

Billy and Howard is copyright © Slicer 2004.

Chapter 1

"I'm your dream, make you real! I'm your eyes when you must steal!
I'm your pain when you can't feel... sad but true!
I'm your truth, telling lies! I'm your reasoned alibis!
I'm inside, open your eyes.. I'm **YOU**!! Sad but true!"
- Metallica, *Sad but True*

It was my third day out on the streets of suburban Chicago, and I was tired and hungry. It's glamorized in movies and television, but in reality, it's crap. No one will help you if you're ten years old and running away (despite **what** anything or anyone tells you, Christianity is as dead as its leader), except the cops who will just come and take you to an orphanage or something. That's why I didn't run away from them this time, like I did so many times before out of simple paranoia. My parents died in a car wreck and for some reason which I couldn't fathom, I felt like I had to get away from something, and I had no idea what. I just... ran. And ran. And kept running, for three days straight. Since I had no extended family, there was no one to take care of me, except a foster-home agency or an orphanage... fuck it. I can't run forever. Even if an orphanage has rules, assholes, stupid bitches, and other assorted crap, it can't be as bad as grubbing for food (I've always needed to eat a lot) and getting away from weirdoes- although I'm not sure what happened to the last guy who tried to touch me... what the hell could I have done to him? Dislocated his wrist through some kind of luck and physics.. I felt like a refugee, and I was running away with other people's food about every six hours.

This time, I just walked up to the nearest cop and looked at him. He knew who I was immediately; my easily-recognizable face has been in the mail and on posters. I'm hard to catch when I want to be- he thought I was just going to run like I did so many times before, and slip into the nearest crowd or sewer. Forget that. Even though you are an oinker, piggy boy (and I'm scared out of my shit), I'm going to get a bed and some real food tonight. "Billy Bohecker?", he asked. I nodded. He nodded and smiled, and told me some things about how I shouldn't have been running away. Yeah.. yeah.. whatever.

He just wore an Officer Friendly smile (scare me more, why don't ya.. to be blunt, I'd prefer the handcuffs), showed me the back of the car, and talked into a cell phone as he drove. I only heard one side of the conversation though.

"Hey, guess what. I found that kid, that Billy Bohecker. No.. I didn't have to catch him. He walked right up to me. Any paperwork.. done already? Heh, I'm not surprised one has a spot open for him." He then reached back where I was, messed up my hair (I really hate that, and could have darted out of the way... but that really freaks everyone out, including me) and said that if the crooks were like me, his job would be a lot harder. He drove me right over to the children's home- Happy Valley cow urine or something, saying that I wouldn't be there long. I knew that, of course. For a lot of kids my age, it's a permanent residence for the retards and everyone who always keeps running away from their parents- at school, it's talked of in deathly tones. You don't want to end up in the **home**, do you? I don't think I'd have any problems getting foster parents though; everyone knows who I am. Being an albino mutant makes one noticeable, if nothing else.

The cop walked me right in, told them who I was, and I had a room and clothes in less than an hour after some bureaucracy. A whole lot of kids seemed to be waiting for me in the bunks, surprised at my looks. A couple of young ones asked me why I didn't keep running away after I ended up telling them what happened. A few others, older, looked at me, and knew. I wasn't really harassed at the place like I thought I would be. I was just another easy-come, easy-go, regardless of my physical features. I don't have the problems other kids in there do with their minds and bodies either- of course the majority of them are pretty fucked up in some way or another. Not that I'm an exception to that. The day just went by in some forced orderly fashion.

That night, I was exhausted. I wonder why they gave me a private room- doesn't make sense, this place is crowded, they need the beds, everyone else is sleeping in a bunk room. I was awake all night.. couldn't sleep. There was a hissing coming from a wall, and I listened to it half-heartedly until I just passed out. I should have checked to see what the hissing was, I should have figured it out, I should have ran out of the unlocked room (but was it?), I should have stayed paranoid, and I should have never, ever allowed myself to pass out.

When I woke up, it was still dark out, and four guys were holding on to each of my limbs. The fifth guy put something really weird over my mouth. I screamed and screamed and nothing happened. Soundproof, I thought, as they brought me out to their van- and if Murphy's Law holds up, there's not going to be any witnesses. Four of them were still holding on to me painfully (they were strong as hell) when the fifth guy put something over my head, and I heard another hissing from it, and went straight into blackness. I fell, screaming into nothingness, for what seemed to be a couple of seconds- then I finally landed...

Onto a nice, cool, clean, soft bed with unwrinkled white sheets. There was some sunlight and cool, rain-tasting air that was devoid of normal Chicago pollution. I relaxed in the comfort of... **hold the fuck up..** what the hell happened?

How did I get **here**?! I don't even have my own bed anymore- this isn't my room! Where am I? I stopped a moment to check the place out. There was a closet full of various clothes, all looked to be about my size. The walls were made of a nonreflective metal. A large, circular window was open near the top of the room, and it didn't seem to have anywhere to close it from. Some large computer system filled the far wall, and what looked to be drawers of some sort were etched into the other walls as if someone had taken a blowtorch and simply carved lines into the wall. The bed was bigger than the ones in the orphanage, and the room was about twice the size of even the big bunk rooms. I was wearing some loose-fitting grey pajamas I didn't even realize I put on (probably because you didn't, I told myself). The door was closed- I figured locked- until I opened it and could barely catch my breath.

The place is huge. This.. mansion (what else could it be?) is the biggest house I've ever been in. Big enough for everything you'd want to fit in it but probably not quite so big as to stop you from getting to the bathroom quickly. Not many rooms, but large rooms, with the same metal-walls motif everywhere. I looked over the railing and saw myself opening presents for my tenth birthday- that's right, if it's Monday, it's my tenth birthday, I reminded myself- not just imagining it but actually **seeing** it, with my doppelganger stripping the wrapping off of more gifts than I've seen given to anyone in my whole life. I never imagined myself being frustrated not being able to find something in the presents though- if this is a dream, it's a fucking good one. I started breathing harder than normal watching myself open presents- things that looked excessively expensive and some super high-tech shit I didn't recognize. And then he looked up and heard me and part of me stepped from the land of real things into the land of nightmares.

"Billy?", he asked in the middle of his torn wrapping papers, with a big smile on his face. I was scared to paralysis, and I started stuttering and maybe even crying. How the hell does he know my name and look just like me? Is he my twin? Is he my.. replacement?! The events of the past few seconds (hours? days? How long was I out?) caught up to me. I was finally able to fit my tongue back into my mouth again and tell him the obvious.

"You- you're me!!", I exclaimed with an ability I've only used a couple of times before. No shit, he's me. But at least I'd maybe get a reply.

My other self laughed. "No," he said with some bemusement, "I'm not you. I'm the Grand Inheritor, but you can call me Howard. Down there's Sarah." A thirteen year old girl wearing some black tights and an expression I didn't understand waved at me. I was still freaking out. "Come on, Billy, sit down. I've got a lot to tell you." I went down and sat down on his big couch, my ass sinking into the

unfamiliar material- and why the hell did I do that? Okay, now this is getting just plain **weird**. Five mobsters brought me here to talk to my clone, and I don't even know why I'm doing things.

Sarah sat down right next to me and said in a pretty, high voice, "Don't worry. You'll eventually get used to it." What the heck isn't that bad?! Oh man. I really think I'm in for a deep load of shit. That's the **last** time I ever lose my paranoia again, if I ever get out of here.

"Used to WHAT?!", I screamed. I was really freaking out. It's not every day you get captured and then brought to a big mansion with a nice girl and someone who looks like yourself. I felt like I was on that old show "Nowhere Man". Shit. I must have been dreaming, obviously. I jumped up, pinched myself and ran around the really big room dazedly, trying to get myself to wake up. I couldn't.

Howard said, in my voice again, "Billy, you're not dreaming." It's possible to have nightmares when you're awake? "Sit down and calm down and stay seated down and calmed down until I tell you you can get up." He isn't seriously expecting me to.. and I sat down on the couch again and kinda slowed myself down. I tried- but didn't try- to stand up. I tried again. And again. My ass wasn't glued to the couch, so I tried again. My legs and my body stayed right where they were. The muscles didn't even contract. Oh shit, I'm fucked. And why the hell is he so happy- that The Conspiracy finally managed to get me and bring me to him? Yeah, that's got to be it..

I started trying to say "what the hell did you do to me?!", "why do I have to do exactly what you say?!", and "how the hell did you do that?!" all at once. Chuck Norris, Charles Bronson, and James Bond never get into situations like this unless they can get out. And I'm none of those guys (or am I? There's been a few times..). I grabbed Howard's arm, hoping for answers fast.

"You won't hurt me, nor will you do anything to my possessions or leave the island without my permission.", he said as if he were reciting it from memory. I felt my grip loosen. I really began to panic- how do the movie (that's what this has gotta be..) heroes get out if they can't even kill the bad guy or leave the place? I realized I should have deftly slammed his nose into his brain when I had the chance- could I have, if he's as fast as me? Oh shit shit shit shit... I eventually got a single sentence out of my mouth, filled with expletives as it needed to be.

"How the **fucking damn shitty hell** do you make me do things?!", I exploded. I was at the point of tears. I felt like a five year old not understanding simple magic tricks. He just touched my forehead, and then I realized what had happened. They had done something to my mind. Well, that would be fitting, considering the rampant insanity. "No.. nonono.. that's impossible.. has to be..", I said at the bottom of my voice. I was getting really shaky by now, and I couldn't even control myself.. that's because he controls me..!! **Dude I'm screwed!!** Rational thought gave way for a few instants and then rematerialized in a slightly different form.

"Forget it.", he said. "They're below the skull. Besides, I told you not to hurt my possessions; **that includes you.**" Then it's final. Free will, exit stage left. I thought mind control implants were simply outside the realm of possibility. If I can possibly get out of this, I'm never returning to anything vaguely resembling civilization... Oh man. I felt like an elephant was standing on top of me. I just froze up, like being shocked by 500 volts of DC- every muscle in your body contracts at once. I was barely able to look at Howard and I noticed something very simple. He was exactly like me, only a lot happier. Self-control will never mean the same thing to me again.

Sarah held my hand just then, looked at me, and told me the most terrifying thing I could have possibly heard. "Billy, I really don't think he's going to hurt you. He's been waiting for you for a week and a half now, and I doubt he's going to do anything to you. Calm down. You **will** get used to it." He had me here for a purpose, then. Probably something really fucking diabolical too. She then looked past me at Howard, who was right next to me too, and chilled me further. "Why didn't he tell him?! It would have at least helped." Helped in WHAT?! And who the fuck is 'he'? I started breathing better again, and I unfroze some. Insanity danced through my mind like a ballerina on crack. This is just plain old downright **NUTS**...

I didn't say anything for a few minutes. Nothing made sense. 'Shock' isn't strong enough, 'Trauma' barely scratches the surface, and 'Panic' isn't even close. Add all three of the words, then put twenty exclamation points on the end of them, and maybe you'll get the idea. I would have strangled him then right there if I could, on the general principle that one does not leave one's ultimate controller alive.

My thought process (if you can call it that) was interrupted by Howard's calm voice. "Billy, I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I'll try to answer them all." All right, doppelganger- here's the one you were expecting. An answer might have redoubled the nightmare; but I have to know this much, at least.

"Why have you brought me here?", I asked in the deepest, roughest, nastiest voice I could muster. If I'm going to be captured by the evil empire, I might as well act the part. Besides, my throat was clogging up anyway.

"Because it's my tenth birthday. No one told you anything?", he asked in my semi-euphoric voice. Consider the nightmare redoubled. I started talking to myself, something I occasionally do in my sleep. When I wake up, I'll be out of this damn mansion, and there will be only one Billy Bohecker...

He heard me. "Finish your sentence, at least.", he said, and I realized I fucked up again. I looked him square in the eye, and told him what I believed at the moment. "When I wake up, it will be my tenth birthday, I will be at the orphanage, and you won't exist."

He cackled in a way that I've only done once before- not very loudly, but sinister. "Well, if I didn't exist, Daddy'd just have somebody else doing this. Now tell me what the last thing you remember before you got here is.", he replied. Now why.. he's checking to see if the procedures were carried out properly, isn't he. God damn. Just how powerful IS this joker, anyway? And who the hell is 'Daddy'?

"I remember people in dark suits carrying me out of my bed, I remember them putting something over my face, and then I woke up here, wherever here is.", my mouth said. Again, I was forced to say something I really didn't want to- how long before he makes me sing his praises, lick his boots, suck his... I pushed that train of thought right out of my mind. I'm going crazy enough as it is.

"You're on my island, about 100 miles off the coast of Oregon." And it figures that he'd own the island too. Dr. No doesn't hold a candle to him. At least the super powerful bad guy was me. I felt a sick sense of pride. I put my hand on my head and groaned. "It's big, about a hundred acres or so." Yeesh. That's one big privately-owned island. Great place to conduct science experiments... oh shit.

Well, not everything was completely screwy. He said it was his tenth birthday; that must make me some kind of present. And what better gift to a rajah than a new servant or hundred? I was finally calming down, despite my rising internal panic and some serious nausea. "All right... Howard? Why am I here for **your** tenth birthday?", I asked, looking him in my face.

Why the fuck did I ask that? He didn't command me to, either. "You're here because Daddy wanted me to have you." Wait a second. If he owns an island.. what the hell does Daddy own, the planet? "Sooner or later, you're going to help me run things, you're going to be my new taskmaster when the workers get here, you're going to tell me all about your 'normal' view of the world, and you're going to do lots of things you've never even considered doing before." So he meant for me to whip people while he's whipping me. Sounds like some kind of sick S&M. And he sounds sheltered, he must be. No surprise there. "I'm going to play with you a lot too, it'll be fun.", he said, sounding just slightly more evil.. to rile me, on purpose (it's WORKING, okay?!), because he's enjoying this. And somehow, I don't think he meant that in the 'friend' sense of the word.. more like the 'toy' or the 'pet' sense. Fuck. I thought of another question, but decided to shut up.

"What were you going to say, Billy?", he asked. How much do I have to hide from him so he won't know what I'm thinking? The same amount of hiding I'd have to do from myself, and I'm perceptive as hell. Great. Just great.

"Why.. did you bring me here.. for **my** tenth birthday?", I asked, wondering how my alter ego could do this. It would be interesting to hear his reply, at least.

"Well, if we're clones, we do have the same birthday.", was his nonchalant, still somewhat exhilarated reply. "Besides, I didn't bring you here. Daddy did. Daddy runs the Illuminati.", he said, in a voice obviously intended to cause me to panic. Well, I'm panicking-- he runs the WHAAAAAT?! Am I in an episode of 'Nowhere Man' or 'Gargoyles' here? "He can do anything he wants, even give me friends like you." I was ready to ask his definition of the word "friend" but I decided I **really** didn't want the answer to that. It more than likely is something I **DON'T** want to hear. Just then, I smelled something really good with a lot of sugar in it. Birthday cake, must be. And for his- not my- birthday.

"Oh, that's the cake. I think it's done.", said Sarah, who got up from the couch. So did Howard. I couldn't move from my sitting position.

"Is it ready now?", I heard Howard say. What was it? What were they putting in there? For a minute I was thinking meat, but then I remembered he had other plans for this meat. Maybe he wants me to stir fresh chunks of dead baby with a seasoning of ground rat? (that's an insane thought..) No, that's American-style, freshly baked birthday cake. It smells too good to be much else.

"Yes, Howard.", Sarah said in a voice more sugared than the cake. Either he makes her always answer him like that, or she's got some serious malevolent intent. I guessed the latter.

He told her to tell him what she was thinking. So he does it to her too.

Then I heard the words that would shatter my image of Howard as a demigod forever. "It's very ready for you, all **four hundred degrees** of it, you little numb fuck! Eat and burn!", she replied. I broke into hysterics. It was so funny. He says all that shit about himself, he has so much control, he owns the island, his dad runs the biggest conspiracy in the world, and his ego is just as deflatable as anyone else's. I could almost hear the hot air rushing out. It's always nice to know that the guy you hate and fear most is still remotely considered human.

"Billy, don't laugh at me ever again.", he said with some irritation, and I couldn't anymore. Saddam Hussein doesn't stand a chance in an evil dictator contest with my duplicate- Saddam might have fanatically loyal Iraqis for his murderous schemes, but Howard just controls people absolutely. I felt sorry for myself and some of that sick pride again.

I couldn't hear them too well after that. I took a look around the room. I was sitting on a big red plush couch with a huge video screen in front of me. There was a lot of paper everywhere, and I could read the names on some of the boxes of presents. "5 billion hertz working prototype" read one. "Useful Asskicking Stuff for High Levels" read another. What the fuck? God dammit Dad (note to self: if he's my twin, who are my real parents anyway?), why the hell didn't you ever get me anything like that for MY birthday? A strange-looking white bodysuit was draped over the side of its box, partially lying on the floor. 'The Suit.', the box read, and through my naturally superior vision I could tell that there were no other, smaller words near it. Question: Who the hell sends anyone a box with just the words 'The Suit' on it?

