

Grand Theft

Sara Jacobs adjusted her nurse's gown as she pulled the chart for the patient in front of her. The Latino man, labeled Jose Doe on the chart by some smart-ass intern, had arrived yesterday with a concussion, thought to have been sustained in a car accident. He also had some nasty scratches across his arm and chest, and complained of severe pain just before slipping into a coma. And there he remained. The head wound, while horrifying to look at, was not life threatening. By all accounts of attending nurses, he should have popped right back from this.

She shook her head and bent to examine the scratches. Uh oh. A sticky, greenish fluid soaked the bandages, seeping out of the wounds in his tattered flesh. Time to get a second opinion in on this. Just as she was about to turn away, a hand reached out and grabbed her wrist. Dropping the clipboard, she screamed and yanked away.

The Latino man had come out of his coma. "Get me Samantha Killian in Washington," he rasped, overturning a hospital tray as he reached imploringly for her notepad. The nurse handed it to him, still recovering from her shock. He scrawled a phone number; then collapsed back on the bed. "Hungry," he croaked, touching his arm where the deep lacerations were.

Sara Jacobs ran for the nurse's station as fast as she could.

Randolph Wingate had just finished typing up his final report about the disappearance of one Rex Foster, handler in the Agency, when his phone rang. He absently picked it up, proofreading his electronic report by eye. All the loose ends were tied up; two men had been implicated in the kidnapping of both Foster and his aide. Unfortunately, they had both "resisted" when security forces tried to apprehend them, and were lethally shot. A large stash of cocaine was found on the premises. Yes, nice and neat, if a little overdone and cliché. Still, the old tricks were still the best.

"Hello, this is Wingate," he spoke, clicking the Send button on his computer screen. The message shot into cyberspace on its way to the Agency council.

"This is Doctor Phillips in Los Angeles, CA. I have a man here that gave me this number, asking for a Samantha Killian. Do you know this person?" the nasal voice on the other end inquired.

Wingate sat up quickly. "As a matter of fact, I do. May I get some information from you, Dr. Phillips, was it? Yes, yes, I see. I understand that the details are patient-confidential at this point. Yes, Ms. Killian is a family member. I'm glad he was taken to a hospital near his home. I'll notify her right away. Thank you again, Doctor. I'm glad he's been found."

Samantha Killian towed off her dripping hair as she walked out of her bathroom. It had been weeks since the frame-up of Rex Foster, fourteen fabulous days of knowing he would never be seen again. Wingate hadn't come right out and told her, but she knew he had taken care of it. The old man had liked Famine, even tried to get the assassin into counseling a couple of times.

Her cell phone rang, playing the opening chords of "Symphony of Destruction." She hurried over. Speaking of Wingate, that was his ringtone. She flipped open the phone. "Hello, Randolph. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

His lightly-accented English got right to the point. "My dear Miss Killian, you've been asked for by an agent in the hospital in California. I've sent you an itinerary and a new partner. Get down there and see what he knows and how he knows you. I've got to run, dear. Cheerio."

The phone clicked off. She looked at it in puzzlement. If Wingate was giving her a mission, it was urgent. Extremely. She got dressed, pulling a revealing blouse on as her fax machine churned out several pages. Reading for the trip, how fun.

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Samantha arrived at the airport, stepping out into the frosty D.C. air. The tarmac was cold enough to play hockey on, so she quickened her stride to the private hangar. The Learjet sat idling as the pilot went through his takeoff procedure. Boy, he looked familiar, waving from the small window up high. It was Skynet, everyone's favorite hacker/pilot. She had surprisingly built a bond with the man, though everyone else had a hard time even being around him. Too smart for his own good.

She ascended the roll-up staircase with her two carry-on bags and waved to him as she passed the cockpit. He smiled; then turned back to his control board. She had enough time to be frightened at the mess of wires littering the floor before a hand touched her back. She whirled, grabbing at the wrist and readying a punch from habit.

