

Tangled Web

She awoke to the sound of water dripping nearby. The cold wind whistled through the chinks in the boarded-up warehouse somewhere in Germany. Outside a still-intact window, she thought she could see snow swirling in lazy circles. It was still January, she thought, but she couldn't be sure. The last thing she remembered was eating dinner at home with her boyfriend, then darkness.

"Wake up, little one," a booming voice mocked her. Swiveling her head sluggishly, the agent blinked through the haze in her mind to focus on her captor. He stood with arms crossed lightly over his chest, his Cheshire grin glowing out of his dark face. The black man was in her mind, whispering that it was time to give up, to forget about all the terrible choices and let him make them for her. His mouth never moved as she heard the words echoing in her skull.

"Get out of my goddamn head!" she cried, looking away from him, "Where is Bernard?"

Laughter. Then, "Your mission is complete, little Spyder. Bernard is dead, as you were planning on doing anyways. Your precious Agency will hear of his death and wait for you to report in, but that is not going to happen."

Spyder flexed her wrists to feel the tension on the ropes holding her tightly to the chair, but they were expertly tied. It would take some time to get free. She wasn't sure she'd be given that much time. "Why am I even still alive? Who are you?"

"That, my dear," the man spoke for real this time, "is a very good question. I work for the Cold Zero Clan, and you've meddled in our affairs for far too long. Bernard Denton was one of our best customers, and will be missed. But he chose to bed the wrong woman, though I can certainly understand his attraction." The words were spoken slowly, in halting English. Nothing like the assured voice he had spoken directly into her mind.

"My people will come for me. It would be better for you to release me now," she lied, locking gazes with him. Her curly brown hair blew into her face as another gust of freezing wind tore through the building. She clenched her jaw to keep it from chattering in the dropping temperature.

"Tsk, ts," he remarked, moving forward to caress her hair, "lying will get you nowhere, Ms. Lynch. You are alone in the field, expected to take care of yourself. A deep-cover operative trained to trust no one and keep your own counsel. That is why you are still alive. You will make a valuable tool, though in need of some dulling. We can't have you turning and cutting the hand that holds your leash."

"What makes you think I would work for you, asshole?" she countered. Immediately she felt the force of his will descend upon her, prying open all the locked doors in her mind. It was unbearable. She screamed, for how long she didn't know.

"Enough," the voice said, withdrawing to a soft murmur, "your mind is strong, but you are untrained. I will win, and then you will do as I say. Sleep now, little Spyder. When we are through, you will be my assassin instead of the Agency's, and you will be rewarded with greater riches than you could ever imagine. Most people would join us gladly." The pressure on her eyes increased, drawing her lids down inexorably. She spiraled back into darkness for a time.

Tangled Web

When she next awoke, a small table had been set up a few feet in front of her. A pitcher of water, a towel, and a strange doll were the only things on its cracked and pitted surface. A straight pin stuck out of the doll's left foot. Moving around gently, she realized she couldn't feel her left foot at all. She looked down, reassured that it was still there. Very strange...

A door somewhere opened in the old warehouse, up above and behind her. Probably an old supervisor's office. The creak of footsteps heralded the arrival of someone with a quiet tread. Appearing around her left side, a bent old woman shuffled to the table and put down a covered plate of food.

"You --you're my maid!" Jocelyn Lynch cried out in German, focusing on the woman's old and lined visage. "You work for them? You betrayed me?" It all began to click into place. Adelinde was always in a position to know what Bernard was up to. Nothing was hidden from the hired help. It was only natural that the Cold Zero Clan would plant a spy within the household of a client they suspected of keeping secrets from them. The old woman had been a fixture since long before Jocelyn had met the wealthy Bernard Denton, a German national with a summer home in Paris. In a rush, the agent remembered the translation of the maid's name: "noble serpent." At least half of the moniker fit the wrinkled old woman.

"*Ja, Frau Lynch,*" she answered, getting a forkful of green beans and moving them towards Jocelyn's mouth, "*es war mein job.*" Jocelyn muddled through the translation. German was still new to her. It was my job, the old maid had said.

The young spy took the food offered, needing her strength. After she was finished, the old woman pulled the shawl from around her shoulders and draped it over Jocelyn. The frigid temperatures seemed less intense now.

"*Sie werden bald bewegt,*" the old woman said. You will be moved soon. Then she smiled kindly and laid a hand on Jocelyn's shoulder, patting it gently as if to say, I am not your enemy. She retreated.