I also saw two small books placed carefully on the table. "Comprehensive List of Exactly Phrased Useful Commands that Cannot Be Misinterpreted" and an eye-in-triangle symbol was on the cover of a small black leather-bound one; "Guide to all rooms. Happy tenth birthday, Howard." read the paper covering another.

I would have gladly read them both if not for Howard's calling me to sit down near where he was. I went through the huge kitchen with all the signs of cake-baking in it, turned through the door, and came into the big dining room where he was sitting at the head of the table. I sat down next to him and looked at the biggest cake I've ever seen in my life. Watch him eat it for himself. That's crazy. This thing's big enough to feed India for a year. Even for someone like me- and I eat way more than anyone else, and I suppose he's the same- that'll take a fucking eternity to eat... damn, it's my tenth birthday, and I'm forced to sit back and watch as all the presents and probably the majority of the cake is given to someone else. I must be dead, and this is the deepest level of Hell. What did I do so wrong? Oh well. If this is eternity, might as well sit back and pretend to enjoy it.

No. I'm not in Hell. In Hell, it's much more pleasant, and they only torture you with fire and stuff. God would never sentence anyone to this, and even Satan couldn't be this nasty. Images of things I didn't want to think about flitted through my mind. The three words 'anything he wants'- and all their connotations- danced through my head.

Sarah brought out a big knife (for me? Billy chops already? That's just an insane thought..) and cut the cake into eighths. "How much?", she asked.

The answer, like most of the stuff I'd heard in the past 10 minutes, surprised me to no end. "Two. Give Billy two, too. He looks like he's starving. And eat one for yourself.", he said, still smiling and happy. I looked down, decided it wasn't rat poison, blew on it because it was oven fresh, and took a few bites. It was delicious and really rich. Wow. Nice place, too bad it's not mine. And Billy, too bad he's not mine anymore either.. that thought just jarred my head like a blow. Then I thought of something else.

"Howard?", I asked.

"Yeah, Billy?", he said, looking at me as if I were some rare specimen or something, still smiling.

"How long am I going to be here, anyway?"

"Well, forever. Until you die.", he said before he went back to his cake. I wasn't too surprised this time. What the fuck was I thinking, would he just keep me for a while and then let me go? Of course not. And something tells me that he can't release me anyway. What if I told someone? These people obviously value their secrecy..

"Figured.", I said, as I went back to the cake. I guess this is my surprise party- 'Your life is now in the hands of your exact duplicate and you have to do whatever he says, surprise!! Welcome to HELL, Billy!!!' I started picturing scenes from Bill and Ted's Bogus Adventure. Oh well. At least it's warm in here, and the birthday cake is tasty. My thinking started to slow down and stay straightforward right about now, and I finally, rationally, seriously wondered exactly what my location was and exactly how the hell do I get this.. this effect he has off me? I can't even begin to fight it. It's like doing what you're not doing. Still, Sarah was right. He is at least pretending to be nice, at least sometimes. That made it worse. Couldn't he at least do torture like a proper evil dictator?

And why am I getting this nagging feeling that I always knew something like this would happen?

Chapter 2

After we consumed as much cake as was physically possible (God damn, I've never seen anyone else pig out like that before..) and Sarah put it back into the enormous fridge, I heard a loud BZZZZERT! come from the living room, and all three of us went to see what it was. On the screen was a gray haired man, sort of old, who made a strange sign with his fingers as soon as he appeared. Looks like Howard has a few servants old enough to be his parents- or maybe that's who he is, his (and my, if we are indeed twins) dad? Howard gestured his head in my and Sarah's direction, and pointed upstairs. "Go and close the door behind you- this is not to be heard by

servants." This must be Daddy, then. I climbed upstairs back to the room I came from. Sarah followed me in and closed the door behind her. I took my second look at the room then; screw the size, the design in here is completely futuristic. Things built into walls, sliding panels for the closet, and so forth.

"First things first.", she said, suddenly reaching towards me and kissing me deeply, passionately, and as hard as she possibly could. I kissed back reflexively. She then pulled back and gave a big sigh of relief. What was that all about? I didn't think the hero got kissed by the girl until they were **out** of the enemy camp? I still liked it, even through the pain, confusion, and panic.

"Why did you do that?", I asked. 'Why **not**?' a dark corner of my brain replied. 'If you're as screwed as you think you are, you might as well take advantage of everything while you still have it.'

"Even though you look and talk like him, I'm still glad he wasn't the first to do that. Dammit, I wish he didn't stop me from 'losing my chastity', or we could go further and I could laugh at him.", she replied in her sweet voice again. Geez, that was quick. Is she some kind of slut or does she just not want to lose her virginity to Little Rich Master Boy? I wasn't exactly in the mood for that kind of thing right then, no matter how few adults were there. "Now ask me stuff, just in case he stops me from telling you later."

"So just where is this place, anyway?", I asked.

"Would you like that in GPS?" When it was obvious to her I didn't know too much about it, she told me it's about 95 miles away from the Oregon coast, and no ship nor plane came this way at all.

"Okay- why did he bring you here?" Best to know who you're talking to before you ask people questions about your own situation.

"I'm his little servant girl. He makes me do all the chores, the cooking, the assassinations, everything." She slowly uttered the words with a lot of distaste- she didn't want to say it out loud no matter how many times she's thought of it. But what kind of assassinations.. I'll ask that later. "And when he gets older, he'll..." She did not finish. I mentally finished it, and the same sense of horror and disgust that she had flowed into me. Talk about rape.

Ugh... wait a sec. Something doesn't add up. "Then why the hell do you say he's nice?!", I exploded with some wonder and some real fucking paranoia. Getting controlled by your duplicate tends to do that to you, even more than being captured by men in black.

"Because he really cares. He could easily be much worse. He's prince of this whole fucking planet, Billy, and he's doing his best to act like it. He's a lot better than some of the previous people I've worked for.", she said to my disbelief.

"That's impossible!! That belongs in the Weekly World News. No one runs the planet. If someone did, why would there be wars?", I said using one of millions of disproofs to that. Damn.. one person who might be able to help me get out of here, and she's nuts or believes all that crap from the papers.... or everything Howard tells her. I already figured out whatever he's doing doesn't affect beliefs, but enough coercion, over a period of days, weeks, months... I shuddered. Hopefully, there's a way out of this. I was getting the feeling of "this is just a long nightmare, and I will wake up from it with a feeling of great relief."

"Billy, you never read that damn Orwell's *1984*.", she said with some cynicism. "Besides, a ten year old getting captured by men in black and controlled with mind control implants by his identical duplicate belongs in the Weekly World News too." Ugh. Reality and fantasy clash again. Something told me I better get used to this, because the culture shock of my old life versus this place is going to be happening a lot.

I sighed. She didn't sound crazy, at least not to me. Then again, this is all bananas anyway. Maybe I'm wearing a straitjacket in a padded cell somewhere talking to people who don't exist. No, it can't be. One does not feel the post-kiss saliva in one's dreams. I wiped it off. "Sarah.. what does he want from me?", I asked, not really wanting the answer from her either. I really don't feel like getting surprised later though.

"He wants **you**, obviously. I think you're going to be the taskmaster of those workers he says are going to get here soon, and I think he really does need a friend.", she said with some sympathy. (For which one of us?) I wasn't going to ask her definition of the word "friend" either. A vision of some cartoon freak came to me ('I love you so much, cute fuzzy, and I'll never let you go!!') and I was firmly slamming the mental panic button hard and repeatedly. Unfortunately, the circuit ran out of batteries from the last few minutes. All I could muster was hard breathing and shaking hands.

"Do I have to do... everything he says?", I asked, praying to a nonexistent God that there was one loophole in this. Just one, and I'll jump through it- one small nick in the enemy's defenses, and Luke Skywalker gets out of the Death Star for the ending... the hell with killing Darth.

"Everything, Billy. **Everything**. I don't know how it works- I don't think anyone does, in total- but it works well. The implants are perfect." (Lifetime warranty on all our mind control products!! Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back!! Order now for the low, low price of \$19.95 and your soul! Call 1-800-666-EVIL to order now!)

"Great.", I said. "So there's no way out of here..." I started crying. My father's voice said to me, 'Big boys don't cry.' My mental voice said to his in the morbid fashion I'm used to, 'You're dead, mother fucker, get the hell out of my head!! I have one controller to deal with-- I don't need two!!' I must have looked like an escapee from a sanitarium. Too bad I wasn't one from this hell. I think a mental institution would be the place for me after this if I told anyone where I've been. 'Yeah, I got controlled by my clone in this mansion...' would go over with the men in white coats real good. Lock him up, put him in the basement, and don't forget the Thorazine. Straitjacket included.

"Is there anyone else on this island?", I asked. Not that their existence would mean shit, just that it would be nice to know. Why am I even asking that kind of stupid question? Who cares?!

She nodded. "Yeah," she said, "there's a few Enforcers around, and a few covert operations guys are here too. You probably won't see one, but they do a lot of training here."

Of course I probably won't see them, I thought. Howard told me those guys are professionals. They have to be. Would **you** staff your world-controlling army of spies with amateurs? And when they say covert operations, they mean it- think cloak (of invisibility) and dagger. Fuck... all my paranoid fantasies about getting captured and taken in by a powerful foe were completely represented here. Only one thing was missing, the small bit at the end where I get the fuck outta here. Aww shit, is there something I'm not seeing or am I simply not looking in the right place?

Once more, I tried to pull myself together, and once more I failed miserably. I looked into Sarah's eyes, she looked into mine, and I knew right then that Luke Skywalker wasn't going to get out of this Death Star any time soon. No, I can't believe that. Just because there's almost certainly no way out of a trap doesn't mean you don't look for one. 'Denial.', that same corner of my brain told me, and I told it to shut the fuck up until I'm absolutely sure it's completely hopeless.

I took my second look around the room, more carefully this time. There was a closet full of clothes- all in my exact size- in the right corner, the bed on the right wall was large enough for three, the door behind me was about eight feet high, and the shelves to my left were part of the wall. And what the hell is that? A screen and a keyboard, both part of the wall. Judging from the rest of the futurism and general technological displays of power, I'd say that thing runs many times faster than the average computer.

Then I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and I wondered what I was in for next. The fact's been said by all the millions of assorted poor people over the various millenia of the world's history- there ain't no justice. The door creaked open and my heart became entwined with my throat.

Howard came into the room with the leather-bound book, turned to the very first page, and started reading from it. "Servant Billy, as the property of the Inheritor, you shall do my will. You are forbidden to cause the secrecy of the Illuminati to be compromised. Except in the case of defending me or my property, you may not harm Illuminati or their property." Wait, that.. no, that does include self-defense. Like he said, **I'm his property**. "You must not attempt to harm me or my property, nor may you attempt to delude me, break your word to me, or attempt to remove the implants. In the Illuminati, ordering a servant is considered the same as doing it yourself.", he monotoned, obviously just reading from the book and not thinking about what he was saying. I sure as hell was. "I am the Inheritor, and one day I shall become the Dominator, final judge of the Illuminati, and I will be the most powerful person on the globe."

Fuck. So he is the master of this planet after all, at least in training. From looking around and from what happened to me, I didn't doubt the truth of it one damn bit anymore. An image of my old classroom came to me, Mrs. Krink (constantly named Mrs. Wrinklebutt) asking everyone what he wanted to be when he grew up. Most of us said stuff like firefighters or police or doctors. Two said lawyers, I being one. But little Tommy, the kid who looked retarded but was really smart, spoke up, "When I grow up, I want to rule the world." Everyone laughed, including me and the teacher. It was funny then.

It isn't so funny now... sorry Tommy, the position's taken... my breathing slowed to an infinitesimal crawl.

He flipped a few pages, told me not to go or look inside his room without his permission, told me to always put his needs above my own, and told me never to misinform him. Good, from now on he'll get nothing but the naked truth, the goddamn pompous fatass. I always think of controllers that way for some reason- even though they may be skinny, I always refer to them as fatasses.

Howard closed the book, looked once more at my terrified expression, and smiled my smile at me. "It's okay, Billy. I'm not going to torture you or anything. You're my friend. I love you, dude. C'mon, I'll give you the grand tour." He couldn't have said anything more scary than that, but I was getting used to fear. His voice was happy, still a little exhilarated, and what scared me most of all, unequivocally friendly, with only a small hint of world controller lurking in the back. That's because he never has to get mad, the same voice in the back of my head said. He never has to get angry or threatening or violent because he has complete mind control over you and over Sarah, and if he wants anything to happen, it happens, except for violating laws of physics (at least, I don't think he can.. no, he would have demonstrated that by now.). This guy is one powerful son of a bitch, some action hero said in yet another disused corner of my hyped up brain. The words 'I'm FUCKED!!' don't even come close to the fate I figured I had waiting.

Chapter 3

He opened up a small pamphlet which looked like it contained blueprints. Glancing at them, I could find out that they were for.. his own house! I stifled a laugh and looked at him. "You need a guide to your own house?", I asked. This is getting more and more fucked up as it goes.

We followed him into an elevator, Sarah staying close to Howard- as a bodyguard would, I realized. My sixth sense... my Illuminated sense, I guess I could call it now.. told me she's much more than she appears to be- 'doing the assassinations' is probably only the tip of what she's capable of. Under normal circumstances, I would have been surprised at the existence of an elevator in a house. The way things were going, I sort of expected it. Anything could be down there, literally anything- anything from secret plans for the building of humanistic robots to antimatter weapons to teleportation devices to.... holy fucking crap... mind control implants, mass produced. The thought

did not exactly get my digestive juices flowing, and I tasted birthday cake and the telltale nauseatic taste of stomach acid. Howard pressed the button marked "5" and I wasn't surprised when the elevator went down instead of up. Everything else has been screwy today anyway.

The elevator dropped somewhat sharply, and kept dropping... we went down for what I'd guess as a 40-story building's distance. The only reason anyone would have anything down **this** far is for protection from something. Nuclear attack? Radio-static interference? Or did they just put whatever it is here so no one would break into it? (*ding* Fifth floor! Children's wear, ladies' lingerie, and Illuminated secrets!)

The elevator doors opened, and I saw one of the last things I would have expected, although I've been learning to expect the unexpected today.

It looked like a mall. An ordinary, terrestrial, usual mall, the place where you could buy some ice cream or some shoes or maybe skate around on the indoor ice-rink, although I doubt you could do any of that here. The railing right in front of us wasn't plated in gold, and there were no sparkling rich-ass-brand chandeliers hanging from the ceiling- again, a no-frills metallic architecture. It looked perfectly normal- except, of course, for the fact that it was way, way, way underground. And no one else was in it. And the floors were thickly carpeted. And it was completely neat and clean. And it was on an island in the middle of nowhere. And the fact that what's down here was obviously not something you'd get at JCPenney's, unless they were having their annual Secret Shit sale. I barely realized I was flat-out gawking. It was quite large- not too big to waste space, but big enough to hold everything- there were only five rooms to it, but I got the impression that there could have been more. It wasn't designed to impress, but it did so anyway.

Right next to the elevator was a video arcade. Gee, a nice place to put secret shit of all sorts, and they put a fucking arcade down here. I briefly wondered who the hell would play video games at a time like this, then I remembered- it's a happy time for the controller of the world. It's his tenth birthday, and he got a new.. friend for his birthday. The thought burned an impression on my brain. (Sure as hell makes things convenient... oh damn.)

We kept following him past several machines of popular games I recognized, until he came up to.. ah. Mortal Kombat, the first one of the series. At least he has good taste. Almost no cheesy unblockable shit, few cheese combos, and lots of blood and gore. Old, sorta, but who cares? I **rule** this game. No one, I mean not even those 20 year old game-addicted college kids, can touch me on this. I instinctively reached into my pocket (which I didn't have) for a quarter, and looked at the place where I would put it... Then I realized it. There's no coin slots on the machines. I could understand it if the machines were coin-disabled and the screens were flashing 'Free Play', but **no slots at all?! And the games don't even say anything about coins on their screens (the 'Insert Coin' or 'Press Start' I'm used to was totally absent)? What the fuck? Anyone mind telling me where you get these things? I know enough about manufacturing and arcade machines to say that this would be a special order of a pretty high order. (Higher than you think, Billy, my dark side said- but then again, my dark side is probably the only thing I can really understand this with) Of course, my selfish host definitely has the resources to make (not to mention GIVE... ow, my stomach) high orders.**

"Billy," he said in my cockiest voice, "play your hardest. Win." I looked at him as if he was insane. Maybe he is, maybe that's a requirement to control the world, sane people can't handle it. If these guys are the ones who watch people, keep tabs on them, and destroy all threats to their diabolical schemes, then they'd know how good I am at this. And anyone dumb enough to ask me to... no, fucking **command** me to win, might as well just not play at all. Okay, asshole. You bring me here, you make me your fucking slave, and now you want me to beat your sad ass? Fine then. Into the pit with you, Inheritor.