Facing her, a girl that had to be just into her twenties hopped back, avoiding Rose Asp's reaching hand. The Irish facewoman gasped, awed at the other person's agility.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," the Latino girl said, "just wanted to introduce myself before we got going on the important stuff." She took one of Rose Asp's bags, slinging it over her shoulder and turning to saunter back down the aisle with catlike grace. Shaking her head, Samantha followed after her. Since when did the Agency send a kid on a mission, she thought, and how did I get to be her babysitter?

Skynet rubbed his eyes and pushed back from the console. He spun his seat around and stood up, shaking potato chip crumbs from his Darth Vader t-shirt. The weight sensor in the seat clicked, and an automated sexy voice said, "See you later, Skynet." He clicked a couple of buttons on his laptop and made sure the Learjet's custom engines engaged on the autopilot. They were halfway to Los Angeles, and he needed a break.

He heard something from where the girls were sitting, so he went to "investigate." The hacker found them sitting side-by-side at a situation table, laughing hysterically at something, but they shut up as soon as they saw him. Samantha shoved cosmetics back into her purse as the new agent, Shiv, picked up the briefing and pretended to absorb the details.

"I can see you two are off to a great start. How's it going, Red?" he said, taking a seat facing them. The table in between him and the girls sheltered Skynet's growing bulge from their sight. They were both hot, but he was kind of seeing someone at the moment. There was no harm in looking, though. Poor girls, didn't know what they were missing, he mused.

Samantha snapped the clasp closed and looked back up at him. "Not too bad, there, Mr. Pilot. So if you're back here, who would you trust with your baby up front?"

Skynet yawned, stretching his arms out across the back of the bench seat. "Oh, you know me, Red. I don't trust anyone. The laptop's running the show. Had to Frankenstein ol' Alice into the control column, but I'm pretty sure it's dead on. I'm actually trying out a program to sense out rising pockets of air to give us extra lift on the way there. I estimate it will save us about 13% in fuel expenses. So if you feel the engines go idle for a few seconds, it's just because the sensors found a pocket we can use for drift."

Shiv's Latina features went a shade lighter in color, and Rose Asp's already milky complexion turned positively ghostly. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Shiv whispered, her fear giving way to anger, "I'm not exactly a fan of jet travel, Spock! Why don't you get your skinny ass back in the *pinche* pilot seat before I slip my blade between your ribs!"

Skynet busted out laughing, ignoring her anger. "Wow, you remind me of someone. See, Famine always said shit like that to me back in the day, before he came to terms with the fact that I use more brain power than the two of you combined, and more than six or seven blondes working their way through ninth grade. Relax, sister. It's under control."

"Famine again," Rose Asp sighed, "it's almost like we're bit players in a novel about a dead guy lately. And the sad thing is, I never even met him and we're still dealing with his crap."

Skynet's face got serious. "It wasn't Famine's crap, little sister, it's this Agency. They're never straight with us, so problems are going to happen. You know they haven't told you the whole story dozens of times. Hell, they even bugged my plane on the Irish Wake mission." He looked down, as if he was considering if he should say more. Then the hacker met her eyes and nodded to himself.

"What is it, Skynet?" Samantha asked, "What do you know?"

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"You didn't hear it from me," he said, "but there's more to this mission than meets the eye. My sources say you're walking into something that could get you killed the slow, nasty way instead of quick and painless. Now I don't know all the details, but whatever you do, don't touch this guy. He's got something, some virus, that's spread by touch. And I'd watch out for the nurses and staff, they're probably already infected."

The two women sat in stunned silence. Samantha spoke up first. "Wingate didn't mention anything about contagion. Shouldn't he have sent some experts? I hear that guy Trigger knows about this sort of stuff."

Skynet pushed himself to his feet. "Wingate's one of the only ones in the upper crust that isn't completely twisted, so chances are he doesn't even know. But someone below him does; someone who didn't want you to be prepared. But at least you're safe here, for now."

On cue, the plane began a gradual tip into a nosedive. Shiv, with her superb sense of equilibrium, felt it first. "What the hell?"

The skinny hacker raced for the cockpit as the redhead and the Latino thief belted themselves in. Within moments the plane righted itself. The overhead crackled, and Skynet's voice traveled over it. "Nothing to fear ladies, everything's okay."

