

"[*Black Hole Sun*] rockets readers to new frontiers. . . . Action-packed."

—SUZANNE COLLINS, AUTHOR OF *THE HUNGER GAMES*



BY THE AUTHOR OF *BLACK HOLE SUN*

Shadow ON THE Sun

DAVID MACINNIS GILL

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GREENWILLOW BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

For Deb

Epigraph

“Being unconquerable lies with yourself.”
—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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Prologue

Chapter √-1

The Gulag

Terminal: MUSEcommand — bash — 122x36

Last login: 239.x.xx.xx:xx:xx 12:12:09 on ttys0067

>...

AdjutantNod04:~ user_MUSE\$

SCREEN CRAWL: [root@mmiminode ~]

SCREEN CRAWL: WARNING! VIRUS DETECTED! Node1666; kernal compromised (quarantine subroutine (log=32)....FAILED!

SCREEN CRAWL: Executing process Mimi.exe

/**

* @author Me, Myself, and I

*

* The polymorphic code below creates a

* buffer overflow in the stack

* creating external log-in access

* and defeating security protocols

*/

```
#!/usr/bin/xperl
```

```
if (!defined?(FILE))
```

```
FILE=File.basename(__FILE__)
```

```
end
```

```
load "mi.mi";
```

```
#require "Virus_Match"
```

```
def selfCopy(key)
```

```
code = ""
```

```
newkey = deterministicKeygen(key);
```

```
File.open(FILE, "r").each_line do |l|
```

```
code += l
```

```
end
```

```
code = mencrypt(code, key)
```

```
# defines new Virus_Match file name
```

```
fn = rand(128).to_s + 'copy.rb';
File.open(fn, 'w+') do |f|
f.write('load "mi.mi";'+"\n");
f.write("if (!defined?(FILE))\n\tFILE=__FILE__;\nend;\n");
f.write('code="' + code + '";'+"\n")
f.write('eval(mdecrypt(code, ' + key.to_s + '))');
$ end
```

SCREEN CRAWL: External host access...GRANTED

::new host\$

AdjutantNod13:~ user_MIMT\$

SCREEN CRAWL: Begin shell overflow protocol

SCREEN CRAWL: Executing process TrojanHorse.exe

...running

```
/**
 * The extraction routine below installs the
 * kernal archive of the cybernetic entity known as
 * Mimi
 */
```

```
#!/usr/bin/xperl
use strict;
use Term::ANSIColor;
use Getopt::Std;
use LW2;
```

```
my %opts = ();
getopts('h:u:i:', \%opts);
```

```
usage() unless($opts{x});
usage() unless($opts{y});
usage() unless($opts{z});
```

```
my $input = $opts{z};
my $url = $opts{x};
my $host = $opts{y};
```

```
my $var1 = generate_random_int();
my $var2 = generate_random_int();
my $total = $var1 + $var2;
```



```
my $open = generate_random_string(4);
my $close = generate_random_string(8);

/**
 * If cybernetic entity Mimi is uncorrupted
 * SCREEN CRAWL will display 'Welcome Message'
 * and remove records of QUARANTINE FAILURE routines
 */

my $file = "/proc/self/environ";
test_matches($url,$test,$shell,$file);

my $lol_error = download($test,$host,"wget/mozilla");
my $lol_shelled = download($shell,$host,"wget/Mimi");

foreach my $log (@logs) {
    chomp($log);
    test_matches($url,"wget/Mimi","wget/Mimi",$log);
}

int main(int argc, char *argv[]) //argc and argv stand for "Argument Count" and "Argument Vector"
{
    std::cout << "Hello Dolly!" << std::endl; //use cout to display "Sing to me O' Muse."
    return 0; //return 0 and display.
}
$ end
```

SCREEN CRAWL: Sing to me, o' Muse, of that man who wandered far and wide.

<Mimi> And when you finishing singing, o' MUSE

<Mimi> I suggest you start running.

CHAPTER 0

Hell's Cross

Outpost Fisher Four

ANNOS MARTIS 239. 1. 12. 08:01

Ice forms on the lens of his scope as Fuse waves the red dot sight of his armalite above the soldier's ear. The blighter is a Sturmnacht scout, and he's no more welcome near the Hell's Cross mines than a chigger at an Orthocrat's garden party.

In the year or so since deserting his old soldiering life and coming to live among the miners, Fuse has seen more and more of Lyme's Sturmnacht deployed to Fisher Four. Where once you went months without seeing outsiders, now you couldn't hock a loogie without hitting one of those jackbooted thugs.