On the other hand, this joker does look like me and talk like me, so maybe he'll actually have some skill and pose a threat. Then again, maybe not.

He bashed the 1 and 2 player start buttons. I immediately went to Sub-Zero, my best character. I comparatively suck at Sonja, so I usually play as her against most people, but this guy wants me to win. He chose the Annoying Ice Guy too.

He played exactly like the annoying bitches I'm used to. Hard-to-stop combos all around, and lots of special moves. Sigh. One, two, and BOOM, I struck at every available opportunity, red pixels came from his guy en masse, and his life points went steadily to naught. Splat. The other shade of blue on the screen was laying down, knocked out, and my guy raised his fist.

Crap... what happens if ye Inheritor gets pissed at this? Something in my mind which I couldn't identify was starting to disintegrate, but I knew for certain it wasn't the implants or even my consciousness. Could be my sanity...

The second round was just a joke. He got angry and frustrated, showing his surprise at playing someone who could match him. I put him away, with lots of happy ice and uppercuts, and just because I thought he needed it, I put in the Fatality code and my Annoying Ice Guy ripped the spine out of his. Little kibbles of blood dripped out of the hanging head. "Flawless Victory", Shang Tsung said in his demon's voice.

That was one of the toughest battles I've had, and this guy probably never played any humans before. "Orwellian cunt.", he muttered with a half-smile, half-sneer, and gave the machine a solid, hard kick that didn't disturb it at all. What the hell? He's using Orwellian as a swear word..

He gritted his teeth, sighed, and said, "Keep following me around." I couldn't even start to resist, and that was getting more than annoying. The same sense of destabilization flowed into me as before, along with more nausea.

We left the darkened arcade of pixelated death and went to the other side of the elevator. It was a room of... more death. Only this time, not pixelated. It was unbelievable. The room had to be about half a football field in area, 50 feet high, with racks covering it. The steel barrels of guns, guns, and more guns all glistened in the non-fluorescent, strange lighting that I realized was all over this basement. No two seemed to be alike. Most seemed to be made of stainless steel, although I seriously doubt that was the material. A few items I recognized as AK-47 and M-16 variants hung from the rack on the left, while some strange-shaped items hung from the right- large high-tech grenades, some large device that I guessed to be a railgun straight out of BattleTech, and a device (laser? Tiny-bullet machinegun?) with 'Micro-2025' in big black letters on its side. "Jesus fucking Christ...", I uttered in a whisper, and I realized I was gawking again. This is ridiculous. You could equip (and kill!) an army with this shit. God help the idiots who'd dare invade **this** island.

Howard looked around the room again, looked at his guide again, and we followed him to a pool of very clear water and then to a room full of strange stuff, not quite as big as the weapons room, but none of this stuff I recognized to be similar in the least to anything I've seen before. A pile of blueprints lay on the near corner of a large table, with a few books lying around. Stuff I really wondered about was lining the walls; a suit of very fucked up armor, a large globe that looked almost like a crystal ball (who knows what you can see in THAT thing..), and some strange TV-like devices were in the back. It was a sampling center, I realized- a place where he can take a closer look at things that his organization is using.. and perhaps, test them out. I noticed Sarah wasn't looking at anything in particular, then I noticed a book on a simple wire rack.

'Control Devices', it read in bold print. Out of simple, overwhelming curiosity I flipped through it randomly. What the hell? Chemical balance checkers? Implanted homing beacons? Lots of drug dispensers, but no drugs... mind control implants, figured that'd be in here (more destabilization and nausea again)... and what the fuck is a cephalic wave inhibitor? Good thing it's listed as 'mostly ineffective'... How many times have they used this shit already? What HAVEN'T they used?! And what the hell is it all doing **in alphabetical order** in a neat little textbook on some fucking shelf?!

More destabilization, more nausea, and still a nagging sensation of disbelief. My mind did a backflip, and my stomach took an Olympic dive. Amazing clarity and total disbelief came into my line of thinking at the same time, and my world went fuzzy, although I didn't come close to passing out. I came to a certain realization, and some craziness to go along with it.

I struggled to put all the public control shit I've ever seen into one sentence, my voice and my mind being impaired by the steady constriction of my throat and my state of panic. "You're the one who's behind this?! Barney, the Power Rangers, the fake-ass morals, the schools, the lies, the controlling.... it's YOU, isn't it?!" A pathetic list- didn't mention causes and effects, didn't mention **how**, didn't mention **why**, but I'd be listening for hours if I could think of all of them at once... and only these guys, I realized, really know why.

He seems to be practiced at terror. "Not quite.", he told me. "I'm just starting to get complete control today. All of that crap you talked about was, yeah, either produced or influenced by the Illuminati and fed to the masses to keep them sated and complacent. I wasn't the one doing it." Destabilization, nausea, and the steady sense of being out-of-body infused me. I was watching a movie or playing a game, with my point of view as the only camera. It's like playing Doom or something- your first-person view is way out in front of you and you know it's not, can't be, definitely isn't real.

And here I am in unreality playing a nice little video game of Billy and Howard. So when does the shooting start?

I flowed back into myself and kept following ye mighty Inheritor around, down the steps, into a library. A monster library. A really, really, really big fucking library, twice as large as the biggest public one I've been in, with laminated books lining the metallic shelves (no particular paper smell, it smelled of nothing like every other room in this place). And in the center, I saw a computer connected to a very big metallic box.. if that was all modern hard drive (or better!), every book in the world could be contained in that, with quintillions of bytes to spare for multimedia. It's all largeness, I realized- this whole place is designed with the simple aim of aggrandizing the Inheritor's power and position. And it doesn't just look large and useful, it **is** large and useful. This whole place is built with an underlying philosophy of utilitarianism.. which makes a good deal of sense.

'Where do we want you to go today, Billy? You see, we've got the information, the power.. you're one of us now... everything is at your fingertips... except one, small, inconsequential, little thing...', I heard in my head. Need I mention the destabilization and nausea again?

I noticed I wasn't blinking. Power... money... unbelievable resources... all shown to me within ten minutes of me getting here. If there's such a thing as shock therapy, this is it. Of course you have to know, Billy, you're going to be walking these halls for a long, long time, my other self thought to me. Or was it Howard? No, this was actually me thinking to myself.. and I couldn't tell right off the bat, which made me worry about my own sanity again.

I noticed the Lord Inheritor going back up the stairs to the elevator, and I followed him up it, to the spacious living room with the couch. He told me to sit down on it again, and I did it. (You have no idea how utterly annoying that is.) The destabilization had finally won. My head felt like it was on fire. I had no idea what was in for me next. Is this, indeed, Hell? How long will I be here, and where will I go if I die? Is this guy really my twin or just a demonic doppelganger? And the control... the control... I looked directly at Howard, trying to ascertain what he really was. I realized I had calmed down somewhat. I looked deeper, and I saw.. a boy. A boy far above the normal, IQ in the stratosphere, almost certainly with the same regenerative powers I have (One time, I cut my finger with a razor, the cut no longer existed in less than twenty seconds. I've kept it a secret). Ten years old, rich as fuck, powerful enough to have his servants surgically implanted with technology the world won't see for a long time.

"Billy," he asked me, "where do you think you are?" Good question, Howard. If only I really knew.

I told him as much as I was sure of, "I'm on a big mansion on an island... somewhere." That somewhere could be anywhere from the bad ends of the bible to another planet. Another planet... must be serious warp technology if it's that. How much power you packin, Howie? Nah... it's not another planet. He's the ruler of **this** world, remember? Or close to it.

"Billy, you realize you're going to be my servant, if you didn't understand it the first time.", he said. Of course I understood it the first time. How could I not? Smart people do not get thrown into bad situations without understanding them very, very quickly. And this, indeed, is a bad situation... all my nightmares have built up to this one specific point. I'm not dreaming, though, I already figured that out.. this is real, there really IS a world controller and the government really is a lot of puppets... good lord... why hasn't anyone done anything? What the hell is going on when someone like this can exist? And why, in a world with six billion people, do I have to be the one in this situation? Guess I won the anti-lottery... and my anti-prize is worse than death. Happy birthday, Howie, because you're the only one of us getting one this year.

"Yeah, oh shit.", I said in a neutral tone. My thoughts were not reflecting on my voice anymore.

He was just smiling faintly and looking at (or through) me. Probably powertripping. Geez, if medieval kings could powertrip, he must be stoned all the way to the moon. I've powertripped before, with the small, childish causes most schoolkids have.. getting a 100% on a test, winning a contest, being the best in something or other... but never with real power. Never with real, world-controlling, do as I say, I get what I want, utter, sheer, total power. Not like Howard.

But power doesn't exist, does it? Not really. In the world I'm used to, people do things through fear. Fear of being killed, fear of "failing in life", fear of parents, fear of the boss, fear of jail, fear of losing something important. From there comes power, when some person holds the reins of fear of someone else. Do A, or C will happen to you. Don't do B, or C will happen to you. Invent God to make people do as you say even when they're alone. Don't jack off, you'll go blind. Don't think evil. Just do as we tell you if you want to remain healthy. That form of control makes excellent servants.

This form of control makes better ones. Somehow, they totally bypass the decision-making parts of the brain, and just force people to do things. No fear needed. Beliefs unnecessary. 'Hate us all you want, we don't need to inflict pain or impose physical restraints, you can't hurt us.', I heard some imaginary Illuminated scientist say with some insane technical dudes at his back, calmly working away at the next diabolic plot, destined for success because there are no James Bonds or Arnold Schwarzeneggers who can stop them. The reality was probably a large team of collaborators working on what they'd probably refer to as The Project. Are Sarah and I the only two people like... like this? How many more do you have, Howard.. or dare I ask? Hope he doesn't ask me what I'm thinking again. At least leave me my thoughts, you already have my body, I wished silently.

More likely, he didn't even need to ask. It should be fairly obvious to an idiot where my mind is, given said idiot could imagine himself in this situation. I looked at Howard intently again, testing his reality, making sure I couldn't look right through him, observing his characteristics. Know thine enemy, even if you can't do much about him.

If there was one thing that took me back the most, it had to be his security and calmness. Even when he got pissed off, his voice proclaimed 'this is temporary.' He's obviously never really worried about anything important. No fear. At all. Of anything. And what does he have to fear, anyway? His (my?) dad probably never told him any lies, and certainly never disciplined him. Would he dare, when his son would have the power to have the guy removed from reality in a few years? He had no scars, no blemishes, nothing obvious to separate him from the ordinary people, except for what I have- twelve fingers, eight toes, totally melanin-free body, almost completely white eyes, and stark white hair (which, for the first time, I noticed was all the way down to the middle of his back). And I'd bet whatever I have left to bet- which probably isn't much- that no morons ever chastised him, called him names, or pissed him off at any point in his life. No priest ever told him to keep his hands

away from porno, no teacher ever warned him about drugs or AIDS or gangs or strangers or the dangers of guns. I was nearing powertrip status just thinking about that- a life with no negative influences at all, no resource blocks, nothing at all to stop you from doing what you wanted and what you were good at.

I have no idea whether he was reading my thoughts or simply thinking along the same lines, but he said, in his usual happy voice and a grin on his face, "Billy, you'll never have to go to school again, **ever!**" I screamed for joy. He wasn't taking me to his level, probably no one could be at his level at the same time as he is, but he is indeed nice. Nice and badass. And I was getting the golden opportunity to watch someone else, just like me, be even better than the person I've always wanted to be.

Then external reality, my accepted norms of life, and the perverted, disgruntled-postal-worker insanity of this whole thing came crashing down on me again and I shook it off. I decided to take everything at face value- if it was, indeed, an incredibly vivid dream, then I'd wake up from it sooner or later. If it was real, then like the annoying meerkat guy and the fat warthog with the small brain say, *hakuna matata*. No worries, I'm just along for the ride, I don't even have to worry about what I'll be doing in response. Because in this section of the choose-your-own-adventure novel we call life, there's literally no choices at all for me. All I have to do is just keep flipping pages, and sooner or later the little evil words 'The End' will be put in the middle.

The screen in front of us buzzed again, and the old guy reappeared on it.

Chapter 4

I also noticed the characteristics of the old guy on the screen- about 50 years old, gray haired, hazel eyes. And obvious intelligence. Is this the guy who (according to long-held conspiracy theory) killed Kennedy, covered up Area 51, and orchestrated the Vietnam War? Not to mention a long line of control programs? "Could be...", Bugs Bunny said in the back of my head. Oh well. His past sins are not of interest. His current sins are much more important to me right now.

"Howard, get dressed in your newest clothing. You'll appear before every last member of the top five levels at midnight GMT at the usual place, so you better look your best.", he said in his fatherly voice, which sounded like an old man on steroids. Top five levels? Of what?! Oh. I think I know. What the hell am I doing in the middle of this, anyway? Is this Bring-Your-Clone-To-Work day at the local Evil Incorporated?

Howard glanced at the clock and his face became one of indignation. "WHAT?! If I leave NOW I'll get there! Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?", he screamed, not the rich kid's screams of spoiledness but of real anger.

"Because I wasn't supposed to. Now get going. You'll be expected to make a speech basically saying what you want to do with your planet and your power, and it better be long and good. You might be the Emperor-to-be, but those guys you'll be talking to are your power base." Figured. Can't run the world alone, can ya Howie? Is that what I'm here for, a little help when nothing but yourself will do? "There will be a lot of merriment, joy, and maybe some guys wanting to kill you, so watch it. Inheritors have been assassinated there before..." Whoopee! Maybe, just maybe, I'll get extra lucky and this whole control business can end unexpectedly. Of course, if he gets waxed, what happens to me? "...which is why every servant there will either be yours or mine.", continued the old guy in a matter-of-fact tone, talking about world domination as if it was a new recipe for cornbread. Add one part manipulation, one part force, one part disinformation, and let simmer a few decades.

He punctuated his speech with a click- the screen turned off, giving Howard no chance to reply. That must royally piss him off. And he was pissed off, indeed, but not at the click. He was probably pissed at the fact that someone might blow him to kingdom come, turning his informed brain into gray slime and his skull into bony sawdust, with little tufts of white hair hanging from it in a

congealed splattering of gore. I found that hard to believe- that the guy I'm enslaved to has a high risk of getting killed. One expects the secret masters to be safe from molestation. Then again, one also expects to wake up in the bed one went to sleep in, and one also expects one to still own one's self. Fear returned (so much for hakuna matata, shall we try hara-kiri? Oh, whoops, he won't let me kill myself.), with its old pals Horror and Terror, taking the spot in my brain right across the street from the implants, and they were having a cookout with my mind. Only my mind was the meat. I could almost hear the sizzling sound of frying meat.

Howard had a (my) pissed-off look, which is a devilish combination of little-kid aw-pooiness and very grown-up 'All right, somebody better tell me **what** is going on here before I beat someone's **ass**!' He snarled a bit then growled, "Billy, Sarah, go up to your rooms, (Right then, my legs just **moved** to the stairs, and I couldn't even contract the muscles to stop them. This is annoying as hell, sort of like being in a dentist's chair with your mouth numbed to the point where you look like a fish, and he's pulling every tooth.), wear clothing that covers every non-face part of your body in black, preferably something with a lot of pockets and weapon carriers, and then get back down here." He was being purposefully specific, and I had a good idea why- although I had no clue what the hell a weapon carrier was.

For the first time today I was totally lucid of myself and my surroundings. The dreaminess of being here vanished, but the dream didn't. I could taste birthday cake coupled with vomit in my mouth, and swallowed the unwholesome mess back down. Whatever destabilization there was, was gone. My mind was in one (polluted) piece again, but something inside was **burrowing**, like a rat. The implants? Growing insanity? Panic? Who knows? And who the hell cares? My mind has been a playground for everyone in the last fifteen minutes, and if some new kids want to play, they can get in line for the swings.

I opened up the door, flung off the pajamas (which I then noticed were exactly my size down to the millimeter), and opened the closet. A lot of different shirts, coats, and pants stared me in the face. Many were recognizable as various fashions back in the other world, some were just weird. I realized immediately that I was thinking of my old life as another world and Fear flipped over my mind again to cook it well, then I realized I was thinking of it as my old life and True Horror cut off a small piece to test the flavor. Mmm.. needs salt. I found myself looking around the closet for black. What was black? That thing was, a large coat with a hood. I pulled it off the rack and felt inside. It had pockets, certainly, and small things that felt strangely magnetized, which would only pop off if you pulled outwards. Perfect for holding something you need to get out quickly.. like weapons. I put it on, and put the hood up. I looked for buttons but it seemed to almost seal itself instead, with more magnetic pull. Long slits on the sides gave me easy access to whatever I wanted to carry.