"What happened up there, Brent? That was definitely not fun!" Rose Asp called towards the cockpit.

"Err, forgot to charge the battery on the laptop. Flying this bird must have drained it faster than usual. Funny, huh?" He barely got the bulletproof cockpit door closed before Shiv's throwing knife cracked into it.

The automated doors to Lady of Mercy Hospital whooshed open at the approach of the red-haired woman and her slightly shorter Latina companion. The nurse at the acceptance desk looked up in mild irritation. It was almost the end of her shift; she didn't want more paperwork to do.

Samantha Killian strode up to the desk, Juanita Yuarez just behind her. "I'm here to see Ramon Valdez, he's a patient here."

The nurse pointed to the sign-in book. "And who are you, miss?" she asked, eyeing Samantha's fiery red hair as she sipped her Diet Coke.

"I'm his sister," Samantha said curtly, filling in her name as well as Shiv's.

Diet Coke sprayed across the counter, seeping out of the nurse's nose. "What? He's Mexican! Just who the hell are you?"

Shiv stepped up to the counter and stared the woman down. "Samantha, I think this woman just insulted our dead mother's choice of male companions. You want me to take this *puta* out back and teach her some manners, *hermana*?"

Rose Asp had to stop herself from bursting out in laughter. The little vixen was quick with her mouth as well as her hands and feet. The nurse gave them no further trouble, and directed them up to the intensive care ward.

"Can I help you?" the older man asked as they entered Ramon's room. He eyed the two women with a withering stare, obviously used to having his questions answered sooner rather than later. He peeled off the latex gloves and tossed them into a flip-top trashcan with a biohazard symbol on the outside.

"Dr. Phillips? I'm Samantha, a relative of Ramon. How is he doing?" Rose Asp queried as she sidled up to the bedside. The Latino man lying in front of her was in terrible shape. Ramon Valdez's skin had a strange sheen, almost as if the top few layers of skin were becoming transparent. The beating of his pulse could be seen in the small capillaries near the surface, blackened and poisoned roots of his circular system being destroyed from within. Small green sores pockmarked the skin everywhere the women could see.

The doctor ushered them back from the bedside. "We don't know what we're dealing with here. Your...brother...was attacked by something. We're finding traces of a foreign substance, some kind of biological poison, in his system." The doctor closed the door once they were outside. "What is your brother into, Samantha? This kind of contagion, it's unknown around here. Does he work for a pharmaceutical company or bio-lab? We're grasping at straws here, and one of my nurses that was attending him is sick. She's showing early stages of what he is going through. We need information." The doctor rubbed his temples, the bags under his eyes showing how little sleep he'd had.

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Sam locked eyes with Juanita, and an unspoken thought passed between them. Then she took the doctor's arm and strode off with him down the hall. "I don't want to get him in trouble, doc, but my brother fell in with the wrong crowd. He loves his cars, and his friends love that he can outrace the cops. Being this close to the Mexican border, trouble seems to follow him, if you know what I mean." She continued walking, looking the doctor in the eye as she spoke. He listened.

Behind them, Shiv popped the lock on a linen closet and slipped inside. Quickly she grabbed what she needed. Crossing the hall, she made sure no one was looking, then opened Ramon's door just enough to slide through before locking it behind her.



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Ramon looked up at her in astonishment, waking in a cold sweat. “Wh—who are you? Where is Samantha? She should be here by now. I’m so co-cold...” He collapsed back on the bed, shivering. Juanita snapped on a pair of latex gloves and pulled up her mask. It wouldn’t stop anything airborne, but it made her feel a little better. That skinny punk-ass hacker better be sure this was only spread by direct touch, or she would fillet him with her last ounce of strength. Then she’d cook him with a little napalm while he still lived. After that she’d get really nasty.

“Listen, Ramon, she’s keeping the doctor busy. What happened out there, *hermano*? *Que paso*?”

He spoke in a combination of Spanish and English, gasping between words and holding his chest where the greenish-hued wounds were beginning to soak through the bandages again.

“I was ordered to pick up a package from one of our contacts in Mexico City. He said he had something we had to see, something on Cold Zero. They’re there, working in an abandoned steam mill outside the city limits. Don’t know how long.”

