disappeared into the darkness.

Trigger closed up the passage and collected the few errant dustings of sheetrock that had drifted loose before heading to the lab again. Time to get rid of the evidence.

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Skynet cracked a glow stick and took in his surroundings. The cold concrete scraped his arm raw as it narrowed and gradually dipped downward. Rushing water met his ears, just before a foul stench began to permeate the air as well. Los Angeles sewers, the hacker groaned, one of the worst places in the world.

But now that his memories were returning, the hacker knew there was at least one other place that was worse. Shrugging away the potent reminders of what he'd escaped, Skynet continued down the tunnel. He reached a T intersection and looked around uncertainly in the gloom, trying to make out the correct direction in the pale green thrown by the glow stick. Uncertainly, he faced left and took a step. Had Trigger told him which way to go?

A dark arm pointed past his face in the other direction. "You're supposed to go that way, *gringo*," Shiv said, dropping down from her perch in the ceiling pipes.

"For fuck's sake!" Skynet screamed, his voice cracking just a little as a fist swung out in reflex. Shiv ducked slightly and weaved past him in the narrow confines, her pearly teeth winking in a wide grin in the green ambience. "Are you trying to give me a goram heart attack?" he continued, talking to her retreating back. Hitching up the strap on his backpack more snugly on his shoulder, he followed her lead.

Back in the lab

Leonard brushed his tinted lenses back to rest on his hair and looked mournfully at the corpse under the sheet. The boy, Isaac, which they'd rescued from the same facility they'd found Skynet in, was cold and blue in the blowing frigid air of the walk-in freezer. Trigger hadn't bothered with a toe tag, since no one would know his name.

The small lie to the hacker about the time of the boy's death still tugged at Trigger's psyche, but it was necessary. He knew that Brent had a lot on his mind, and telling him that a boy had been sacrificed to keep him alive would distract the hacker when he needed his concentration most.

Trigger's mind jumped back to a few days previously, reliving the events. Both of his patients were dying on him from the barbiturate allergy. All hope seemed lost as he and Shiv sat by their bedsides in silence. Finally the biological scientist had broken the eerie quiet. "We're going to lose them, Juanita," he whispered. Her keen hearing had picked up the words where most mortal ears wouldn't have.

"We're not going to lose them, Leo," she looked him in the eyes, "we're going to lose one of them." She stood and began rolling up the arm of her long shirt methodically.

"What? We can't --"

"*Dios mio*, Leonard," she shot back, "it's one or both. It's called triage, not murder, *amigo*. You're a doctor and you've got to do something for our friend." She'd pulled up a tray with a selection of needles on it and looked up at him again.

Trigger felt his insides quake. He'd played God with the micro-organisms in Petri dishes time and again, probing and prodding to understand their lives and deaths. But humans? That was something else altogether.

Just then, Skynet's brainwaves tripped an alarm before quieting down. His brain was still swelling without the chemicals to keep it under control. The same chemicals that would kill him by their very presence.

The decision was made in an instant. "We test it on the boy first. My God, I don't believe I'm doing this."

Trigger shook his head, bringing his mind back to the present with a start. He had to get moving. Grabbing the stretcher, he pulled the frozen corpse onto a wheeled framework. It smashed onto the metal with a resounding clang, overwhelming in the silence. Pulling the release lever, Trigger undid the brake and pulled the stretcher out into the main lab and through the airlock.

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Cycled air hissed before the far side popped, letting him into the less secure area. He made his way to the basement elevator and got inside with the boy's body. He pushed the button and watched the doors close.

The mixture was a shot in the dark, an impossible combination that he had no control over and no time to figure it out. It had seemed to leap into Isaac's bloodstream, sending the boy into convulsions for a few moments. Then the lethargic limbs quieted once more into unconsciousness. Trigger had smiled, looking at Shiv with a ray of hope etched onto his face.

All hell broke loose a moment later, as the allergy attacked the boy's body. "Not strong enough!" Trigger yelled, trying in frustration to do anything to stem the damage. It hadn't been soon enough. Just before Isaac died, he opened his eyes and stared right through Leonard as if the scientist had been responsible. Then he died, his brain crushing under the pressure as the allergy ate away at his central nervous system.

"FUCK!" Trigger raged, picking up the surgical tray and launching it across the room. The vials of barbiturates shattered, splinters of glass raining onto the sterile floor.

Shiv grabbed his arm, looking up at him with frightened eyes. "Net's monitor doesn't look good, doc. Now's the time."

