

# All Fun and Games Until Somebody Loses an Eye

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# Prologue

## Toyz

'It would encourage me, you know, to think . . . or rather it would comfort me, no, wrong word, well, maybe the right word, but it would, you know, inspire me but at the same time sort of soothe me in an all-is-well-in-heaven-and-earth kind of way to think, ah, what am I trying to say here?'

Som was sitting on an upturned black flight case, rocking it back ten or fifteen degrees as he rolled his heels on the frosted gravel in front of Bett's mansion. Lex wished he wouldn't do that, *really* wished he wouldn't do that. Okay, it was Som's case, Som's stuff, and maybe he was cool with the contents getting clattered in the less-than-improbable event that his feet slipped and put him on his skinny Thai ass, but that wasn't the point. It was bad practice. There were several black flight cases sitting out there with the three of them in the cold tonight, as on any such night, and Lex didn't much like the thought of Som using the vessel of her fragile, delicately packed and fastidiously inventoried kit as a makeshift shooting stick. Weighing further upon her discomfiture was the fact that Armand's flight cases were occasionally known to accommodate materials sufficient to denude the immediate vicinity of any standing structure, mammalian life, or even vegetation.

'Som, you're 404-ing,' she warned him.

'Sorry. I'm just saying, wouldn't you love to believe that somewhere in this world there really is at least one – just one – hollowed-out volcano containing a super high-tech ops base under the command of a fully fledged evil genius? I mean, I could live with all the havoc the evil genius might wreak simply to know there was a facility like that in existence. It would just make the world a more fantastical place, don't you reckon? In a Santa-really-does-exist-after-all kind of way, you know?'

'Would it need to have a retractable roof for space-rockets and nuclear missiles to launch through?' Armand asked,

bringing a measured irritation to bear in the precision of his accented pronunciation.

'I'd settle for a submarine dock,' Som responded, with an equally measured, deliberate guilelessness.

'So,' the Frenchman said, 'the thought of an actual, existent, staffed and fully functioning underground base doesn't, how would you say, blow your hair back? It must be inside a hollowed-out volcano and run by a cackling megalomaniac or it's merely part of the crushing ordinariness of life's relentlessly drab ennui?'

'Not at all,' Som protested. 'I didn't say that. Did I say that?'

'No, but you could be more "up" about it,' Armand complained. 'I've been looking forward to this, you know. Really looking forward to it.'

Lex smiled to herself at the sight of Armand – mercenary, soldier, explosives adept and trained killer – putting on a petted lip and acting like a disappointed child for the express purpose of winding up a scrawny adolescent techno-geek half his age.

'I'm "up",' Som insisted. 'I'm extremely up. I'm looking forward to it as much as you. I'm just, you know, insulating myself against disappointment.'

'A pitifully negative approach to life,' Armand condemned.

'Easy for you to say. When I was a kid, my parents took me to Tunisia, and we went to visit the place they filmed *Star Wars*. I was eight years old, and—'

'Pitifully negative,' Armand repeated. 'And cowardly to boot.'

'I'm just saying, I'd love to believe it'll be all chrome and glass and LED read-outs everywhere, but I'm preparing myself in case it's just a quarry with a roof.'

'Silence, coward. Be gone. Alexis, *ma chère*, when Rebekah gets here with our transport, I'm going to sit up front with our designated driver. Sorry to land you with Som, but I plan on enjoying myself this evening and I don't want him "bumming me out".'

'Yeah, sure,' Lex said, rolling her eyes. 'That's why you want to sit beside Rebekah. Forget it. It'll be girls in the front, boys in the back. I've been waiting years for some female solidarity around here.'

Armand waved dismissively at her, but knew she wouldn't

be giving ground, just as she knew he had no intention of sitting anywhere but next to his playmate. There had to be twenty years between them, but as Som and Armand's relationship seemed to be based upon bringing out each other's inner thirteen-year-old, the age gap was irrelevant to their inseparable (and often insufferable) camaraderie. It was the female solidarity she was less sure about. Rebekah had been with the outfit a month now and, despite being the only other female, they'd barely engaged in anything other than the most perfunctory of exchanges.