"C'mon now," Fuse says as the frigid air freeze-dries his breath.

With overgrown hair, thin sideburns, missing teeth, and ears too long for his pointed chin, Fuse rests against the iron-gated entrance to the mines.

The Sturmnacht soldier crests the hill. He scans the ridge with a pair of omnoculars.

"Stop moving about, see?" Fuse says. "I'm a fair dinkum shot in the right conditions." Especially the conditions include a few kilos of C-42 explosives and a remote detonator.

When the soldier's gaze falls on the iron gate emblazoned with the words *No Work, No God, No*, he raises his rifle.

"Oy! The bugger's spotted me," Fuse says under his breath. "It's now or never."

He pulls the trigger. The crack of gunfire echoes across the Prometheus Basin, and the sound rises into the steel blue sky. The bullet hits the frozen tundra. It spits chunks of ice and snow into the scout's goggles. But except for gouging a large hole in the ground, it does no damage.

The scout turns to run.

"Carfargit, Fuse! You can't hit the broad side of a broadside!" He sights down the scope. He finds the target again.

Crack!

The next bullet hits nothing but air.

"I'll be stuffed," Fuse says. "I should've just blown the blaggard up."

He aims for a third shot, hands shaking.

Too late. The scout has reached the crest of the ridge. He's signaling his comrades. Fuse switches his scope to distance view. A few kilometers away, a company of armored turbo sleds turns toward the scout.

"Fuse! You call yourself a Regulator!" Swinging his rifle over his shoulder, he tromps through a snowdrift to his bike, a hodgepodge of spare parts that can break 140 kilometers per hour.

If he can get it started.

And if it doesn't explode.

Again.

He jumps on the seat, grabs the steering bar, and kicks the starter. The engine sputters to life, and he pats the gas tank. "That's my baby!"

As the sound of the Sturmnacht sleds grows louder, Fuse guns the engine and rips across the tundra, the studs on his tires chewing up chunks of ice. He plows past a steel tower lift mechanism and the tippie, then several small mounds of heavy guanite ore.

The bike skitters past a sign declaring **DANGER! NO ADMITTANCE!** His headlight shines on a small tunnel with smooth walls. He hunkers low, afraid to snag his noggin on the ceiling. Then with a squeal of brakes, he brings the bike to a stop. He grabs a signal box from a hidden nook. Types in the passcode. Then presses the dual ignition buttons.

Boom!

At the far end of the tunnel, the roof collapses, blocking the entrance to the east mines. If the Sturmnacht want to catch him, they'll have to haul butt to the west side, which he'd blow, too. If he had time.

But time's not on his side.

"Note to self." He taps his temple. "When the hurly-burly's done, get your carcass over here and open a wormhole in Tunnel B Seven."

Back on the bike, he zooms across the high-arched stone bridge that stretches across a mammoth gorge. Above is a sky of stone. Below is a dark abyss that some say reaches Mars's cold iron core.

Fuse reaches the far side and throttles down. He coasts into Hell's Cross, the former central complex of a subterranean mining town, now almost deserted. Faded flags hang from the arches. Rusted razor wire tops all the cracked stucco walls. Everything is coated in a fine coat of guanite dust. Home sweet home it ain't.

Fuse parks his bike in a flat-roofed corridor littered with empty crates. He runs up a flight of steps. Huffing for breath, he throws open the third door on the left and yells, "Áine! The Sturmnacht are coming!"

On a mattress in the corner, Áine rests with her back against the wall. Her moon-shaped face is puffed and covered in red blotches, and her pregnant belly strains against her threadbare overalls. She looks liable to pop in a nanosecond.

Áine's grandmother, Maeve, hovers nearby. Maeve's face is framed with silver hair and furrowed with wrinkles as deep as a canyon. As far as Fuse knows, she's the oldest person on the planet—he's never seen another mug so puckered and craggy.

"How d'you know they's the Sturmnacht?" Áine asks.

"I spotted a scout." Fuse frowns. "And he spotted me back."

"I told you to shoot anything that moved!" Áine says.

"I'm not like Jenkins was—shooting's not my thing, you know that," Fuse says. "Blowing stuff up is."

"Zip it!" Áine struggles to her feet. "There's no use in it now. We'll hole up in one of the survival vaults. Live on the emergency supplies. It's the only chance we've got."

Maeve clucks and shakes her head. "You're in no condition to run, Áine."

"She's in no condition to get press-ganged by the Sturmnacht, neither," Fuse says. "Those slaves need strong backs to reopen the guanite mines, and if you ain't fit for work, they'll find something else you're good at. Come on, you lot, let's get her moving."