Soon, more solid footsteps sounded. The black man came around to face her once more. "I see you are thirsty," he said, picking up the pitcher and bringing it to her lips. Jocelyn drank greedily, not knowing how long she had been kept here before she awoke. It felt like eternity. "You have been here two days. You awoke this morning," he told her, as if reading her mind.

She looked at the doll on the table as he put the pitcher back down. "Ah, you wonder how it is done, no?" he asked, picking up the doll. "My family practiced voodoo back in my homeland, girl. Some people believe that if you have no fear, no knowledge of a thing, it cannot harm you. I know this to be untrue. The less mental defenses you have, the easier the voodoo slips into you, turning blood to ice and life to death. I will show you before we are done. Julio!"

More footsteps, slow and shuffling. Feeling an unreasoning fear in her belly, Jocelyn turned her head as another dark-skinned man came forward. He stared straight ahead, lifeless eyes boring into the voodoo priest in front of her. Wearing nothing but a loincloth, he stood in the freezing temperatures without seeming to feel them.

"You will not move, little Spyder," the priest said, dusting her with powder from a small bag on his belt. Turning to the doll, he pulled silver pins from a bracelet on his wrist and pushed them slowly into the arms and legs of the doll. Jocelyn felt her limbs grow weak, falling dead to all feeling. The man untied her and lifted her effortlessly into the waiting arms of the nearly-naked man.

Continued on next page...

Tangled Web

"Julio, bring her to the car. We go."

The man shuffled out into the cold night, the priest ahead of him. Jocelyn willed her fingers to move, anything at all, but it was all for naught. The loinclothed man placed her in the back seat of the car and shuffled to the other side, the priest giving him explicit commands. He was a zombie.

As the snow continued to swirl downward, Ojimba Noray sat in the front passenger seat and commanded the driver to take them back. But back to where? The young spy didn't know, and wished desperately that there was a way to warn the Agency of her whereabouts.

As Ojimba Noray's car vanished into the night like a shadow, a lone hunter on the other side of Berlin held a satellite phone to his ear in the foyer of a mansion. "She's gone, sir. Agent Spyder is missing and Bernard Denton is dead, chest carved out with a knife. I think his heart is missing. Low levels of some sleep agent in the soup, both bowls. No, I don't think she's covering her tracks. I think she was taken."

The voice on the other end of the line squawked in his ear. "We've been watching her for insubordination for some time now, Agent Famine. Deep cover operatives are not the most reliable, as they're away from superiors for too long at a time. Makes them think they call all the shots. She's going to have to be liquidated, once she resurfaces."

"No, you're wrong, Foster. This is all wrong. She's been taken; I have a gut feeling. Now what are we going to do about it?"

Famine could see almost see the red rush of blood on Rex Foster's face as the words dripped acid. "You're new here, Collins. I'm your handler. I tell you what to do, and you do it. Understood? Look for anything that could tell where she's gone, search the computer for transactions, just give me something."

The intruder flipped off the phone with his free hand, biting his tongue. It had been only a month or so since he was pulled into the inner workings of the Agency, but already he knew there were bad elements everywhere. Rex Foster was one of those, a fat bitch that couldn't cut it as a field agent, so he tried his hand at manipulating others. Hitting the disconnect button, he made for the computer in the upstairs study.

Pulling out the modem cord, he clipped on a nondescript black box with a matching length of cable. Plugging it into the back of the computer, he powered up the high-tech desktop and watched as the bank of four monitors came to life. Flipping up the antenna on the sat phone, he dialed another number.

"Agent code 23GH47, Romeo-Delta. Give me your best tech." He waited as the Agency surveillance department patched him through to an operative.

"Agent Famine, welcome to the party. I'm Skynet, I'll be your host for this remote hack. Just kick back and relax, I'm already working."

A flashing sub-program, with the logo SkyHack in the upper corner, replaced the login page. A three-dimensional view of the system with a code box underneath appeared on the monitor, a mirror of what the hacker was doing scrolling up underneath. The black-clad thief tried to follow, but the blur of numbers and pointers looked like garbage to him. "Are you sure you can do this thing? Don't you have something to just smash on through?" he asked finally as the minutes ticked by.

Continued on next page...

Tangled Web

The scroll of code continued on, unabated, as Skynet answered him back. "It's rarely that simple. They call me in when you want into the top of the line systems, not your average Windows 2000 piece of garbage. Now shut up and let me work, you field mook. Jenny, more Mountain Dew! That's a good girl."