This was pretty familiar, however. Lex had seen it before, in herself and, more recently, in Somboon. The blasé and cocky figure who was so nonchalantly leaning on easily fifty thousand dollars' worth of electronics, as he bantered about the interior fittings of the underground weapons facility they were about to assault, might fail to recognise the hunched and introverted serial nail-biter who'd barely managed anything more articulate than gaze-averted mumbles for the first month in their company. Rebekah had been less physically withdrawn than Som was during those earliest days, and she looked unused to shrinking from anyone's gaze, not least because she was five-nine and a looker. She was always straight-backed and forthright in her posture, but this struck Lex as a conditioned reflex, a body-language statement of 'no comment'. When she did speak, her accent was American, the delivery a little clipped and forced, like discipline was overruling shyness and more than a little fear. Som had once referred to her as 'the she-bot', a throwaway remark that nonetheless accurately identified something automated about her behaviour.

Rebekah had been unquestionably scared, nervous of her new environment and untrusting of its apparent security; noticeably starting at telephones and doorbells and, rather curiously, at overhead aircraft. Post-traumatic stress disorder, or what used to be known as plain old shell-shock, any observer might reasonably have diagnosed, but Lex could identify the symptoms of a more specific anxiety: that of the fugitive. The girl was still waiting for a trapdoor to open beneath her.

'Lex, you're welcome to sit with Rebekah, far as I'm concerned,' Som said. 'I figure "the Transport Manager" has gotta

have some serious driving skillz. She's gonna be throwing that bus around, man. I don't want a front-row seat.'

'I could hear that z, Som,' Lex warned him. 'You've got to drop the leet speak. Seriously. I'm the hacker here.'

'I'm so grateful to the American cultural imperialists that they have made English the international language of code-crunchers and keypad monkeys,' Armand said with a sigh, the steam of his breath billowing affectedly in the moonlight. 'It would pain me too much to hear French so vandalised.'

'Ah, bullshit,' Som replied. 'French is just too effete-sounding to be of any use with technology. I mean, listen: *ordinateur*. That sounds like something that runs on steam, with, like, brass fittings and a big wooden plinth.'

'Exactly. You describe elegance and grace, agelessness and finery. That is French. Plastic, fibreglass, coils of tangled cable, porno download, shoot-em-up – English, English, English.'

'Fuck you.'

'*Encore, Anglais, Anglais, Anglais.*'

'Our new Transport Manager.' That was how Rebekah had been introduced by Bett, with their leader's typically cryptic brevity. Each one of them came here with two things: a talent and a past. Everybody would find out the former soon enough, but only Bett would be privy to the latter.

Bett knew everyone's past, but nobody knew his. There were fragments one could piece together, clues in remarks and logical assumptions, but they didn't render a whole that was either coherent or remotely vivid. Some military involvement, obviously. Police work, here in France and possibly further afield. No wife, no children, no siblings or parents ever referred to. Multilingual. First language: pick one from three. Accent unplaceable. Provenance unknowable. A cipher, and yet known in certain influential circles. Private, and yet highly connected. Cold, and yet conscientiously loyal. Solitary, and yet surrounding himself with cohorts, generally much younger, who were energetic and often immature.

Bett collected them, brought to his attention by shadowy contacts and murkily submerged channels of information. Rescued them, no question, from each of their secret pasts, but he kept hold of those secrets too, an unspoken but ever-looming means

of leverage. His employees were thus a remarkable raggle-taggle of waifs and strays, who found themselves grateful but beholden, and not a little scared. Lex didn't know anyone else's story for certain, but guessed they would share a number of elements, prominent among them a precipitous epiphany regarding the price a single rash act could exact from what one only now realised had been a bright future.

In her case, she put it down to adolescent impetuosity and misdirected anger. Mistakes we all made on the road to adulthood, lessons we could only learn first hand. Nineteen was a difficult age. Anything beyond twelve, in fact, was a difficult age, but turning nineteen stuck in the mind as being especially tough – something to do with her parents' marriage breaking up around that particular birthday, which happened to be September 12th 2001. Adolescent impetuosity. Alienation. Despair. Misdirected anger. A common enough story. You let your feelings get the better of you and you do something that makes sense at the time, but which will have far more damaging consequences than you have the vision or clarity to foresee from your emotional and immature perspective. Such as getting shit-faced and totalling your dad's car, deliberately screwing up your exams, selling off your mom's heirloom jewellery, or causing an overseas emergency and mid-level international diplomatic crisis from inside your Toronto bedroom.