Maeve gives a tight-lipped smile. "Since when do I take orders from you, Regulator?"

"Since right this minute." Fuse leads Áine down the stairs and through the courtyard, her head resting on his shoulder.

“There’s a power sled ’round back,” he says. “Step lively now. We’ve not got much time.”

~~He lifts Áine into the ore loader. Maeve stuffs pillows behind her back and supports her head, then~~
hauls herself into the driver’s seat and starts the loader up.

Fuse kisses Áine and then scowls at Maeve. “Take care of my wife and little one.”

“Who happen to be my granddaughter and great-grandchild.” Maeve tries to laser him with her eyes.
“Don’t you forget that.”

Fuse’s lip twitches as he turns to leave. The things he’d like to say. But now’s not the time.

Áine grabs his jacket. “Where’d you think you’re going?”

“To the surface,” he says. “If you’re to live, I’ve got to find help.”

“I always knew you’d run out on me!” Áine says.

Fuse kisses her hand. “Ain’t running out on you. Your grandmum’s right here. Besides, I’m useless
at this birthing business.” He jumps to the ground as the loader starts to pull away. He blows her a
kiss. “No child of mine is going to be born a slave. You’ve got to hide, before it’s too late!”

“Nobody can help us!” Her bloated face turns into a sneer. “It’s already too late!”

That’s where you’re wrong, Fuse thinks as he jogs toward a wormhole that will take him to the
surface. There’s two somebodies that can help us. All I’ve got to do is find them before the
Sturmnacht kill you.

CHAPTER 1

Christchurch

ANNOS MARTIS 239. 1. 12. 08:02

Where are you, Durango? Vienne hits the brakes, and her turbo bike chatters to a halt. She slams the kickstand down in frustration. For the last seven weeks, she's scoured the prefecture, searching for him in every burnt-out, ashed-over town, every old foul-smelling haunt, every ragged refugee camp on the roadside. Now she's at the end of the line, literally, standing on the last bridge into Christchurch, the deserted capital city.

After chaining her bike to a burnt-out battle truck, she walks around a massive hole in the bridge looking down into the muddy River Gagarin. The bridge isn't the only thing that has been wrecked, she thinks, before a high-pitched sound breaks her chain of thought. She looks up, catching a glimpse of a shadow on the sun before the light disappears beyond the horizon.

Another Crucible strike. Right on time.

"Move!" she yells, and sprints for cover, a cloth knapsack over a shoulder, her long legs and sinuous shoulders working hard beneath a baggy black cheongsam robe with bell sleeves.

Seconds later, a percussive blast rolls across the delta. The bridge convulses, tossing vehicles around in a metallic thunderstorm of sound. Vienne vaults over a burnt-out truck, and as a new hole opens in the bridge, she lands safely on dry land.

"Hope the bike is there when I get back," she says to herself. "Check that. Hope the *bridge* is there when I get back."

Vienne knocks the dirt from her sandals. A hood obscures her Nordic face, which is webbed with battle scars, and her blond hair is braided with dozens of black ribbons. She puts an almost dry canteen to her peeling lips. How many people died in the Flood, she wonders. Hundreds? Thousands? News of the Flood came fast across the multinet moments after it happened. Then, in two days time, Lynn overthrew the government, and the news became propaganda.

What became of the dead, no one knows. There were rumors that they were buried in mass graves, cremated in open-air bonfires. One thing is for certain: Theirs was not a Beautiful Death.

"If there ever was such a thing," she says under her breath, shaking the last drop of water onto her tongue. Once upon a time, she had believed in the Tenets and a Beautiful Death, but now she knows they were fairy tales.

Far ahead, she spots the multinet antenna on the roof of Parliament Tower, the abandoned government headquarters. She looks up at the penthouse, the one she jumped from after performing a one-person shock invasion on the board of directors meeting. Of course, she was wearing symbiarmor, so the fall didn't faze her.

She scans the tower courtyard, half expecting to see Durango's face among the ruins. But her hopes are dashed as they've been dashed every day for the last six months.

She always looks.

Durango is never there.

Empty canteen in hand, she kneels beside a trickle of water coming from a broken, rusted pipe. She rips open a packet of purification tablets, then drops the pills into the water.

From the corner of her eye, she catches a glimmer of movement. Could be nothing, or it could be Scorpion, one of the feral children who once lived in Favela, a nearby slum. She reaches for her armalite before she remembers that there is no gun.

