

Ice Block

Samantha Killian strode into the briefing room. Rodeo and Skynet met her inside, making room for her at the low table in front of the projector screen. "So the gang's all here," the flame-haired agent remarked, smiling, "seems like it's been ages, Rodeo."

"Yep," the well-built woman agreed, "time flies when you're blowing stuff up in Italy."

"Heard about that. Had a couple of close shaves the other day?"

"Nothing I can't handle, darlin'. Just a little barbeque and some target practice."

Skynet broke into the conversation. "If you call flipping a car upside down and shooting four bad guys while still strapped into the seat a little 'target practice', I'd just as soon sit back and let you kill everybody."

Rodeo flipped her hair back nonchalantly. "Isn't that what you do anyways, brainiac? Don't worry; you'll get the chance to fire that little popgun sometime soon. Battle's good for the blood."

"I'd rather stay in one piece, actually," Skynet grumbled, "and my blood is just fine, thanks."

Their new handler chose that moment to step into the room. Very tall and thin, the African-American man shook their hands briefly, then got to business handing out their mission briefs. "Good evening, agents," he said, speaking slowly so his accent would not mar his words, "I am Ojimba Noray, your new handler. It seems the investigation into the disappearance of Rex Foster is still ongoing, so I will be handling your missions in the interim. If you have any questions, I am available. Now then, on to the report. Please open to the second page. Here you will see a short list of possible senators, meeting in three days to consider a bill to refinance the IMSTS, a government branch created to control diamond smuggling, tentatively labeled S.4721. Some of them are taking bribes by the diamond companies in South Africa, and we want to know who."

Diamonds, Rose Asp thought to herself dreamily, a girl's best friend.

Next to her, Skynet daydreamed of using the polished facets of a diamond in elaborate switches to send information through a LAN at the speed of light. Faster porn downloads...and of course important information too.

Rodeo saw the pictures flashing on the screen of the diamonds that had been captured by the IMSTS in its short operation. I'd have gotten them across the border with no problem, she thought, and fenced them for twice as much. But those days were over...or so she thought.

"Your flight leaves in 45 minutes, gear up and go."

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Skynet sat in the back of the AVST, or Audio Video Surveillance Truck, provided by the Agency. The group was planted down the road from the hotel where the senators were meeting. Up front, Rodeo sighed in boredom and slipped a flask out of her pack. "What is that, whiskey? Damn, Rodeo, we've only been here for three hours!"

The surly smuggler looked back at him. "You're right; it's time for another smoke."

"Those things will kill you, you know," the hacker replied, eyeing the video camera angles.

"Yeah, but not before I knock off your skinny ass for trying to tell me what to do," Rodeo announced, blowing a plume of smoke into the back of the van.

"That's just nasty!" Skynet grimaced, coughing. He straightened in his seat. "Showtime. Looks like we have a couple of arrivals."

Outside, the black sedan pulled up to the curb, disgorging two well-dressed men in their fifties. Security agents complete with sidearms and throat mics advanced to cover them, keeping a close eye on all passersby. The day was getting long, and security seemed to be airtight.

Just then, a quick knock sounded at the back door of the van. Skynet flipped the switch to deactivate the electric current running to the back door handle and said, "Okay, Rose, you're good!"

The door opened to admit a plain-faced woman with wrinkles around her eyes and a noticeable slouch. "Look what the cat dragged in!" Rodeo quipped, sipping from her flask.

The hag sat down at the short side table in the van and began peeling off her disguise. Underneath, the redhead's beauty showed through as the fake skin came off, like a butterfly breaking from a cocoon. "Security is tighter than this guy's ass before he went to his short prison stay for hacking the federal paycheck database," she joked, hooking a thumb back Skynet's way.

"My ass is still tight, thank you very much," Brent retorted, giving her the finger, "so what else did you find?"

"I can try to sneak in as housekeeping if I can get a look at the uniforms, but so far no one has come or gone from the back entrance, according to my video bug. They're not even letting the help out for smoke breaks."

The group sat and pondered their next move. Rodeo rolled her eyes finally. "Just hack the damn hotel, Sky; I can see you itching to do it. We've got nothing to lose at this point, and we need to know who's expected to show up so Rose can dopplegang `em and get us in there."

