

AS-YET-TO-BE-TITLED PENISMIGHTIER FANFIC

Written by the magnificent DOOMY!!

CHAPTER ONE - *Prelude*

Eod tapped his fingers slowly on the armrest of his leather revolving chair, staring up at the large projection screen in front of him resignedly. It had been five years since he'd seen the screen looking like this, and he knew what it meant, but he had sworn the last encounter would be the last. But then, he hadn't expected to see this screen again, either. He'd thought the threat was gone for good.

The projection screen displayed a textured map of the globe. All seemed to be in order, no particularly foreboding weather patterns or natural disasters to worry about, and though a few countries were at war, as some always were, nothing was any different in their situation than it had been the last few weeks.

But... there. Eod pressed a blue square on the touch screen in front of him, and the image displayed on the projection screen zoomed dizzily in to a small sector in the Detroit area. Yes. There. Tiny pockets glowed blue, buildings that looked like warehouses, possibly even hangars, maybe a few scattered houses in the mix. His intelligence wouldn't lie. He'd thought it impossible, but he couldn't ignore the growing menace any longer. He knew what this meant.

Xclusive was back. The Vanguard would have to be summoned.

Eod chuckled bitterly to himself and stroked his goatee. He could think of several members of the Vanguard, *founding* members, who would not be thrilled to know they were called back into active duty again. There was always the possibility of an uprising. His control over the Vanguard was tenuous at best; he'd narrowly avoided an ousting the last time they had been brought together, and only after unrelenting persuasion by a few carefully placed contacts had he been allowed to remain on a probationary basis. But... Xclusive wasn't just some kid toilet-papering their house. He was a real hazard, as the previous incident had clearly demonstrated. He could not be allowed to continue his activities in Detroit. He should have been dead five years before. How *did* he manage to survive, anyway?

Eod lifted a cigarette out of his ashtray and took a long drag, even though it had mostly turned to ash while he mused over the images on his screen. He then leaned to his right and lifted a red phone off the console. The click of the phone releasing from the handset echoed interminably in the large lead-lined dome underground that was Eod's private residence. It wasn't exactly inviting, but he had to take precautions. He stamped the cigarette out in the tray and then spoke into the phone. "Mr. Hussain?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll need you to activate the Preemptive Emergency National-International Signal."

"The... PENIS, sir?"

"Yes, it's an unfortunate acronym, but it wasn't my choice of names, was it?"

"No, sir. I shall mount the PENIS immediately, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Hussain. You're a good man."

"Thank you, sir. It's not... Xclusive, is it?"

Eod paused, and then responded, "Yes."

“I... see.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Mr. Hussain.”

“No, sir, I’m sure there’s not. It’s just... I thought I would never see this day.”

Eod ran his free hand over his clean-shaven pate. “Neither did I.”

“I’ll... erect the PENIS now, sir.”

Eod nodded, oblivious to the fact that Hussain couldn’t see him, and hung up.

Hussain had emigrated from India as a very young child, and as such, had no discernable accent. He was still, however, fiercely adherent to conventional Indian and Islam traditions and beliefs. This caused Hussain no deal of grief when Eod would go on his biweekly drinking binges, especially since he suspected Eod’s main motive for these binges was his residual guilt and resentment over the Xclusive incident five years prior... but Hussain hoped he would have let that go by now.

Hussain now headed through the twisting labyrinth of corridors until he reached the base of the PENIS, which was situated in a missile silo directly above Eod’s underground lair. After bypassing the five distinct levels of security in thoroughly mundane ways not worth describing here, Hussain reached the core of the PENIS itself, a small circular chamber lined with CAT-5 cables, flashing lights, and whirring hard drives. He entered three six-character security codes on a small centrally-located touch screen, and then, after a pause, one final command.

EJACULATE.

All the lights on the console flashed three times, one of the computers beeped, the screen glowed a brilliant white, and then all was relatively silent again. A cursor on the touch screen flashed, waiting for the next command.

Hussain logged out of the PENIS control system, and then exited the chamber, taking care to reactivate the security systems on his way out. As he returned to his quarters, he puzzled over the strange innuendos related to the PENIS and its workings. Ejaculate? Its inventor had sworn it meant “to cry out,” but its inventor had always been a bit of a strange one.

During its innocuous flashings and beepings, the PENIS had expelled missives to twenty-three microchips implanted in twenty-three heads located around the globe. Eod had personally installed these chips during the Vanguard training sessions years earlier. They sat docilely just under the skin at the nape of the bearer’s neck, never intruding upon his or her daily life, until the PENIS spoke to it. Then the chip would send out barely detectable electrical impulses to a certain lobe of the bearer’s brain, informing him or her of the present situation and orders in the form of planted thoughts. The PENIS carried a specific numeric code, which each thought would state at the beginning of the message, so the bearer could distinguish a PENIS message from a random thought, and the PENIS also blocked the bearer from thinking this numerical code at any other time, so as not to confuse him or her. This was all accomplished through the miracle of neuroscience, and the help of a young researcher at Brandeis University named Laura, who had expressed a strangely intense interest in helping out with the PENIS project. Eod hadn’t been sure of her motives at the time, and still wasn’t exactly, but her loyalty and secrecy had never wavered, so he’d never bothered to ask. If he had, he could have perhaps noticed that Laura had installed a PENIS chip under her own skin, even though

she'd never been trained in Vanguard techniques, or even received security clearance to access the actual content of PENIS messages.

However, since Eod had issued the order for PENIS activation at 1 AM PST, the PENIS transmission caused twenty-two people to sit up in bed abruptly, pause for a moment, as if listening intently, and then mutter various colorful expletives. The twenty-third, Laura, sat up, listened, and then rolled over and went back to sleep, smiling quietly to herself.

Chapter Two – *Awakenings*

Though many members of the Vanguard harbored distaste for Eod's way of running things, their experiences within the unit had led some of them to form very close friendships with each other, and as such, many of the VGs, as they called themselves, had moved into apartment complexes or even houses together, in their time in inactive duty. Until now, none of them had suspected that Xclusive would ever return, and many of them expected their time as an active VG to be officially over. They hoped to quietly live out the rest of their days with no further incidents, and with no more invasive thoughts implanted by their PENIS chips.

However, at 1 AM PST, these hopes were whisked away into oblivion, as they were confronted with the cold hard truth. They were still VGs, they still were wearing PENIS chips, and they hadn't taken care of Xclusive the first time.

In South Carolina, Jimbo heard the message, rubbed his eyes a few times, and turned on the lamp on the nightstand next to his bed. "Oh god," he said, continuing to rub his eyes with the palms of his hands as if there was some kind of grit stuck in them. "Did you hear that, Peet?"

In the other bed, InThrees was lying on his side, his eyes barely cracked open. "Of course I did, you dumbass."

"Shit." Jimbo swung his legs over the edge of the bed and blinked at his feet a few times. The bedroom door swung open and TheOnyx switched the lights on. Jimbo moaned and fell back onto the bed again.

"Dude. What the fuck?"

"Sorry, Jim," Onyx said. "Mission critical though." He walked into the room in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, followed by a squat Cuban in pajama pants. Jimbo and Threes only knew him as Dave. Onyx had invited him, so he wouldn't be left home in Florida alone, but Dave had this obsession with finding disgusting porn that Jimbo and Threes were, frankly, disturbed by. But, as long as Dave stayed in Onyx's room, he was tolerable. Only then.

"Fucking Christ, it's 4 in the morning," Threes mumbled, switching the alarm clock off and sitting up in bed. "Who the fuck does he think he is?"

"Well, he *is* Eod," chided Onyx. "I know you guys don't think he's the greatest leader, but he *is* still the leader, and our orders still come from him."