I felt another kind of pull at my crotch and I realized I had a hardon. Now why the fuck would Mr. Woody decide to salute at a time like this? I grabbed a pair of long, black pants and covered him up, realizing at the last moment (Too late now!) that I wasn't wearing underwear. I tried to undo what I had done and simply couldn't. I could have easily shouted 'God, this is so damn annoying!!!' at the top of my lungs, but I didn't- if I start screaming now, I may never be able to stop. Fortunately for Mr. Woody, whatever this fabric is made of doesn't chafe cocks.

I glanced down and saw a tall pair of black boots, with padding inside- they were meant to be worn without socks. Again, I simply acted. I was getting more used to this.. effect and how it works. It's not a compulsion. Whatever these implants do, they don't compel- you simply find yourself **doing it** and whatever you try to do to the contrary simply doesn't get through. I put them on and they sealed in the same way. They were light, but they had something at the toe- metal. I was wearing some nice cool shoes with steel toes, Ass Kicking For Kids™!

My hands were still white, unblemished by any clothing or pigmentation. There were no gloves in the closet. I would have to stay here, I realized, until I could finally find some- but where? Then I thought of the drawers and immediately I once more found myself doing things- I opened the first one up. Along with some other small forms, a pair of black gloves were on top.

'Hey, stupid! You can't wear gloves, remember?', my personal incarnation of the Annoying Childhood Peer-Bitch-Voice screamed. I didn't let it show often, usually I beat it down with my mind's version of a crowbar and a tire iron, but it was always right. I have five fingers plus a thumb, and my parents (if that's who they were..) never got the outer one amputated, citing "nature" and making me the butt of endless creative jokes. Not to mention no sign of nipples.. and no bellybutton, which I thought was scientifically impossible. 'The knife got too close and it healed over' was all my parents really told me. Funny.. there's no scar, or anything. It's simply not there.

'Hey Freddy, how do ya count to twelve?', one would say, and (of course he knew but) the other said 'I dunno.' 'Well I don't know either, but Billy sure does!' Or the obvious 'Billy's got his nipples on his hands!' Then of course both of the brats would break up into semi-forced, bawling, burbling laughter. Good, you brats. Laugh all you want- but don't follow me too far or you won't be able to **do that** anymore. Even in light of my helpless situation (I like the term 'situation'. I really do. The term makes it appear to be an exterior event instead of pertaining specifically to me.), I felt totally superior over those who used to mock me. You do not follow a ghost into a cemetery, not if you like staying alive.

Not that I ever wanted to lose any parts of my body, but there are no gloves made to fit ten-year-old hands that have six fingers, and my parents were too poor to get some made. I've always needed to stick to mittens- big, clunky things that you couldn't grab anything worth shit with, really made for babies (give me a ten-year-old who wants to feel constricted anywhere and I'll give you a retard, one of the little happy boys and girls that ride the short yellow bus home) but hey hey hey, if there's a market there's either going to be or already is a product. Right then I realized, with utter and terrible clarity, that that applied to everything possible to make, and ladies and gentlemen, if you've got the cash, we've got the stash- computers, clothes, land, power, human beings. Name it and it's yours, rich ones, and we do accept Platinum Visa and MasterCard. How much, I wonder, did I cost?

It took me about two to three seconds to think all that. Even the Awesome Power of Coffee and Sugar™ doesn't hold a candle to adrenalin, and I'm an incredibly fast thinker to begin with.

Then I glanced down and of course, I should have known, the clothing's all specially meant for me. I felt four finger-wedges push against my skin as I put the black material over my fingers. Again, as with everything else, it was exactly my size, no tightness, no looseness, no way. If I could do it, I'd get a miniature version of a cattle brander, and I'd sear the words "rich kid" on his forehead forever. Let him flaunt his power then. Hell with that, it would probably be an emblem of superiority in this place..

I found myself checking to see if I was wearing all black- I was- and I walked down the stairs. Or rather, my legs did. The feeling of not doing what you're doing is like hearing classical music in your head while the metalhead in the boom-car next to you has turned up White Zombie or Pantera to maximum volume.

Sarah was already down there, wearing a black bodysuit which fit her exactly. And she's built like a model.. an exceptionally strong model. She looked like she works out daily with hundred-pound dumbbells. I'm also strong as hell (most adults can't overpower me), but I don't look like that. I just look like a semi-short high school freshman who shows up at the gym every so often.. although I'm not and I never did. The lady in the health room said I must be going through puberty earlier.. although that's bullshit, I know it is, I never had any "nocturnal emissions" or beat off at any point in my life. Most of the doctors explained it away as just another minor abnormality, and that I would be a bit taller than everyone else when I grew up. Now here I am, with a girl who's probably only a few years older than me, at least 5'10", and could probably throw around Chuck Norris like a rag doll.

Then again, she did say she 'did the assassinations' so I doubt she'd even need to get close. Yeah, like I really need more things to worry about..

For no immediate reason Fear and Horror added salt to my overdone brain, and really started to chow down. It wasn't just 'No way dude, I'm in a really, really, severely **bad** situation here!', it was 'No way dude, this is insane, impossible, and evil beyond all recognition, but it's **real**, and at this very moment I am under control of my exact clone, who got me for his tenth birthday, whose homework is running the world, whose power is unbelievable, and who sees me as nothing more than a complicated tool and plaything for his own private use!! God I am **fucked!!**'

Sarah watched intently as if she was watching a football game and waiting for the score to come up on my eyeballs. Fear 9000, Billy O. And, not unexpectedly, she decided to add some itching powder to my mental wounds. "Billy," she said in her high voice that totally did not fit her, "it doesn't get any worse. He's not going to torture you."

"Gee, Sarah... that's a real comforting thought, ya know?", I said immediately and sarcastically. "Besides, it can always get worse." Which is true. It doesn't matter how bad it is, boys and girls, it can **always** get worse. And since Murphy has ruled this place from the beginning (screw Howard... Murphy's Laws will not be denied by anyone, no matter how much earthly power they have.), it probably will.

Howard came out the elevator doors, slid down the stair railing (which was probably designed for the curves of his ass) and did one of the least expected things ever. He handed us both semi-automatic pistols and told us to put them in easy reach. The weapon-carrier fit the small gun very snugly.

He walked to a door leading outside, and pressed a small button. An entire section of grass simply flipped over, and a sleek, black jet was there. It looked sort of like a normal jet, only with enormous thrusters. And it was way, way larger than any fighter aircraft I've ever seen, although it had to be one. No way that's a luxury airliner in disguise.

Almost immediately after Howard opened the door, something big and white rushed at him. For an instant of fleeting hope I thought it was a werewolf- but nope, it was just a big dog, with a lot of teeth, a thick white coat, and slobber. It ran to me, back to Howard, back to me and I instinctively reached down and petted it. The fur was surprisingly light. "Fido, we're going away for a while, and I want you here when we get back.", Howard said, not in doggie-talk or baby-talk but in the same neutral tone he used with me. The dog barked. Jesus, do his **dogs** know English? It would not surprise me. Not now, anyway. All the weird shit I've seen before pales in comparison.

Howard absently told Sarah and me to follow him inside the plane. We crossed the uncut grass, he put his palm on the black metal and two panels on the plane slipped open soundlessly. We climbed in. It was, indeed, a luxury airliner, at least a few seats' worth of one. A luxury airliner probably armed to the teeth with everything from antimatter missiles to hydrogen bombs. For a brief moment I felt myself in a very, very twisted Richie Rich cartoon, as if whoever owned the copyright to the little rich kid sold it to whoever made Doom and Quake. His handling of weapons is certainly unnerving as hell. He acts like a weapons expert. Hell, he probably is, learned how to blow someone's head off with a couple afternoons of practice. That was when it hit me. I never handled a gun before in my life, and he just handed me one like it was a toy. What the fuck? God, how I wanted to kill him with his own gun, that would be funny as hell, but I couldn't. I focused every ounce of my willpower, I was one with the universe, I even opened up my power-channels that I've only used a few times before. Nothing. It was as if I had never told my muscles to move.

"Sarah, fly us to headquarters, cruising speed.", Howard said in a semi-evil voice, and Sarah went up to the cockpit to fly to wherever "headquarters" is. I was expecting more of a demonic bellow from him. But he's not a demon. This isn't Hell- at least not the Christian version- and he's no more evil than your average preppie. He's just a naturally happy person, and he has things to do. Making a speech to his fellow secret masters, for example, probably for what sounds like his coming-of-age ceremony. And he, like all other rich kids, gets expensive presents. One of those presents- no, two, he owns Sarah too- happens to be a human being. But what about the cops and the feds?

What the hell am I thinking, cops and feds, this guy **owns** the cops and the feds..

That was the utter, final, obvious answer. The 'authorities' could not, would not, stand in his way. This jet was not constructed from nowhere. That mansion was not formed from nothing. That book of secret plans to control the world was not fiction nor mere blueprints. It detailed exact, precise ways in which one human being could control another, or several at once. And these plans were definitely already enacted. Our 'defenders of freedom' are slaves. He, and/or his organization, controls the world. Getting me was probably child's play to him. And then there's the little matter of me being his identical twin. I could have asked what the hell is with a world where human rights can be ripped apart so easily- but then again, there's no such thing, is there? It's just a lot of crap. Humans don't have rights. He was never told enslaving others is wrong, in all likelihood he was told it's the thing to do with them.

Then I realized something else. The nose of the plane was pointed towards a rainforest, and a plane this big needs a really big runway. "Umm, Howard? Don't we need a runway?", I asked, before I remembered that death would be much better than this. He said nothing, and for a second I thought Sarah was going to send us right through the trees, killing a dozen species a second and sending me straight to Hell, where I shall bask in the warmth. Then the plane kicked on its jets, and accelerated. Straight up. Ordinarily, I would have gasped and gawked and been surprised, but not now. Surprise is totally unknown to those who expect the totally insane. I felt the burrowing in my mind, like a mole was getting deep down.. oh no, Howard, you've already got my body, I already have to do whatever you say, are you going to take my soul with these things too? I almost asked that out loud. But I didn't want an answer.

The jet exploded into the sky and I was pushed against the thick seat for about a minute. After we were going way faster than the speed of sound, the acceleration ceased and an air pump turned on. The reality of it struck me. It's not some fantasy spacecraft with instant inertia from no acceleration. It's a jet, a cross between an F-22 and a luxury liner, with advanced technology comparable to, if not **better than**, the (fucking substantial, I know that much) military technology of the United States. And the pilot was a cute thirteen year old girl, who just came back to sit on Howard's left. An America-trained, circumcised, "normal" adult would be either impressed or befuddled by that fact, but not these people. I've been living in a dream world, and I'm almost touching the elementary-school-age boy who will be the master of its controllers. I vaguely wondered how much controlling they actually did do, whether they just used their power to take our tax dollars and have fun with them, to screw around with whatever they felt like, or to shape the fate of the entire world. Almost certainly the latter- they want to ensure their permanent place in the world. Power spawns greed, and greed knows no bounds.

Howard was trying to think of the speech. Although he certainly knows much more about this particular topic than I do, why the hell did they give him only a plane ride to do it in? Sigh. More shit I hope I never understand.. but I'll probably have to understand it... the burrowing feeling in my mind was getting deeper, but to what? I once again tried to think of a way to get out and again came out empty-handed. I could always start begging, but.. nah. It never works in the movies, and if he intended to show me mercy he would have done it by now.

"What could I possibly, realistically, have for a strategy to put in the speech, anyway?", asked Howard. Don't look at me, Howie. I'm just your poor, semi-distraught servant boy. I know way more about world manipulation than I should already, but I don't have a clue how to help you with this. I was waiting for the Effect to simply take control of my mouth again- but it didn't. Am I fr- no.. it's because I simply don't know, that's why.

"Just tell them your job, basically, say you'll do it well, stuff like that. Yeah, I know they can't be snowed, but I thought you were supposed to just solve their interpersonal problems.", said Sarah. This is insane. He's not controlling them, he's.. he's..

"The Lord of Guidance Counselors?!", I blurted out. Howard's stomach expanded and contracted rapidly in the vibrations of laughter. I was going to, it really was fucking hilarious, get the secret controller of the world to do things like "peer mediation" and "conflict resolution", so funny- but I couldn't. I had to forcibly stop myself. I tried to laugh, I wanted to, my body wanted to- but no way. I just.. couldn't.

"Billy, you know when I told you not to laugh at me? Cancel that." I exploded and almost doubled over.

"And Sarah.. I wish I could just do it like that, but these are Illuminati we're talking about. If I told them I had no long-term plans, they'd just think I was hiding them, and then they really would start gunning for me.", he explained. Once more I was reminded of his humanity. He's not some evil character, he's just a happy little friendly boy who controls the world.. and me. The mental burrowing continued deeper to a place I never had much contact with. My thoughts shifted briefly a bit, I hit something, and I heard my mouth starting to answer Howard's question.

"Hey, Howard, you know all that tech shit for control you got in the basement?", I said.

"Yeah?"

"Well, say something based on that. Promise how you'll use it to step things up and help everyone by controlling everyone. If you help them all, none of em would want to kill you. That is what all of you want, isn't it?", my thought finished and my mouth said.

"There's six thousand people there, so I can't possibly address all their concerns, except all the firsts will want me to, and probably the seconds too." Leaving the thirds, fourths, and fifths to fend for themselves?

"That includes that Adam bastard and those two prissy whores who look like pigs, doesn't it? Howard, you can't possibly address anything exactly as **they**'d want them.", Sarah said in a knowledgeable tone. Again, the insanity crept upon me. These people aren't united at all, or they're just.. acting human. In a profession that's not supposed to have any humanity in it at all. That made it worse.. humans are more prone to acting irrationally... and breaking.. their.. stuff... oh god no. Keep thy cool, Howie. The burrowing continued.

Howard rolled his eyes, a bit frustrated. Fear and Horror were presumably eating my brain, but I couldn't feel them anymore. It was like I had lived with them all my life. What's next? Body parts? And I can't fight back.. at all. He could even make me do it himself. Oh god. Please be my clone, Howard, because even I, violent as I am, don't want to do things like that.

I have got to keep my cool. Nothing is to be gained by losing my rational faculties, which are about all I have at the moment- no friends, no family, no freedom, probably not even any identity. Now I'm stuck in a jet plane with my clone who completely controls me in such a way that there is no disobeying him. I searched for ways out and found none. I could always start begging, but I doubt he'd do anything but laugh. I'd laugh too...

The screen facing us clicked on and 'Daddy' was on it.

"Damn it Dominator, just why didn't you tell me about this line of bullshit earlier?!", Howard screamed. "I don't have TIME to make some giant speech- I don't even know what these guys want!" You wouldn't think the future ruler of the world would start screaming like that, would you? Then again, he's simultaneously psyched out and pissed off.. and this is obviously the most important event in his life, so of course he's on edge.

"Howard... I figured this would happen. You didn't even have the faintest clue that you were going to have to do jack shit today, did you?" Howard emphatically shook his head. "Those stupid..

absolute... **idiots!** I told them, but nooooo, they have to 'test the Inheritor's ability'. Look. You want me to drag out all the shit on them? I know you don't know it.", 'Daddy' continued, angrily and with hand gestures. And again, these people are disunited. Almost like.. wait, I can't call them real politicians anymore, now can I? This is how politics is done. Get the top dudes, make them pit the assorted 'normal' politicians against each other to make it all look real, and slowly manipulate the populace farther and farther into your clutches. And if you ever need help, it's easy to get, and if you need it to be wise in the ways of the 'normal' world, let it go and recapture it. And don't worry about it ever rebelling because it can't anymore. It'll come right back to your agents for food and shelter and then whammo, you've got it, and the technology lets you do whatever you want with it. Simple, really. People are objects. Some are easy to manipulate and for the ones that aren't, there's science. A song I heard from a car screamed "ya gotta keep em separated!" in my head.

"Yeah, that'll help. Also, what the hell am I supposed to say? How my plan relates to their plans or what?", Howard said in a tone that was almost like asking about the details of an after-school project. We get to research types of rocks- he gets to make detailed plans on keeping the human race in slavery. No worries about me until after he's done his work... the burrowing continued.

"Yes, you need to address the general concerns, all the major stuff. Don't obsess over any of their individual specific shit for the main speech- you'll be doing quite enough of **that** as Dominator- but do be prepared to answer their questions about that sort of thing. And they always have questions. I'll dredge up a list of plans. And only through a lot of my own manipulation and general cajoling power was I able to even talk to you. Those damn fools don't even want me to tell you what you're doing. Howard- I know you're not going to screw this up, and I definitely don't need to tell you that what I think isn't going to make any difference anymore. But I will tell you that they're going to act differently from what you've seen. They're going to pull new tricks out of old hats, just to be unpredictable. Watch it. And remember who has the power." So they have problems with communication and power structure as well. This is getting insane, but with the few small insanities and discrepancies that make up reality. No. This cannot be real. I can't be in a jet with my exact clone who has total control over me and the best assassin in the world, a teenage girl. Everything I've known utterly contradicts the possibility. But here I am. I began to get a steady sense of wrongness, not fear, not horror, just the general sense of 'something is really wrong here'. Well, no shit.