Yeah. Oops, huh?

Seemed like a compelling idea at the time. Her own private act of post 9-11 anger, prompted largely by the war in Afghanistan and not at all by her parents' marriage disintegrating. Afghanistan. That's where they were bombing. What the hell was there to bomb in Afghanistan? Wouldn't they have to send some army engineers over there to build some shit first, kinda to make the bombing runs worthwhile? Nineteen of the hijackers were Saudis. Bin Laden was a Saudi. The money was Saudi, the ideological pressure was Saudi. So let's bomb Afghanistan. Fuck that.

She shut down a power station near Jeddah and halted production in two major oilfields for close to eight hours. It was embarrassingly easy. In fact, if it had been even slightly harder, maybe she'd have stopped to think a little more about just what

the hell she was doing. It didn't even take very long, nor was it a particularly cute or elegant hack. She just enslaved a couple of home PCs somewhere in Kuwait and used them as bots to orchestrate a crude, worm-led, denial-of-service email attack. This predictably led the on-site techs to shut down and reboot all but the core operating systems required to keep the station online, conveniently isolating and identifying the masked ports she needed access to in order to *really* screw things up.

There was predictable panic at the business end over motive, perpetrators and what the attack might be a precursor to. Al Qaeda? Iraq? Israel? The US? Calls were made, denials issued, intelligence sources tapped. Fighter jets, she later learned, were put on standby in at least two countries. But while all this was happening, some über-geek in Finland, hastily retained by an oil company, was following a clumsily discarded trail of evidence all the way back to that notorious global aggressor, Canada.

What do you mean you never heard about it on the news?

Embarrassment stings far less if there are fewer observers, and international embarrassment is no different. Neither Canada nor Saudi were ever going to look good over this one, and they knew it would be mutually convenient to write off their losses and cover it up. Countries did it all the time, though it was easier when it was unilateral. A couple of months back, for instance, the US had misplaced a Harrier jump jet, and decided that avoiding scrutiny of the circumstances was worth more than however many million the hardware would cost to replace. Lessons were no doubt learned, private apologies and assurances granted, but, officially, nothing happened, a position that ironically might have been harder to maintain had they actually apprehended the perpetrator.

Nobody heard about it on the news, though that didn't mean nobody knew. Bett sure knew, like he knew oh so many things, and he knew early enough to tip her off that she was hours away from being arrested.

Ah, yes, *there* was a memorable little interlude. Was she ever done wishing she could experience those fun few moments again, as she contemplated what some petulant keystrokes had wrought for herself in the big, wide world. He informed her by



email, attaching copies of confidential correspondence, transcripts of briefings, damage reports, estimates of financial implications, projected costs of security upgrading and increased insurance premiums. A lot of very powerful, very important and very serious people would be looking for retribution over this, and that was just at the Canadian end. It looked like the last screaming tantrum of her teen years was going to hamstring her adulthood. She could see college disappearing from the horizon and prison looming up in its place. She could see a weary and crushed version of herself released in five to seven, subject to restraining orders forbidding her access to computers, the one thing in her life that she knew how to make sense of. She could see a long career in waitressing, serving coffee to the people who actually mattered, before slouching home to a shitty apartment filled with laundry and regrets.

Bett had offered a way out. Taking it was only marginally less scary than what she was already staring down the barrel of, involving, as it did, disappearing from her old life with just the clothes on her back (and doing so within an hour of receiving the email), but as far as decisions went, it was a no-brainer. Not quite the career trajectory she'd once envisaged, but things had worked out a lot more colourfully than the future had looked from her old bedroom. She had a great apartment in a beautiful village in the south of France. She had a good job with an excellent salary, plus health and dental. The only niggling flaw was there was no fixed term of contract and nothing in the small print regarding how you went about leaving. Oh, and it occasionally involved killing people.

To Lex's relief, Som at last stood up straight, the flight case gently righting itself as he relieved it of his weight. He jumped up and down on the spot a couple of times and wrapped his arms around himself.