Jimbo snorted bitterly. "That's such bullshit. If not for Bitchgoddess and K stepping in..."

"Hey, I found this site last night, and it had a girl getting penetrated in six different places," interjected Dave.

Threes looked over at Dave. "...The fuck is wrong with you?"

"Well, well, guys, let's just settle down now," sputtered Onyx hastily. "We probably need to be moving on out to Portland right about now. I already packed and everything, so whenever you guys are ready to go."

Jimbo could barely keep his eyes open. "It's fucking four in the morning. Why the fuck are you so goddamn chipper?"

Onyx shrugged. "I work night shift, remember? Just cause it's my night off doesn't mean my sleep patterns change."

Jimbo rolled off the far side of the bed and plummeted to the floor with a thud. "God-fucking-dammit..."

"It looked like it kind of hurt. I mean, six holes and all," said Dave obliviously.

Peet put a hand up in resignation. "Okay, okay. Give me an hour to get showered and packed up and stuff."

"But... an hour..." Onyx shuffled his weight anxiously. "I'm sure it's very urgent and we need to go."

"I WANT A FUCKING HOUR." Peet glared at Onyx.

Onyx shrugged. "Suit yourself. Come on, Dave."

"Actually, she might have been bleeding," continued Dave.

Out on the stained orange couch in the living room, MightyMon rolled over and fell back asleep.

Much later that day, around 1 PM actually, in Columbus, OH, CapnBiggles was saying his third or fourth goodbyes to his beloved Magan. Joshy and Fenomas had been sitting out on the balcony in lawn chairs watching the trees in the neighbors' yard sway lustily in the slight spring breeze for a good hour now, and Flashdim had eventually given up on waiting and gone back inside to play video games. Outside on the curb, Onyx paced around anxiously, while Jimbo and Threes tossed a football around halfheartedly in the yard and Dave remained on the bus, flipping through one of his nearly interminable stack of naughty magazines and listening to Krautrock.

A bus, you may ask? How did this get here? Well, I will tell you.

Onyx had gotten so bored while waiting for Threes and Jimbo to get packed that he'd rented a bus and dashed off emails to his Vanguard contacts across the country stating that he would be picking them up, along with estimated arrival times. Naturally, when Jimbo heard of this, he pointed out that this would add a good number of hours onto their travel time, and how there were certain Vanguard members with whom he wasn't exactly on the best of terms. But Onyx promised to drive the first four-hour shift, and what with it still being so early in the morning, Jimbo's argumentative facilities weren't exactly at their strongest, so he had no choice but to give in and climb aboard the bus. Threes and Dave followed suit, and Threes and Jimbo took turns alternately catching up on sleep and preventing Dave from gaining access to the bus's DVD player. At the last possible moment before pulling out on the bus, Threes suddenly thought to inquire about Mon's location, causing Onyx to leap out of the bus so quickly he cracked his shoulder on the door as it was still opening, toss most of Mon's clothing into an athletic bag, and drag Mon out the door. Mon didn't even really wake up, even though he wrenched his shoulder pretty good when Onyx tossed him into a seat.

So anyway, all this was going on, and Fen looked over at Joshy watching the trees and noticed Joshy's eyelids drooping sleepily. He stood up, dropped his hands onto the balcony railing, and announced, "Okay, that's it. Biggles, just say goodbye so we can get the hell out of here."

Biggles looked deeply into Magan's eyes. "But! Forsooth!"

Fen smacked Joshy across the chest sharply, and Joshy started awake. "Wha... oh hell. Is he still going?"

Jimbo turned and threw the football a few feet; it slapped Biggles in the chest. Biggles looked down at his chest and then up at Jimbo in outrage. "Sir, thou dost—"

"I don't even give a shit." Threes grabbed Biggles by the shirt collar and yanked him in the direction of the bus. Biggles flailed his arms wildly.

"Magan! Mine love!" Magan took a few hesitant steps toward him, but then stopped and remained in the yard, since most of the other people here were men she didn't know that were much bigger than she was, and she was a pretty young thing. Fenomas and Joshy had left the balcony and come downstairs and out the front door with their belongings, and Flashdim trailed behind, attempting to kick a suitcase out the door while still fidgeting with an X-box controller for as long as the cable would allow.

Threes tossed Biggles onto the bus, where he stomped to the back, tossed his suitcases into a seat, and sat in the seat opposite it, sulking and staring longingly out the window at Magan. Fen, Joshy, and Flashdim got onto the bus as well, adjusting their packages and then sitting down in the middle area. Jimbo handed Threes the keys to the bus, and Threes sighed and slid into the driver's seat. "Oh, what the hell, it's all slimy." A football whacked him in the back of the head. "Hey now, no horseplay on the bus."

As the bus pulled away from the curb, Onyx stood up and faced toward the back of the bus. "Okay, we have this selection of DVDs. Which one do we want to watch?" He looked around, but there were no takers. "Biggles?"

Biggles was making the Vulcan sign of prosperity out the window to Megan, his fingers pressed up against the glass, and Onyx could faintly see her returning the sign from the yard. He found it strangely romantic and horribly pathetic at the same time. Onyx shook his head abruptly and snapped out of it. "Dave?"

Before Dave could respond, Jimbo leaned over, blocking him, and announced, "How about *Half Baked*?"

A quick vote confirmed the decision, and as Onyx reached up and placed the DVD onto the tray, Mon rolled over in his seat and mumbled, "Can you guys shut the fuck up? I'm trying to sleep here."

In a large corporate office somewhere in central Kentucky, Doomy304 sat in her opulent "think room" and debated. Well, opulent by her standards, anyway. Large cushy red couch, deep golden walls, lots of Spanish-themed artwork, and the most bad-ass media/informational center she could get her hands on. Her own dedicated cable internet line on a top-of-the-line homemade PC and a 57" projection-screen TV with a DVD burner and the three major game consoles, stocked with games from every genre. She also had surround sound, a stereo system that played all major forms of music media, and a full wall covered in overflowing bookshelves. In the corner sat her own refrigerator, which was stocked every morning with Pepsi and string cheese (she did eat other stuff;

those were just the biggies). Doomy spent her days sitting in her think room researching and keeping track of all the news and popular trends going on across the country, and predicting which ads and methods of info dissemination would be most effective. In short, she had a highly absorbing job, which sucked up all her free time, but was also extremely fun.

How did she manage to snag this job, you may ask? This is a good question, and one which remains a mystery to this day. Even the very people who hired her and *created the position for her* could not now remember how she'd gotten the job or even if they'd seen her resume. But she'd single-handedly used her powers of intuition and persuasion to bring the company millions, and now they weren't sure what they'd do without her.

But perhaps a better question to ask rather than how is *why*. Five years ago, after Xclusive had been destroyed, Doomy had felt the need to get as far away from all things Vanguard as possible. The harrowing images she'd seen at that final confrontation had remained burned behind her eyelids for weeks, and it was only after finding herself a new job in which to immerse herself completely that she could force the images away. Some nights, when she hadn't had enough to do and the scenes threatened to flash through her mind again, she'd pull out a blanket she'd stashed behind the couch and sleep in her think room instead of going home, hoping the environment would continue to block the memories out.

But now...

She knew what she'd committed to when she'd joined the Vanguard. She'd promised to defend her world to the best of her capabilities from any foe that threatened it. Defeating Xclusive hadn't completed that promise, but hadn't there been an unspoken agreement amongst the remaining twenty-two of them that this would never happen again, that the days of the Vanguard had officially concluded and that their services would no longer be necessary? She'd certainly sensed it, riding on that plane back to Portland that night, she and her comrades tired, filthy, incapable of doing anything other than existing. She'd looked around, lazily peering through their thoughts, and as she saw the long string of empty, silent minds broken by an occasional burst of blinding fury directed at Eod, she knew she could no longer be a part of the organization, regardless. The next morning, before anyone else had awakened, she was up, taking a cab to the airport and the next plane back to Kentucky. As far as she knew, no one knew she was here.