“Why Rose Asp? Why’d you ask for her?”

Agent Nitrous spit up phlegm, coughing uncontrollably as Shiv backed out of range. Finally his throat cleared enough to speak again. “*Mi amigo* was on her team in the raid on the Cold Zero base in San Jose. Spinal, a good guy. He said I could trust her, that she was a good leader.” Nitrous leaned back wearily. “And I’m dying. Spinal said she was hot, so if I’m going to die, I might as well see what she looks like. But you, *senorita*, you’re not too bad yourself--” He collapsed into another coughing fit.

Shiv waited until his airway cleared again. “Men,” she said, “even when you’re on your deathbed you only think of one thing. *Animales*. What were you bringing back with you, Ramon?”

“A biological agent. It was in a sealed container. DNA, maybe from the thing that did this to me,” he said, gesturing to his wounds. “It wasn’t human; I can tell you that, *senorita*.”

“Go on.”

“I was to meet the informant outside the lab. I got there; it was that scientist from Famine’s report a few months before he died. Janus O’Brien. But someone was watching us make the exchange. O’Brien felt it too, dropped the container and took off. I grabbed it, but I barely got back to my car, *chichita*. Whatever it was, it made my stomach twist like a case of bad tequila. I took off out of there, must have been doing thirty or forty miles an hour on back desert roads.”

“What was it? Did you get a look at it?” Shiv asked with a growing fear in her belly.

“Not then. Later. I got to Tijuana, thought I’d lost it. I put the container in a hidden compartment in the Mustang and slept a little before I made the run across the border. I woke up, that twisting was back. I think I puked, little lady. Whatever had caught up to me, it was *mucho malo*, a devil or something. It reached in the car window and ripped the hell out of me. I floored it and got out of there. But that hand that came through the window, *chica*, it was not human. It was green and grey, and had big-ass talons on it. I just drove. I don’t remember much. I got across the border to some shitty town and parked to rest.”

Shiv listened intently as the wheelman continued his story. “So I woke up, and these guys were pulling me out of the car. I couldn’t fight them, I was too weak. They took off with my baby, and the package. *Chica*, you have to get it back. You have to warn them not to open it, it’s deadly.”

“How, Ramon? Stay with me!” Juanita yelled as he drifted off. The pulse monitor on the screen nearly flat-lined before bouncing back up. It had been close. She still needed more information.

Ramon opened his eyes, shook the glaze out of them one last time. “Transponder on the car,” he croaked, “T45H6. From satellite. Find it.” He closed his eyes, and the breath rattled in his throat. All was silence for about two seconds before the alarms went off. Nurses burst in, shoving her out of the way. She made for the door.

Outside, Samantha caught up with Juanita. “Did you get the info, Shiv?”

The Latina girl looked up. “I’ve seen death before, *chica*, but not like that. Whoever made that shit is off the deep end! Let’s get out of here. We need to contact Wingate and get a team to the car.”

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Randolph Wingate got off the phone with the members of the council. It had not gone very well. Someone, or multiple someones, was keeping vital information from him. The council was shutting him out, or he would have found out about Foster's traitorous conduct sooner and possibly saved three agents' lives in London.

Now they had let him lead two of his agents into a possible contagion situation with no heads-up. He had the distinct impression that the walls of the Agency were crumbling around him. Rotten masonry; that was what was holding the bricks of morality together. The dream he had of a safer world was slowly unraveling.

A part of him wondered if it was worth it. He wasn't exactly a spring chicken, and he had done all he could. The other part of him, the vengeful ex-special forces of half a century ago, wanted blood. Blood by the gallon. But for the moment, he had more pressing matters. Vengeance would come later.

He picked up the phone.

Rose Asp clicked off her cell phone, deactivating the scrambler, and turned to Shiv. "That was Wingate. The council can't be trusted at this time. I believe that, I've seen their machinations at work. He's sent a team to recover the package; Valhalla and Piranha are in the group, along with some new, trustworthy agents."

Juanita looked indignant. "Are they letting us sit this one out? Screw that. We're here."