Trigger compartmentalized the emotions and got to work, measuring the greenish blood from his mutant patient against the barbiturates in the vial before closing his eyes and mouthing a prayer. There would be time for doubt and recriminations later. He injected the serum into Skynet's IV line.

Standing before the incinerator, Trigger finally allowed himself to cry as Isaac's body was consumed by the flames. "I'm sorry," he murmured, glad Shiv wasn't here to see him breaking down. Though she'd be the first to tell him he'd done what he had to do, it didn't make the actions any less painful. Turning, he walked out of the room as ash drifted out of the chimney two stories up.

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October 15th, 2007

Samantha Killian awoke to the sound of her beeper going ballistic. One hand stretched out into the chilly room to click it and bring up the number. A digital code she hadn't seen in ages popped onto the screen, something she'd expected to see months ago. Skynet's extraction code.

Pulling herself to a sitting position, the fiery-haired beauty clutched the silk sheets to her breasts to ward off the chill. Beside her, the dark-haired man snored on obliviously, not even stirring when she swung her legs out of bed and reached for the robe slung over the back of a nearby chair.

Samantha took a moment to pull herself together. The day she'd both feared and yearned for had at last arrived. The day she'd be free of the Agency and its undercurrents of deception. The code would lead her to an anonymous message board the escaping agents had agreed upon some time before, but the spy knew she couldn't access it from her lover's home.

At last Tony stirred, woken by the cold creeping into his bed. "Sam?" he mumbled, looking up with bleary eyes.

"Right here, hon," she said, tucking the pager into the folds of the robe. If she had to leave, it was better that he didn't have time to ask questions. She gathered her clothes up from where they'd been strewn on the floor and walked across the imported marble floor in a hurry to the bathroom.

The sound of the shower spraying covered Digger's sigh. The mob hitman turned covert agent sat up and put his head in his hands wearily. He'd seen her attempt at sleight-of-hand with the beeper. He was a private investigator, after all. He also knew it was meant to be this way, but he didn't have to like it. After losing his son and wife, the grizzled agent never thought he would find happiness again, and it hurt all the more for knowing he was going to lose that happiness.

Shivering, Tony pulled himself out of bed and threw on some boxers before pulling her go-bag out of the closet. Shuffling around, he pulled her disguise kit out and put his parting gift underneath it. She'd find it. Satisfied, he crawled back into bed and pretended to sleep when she came out of the bathroom and softly kissed him goodbye. Tony wondered if he'd live long enough to see her again before making up his mind to follow her. Just in case, he told himself.

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The clink of the glasses on the flight attendant's cart caught Samantha's attention. The beautiful brunette smiling at her asked a soft question in another language, probably Sudanese. The redheaded agent pointed at a can of Coke on the top of the cart and smiled hopefully. The woman promptly refilled her plastic glass and plunked in a couple cubes of ice, then moved on down the line.

Samantha pondered the meaning of the summons she'd received from not one but two people she hadn't talked to in a long while as she brought the cup of fizzing caffeine to her lips.

Skyнет's blurb on the message board had been a nonsensical grouping of letters and numbers, and would probably be deleted by the moderators of the board as garbage soon enough, as the wily hacker had counted on. Using her key, a modified complex cross algorithm of Brent's own invention, she'd deciphered the message in a half an hour at a coffee house a few blocks from the apartment. It had been simple to decode, but harder to understand. Damn, she needed answers! Pulling up the image in her mind, Rose Asp contemplated it again.

****Avengers Assemble! Jakarta, 32 Siri Kodra Street. Oct 16, 7 pm local. Come armed.****

Then, an hour later, a scrambled phone call rang in on her cell. The other voice on the line was Randolph Wingate, the man that had brought her and countless other agents into the fold. He was the only higher-up that Rose trusted, and had been courting trouble ever since the disappearance of Rex Foster some time ago. Still, the old British bird had managed to keep both his head and career relatively intact...so far.

After a summary barring of his presence at the Council that ran the Agency, the stalwart patriot had been given command of Jakarta, a post far away from the central powers in Washington, D.C. That had been the last time the fiery-haired agent had seen her old handler.

His call had been brief: bring a few agents she most trusted, and get to Jakarta as soon as possible. Same bat-time, same bat-channel, she mused. It didn't take a genius to realize that Skyнет was making an appearance after months of being MIA.