In the background, Famine thought he heard the phrase "Fuck you, prick," though he couldn't be sure. He smiled. Whoever this kid was, he sounded like he knew what he was doing.

A few seconds later, Skynet's custom bug wiped the floor with the last of the ICE programs and firewalls. "I'm in. What are you looking for?"

"Travel arrangements paid by card for anywhere around today's date. My jackass of a handler seems to think our deep-cover killed her mark and ran. I don't get that feeling. If you see anything else, let me know."

Three seconds later, Skynet spoke back. "So, it looks like you're working for Foster. Yeah, he's the top peanut in the turd, if you ask me. Nothing for travel, no keywords coming up. Wait --almost missed it, the coding is that beautiful." A whistle sounded from the phone.

"What have you got, Brainiac?" Famine asked, looking intently at the screen.

"Security cameras are tied in. Smile, you're on candid camera." A view of the intruder popped up on one of the screens in front of him. Taking a second to analyze the angle, Famine found the hidden camera atop a row of books on an eye-level shelf.

"Transmitting an address to your PDA, somewhere local where the signal is going. The owner of this computer had no idea the system was patched in or sending a signal."

"So that's how they knew what she was up to."

"What?" the hacker asked, thousands of miles away.

"Nothing, just thinking out loud. Thanks for your help..."

"It's Skynet. And whatever. Thanks for calling." The line clicked dead as Famine stood up, adjusting his saber in a sheath hanging between his shoulder blades. Time to see who was watching him. He thought about calling Foster, but discarded the idea. He can't tell you no if you don't ask, Jasper Collins thought to himself.

Tangled Web

Jocelyn didn't know where she was, only that she couldn't move and the voice in her head was back. The black man, whispering to her again. He told her that she was in danger; that a man was trying to kill her. The voice came with a picture in her mind, a man with graying hair and a noble set to his shoulders. Wingate. This man wanted her dead? He was the one that brought her into the Agency. It couldn't be true!

The voice insisted that it was, that she would always be hiding until she got him off her trail. It would be so easy, just slip the thin dagger with the serrated edge into the soft spot at the base of his skull. Twist it until his wild thrashing stopped and the blood came thick and hot all over her hands. Then she would be free.

"We will do this again tomorrow," the true voice of the man leaning over her said, hidden behind her blindfold. So it had been for days upon days, she didn't know how long. He would take off her blindfold and let her watch him take the pins out of the doll that looked like her, adorned with snips of her hair. A while after that, feeling would slowly return and she would get up and pace her small cell. Today was no different. He did as he had done countless days before, and then left her.

Next Adelinde came in to leave her some food, escorted by a massive man in black armor. He waited patiently in the hall as she collected the plate from the previous meal and helped Jocelyn to sit up. "*Là vous êtes, chers,*" the old woman said. There you are, dear. She propped Jocelyn up, pulling the pillow behind her to give her something to lean against. Smiling kindly, she trudged out with the old tray. The mountain of a man in black armor followed after, and silence reigned once more.

In the palm of her hand where Adelinde had placed it, the curled note felt warm. Unrolling it by her side, Jocelyn saw a small pill drop out. The writing was in a hand she didn't recognize, a sharp scribble of letters in cursive. She was no handwriting expert, but even she could tell that it had been done in a hurry.

You have been drugged continuously with a substance called Pancuronium bromide, used in hospitals to keep people from moving when they are on respiratory control. I'm from the Agency, here to help get you out, codename Famine. Take this pill before he comes again, it will counteract the nerve agent in the dust I've found upstairs. You've been here for almost a week. I made it past the perimeter patrols and have been hiding in the house for two days. I'll do what I can.

Was it a trap? She hoped to God it wasn't, but she knew she had to try anyways. Knowing one of the black man's tricks helped ease her helplessness, but she still had to contend with the voice that echoed in her head whenever he felt the need to use it. She wanted to kill him. Rolled up with the first note was a second one, a list of the black man's contacts that her would-be savior had gleaned. That said to her that he was preparing, risking his own death to get her out, and wanted her to get the information back to the Agency at all costs.

Slipping the note into a pocket of her jeans, she once again made a circuit of her prison, a barred wall the only entrance. A security lens focused on the door, but probably had a convex lens to try to capture what she was doing most of the time. She'd have to play it normal and just hope for a chance to break out. Usually he showed up with an armed guard that left after he'd dusted her and put the pins in the doll. She'd make her move then, hoping the gate was left unbarred.

For now, she thought, I'd better get some sleep.