But Xclusive had returned. She'd thought him dead. She'd watched Eod fire four bullets directly into his chest, and she'd watched Xclusive crumple to the ground in a pool of blood. The long-dormant thoughts were now bubbling up to the surface, image after image cascading one after the other, and she fell to her knees, sliding off the couch and curling up into a little ball on the floor, rocking. Weis howling in agony and pure terror. Fen racing down from the catwalk, stopping in the back of the room with a look of limitless remorse on his face. Eod kneeling over Sara, his face contorted with anguish, and XPeter and Mon struggling to pull him away. Jimbo and InThrees carrying Weis off on a stretcher, and the look of utter loathing that crossed Jimbo's face as he glanced at Eod. The long walk away, watching her fellow VGs' faces fall from jubilation to shock as the eight of them put one foot after another and forced themselves to keep moving.

She didn't know if she could go through with it again. She didn't want to lose anyone else. And she *liked* her job. Aside from a tired sense of duty and honor, she

couldn't think of any reason why she should toss herself back into that hell when she had a perfectly good life waiting right here for her now. She sat, and she pondered, and her computer and media systems were no good to her; any possible information she could glean was all inside her mind.

There was a knock at the door, and some young upstart she knew only as Matt poked his head in. "Cassy?"

She sat up and blinked for a moment, not recognizing her own name, and then with a start, replied, "Yes?" She realized she'd been thinking of herself under her old VG operative name, Doomy304, for the entire morning.

Matt swallowed nervously and then blurted out, "I have this bet, with a guy, and I was hoping you could settle it for us."

Doomy smiled. "You paying me?"

"Ahahaha, heh, heh," Matt giggled. "No."

Doomy rolled her eyes. "Okay, what is it?"

"On what date did the Beatles first perform together at the Cavern Club?"

"Why the hell do you have a bet over that?"

"Actually, it's a bet to see if you know it or not."

"Oh. With Pete or with Ringo?"

"...Pete?"

Doomy sighed. "Never mind. March 21, 1961."

Matt's mouth opened and closed a few times, and then he turned a deep red and slammed the door behind him. Doomy smirked. Then she turned, and looked out the window. It was a beautiful day, crisp and clear and bright. She thought back further, past the horrific images, to the days before that, when she and the other VGs had gotten along beautifully, basking in the camaraderie, before everything got so serious so suddenly. She missed that. She'd miss this too, the room, and the stuff, and the ability to do what she loved and get paid for it... but she loved them too. No matter how much she and the others wished it was over, it wasn't, and they'd made a commitment. They had to honor it. If not for anyone else, then for each other, and for themselves.

Doomy picked up the phone in her think room and called a cab.

"And I told him, I told him, no more dogs in the trees, no more dogs, NO MORE DOGS!" Clme mumbled as he rocked back and forth and polished his shotgun. After the Xclusive incident five years before, the inventor of the PENIS had fled to Montana, where he'd gone mildly schizophrenic in a small cabin in the mountains, holed up alone for so long. Burt Reynolds, a fellow VG, had followed after him, becoming a park ranger in the area in which Clme resided, trying to keep him mostly sane from a distance, and to keep him from using his VG abilities for the worse. Clme had not been directly involved with any of the events that one fateful evening; he and the other VGs had been otherwise engaged outside, but when they saw the survivors exiting and turned from jubilation to shock, Clme went into a deep depression instead. He'd left shortly after Doomy, unaware she had even left, and headed straight into the mountains.

There was a sharp rapping on the door. Clme looked up warily. "What?" He stumbled out of his seat, juggling his shotgun and polishing cloth and nearly dropping both. "Who is it?"

"Park Services, sir. Just checking to make sure you're doing okay up here."

Clme's trembling fingers attempted to load the shotgun, but he kept dropping shells. "I'm fine! Go away!"

The door flew open, and Burt Reynolds stepped in, having just kicked it open with his artificial leg. "Clme. We gotta go, man." He took a few cautious steps toward Clme, with one of his arms outstretched. "Give me the gun. Xclusive's back."

Clme's eyes widened and he took a few steps back, clutching the gun to his chest. "No! No Xclusive! We killed him! He's dead! ...dead..." He began crying, and sank to his knees. "He's dead..."

Burt Reynolds walked over to him, carefully dislodged the gun from his fingers, and patted him on the shoulder. "Well, don't act so surprised. You had to have known before I got here."

"He... *can't* be..." Clme looked up at Burt Reynolds. His mental faculties seemed to be returning, a little bit anyway. "We killed him, right? Shot him? Then we all left?"

"Well, mostly all. But yeah. I don't know what happened. There's no reason he should still be alive. I mean, the damn building *blew up*. With him in it."

Clme sniffled and wiped his nose sloppily with the side of his hand. "So... we have to go now? Back to Portland?" Burt nodded, and Clme nodded too, standing up and looking around at his lack of possessions, trying to think if he should pack anything.

"Can I have my gun back?" "No."

Eod rubbed his temples and exhaled. At the far end of the long steel table, Cyd, XPeter, LonMabonJovi, and Tons'o'Fun looked in worry alternately at Eod, and down at the table. They'd all driven to Eod's place the day they'd received the message, since they had been the only VGs to remain in the Portland area after Xclusive's defeat. They'd all managed to leave relatively normal lives after the incident, since, with the exception of XPeter, none of them had been directly involved. And XPeter hadn't suffered the way Doomy had, convincing himself that the things he saw in that room that evening were all part of the job and nothing to feel any grief or horror for. He'd become a successful DJ and performer at a popular Portland club, while Cyd opened up an artsy coffee shop, Tons became a mattress salesman, and Lon was hosting a public-access TV show on fly fishing.

Tons hesitantly spoke up, breaking the tense silence that had settled over the room in the hour or so since they'd arrived. "So, um, any idea how Xclusive isn't dead?"

"No," Eod murmured, shaking his head. "No."

Tons looked down at his hands again for a moment, then said, "Well, did you think—"

"Yes, of *course* I fucking thought!" Eod screamed suddenly, and both Lon and XPeter jumped a little. "Don't you think I've spent every fucking MINUTE since I saw those fucking blue dots on the screen thinking about it? I shot him, he fell over, he didn't move, the building blew up, what the *fuck* could possibly have happened?" He stood up, grabbed an empty chair and hurled it towards one of the metal-plated walls. "What the fucking *fuck* am I supposed to do?"

Weis, who had just rolled in mid-rant, winced as the chair crashed resoundingly and clattered to the floor next to him. "Okay, bad time. I'll be right back." He turned his wheelchair around and headed back out into the hall.

“No, shit, Weis, I’m sorry, get back in here.” Eod dashed after Weis, grasped the handles on his wheelchair, and swung Weis around, scooting him into the spot recently vacated by the chucked chair. “You probably more than anyone else should be able to help me think this through; you’re the only other person in this room who *saw* the damn thing.”

“Well, not really, I was kind of lying on the floor *writhing around in agony*, but okay.” Weis shook his head. “That fucking brother of mine. God. Only had to fire one shot. One fucking bullet, and that pussy couldn’t even manage that. Now fucking look at me.” He gestured angrily at his legs, useless appendages now.

Hussain entered the room, carrying five glasses and a bottle of scotch on a tray. “Drinks, anyone?” He passed the glasses around the table, and then walked around filling each one.

As Weis sipped his scotch, he turned to Tons. “What, nothing for you?”

Tons smiled and shrugged, glancing down at the empty table in front of him.

“Nah. The whole lush thing is just a rumor, after all.”