The red-haired spy patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll get your chance. We've got our own op. A little recon on the Cold Zero Clan's Mexico City facility. With Famine dead, you're the next best intruder on the list. That was straight from Wingate's mouth, sis. You're new, but you've got the talent. Let's get with Skynet and—"

"Could you not say 'Get with Skynet'? That sounds gross. He's a pasty little *puto*."

"Sorry. Let's go."

The Learjet sat on the tarmac like a giant bird of prey. Exhaust created heat shimmers in the afternoon air, distorting the rows and rows of apartments situated behind the airstrip.

Samantha peeked her head into the cockpit. "What's up, Flyboy? We've got a new mission. What are you doing?"

Brent Styles looked up in alarm. "Nothing!" he said, trying to block her view of the laptop. Shiv's hand snaked out and encircled his wrist before he could close out the screen. The girls sprang to either side of him.

"Wow, Skynet, you didn't say you were banging someone. Or is all this smut talk just over the internet still?"

The hacker, face red, shook loose from Juanita's grasp and flipped the top down on the laptop. "Wouldn't you like to know? Now where the hell are we going?"

"No, Brent, I swear I've never done this before!" Shiv laughed, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

"Oh, Brent, tell me what you're going to do to me when we meet face-to-face for the first time!" Samantha pleaded, hugging herself.

He crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared out the cockpit window. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do if you don't get out of my cockpit, Red! And take your little snake sidekick with you!"

The two women looked at each other. "He said cockpit," Samantha chortled.

"He said snake!!" Juanita burst out between laughing spurts.

Samantha's laughter eased just long enough for Skynet to make out "Mexico City" before starting up again.

He slammed the door behind them. Freaks. Speaking of freaks, he thought, flipping the top of the laptop back up.

The jet leapt off the airstrip like a championship diver. And just like a diver, the nose of the plane leveled off, then tipped back down. The ground rushed up at blistering speed. Two screams from the passenger cabin could faintly be heard before Skynet leveled out, smiling a devilish smile.

"218, this is control. You lost altitude. Is everything okay up there?" asked the control tower watcher.

"Control, this is 218," Skynet answered back, "slight turbulence. We're sitting pretty now, thanks."

"Turbulence, at this altitude? You must be joking."

"Weird, huh? See you next time we're in town, Control."

"Have a safe flight, 218."

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Darkness was creeping across the busy Mexico City landscape as Shiv leapt from rooftop to rooftop. Brittle ceramic shingles barely groaned under her light-footed leaps and tumbles. The guards around the warehouse complex were too numerous for a straightforward approach, so RoseAsp had stayed back with an Agency-acquired car and let the nimble thief make her approach. Fifteen minutes away by car, Skynet kept the Learjet powered up for a fast escape.

The heat, even in the middle of the “cool” season in Mexico, was almost unbearable. Shiv's heavy black catsuit kept her body from glowing like a candle in infrared scopes, but she paid the price of having all that body heat contained. Sweat trickled down her neck from her red-dyed hair, hit the collar of her suit, and fell slickly off the Teflon-impregnated fabric to fall silently behind her. Just one more jump to go...

Her feet landed securely on the rooftop. Dropping to her belly, she crawled up to the edge of the roof and looked over. In the darkening shadows, she could just make out seven or eight guards armed with submachine guns. Didn't matter, she was going in another direction entirely...

She stood, positioning her silhouette in front of a chimney stack so she wouldn't be seen by those below. The grappling hook in her hand swung in four tight circles as she waited, before soaring through the air to land on the rooftop of the steam mill thirty feet away. The slight thunk was perfectly in time with an expulsion of steam from the mill. The guards continued on their rounds, unaware of the shadow that scurried across the line above their heads.

Dropping to the corrugated tin roof, Shiv listened intently. All was quiet. She stepped toward the ductwork - and nearly missed the tripwire stretching through the darkness. Tracing it back to the source, she found a pin in a claymore antipersonnel mine, cleverly concealed and painted to look like part of a group of piping from the exhaust system. Laying flat on the still-warm roof, the intruder could just make out a dozen more wires stretching off at random places over the entire roof.