Skynet flexed his long, dexterous phalanges in anticipation. "I'm going to need some Cheetos or something."

Rose Asp sighed and hopped back out in search of snacks and caffeine. Lots of caffeine.

"Are you done yet?" Rodeo snarled, lighting up another cigarette.

"Patience is a virtue, as I recall," the hacker remarked, brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Rodeo threw the empty cigarette box at him, deep in thought. "Yeah," she remarked, taking another swig of whiskey, "never had much use for it."

It was going to be a long night. Luckily they still had a couple of days before the vote was supposed to happen. They might need it to get into this modern fortress.

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Samantha Killian rubbed her eyes and yawned. It was nearly midnight, and she was getting agitated. Sitting around and waiting was fine for others, but she wanted to do something. As team lead, she didn't see another opening until they had an identity to get in there with. There were three female senators that she had looked up, and everything was prepped. She just needed to see what Skynet pulled up on the database to see which of the three had not yet checked into the hotel.

Rodeo leaned back and tapped her on the shoulder. "It'll take the edge off," she smiled, offering the flask. Samantha thought about it, then took it and threw back a drink. In a moment, her eyes watered and she coughed spasmodically.

"Christ, Sammie, what have you added in here?" Rose Asp managed to say after a few moments.

Samantha Drake just smirked, tucking the flask away. "My own secret recipe. A little battery acid, some Clorox, you know, household stuff."

Skynet swiveled around in his ergonomic chair. "Samantha!"

Both women turned and said "What?" at the same time.

"Okay, this just isn't working. Rodeo, you stick with Sammie. Rose, you're Samantha. Cool? You'd think the Agency could get chicks with different names or something." The two women stared daggers at him. "Umm, moving on. I've cracked their firewall open like a ripe melon. Looks like Roberta Puratz hasn't checked in yet. Have you got a disguise ready?"

Rose Asp turned to her makeup setup. "I'll be ready in ten. We might need to find a black sedan for our arrival."

Without warning, shattering safety glass rained on them as the windshield exploded inward. Rodeo threw herself back, knocking Rose Asp out of her chair. Was it a gunshot? Out of the corner of her eye, the explorer saw the gas canister rolling toward her across the floor, a bluish mist escaping out of it. Gas! Her limbs suddenly became leaden, forgetting who was boss. Rose Asp slumped down next to her, blinking feebly.

A second later, Skynet fell out of his chair. Just before he passed out, he thought how lovely the two Samanthas looked draped over each other like that. And he couldn't be sure through the haze clouding his vision, but he thought he could see down Rodeo's shirt from this angle. Then darkness descended upon him.

Rodeo tried to scream "GET UP!" to Rose Asp, but it only came out as a gurgle. Her tongue wouldn't form any shape for talking. Just before she passed out, she had the satisfaction of hearing someone rattle the back door handle to the van. The electric current wired to it pulled a sickening, reverberating scream from outside. Serves you right, you son of a bitch, she thought idly, falling backwards into grey. Her eyes drifted closed.

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On some subconscious level, Rodeo heard the snapping of the vial seconds before she inhaled a batch of smelling salts. Instantly she gasped at the sharp smell, bursting forth from a magnificent dream of diamonds and gold into wide-eyed wakefulness. Her heart pounded in her chest at unnatural speeds as the chemical reaction jump-started her metabolism. Around her was only darkness, and the dull hum of tires on an asphalt road. Riveted metal dug into her back like a dagger, making the tough-as-nails smuggler shift to the side uncomfortably.

"Ah, you are awake," a man's voice said out of the darkness. The blindfold was lifted from her eyes. Rodeo blinked rapidly, willing her eyes to adjust to the dim interior of a van. On the floor next to her were her companions, tightly bound as she was and still unconscious. On a bench along the wall sat four men and one woman in suits, weapons holstered under their jackets. The one kneeling in front of her sat back as the one that had spoken before crouched down to stare her in the eyes. "We know you, Agent Rodeo. And we have a proposition for you."

Sammie shook her head to clear it of the spider webs lurking in the corners. She knew this man, but it wasn't clicking. Whatever nerve agent they had used, it was potent. "Propositions are for whores, buddy. Just tell me what the hell you want so I can go ahead and tell you to take your little proposition and shove it up your ass."