"What the hell are they smoking?", Howard asked. Better question. What the hell am I smoking?

"No idea.", the old guy said with a throat full of sandpaper. "Anyway, here's the info. And don't be afraid to remind them that you've got the real power. In fact, make it very fucking clear to them."

"They recorded that.", said Sarah, as if it were pretty damn obvious.

"Yeah, no shit.", Howard said. "I do **not** want to do this right now!!", he shout-muttered in an annoyed voice. Okay, asshole. You're one to talk. But this is consistent with what's been going on - he, of course, considers himself the important and only 'real' person, much like a psychopath. It's all following a pattern.. except this one part.

"Then why not tell us to do it? We're your servants, remember?", I reminded him. The words came out much darker than I expected they would.

"Billy, do you have any idea how much I'd like to have someone else do this?", he asked. I found myself answering in the negative immediately after I thought about the question. "I'm the only one who can.", he finished. That explains it. I suppose he's going to tell me the secrets now, I realized- secrets because he'll want me to do his work, secrets because I'm to help him wield power. Which is the only reason you get servants- to do things. Only this time it isn't boot-licking or ass kissing, it's controlling. I realized that I would become part of The Man... or maybe I already am, in the form of my clone. Once more I tried to move to kill him. Once more I did not.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am going to give you all a...", Howard uttered absently, his mind on the speech to come.

"Kick in the teeth?", suggested Sarah in a bright, happy voice. Yay kids! Yesterday, we learned how to paint with our fingers! Today, we'll learn how to kick Illuminati in the teeth! Reality warped again as I realized that I finally had the answer to the burning question "what do the really rich kids do for fun?" They get servants, play every video game known to man, fly around in super jets, have entire islands as their playgrounds, eat specialized cuisine whenever the fuck they want it, and beat people around when they feel like it. I laughed at the total strangeness of her saying that.

"Yes, that's right, 'Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati, I am going to give you all a firm kick in the teeth. Step up in single file line please, by rank and alphabetical order.'", he said, with a speaker voice and a grin. I laughed even louder. That would be hilarious if he actually did that. Of course, he won't. They are, after all, the people that help him rule the world. "No, no... something that they'd want.", he continued.

"A dick up their asses?", she snapped immediately, and I laughed even harder. Now **that** would be something fun I wouldn't want to partake in. Not like that matters much now.. the utter ridiculousness of all this collapsed on me again and I laughed some more, although I could have stopped if I wanted to. Howard didn't seem to mind or care- because he, too, was laughing hard. Yet again that burrowing returned.

"No, Sarah... something that doesn't involve pain or suffering or loss to them.", he said, in his calm master voice.

"Hmm... suppose flat out-and-out payola wouldn't work?", she suggested. "Maybe a hint of all that extra-new tech shit? You know, get all of them directly involved in the plan by giving them the equipment." 'The equipment to do what, dear girl?', I thought immediately and in reflex. The answer was as obvious as day after a fourth of a second of looking around.

"That's another thing. I don't even have a plan, I didn't even know I was supposed to make a plan before today.", he muttered, and I realized for a final time that this is not some fantasy land. This is reality. In the movies, the supervillain is never confused. In the movies, nothing works like this.

And in the movies, the hero has a chance...

Hero.

What's wrong with me? What's going on here? The burrowing... it's more than just his control, it's more than this.. something larger, something more obvious.. I'll figure it out eventually, I knew. And if I have to, I'll ask him to help me understand this. Ha. Of course, he might actually do it..

He might actually.. of course. It all makes sense. I suddenly paid attention to the abilities I've been hiding from everyone, including myself. The echo effect. The super strength. The healing. The intelligence. The subconscious slowing down to make people think I can't do what I can, keeping myself away from athletics and only releasing the power when really needed-- before I was about eight, I thought everyone had this. When I realized they don't, I kept it to myself, assuming that because I wasn't some powerful hero or god, I must not be that much better than everyone else, and I don't want to brag and make myself more of a freak than I already am, and live with being pointed at for the rest of my days. How the hell could I have attributed all that crap I did to good luck with minor power? I've been in denial.. one too many superhero movies has cost me my freedom. I remember.. I remember with Paul, the fight with those idiots, I sent them to the hospital, I remember that time that teacher tried to pick me up when I was eight.. I think he had a concussion, it was just luck, right.. how goddamn tall I am, fucking inhuman..

Inhuman. Of course. He was created with power in mind. If he really is going to run the world,

wouldn't they make him the best they could? And so they did. That explains it all. They took him to run the world, they put me in the outside world for ten years, then gave me to him as a birthday present. The burrowing stopped in its tracks for a bit. We're products of the Illuminati. I'm part of their plan. How could I not have known about something like this when I could run twice as fast as anyone else and lift them all, and beat the crap out of just about anyone if I let the power loose? The power... I tried... the power can't get me out of this. But I can stop hiding it from myself now. I can stop pretending I don't have it. Because he knows I have it. Because they all know I have it. Because my 'parents' were in on the whole deal. They really played with fire that time. What if someone would have known about me before these guys did get to me.. guess I was just considered to be a mutant freak. Amazing how predictable people are, even me.

Of course, if I panicked and fled somewhere, they would have found me anyway, no question. I couldn't have stopped this, not even with all my abilities, there are simply too many of them and they are simply too powerful. Damn it. My entire life has led up to being my clone's servant? Everything that I've ever done, all I've ever wanted in my life, and now I'm this? Complete insanity.. but it's all completely insane. It's just like working for thirty years and getting to retire, it's just like living on a farm, it's just like... and it's just another way of working for the Overlord. If we've been working against ourselves so much, mankind as a whole is a pack of idiots. And I'm just another casualty, like the sacrificed witches of Salem and the slaves of 19th century America. Strangely, the thought relaxed me a bit, but not enough. I can't keep going like this or I'll turn into a nervous wreck before I figure out anything- anything about the organization, anything about him, anything about a way out of here.. and why is it that I keep assuming problems always have solutions?

Chapter 5

So I shut myself down. I turned off my emotions, my fear, everything, leaving only a thread of left-brain consciousness behind. I was going crazy, and I can't afford that- if I'm too worthless to him because of that, I know what will happen, I will simply be terminated as a failed project. He's calculating and understanding, and he knows how to balance costs versus benefits- of that, I'm certain. He was taught to do it, and I fucking envy him- not just because of his power, of his infinite advantage. I envy him because of his knowledge. He is my identical twin in every respect- I'm positive of that now. But he was taught- not 'taught' in the normal world and the public schools, but truly taught, told how to deal with situations as they arise. And he's being patient with me, showing me what he can do, because he's planning for the future, where I do his dirty work..

Maybe that's an error in thinking, then. Maybe part of the reason this isn't making sense is because I'm not thinking as he would, I'm only seeing things from one angle. So, I asked myself a simple question- what would I do, feel, and say if I were him right now? Well, it should be obvious. I'd be excited and happy. I would have received the biggest inheritance ever given, as well as a present that is literally irreplaceable. I wouldn't kill the servant, then, because any insanity he does develop will probably just wear off after so long. In fact, if I had someone like myself, and I was living a super-sheltered life, I'd do everything I wanted with him after being so company-deprived for so long.

No wonder I'm so scared- he's not going to torture me. He's going to use me for everything he'd use a ... friend for. And he'll act as he damn well pleases because there is **no one** to tell him otherwise. Who the hell would?! He runs the world! Anyone in a position to talk to him probably has other nation-size problems to deal with. I doubt Illuminati care about each other's personal lives. They certainly have jobs to do. And so I'll be his.. his... a wholly unfamiliar feeling I cannot name swept over me like a tidal wave. And he was watching me, taking a good look at his acquired brother.

"What are you afraid that I'm going to do to you, Billy?," he asked in a voice devoid of evil, hatred, and cruelty.

"Anything... you want.", I answered. It was the only answer. Anything he wants, he gets. The only other way to answer that would take twenty years to list every little thing he can do to me.

"Exactly. That's what I plan to do.", he replied with a slight smile. "Billy, I can't afford information disparity between us. If you don't know something vitally important, ask it. One question at a time." Let's start with the obvious.

"Just what.. the hell.. have you done to me?!"

"Sarah, what did they do, anyway?", he asked.

She thought about it for a few seconds before saying, "Let's see... First, they used the gas tranquilizer, then they put him on a plane here.. for a top level mission like that they almost certainly did his implantation mid-flight. Then they washed and disinfected him, inside and out, until there were no carrying contagions left." I don't feel anything in my ass or my throat.. but it figures that they'd make it painless. "Then they vaccinated him for every disease known to man- in his case, including AIDS." In my case? Only in my case? Maybe I can be vaccinated for it, other people can't.. "Then they did some quickie detoxification, definitely, then.." Detoxification. From the normal world's pollutants. That figures too. "they probably skipped most everything else. Ordinarily they'd do some minor surgery on any permanent scars or ailments, but he doesn't get any of that.. Oh, and Billy, feel lucky. They sometimes castrate, not like it would do much to you." Urk. And why is she insulting my penis at a time like this?

"Oh yeah, Billy, I think you better know now before you go on a bad assumption. Both of us are immortal and regenerate. She's a little slower on the regeneration but she'll live more than two thousand years, unless something bad happens." She wasn't insulting... my god. She wasn't because if it was chopped off, it would just **grow back**. I started to remember things I hadn't thought about. How fast I heal. How immune I am to poisons and disease. It explains this, too. We were created- not born, created. Their engineers sat down and calmly talked about how to make a superman, and then proceeded to do it. We have no parents or other relatives. Nothing. Made in a laboratory for this exact purpose. Created and immortal, because we heal our aging, certainly. Disbelief entered my mind and I killed it. They wouldn't lie to me about something like this. "So if it's not fatal, it'll heal up."

"So why didn't you tell me about this earlier? Like- years?" It would have saved me some grief.. but I'm asking stupid questions again. They wouldn't let someone immortal and regenerating in the normal world know about his abilities. Letting me in the open was probably dangerous enough.

"Billy, because you were to be the normal. Inheritors don't get to be with normals, at all, and as such we have absolutely no experience with what you'd call the 'real world'. So, after a lot of thinking (hopefully), they probably decided to send me a normal servant for my tenth birthday, so I wouldn't do something totally foundless. Not sure why they'd use a clone though."

Then I realized something- not just figured it out but realized it, and my emotions came back into my head. "Does that mean.. that I'm just here to help do your dirty work.. **forever**? Not just until I grow old, because I **won't**?" I won't grow old. Death will not be a respite from this. If I were like everyone else, I would be secure in the knowledge that 'forever' isn't forever and that I would eventually croak. Not here.

"Until you or I get waxed, exactly. And I don't plan on that happening any time soon." We can be killed, but by what? Who the hell is going to try to kill either of us? There's no one that would try anything that stupid. I suppose he has serious protections against assassination- more than any normal President, certainly.

So there is probably no way out of this. None. I am not free. I can't go back- where would I go back to, in a world owned by him? What would I do? I couldn't survive, even if I did somehow manage to get out of here. And even if I somehow did manage to kill him, they would certainly kill me. I bent over and awoke- truly awoke, knowing this isn't a dream. He is my master because he **can** be, not

because of anything I did or said, but because of who I am and who I was created to be. I wiped my tear-encrusted face off and looked at him. What do you want, Howie?

"Finally.", he said, as if he was expecting this. Well, of course he's expecting this. He is an Illuminatus. He was waiting for me to simply realize it- that my rights are worth nothing and my will may as well be considered non-existent. Well, if that's what you want, Master Howard, you have it. And in that instant, I knew- just knew- that he would have some mercy on me and allow me to do some things I wanted, because I'm his.. the feeling came back in force, pushed Fear, Terror, and Horror out of the way, and proceeded to mosh on my forebrain.

"Oh no. That's impossible. There's no way in Hell, Howard. It took me three days to finally accept it, and you think that he did in a half hour?" Three days? Maybe for the horror to wear off, and for grim realization to settle in. Which I have, and this realization is fucking grim, all right.

"Well, the impossible just happened.", Howard said. Sarah muttered something about Lucky Little Fucker A and Lucky Little Fucker B.

"What?", I asked.

He then proceeded to tell me things about what he termed the 'freedom illusion' - the fact that people trained to think they were free would continue to think so even in the face of reality, and the control his organization used to keep it that way. With judicious word choice (he obviously expected me to understand all of it), he explained why newly-acquired servants were often confused and emotional. He explained how his people use mass media, schools, and every kind of organization normals will participate in or listen to, to befuddle them and make them think that everything they did was inevitably on their shoulders, and then told me that I had lost my internal illusion. It did not shock me; it saddened me. All this time. No hope for anyone. They wander around like the sheep they are, not understanding anything that goes on but assuming it's done by some normal- it's not. It's just puppet strings, being yanked around.

"So it's all a lie, isn't it, Master... It's just a lie... the government, the corporations, everything on the tv, all the news..."

"No, not all the news, and the government does perform needed functions. We just own it, that's all. The masses usually get told the truth, Billy. We do have to lie sometimes, but we like trust. We control what happens, so why lie about it? Oh, and Billy- cut that 'master' crap. I get called a lot of that high-sounding crap and Daddy gets called it even more- now that I'm going to be the Dominator, I guess I'm going to get a lot of it too. Everything from All-Knowing Lord to Wise Master to Benevolent One. It's all a lot of bullshit, meaning zilch except to sycophants and toadies. Never use any of it. My name's Howard." I read 1984, and only now am I beginning to understand the final meaning of doublethink- Howard's organization doesn't bother to do all the crap, they just do what they need to, to keep things going the way they are, and it doesn't mean editing information for the masses, only the important stuff, to shadow what they need to shadow and say what the people want to hear- no wonder politics is so confusing. It's a combination of doublethink and NO THINK. And Howard doesn't like being called Master. It figures. Why would he? He knows he's the master. 'Howard' is simply an identifier. If someone was to talk about the Ultimate World-Controlling Badass in the third person, using those exact words, Howard would know they're referring to him. But he knows that, and we know that, and so he feels it doesn't need to be said- and he's right. And of course he doesn't want his servants acting like toadies- what would be the **point**?! It's not like we don't already have to do whatever he says..

"Yes.. Howard. Speaking of 1984.. why did you use Orwellian as a swear word back in the arcade?", Logically, Orwell would be a curse because of what he told the masses without saying it outright..

"Ugh.. Orwell. The Bastard. Eric Blair used to be a second level, Billy, one of our best. He ran a lot of shit in World War II, the production, the politics, he had his hand in everything. He was our man

for that war. But something happened to him.. he started bitching about how it's all a lie and how we're fucking over and killing everyone. Eventually he pumped out Animal Farm and 1984, under the name George Orwell. The funny thing was, he never told anyone he was one of us. He never said 'Hey, there's an Illuminati, they're running everything.' That would just have made people laugh. He did the most damaging thing he could- he got everyone paranoid by writing some very cutting books. He even used his power to put them to the front of the shelves. And people got paranoid, and he slowed us down majorly. We axed him after that and made a totally fake history for him, and the books are being misinterpreted in schools all over the world." That all figures. And he's telling it to me as if it were common knowledge.. because it is, to him.

"Holy fuck..", I found myself muttering.

"Billy, we do that kind of thing all the time."

"So no one knows where I am?" If no one does, it's total. Not gradual, not "some people know some things", it's total and airtight. Which it should, logically, be.

"Unless you count us, nope. No normal currently knows anything about you." He pushed some buttons on the jet's screen and called up a few things. "You're dead, Billy. A fire at the orphanage killed you. Everyone else was able to escape, but your clumsy ass tripped and fell into the flames. Everyone else was too busy running off to care, and when the firemen got there they found nothing but a pile of blackened flesh and bones, with six-fingered hands. Must have been you!" Not missing, dead. I wonder how many other people they've done this to? Probably few... I am a special case. Good fucking God, there weren't even any hints about this, it's just that you wake up one morning and you no longer have your life- like midnight heart attacks, only more surprising. And they have guys to cover every base, all the time. For the second time, I envied him- I wanted to throw around that kind of instant power, at least for a while. Don't like the TV programming? Change it without changing the channel! Teacher pissing you off? Kill her and get her replaced! Obnoxious fools gettin ya down? Snap your fingers and have giant musclemen raping their asses with a door handle! Whatever the problem, we can solve it..

"What about her?", I asked. I had to know.

"Sarah, tell him."