Memorizing the tripwires, the Latina intruder continued on to the ductwork. A quick look showed her the electrical contact wires. Out came her B&E kit, and a couple of snips and redirects later found her snaking her way down the tin tunnels. Rats scurried away from her, squeaking their alarm at the presence among them. Somewhere a fan switched on, pulling cool air across her body in refreshing currents.

After many fruitless dead ends she lowered herself down a vertical shaft to the basement level. The hum of machinery in the near-darkness masked her movements, letting her crawl faster from one grate to the next.

At long last she found Janus O'Brien, the Cold Zero Clan scientist. He had evidently been captured, and wouldn't be talking any time soon. He was in a locked room, and his body parts were all over the place. Something had torn into that poor bastard like a *toronado*, throwing limbs around in a semicircle of destruction. Viscera and bone had congealed in puddles on the floor, their stench mixing with excrement and urine, probably from the good doctor's last moments. She could do no good here.

She began making her way back through the maze of ducts, her instincts and memory guiding her out. Until the stench hit her. It flowed through the vents like a noxious wave. Behind her, from the direction of the slaughter room, the sound of tearing metal made her pause and look back. Something was crawling into the vents with her. Something big.

She switched on her comm., finally breaking radio silence. The Latina intruder had a good idea what was following her, protocol be damned.

“Rose Asp, get ready. I'm going to be rockin' and rollin' out of here, *chica*. I think that...*monstruo*...is after me in here. Hit the gates in three minutes.”

Samantha's voice came back to her, faint among the static. “I hear you, Shiv. I've got the welcome wagon warmed up. See you in three.”

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The night air yanked the smell away for a few moments as Shiv pulled herself the last few feet to the duct cover. The echoes had become intermittent. Either the biological creature was heading in the wrong direction, or it was extremely quiet. She was hoping for the first one.

Fingers flashing nimbly, the intruder disconnected the electrical stop again, taking care not to set off the alarm. Rose Asp was coming to pick her up, and she didn't want to ruin the surprise for the guards outside.

A new wave of stench rushed over Shiv, and she chanced a look back. Something moved in the darkness. Her fingers slipped, slick with sweat all of a sudden. A sliding noise sounded like it was right behind her, followed by a low hiss of anticipation. The grate gave way, tumbling her out onto the tin roof with a clatter. The early moonlight flashed on the tripwires as Shiv heaved herself upright and sprinted for her rope line. Her small feet danced amidst the crisscrossing wires, tempting fate. *Por favor, Santa Maria*, she uttered in her mind.

The screech of tires on asphalt sounded through the night as a Lincoln Continental came barreling out of nowhere and smashed into the fence out front, scattering the two guards there like bowling pins. Automatic weapons skittered over the asphalt, finding slightly less traction than the broken meatsacks that tumbled after them. The other guards turned to open fire, but were disoriented in the gloom and glaring headlights. Skidding to a stop, Rose Asp pulled an Uzi off of the seat beside her and let off a long burst to make them keep their heads down. Come on, Shiv, she thought, get here girl!

Above, Shiv's combat knife launched into her hand as if by thought. Still in full stride, she sliced through the rope and let the knife fall, grasping the falling rope. An explosion sounded behind her as the creature hit a tripwire. She swung out into space, down into the darkness.

Something big hit her in the back as shrapnel flew, detonating other claymores. It was the creature. Screaming, it had launched itself after her, propelled by the explosion. Raking claws sank into her backpack, dragging the nimble thief down with the added weight. Her fingers slipped on the rope, then gave way altogether. Locked in the creature's grip, Shiv fell into the night.

"Where the hell are you?" Rose Asp cursed, reloading the Uzi. Automatic weapon fire started up as the guards gained cover and turned back to face her. She sprayed off another burst, taking down one guard just as he pulled the pin on a grenade. Seconds later the frag went off, killing the two men next to his twitching body. The guards were thrown into confusion for a few precious seconds longer.

Shiv spun in mid-air, positioning herself on top of the slime-skinned creature. Talons swished past her face in anger, and she had just enough time to realize why. Shards of shrapnel were sticking out of the thing's back in jagged green-blooded rows. As the ground rushed up, Shiv made her last move as the creature tried to pull her close enough to bite.