Across the aisle from her, Paul Fredericks and Dagher Bjorn both slept peacefully in the quiet of the passenger cabin. Unlike her, the two warriors knew when to rest up when they had the chance. But they didn't know that, good or bad, she wasn't returning from this trip with them.

Eleven rows back, Digger pulled his hat low and tried to sleep, but couldn't take his eyes off of the curly wisp of dazzling red hair that was all he could see drifting down along the side of the seat his lover occupied.

Intuition had paid off, and the investigator had used some contacts at the travel agency to suss out where she was going. Of course he would never tell her, but the secret identity she kept even from the Agency was nothing new to him. Getting to the plane first had been the hardest part, and making sure he was seated behind her spot so she wouldn't have to walk past him took a few favors. Still, it was done and he was here. His intuition had also told him there'd be trouble, and he was going to make damn sure that beautiful dame wasn't going to face it alone.

The hitman had been pissed at first when she'd showed up with Chief and Valhalla in tow instead of asking him, but gave up the worthless anger soon enough. She was trying to make a clean break from him, and he had to respect that. And if he'd have been able to pick her teammates for her, Digger thought, he'd be hard-pressed to find another two he'd rather have around when things got nasty.

Tony's watch read 3:50 pm local time when the wheels hit the runway. They would all have to hurry to make it across the huge city in the worst traffic he could imagine. He ruefully thought of the poor New Yorkers that thought they had it bad. Jakarta was one of the largest cities in the world, with one of the worst congestion problems imaginable. The experts estimated that it would only be a few more years before it was well and truly gridlocked. Great.

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The engine of the Ducati sport bike roared in anger as its pilot careened around a slow-moving panel truck to launch into the parking lot. A second one with two riders completed the same maneuver with even less room to spare, screeching to a halt on the cracked, weed-broken asphalt of the warehouse where the meet was supposed to take place. Two cars were already nosed up to the bricks, their engines still ticking with heat.

The first rider pulled off the helmet, shaking her red hair to cool herself from the perspiration built up on the manic ride here. "Almost thought I'd lost you boys," Rose Asp laughed coyly, kicking down the stand and shutting off the gas flow.

The other two removed their helmets as well, Chief looking a bit green around the gills. Valhalla, the massive wheelman, just chuckled in good-spirited camaraderie. "You made a few mistakes that I was able to capitalize on, beautiful one."

As Rose stuck out her lip in a mock pout, Chief spoke up after gathering his breath. "Really, you two. I'm all for some fun and excitement, but let's try to keep both wheels on the ground when we leave, okay? I've been to some gnarly accidents where..."

The two hot-doggers tuned him out, still high from the adrenaline rush of their bob-and-weave routine that had them to the meeting place a few minutes early.

The sound of wheels crunching on gravel had them all reaching for their weapons as another vehicle pulled in behind them. They all relaxed as they saw another agent step out into the dying sunlight: Spinal. The martial artist smiled brightly at them as he pulled out his go-bag and jogged over to join them. "You make it interesting trying to keep up. Mind if I join the party?" he quipped.

They all smiled in relief. Their newest companion just went by Jon, since he hadn't yet regained his memory. It had been some time since he'd awoken in a car with nothing but a sack of money, blood all over him, and a body in the trunk. Chief had been the agent that had brought him in, fighting through Cold Zero assassins in the forested chasms of Arizona's mountains.

Wingate must have pulled in more resources for this one, Samantha thought; something big is going down for sure. Turning, she led the way into the warehouse's open office door as dusk began to take hold of the city.

The inside of the warehouse looked like the scene from a movie as the group entered. At the other side of the shadowed, cavernous room, Rose made out the two voices engaged in earnest conversation: Randolph Wingate and Brent Styles. She smiled suddenly, overwhelmed at seeing the scrawny hacker again. After so much silence, she'd wondered if he was even still alive.

Two forms stepped in front of them from either side of the door, but both men broke into grins at seeing the agents. "Glad you could make it, everyone. Things are rocky at the moment, and we can't be sure this site is secure." The speaker thrust forward, giving handshakes all around. The hulking Master Sergeant Robert McDowell had long ago given up any pretense at a career in the military and had been assigned indefinitely as a bodyguard to Wingate. Colonel Ruthers, the tactical liaison to the Agency's private military, also doubled as a guard and enforcer for Wingate, should the situation arise. Both were beyond loyal, along with the small group that was now entering.

"Brent, it's so good to..." Samantha started, but paused as her friend turned to face her. The left side of his head, the side she could see from the doorway, looked just as it always had. But as the streetlight from outside cast its feeble rays through the dirty windows high above, she saw the massive scarring on the other side of his head with crystal clarity.