“Oh, that’s such crap,” said Lon, nearly choking on his drink. “Don’t you remember the time we all went out drinking and you ended up dancing on the bar with some fifty-year-old hag of a barmaid with her tits practically flopping out of her shirt?”

Tons’ eyebrows narrowed. “No...”

“Exactly,” smirked Lon.

“By the way, sir, Doomy304 has arrived and is waiting in the atrium,” said Hussain, tightening the cap on the bottle of scotch and tucking the tray under his arm. “Shall I send her in?”

“Yes, yes,” replied Eod impatiently, with a wave of his hand. Hussain nodded quickly and exited.

A few moments later, Doomy walked through the door and waved cautiously. “I’m back.”

Tons got up from his chair and came over and gave her a bear hug, saying, “Doomy! Man. It’s so good to see you.” Doomy sniffed his jacket suspiciously, and he pulled away from her. “What?”

She paused, and then looked up at him. “Your jacket smells like alcohol.” Behind them, Lon fell off his chair laughing.

Chapter Three – *Discoveries*

Biggles blurted out a suggestion from the backseat, where he’d remained silent and pouting for the last hour.

“Look, he’s in Detroit, right? Why don’t we just go kill him ourselves?”

Threes swerved off the side of the road into the shoulder and brought the bus to a jerking stop. “What the fuck?”

“What the hell do we need anybody else for? We’ve got, like, half the crew right here.” Biggles stood up and started walking down the aisle toward the front of the bus. “I mean, who are we missing? Eod, who some of us hate anyway... Weis, who can’t be let near his brother anyway... rednecks and lushes, and Doomy, and we don’t need her.”

A scream of terror came from behind him, and everyone turned to look. Mon was wide-eyed and petrified; he gasped for air for a few seconds, and then slammed his fists down on the seat back in front of him and yelled, “FUCK! When is this going to *stop*?”

“What?” said Biggles.

Mon looked up suddenly, as if just now noticing who all was around him, then shook his head and muttered, “Never mind,” turning and staring gloomily out the bus window again.

Biggles paused, and then continued where he’d left off. “Anyway, wouldn’t we rather just get it over with now? I mean, he got shot four times in the chest and THEN blown to smithereens or burnt to death, one of the two. If he’s still alive, you’d *think* he’d be pretty damn well incapacitated, right? How hard could it be?”

Onyx shrugged uncomfortably, stopping the movie. “I don’t know... he’s obviously strong enough to start gathering power again, and he was obviously strong enough then to survive somehow, and it’s been five years. A lot could have happened.”

“Hmm.” Fen thought for a moment. “Why not just go find him, but not actually *fight* him or alert him to our presence? It wouldn’t take us *too* far out of the way, and we could get some recon done, which is always a good thing.”

Threes put the bus in park and stood up, walking up behind Biggles and leaning into a seat so he could see everyone. “I don’t know. You remember what Xclusive was like last time, at full strength? That was some scary shit. If he’s had five years to recover... I don’t know if I want to be anywhere near him. Not without everybody else. And we won’t even *have* everybody else by the time we get to Portland.”

There was a long, somber pause, and finally Joshy spoke up. “Look. Let’s just go, and lurk, and watch him for a few minutes, and then get back on the bus and go on our merry way. It can’t hurt if we don’t get caught. And we won’t.”

“No?” Onyx said. “How do you know?”

Joshy smiled smugly. “Captain and last surviving member of Squad 5.” As they all watched, he became gradually more translucent, fading away until they could all see the seat behind him, and then rapidly regained his prior opacity.

“Lucky bastard,” Jimbo swore, and Joshy smiled wider.

“Eh, not really,” said Fen, standing up and stretching as far as he could without bumping into the walls and ceiling of the bus. “He likes to take advantage of that while other people are in the shower. You learn to keep a *very* tight grip on the soap.”

As everyone chuckled, Threes turned and headed to the driver’s seat again. “So Detroit it is?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Onyx, and with a jerk, Threes pulled the bus out onto the interstate again.

Several hours later, the bus pulled up across the street from the warehouse on the very edges of town that had been the scene of the final battle five years before. It *had* been blown to bits, rigged by Xclusive in a last cocky maneuver before the tide had turned, brutally, in the opposite direction. But, to the VGs’ surprise, apparently Xclusive (or someone) had rebuilt it, because a new building stood upon the ruins of the old, almost hidden in the intense indigo of the moonless night. It sat ominously on the flat ground, a dark blot against the starry sky.

Threes put the bus into park and turned it off, making sure all the interior lights were off as well. “You ready, Joshy?”

“I think so... it’s been a few years since I’ve gone full-lucence. I’m a little rusty.” He paused for a moment, and then asked, “Can you see me?”

“Fuck, I can’t see *anybody*,” said Mon, who had studiously remained awake for the remainder of the trip.

Joshy laughed a little. “Well, better than nothing, I guess. Here goes.” He quickly regained opacity and exited the bus, vanishing as soon as his feet hit the gravel on the shoulder of the road.

Tiptoeing across the sparse grass, Joshy shivered a little. He hadn’t performed any kind of covert operation like this in years, and now he was thinking that maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea after all. While living in Columbus with Fen and Biggles and Flashdim, he’d been able to live a mostly normal life... after all, none of them had been from Squad 4 or 5, so he’d been able to forget how strange his special training was in the wake of their far more mainstream specializations. Biggles, master of the katana. Flashdim, the man with the machine gun. And Fen, the expert sharpshooter. Sure, they were all magnificent at what they did, but none of those could compare in sheer improbability to being a Squad 5. He could turn fucking *invisible*. It was pretty damn cool, but being the only person he knew of in the world who could do it was kind of shitty. It hadn’t always been that way... there had originally been fifty VGs. Five squads, ten VGs for each. Squad 1s were merciless in hand-to-hand combat. 2s mastered guns and 3s wielded swords. 4s always had kind of weirded Joshy out, because they had ESP and were telekinetic, and so while they could do immensely cool shit in battle, they also loved to poke through people’s heads during downtimes. It was a creepy, tingly, *vulnerable* feeling, but fortunately they never did it for long.

He was within fifty feet or so of the warehouse now. Hopefully nobody had spotted the bus sitting across the street... while it did look black and empty, it quite obviously hadn’t been there five minutes before, and a bus randomly parked out here would look a bit suspicious.

You’d think, what with Joshy and the rest of his squad being able to turn invisible at will, that they’d be the hardest to kill. After all, they could evade radar (one of the side benefits of invisibility was immunity to heat sensors), and could even go invisible for an entire battle if necessary. They’d had minor training in hand to hand combat and first aid, enough to make themselves useful during battle in ways other than just hopping around in and out of opacity, and during the final battle here, Xclusive had unleashed numerous foot soldiers upon the VGs, as well as two huge robot machines... they looked almost like rip-offs of the AT Walkers from the *Star Wars* movies, except not quite as turtle-ish. Unsurprisingly, they were doing vast amounts of damage to the 1s, 2s, and 3s, who were beating back the foot soldiers handily but were being demolished by the robots. Some were smashed to bits under the robots’ weighty feet, and some were hit by the robots’ ray gun, which could only fire one large shot at a time and had to charge between shots, but which caused massive damage when it did fire. So the 5s decided to take the robots out themselves, or gain control of them if they could.