Tightly bound with her hands behind her back, Rodeo was in no position to dodge the backhand that crashed into her jaw, bouncing her head off the metal floor of the van. Stars erupted in front of her eyes, and she thought she could hear the rush of blood through her veins as adrenaline poured into her system. She started to laugh. "Is that the best you've got? It's going to take more than a sissy love tap to take me out."

"That's not what I have in mind, but you should listen to the offer I have for you. Does the name River Frost mean anything to you?"

Rodeo sat up. "River Frost. Yeah, I did some jobs for them, before the hostile takeover, or bloodbath, or whatever you assholes call what you do to each other in Africa. What about them?"

The man leaned closer, light from the back window shining off his shaved head. "There's the small matter of two million dollars in rough-cut diamonds you were smuggling into the United States for them just before our takeover of the organization. Where did the merchandise go?"

Rodeo pretended to think for a moment. "Umm, let's see. Nope, hu-uh, can't recall. Oh, yeah, I got busted with them on me, thanks to a leak in River Frost. Sorry boys, that ship sailed a long time ago."

The man smiled evilly in the darkness. "That just means you owe a debt, dear Samantha, a debt I intend to collect on as the new owner of the Darkened Mined Corporation. In exchange for writing it off, I need your services to bring some product into the country. Five or six trips should do it, and you are absolved of anything you may owe me. And I can cut you in for a small percentage to show my good faith."

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Rodeo contemplated the statement. She loved diamonds, or more importantly the things that came with them, but she also knew that diamond smugglers were not above killing anyone they felt like. They'd been doing it for years, and there was no reason to stop with all the gringos snapping them up with their made-up holidays every year. It was a loser of a deal for her either way. She made up her mind.

"Go fuck yourself, you Samuel L. Jackson wannabe. You and your Darkened Mined cronies can sit on your thumbs and spin. Did I piss you off?"

The man slapped her again. "Pissed off? No. Excited? Yes. Because now I may do as I wish with you."

Rodeo braced her shoulders against the wall and kicked out with both bound feet, catching the mysterious owner of the Darkened Mined Corp. under the jaw. Her powerful, sinewy muscles propelled his head into the side of the van with a smear of blood. "Did I piss you off NOW?!"

The African woman beside him stood up and grabbed her by the hair, immobilizing her head while she took a swing. Rodeo's head rocked back from the punch, her teeth loosened in her head. She spit blood and at least one tooth in the woman's face. "You think you're going to be enough to kill me? Please, bitch. You'll fail just like the rest. I can't die."

Four punches later, the smuggler finally fell unconscious. Johannes Gitaru leaned back against the wall of the van, cradling the back of his head in agony. "Kill her with the other two. Let them suffer for a while first, though."

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Skynet woke up in darkness. Disoriented, he raised his head. **Crack!** His skull collided violently with metal. He reached out his senses. The ropes that bound his hands behind him didn't budge. Expert knots. Damn. His feet were bound tightly as well, and the hacker couldn't move out of the fetal position without hitting something. He was in a steel coffin. Claustrophobia set in with a vicious purpose. "HELP FUCKING HELP DAMN IT SHIT!!!!!!!"

A muffled yell sounded from close by. Rose Asp. "Brent, is that you? Where are we?" The muffled sound of machinery in the distance cut through the sides of his new home.

"We're in the back of a compact car Rose, where the HELL do you think we are?"

"Just when I was starting to like you, Skynet!"

Another voice, off to the other side of him, called out suddenly. "Will you two shut the hell up? I've got a headache!"

"RODEO," Skynet screamed, kicking out with his feet, "GET ME OUT OF HERE!! OH JESUS!"

A crunching sound came from nearby. After that the sound of metal clinking was all Skynet could hear in the sudden quiet. **Whack!** The lid to the trunk of the car he was in sprang open. A dark form moved against the impossibly bright light of the sun. Skynet hoped it was someone he knew, or he was a dead man. He hyperventilated, and could feel the snot in his nose start to run. Oh, crap. He'd brought someone to finish the job with his idiotic kicking and yelling. It was all his fa-

Callused hands rolled him over and began working at the knots. In a moment he was free. Rodeo stood over him smiling. "You look like shit, Skynet."

"How did you get out? They took everything from me!"