"I know, I know, I'm still smokin' hot," Brent smirked at her, waving. Stepping closer, she saw the extent of the damage to the skinny geek and wondered what else had been done besides the incisions.

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The hair on the right side of his head, shorter than the other side but growing back, was intersected by vertical lines of scars running down where the follicles had been ripped to shreds. The scars continued down his face and neck to disappear into his Punk Floyd tribute band t-shirt, then re-emerged to follow their slashing course down his arm and onto his hand.

Walking up, the woman surprised the hell out of him with a tight hug before stepping back in amazement to look at him once more.

"Quit it," Skynet rolled his eyes, "you're making me self-conscious. Jeez, you're acting like you thought you'd never see me again. But there's still plenty of ol' Skynet to go around." Then she saw it, that wry grin that she remembered so well. Rose Asp knew she'd have to get to the bottom of what had happened, but now was not the time.

"Good of you to make it, my dear," Wingate boomed in his cheerful baritone, "and the rest of you gents, of course." Chief, Valhalla and Spinal had all gathered around to hear what was going to happen.

Skynet picked up the thread of the conversation where the two men had left off. "There's a power struggle going on in the Council, boys and girls. We've got a couple of solid players that want in for their own selfish reasons, and now we have to decide what we're going to do about it."

Wingate rubbed the stubble of a new beard and sighed. "I wish I could help more, but as you may not know I've been summarily ejected from all Council intel. Apparently they didn't approve of people going missing under my command." While he hadn't named anyone, it was obvious from those present that he meant Foster. The red-haired, freckled handler had caused more than his share of problems before he suspiciously disappeared.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better, old friend," Skynet stressed, "it might be a good time to get out."

"You still haven't told me how you knew Noray was behind your abduction." Wingate crossed his arms and looked Skynet over. "Not that I doubt you, of course."

Abduction? Rose rushed to make it all come together in her mind. She knew Noray was a bastard firsthand, as many of those present did, but kidnapping Skynet? It did fit with the long, unplanned silence from her friend, but why would Noray move on him? Unless...

"He found out the ladies and I were going to make a break from the Agency, and he evidently had plans for me. He and his pet zombie came for me at my apartment when I was getting out of Dodge. I tried to put up a fight, but ..." Rose smiled briefly as the hacker feigned flexing his skinny arms.

"Anyways, getting down to it, Noray is working with someone. Even my hacking can't get close enough to find out, which makes me think he's keeping this strictly low-tech. That's why I need all of you to keep tabs on the son of a bitch and cover your asses. I get the feeling that something big is brewing behind the scenes. The Agency is rotting at the core."

Rose was amazed at the eloquence with which Skynet spoke. She was so used to his sarcasm and perverted comments that seeing him issuing warnings and orders to others from outside the scope of the Agency seemed out of character. A lot had happened in the months since he'd disappeared to change him from the rebel that wanted out to the valiant knight that wanted to bring the monster down. Her heart swelled with pride to know him and be trusted by him at that moment.

But as fate would have it, Samantha's feelings of elation were to be cut short. The sound of a breaching charge detonating assaulted her ears, shaking the walls of the old warehouse in dusty tremors. "LAY YOUR WEAPONS ON THE GROUND!" boomed an augmented voice.

The hell with that, the woman thought. Around her, all her companions pulled their weapons of preference from concealment and looked for cover. If these guys wanted a drag-out fight, they wouldn't be disappointed.

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Skynet kicked over a worktable for some feeble cover and looked at Wingate as the aging spy hurried over. "Looks like they followed you, old man," he remarked, pulling out his weapon.

"Me?" Wingate retorted, "You're the one that sticks out in a crowd."

The hacker smiled grimly. "I'll give you that one, but we'll have to find out the truth after we walk away from this one."

"Indeed."

Rose Asp crouched next to them, taking a guarded look towards the rear wall of the warehouse. If she was the leader of the tac team, that's where she'd play the surprise round. Pulling another table down, she positioned it to cover their rear.

Meanwhile, Valhalla took up a position behind a stack of pallets next to the office entry door, the huge sledgehammer he carried in a hidden trenchcoat loop now out and readied in his massive hands.

Spinal crouched down behind the tables next to Wingate, his only weapon a snub-nosed pistol. The martial artist was much more deadly with his hands and feet, anyways. If it came to close-quarters combat, Rose knew he'd hold up his end of the bargain.