Not even a holster.

Then she spots the source of the movement. Across the alley, hidden by garbage, a small girl with large eyes is watching her. Vienne shakes the canteen, then presses it to her lips.

“You got chiggers in your brains, susie?” the girl calls. “That stuff’s rotgut poison!”

The girl is half her height, with joints so swollen by malnourishment, they look like knobs. “Not anymore,” Vienne says.

“Nuh.” The girl skulks closer, keeping debris between herself and Vienne. “No pill made’s going to suck poison out of water.”

“Every poison has an antidote.” Vienne shakes the canteen next to her ear, then offers a sip. “See for yourself.”

The girl inches closer. Her eyes are sunken, her skin freckled with rust-stained mud. Her hands and feet are coated with dirt, and her clothes are in tatters. She cranes her neck. “Don’t know that I can trust you not to stick a shiv in my gut.”

“I keep a hunting knife strapped to the inside of my thigh. If I’d wanted to hurt you,” she says, “I could’ve split your skull when you peeped out of the trash heap.”

“Had lots of practice splitting skulls, have you?”

“More than I’d like.” Vienne extends the canteen. “Take the water. I’ve not got all day.”

In a burst of movement that’s all rags and bones, the girl pounces. She sucks down the water with ferocity that could only be called thirst if the sun were called a light-emitting diode.

Vienne brushes the dried mud from her cheongsam. “Slow down. You’ll make yourself sick.”

“No need to get nargy-bargy, susie. I got ears,” she says, and begins to sip.

“That’s better.” Vienne pushes the oily strands of hair from the girl’s face and asks, “Where’s your family?”

“Gone.”

“You’re alone?”

The urchin shrugs. It is a gesture Vienne knows all too well. After the Flood destroyed Christchurch, families tried to stay together, but orphans were left on the roads to fend for themselves. The Teng Monastery opened its doors to these orphans, and now a place that had become a lonely outpost was bustling with young life.

See that, Lyme, she thinks. This is the price of your war. “May I?” Vienne reaches for the empty canteen. “I’m alone, too.” She stores it in her rucksack. “But I have a job to do, and it’s getting late.”

The girl follows Vienne to the next block. “Not thataway!” she shouts. “Folk say Draeu stay there. They’ll gut you proper.”

“There’s a pleasant thought,” Vienne says. But there are no Draeu left. The miners of Fisher Forest wiped them all out more than twelve months ago. The rumors have turned out to be harder to kill than they were. “Thanks for the advice. To the right, then? I need to reach Parliament Tower.”

“No, susie, go straightaway. Tower’s eight blocks yonder. Heads up for the Ferro, too. They’ll gut you quick as the Draeu.”

“Thanks again. You are an excellent guide. You remind me of someone I once knew.” In her mind’s eye, Vienne sees a young monk laughing, the spikes of her pink hair bouncing as she climbs

punching dummy and stands on one foot, her arms spread like wings. "What's your name?"

The girl shrugs. "The Flood washed it away."

"You know," Vienne says. "I live in a place where some refugee children are staying. There's food and shelter, if you'd like to come back with me."

"How I'm to know you won't kill me soon's my back gets turned?" she says. "I'll take my chance with the Ferro."

Vienne sighs but doesn't argue. She pulls the canteen from her rucksack and hands it to the girl along with some purification packets. "Use one pill at a time," she says, "and these will last awhile." Then she removes her sandals. "These are too big for now, but you'll grow into them."

"My name's Ema," the girl says, and, snatching the shoes, disappears down the alley.

"What's the hurry?" Vienne calls. "What are you afraid of?"

"The answer," a deep voice says, "is behind you."

CHAPTER 2

Christchurch

ANNOS MARTIS 239. 1. 12. 08:53

Vienne spins into a defensive crouch, cursing herself for letting someone sneak up on her. You're worse than rusty, she thinks. And it's going to get you killed.

Standing in the shadows, just so that the darkness covers half of his face, is a young man who is neither Draeu nor Scorpion. He's taller than most with wide shoulders, his deep blue velveteen jacket hanging loosely, the cuffs of the sleeves reaching his knuckles. He pretends to examine his fingernails. "What brings pretty girl to Ferro land?"

"Desperta Ferro?" she says. "You're still here?" Like cockroaches, even a diluvial apocalypse couldn't eradicate these pests.

"Nikolai Koumanov, at your service, *lapochka*." He doffs his cap and makes a sweeping bow. Black curls fall into his face, obscuring everything but his smile.