Tangled Web

"Good morning, little Spyder," the black man said, his smile glowing in the overhead light, "it is time for our appointment once again." The guard stood duty as the man sprinkled the dust over her head. He pulled the doll from a hand-woven bag hanging from his belt, setting it on the table nearby. As she watched, he pulled the silver pins from his bracelet and pushed them through the arms and legs of the doll, its eyes two X's of thread.

"RELAX," said the voice in her head, "it is time for you to lie down." She did as she was told, slowly lying back onto the hard cot. The man turned to the guard. "You may go."

Turning back to her, his mind invaded hers once again, pulling open all the doors to the memories she kept from everyone. He knew her every fear and want, and used them to play her like an instrument. "He means to kill you now, thinking you've gone off on your own," the voice teased, "Wingate will see your bones bleaching in the sun, unless you stop him. I can show you how."

Jocelyn forced herself to relax, to keep any hint of suppleness in her limbs a secret. If he could really read minds, the game would be up before she could act. But if he could only try to persuade, or get only vague feelings about her moods, she still had a chance. She delved into her fear and loathing, letting those feelings mask her true intent.

"You hate me," the voice responded. The feeling of a hand caressing her hair was all in her mind. The man still sat in the single chair five feet from her. Yet she could feel the calloused palm and long, thin fingers tousling her curly locks. Anger began to surface. "You want to lash out," the voice continued, "but you are weak. You cannot do a thing to me, but you can do something to him. To Randolph Wingate. Kill him, and we will cross paths no more. You will be free, little Spyder."

He leaned close, trying to make eye contact with her as she looked away. Just as she intended. Tensing her muscles, she prepared to act. The look of fear in his eyes the moment before she struck him let her know he had finally touched on the desperate plan in her mind, the cloak of her fear peeling aside to let him see her true course of action.

Spyder's fist rocked him on the point of the chin, pitching him back into the chair. Standing in an easy motion, she kicked the chair over backwards, running for the door. It was unlocked, as she suspected. He had been careless, thinking her immobilized.

"STOP!!" the voice screamed in her head. She tried to run, but her own mind betrayed her, listening to the priest's words. This can't be happening, she thought, I'm almost free!

A heavy tread she'd come to know sounded in her ears. Trudging down the hallway towards her, Julio the zombie came to the beck and call of his master. She would have to break this paralysis and still get by the staring man. Anger gave way to despair. She couldn't escape, after all.

Something glinted in the dim light of the basement room, flashing past her face in a blurring hiss of steel. The atrophy in her mind lifted, her legs pulling her forward according to her will once more. Behind her, the man screamed in agony, pulling a dagger from his shoulder. "Get her!" he screamed. Julio shambled towards her, vacant eyes boring into her soul.

A dark shape dropped from the ceiling in front of her. A man clad in a black catsuit reached for her arm, his upper body leaning out of a crawlspace. "Come with me, Spyder!" She grabbed on, and felt herself hoisted up.