"We've got more on the way," Chief called down from the catwalk. He peered again through a grimy window before ducking back down. "One assault team probably already on their way in, and three more vans just pulled up outside. We're about to get bum-rushed." He peered out the other direction. "Back flank! Two more vans!"

As the first assault team poured in from the office, Valhalla stepped around the stack of pallets and swung his massive hammer in a horizontal arc. His hips snapped in place, directing his force from his legs up to his upper body in a phenomenal thrust. The sledgehammer accelerated from 0 to over 100 miles an hour in the space of a second, pounding into the chest of the leading attacker as he leaned out to toss a flash grenade into the room.

Ribs, skin and muscle alike ripped asunder as the heavy weighted head of Valhalla's weapon crushed its way through the feeble bulletproof vest the man wore. Stretched to its limit, the skin of the man's back split down the middle to relieve pressure. A rain of blood and pale pink bone fragments poured in a grisly tide down his back and out from under the vest's edge.

"You want to play?!" the stocky northerner growled, gnashing his teeth. He followed through the movement, kicking the armed flash grenade that had fallen at his feet back between the dead man's legs. With a deft pull back, he freed his hammer and stepped back around the pile of pallets. The resulting flash and crushing wave of sound from within the office caught him partially, but it was nothing like the effects the men huddled behind their dead leader faced. Screaming in agony, they clawed at their eyes and ears as the flash-bang shredded their optic nerves and eardrums.

From his vantage point up high, Chief unleashed a full clip into the huddled, screaming masses through the doorway. He knew that any minute now the next 12 men from the vans outside the front would be making an appearance. He wondered if he had enough ammo.

Suddenly, the fireman-turned-spy thought he heard the popping of small arms fire from out front. Curious. But before Chief had time to ponder it, he was rocked forward by a massive explosion! Pulling himself to his feet, he found the source of the blast: the back wall of the warehouse was hanging in tatters as the two four-man teams from the rear vans made their own entrance.

Rose's quick thinking with the extra table was the only thing saving the pinned agents. Round after round peppered their meager cover as Spinal, Wingate, Skynet and Rose Asp all returned fire.

That's when their would-be assassins launched grenades.

Exodus

"Incoming!" Skynet yelled, pushing himself into the concrete in a vain attempt to become one with the floor. The small missiles of death arced in at them. In his peripheral vision, the haggard hacker saw the aging Wingate catapulted backwards against the table, blood leaking from a shot to the shoulder. The old man had been hit.

Then the grenades finished their trajectories and detonated around them in showers of shrapnel. Skynet felt someone falling on top of him, crunching the side of his head against the cool concrete. Time seemed to slow as his hearing was wrenched away by the blast. The popping of firearms seemed duller now, distant. He saw the concrete chipping away a foot in front of his nose, and realized that a stream of bullets was flying past him much too fast for his eyes to record.

Gathering his strength, Brent knew he had to move--now! Turning over, he found a dazed Samantha Killian lying on him. He thought that was pretty cool, until he noticed the long line of scarlet that ran across her scalp right at the hairline, pouring blood into her slowly blinking eyes. A shadow towered over them suddenly as one of their attackers made his way to their flimsy barricade and aimed his assault rifle over the edge at them. Skynet couldn't reach his gun in time.

From a great distance, a battle roar sounded. The killer looked up, his eyes widening at something out of Skynet's field of view. There was a whirring sound, then Valhalla's trusty sledgehammer twirled end over end above the tables. There was a wet crunching sound that made the hacker think of bashing pumpkins with a baseball bat as a child. Their attacker was picked up off his feet and thrown out of view as if a force of nature had decided he was unnecessary.

Instantly, another one took his place, smiling grimly. Skynet's fingers rasped along the broken flooring, inches away from salvation. Somehow, Rose Asp snapped herself out of her stupor, coiling her legs and kicking both into the man's face. His head snapped back for a few precious seconds. That was just enough time for Skynet to pull the dull gray revolver back to him. Two nearly soundless clicks were all that issued from the world's only silenced revolver. A pair of perfect holes opened as if by magic in the man's forehead just under the edge of his tactical helmet.

"Nice shooting," Rose grinned at him, finding her own pistol amidst the tangle of arms and legs.

"The hell with that," Skynet remarked dryly, "I was aiming for his center of mass, just to slow him down." He felt calm, and realized that something was wrong. He was never near calm in a gunfight. The skinny hacker shook out the spent shells from the revolver and fished a few more out of his pocket, but the battle was winding down. For some reason the other twelve members of the tactical team out front never made it in.