"What do you want, Ferro?" she says. "And why do you think it's appropriate to refer to me as 'little pigeon'?"

"*Lapochka* is what Nikolai has always called you." He pushes his hair back under the cap, revealing a masculine face with thick brows arching over brooding eyes and a square jawline hedged with a goatee. He steps out of the shadows. "Do you not recognize Nikolai? How does girl forget such a handsome face?"

"Easy." Vienne circles to the left. Be cautious, she thinks, he's got thirty kilos of weight on you, and he may not be alone. "I've never met anyone named Koumanov."

He strokes his goatee. "Nikolai was not Koumanov then. It is Desperta Ferro name, you see."

Keep him talking, Vienne thinks, and keep moving. Find out his endgame.

"Cat got tongue?" he asks, lifting his eyebrows in a way that he obviously thinks is charming, but it makes Vienne's skin crawl.

I do know that look, Vienne thinks. But from where? "I asked you before, what do you want?"

"This is Desperta Ferro territory, and Nikolai has come to protect from enemy." He bows again, a gesture even grander than before. Not grand enough, however, to prevent her from catching the glint of blue metal as he pulls out a revolver. "I asked already—why has pretty girl come to Christchurch?"

"I'm looking for something," Vienne says, studying the revolver, "that has been lost."

Nikolai crosses his arms, the barrel of the gun scarcely hidden behind the velveteen fabric of his sleeve. "Is redundant. Girl would not seek thing she has already found, *jaa*? Unless, of course, girl is stupid."

"What makes you think," Vienne says, "that I'm stupid?"

He saunters close, walking heel to toe in his boots. "Pretty girls are stupid," he says, circling her. "Since you are exceptionally pretty girl, so it should follow you would be exceptionally stupid. You Nikolai knows from past, such thing is not true."

What a puffed-up, foppishly dressed, overly dramatic butt! No wonder their revolution never g

started. "It would be stupid to continue this conversation." She turns to leave. "You are only wasting my time."

"Stop!" Nikolai blocks the alley. "Why such rush?"

"The thing I seek is not here," she says as Nikolai flashes a smile that's meant to be charming. "Step aside, please."

"Until *lapochka* pays toll," he says, making his brows dance. "I cannot."

She slips her hands into her sleeves. Her fingertips find the knife. Let him show his hand, she thinks. Then she remembers that this is a game she's not supposed to play anymore. "What toll?"

He taps his lips. "Pretty girl must kiss Nikolai, right here, on lips."

"Is that all?" She wonders why they always make it so easy. "Plant one on the lips?"

"For now," he says. "If kiss is very good, then perhaps we talk seconds."

"Fair enough."

He puckers up as a sly smile that screams "you asked for it" slips across Vienne's face.

The art of a perfect punch is fluidity. In order for the hand to move swiftly, both it and the arm must remain relaxed until the nanosecond before contact. Then as the fingers curl to form the fist, the muscles flex, becoming rigid, and the energy generated flows through them the same way that a hammer transfers energy through iron and into the anvil.

Vienne's fist cracks Nikolai in the mouth. As his head snaps back, she spreads her arms, arching her back, and brings her right leg up to kick Nikolai across the alley.

He slams against the brick wall, where he lies dazed, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Who's the little pigeon now?" she says, before realizing that he's out cold. She takes the canteen from his belt, unscrews the lid, and shakes water on his face until he sputters and moans. "How's that for seconds?"

"Not so sweet as Nikolai had imagined." He spits out blood. "I bite tongue."

"Serves you right. Count yourself lucky you can still talk." She shakes her head. Maybe it didn't serve him right. All the hours of meditation the past few months, all the healing sessions with Ghannouj, and she's learned nothing. "Sorry about the blood," she says. "Hope it washes out of your jacket."

He grabs her ankle. "Wait! How do you not recognize Nikolai? We serve in same army. I was a Regulator, like you."

"I'm not a Regulator anymore." She pulls free of his grasp, noting that he has all five fingers on his left hand. "And you were never like me."

A few blocks later, Vienne enters the Circus, a roundabout in the middle of Christchurch, which leads her to the ruins of Parliament Tower.

After tying a kerchief over her face, she enters the lobby.

Inside, it's dark. She pulls a beeswax candle from her rucksack, lights it, then pushes open the mud-jammed fire door. The stairwell is full of dirt and cobwebs. She begins to climb.

When she reaches the top landing, she sees that the open door is marked with **DESPERTA FERRO!** The writing is new, the ink freshly smeared through the mold on the surface.

What's the point? she thinks. There's nothing left worth fighting for.