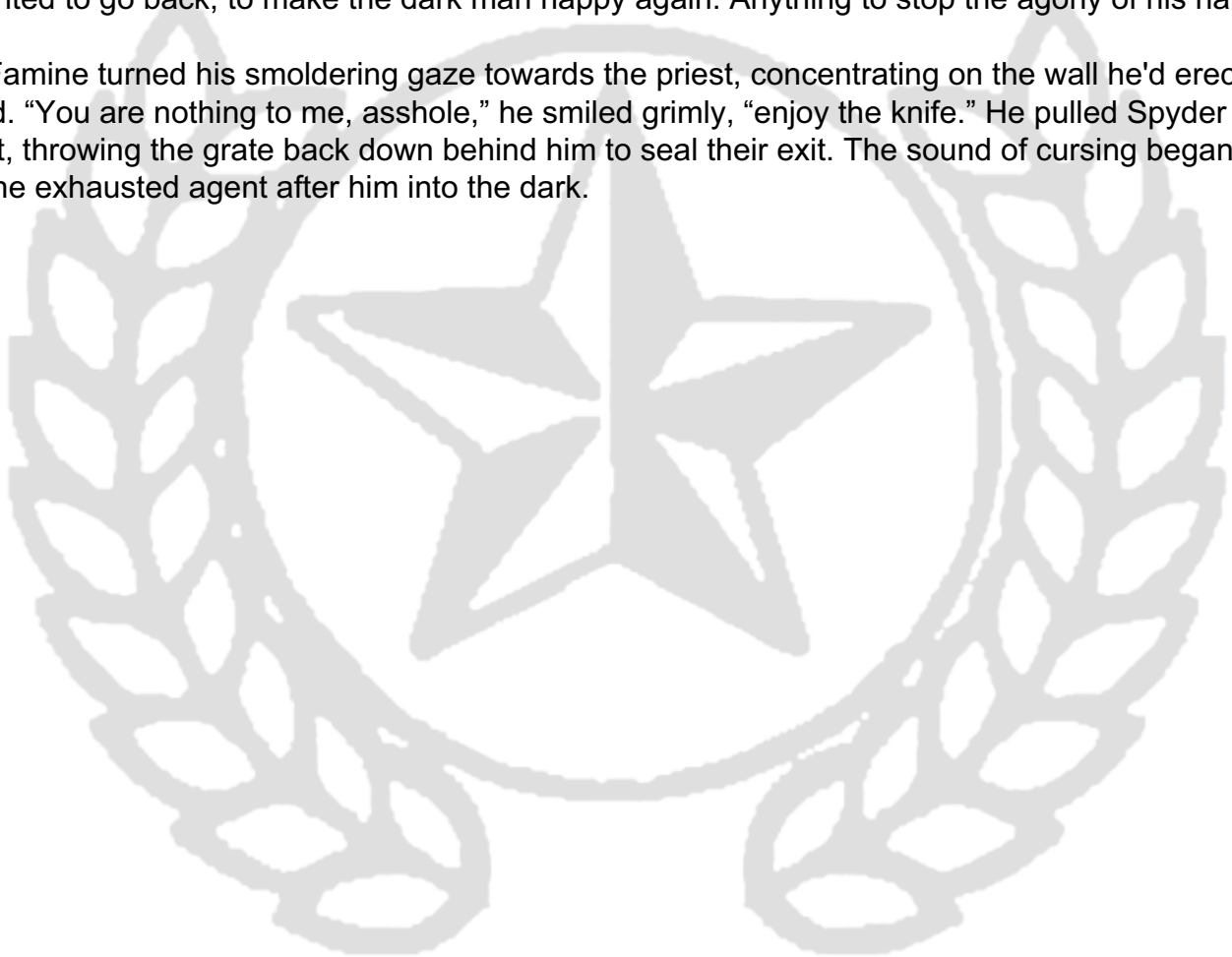
Continued on next page...

Tangled Web

“HALT!!” the voice poured into their minds, demanding that they concede. Jocelyn felt her fingers relax, but the intruder's grip above her stayed solid. Glancing at the approaching zombie, he judged the distance and threw his saber. The razor-sharp weapon embedded itself in the zombie's knee with a sickening crunch. Julio tried to keep moving forward, never making a sound of protest, but the blade sliced tendons and ruptured cartilage. The soulless creature went down.

“SHE IS MINE, RETURN HER TO ME!” the voice battered on, bouncing around in Spyder's mind. She wanted to go back, to make the dark man happy again. Anything to stop the agony of his harsh words.

Famine turned his smoldering gaze towards the priest, concentrating on the wall he'd erected in his mind. “You are nothing to me, asshole,” he smiled grimly, “enjoy the knife.” He pulled Spyder out of his sight, throwing the grate back down behind him to seal their exit. The sound of cursing began as he pulled the exhausted agent after him into the dark.



Tangled Web

"I don't know if this is a good idea," Collins said, piloting the sedan through the snowy streets of Berlin, "he said you were a danger, that you needed to be liquidated. I already don't trust him."

Spyder turned to her rescuer. "We have to get this information to the Agency, and I need to get back, too. For better or worse, the Agency is my home now, and I know that Wingate wouldn't betray me. That bastard tried to brainwash me to kill him, but it didn't work. I trust that old man."

"Maybe one of these days I'll meet him," Famine replied, "let's just be careful on bringing you in."

Elsewhere...

Ojimba Noray watched as the doctor pulled the saber from his brother's knee. "Can you repair the damage?" he asked coldly. Julio was a valuable tool; it would be a shame to release its spirit.

"If the body heals as a normal person," the surgeon replied, "I believe so. I would ask that he not move that leg for the better part of a month, however."

"Very well. Leave us." The doctor did as commanded, leaving the priest alone with the maid and his brother. "Now on to other matters. Adelinde, you have saddened my heart. Why did you betray me?"