"Billy...", she began, "I'm not a normal. I'm just as engineered as you are. I was made to kill. I was their top project, 30 months before you two were created. They wanted the perfect assassin, they said. I've been killing people since the age of 7 and a half. No one suspects a little girl. When I'd be a witness to yet another murder, I'd give the cops some fake shit, then I'd go off with my parents, different each time, and do it again. I've got about a hundred personal kills- I lost track at twenty- and twice that acting as an operations master. I got promoted for it for some reason, and was all the way to a second level Illuminatus when they said they could make me first. Now, no one, and I mean **no one**, except the Dominator, messes with a first level Illuminatus. So I said yeah, and then they said they'd need to knock me out to do the necessary examination, and I was stupid and blind and too full of power-greed, so I said sure, and I woke up in Howard's mansion." So they don't limit their operations to people outside their organization. Makes sense. I found myself wincing- all that power, all those kills, and she falls into the same trap. Ugh.

"Billy, you have no idea how nice it is to have an assassin around the house.", Howard said, grinning a bit. I involuntarily laughed to myself, shaking my head. Of course it means nothing to him... and of course he'll take advantage of the power he wields.

"I could have really used one.", I said. "All those assholes, man.. hey, you mind sending a squad to waste some guys? No problem for you, right?"

"Well, it wouldn't be a problem, but I like to keep the tactical shit to a minimum. Don't wanna raise

any more eyebrows than I have to." Yes, they are the masters, but they're the **secret** masters.

"Yeah, I can see it now.. 'Assholes found dead in their beds! Local community dances for joy! More at 11!'", I cracked. Why am I cracking jokes? Why **not**?

"Billy, I'm sorry, but I am not going to waste resources wasting my servant's old enemies. Besides, you'll probably outlive them by millennia anyway." Good point. "Now for this speech... ergh!" I am certain he would have commanded me to help, if I knew any of the details of what he was doing. What came on his screen was not one of those what-controls-what maps used by various conspiracy theorists to illustrate their beliefs, but just lists. Lists of unfinished business, lists of projects, lists of ideas. Dividing resources, selecting people, implementing policies- the same things, I realized, that you'd see discussed in the halls of any other kind of organization, large or small. What's the order of the day? Well, first we have to decide who should get what in this new industry, we have to decide who's worthy of promotion, and we have to decide what direction our string-pulling shall go in next. Perfectly normal, reasonable, and businesslike, using its own order and its own decision-making protocol. Well- how **does** one expect them to behave, anyway?

He did his job with efficiency. Had I known the details, I would have asked to help, because I want a hand in this. He's deciding the fate of nations with the click of a mouse, writing down things, nodding his head, and occasionally deleting something he didn't want to mention. Sarah seemed to know some things as well. Hmm, that is an interesting question- what should they do about Bosnia for global interests? Keep constant war going and make sure the larger countries' people have some enemy to point their fingers at or at least something to worry with? Or make peace and start some major conflict somewhere else to remind everyone that the military isn't totally worthless? We need these people to look like peacemakers, we need to make enemies of these people, that country's prevailing religious beliefs are starting to get in our way... he went from topic to topic with ease, indiscriminately judging government, corporate, and popular interests alike, deciding the issues that were left on the old Dominator's back burner. "Better let Gates take care of that himself.", he muttered in examining something labeled 'Public versus Private (Anti-Trust) in normal courts-theory, practice, ramifications' and some other, related articles from other people.

"Hold up.. Billy? Read this shit over, and tell me if there's anything particularly crazy or esoteric.", he said, gesturing me to read the notes, ideas, and outline he had transcribed.

"It's all crazy and esoteric...", I said after doing some semi-amused doubletakes on a few items, my mind flittering around with random jokes and half-thoughts. Domination.. manipulation.. re-education.. take coordination! Don't drink and dominate, kids! Of course, anything which would cause mistakes to be made in this field would be out of the question. This is complicated as hell. To figure out exactly what every little thing meant- the exact meaning, not just what it says- would require the years of training and exposure he's obviously had. I'm not sure what Globalism vs. Globality (Howard didn't put it in his speech, but it's an article that came up) means. I'm not sure what some of these items mean in these terms. But I know this much: I'm going to be sure, sooner or later.. and that thought would not quit pounding on my brain like a raging ape.

"So what's the worst of it?" The worst had to be the dates, which he had prepared if asked a question, but he didn't intend to speak about them. One thing I know about science fiction is that it tends to think that technology will advance unrealistically fast in certain ways and unrealistically slow in others. Unless they're hiding elephants behind palm trees, these dates are sci-fi dates.

"The worst? That would probably be this bit about checking the majority of the populace's brain chemistry by 2015.. and this bit over here about having a true visible world government in 2010. Howard, at least add some damn years to that. There's a whole lot of people out there trying to prevent this shit, remember? John Birch Society, all those militias.. you're begging for it if you think you can do all this in two decades."

"Billy, we own the John Birch Society. It's one of our tools. And the militias- any country in the world,

any 'people's army' or whatever- are a bad joke. Fringe groups do not bother us. We can grind them into blood paste. The only thing I have to worry about is the mainstream disliking the idea, and if we put enough crap out in favor, they'll walk right into it like the sheep they are."

"This is crazy.." Which would fit him right in.

"By whose standards? The normals'?"

"Yeah.." What are the standards around here for insanity? I imagine they're much different. I suppose I'm not going crazy, in his terms. I'm just behaving as predicted... as planned.

Chapter 6

It took him twenty more minutes to do it, as he pontificated over details in the same way as someone doing a long book report or writing assignment. He marked off things with a line through them, swore a few times, and then crossed off a whole paragraph as he went through the computer's files and his own handiwork, with an efficiency I imagine I could summon up if I really had to. During that time, I felt rage build up inside me. 'Go away, Rage.', I told it inside my head. 'You're not needed now. You can't help me. Getting pissed off is **not** going to get me out of here.' That's what the burrowing was. Digging, as if an oil well, for the rage within. But hatred means nothing here. It did not reply. It only started to seize me- seize me in its fierce grasp, like a fist of frozen stone. I found I was near-paralyzed with fury. I wanted to kill- not just Howard, but whoever let him in his position. For he didn't get here by himself. Someone- several someones- had to help him, and I wanted to kill them all.

"Billy, wake up.", Howard said, shortly after he finished his work, detailing the finer points of world-controlling bureaucracy.

"I am awake." I realized how monotonous my voice sounded. I sounded like a robot. I did not show anger. I just spoke in a steady, unchanging voice. He'd probably just **laugh** if I got pissed... of course, it's emanating from me and he probably knows it anyway. I'd know it, and he's me.

That pisses me off more than anything else. What the **fuck** is wrong with these people to do something like that? Did they sit down with one of them saying, 'Hmm, what's the most evil thing we can do? Control.. yes, control. But let's have them- **twins!!**', with the rest of them applauding? Well, guys, if it's ratings you want, you got em. I give you a 10 for the idea, a 10 for execution, and a 10 for overall implementation, style, and performance. Now let me out of here, okay? Of course they won't.. and they can't let me go, not now. I have a death certificate. Billy Bohecker is dead meat.. and I can see all the assholes at school, all the teachers, saying 'Gee, Billy's dead, he was so strange-looking, too.. oh well, class, today we finally learn how to spell our own names.' Well, Mrs. Bitch, screw you hard and in the ass. Didn't you know I was world-controlling material? Damn it all.. I figure it would have been much better for everyone concerned if I simply grew up with him, but noo.. they had to give him his world-exposed servant.

"Billy, are you still sane?", Howard asked. Am I? Technically, yes.. I haven't gone off the deep end.

"Yes, Howard.", I found myself answering in the monotone again. Instead of looking at myself to see what was causing the rage- which should be fairly obvious- I looked at the rage itself. It was a primal rage, an anger that transcended the self. I had **hate**. But I knew that giving in to the hate would gain me literally nothing- there's no one I can kill, that's the fact of it. And maybe there is no way out, or a way I haven't even remotely considered, or a way that hasn't made itself available to me yet. I prefer the third option. It keeps the opportunism flowing while admitting the naked truth- that there was no immediate way out and that I just **can not** even begin to break his commands at all. So I turned to the rage and told it to seal its pie hole firmly shut, using it against itself, trying to clear my mind to look for opportunities that would not present themselves any time soon.

"Billy, have you really lost something up there or are you only pretending to act like a machine?", he asked. Well, I have to pretend, because his command also makes sure that my words are intelligible, and if I let go of the mechanical voice, my words would come out as unintelligible primate slobber-speak. Also, I subconsciously knew, if I let this rage take any of my physical faculties, I literally would go crazy, and he'd eventually just chuck me into a meatgrinder or something.

"Pretending."

"Why?"

"Because if I allow my soul to resurface, I'll go insane."

He did the unexpected. He put his arm around me, hugging me a bit, and said, "Billy, I severely doubt you can make yourself stay this way for a couple of days, much less a couple of millennia. And believe me on this one, you're not going to go any more insane than you already have." Maybe he's right.. I'm exaggerating because this whole situation is exaggerated. And he's even more right by saying that I can't stay like this. But I know that I'm really starting to lose it. Maybe reality will come back to me in a new form, with different clothes, replacing its old appearance with a new one.. given the disparity between my current situation and the one I used to live in, that's probably going to happen. New situations require new thinking, and I can never be the same. So maybe I'm just disassembling for the time, and going to come back a new Billy.. yes, that would be nice, because then the pain and the rage would end. That'll happen anyway... I can adapt.. even to this, I can adapt, and he's smart, so he'll give me the materials (information, mostly) I'll need to adapt with and the time I'll need to adapt in. He's cold, calculating, nice, and happy. Exactly what I'd be if I had the position... wait, that does make a good deal of sense, doesn't it.

"I guess I'll end up joining the Mad Hatter for tea after all... but I never heard of Alice getting thrown down the rabbit hole by five bodybuilders in the middle of the night." It was somewhat humorous, but even I didn't find it funny after I said it.

"Oh.. the Enforcers? Oh yeah, those guys do just about everything. Muscles, training, implants. No personalities at all. They're like normal special forces agents, only they're a lot smarter, stronger, faster, and kick more ass." Ah. Who needs regular servants when you can have effective robots? Hmm, that means he'll be using them instead of me for certain things...

"They're basically lobotomized, Billy. Born without souls.", Sarah said.

"Sounds like my old gym teacher...", I said without thinking. Howard laughed, and pressed a button under the seat. Immediately, a long footrest came up, and the chairs reclined slightly. He fidgeted a bit, then did something more unexpected- he threw the weapon out of his coat (whatever it was) and laid down on top of us, his head in Sarah's lap and his feet on my chest. Why does it fucking figure that he'd use me as a footrest.. then, he sat up, pressed another button, and a screen like the one he has in his living room swung together from the sides of the plane, the halves becoming a whole (I've never seen a monitor of any sort swing **together** before, either..), and he pulled up windows of all sorts in it, finding what he was looking for.

LEVEL THREE INFORMATION ONLY

Type: Weapon Name: Micro-2025

Last updated: 4/1/98

Development source: I In use by: limited I Public Release Time (est.): 2025

Development cost: approx. 44 MU Production cost: approx. 170 KU ea. (I'll have to ask Howard what a U is..)

(history, history, who cares.. but it looks like these guys have a long line of superweapons they've never shown the public.)

Fusion-based weapon may release up to 500 Mcal/sec, for an indefinite period of time, in a variable-size beam of high wavelength energy.

Restrictions: The Micro-2025 may overheat. Its internal components must not be allowed to reach temperatures over 300° C, which it may achieve after one minute of regular use at room temperature (27° C). A heatsink is in production; approx. release date 12/1/98

Ammunition/Energy Source: Hydrogen hydroxide (HOH); other non-acidic hydrogen sources usable

Operating life: 5 years, regardless of use, at which point the fission "pilot light" becomes inactive. (Fission pilot light? Hmm.)

Training required: none, other than that on very powerful weapons.

Wait.. Hydrogen hydroxide? HOH?! That's the same as H₂O - which would make this thing run on fucking **water**!! That figures... it just takes the hydrogen and makes it into helium through the process of fusion, throwing the oxygen away. Making this thing run on an indirect conversion of matter to energy. Which makes **five hundred fucking mega calories a second** not so unreachable.. I stared at the weapon in shock. Yeah, that's it all right, the same thing that Howard had so carelessly chucked on the floor.. oh, it's not going to go off on its own, the Illuminati design better than that. But the way he chucks that kind of power around... oh **man**. I realized that if I owned something like that, I would treat it with the greatest of reverence.. but he's much more used to power than I am, which should be fucking obvious by now.

Howard then yawned, as if to punctuate that point. "Billy, what was it like going to school, anyway?", he asked in a completely curious tone.

Needless to say, I told him the truth. "It fucking sucked. We sat around all day slowly pretending to learn crap it would have taken me one minute to figure out on my own. And the rules were such gay shit. What a fucking waste of time. Howard, if you control the world, can you tell me why the hell does it have to be so damn boring?"

I didn't actually expect him to answer me, but he did. "Billy, do you really think any of us want the masses to learn quickly? If they learned quickly, we wouldn't be able to keep them in there as many years as we need, or we'd have to teach them more. And then we wouldn't be able to do the college shuffle with them, keeping them working hard doing the repetitive things to even get into college, doing the things they need to practice to be good employees in the future. Oh yeah, we teach em the intellectual stuff they'll need to actually do their jobs in college, but as for that repetitive mentality to keep em working an eight hour, five day week for years on end with a few vacations? All in the public schools. Not to mention, intelligent and educated people who don't believe in the system are so much fucking harder to control than their stupid counterparts. So it has to be boring." That makes perfect sense, Howie... perfect sense. It's not for us to be educated, it's for them (assuming I'm still one of 'us' and not one of 'them'), to keep the sheeple in line. And, logically, all other social programs are the same way; not for our purposes, but for theirs. Of course it is.. when they're through throwing us bones, they get down to business. The business being, of course, stupefying the people so that they can't fight back. Good job, guys. No fucking wonder I thought those assignments were a waste of time... they are exactly that, an intentional waste of time, time that he's obviously used to actually improve his education. Forget mere genetics.. genetics plus education make the intelligence gap even wider. And now I know why they can make him the ruler of the world so young.. that, too, makes perfect sense. As my brain realized that things, in fact, were

not so crazy as I perceived them to be, I calmed down. Good. Get rid of some of this fucking anxiety, it's not helping me any.

"And you have ways of controlling people who see through some of it, of course.", I replied.

"Naturally. Seldom with implants, although sometimes for their technical skill if they have it. Usually, we just kill them."

"Which is where she comes in." Sarah chuckled darkly at my comment.

"Only in emergencies.", Howard said. "Like I said, we need to let em believe they're free. So far, anyway."

"Yeah.. so far.", I muttered. So far until they decide the time is right to start kicking ass and computerizing names. Howard doesn't really care how long that'll take. It might take decades or it might happen this month. Who gives a shit? He's immortal... he can wait. And he'll have me waiting right beside him... fuck a duck.

Chapter 7

Howard seemed to relax slightly. His muscles simply went more limp, he closed his eyes a bit, and I could feel his current energy level go down. "So how did you deal with people two-fifths your IQ, Billy?", he asked, a grin on his face.

And once more I had to tell him the truth. "I avoided most of them.. two fifths? It felt like less! Well.. some of them were cool. Some of em I could manipulate, but others were just plain stupid and obsessed with their own dicks, like nothing else mattered except how long their cock was. Ever since I was seven, I realized I was better than them," As I said that, I realized a strange correlation between my previous thoughts and what's happening now. Of course... fuck, I won't have to deal with any of them again, that's for sure.. "I knew I was way stronger and smarter than any of em, and I kept wishing I wouldn't have to deal with them anymore." As I spoke, I realized the connection all too well. I had long been... wanting to be away from.. fucking HELL!! **"I got what I wished for!!"**, I screamed, squinting my eyes so as not to cry.

"Yup. And now you're the genie.", Sarah said in an all-too-pleasant voice.

"I saw that movie..", I muttered back.

"What?", Howard asked, unfamiliar with what we were talking about.

"Aladdin.", we answered simultaneously. Sarah continued, "End of the movie, guy gets a genie and three wishes, he wishes to be a sultan, not powerful enough for him, wishes to be a sorcerer, Aladdin tells him the genie is more powerful, so he wishes to be a genie." And then he gets nailed by wrist-cuffs, the restrictions of the genie, and he is crammed into a lamp and sent off to the far reaches of never-never land, only to return when Disney feels like making sequels.

"Complete with restrictions.", Howard figured out.

"Yup. Saw it while tracking my fifteenth kill." What?!

"What the hell would someone the Illuminati are trying to kill be doing watching a Disney movie?!", I asked in total surprise. That doesn't seem to make sense, but I know it does.. the same strange sense the rest of this makes. But hell, a Disney movie?! The happy variety, with all the bright colors and the whistles? That's just fucked up..

"He was a family man. Eight year old boy, six year old girl." I guess their targets have families just

like everyone else.. the knowledge woke me up a bit.

"Why?", I asked.

"They never told me for any of em." Figures. A soldier's job, and all that.

"So how'd you do it?", I replied.