Squad 5 went instantly invisible and assaulted the robots, climbing up their legs with the suction units built into the official VG gloves and boots. Once atop the heads of the massive machines, they began prying and banging on the outer steel hull, trying to

find a spot where they could get inside and wrestle control away from the operators. As captain, Joshy had a special earpiece hooked up to Sara, the captain of Squad 4, so that if she saw the enemy plotting any particularly dangerous moves, she could alert him and he could then alert the rest of his squad. While struggling with the robot, he heard a shot in his earpiece, and then Sara screamed loudly in his ear, a scream filled with horror and fear. The sudden force of Sara's scream caused Joshy to jerk back in pain, instinctively reaching for his volume control, but as he did so, he lost his grip on the robot and slid off the side, plummeting downward. He would have hit the ground if not for a conveniently placed glider that swooped in to catch him at the last moment, a gift from an anonymous someone on Squad 4. As the glider carried him up and momentarily away from the action, awaiting a command from either Joshy or the 4 who had sent it, Joshy turned and looked back at the robots, hoping to see a hatch fly open or a hole punctured in the side, *anything*.

Inside the robots, Xclusive's Special Forces Agents Merce and Filious, the drivers, were not making a move. In fact, they were in the midst of having a brief, whispered conversation over their headsets. After a few minutes, they concluded the conversation, and at that moment, Doomy yelled into Joshy's ear, "Get your guys out of there! They're gonna blow!" Simultaneously, Merce and Filious both pressed the Self-Destruct buttons on the consoles in front of them, and waited silently for the end. Joshy fumbled with his headset, attempting to find the "send" button, and finally depressing it and shouting at his squadmates, "Squad 4, get the fuck out of there right fucking now!" But by that point it was too late; before any of the rest of Squad 4 could escape, both robots exploded, twin fireballs expanding in air and then turning to smoke and raining flaming debris onto the remaining VGs and foot soldiers, running for cover. All of Squad 4 except for Joshy was immediately terminated.

Joshy stopped suddenly, a few feet outside the door of the warehouse. He had lost so many friends that day, not only in his own squad, but so many others had been lost. Out of an initial crew of 50 VGs, they were now down to 22. Xclusive may have been defeated, but he'd dealt out a good deal of damage before he went... and now he wasn't even actually dead. Joshy wondered if it was even worth it.

But, he'd come too far to back out now, and when a Lance Corporal in familiar uniform exited the front door to relieve a guard on duty, Joshy seized his chance and slipped inside.

Psyci leaned over a dimly lit console in an enormous windowless room that was nearly black inside and pressed a glowing blue button. In front of him, a glass tube sealed at the top and filled with a viscous blue-green liquid flickered to illumination.

"Hello, my child," he murmured. "Are you ready yet? I've waited so long." Joshy flattened himself on the wall behind Psyci, trying to keep himself as unnoticeable as possible (for, after all, even though he was invisible, he could still be bumped into) and stared in awe at the tube before him. He suspected Xclusive was in there somewhere, but couldn't see anything to tell for sure; there was too much of that liquid in there.

A steel door on the other side room crashed open, and Psyci quickly shut the tube lights down, busying himself over the console as if there were important things to do.

"Psyci!" screamed the intruder, flipping a switch and turning the floor track lights on, and Psyci winced a moment. "What are you *doing* in here?"

“Just making sure his vital signs are still okay, sir,” mumbled Psyci, scribbling random words onto a nearby clipboard. He quite despised General Bleh, but supposed he was still his superior, even though Psyci had never actually been in Xclusive’s employ prior to the incident five years ago and thus probably wasn’t anywhere in the rankings system at all.

Bleh looked up at the tube and its murky contents and grimaced, and then glanced back at Psyci. “Isn’t he *done* yet?”

“Done what?” Psyci raised an eyebrow.

Bleh gestured with his hands awkwardly as if trying to think of the right word. “You know... done cooking, or whatever he’s doing in there.”

“Oh.” Psyci looked down at the console again and tried to look busy. “No... give him a few more weeks.”

“A few more weeks?” Bleh stomped his feet petulantly. “But I want him to be ready now! My men are getting impatient!”

“Trust me; it will all be worth it in the end. Just train them some more or something,” Psyci muttered, waving his hand at Bleh in dismissal and turning back to his clipboard.

Bleh’s eyes narrowed and he dropped a hand heavily onto the edge of the console, tapping his fingertips. “You know, *Psyci*—” he said this through gritted teeth “—I could easily get rid of you if I wanted and take care of this myself.”

“Oh, for the love of...” Psyci tossed his pen down onto the console, where it bounced off and skittered across the floor a few feet. “Who has been behind this whole regeneration process? Who is the only reason we are even here in this building right now?”

Bleh scuffed his shoe on the impossibly clean floor. “You...”

“And who invented the Arcangelo all by himself? And installed it all by himself? When he was promised assistance?”

Bleh seemed to be trying to turn invisible. *Fat chance*, thought Joshy. “You...”

“That’s right.” Psyci stood up and glared at Bleh. “So back the fuck off. And get me a mug of coffee.”

Bleh stepped back for a moment, glowering at Psyci, and then turned and signaled to two Lance Corporals lurking in the back of the room, near the door he’d dramatically entered through. “Buckjohnson! McDrewbie!”

The two soldiers, who had been leaning against the wall furtively smoking a cigarette, quickly turned the cigarette into a squashed pile of tobacco on the floor and jogged over to Bleh. “Sir!”

“Get Psyci a mug of coffee,” Bleh reluctantly commanded.

Psyci looked up and smiled sweetly. “Decaf, with plenty of creamer and sugar on the side.”

The two soldiers saluted and dashed out the back door, and Bleh turned around, scowled one last time at Psyci, and followed them out.

When he was sure they were gone, Psyci hit the glowing blue button again, and the tube lit up once again. But this time, he also flicked a switch next to it, and suddenly, the blue-green liquid turned clear, revealing Xclusive suspended there, wrapped in something metallic-looking from his shoulders to about his waist, with some kind of electrodes or wiring extending from his extremities and temples to the outer edges of the

tube. Psyci hit another button, and the electrodes must have sparked to life, because Xclusive threw his head back and screamed silently, quaking visibly within the confines of the tube. Joshy stared in shock for a moment, and then quickly glanced over at Psyci, who was grinning and mumbling things to himself that Joshy couldn't make out. After thirty seconds or so, Psyci finally hit the button again, and Xclusive sagged back into immobility, twitching a little.

Joshy decided this was a good time to leave, and headed for the door he'd entered through, flinging the door open as hard as he could, and then walking outside and moving as silently as possible away from the warehouse while the guards puzzled over the door and eventually decided the wind had blown it open.

Back on the bus, he regained opacity instantly and gasped for air for a few moments. "Damn. That shit takes a lot out of you. I gotta get back in shape."

Threes put the bus into drive and turned his parking lights on, moving ever so slowly away from the warehouse until it was out of sight, and then throwing the full headlights on and moving up to full speed.

Jimbo sat up in his seat and stretched. "Jesus, you took long enough. So what happened? What's going on in there?"

Joshy shook his head slowly. "Un-fucking-believable."

Chapter Four – *Preparations*

Two days later, a worn and weary bus pulled up to Eod's residence and parked on the side of the road, wheezing. The VGs had pushed it nonstop for a full 48 hours, only pausing to refill the gas tank, in hopes of getting to Portland a little faster.

They all burst off the bus, forgetting their luggage for now, and ran through the front door. But Jimbo paused, seeing a long-haired figure in filthy clothing slumped against the wall. The person didn't appear to be moving. He wore a white shirt, with most of the buttons opened, olive green khaki pants, and scuffed boots.

"Hey!" Jimbo kicked him in the leg. "Who are you?"

The person slowly lifted his head and glared up at Jimbo. "The fuck you care?"

Jimbo raised an eyebrow, and kicked the guy again, a little harder. "You spying on us?" Then he laughed a little. "Nah. Xclusive may be an ass, but he isn't stupid, and he *damn* well wouldn't send some drunk-ass Nixon-era reject out here."