'I hope this place we're hitting has central heating,' he said. 'Wouldn't have to worry if it was a hollowed-out volcano. The top-of-the-range ones have a pool of boiling lava for the evil genius to dispose of dissenters and broil burgers at masterplan-launching parties.'

'This isn't cold,' Lex told him. 'Try winter in Ontario some time. You should have more layers on too.'

'I didn't expect to be standing out here more than a couple of minutes. Plus, we'll have to change when we get there. Bett would have mentioned clothing at the briefing if it was an issue, wouldn't he?'

'I don't know,' Lex replied. 'Maybe he did. I wasn't listening. I thought it was your turn to pay attention.'

'No, I traded with Armand. I have to pay attention next time. Armand?'

'I'm sorry, I fell asleep,' Armand said with a shrug. 'I'm sure he didn't say anything important.'

'Where is Bett anyway?' Lex asked.

'Probably taking a bath,' Armand told her. 'You leave that man unoccupied for any length of time and pssh! He's in the tub.'

'Hey, he's the boss,' she reasoned. 'Guy owns a mansion with half-a-dozen bathrooms. Maybe he figures he's gotta get his use out of all of them or he's wasted his money.'

'Whatever makes him happy,' Som said, stamping his feet on the flagstones.

'He's Bett,' Lex reminded him. 'Nothing makes him happy.'

'Okay, whatever makes him marginally less belligerent.'

'He's got this forecourt bugged, you both know that?' Armand warned, casting his eyes melodramatically towards a nearby fir.

'Seriously, is he around?' Lex asked again. 'Because it doesn't look like anybody's home. Or are we meeting him there?'

'That's a negative,' Som said. 'Nuno's meeting us there. I'm pretty sure I heard Rebekah say we were gonna pick up Bett in Aix.'

'In Aix?' Lex asked, a little dismayed. 'This place is in the Alps. If we're picking up Bett en route, we'll be lucky to get there by lunchtime tomorrow. Are we planning to hit it in daylight, is that the deal? What would be the point of that? Who the hell hits a place like Marledoq in the middle of the afternoon?'

'Maybe that *is* the point,' Armand suggested, smiling. 'Why pay anyone to guard it during office hours if the thieves and marauders only work the late shift?'

'You've been around Bett too long. You're starting to sound like him with that disingenuous bullshit.'

Som rasped his lips and shuddered.

'Day or night, we're not going to get there at all if the wheels don't show up. Where is she?'

'Why don't you wait inside if you're cold?' Lex suggested, prompting him to glance back bitterly at the mansion's sturdily locked storm doors.

'Yeah, very funny. But I'm gonna go sit in my car if she doesn't show soon. What's the time?'

'Seven minutes past five,' Lex told him.

'She's cutting it fine,' Som said. 'You know what Bett's like about punctuality. "Late is what we call the dead",' he quoted.

'She's not late yet,' Lex observed. 'She was only going to Nice, to pick up our ride, she said.'

'She said that much?' muttered Som. 'Favouritism.'

'Our ride?' asked Armand. 'What's wrong with the old charabanc?'

'Maybe it wouldn't stand up to her hot driving skillz,' Som suggested, emphasising the z for Lex's benefit.

'I'm not so convinced about that,' Armand said. 'Have you seen her in that new Beetle?'

'Yeah,' Lex agreed. 'I saw her driving out of here yesterday and it was rocking like it was being boffed by an invisible Herbie.'

'A bit rusty with the manual transmission,' Armand mused. 'Not unusual for a visitor recently arrived from the United States,' he added archly, alluding to the typically shady provenance of Bett's latest appointment.

'Yeah, well, whatever her story, Bett wouldn't be calling her "Transport Manager" for nothing,' Som insisted. 'Hey, what time's it now?' he then asked.

'It's . . .' Lex started, but stopped herself as it occurred to her that Som could not possibly have come out on an op minus a timepiece. 'Why don't you look at your own watch?'

'I don't want to roll up my sleeve. Too cold.'

'You're a pussy, Som,' she told him. 'A shivering, pitiful Thai pussy.'

'Thai pussy *beaucoup* good,' he responded in a hammy accent. 'Love you long time.'