Brent pulled himself to his feet and surveyed the damage. That's when he noticed that Wingate was dead.

Exodus

"Oh, shit," Rose whispered to herself, sinking down next to the prostrate form of her benefactor. "Oh, Wingate, don't do this to us!" Skynet brushed the overhanging hair out of his eyes and tried to make sense of what was happening. It wasn't supposed to go down this way. Oh, he knew others that had died...

Right on queue, a quiet, raspy voice whispered in his ear. "What, kid, did you think it was going to be happily ever after? You're death to everyone around you, Brent, you know that. Couldn't save Java. Couldn't save me." The hacker whipped around, but no one stood behind him. He wasn't surprised.

"Damn it!" he yelled, flipping off the corrugated roof over his head in rage, "what are you trying to prove?!" He wasn't sure if he was talking to God, Famine, or himself.

"He's alive!" Chief yelled, materializing from out of nowhere. Seconds earlier the paramedic/fireman had been laying down suppressive fire from the catwalk, now he was strewing medical equipment out of his backpack in cool, deft movements.

Rose and Skynet knelt down next to Wingate, sensing the others moving up quietly behind them. They all knew they could only bear witness to the work going on in front of them, not daring to interrupt Chief's concentration for even a score of heartbeats. A thin rolled-up sheet of plastic appeared in the healer's hands, which he quickly unrolled next to the aging man's pale form. "Brent, I need you to help me slide him onto this. Easy, now, we have to secure him. Ready? One, two, three."

Skynet felt like he was detached, looking down on the huddled masses. He watched his scarred right hand reach out, grasp Wingate's shoulder. His left cupped the man's head, feeling the warmth through his thinning hair as he helped Chief straighten their handler's spine as much as possible. Somehow they got him onto the support brace with a minimum of movement, and Skynet sat back numbly. Paul Fredericks pulled some Velcro straps out, securing his patient to the small area brace.

"You're going to be okay, Randolph, you hear me?" Chief intoned in a calm voice, his fingers flitting here and there. The waxy complexion of their friend and mentor betrayed the fireman's claim, though.

Wingate's eyes slowly opened, clouded with the absence of synapses firing up his spine. "I don't feel any pain, Mr. Fredericks," he said at last, "and I believe that is a bad thing."

Paul stopped his ministrations for a moment to grasp Wingate's hand briefly. "You've suffered an injury known as an internal decapitation, sir. Your skull has separated from your spinal cord. I've restrained your upper body, but still don't try to move even if you think you can. Do you understand me? We're doing what we can for you."

Wingate's eyes sharpened. "I...will not make it, will I, Paul?"

The fireman stared hard at him. "I've seen people walk away from this, Wingate. You just hold on. Just hold on." His voice trembled slightly before becoming calm again, only the barest hint that things were dire, indeed.

The blue eyes swiveled past him, focusing on Skynet. "Brent, get the card out of my right breast pocket. You'll need it. You have to go back when the time is right, find out about Project Exodus. I didn't have time to -- to --" The old Agent Blindsight coughed once, a bubble of blood forming and popping between his lips. And just like that, he was gone. The spark in his eyes faded, breathing halted.

Skynet saw something dripping, and looked up to see Frederick strying in vain to hold back the tears. The agents gathered around felt their energy slipping from them. A great weariness from the constant battle made them wonder why they were still even fighting.

A perfectly-manicured hand brushed past Brent's shoulder, feeling inside Wingate's jacket. The card slipped out, and Rose dropped it in his open palm. Then she reached back in and ripped the bloody patch off his uniform. The letters that spelled out Blindsight were covered in blood, ugly next to the Agency star symbol for what it now represented.

Continued on next page...

Exodus

A deep voice growled out from behind them. "This did not happen from his fall, did it?" Valhalla bunched his muscles, hefting the sledgehammer in sudden fury.

"Why do you say that?" Rose asked, looking up suddenly.

Chief answered the question for him. "Because Spinal's gone. You two," he pointed at Rose and Skynet, "get the hell out of here. We'll take care of our errant traitor."

Valhalla chimed in. "We kind of knew this was goodbye, Sam. Just take care of her, Brent. Godspeed to you both."

Skynet pulled her up and made for the office and her motorcycle. They had to get out of the country before any more Agency "help" showed up. But after that, the hacker thought, there'd be blood for what had transpired today. Gallons of the stuff.

END