Descending out of the dark, something massive smashed into the hood of the car. Samantha screamed in terror as a torrent of green blood splattered the windshield. Shrapnel stuck in the hood and stopped, but the creature's body didn't. The spurs of metal jutted up further into the thing's body, exploding in a fraction of a second through its torso. It twitched once, then laid still.

Something atop the creature moved. Shiv! She was alive! "Hang on, sister!" Samantha screamed, gunning the car. Gunfire cracked threateningly around them as Shiv clung to the pinned body of the monster on the hood of a speeding steel bullet. The g-forces tried to tug her off as Rose Asp spun through a tight turn and rocketed out of the ruined gate. Pinned to the creature by the shrapnel pushing through it into her own skin, Shiv finally slipped into unconsciousness.

"What the hell is going on?" Skynet finally broke in, "all I hear is screaming, and if it's not over me it can't be good."

Samantha thanked her lucky stars that the little geek was monitoring their communication links. "Brent, we're coming in hot! 10 minutes out. Shiv's injured, we're going to need medical assistance, anti-viral!" She smashed on the accelerator, the powerful engine of the luxury car jumping ahead. "Make that 8 minutes!"

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Brent Styles cranked down the access hatch to the "SkyJet 1", as he liked to call it. Instantly a bloody Latina thief was thrust into his arms. "Normally I'd be thanking God for an unconscious woman, RoseAsp, but what the hell happened to her?" The redhead had disappeared back towards the car. "Just leave the weapons!" he called, "airport security is already on the way!"

He examined his fellow agent's body. Some kind of green liquid was all over the front of her catsuit, seeping through huge punctures. Nasty! He laid her on a row of seats just as Rose Asp reappeared with something wrapped up in her leather jacket. She seemed to be struggling with it, so he helped her pull it on board.

The smell of rotten assholes assaulted him. "NO, that does NOT come on my plane!" he yelled, "that is seriously fucked up, Samantha!" She didn't listen to him, slinging the body of the creature into another row of seats and tying it up with cord from Shiv's pack.

That upholstery was kind of ugly anyways, he thought, closing the hatch and running to the cockpit. Women were always redecorating...



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Leonard Christopherson, AKA Agent Trigger, straightened up from the lab table, wishing he could rub his eyes but fearful of the horrible death he would endure if he opened any portion of his containment suit. The molten green liquid was slowly burning off into the ventilation hood, and he was running out of time.

The intercom within the Agency bio-containment wing crackled to life. "How are we doing, Doc?" Skynet queried, still chipping away at the data on his laptop. In the corner of the room, Samantha sat with bated breath, knowing she was useless in this environment. She just stayed out of the way and brought Mountain Dew refills to the hacker.

"Not good, I'm not sure what I'm looking at. This is definitely man-made, but I don't know how it's affecting her. I'm going to do a bar strain on it; see if it could be neurological. That...thing...that you brought in is already decomposing," Trigger sighed, "the storage room is just filled with that green wispy gas. This thing's blood begins to boil after contact with outside air."

The silence stretched on after that, with Trigger sending analysis trays through a molecular identifier, and Skynet interpreting the readings.

"Jesus."

Trigger turned to the two-way window where Brent and Samantha sat. "What is it, Skynet? Something I can use?"

"That nasty-ass carcass used to be human!" Skynet uttered in wonder, "That is not a pretty way to go."

Trigger perked up. "Human? So they made that creature's body somehow accept all the biological agents they were pumping into it. I need another sample." He dashed off to get a new respirator cartridge.

Samantha perked up as Skynet suddenly began typing commands into his biological emulator program. "What are you two on to?"

Skynet talked as he punched in commands. "The body's immune system is all interconnected. I'll try to put it in layman's terms. You have an innate immune system; it will recognize foreign bodies in your system and react to them. It only knows generalities, though. So one flu is treated just like another flu until the body knows different. It adapts to certain bugs, making it more efficient when it comes across them again."

"Okay, so how does that help us?"