'It's nine minutes past,' she told him, mainly to stop the routine going any further.

'Shit. Doesn't augur well for Rebekah's first op,' he stated.  
'She's not late yet,' Lex reiterated. 'Not for fifty seconds, least-ways.'

'Well, I don't see any headlights.'

'Maybe her killer skillz let her drive in the dark,' Lex told him, emphasising the z herself this time.

'Shhh,' said Armand. 'Listen. Do you hear that?'

'What?' asked Som.

Nobody said anything for a few moments, allowing them to hear a low bassy sound, distant but getting incrementally louder by the second.

'You gotta be kidding me,' Lex declared. She stepped further out into the forecourt and looked around, but saw only black night beyond the avenue of trees. Still the noise grew nearer.

'No way,' said Som.

'Thirty seconds,' Armand remarked, standing away from the flight cases and looking towards the house, from which direction the sound was approaching.

Less than ten seconds later, the black shape of a helicopter swooped upwards into sight above the building and circled the property once by way of signalling intention to land on the gravel. The three of them stepped back towards the house, Lex taking a moment to rest Som's flight case down flat before making her retreat.

She looked at her watch again. The chopper touched down at nine minutes and fifty-four seconds past five.

'She's six seconds early,' Lex reported to Som above the storm of the rotorblades. 'Oh ye of little faith.'

'Transport Manager,' Som called back. 'Very funny. I guess she meant Nice as in Nice Côte d'Azure airport, for a charter. Wonder who she hired to fly the thing. Somebody who can keep his mouth shut, I hope.'

The front cabin door opened and out stepped Rebekah in a black one-piece jumpsuit, her blonde hair fluttering untidily in the wind where it spilled from beneath her helmet. She slid open the door to the passenger cabin and strode towards the flight cases. Given their cue, Lex, Som and Armand came forward again and joined her in loading their equipment. Directly underneath the blades, the noise was too intense to allow any

verbal communication, so an exchange of gestures conveyed that everything was in place and they were ready to board. Som eagerly climbed in first, followed by Lex, deferred to by the bowing Armand. Rebekah then slammed the cabin door closed and returned to her seat at the controls. It was far quieter inside, but the noise level increased again as the blades accelerated in preparation for take-off. A voice cut across the growing whine, carried clearly over embedded speakers along both sides of the cabin.

‘Good evening everybody and welcome aboard this Eurocopter Dauphin AS365N2 travelling to Marledoq via Aix en Provence. We will be leaving very shortly, so please fasten your seat belts and place all personal items, including hand-guns, tasers and plastic explosives, securely in the hatches provided. We ask also at this time that you stow all mobile phones and personal tracking devices, and that passengers with laptops refrain from hacking any mainframe computer systems as this can interfere with our navigational instruments. We would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for flying Air Bett, and that we appreciate you have no choice.’

The stop in Aix was brief, little more than a touchdown. The chopper landed in a car park on the perimeter of a light industrial estate outside the city. A solitary figure stood motionless on the black-top beneath the yellow sodium of street lights, flanked either side by aluminium cases. Frost had enveloped all but one of the four cars lined up closest to the abutting low-rise building, windscreens and bodywork glinting as the chopper’s lights passed over them.

Bett began walking forward as soon as the wheels met the earth, leaving the cases where they stood. Without prompt, Armand opened the door and climbed out, moving with brisk but unhurried steps to retrieve Bett’s luggage. Bett climbed aboard, ignoring Som’s proffered hand-up, and took a rear-facing seat directly behind the slim partition separating the passenger cabin from the cockpit. He glanced emotionlessly at his watch: they were dead on time. As ever, this didn’t appear to be any source of particular satisfaction, though Lex had nothing to compare it to. Thus far in her experience, Bett’s vaunted

displeasure at ever being behind schedule remained at quantum level.

Armand handed up Bett's cases to the waiting Som, who stowed them, as Armand climbed back aboard and closed the cabin door. Then Bett gave the most cursory hand signal through the perspex window panel to the attentively waiting Rebekah, and they were off again.

They were on the ground less than ninety seconds.