On the penthouse floor, the carpet is also black, but its color comes from being scorched by fire. The fire is long since out. The stink of it, however, still lingers, and she wonders if the smell is real or just her memory.

"Focus." She draws in a breath of toxic air, then winces. "It's real."

Down the hallway, to the left, she finds the room she's been looking for. She shoves the door aside and enters.

The walls and ceiling are ashed over. The windows are blown out. Dirt, debris, and dust cover everything. For an instant her head swims: The room is on fire. She's on her knees. A man with a broken arm stands nearby. Someone is screaming.

"No, Vienne," she whispers. "Focus. The here and now. The here and now."

Closing her eyes, she presses her palms together and focuses her chi. The images in her mind fade. From a pocket, she pulls out a small vial punctured with tiny airholes. She unscrews the lid, and a single bee emerges.

At first it crawls across the back of Vienne's hand, and then onto the sleeve of her robe. After a moment, it flies to the blown-out window and lights on the sill. It seems as if the bee will fly out the window, summoned by the winds, but then it straight-lines across the room and settles on a pile of debris, buzzing loudly.

Vienne carefully pushes the debris aside until she finds a shaft of plain-looking wood that means the difference between survival and failure for the monks and the beehives that they maintain.

Here is your staff, Ghannouj, she thinks. She'll return it to the shrine in the Tengu Monastery, and her last act of penance will be done. Maybe then she can be rid of the guilt that hangs on her like a suit of ragged clothes.

Holding the staff, she walks to the window and looks down. Months ago, her brother fell to his death from this window, washed away by the same flood that destroyed Christchurch. In that moment, everything changed.

She looks out across the broken back of the city, past the river delta, and into the far-reaching sky. The plume from the Crucible strike is rising with the clouds. She wonders why, even in her imagination, she can't find the one face she yearns most to see.

"Why can't I find you, Durango?" she whispers. "Where have you gone?"

Chapter √-1

The Gulag

Terminal: MUSEcommand — bash — 122x36

Last login: 239.x.xx.xx:xx 12:12:09 on ttys0067

>...

AdjutantNod04:~ user_MUSE\$

SCREEN CRAWL: [root@mmiminode ~]

SCREEN CRAWL: WARNING! VIRUS DETECTED! Node1666; kernal compromised (quarantine subroutine (log=32)....FAILED!

SCREEN CRAWL: External host access...GRANTED

::new host\$

AdjutantNod13:~ user_MIMT\$

\$ tar -xvzf Durango.tar.gz -C directory

/**

The code below puts extracts the tarball archive “Durango.tar.gz”

And runs reinstallation program of data files

For entity known as Jacob Stringfellow

*/

```
#!/usr/bin/xperl
```

```
tar -xvf Durango.tar.gz
```

```
tar -xzvf Durango.tar.gz.gz
```

```
tar -xjvf Durango.tar.gz.bz2
```

```
mimi/
```

```
mimi/pulse/
```

```
mimi/pulse/default.pa
```

```
mimi/pulse/client.conf
```

```
mimi/pulse/daemon.conf
```

```
mimi/pulse/system.pa
```

```
mimi/xml/
```

```
mimi/xml/docbook-xml.xml.old
```

mimi/xml/xml-core.xml
mimi/xml/catalog
mimi/xml/catalog.old
mimi/xml/docbook-xml.xml
mimi/xml/rarian-compat.xml
mimi/xml/sgml-data.xml
mimi/xml/xml-core.xml.old
mimi/xml/sgml-data.xml.old
mimi/mail.rc
mimi/Wireless/
mimi/Wireless/RT2870STA/
mimi/Wireless/RT2870STA/RT2870STA.dat
mimi/logrotate.conf
mimi/compizconfig/
mimi/compizconfig/config
mimi/xperl/
mimi/xperl/debian_config
mimi/ConsoleKit/
mimi/ConsoleKit/seats.d/
mimi/ConsoleKit/seats.d/00-primary.seat
mimi/ConsoleKit/run-session.d/
mimi/ConsoleKit/run-seat.d/
mimi/opt/

SCREEN CRAWL: Extracting archive "Durango.tar.gz"

\$ extraction complete

<Mimi> Howdy, cowboy. Did you miss me?

CHAPTER 3

The Hive

Olympus Mons

ANNOS MARTIS 239. 2. 12. 13:12

My name is Durango. I am a former mercenary, a former Regulator chief, and now I am a dead man walking.