The short woman looked up at him, replying in perfect English, "You are a worm, Mr. Noray. To ask me to drug the master and his girlfriend was bad enough, but I could not do more. Not after what the young woman did for me." She stood resolutely with her hands on her hips, berating him like he was a spoiled child. His anger smoldered beneath his flat, unemotional gaze.

"And what did she do that was so important you would reject the riches I have offered you, Adelinde? Surely you knew that I would eventually find out of your betrayal, and yet you helped her escape anyways. Another week and her soul would have been mine. The perfect assassin. Opportunities like this do not come often."

Her eyes flashed as her hands slipped into her simple apron. "She saved the life of my youngest. He needed a transfusion, and when I found out she was the same blood type, she agreed to do it in secret. My boy will walk the earth for a few more years before the cancer takes him, God willing. For that, I owed her her freedom. And you, curr, deserve death!"

His eyes widened as she rushed him, pulling the blade from her apron. Such fury this little woman held. He would cherish her life force draining away. Dodging her first swing, he stepped inside her guard and touched a cluster of nerves on her neck. The blade fell point-first into the floor, quivering. She gasped in surprise, trying to swing out with her other arm that still moved. Her small fist thudded off of his chest as if she'd punched a brick wall. Laughing evilly, he backhanded her to the floor.

Soul-Eater picked her back up easily, dodging her weak attempt at a bite. Lightly touching each hip, he doused the nerves in her legs in unbelievable pain. Moaning, she collapsed back against the examination table in the small medical room. A tray of utensils crashed to the floor next to her, raining scalpels and clamps over her lap. With her one good arm, she struggled for a scalpel to make a last desperate strike.

Continued on next page...