Nobody spoke, in conspicuous contrast to the relentless back-and-forth bullshit between Som and Armand on the flight to Aix. It was an observed silence, and slightly tense for it. It was always like this when Bett took his place, like a schoolroom hushed by the intimidating presence of a strict and respected teacher. Nobody would speak until he did first. Once Bett set the tone, other conversation could and would resume, if appropriate. Until he did speak, however, it was impossible to know what that tone would be. He sat silently as they ascended, impenetrable seriousness in his eyes as he stared out into the night.

There had been no greetings, nor would there be any checks or queries as to their preparations. Bett had no need to ask, for instance, whether you had remembered to bring a particular item, or to reiterate any information. Armand couldn't have been less serious when he said he'd fallen asleep during the briefing.

Bett stirred from his inscrutable absorption once they had reattained cruising altitude. He glanced around the cabin at their faces, all three meeting his eye expectantly.

'Alexis, boot up, please,' he ordered, unsnapping his seat belt. He projected his delivery just enough to carry over the ambient noise, which was louder than on a passenger aircraft. Bett didn't like to raise his voice; didn't like ever to consider it necessary. It was said that if you wanted people to listen, you should speak softly. Bett simply assumed people were listening, and didn't expect to have to shout to get their attention.

Lex recalled Rebekah's words over the intercom, echoing the standard in-flight passenger protocols about laptops. On commercial airline flights, that only applied during take-off and landing. She didn't know about helicopters, or therefore whether Rebekah's warning was serious despite its humour, but she sure as hell wasn't going to refer it to Bett. Any sentence that began

'But sir,' was a bad start with the boss. He hated 'whining' as he called it, presumably because it infringed upon his exclusive rights to all grumpiness and complaining within the company.

She unbuckled her restraint and reached beneath the seat for her kit. Meantime, Bett knelt down and slid out one of his cases from the cargo rack, flipping it slightly ajar. She didn't see precisely what he had removed – a flat plastic sleeve, possibly a CD – but did catch a glimpse of a row of identical gun butts nestling cosily in protective plastic foam. A glance at her co-passengers confirmed they were also sneaking a peak. Bett's mission briefings were detailed, but seldom comprehensive. There were almost always surprises.

The first one, this trip, was for her.

'Get into the network at Marledoq,' he said.

'Sure thing.'

Mid-air hacks were not part of the plan; in fact, she hadn't been instructed to do anything more than a covert recce of the Marledoq system prior to the mission, so there was definitely no need to be doing this at fifteen thousand feet. She guessed it must have been a CD-ROM he'd taken from the case, and the contents of it were possibly something that had only latterly come into his possession. Far more likely, however, was that he simply wanted to see her dance. He liked to keep everybody on the edge of their game, always ready to improvise and adapt at zero notice. There was no record in the company of anyone ever complaining about being bored.

'Rough skies ahead,' Lex announced to no one in particular as she tapped slowly at the keyboard and patiently scanned the screen.

'What makes you say that?' Bett asked. 'You scanning Met office websites or are you just . . . channelling?' He paused before the last word to give it emphasis, then pronounced it with a clipped crispness. Bett's scorn was seldom far from breaking the surface, but nor was it ever less than elegant.

'Latency,' she explained. 'Connection's a bit sluggish. Electrical storms tend to do that to these satellite modems.'

'Oh, neat,' ventured Som, gloomily. 'I always wanted to be in a helicopter during a lightning storm.'

'Are you in yet?' Bett enquired.

'General network access,' she replied, 'but if you want me to start tampering with surveillance and security systems, it's gonna take—'

'No, no,' he interrupted. 'I just want you to shut down one of the PCs in the Security HQ. Can you do that?'

'Shutting down a PC isn't going to . . . ' Lex stopped herself. 'Yes, sir,' she corrected.

'Good. I want you to script something that monitors when it gets rebooted. Run a clock on it from the moment you close it down. I want a response time.'

'You got it.'

Lex did as instructed, leaving the response-time clock running in a minimised panel towards the left edge of her screen. It would open fully and play an alarm chime when someone at the Marledoq end turned the machine back on. She looked up expectantly for Bett's next instruction, but that appeared to be all for now. He was staring out of the window again, though there was nothing to look at but a few wispy snowflakes dancing across the beams of the helicopter's lights.

The chime sounded and the clock stopped after four minutes and eighteen seconds.