The man pushed himself up off the ground and deliberately raised himself to his feet, revealing a long sheathed blade which had been hidden beside him on the ground. At his full height, he was an inch or two taller than Jimbo; thinner, but it was all muscle. He stared at Jimbo for a few moments, and then spat on the ground near his right boot. "Don't *ever* fucking insinuate that again." He then stumbled back a step or two, and a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels fell out of his pocket.

Jimbo rolled his eyes. "You dumb fuck." He grabbed the man by his shirt and dragged him inside.

Inside, most everyone was milling around, cautiously reminiscing and catching each other up on what they'd done for the last five years, when Jimbo tossed the stranger in. "Who the hell is this guy?"

The crowd parted Biblically for the man, and he stood there, teetering back and forth and blinking. Eod walked up to him, looked at him for a few minutes, and then walked around him in a circle. “Jesus, what did you do, take a *bath* in it?”

Tons, from across the room, said, “You could have picked something better than Jack Daniels.” Everybody looked at him, and he stammered, “Um, or so I hear.”

In the back of the room, Cyd’s brow was furrowed, in a look of confusion and pain. The stranger could feel a strange tingling in his head, but he was so out of it he didn’t even bother to worry about it.

Eod brushed a few specks of dirt off the man’s shoulder. “So, who are you, and why were you lurking outside?”

The man remained silent for a few moments, so Jimbo reached around and punched him hard in the gut. The blow did not faze the stranger, or even force him to stagger in his drunken state, as he drew his long thin blade from its scabbard and whirled it in a vertical loop with a quick flick of his wrist. Everyone around him took a few instinctive steps back, and Eod put his hands up in submission. “Okay, okay. We won’t do that anymore.” He shot a meaningful glare at Jimbo, who glared back. After a pause, the stranger slid the sword back into its sheath.

Eod exhaled. “Let’s start again. I’m Eod. The guy who hit you is Jimbo. I can introduce everybody else later. What can I call you?”

“Just Rufus,” the man said in a low gravelly voice.

“Oh, good. Rufus. It is a pleasure to meet you, Rufus.” Eod extended his hand to shake Rufus’s, but Rufus just looked away. Eod shrugged. “So, I guess the next thing I need to kn—”

“I want to take Xclusive out,” said Rufus abruptly. His voice wasn’t slurred at all, and Eod suddenly found himself wondering if Rufus was drunk in the first place. “I want to kick his fucking ass, rip his balls off, and jizz all over his grave.”

There was a long silence, and then Onyx piped up, “Well, you’ll fit in great, I think, or something. Maybe.” He turned to Eod, “So, who are we missing?”

“Clme and Burt Reynolds, who should be here any minute now, and then the Euros, but they won’t be here.” Eod sighed disgustedly.

Doomy looked up, paused, and then said, “Oh, dammit.” Cyd was still poring through Rufus’s head, and Mon couldn’t be bothered; he was still forcing himself to stay awake.

“What?” Biggles said, pushing his way toward Eod (but staying well out of Rufus’s way). “What? Why not? What the hell kind of excuse do they have?”

“Why don’t we just show you?” Weis said bitterly, wheeling his way over to the console and pressing a few buttons. On the projection screen, where the map of the United States with the blue spots in Detroit was currently displayed, the picture abruptly changed to an image of Lamfear and Faran, sitting in beach chairs next to a pool. Weis hit another button, and the image jerked to life.

Lamfear waved at the camera. “Hi guys!” Faran waved as well, taking a sip of some kind of blue-colored drink. Behind them, a few servants walked around on duty, but none of their faces were visible.

“Oh my *god*, we just heard the news about Xclusive. How horribly rotten that is.” Lamfear pouted, and then smiled brightly again. “But, we’re stuck here in Europe, so it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to help you duckies out!”

“It’s so unfortunate, you know,” said Faran in his considerably thicker accent, “but we just won’t be able to make to America in time. I’m sure you understand, darlings.”

“Yes, I do too. I mean, how hard will it be? Just chop his head off or something.” Faran and Lamfear both laughed coyly, and then Lamfear clapped his hands. “More drinks!”

A few seconds passed, and then Banjoman (who had been an excellent fighter in his day) walked into the shot, carrying a pink drink on a tray, and wearing a white coat and tails with little black short shorts. He glanced up at the camera and gave a look of complete mortification.

“Thank you, Banjoman,” said Lamfear happily, taking the drink. Banjoman nodded tightly and backed out of the frame. “You see, Eod? With nothing to do for five years, Faran and I have taken the time to become filthy rich!” He and Faran clasped hands and laughed loudly again. “And, with our newfound filthy richness, we have taken Fakie and Banjoman as our man-servants! It is very, how do you say, rewarding.”

“In so many ways,” added Faran, and they laughed again. Fakie1080 entered the shot, wearing a similar get-up as Banjoman and looking even more embarrassed, and handed each of them a pair of sunglasses. He then quickly ducked out of the shot and fled.

“So, Eod, this one is for you,” said Lamfear, raising his drink with one hand and putting on his sunglasses with another. “Good luck with that Xclusive thing; we’ll be right here in sunny Amsterdam, being filthy rich, and enjoying our man-servants. Toodles!” The screen went black, and the United States image reappeared.

“Those bastards,” said Threes. “What the shit was that?”

Eod shrugged. “Well, what can we do? We don’t have the time to go over there and get them.”

Threes looked at Eod for a second, and then jabbed Weis in the shoulder with a finger. “Bring them back up. I want to talk to them.”

“But...that was just a video,” said Weis uneasily. “I mean, talk to the screen all you want, but...”

Threes rolled his eyes. “No, I mean, if they can transmit shit to us, we can transmit shit to them, right? Set up the uplink thing whatever it is.”

Weis opened his mouth to respond, but then just threw his hands up in submission and hit the buttons again. The screen changed back to the pool-side view, and they watched as Lamfear climbed out of the pool in a Speedo and walked up to the camera. “Oh, hi guys! What can I do for you on this fine day upon which I am enjoying my filthy richness?”

“Um, hi Lam,” said Eod, rubbing the top of his head awkwardly. “We were just wondering if—”

“Listen, assholes,” Threes said, bumping Eod out of the way. “You are going to get your fucking asses out here right now even if it means I have to go out there and drag you by your toes.”

“Oooh, I know something *else* you could grab me by,” Lamfear said, winking suggestively. Lon shuddered. Dave looked up interestedly.

Faran walked in from outside the shot wearing apparently little more than a white silk bathrobe, tied loosely around his waist, and stood next to Lamfear. “What are you naughty boys talking about over here?”

“Oh, they want to drag us over there by our winkies; isn’t that just *adorable*?” Lamfear winked exaggeratedly; Doomy snickered.

The main entrance door to the room flew open, and Burt Reynolds angrily dragged Clme in. “Thank fucking God I’m finally here, I am sick of this guy,” he grunted, tossing Clme into the center of the room, where he nearly ran into Rufus. Clme looked up at him, and then burst out laughing, not in a mocking way, just in a completely insane way.

“Oh Jesus, what happened to him?” asked Onyx.

Burt Reynolds sat down in a chair and leaned back. “*You* try being alone in the woods for five years and see if *you* don’t go fucking crazy.”

“Hi guys!” said Lamfear a little impatiently, waving.

Doomy looked over at Clme, squinted for a moment, and then grimaced. “Ow. That hurt.”

Fakie entered the picture, examined the view into Eod’s hideout for a few moments, and then looked at Lam hard for a few moments. Lam promptly turned to Faran and said, “You know, I have just had an absolutely lovely idea. Why don’t we go out to America and help them beat Xclusive? It would be such fun.” Faran looked like he was about to demur, but a quick glare from Fakie and he was quickly nodding and grinning in agreement. Mon smirked.

“Well, okay guys, I guess we will see you in a few days.” Lamfear waved and began to reach to turn the transmitter off.