Rodeo motioned over her shoulder towards the next car on the impossibly high junker stack they were on. The trunk was sprung, with a fist-sized hole near the back lock. It was only then that he saw her bloody hand and the welts around her wrists from snapping the stout cord. He suddenly realized that Sammie was probably strong enough when she was pissed to crush someone's skull with one hand.

"Do you do drugs?" he asked meekly.

In answer, Rodeo picked up a tie rod and wedged it under the trunk of the next car over. In a moment, Rose Asp was free as well. The group looked around. The junkyard they were in had sheer 12 ft. walls all around. They needed a way out, and fast.

The trio clambered down from the immense height. A little ways over, a conveyor belt sent a car into oblivion in the jaws of a massive car crusher. It automatically engaged, rending metal and sending chunks of safety glass showering over the sides. In less than a minute, the powerful hydraulic presses had made a ragged cube out of a half a ton of Detroit steel. The next car fell into position.

If machinery was running, someone was home. They searched for weapons, picking up pieces of metal and moving on. "Look out," Skynet whispered, "video cameras on the walls!"

Suddenly a cry broke the stillness. "They're loose!"

"Information we could have used YESTERDAY!" Rodeo spat, gritting her teeth. This was going to get ugly.

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The tramp of feet signaled the approach of the armed guards. They were dressed in military combat gear, even if it was poorly maintained. The clicks of safeties being released sounded like hammer blows in the sudden quiet. Rose Asp flattened herself up against a row of crushed cars as the three men came bolting around the corner of the junk heap. Skynet chucked his piece of metal at them and made for the nearest cover he could find. Rose Asp sighed. At least the little shit was out of their way.

The men focused on Rodeo. The stout woman stood quietly waiting for them, her hands relaxed at her sides. They moved in for the kill, not noticing Rose Asp racing up behind them. The red-haired boxer moved between the back two, getting up close and personal before they could level their weapons and blast Rodeo. Her fists flew in rapid succession, landing stunning blows to the face of one and the body of the other. Oblivious, the man in the lead took a hurried aim and fired at Rodeo.

Rodeo laughed in his face as the first burst drew a nick of blood in her side. "That's not even a flesh wound, big guy. You'll have to do better." Rushing forward like a gazelle, the dark-haired woman swatted the MP5 out of his hands and delivered a brutal uppercut to his jaw. The African man fell back, the gun landing behind him. His eyes widened in terror as a size ten combat boot smashed into the ground where he had just been laying. Rolling to his feet, the soldier pulled his pistol and fired off a hurried shot. It lanced through Rodeo's other side, spilling scarlet onto her clothes. Big mistake.

With a roar of fury, Sammie slapped the pistol out of his hand. It landed with a plinking sound inside the smashed cab of a ruined truck. The man looked wistfully back at the MP5 as Rodeo rushed forward, smashing her powerful fist into his solar plexus. As the soldier struggled to force air back into his lungs, she reared back and drove her fist into his throat with all her momentum behind it. Bones and cartilage shredded under the assault, turning his windpipe into so much hamburger. He fell to the ground, powerless to pull air into his oxygen-starved body. Rodeo stepped past him without a glance as he sank to his knees.

A few yards away, Rose Asp racked one soldier in the balls before turning to work on his friend. He punched her in the face, realizing his submachine gun was useless in such tight quarters. "Not...in...the face!" Samantha roared, punctuating each word with a rabbit punch to his head and body. He finally collapsed under her assault, unconscious.

Rose Asp turned to see the other man finally straightening out of the standing-fetal position he'd adopted when she smashed his jewels. "You're gonna die, American bitch!" he cursed, pulling his arms up in a boxing stance. Breaking his guard with a left feint, she moved in and pistoned her right fist into his nuts again. He screamed weakly before collapsing in shock, his scrotum turned into nothing more than a sack of blood.

Skynet came back out from his cover, smiling like the Cheshire cat. "Man, that was fantastic! The way you two were working them over, it was like Christmas! Now let's get the hell out of here!"

Rodeo looked up, her face devoid of emotion. As the man Rose Asp had knocked down started to stir, she placed her boot on his throat and twisted. He stopped moving. "Skynet, grab his legs."

Moments later, armed with the guards' pistols and MP5's, the group moved out. The car crusher continued to operate, smashing the next car in line. The three bodies inside rained rivulets of crimson into the fluid grate like an offering to a god.