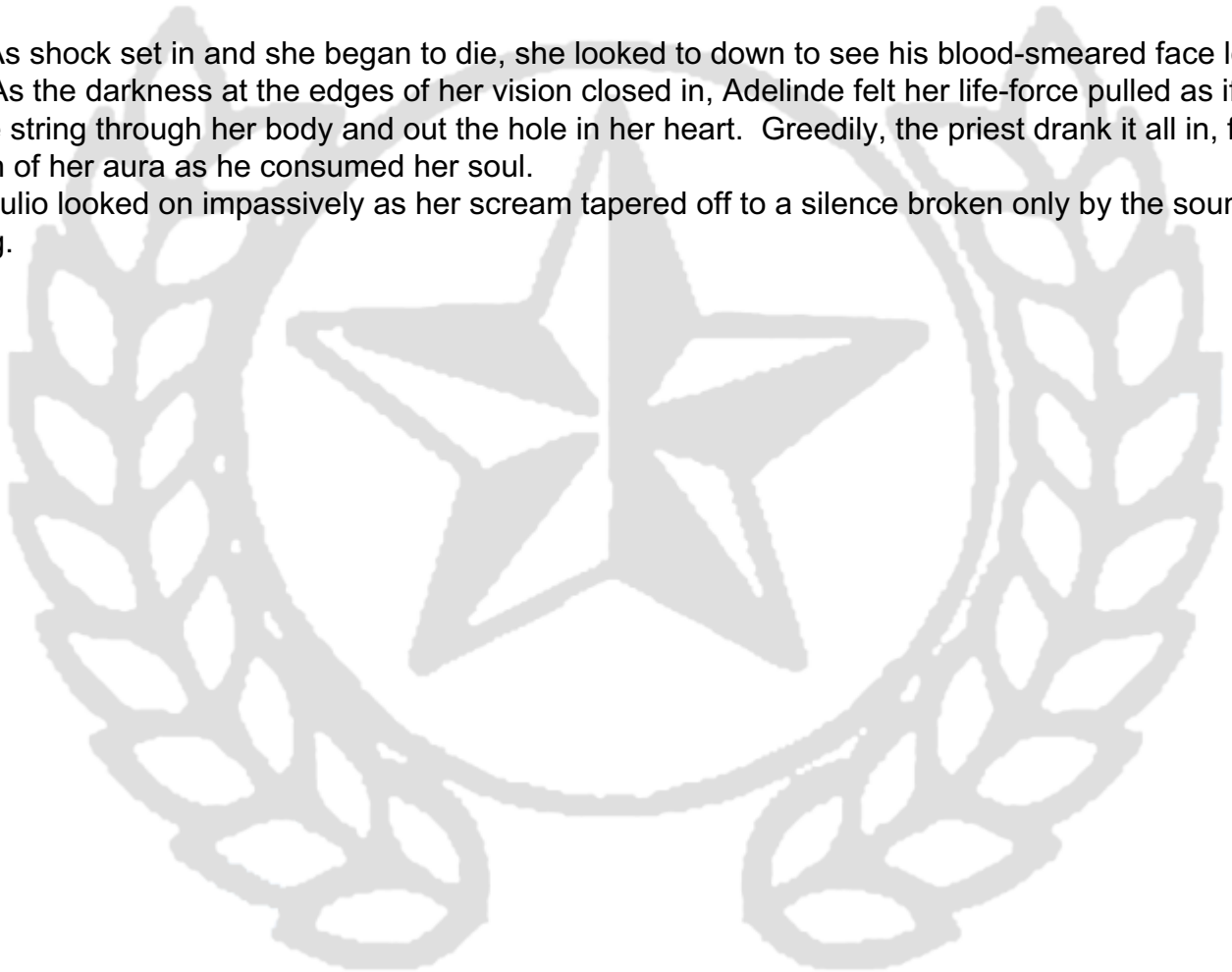
Tangled Web

“Julio, get her.”

The undead creature on the table behind her grasped her arms in an iron grip, pulling her up onto his chest. Soul-Eater selected a scalpel and a bone saw, and leaned over her. Methodically, he cut away her uniform, then set to work carving her chest open. The bone saw and spreaders pulled her ribs aside, giving him access to the organ he was looking for. Rubbing a handful of dust into her mouth and nose, the priest made sure she was awake and coherent up until he took the first bite from her still-beating heart.

As shock set in and she began to die, she looked down to see his blood-smeared face look up at her. As the darkness at the edges of her vision closed in, Adelinde felt her life-force pulled as if by an invisible string through her body and out the hole in her heart. Greedily, the priest drank it all in, feeling the burn of her aura as he consumed her soul.

Julio looked on impassively as her scream tapered off to a silence broken only by the sounds of chewing.



Tangled Web

The snow swirled in off the mountains crowding the lake. Forty feet below them, the thin crust of ice on Sylvenstein Lake crackled and popped occasionally, still not sure if it wanted to melt or thicken in the crisp air. Famine leaned casually on the rail of the bridge, lost in wonder at the thick forest that crept down the mountainsides to end right at the lake's edge.

"Bavaria is very beautiful this time of year," Spyder commented, joining him from the warmth of the car. He could tell she was nervous, but he was determined to watch her back when the meet with Foster went down.

The special agent had left immediately from DC, promising the intruder that he would bring her in safely. Famine didn't buy it for a minute. The little fat red-haired whelp was too nice, not even berating him for following his instincts and breaking her out. It just wasn't like the little worm to reward him for anything.

A rumble in the night was the precursor to the arrival of the team sent to bring them in. Appearing through the veil of snow, a deuce-and-a-half rolled ponderously into view, stopping at the end of the bridge. A collection of men poured out, Foster among them. His red hair was unmistakable even in the sporadic lighting of halogen headlights. "I don't like this, Spyder," he ventured, "too big of a vehicle, too many people for a simple pickup."

She tightened next to him, feeling vulnerable and exposed on the massive bridge spanning the lake. Perhaps the intruder was correct, she thought, this was a bad idea. Another rumble sounded from the opposite side of the bridge as another transport truck rolled into place, disgorging a score of Agency security officers. The two groups closed in on them as Famine slipped his climbing kit out of his pack and affixed it to the rail of the bridge with deft movements of his hands.

"Agents, I'm glad to see you safe," Foster said, closing to within thirty feet. The guards behind him and on the other side of Famine and Spyder weren't leveling their weapons at them, yet. "We're here to bring you both in. Come on, we've got to move fast before Cold Zero retaliates. The buzz of your escape is already racing through our underground network. They're looking for you both, with orders to shoot to kill."

"And what are your orders, Foster?" Spyder demanded, moving towards the climbing kit hidden behind Famine's back.

"My orders are to bring you both in. They didn't specify dead or alive, however," the worm snickered, "you've been a bad girl, Spyder. Your usefulness is at an end. Collins, make the right choice, and you can walk away from this."

"Fuck you, Foster," the intruder muttered, reaching for his pistol. Immediately twenty-four rifles were shouldered, pointed at his chest. In a heartbeat, Spyder was lunging for the climbing hook behind him, diving over the side. Famine put his arms above his head and smiled as the troopers rushed towards the railing. Shimming down below him, Spyder was thirty feet above the surface of the ice. It was thin, but would hopefully hold her weight.

Continued on next page...