“Wait, what?” Threes spluttered. “A few days? You could be on a goddamn plane within the next hour.”

Faran rolled his eyes patronizingly. “Yes, cutie, but do you *know* just how many clothes we have? I mean, seriously, we go through at least five changes of clothes a day, and our wardrobe is just immensely huge, and of course we have to try everything on.” He and Lam turned to each other and giggled.

“Oh gawd, we have to go get started now!” Lamfear exclaimed, grabbing Faran’s hand and dashing away from the transmitter. “Bye, loves!” Fakie turned to the transmitter, said, “About bloody time,” and then turned it off.

Biggles turned away from the screen and said, “Well, good. So how many of us does that make?”

“Twenty-one,” replied Onyx, shrugging disappointedly. “Six from Squads 1 and 2, five from Squad 3, four 4s and then Joshy. Oh, and Rufus, if he counts.” He looked questioningly over at Rufus, who remained silent and impassive.

“Shit,” said Eod, turning away from everyone and thinking to himself. “And if he’s just like he was last time... or even *more* powerful... damn, we’ll be completely wiped out.”

“Well,” said Flashdim, shoving his Game Boy into his back pocket, “we don’t know how powerful he is. We went and checked things out, and—”

“You what?” muttered Weis, rolling a few feet toward him. “You went and *checked things out*? What the holy hell were you thinking?” Biggles raised a hand and was about to take responsibility, but Weis cut him off. “Do you realize what could have

happened to you? Most of you were on that bus. You could have been completely wiped out and where would that have left the rest of us?” He turned to Fen, who had been silently hiding behind Joshy, and his eyes narrowed. “Was that your idea? Was that your fucking idea?”

Fen winced. “No, I had nothing to do with it, I—”

“Oh, bullshit. That is so typical. You’re *all about* risking other people’s lives, aren’t you? Doesn’t matter what happens to them; let’s look out for number one! Fuck you, Fen, look what you did to me! Look what you fucking did to me!” He gestured angrily to his useless legs. “What the fuck were you *thinking*? Oh, it’s okay, I don’t need to shoot, they can just insult him to death. They can smack him to death with their mighty wangs. I mean, what the *shit*?”

Fen’s brow furrowed. “Oh, I’d like to see you try doing that. It’s just *so* easy to just—”

“No, no,” interrupted Weis. “This doesn’t apply to me. There’s no such thing as long-distance swordplay, it’s not my situation, it was just *one fucking shot*, wide open, no way for you to miss, and you *didn’t* shoot. You fucking *cunt*.”

“Hey...” Onyx said uneasily. “Hey you guys...”

“Stay the fuck out of this, Onyx,” growled Weis. “You weren’t even fucking *there*.”

He reached down for his sword, but Tons reached over and blocked him. “Dude. He’s your brother. We have more important things to deal with right now.”

“Yeah,” said Mon, “if I knew all we were going to do was sit around and bitch at each other I would be back home sleep—uh, watching TV.” Doomy looked at him bemusedly and attempted to access his subconscious, but as a fellow Squad 4 he’d also been trained to close his mind off to others. She quietly harrumphed.

Weis shot one last hateful glare at Fen, and then wheeled his chair around and faced away from him. Fen resumed hiding behind Joshy.

Lon cleared his throat. “So, uh, I think we established that could have potentially been a very bad thing, but since it obviously *wasn’t*, what did you find out?” He took a seat at the long conference table, and everyone else followed suit, Weis rolling up to the spot vacated by the chair Eod threw. Rufus remained silent and lurking against a far wall.

“Well,” began Joshy, picking up a pen lying on the table and twisting it between his fingers, “I’m the only one who actually saw anything, what with being a 5 and all, so I guess I should begin.” He told the entire story, Psyci, Xclusive in a tube, Bleh, internal conflicts within the Xclusive regime, everything. When he had finished, everyone sat around silently.

“So... he’s not strong enough to do anything yet, but he’s getting there, is that right?” asked Lon. Joshy nodded. Lon shook his head. “Man. How the hell did that happen?”

XPeter lit up a cigarette and exhaled. “Well, there was that thirty seconds or so between when we left and when the building blew up. I mean, it’s unlikely, but something *could* technically have happened then. Like, he dragged himself to safety, or someone else grabbed him, or he magically healed up, shit, I don’t know.” He turned to Eod. “He wasn’t wearing a bullet-proof vest or anything, was he?”

Eod shook his head. “He was bleeding all over the floor. Besides, I shot him practically pointblank.”

“Let’s not worry so much now about that,” said Burt Reynolds, grabbing Clme by the shoulders to prevent him from sliding into Dave’s lap. “Let’s worry about arming ourselves and making sure we’re all at full health and skills and intelligence and stuff, since there are less than half of us remaining.”

“Good idea,” said Cyd. “How are we on weapons?”

Eod shook his head. “I don’t really have a stockpile here... I wasn’t expecting him to come back. *None* of us were.”

Jimbo shrugged. “Well, I don’t need any weapons. My squad and I could go take him out today.” He smiled smugly at Eod.

“Yes, but some of us need guns and shit,” said Flashdim irritably. “We weren’t *all* trained to be masters of hand-to-hand combat.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Joshy added. “I mean, I can go out and smack some people, and Squad 4 can run around reading people’s minds, and you can beat people up, but really, what do you want the rest of us to do? Sit on the sidelines and hope you don’t get killed?”

Jimbo sighed and rolled his eyes. “Didn’t you guys think to *bring* anything? Haven’t any of you been *training* for the last five years?”

“Dude. I DJ for a living,” said XPeter, rolling his eyes. “How much opportunity do you think there is for swordfighting in the club scene, huh? Not a whole hell of a lot.”

“Seriously.” Doomy stood up and stretched. “Personally, as soon as we got back to Portland, I said ‘fuck this shit’ and moved off and I hadn’t messed with anyone’s heads until today. Well, uh, except for that one guy, but that was different. Anyway, I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of other people did the same thing, where they didn’t want to do it again, and they didn’t think they’d *need* to do it again, so they just didn’t bother keeping any weapons or practicing or anything. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” She started walking towards a back exit. “As a Squad 4, I don’t have any weapons to speak of, so I’m going to go exploring and re-acquaint myself with this place. Later.” Cyd, Mon and Joshy all quickly followed suit for similar reasons, leaving Squads 1 through 3 alone at the table.

There was a moment of silence, and then a sensor in the middle of the table began flashing red. “Incoming,” said Weis, backing his wheelchair up and rolling back over to the console, where he accessed the message.

A bald man wearing an expensive dark pinstriped suit sat stolidly in a large upholstered chair, resting both his hands on a black walking stick of him with a gaudy pewter globe on the top displaying a large “K”. Many of his fingers bore large gaudy rings, and his head bore a black fedora with a white band. Standing around him in a perfectly symmetrical pattern were five other men, all clad in solid black suits and ties and similar fedoras, all wearing identical dark sunglasses, and all with their hands behind their backs. The screen was dark, the only light coming from directly above the bald man’s head, so most of the faces were in shadow or completely obscured.

The bald man nodded in greetings. “Buon giorno.”

Eod smiled and nodded back. “Buon giorno, Krizzo.”

“I expect you remember my associates, so I’ll just—”

“Actually,” Eod interrupted, “this is Rufus. He’s new and he doesn’t even know any of our names yet, so...”

Krizzo arched an eyebrow at him and paused, as if stunned he'd dared to interject, and then nodded slowly. "Earthbound, Dlack, MidniteSquirrel, Demon of Elru, CDBee." He gestured nearly imperceptibly at each of his minions as he named them, and they all nodded in turn. Eod turned to Rufus, expecting a thank you, but Rufus just shrugged indifferently. Eod frowned a little and turned back to the screen.