"Poke to the heart." Uh, what? "A lot of people live on the verge of cardiac arrest, Billy. Sweet shit might be great for us, but cholesterol clogs up their arteries, fat makes their hearts pump harder, and a lot of other shit they do hurts their health. Do a strong, quick poke to a few points on the chest, blood clots and pieces of cholesterol get stopped up in the cardiac muscle, and presto! Instant corpse." In other words, she does the right shit to the arteries and the veins and.. oh crap. But I know that can't work except on people ready to die..

"So what about the healthy people?", I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"If you can think of it, we've probably done it.", she answered, in a voice that would normally have a shrug with it.

And can I ever think of it. Gibs Ahoy... "Ugh..", I said, thinking of all the possibilities. Violence is great, yeah, violence kicks.. but these people probably have a power of nastiness you don't exactly see on TV. And with those fingernails.. a little chunk here, a little chop there... that's an interesting way to kill someone, just take them apart, small piece by small piece until nothing is left but a bloody mound of flesh.

I looked and noticed Howard happily drifting off to half-consciousness or sleep. Why not? He has nothing to fear for the moment..

"This is nothing like what I expected.", I muttered. When you get captured by the bad guy, you expect bad things to happen to you. When nothing other than the obvious happens to you, and the bad guy is perfectly willing to let you live, oddness is afoot. When the bad guy happens to be your fucking world-controlling **twin brother**... yeah, it's pretty fucked up. Fucked up or no, I'm seriously beginning to doubt I have any hope in Hell of getting out of this..

Sarah chuckled a bit, in a nice tone that isn't usually heard from expert assassins with kills galore under their belts. "Oh, you're going to have to get used to that. In addition to running the world, we also specialize in fucked up shit." The first thing that struck me was her use of 'we', but then I discounted it in favor of the second thing.

"It gets more fucked up than this?"

"Billy, these people are trying to engineer a **dragon** up at Northberg. And it gets more fucked up than **that**.", she replied in a slightly nastier voice. Now how would they go about doing **that**?! I guess since they have the Genetic Engineer's Construction Set, they can do whatever the fuck they feel like.. wonder what practical applications it has, or if they're doing it simply because they can.

"I feel like I'm in a book.. with a schizophrenic as the author.", I muttered, wondering what kind of freakish, mutant, deranged mind could ever possibly come up with something like this.

"Welcome to your own private piece of Hell, Billy. Just feel lucky Satan over here doesn't believe in torment.", she said, gesturing to Howard's relaxed form. No, he doesn't believe in pain, he just likes servants, someone to be there for him as he goes about his business of world domination.. and that's who I am, now. The best toy in the world, kids.. I wonder if three hundred years in the future, they'll have a Friends Factory for this. Get whoever you want, freshly created, pick any servant you want, we got hundreds, we even make em custom. Yeah, they probably will. And I'll be around to

see it happen...

"Billy... it's not going to be.. what you think it's going to be.", Howard gently said, his feet on my stomach relaxing even more.

"I believe you, Howard.", I told him. That much is certain. I better quit even trying to guess the methodology of this place before I find out more about it.. and if I can't escape, I'll find out lots, lots more about it shortly. I am not being kept in a box.. my imagination drifted a bit, spurred by recent developments. I imagined myself coming into school and telling my adventures.. I imagined Howard coming there, I imagined my old buddy Paul coming here.. I imagined a number of things, most involving the people I used to know or thought I knew, all interplacated with various elements of what I've seen here. It makes for some pretty freakish combinations.. some of them utterly unrealistic and impossible, some of them merely unlikely. All involved some sort of dominance from one hominid to another. Oh, God.. but God can't help me now, and neither can anyone else. Actually, the only person who can give me any sort of real help is Howard himself..

Slow as ever, time continued to pass. It has a habit of doing that, whenever you do or don't want it to. Time, unlike anything else (except light, but even jets like this can't quite do relativistic speeds), tends to have its own road, apart from the usual turn of things. It decides the turn of things. Time will pass regardless of who dies and who doesn't. It's just a matter of what state you're in at the moment- sleeping, normal, super-adrenalized, or anything in between- that decides how you experience time.

So, naturally, time was going pretty damn slow for me. Which is a bad thing- I do have an odd craving to watch Howard speak, to get some of the suspense over with. But it's also a good thing, it means that I can stop and think some more. And seeing as how thinking's the only thing I really **can** do at the moment, now's a great time to start.

Ways out: Forget it. Been there, can't do that.

Ways in? Hmm. That's a new one. No one ever considers how to break **into** jail. All the barbed wire is pointing the wrong way, all the guards are expecting in-to-out movement.. how do people get into this organization, anyway? They got me The Really Simple Way (and had I not been to that orphanage, it surely would have happened some other way, one thing I do know is that these guys **do not** fuck around), they got Sarah Another Really Simple Way, but what about the Illuminati themselves? Oh, hell. I'll find this shit out later. It's probably a variation of the obvious- find the smart guys and just draft them in.

Ways sideways: Another new concept. A little birdie in my head (Okay, guys, it's getting crowded, I need some space in here, it's still my cranium after all) told me that I'm probably fairly safe where I am and that if someone else in this organization got me, it would probably be a fuckload worse- hell, for all I know about this place, I could be sitting on a cliff of Bad, ready to fall into A Fuckload Worse. Besides, Howard's my twin, after all- he does have some sense of empathy and he reserves his power. So, fuck that. If I am doomed to be somewhere in this organization forever, I need to know what Howard's really like and what he really does anyway..

Ways some other way: Not even gonna try.

So, fuck moving around. As much as it pains me to admit it, 'doesn't work' is still 'doesn't work' and no amount of wishful thinking will change that. Let's see, what else...

What do I have to lose? Not all that much, really. My sanity, perhaps. My thoughts, I doubt I'm going to lose those. The idea of being able to perform the natural functions of a living creature? Not going to lose most of those.. The idea of being able to do what I want? I haven't lost that, really. I looked at it from his point of view and thought about it- well, if he's not actively using me, what the hell does he care what I do so long as it's not in his way? Of course, contact with the outside world is something

definitely forbidden. These are the **secret** masters, after all.

How monumentally fucked-up this all is took another moment to reflect on me. For a reason I cannot fathom, I simply stopped thinking about it, leaned back, and probably had a self-induced *petit mal* seizure, as time passed by. I suppose that's just my brain reconfiguring itself, getting rid of the waste.. all the postulates and pre-suppositions are gone now. The real rules have been discovered.

I looked at Howard and he was thinking about what's to come, or maybe just daydreaming (What about? Some things are better left unasked. Of course, as an immortal I'll find out such things eventually, they'll fade back into unimportance, or better/worse yet, his daydreams will come true.), head rolling back and forth on the comfortable seat. Which is a reminder of reality- in fantasy, no one ever finds themselves idly daydreaming about random shit, unless it rapidly starts coming true. But the Dominator has fantasies and worries, just like anyone else.

He rolled his head in my direction. "Billy, how is life without power?"

"It sucks shit, especially when you think about it."

"All the time?"

"All the time. As soon as you remember you're powerless, no matter where you are, your life is acknowledged as being sucky."

"And I suppose your school was designed to manipulate its students into the normal way of thinking."

"Yup. Brainwashing through fear, peer pressure, pressure from authority figures, and use of force, over a long period of time." And probably some other manipulative techniques I don't know enough about to identify. The time is what gets me the most. My twin master here hasn't been forced to spend six and a half hours a day for five days a week doing effectively nothing.

"So how little power did you really have, anyway? Any influence over school, over others in the school, over other events outside of it.."

"Okay, how do I get this through to you.. imagine being in a straitjacket, tied to a wall. Only no one ever tells you you're tied up, you're in the 'land of the free' and all that, but you can't do anything. Nothing. I mean fucking zilch. Everyone in America under the age of 18 isn't much more than a numbered hunk of meat, and those over are moving, numbered hunks of meat. The only people who understood anything, including me, at all were my so-called parents, who were probably agents.."

"Every normal in America, you mean. We've got young Illuminati all over the globe. We're not the only engineered on this planet, Billy." Why would we be? Shit, if you're going to make that kind of technology investment.. "And yes, your parents were our agents. We wouldn't do it any other way."

"That figures. I'm going to assume you get whatever the hell you want.."

"You assume correctly.", he replied. Sarah laughed for a bit.

"So if you want something that's a prototype or just not out yet, do you get it?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not the only one who wants things before the masses get their hands on them. Pre-dated inventions and products are just another one of the perks, and we've got several dozen dedicated Enforcers and servants here for just that." That also figures. If not for their efficiency that number would probably be several hundred, either way it's expensive as hell.. but who cares about

the expenses, so long as these guys get what they want?

"And if you want something that doesn't even exist, can you get it anyway?"

"That's called a special order, Billy. If it can be built with the technology we have, they will build it for me. And they will check it, and even put it into general use- this one's mine, the hangcopter." He showed me a diagram and animation of a cross between a hang-glider and a helicopter, with large blades, straps, and obviously some automatic system in it so that the rider could utilize weapons or tools while flying. I studied it more closely- yup, it's workable, got a tail-rotor, guards against getting your limbs severed by the blades, emergency disengage (don't forget your parachute..), and all.

"Fuuuuuuck...", I muttered. I've seen these style of things on the History Channel, but the government abandoned them because they simply couldn't perform.. of course, with the mega-advanced power supplies, super materials, and micro-engineering techniques of these people, if it could ever possibly work, they'll make it work. Some remaining shred of self-preservation told me that I've got to keep that in mind...

There wasn't anything else to ask him. I know what's going on, as insane as it is. He simply owns.

And so I waited, looking over at Sarah, who was partially zoned-out, even with Howard laying on her. Looks like she's used to waiting.. which makes sense, considering that's what predators do. Howard wasn't, and he was slightly fidgety, playing a few games I didn't recognize on the jet's computer, trying to sleep, and took a few things that looked like candy bars from behind the seat and ate them- I took some myself and found them delicious, and found a water supply to the front and right of where I sat. For a jet this small, it's sure made for long trips.

A while later (no way I'm looking at a clock- I don't want to be counting seconds), Howard sat up, pulled apart a magnetic closure on the ass of his suit, pulled open a slit on the seat, and relieved himself- the instant he did that, I realized I badly had to go and did the same. "Woah! Good thing the air exchange works.", he said as I unloaded lots of crap and piss.

"You're even faster with the fart cracks than the jokers at school.", I noted. But he was right- my shit stank considerably more than his, certainly due to the differences in diet. How's that, assholes? The people in power really **DO** have better smelling shit than you!

An indeterminate amount of time later, Howard was obviously making mental preparations, flexing his muscles and trying to focus himself, before giving us a command I expected. "Billy, Sarah. You will certainly have obvious seats. When I go up, take them. When we're there, say nothing unless I want you to, **do** nothing unless I want you to. And I am to be protected from assassination. Do you understand?"

"Yes.", we simultaneously answered.

He continued his mental preparations with a deep breath, and about ten minutes later, Sarah landed the plane.

The installation, on the outside, was a large, one-story brick building, surrounded on all sides by forest. Guards stood at attention, watching us get out of the jet. Although it was the dead of night, I knew that it had things going on inside- the whole place smelled of secrecy. Or maybe that's just because I know what's going on in there, namely secret stuff.

Howard led us to a small door marked 'Sentient Entrance', obviously knowing where he was going, no guards escorting him. The inside was made of the same steel his mansion is. We continued through a series of elevators, a tram ride, and a few hallways- all interspersed with a few security checks which Howard negotiated quickly. I was too bedazzled by it all to pay much attention to exactly where I was, although I didn't see anything except for mechanical conveyances, steel walls,

guards, and security devices- I was too busy imagining what was going on behind the closed doors we passed. Oh well. I'll probably become familiar with this place as well.. we finally came to the anteroom of the auditorium where Howard would give his speech, and his surrogate father was there in the flesh.

He said all of four words. "Howard, you already know." I tried to telepathically command him to look at me, to answer the burning question of what the fuck he thought he was doing when he separated us and then made me his servant. It didn't work. The aged man walked out the stage door, and stood in front of the chairs, at the stand-up microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati!", he began, in a booming voice amplified by the sound system. "You know why I'm here. I'm here because I'm old. I'm here because I'm losing touch. I'm here because I don't belong here anymore, and I have someone with me who does."

"Ladies of Gentlemen of the Illuminati, I have a statement to make. I resign from my position as Dominator. I claim no power, either as a leader or an Illuminatus, for I am neither of those things. The man who stands before you is one of the masses, who humbly requests that you kind sirs and ladies accept the presence of his chosen replacement, Inheritor Howard." Two guards led him away, either to his death or a life of leisurely retirement- I'm guessing the latter.

Even though a large, digital wall clock said that it was almost fifteen minutes early, Howard didn't keep his people waiting- he walked onto the stage, and we followed him.

Chapter 9

The first thing I noticed about the auditorium was the small, black, cushioned chair directly in front of me. I realized the setup and sat down- Sarah took the one on the other side, and Howard took the elevated, white one in the middle with the slender speaker's podium in front of it, allowing him to look down on everyone except the people high up in the back- which was the second thing I noticed, the room's **size**.

Thousands of Illuminati! Thousands! Granted, it's hierarchical, but I had no idea that so many people could be in on the big secret, with it still being a secret. Wouldn't someone blab eventually? Then again, these people certainly have ways of dealing with that.. such as unity. I doubt this sort of thing is the usual- likely they were just all trying to intimidate him as a common goal- but everyone in the room was **staring** at Howard's face, with few blinks.

If Howard cared, he didn't show it. He pulled the chair's microphone down to his mouth and shouted, in an echoed, booming voice I've only used a couple of times, "**Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati!!!**" His loudness was matched by the sound of a massive wave of clapping. As with the staring, **everyone** was doing it. I immediately understood the dynamic involved- one lone soon-to-be-Dominator is directly showing force in the face of the combined might of the world's controllers. My God, can he really be **that** powerful?!

In an instant, the clapping ended, full stop. Howard picked up the unused podium, folded it in half, and tossed it over his shoulder, creating a significant clatter in the silence. Ah. He's proving he doesn't need to write down his lines.

He spoke clearly and with definition to every one of his words. "Annuit Cœptis: Novus Ordo Seclorum. The clock has ticked again, for what could be the final time. Yes, for all of you who don't know me, I am immortal, a product of Northberg." Some murmuring grew from the back as his sentence ended. Maybe not all of them knew his true origins? "And I have been created with one task in life: to serve as the Dominator of the Illuminati." **Serve**? There's a laugh. Something tells me Howie isn't going to be serving much of anyone.

"As Dominator, I promise to uphold the power of the Illuminati, to uphold secrecy until the Day of

Exposition," I can't wait for **that**. "to be a fair judge, to refrain from excessive alcohol," That line must just be pure tradition. I can barely stand the smell of booze. "to avoid recruitment of the unworthy, to defend my fellow Illuminatus, to dispense justice as I see fit, and to choose an- no, ladies and gentlemen, I just told you why I will not be choosing an heir." The interruption of the speech with that last part was too obviously rehearsed- to me, anyway. Maybe it's better if he **does** sound rehearsed. I know fuck all about how Illuminati use words to judge people.

"I have only one thing to say about the previous Dominator. Any problems you might have had with him, personally, are gone. He's retired, and if any of you wanted revenge against him for something or other - you're just too late, assholes." You're not going to find that level of directness in normal politicians. That paragraph was useful- he demanded a blank slate with regards to personal grievances, and he's going to get it- the reactions to that were laughter and a few fingersnap with half-joking calls of "Shucks!", "Damn!" and similar words in various languages. However, I noticed a man and two women in the front row who didn't appear to be amused at all. Long-term enemies?

"Right now, there's one friendly reminder I want to make." There was a general, almost imperceptible bending-forward, when people want to hear what someone is saying "**WE are the ELITE!**", he boomed. That's just to fuel egos, I know- but it just sounds so **weird** in the middle of a speech! Then again, I should be rather used to weird by now..

"When I came here, I was hit with many more things than I expected. I didn't want to be giving you that litany of undecided issues. New policy time, folks- if you give it to me to choose, I will choose it within three days or give it to someone else, or I'll just say it can't be chosen. I will not let all this sit here, and I can't think of why he did." "To make things harder for you, why else?", I almost tried to say. The assembled masters did not match my cynicism and gave him applause and cheers instead.

"Likewise, I have something to say to all of you- choose things for yourselves. Don't rely on me to make your decisions for you. I'm here to keep order, to break ties, to judge. Nothing more. I've been examining this organization from day one and I can say that everything works much, much more smoothly when you put down your vengefulness and your pettiness and you just decide the major issues breathing together with each other- then go back to your vengefulness and your pettiness when it doesn't matter anymore." For his good advice, he got boisterous, pleased approval of all kinds.