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As Rose Asp and Skynet scoured through the junk piles for anything they could find to aid them, Rodeo kept vigil from the top of a row of refrigerators nearby. The added height easily let her see over rows of burnt-out appliances, recycled paper, and 55-gallon drums. As dusk descended on the junkyard, a rustle of pebbles caught her attention. She hissed, catching her teammates' attention. They crouched down, weapons out. Taking careful aim with her captured revolver, Rodeo dropped the man skulking below her. The blast reverberated against the concrete walls, rushing back upon her ears in disharmonious waves.

"Over here!" another voice called from the darkness. Two more soldiers converged on their position from opposite directions. Spotting her silhouette, the one closest to Sammie pulled himself up on top of the refrigerator stack and advanced on her with blinding speed. Good, a challenge.

A combat knife flashed in front of the smuggler's eyes as she danced back, the beginnings of a laugh racing up from her belly. Confused, the man hesitated for only an instant.

That was all it took. Rodeo reached out and touched someone, grabbing his knife arm and twisting it behind his back and up. Bone popped wetly out of its socket, and the man screamed bloody murder. Spinning him towards the aisle between the rows of appliances, Rodeo pushed him over the edge and rode him to the ground. With only one arm to try to stop his fall, the soldier face-planted cruelly into the hard-packed earth. His jaw gave way with a snap. Rodeo's weight on his kidneys forced them to rupture, sealing his fate.

Rodeo's laugh tapered off as she rose to her feet. As she thought, Death wasn't coming to claim her this time. She shrugged off his skeletal reach as she had done countless times. As she would do again. She stalked off after fresh prey, her senses keen in the dimming light.

The other man let loose a burst from maximum range, more for scare tactics than actual accuracy. Rose Asp fired off a few return shots from her scavenged pistol. "Skynet, shoot the bastard!" she called. In her peripheral vision, she saw the hacker aim at the guard, but he didn't pull the trigger. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"He's not in range yet. I'm good."

"Shoot him!"

"I don't want to waste ammo. You've seen my targets at the Agency range. They're still intact."

"Fuck!" Rose Asp screamed, emptying the last rounds in her pistol. Ahead of her, the man ran out of ammo in the MP5 as well, popping the spent magazine and reaching behind for a spare. Throwing down the pistol, Rose ran full tilt at him. He looked up just in time to catch a two-fisted smash to the bridge of the nose. He staggered back, losing his submachine gun. He reached for his pistol, but his sweat-slick fingers slipped on the release catch of the holster.

"Hey, junior!" Samantha yelled, pivoting on the balls of her feet. Her leg shot out in a side snap kick, driving the wind from his body in a rush. Her follow-up kick to his balls lifted him off the ground and sent him flying into the wall of the office. Somehow rising to his feet, he made it in the front door and closed it. Samantha reached it just as the bolt was thrown from the other side. She slapped it in frustration.

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"I'll get the gate!" Skynet yelled, racing for the security booth. He reached in the window and hit the release button, looking around furtively as Rodeo joined them. The gate moved ponderously open, squeaking on rusty rollers.

"We have to find out who these guys are," Rodeo said determinedly, pulling out her flask and taking a swig as she walked away from the gate.

Skynet couldn't believe it. "The freakin' exit is RIGHT HERE!" he pleaded, "Let's get the hell out of here! Where did you get your flask?"

"She's right, Brent," Rose Asp said wearily, "I want to know who's trying to kill us. Besides, they probably have your laptop. As for the flask, she is a smuggler, after all."

"But where did she hide -whoa." He shook his head to clear it of the mental picture. Time for that later. "Shit. I'm probably going to die here, Rose. It's your fault if it happens. You know that, don't you?"

Samantha smiled wearily at him. "Just pull the trigger this time, will you, nerd boy? It's kill or be killed."

The sound of a garage door rolling up on the other side of the building rang in their ears. More reinforcements. Skynet sighed, pulling the pistol from his waistband, and chambered a round before hunkering down in the relative safety of the security booth. He seriously thought about just grabbing the girls and pulling them out of the gate, but Rodeo would just throttle him and then he'd be too out of breath to run.