'Log that,' Bett said. 'And shut the same PC down again at exactly twenty hundred hours.'

'Yes, sir.'

The snow grew gradually heavier as the flight continued. There was no lightning, but the wind was picking up and the chopper lurched and dipped with increasing frequency. Lex felt a little nauseous, but wasn't sure whether it was as much to do with the motion as worry. This was only her second time in a helicopter. The first had been eight years ago, a tourist jaunt over Niagara Falls on a sunny July morning, in maximum visibility and nary a breath of wind. Right now it was December, pitch black, there was a snowstorm brewing and they were flying towards the Alps.

'Looks like Lex was right about the weather,' Armand said, looking a little concerned.

'If we don't do this tonight, it'll be at least two weeks before we can reschedule,' Bett stated.

'Only if you're stuck on exposing—'



‘I’m stuck on all aspects of my plan, yes,’ Bett assured him, with the calm of a man who seldom had to stress his point. ‘But if the weather continues to deteriorate, it won’t be my intentions that prevail. That will be Rebekah’s prerogative. In fact, I’ll just have a word.’

Bett got up and opened the door to the cockpit, reaching with his other hand into the pocket where he’d secreted whatever he removed from his case. Through the window panel, Lex saw him talk to Rebekah, then hand her what indeed turned out to be a silver disc. He returned to the passenger cabin and took his seat once again, his visage familiarly betraying nothing.

He waited for the next sudden, stomach-knotting surge before responding to Lex’s eager gaze.

‘Rebekah seems unconcerned,’ he said flatly. ‘The snow is getting pretty heavy, but she’s not navigating by sight anyway.’

‘What about the turbulence?’ Lex asked.

‘Unconcerned,’ he repeated. ‘I believe her exact words were: “This isn’t turbulence.” She then added something I didn’t precisely catch, but the gist of it was that you’d know what turbulence was once we’re above the mountains. Which should be any time now, I estimate,’ he concluded, fastening his seat belt with precise delicacy.

Everyone else followed suit, knowing a cue from this bastard when they saw one.

Mere moments passed before the chopper plummeted like a broken elevator, Lex feeling as though her guts had remained at the previous altitude. The descent stopped just as suddenly, the plunge bottoming out, rising and banking into a swoop that seemed to increase their velocity by about fifty per cent.

Those in the passenger cabin weren’t the only ones to get a cue. Bett reached his hand behind his head and rapped on the window before gracefully flicking his wrist in a gesture that looked like the proverbial royal wave until Lex realised his fingers were gripping an imaginary baton.

Music. Motherfucker. And a thousand bucks said *Ride of the Valkyries*.

The music began playing over the cabin speakers a few seconds later. It was *Song 2* by Blur. Lex was set to (privately)

deride it as old man Bett's idea of cool, but quickly recognised his cold humour at work instead. It was probably a mistake to think he *didn't* know how overused it had been as a soundtrack to such high-adrenaline moments. The man resonated disdain like other people gave off body heat.

Som, being less sensitive to such subtleties, simply went for it, and joined in the 'woohoo's as the chopper dipped and soared through the snow-flecked blackness.

Bett sat expressionless throughout. Lex looked for a hint of a smile or twinkle in his eye to betray just how much the bastard must be enjoying this, but there was nothing. The song played out without him even tapping his feet to the rhythm.

*Then came Ride of the Valkyries.*

The snow lightened off over the final twenty minutes of the flight, down to mere wisps by the time they landed, though it was close to a foot deep on the ground. This proved of no concern to Rebekah, who expertly set down the helicopter on a valley floor, some woodland to the north the only feature of landscape close enough to be visible by what little moonlight broke between the clouds. Lex saw no lights to indicate settlement, though as Nuno was waiting for them behind the wheel of a high-sided container truck, there at least had to be a road in the vicinity. At least, though quite possibly at most.

'Thank you, Rebekah,' Bett said, as the rotors slowed and their pilot joined them on the white surface which was so permafrozen as to compact only a couple of inches under the weight of their feet. Lex had estimated the depth at about a foot, and the chopper's wheels had sunk close to that much, but it could easily be more. Bett sounded, as ever, like his gratitude, while not begrudged, was measured out with microscopic precision to be exactly what was due and appropriate, no less and no more. The sentiment gave off as much warmth as a dying penguin's last breath, but somehow inexplicably avoided sounding insincere or even entirely graceless.