"What can I do for you, Krizzo?"

Krizzo chuckled, a deep, guttural growl of a laugh. "No, no, Eod. It's not what you can do for me. It is what I can do for you. I recently received word from some associates in the Detroit area that your old friend Xclusive is not dead, as was previously assumed. I presume you are aware of this." Eod nodded, and Krizzo continued. "Would I also be presuming correctly that none of your Vanguard have trained or practiced in the last five years?" There was an awkward silence, in which Jimbo seriously considered speaking up about his nightly regimen with the punching bag but pussied out at the last minute, and then Krizzo went on. "I know of a store in Boston, run by a former arms supplier to Xclusive who has since dropped out of the game entirely and thus is impartial to either side. It masquerades as a bicycle and music equipment shop, but with my credentials he could be of some assistance to you. Perhaps you might look there, if you are in need of weaponry. You will find the required credentials in the bus that is parked outside your residence now." He nodded sagely.

Joshy turned to Fen, who was still hiding behind him a little, and murmured, "How the hell does he *do* that?"

Eod bowed a bit in the old Japanese style and said, "Thank you, Krizzo. This should help out a lot; we're very grateful."

Krizzo's eyes narrowed. "Eod... do remember I have a great deal of faith in you as a warrior, as a leader, and as a friend." His eyes flickered around the screen, catching a stray glint of light here and there, giving the VGs a contemptuous once-over. "It would do some of your compatriots well to remember that." CDBee reached over calmly toward something outside of the camera's view, and the screen zapped back to the world map.

"Well, damn," said Eod with a slight laugh. "I guess that's taken care of. I'll get us hooked up with a plane th—"

"Speaking of former Xclusive associates..." spoke up Vetis from the back of the group. No one had even seen him come in. Vetis was a whiz kid from the local university who Eod had hired as a researcher and strategist a few weeks ago after making him jump through numerous bureaucratic hoops and sign six separate confidentiality agreements. "I have reports of two men who used to work for him living now in the Cleveland area. They haven't been linked to any of the recent Xclusive activity, but since they *did* use to be part of the machine, maybe they know something we don't. Can't hurt anyway."

Jimbo walked slowly over to Vetis, staring at him incredulously. "Who the hell is this guy?"

"Uh, that's Vetis, he's from the—" began Eod.

"You fucking hired someone from *outside*? Are you *trying* to get us all killed? Oh, no, wait, I guess you must have learned your lesson from the last time. It must just be sheer stupidity now. Hmm, strange, isn't it? You kill off over half your squad, cripple

your best friend, but you're still alive and completely unharmed, and as it turns out, so is Xclusive. How charmingly coincidental."

Tons coolly walked over to Jimbo and decked him, making him lose his balance and fall on his ass. Jimbo grabbed his jaw and glared up at Tons.

"Don't you dare say a word about that again, Jimbo," Tons said softly and evenly. "You have no idea. No idea." Jimbo rubbed his sore jaw and pushed himself up off the floor, but remained silent.

Eod turned to Vetis wearily. "Cleveland, huh?" Vetis nodded nervously. "Okay then. Biggles and Flashdim, can you go find everybody and get them back in here?"

A few minutes later, everyone was together in one room again, and Eod stood up on a chair so everybody could see him. "Okay. Most of us are going to go to Boston to get accessorized. I'm going to put Jimbo and Threes in charge of that, simply because they're more commanding than Weis is, and who knows what you might run into, especially if the credentials, whatever they are, don't exactly work. I'm taking... let's see. Doomy, Onyx, and... oh, hell, why not. Rufus, you want to come with us to Cleveland?" Rufus shrugged indifferently again. "I'm going to pretend that was a yes. Okay. The four of us are going to Cleveland; everybody else can head out to Boston. However, nobody is going *anywhere* until tomorrow, because I'm sure everybody is tired as fuck, and even if they're not, I am, so I'm not going anywhere. Go get yourselves some rest; we'll set out first thing in the morning."

At 4:30 PM EST the next day, Jimbo kicked in the door of the Ectoplasmic Bike and Tunes Shop in Harvard Square.

"What the hell did you do that for?" said Threes. "The damn store doesn't close till 7."

Jimbo grinned sheepishly. "I've just always wanted to do that."

He walked into the store, followed by fourteen weary VGs, and glanced around casually, attempting to look inconspicuous, but not really looking at anything. The walls were papered with concert advertisements for local bands, and what appeared to be several hundred bikes were suspended from the ceiling. The floors were covered with racks displaying CDs, vinyl albums, magazines, and bicycle equipment, as well as a few messenger bags and t-shirts. Jimbo approached the counter, where a heavily pierced and tattooed little man glanced up at them from a music production equipment catalog. The man raised his eyebrow suspiciously; none of them looked like his usual clientele, with the exception of maybe XPeter. "Did you need something?"

Jimbo dropped his hands heavily down onto the counter and smiled widely. "We want weapons, Tin Sloth."

Tin Sloth jumped, juggling his catalog and nearly dropping it onto the floor. "Jesus Christ, don't say that so loud. You're lucky there's no one else in here." He cleared his throat, attempting to regain a modicum of dignity, and flipped through his catalog casually. "And at any rate, I don't have anything. I gave that up long ago."

Threes smirked. "That's not what Krizzo said."

Tin Sloth jumped again a little, but the catalog remained unruffled this time. "Pfft! You couldn't *possibly* know Krizzo. I mean, look at you. You look too... average. No suits and hats, no crazy Italian or New York accents, no nothing. Get out of here with your crazy talk."

Jimbo raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. “Okay, whatever.” He casually dropped a long walking stick on the table, identical to the one Krizzo had been holding during their conversation, followed by a sleek black briefcase. “What can I get for these?”

Tin Sloth stared at the items for a moment, and then sighed reluctantly. “I *told* him I didn’t want to do this anymore.” He looked around furtively, re-confirming that they were alone in the store, and then whispered, “Follow me. But you *don’t* know this is here.”

Jimbo nodded agreeably, and Tin Sloth led them all towards a CD rack mounted on a wall in the back of the store. He pulled some CDs forward, revealing a keypad, and entered a six-digit PIN. The entire wall swung back a few feet, leaving just enough room for all of them to slide through one by one. Behind the drywall lay a room encased in a substance Jimbo deduced to be tin foil, appropriately enough, and glass display cases containing all manner of illegal weaponry formed a U-shape on the floor. Tin Sloth gestured quickly around with his right arm, and then shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor, muttering to himself.

Jimbo and Threes took a few steps into the room, their shoes crunching and tearing the foiled floor, and Threes rubbed his hands together greedily, smiling. “This will do nicely.”

Doomy steered the rented Camry into an innocuous-looking driveway and parked it. She shook her head irritably. “God, I hate Cleveland roads. Poor car just got the shit beaten out of it.”

“Well,” said Eod smugly, crossing his arms, “if we were driving a VW this wouldn’t have happened.”

Doomy rolled her eyes and got out of the car, shutting the door behind her. Onyx, Rufus, and Eod followed suit shortly. At the end of the driveway was a small two-car garage, set apart from the main house by about fifty feet or so. Half the garage was filled with miscellaneous car parts, grill gear, toys, and miscellaneous junk; a convertible with the hood up took up the other half. Two men were bent over the convertible, toying with random parts and occasionally shocking each other with a grill ignition; one had long wavy red hair and was wearing a yellow jacket.

“Hi!” said Eod enthusiastically, walking toward them with his hand extended. “I heard you might know something I’m interested in.”

The two men turned, blinked, and then the man on the left laughed uneasily. “Do I know you?”

“Sure you do. I’m Eod. Remember... five years back... a little battle thing...” Eod grinned chummily. Onyx cracked his knuckles.

The red-haired man on the right