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"Okay, Sammie, let's try to ambush them over the—" Rose Asp began, just before Rodeo opened fire on the goons turning the corner of the building. One of them went down in a spray of blood. "Crap, so much for that idea," the red-haired boxer told herself. She rolled up her sleeves and rushed into the fray, swinging left and right.

Behind the two girls, one of the thugs unbolted the front door and stepped out. Taking careful aim, he lined up a shot to the back of Rodeo's skull and pulled the trigger. **BLAM! BLAM!** Skynet's shot from the security booth spun him around just as he pulled the trigger, sending his shot skyward. Screaming, he dropped his gun and held his shattered elbow, trying in vain to quell the flow of lifeblood jetting into the pebbled soil.

"Do you got my laptop?" Skynet asked calmly, stepping from cover. "Nope, guess not." The lanky hacker's next shot gave the man a third eye in his throat. The soldier dropped without a sound.

The rest of the African soldiers fanned out, peppering shots at Rodeo as she began taking aimed shots at them. Two went down in sprays of blood before her revolver clicked on an empty cylinder. "Well, that's that," she sighed, chucking the revolver at one of her assailants. It shattered his shooter's glasses and broke his nose, sending him reeling to the ground. The first bullet found her, smashing into her leg in the meaty part of the thigh. She growled.

Rose Asp took advantage of the men looking at Rodeo to come up behind two of them. Moving in close in a boxing stance, she cracked one in the back of the skull and felt vertebrae grind beneath her fist. Screaming in agony, he fell twitching to the ground. His partner had enough time to turn around before her knee strike to the body broke ribs. Two more punches and he was down and out. She ran for the next closest assailant.

Rodeo caught another shot, this time in the chest. Her breath came in ragged pulls laced with blood. Too many of them, she thought, let's see how good of a shot they really are. She made eye contact with a soldier reloading his pistol. He stopped, frightened of what he saw behind her eyes. A coldness washed over him, and like a deer caught in headlights, he couldn't look away. Rodeo charged.

The bullets stopped flying through the air as she launched at the man, his buddies too afraid to fire with him caught in their sights. Her mad dash lifted him off his feet. Before he had time to fall backwards, the explorer's callused hands plucked him out of the air and raised him high above the ground. He had time to gulp before he was smashed to the ground, his spine shattered in multiple places.

The shots resumed, one catching Rodeo in the arm, and another to her good leg. She smashed into the next man with an expert shoulder block, launching him into his friends like a bowling ball into tenpins.

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Skynet ran up behind the soldiers on his side of the battlefield, catching them unaware as they followed Rodeo's path of destruction. "Neither of you has my laptop!" he screamed, shooting the first one with a quick 1-2. His first bullet, aimed for the soldier's head, actually hit his Kevlar vest instead. The recoil lifted the barrel of Skynet's pistol up and to the left slightly, making his second bullet the one that told the tale. The man's head exploded from the impact of the hollow point, spraying blood all over the back of the man in front of him. Skynet reached past the falling body and grabbed his blood-spattered ally. He pulled the man back by his hair, burying the barrel of his pistol into the unfortunate soldier's spine. "You don't shoot at my friends, fucker." Chunks of vertebrate chips and geysers of blood peppered the ground several feet away.

Rose Asp uppercut the man in front of her, moving past him without checking to see if he was down. The pain in her knuckles assured her he was out of the fight. A man spun around, the snub barrel of an MP5 tracking her. The short burst caught her in the arm as she spun to the side. His mag clicked on empty, the other shots wasted on Rodeo seconds earlier. The boxer moved in, stunning him with jabs from her good arm before reaching down and breaking his wrist with the other. The stabbing pain in her arm was a fair exchange for hearing him squeal like a stuck pig. The MP5 fell to the ground. She punched him as hard as she could in the balls to finish the job, and then kicked him while he lay screaming just for good measure.

Rodeo lifted the man she'd shoulder-blocked over her head. "Die, you whore!" she spat, heaving him into a pile of broken glass. There was a wet popping sound as a fluorescent tube speared through him, releasing its toxic gases through the hole in his chest. He tried to scream, but only blood roared out in a scarlet flood. Two to go. She charged for the woman she'd "met" in the van earlier, obviously the leader of the ragtag group left to watch them die. The hellcat that used to be a woman smiled at the African soldier-for-hire. Time to get reacquainted.