Tangled Web

One zealous trooper, not knowing who he was standing next to, shouldered Famine aside roughly to get a clean shot at her head below. "Oops," the thief remarked offhand, driving an elbow into the small of his back. Overbalanced, the man flipped over the rail to fall screaming to the ice below. A reverberating crack sounded as he went headfirst into the thin layer of frozen water, breaking through easily to the unseen depths below. The rest of the troopers stood back, their rifles trained once more on his chest.

Foster pulled a comlink up to his mouth and said one word: "Now."

The shot from the sniper rifle thundered through the valley, rolling in echoing waves to the far side of the lake and back. "NO!!" Famine cried, pulling out his backup saber. The guardsman nearest him lost both hands in one sweep of the weapon, said hands and the rifle falling harmlessly to the bridge as warm blood fountained onto his comrades. Famine prepared to carve his way through the mob until he had Foster's head dripping on the blade of his weapon.

The handler brought another small device up in his other hand. "I always knew you couldn't be trusted to do what was best, Collins. I have a little insurance." He pressed the button, letting a small amount of toxin release from a chip in Famine's skull. "I can kill you, if that's what it takes. Don't make me do it." The intruder writhed on the cold concrete in front of him, his nerves burning like fire as the toxin raced through his system.

Rex Foster turned to the guards. "Retrieve the bodies in the water below. Do it now before someone decides to spoil the party. Load this one," he kicked Famine savagely in the face, "in the truck. My superiors don't want me to kill him yet, if possible. But the day will come."

A half-hour later, the troops made their way back to the bridge. "No luck, sir. Both bodies are gone under the ice. They could be anywhere by now. Eagle Three says he had a clean shot, though. She's dead, and won't be found until spring at the earliest."

Foster sighed. Another loose end. Still, it would be daylight soon, and they had to be out of the country and back on the way to DC. "Let's move out. Leave the snipers in position until daybreak, then have them make their way back to the States. If anything leaves that lake, kill it."

"Understood, sir."

Tangled Web

The sniper made another sweep of the lake, confident he would see what he had seen for the last four hours: a bit of wildlife moving out of the trees for quick access to water, and nothing else. Situated in a rough triangle around the basin, he and the other two members of his team fumed in low tones over the comm-link about their boss leaving them in the cold while the rest of the team got a warm plane ride back home. Still, they were soldiers and did their duty.

"Eagle Two," he whispered into his mic, "no movement. Daylight's coming, let's pack up. I know I tagged her good, straight body shot even when she was swinging on the line. If that didn't kill her, the cold water sure as hell did."

No answer. "Eagle Two, respond."

A booming shot rolled off of the eastern peak, where Eagle Two was stationed. "Cease fire, Eagle Two!" he screamed, tracing a path to where Eagle One was dug in. To his horror, the other sniper slumped over his weapon, gouts of blood still spewing from a headless neck. He swung around to zero in on Eagle Two's position, a horrible feeling sinking into his stomach. Eagle Two was down also, hunched forward over a dead log with a blade still sticking out of his back. Tracking around, the sniper finally found the other form in the trees, fifteen feet to the left of the dead sniper's position.

Her captured rifle was trained in on his position. He reached for the trigger, but knew in a heartbeat he was too late. He saw her smile as the first 7.62 mm shell ripped his right arm off at the shoulder. The gun discharged as his dismembered arm constricted in shock. He stared numbly at it, not feeling anything yet. Blood spurted everywhere, and as he went into shock, the sniper knew that was bad.

The next shot blew his other arm off, lodging bits of bone into his chest cavity as he mercilessly passed out. Spyder stood up calmly, shouldering her rifle and favoring her right side. The low profile armor Famine had supplied her with had turned a killing shot into a painful wound that had torn out a chunk of skin and pushed Kevlar into her ribcage. Still, she would live.

The spy considered her options. Famine would think she was dead, though Foster would know different when his men never came back. Still, she knew that asshole would never let on to the intruder that she was still out there. The consequences of his failure would be too severe; she knew he would cover his tracks nicely. That worked for her, the woman thought; she was a corpse now.

Time to strike out on her own, find out what she could about Cold Zero before she came back in. Wingate would hear her out, she knew that. But timing was everything. With a start, she considered another option, one she hadn't thought about until now. Never go back. The Agency be damned.

Pulling out the list, she scanned the long line of names Famine had found. Andre Kasinov, arms dealer and fugitive. He sounded promising...

The winter sun broke above the horizon as she made her way off the mountain and towards the concealed vehicle left for the snipers. The future was bright.

End