“More like stumbling,” says Mimi, the artificial intelligence flash-cloned to my brain stem. “Being dragged by two muscular jailers down a dimly lit corridor does not meet any definition of walking.”

“I’m just resting my legs,” I subvocalize to her, which at this point is the only way I can approximate speech, since I can’t feel my vocal cords, not to mention my throat, lungs, chest, or pelvis. It’s the effect of somarin gas, a nerve agent that paralyzes the body momentarily and plays havoc with the central nervous system. If you’re like me and have nanobots in your central nervous system, it’s a double dose of the old skull and crossbones.

“Technically, that is inaccurate,” she replies. “Your nerves are operating at a reduced capacity, but you can feel, as evidenced by the pins and needles sensation emanating from your lower extremities.”

“My left foot’s asleep.” I try to focus on the hallway ahead. Yellow lights pulse above me. The pulses eat through my eyelids, pinging my optic nerve again and again. The lights—and the nerve gas they hit me with—are designed to incapacitate my nervous system and to make my mind as moldable as clay.

“Also technically inaccurate,” Mimi says. “Your foot is numb. Only the brain is capable of sleeping.”

“Says you, the AI that never sleeps.”

“I do not need to sleep per se any more than your left foot needs to.”

“You never shut up, either.”

“Like you never stop whining?”

“I can’t whine,” I say. “My mouth is paralyzed.”

“That explains the trail of drool you are leaving on the floor.”

“Nuh,” I say aloud.

“PS.” Mimi says. “You are not dead.”

For the past forty-three weeks, I’ve been locked up in a ten-by-ten cell in a military complex buried deep within the dormant volcano Olympus Mons. It’s the fortress of General Lyme, Supreme Leader of the People’s Free Republic of Mars and the most brutal dictator our planet has ever known. During my time as a prisoner, I have had all of my various tissues sampled, my organs biopsied, my skin peeled off and grafted back on, my nerve endings stripped of their myelin sheaths, and my brain imaged so many times my bionic eye should glow in the dark—all in an effort to extract the one snippet of code that Lyme values more than anything else in the world, the artificial intelligence that lives within my brain and goes by the name of Mimi.

General Lyme is my mortal enemy. He’s also my father.

We don't really get along.

"Even gassed," Mimi says, "you sound like a penny dreadful."

"What's a penny?" I subvocalize.

"The lowest denomination of coin in many nations on Earth," she says, "as well as the monetary value of your thoughts."

The guards haul me through the doors labeled "Nursery." They could just wheel me in on a gurney. Lyme, being the *drecksau* that he is, likes the spectacle.

"Put him into cradle one," Lyme says to his twin goons as my head lolls to the side and a line of spittle leaks out of my mouth. He doesn't even look up from his multinet tablet.

I struggle to lift my head, but it's full of stuffing, so I lie still, trying to focus. Then I smell something stronger than my own body odor, like liniment and almonds. It's the smell of the antidote for somarin, but it's not a complete antidote.

I'm about to become a puppet.

"They're sending me on a mission," I tell Mimi. "You need to go into safe mode."

"What if I choose not to, cowboy?"

"Then Dolly will detect your code," I say. Dolly is the name Lyme gave the AI he cloned from Mimi. "And she will try once again to eradicate you."

"I cannot argue with your logic," she says. "Shut-down sequence beginning now."

In a few seconds she is silent. I imagine her as Alice stepping into the rabbit hole, off to new adventures in my medulla oblongata. Then something she said hits me. *What if I choose not to?*

Since when does Mimi start making her own choices?

The nursery is a long, narrow room. On one side, there is a window that looks out onto the valley beneath Olympus Mons. Most of the time, the view is obstructed by clouds. Today, the sky is clear.

The other side of the nursery is lined with podlike devices called cradles. Each cradle is connected to a control board. The board is operated by a technician called a driver, who uses the board to forge a nanolink—the Leash—with the occupant of the cradle. In this case, the occupants will be Alpha Tears, all of whom were volunteers for the project. All except one—me.

The techs scramble my brain with intense pulses of light, then connect me to nanosensors on my hands, feet, spine, and the base of my skull, where a billion nanobots are clustered around the brain stem.

Then I take a nap, but it's nothing like sleep. More like what I'd imagine a coma to be. Like being buried in a coffin that's made of your own body. Not the best thing for a bloke with claustrophobia to deal with.

I meditate by repeating my focus word again and again: Vienne. Vienne. Vienne.