The other man aimed his next shot at Rodeo, hoping to take the crazy white woman out before she reached his boss. "Hey, asshole!" Skynet screamed, squeezing off a shot. The bullet flew far to his right, grazing Rodeo's shoulder bone and skipping slightly to the left. The African woman screamed as it blew her left hand in two. Her weapon fell uselessly to the ground, barking out a short staccato as it railed off ammunition into a cluster of 55 gallon drums. One caught fire and went up in a massive explosion, lifting the agonized woman off her feet to land two feet in front of Rodeo.

The other soldier laughed and swung his barrel towards Skynet.

"Oooohhhh, shit!" Brent yelled, ducking and covering. **SNAP!** He looked up to see Rose Asp disentangle her muscular arms from the man's neck. He fell to the ground, his head lolling in an unnatural posture. His teeth gnashed in a reflex as neurons fired for the last time in his brain.

Rodeo picked the woman up by her hair. "You picked the wrong side this time, bitch," she said calmly, breaking both of the woman's arms in turn. The complex fractures poked out of the dark skin like light at the end of a tunnel, dribbling bright red that soaked into her black combat fatigues with nearly no trace.

"Yo-you should have joined us, Agent Rodeo," the woman laughed weakly, "we'll be coming for you now."

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"Yeah, well YOU certainly won't. And as for your sissy friends, I think my friends and I can handle ourselves."

"Rodeo," Rose Asp called, "maybe we should take her back for questioning; find out who did this."

The explorer lifted her off her feet and drove her headfirst into the ground. The snapping of the spine sounded like a rifle shot. "Not this one, Samantha. Find another one."

Skynet pulled a man to his knees. "This one's still breathing. His balls are crushed, though. Rose Asp, was that you?" he winced. Even if he was the enemy, any guy could sympathize with a fellow man that was...well...less of a man now.

Rose Asp grabbed Skynet and kissed him full on the mouth. "You didn't run!"

"Well, no. My good looks aren't going to get someone to give us a ride in this part of town," he joked, wiping blood off his hands, "can you do that again?"

"A little help here?" a weak voice called out. They turned to see Rodeo pulling herself to her feet wearily. Bullet-holes bled rivers of life out onto her clothes, and her complexion had turned a dull waxy color.

"Sammie! Jesus! We've got to get you to a hospital!"

"Well, it's not like I'm going to die or anything," she grimaced, breathing shallowly, "Can't be done. But those bastards shot a hole in my flask. Damn waste of whiskey if you ask me."

The hacker and the boxer rushed to hold her up as her legs collapsed beneath her.

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Ojimba Noray stalked into the room, his fists clenched at his side. "You've been gone for three days. Whatever nerve agent you were exposed to kept you out of the action. A perfect plan. The appropriations bill was defeated, and the flood of illegal diamonds into this country will increase. It was bad luck being spotted, agents."

Samantha, Sammie and Brent sat quietly at the table. Sammie's multitude of wounds were covered in bandages, leading Skynet to call her "his Mummy" on more than one occasion. She was still too injured to properly beat the crap out of him.

"With respect, sir," Rose Asp began, "this wasn't just a matter of being spotted. They knew we were going to be there, and they knew who Rodeo was. We have a mole, sir, and we need to smoke him or her out somehow."

Their new handler spun to face them. "You will do nothing, Agent Rose Asp. Neither will your comrades here. You will all take a mandatory leave of absence for two weeks, effective immediately. The Agency is not in the business of failure. It would do well for you to remember that. Dismissed."

Rodeo stood with some difficulty. "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'm taking three weeks. Me and geek-boy are going to do a little yachting and let the dust settle."

"That is fine. Keep in touch every week per the usual procedure."

The three walked out of the briefing, more pissed off than they were going in. "Are you sure you're not coming, Rose?" Skynet asked, "You could use the break." There seemed to be a deeper meaning to his words, but she had other things to take care of first.

"Thanks, you two go ahead. I'll take a rain check. I need some quick answers, and I know just the man to talk to."

"Digger?"

"Digger."

Rodeo spoke up. "Be careful there, Samantha, he seems on the level and everything, but he's got some dangerous people looking for him, and he's got more secrets than all of us combined."

"Speak for yourself," Skynet muttered.

The three friends gave each other quick hugs before they split off. Outside, a storm was brewing.

End