*'De nada, sir,'* she replied.

'Oh, shit, man, it's freezing,' Som complained, while they got busy unloading their flight cases.

'Appropriate clothing will be supplied,' Bett said, signalling

to Nuno to bring the truck closer now that the chopper's engines had powered down.

'You are a god,' Som told him, shivering. 'People don't say that enough.'

'No,' Bett reflected, 'they don't.'

Rebekah pulled off her helmet and placed it on her seat inside the cockpit, replacing it with an elasticated fleece cap. Lex approached, flight case in hand as she shut the door.

'Thanks for the ride,' Lex offered with a smile.

'Hope it wasn't too rough. Helicopters aren't really my forte.'

'You gotta be kidding. Not your forte? That was some serious flying.'

'It's all in the technology these days. There's a joke among the civil flyers that future crews will comprise a single pilot and a dog. The pilot's job will be to watch all the computers, and the dog's will be to bite the pilot if he attempts to touch anything.'

*Civil* flyers, Lex thought. As in what Rebekah was not.

'That's cute,' she said. 'But way too modest. You were hot-dogging up there, and on Bett's orders too, I'm guessing.'

'No comment,' she replied, failing to conceal a smile.

'That's a ten-four if ever I heard one. Where'd you learn to fly like that?'

'Definitely no comment.'

Nuno cautiously brought the truck towards the chopper, the vehicle bobbing and swaying as its tyres traversed uneven terrain beneath the snow. Lex suppressed a smile at the sight of the tall Catalan in this unfamiliar environment, his beloved dark locks all tucked out of sight beneath a tight black ski-hat. She couldn't wait to see how that striding gait of his coped with the underfoot conditions either.

He veered the truck right as he drew close, allowing him to turn in a wide, careful arc, presenting the rear of the container towards the new arrivals. Bett hopped on to the tail-gate and flipped a lever, causing the double doors to open and releasing a heavy steel ramp that slid down to meet the snow. Lex felt it bite into the ground with a shudder a split-second after the overeager (and possibly borderline hypothermic) Som skipped backwards out of its way. Nuno

trudged cautiously and awkwardly around to the rear and climbed inside behind the boss.

Bett emerged shortly with an armful of clothing, which he tossed to Som. From the flail of sleeves and legs, Lex guessed two fine fleece tops and two pairs of trousers.

‘Get these on. That goes for everybody: two layers each. There’s a box inside with various sizes. And if you’re wearing anything made of cotton, lose it before you put these on.’

Som wasn’t about to ask Bett why – you just didn’t do that – but his face betrayed a reluctance to shed any of the clothes he already had without a damn good reason.

‘Cotton equals death,’ Lex told him. ‘Cotton holds moisture against the skin and prevents you warming yourself. Trust me, I’m Canadian.’

‘Are we talking, like, even my Y-fronts here?’

Lex herself had opted for all-synthetic undergarments, but wasn’t sure just how much outdoor work was going to figure on the agenda. She guessed not enough for it to matter if Som’s nads got a little chilly. The temptation to lay it on thick was enormous, leavened slightly by the prospect of seeing his scrawny little goose-pimpled butt in the flesh. She settled for: ‘That’s entirely up to you.’

‘Jeez. Just how long are we going to be out in the snow? How far is this place?’

‘It’s about five miles,’ Nuno told him.

‘Just get the fleeces on, Somboon,’ Bett instructed. ‘And if you’re still cold, I’ve got another layer for you here.’

Bett kicked a fibreglass trunk forward across the floor of the truck and flipped open its lid. Kevlar vests. For all the protection they offered, they were nonetheless seldom a reassuring sight.

‘Body armour?’ Som asked. ‘I thought this place was all about non-lethal enforcement technology.’

‘If it was a bakery, would you expect the guards to be armed only with custard pies?’ Bett asked, with what passed in his case for good humour. ‘The parent company also develops laser-guided missiles, so you’ll be pleased to know the security personnel are issued with standard Beretta nine-millimetre handguns and none of Industries Phobos’ hallmarked product.’