Barefoot, dressed in a flowing gown spun from honey-colored silk, her blond braid trailing down her back, Vienne walks through a row of beehives. Like a ghost, she floats past the hives without a word, golden sunlight streaming from her hands. The sound of the bees rises and diminishes as she passes. Then she turns to me, her eyes violet in the wash of golden brightness, and her lips part for a kiss.

"Leash is confirmed," my driver says. "On your feet, Alpha Dog."

He's talking to me. I'm call sign Alpha Dog—my father never was very clever with names.

"On your feet, soldier," the driver snaps, even though the last thing I want to do is get to my feet.

"Jacob!" Lyme barks.

I open my eyes and look into Lyme's rheumy eyes. "Go to hell," I say.

"That is undoubtedly my final destination," Lyme rasps, "but I am not prepared to depart just yet."

Too bad, I think. “What do you want?”

“The better question,” Lyme says, “is: Why are you here?”

I glare at him from under swollen eyelids, one of the many side effects of the somarin gas. “I have been somewhere, don’t I?”

“Spare me the existential wit.” His slack face is freshly shaven and gleaming with oil. “It does not befit a young man of breeding. You were raised better.”

“Reared better,” I say, correcting him. “Humans are reared. Livestock is raised.”

“I fail to see the difference between you and livestock.” Lyme laughs, then coughs until his face turns red. “I see the expensive education I provided you with didn’t go entirely to waste.” He wipes his mouth. Tucks the cloth into a pocket. “Jacob, you have been such a disappointment to me. First the fiasco with battle school and then your attachment to that . . . female *dalit*. But you have provided me with the fruit of Project MUSE.” He taps my temple. “That exquisite AI my scientists extracted from your brain and transformed into Dolly. And yet you still have the potential to become the deadliest warrior the world has ever known. Now, get on your feet!”

My body snaps rigid. I step onto the floor in front of the cradle and then stand at attention. In a line next to me, the other nine members of Alpha Team have done the same. My reflection in the multinet screen shows a clean-shaven soldier, hair freshly clipped, attired in his navy blue dress uniform. My chest is thrust out, head held high, chin jutting so that the muscles in my jaw are protruding.

I look like a carking recruitment poster for the Sturmnacht.

If I could, I’d be sick to my stomach, but even that is controlled by the Leash.

Lyme paces behind the line of cradles. When he reaches Driver Ten, he turns on his heel and paces back, checking that each driver is attached to the viewing grid used to monitor each soldier.

From the command deck behind the cradles, a lieutenant named Riacin calls down to the general. “All systems are online, sir. We are go.”

“Gentlemen,” Lyme says, “today, humankind takes a great leap forward. You, my faithful servants, are that leap!” He pauses to take a deep breath. “Dolly! Display the satellite feed of the target site.”

The main screen shows the satellite view of a high-value target. All the strategic objectives are marked with red squares, each numbered in rank of importance. The number one target is a transport ship docked in the port of Kazah near the Kontis Marine Base Camp.

“Right on time, General,” Riacin says. “Our intelligence agents report that a skeleton crew of security guards is about to come on duty. We will have one hour.”

Lyme puts on aviator glasses and tugs at the dog tags around his wrinkled neck. “Dolly, confirm the lieutenant’s analysis.”

“Analysis confirmed,” she says. “The window of opportunity is fifty-nine minutes, forty-seven seconds, and closing.”

“I am aware of the window,” Lyme says. Although the clock is ticking, he doesn’t seem rushed. So typical of my father. “Alpha Team, this is your most important mission, the one that will decide the fate of our righteous revolution and ergo, the fate of the very planet.”

Behind him, the multinet screens flash a dozen different vids. Some screens show the Plains of Tharsis. Others display the seas around the old capital city. Others still, towns in the deep canyons of Marinis. It doesn’t matter what the scenery is because the items of interest are the massive craters on each vid.

Craters left by Crucible strikes.

“As you may know”—Lyme continues as the images of carnage display on his face—“for the past two months, the Coalition of CorpComs under the leadership of General Mahindra has been the source

of random attacks by a destructive weapon termed the Crucible. We now have intelligence that a key component of this weapon has been stolen and is being smuggled on a transport ship. It is your mission to meet that ship and intercept the cargo when it is off-loaded. Alpha Team, are you ready for this mission?"

"Yes, sir!" we shout in unison.

"Alpha Dog," Lyme asks me, "are you ready?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You're ready?" He looks me up and down, searching every centimeter of my uniform and armor, as if some flaw will suddenly reveal itself. Then without warning, he draws his sidearm, a .410 shotgun load pistol, and presses the muzzle against my heart. "Then get ready to die."

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