"We know that her body is dying, but there are none of the normal signs of fighting, like increased white blood cells around the entrance wounds. That is totally unnatural, unless the foreign body has been crossed genetically with something else; something that can trick the body into thinking it is not a pathogen. I think I know what Trigger's up to."

The scientist ran back into the lab, a syringe of milky white swirled with green in one hand. He began squirting small amounts into vials, adding sterile solution and packing slides.

"So what's the deal, Trigger," Skynet asked, "try to give Shiv's cells some artificial immunological memories so they think they've seen this bug before?"

Trigger walked to a gene splicer and waited while it warmed up. "Not exactly. Even if we could do that at this point, it would be too late. We couldn't program all the cells in her body to attack in time, and it would leave her vulnerable since the pathogen has spread to all parts of her body already. We've got to try something else. Skynet, I'm sending some theoretical info. Introduce some white blood cells into your equation and advance the time frame times four to see what happens."

Skynet clicked a few keys. He frowned. "Nothing yet. Wait! What the hell! It's mutating! Trigger, we need another option."

"Not just yet. Keep an eye on it for another minute. I have a theory..."

"Whoa," Skynet muttered moments later, "now I see where you're going with this, you evil genius! It looks like a go, but it's going to take time. We'd better start right away!"

"Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?" Rose Asp demanded. Her only answer was Trigger's suited form rushing through the airlock to Shiv's room. She turned to Skynet. "Brent, tell me what's up!"

"Not right now, Samantha, I've got work to do!"

"I'll show you my breasts."

Skynet swiveled around. "Okay, you go first. Then I'll tell you, just to make sure you're not playing me."

Continued on next page...

Grand Theft

Trigger mixed the blood and lymphocyte sample with the chemicals he'd mixed, and siphoned it up into a syringe. He didn't believe in luck, being a man of facts, but it wouldn't hurt to have some now, he thought. The syringe was slipped into the IV feed and sent on its way into the agent's body. This was going to work, or she was going to flat-line any second now.

Samantha pulled her blouse back down. Skynet sat in shock for a few more seconds before shaking his head. "Where was I," he asked out loud, "okay, here's the plan. Geez, you've got a nice rack."

"Brent!"

"Right. Okay. Trigger's little cocktail took parts of the creature's modified immune system. He tweaked them so they would bond with Juanita's immune system. In theory, she should be able to metabolize the poison as a normal product of her biological makeup. In effect, she'll have a ramped-up immune system from this point forward, and should be able to shrug off the effects of that particular pathogen if she comes into contact with it again."

"So what's the down side?"

"I'll tell you if you show me your-"

"Brent!"

"Alright, alright. The downside is that her body could turn on and attack the cocktail, in effect diverting her protections away from the real bug. She'd succumb to its effects even faster. There's no way to know, it's just a waiting game now."

Samantha was dozing silently when Juanita weakly raised her head and looked around. "*Amiga*," she croaked, "what the hell happened?" The red-haired agent rushed to her side, laughing hysterically.

Brent stuck his head in the room to see what the commotion was, and smiled in spite of himself. "You're up, skinny!"

Juanita smiled, then grimaced. "You're one to talk, beanpole boy. Wow, I feel like crap right now. So we got away, anyways. Why the long faces, was it bad? I remember falling."

Her other two team members looked at each other, silently vowing not to tell her everything at once. "It was closer than you know, sister," Rose Asp said, bringing a cup of ice chips to her side.

"It always is," Shiv remarked, laying back in exhaustion.

The sound of the phone ringing shattered the reflective silence. Rose Asp answered it, talking quietly in the corner. She hung up and rejoined them. "That's control. Skynet, we've got to go. Something about a diamond conspiracy here in Washington. Juanita, we've got to go, but I'll check back in on you after we get back. Rest, we'll see you soon."

The two healthy agents walked out, the door swinging shut behind them on well-oiled hinges. Juanita was left to ponder the meaning of their look to each other. Idly she examined the bandages all over her chest, wondering at the small amount of green pigment in the red soaking through the bandages. Questions for another time, preferably after she got another nap in. The Latina girl yawned and closed her eyes.

End