"About spying. Right now, we have tens of thousands of spies. Is that enough? I don't know. Is everything that needs to be spied upon being spied upon? I don't know, no one person can. But I do know that we need to encourage it. As the plan moves forward, intelligence becomes crucial. So if there's any piece of spying you think needs to be done and you don't have the resources for it, go to whoever your boss is and ask him directly. He's here; he knows what I want." There was a bit of clapping- that came from the back, which is where the lower ranks likely are, the ones with bosses who control their resources.

"That leads me to pass my judgments on what we've been doing and how we can make it better. All of you know what recursive encompassization is, and what the main problems are- sometimes the normal organizations don't form, and sometimes our manipulation doesn't have the desired effect. It's a mistake to believe that the sheeple will always join organizations for the things that they strongly do or don't believe in- we know that the ones that aren't willing to speak aren't willing to fight. But I'm asking that we take it one step further. Hidden, private beliefs can get in our way in other ways. This has been discarded many times in the past, but now it's time for Advanced Recursive Encompassization, where we take a more pro-active stand instead of a reactive one. We need to form the organizations now, anything that needs to be there, even if it would theoretically hurt us or not. We need to encourage them to believe anything that they feel like believing, just so they know- on any level- that their beliefs can't do anything. Most of you have heard that as traditional Illuminated speech, but I'm talking about it more literally- make legality supreme, make the framework unstoppable, while giving the sheeple a large cage to play in. And if we want to stop

them from believing something to our detriment, we can do it instantly, because they will be organized, placed into a camp. The odds of any need for emergency secrecy measures are low, because I am not merely suggesting that the larger organizations have Illuminated or servant heads, but we also encourage normals to do it themselves, and we place a manipulator in if it's worth it. Now you'll notice I haven't named any names, because this applies to everyone. I want all of you to keep what I said in mind when doing your jobs- it is universal. You've probably heard most of this before as theory, but I want you to make it concrete. You already know the psychological factors that make all this possible- you know how the masses react- that is my plan. Because the end of secrecy **will** happen in my lifetime and I want us prepared!" I was amazed that I understood all of that. That paragraph still just doesn't sound right to me- I wanted to put it all in other words- but when Howard was writing the speech, I couldn't come up with those words and so I kept my mouth shut. I still can't. The problem is definitely mine- I don't understand how the Illuminati thinks yet.

"I know there's been some hubbub about technological priorities. I've been over them and I don't intend to change them." The finality in his tone ended the paragraph and the topic.

"But there is one thing I do intend to change. Every Illuminatus who does not have them will get two Enforcers. As I said, we are the elite, and we should all be treated like it." Cheering from the back. **This** I understood even before he bothered explaining it to me. Give them something they're going to get eventually, and make them love you for it.

"So what you're saying is that every level 5 deserves Enforcers?", someone from the fifth row asked, keeping his tone completely neutral.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." The lower levels cheered their agreement. "Is that of particular offense to you?"

"No, but I know some people who hate the whole idea."

"So do I, and those people can all go fuck themselves." The lower levels cheered even louder, while the front rows remained generally silent. So much for unity. "There is no reason why every one of us shouldn't have them. They are invaluable. It's time to make them stop being the sole property of the highest levels because, trickle-down issues aside, they improve efficiency, we all know that. And **that** should be our primary concern. And yes, I know what the other concerns are- but we're not going to let fear of each other stifle us this time." 'Fear of each other' being the fact that those creations can probably kill almost anyone in an instant. More cheering and some applause came from the back, letting Howard take a breather- I realized that he was using the time to collect his thoughts.

"Now let's talk about what we all want. The end goal. The Day of Exposition, The Final Triumph, the End of Secrecy. The fact that it's called by so many names is a testament to how much we think about it." General agreement. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, it's coming. You know what we have. And yes, you're damn right- I **do** plan to use mind control implants to do it!" 'Well, why the fuck wouldn't you?', I almost tried to ask, my cynicism reaching up and grabbing my brain. The answer is likely a political one. After all, what's to stop him from doing it to **them**? The irony of that made me smile imperceptibly, as the Illuminati clapped and cheered once more. But there was something else as well- one man said, to himself but loud enough for everyone to hear it, "yes.. and we all know what you plan to do.." The man stood up, and shouting "**Sic sempi-**", drew a gun from his belt to aim it at Howard's head. I zipped the gun out of my trenchcoat with my usual alacrity, aimed it at his head- two gunshots went off, one after the other- and I squeezed the trigger. I immediately realized what had happened. Sarah had fired before I did, her bullet smacking straight into the man's trigger, causing it to go off, just before I gave him a new eye hole in the left part of his forehead. The corpse slumped into the chair. I looked at Howard, wondering if it had all been over that quickly- he was leaning back to the right, covering up the bullet hole.

He **dodged** it.

'Holy fucking shit, why didn't anyone tell me I could dodge bullets?', I asked myself, before my rationality returned and I realized the obvious answer.

"There's also been" Wait a minute- someone just tried to **kill** him and Howard's continuing his speech?! What the fuck?! The show, apparently, **must** go on. "a lot of hubbub about space, how hard it is to achieve it and how many resources need be devoted to get **anything** up there. I have only ten words to say about space. We will get there **completely** in the next hundred years." There were some shocked looks and no clapping- I imagine that had nothing to do with the assassination attempt and everything to do with the fact that most of them probably expected it sooner. Howard's not about to make a promise he can't keep- not to these people. And if NASA's (and the Illuminati backing them's) general inability to provide human colonies over the past thirty years means anything, it's that getting to space is going to take a very long time indeed. But then again, these people could be hiding their own technology, as they did in the bioengineering department.. wait a minute, I just **killed someone**, what am I doing thinking about all this now? It looks like I'm adopting Howard's way of thinking, pragmatism incarnate.. as I realized that, I felt fear once more.

"I know this hasn't been very long, but I'm not going to bore you and that's all the words I care to speak." There was some applause, but not enough for a finale. I looked at them, and it was almost as if they weren't finished with him yet.

A middle-aged man stood up from his seat, hopped up onto the stage to come face-to-face with Howard, and said, clearly, "And you'll get the power when you'll pass the tests." Howard seemed shocked- I had no idea they were allowed to surprise him with something like that, and obviously neither did he. The audience, however, was holding down smiles.

"You were **all** informed of this, weren't you.", Howard addressed the audience. Everyone answered a general affirmative- in a great many different languages.

Howard, apparently, was going to complete the show to their satisfaction. He laughed and smiled, waving to the crowd as he followed the man offstage. Sarah quietly followed him and I walked off behind them.

I can't believe that just happened. I just executed someone- a member of the Illuminati, no less- and no one appears to give a shit. What kind of place is this, anyway?! And then there was that little matter of bullet-dodging- the fastest thing I've ever dodged before was a rock.. definitely a true example of "you don't know until you try". Of course, I've only gotten started. The weirdness has just begun.

Our host took Howard through some corridors and down some stairs, and we ended up in.. what appeared to be a motley prison. Howard recoiled when he saw it; so did I. It looked as if- no, someone actually **had** taken a variety of cells from different eras of recent history and put them all in the same place. The oldest appeared to be something out of the Middle Ages and the newest was made out of plexiglass. The next-to-newest, an ordinary, dirty cell prison, contained a man.. or his living remains. Wrinkled, gnarled, and reeking of his own shit, he looked up at Howard with cataract-filled eyes.

"Lemme guess. This is what happens to me if I fail, right?", Howard said unemotionally. The host simply nodded and I realized what I'd have to be doing. Although watching Howard get thrown into the chamber for all eternity would be poetic justice incarnate, the same problems Sarah and I would have with his death would still apply.

"My paranoia was too low." No, Howard, **my** paranoia was too low! "I didn't anticipate something like this. So.. what are the rules?"

"Go home.", he replied. "You'll get your information on your plane. That's all I'm allowed to say." I

knew- absolutely knew- that Howard could have torn him to pieces on the spot. But an Inheritor, obviously, does not do that to what will be his subjects.

"I know why you did it this way.. you were worried about me killing people after I heard them." If Howard's right- and I have serious difficulty visualizing Howard being wrong- that's incredibly bad. The man simply nodded again, grinning. Howard sharply turned around and walked out.

As I turned around, I heard the decrepit prisoner speak, a thing that sounded like a dog trying to talk through slime. "Howard.. you're immortal... hahahahahAHAHAHA..." He then began hacking and coughing. Howard didn't turn around to answer him.

Howard knew his way around the installation rather well and we silently walked to the internal rail system, which started taking us back to Howard's plane. What insanity, all of this. An Illuminatus tries to assassinate him, but dies by my hand instead, and no one seems to care- was that set up, too?!- and then he is given the final exam from hell after ten years of life and a guarantee of world ownership. I didn't think they'd waste the resources on a possibility of failure. All that work, all that bioengineering, down the drain. I don't understand this place yet, but there is one thing I do know, I realized, as the rail system parked us a few feet from the plane itself.

"Nothing is ever easy.", I said to him as we entered it, Sarah going up front to the controls. "Not even for you."

"Nope.", he replied. "Not even for me. I had no fucking idea. Is this confusing you?", he asked, as the jet lifted itself off into the air and blasted off once more.

"What, the fact that they've spent so much time working on you, you're going to get ultimate power over everything, and you have to do this kind of thing for your enormous parliament?" He nodded. "Nah. Murphy's Law affects all of us." Including- no, especially the Master, because of his position. They need to test him now, which will apparently be bad enough, but it's likely to get nastier as they dislike him for whatever reason. That must be why no one was particularly surprised at an assassination attempt- this is, after all, the Illuminati, where people likely plot against each other on a constant basis.

"Unexpected bad things are distributed indiscriminately. We've lived by that maxim for a long time. In case you didn't already figure it out- which you probably should have by **now**- there's no such thing as 'fair'."

"Don't worry. I figured it out." Howard clicked a few buttons and the information appeared on his screen, and Sarah climbed into the back seat to take a look.

Howard groaned loudly when he read them- I just shook my head and put it in my lap. Ugh. Sarah muttered "Oh, that's just stupid.." under her breath.

1. The first test will last for 28 days, starting at midnight PST. (Wait, how's that possible? Oh yes- we're going west at a faster rate than the rotation of the earth..)
2. You will find that your communications have been severely curtailed. You are to accept this for the 28 days.
3. You and anything you own must stay on your island.
4. You may not intentionally bring anything, save this jet and its current contents, to your island.
5. You have twelve Enforcers and one hundred unimplanted normal servants at your command during those 28 days. (Unimplanted and at your command? This oughta be good.)
5. A particular variety of potato will be available for food. Only the unimplanted servants may farm it. (Yay. None of that crap for me or Sarah.) You and your servants may only eat what is produced on the land surface of your island.
6. No humanoids may be killed or neglected to die during the 28 days. (But why would he do that? Maybe if he gets really, really hungry..)

7. You must run a 3-kilometer course three times a day. When you start running the course each time, you must complete it in 18 minutes. (That's not fast at all, especially not for him. But apparently they want him burning calories.)

8. You must complete a given mental exercise each day.

"Oh **yeah**, Howard.", Sarah said with lots of sarcasm. "**Nooooo** one wants to kill the Inheritor, not before they have a reason to, **uh-uh**... aaa, who's my next employer?"

"Sarah...", Howard warned her.

"Sorry. Realism took over for a minute. Ya know, it would be easy as hell for them to push this just a little bit too far, and the other two tests would.." Drain and kill? Is that what they're going for?

"Yes.. but there's food already on the island, you know that. And that self-sufficiency crap Daddy was telling me about.. just a warning, nothing more." I'm surprised he got a warning.

"And you have to solve one of those problems every day, that and the running.. shit." What if luck was bad and he couldn't keep it up? For a minute I doubted it'd be that hard. I didn't know. Time would tell.

"They want to make sure I'm burning calories and that I can continue to think straight. You know, though... this looks like it was planned as if I'd have to do it alone.. it looks like not that much thought was put into it.", Howard said. I laughed. What the hell? These guys are supposed to be the smartest in the world!

"Committee decisions look like that.", Sarah explained. "You know how it goes. Somebody pushes, somebody pulls, sometimes decisions are made without enough information. They sat down, took a good, careful look at the Northberg specifications for you, figured out how much you'd eat, argued about just what to make you do.. and they completely forgot the edible plants and animals already on the island.. as well as the two of us." What insanity. They weren't thinking about Sarah after all the time it took them to end up implanting her? That's ridiculous.

"Wait a minute.", I said, shaking my head. "That can't be right. You mean to say that the organization in charge of everything, the suuuper-smart Illuminati- just fucked up?"

"Or no one bothered to tell them.", Sarah replied. "My bet's on the Dominator simply not divulging information. You said he warned you. He was probably pulling strings from the first." So some of them didn't know about her, fewer of them knew about me (I knew **some** had to..), no one was thinking about the local plants, and they came up with something based on misinformation. I realized then what that does to decision making. Garbage in..

"That would explain it.", Howard replied. "Oh, and Sarah.. about that mistake."

"I know! I'm sorry, Howard." 'Sorry for hitting the guy in the trigger, or sorry that Howard dodged it?', I didn't ask.

"You were telling me before how you were too good, and that's how you got into this mess.", Howard said patiently. "I told you that there was no such thing as 'too good'. I was wrong- you hit your mark exactly on target, exactly perfectly. You blasted him right in the trigger." I chuckled. "Next time.. don't!"

"Dammit, I know! If you would have been just about anyone else..."

"..you probably would have found a way to kill me already." Sarah was.. blushing? Ah. That's a compliment.

"And as for those potatoes..", Howard said, scrolling down the rules. Specially engineered, require constant maintenance, made to supply him with enough nutrition to get through this test. This is going to be more aggravating than anything else, for all three of us. Howard was making a plan to get them to work and talked to himself in a blend of Latin and English. He finished it, I practiced reciting a work-or-else speech in Spanish, and then he went to look at the dossier of the guy I killed. Nathaniel Lee, age 32, with dwindling fortunes and a grudge. The fool. I imagine Howard's going to have to deal with more idiots like that in the future, which means that I'll get a steady stream of commands to kill.

Chapter 10

And now it's time. Back to the hell I started from, back to see if Howard's short speech is going to work properly. It's a simple one- the gist of it is 'do work or get tortured'. The jet's landing area was fairly close to the small expanse of flat land suitable for farming, and there they were, in cages, under powerful spotlights, near some hastily-constructed grass huts and a giant mound of fertilizer. Four cages full to the brim, guarded by the dozen Enforcers he was allowed. He looked at them and recited, in something of a monotone, what he planned to say. "This is an American experiment.", he told them in perfectly-accented Spanish, and his echo got their attention immediately. "This is a simple test. If you do work for five weeks," When he came up with that, I laughed hard. It's a good idea to overshoot the time frame lest they start slacking near the end. "we will let you go. Escape, however, is forbidden. We will put you in groups of ten. If you escape, we will kill the other nine people in your group." He says he forgot where he got that one- the North Vietnamese or the Japs in World War 2.

"When we release you, we shall give you all a home in America. But to resist is to feel pain. You will grow your own food. You will find water on the other side of the island. You have no way out of here, and you have no rights until you are let go." As if they had any anyway.. "Do you understand?" He was received with weak "Si"s from the huddled, caged masses. He then motioned to me, and it was my turn- I gave them the details of how the engineered potatoes were to be farmed, avoiding tripping over my tongue while speaking their language. As I looked at them, I realized that this part of the test was going to be easy. They were scared of the enormous Enforcers surrounding them, they were scared of their environment, and more importantly, they were scared- more like positively terrified- of Howard.

"That is where you will live.", stated Howard, motioning to the huts. "You will begin work at daybreak tomorrow. Do not be afraid- if you comply, you will have nothing to fear. Enforcers, put them in groups of ten and ensure they know which group they're in." As I looked, I found a few rows of the plants, in various stages of growth, near the fertilizer. Ah, so we won't starve right away.

He didn't need to say anything more to them- better to let them worry. Howard led us back to the mansion at an intentionally leisurely pace, and then to the stairs, the whole of the mansion lit by softly-glowing, well-placed night lights.

"Billy, as of right now, how confused are you?", he asked, leaning up against the door to his room.

"Not confused. Lots of stuff I don't know, but that's different.. only one thing getting me at the moment. How are you going to get to sleep after resting in the jet all day?"

"Simple. I'm just going to think about how tiring the next five weeks are going to be."

"Yeah, enjoy it while you can.", Sarah added, taking off her two-piece suit in a few seconds and opening the door to her room. I realized that that was the first time I've seen a girl naked in the flesh- she excited me on a primeval level, but I was too shocked by the day's events and the general situation to feel much lust.

"I'm gonna have some fucked-up dreams tonight..", I said, as I opened the door to the room where

this whole nightmare started. I'm not sure why both of them found that amazingly funny, but they laughed hard before we all went to bed. Wait, make that 'I'm gonna have some fucked-up dreams tonight if I can actually get to sleep'. I've accepted this whole freakish scenario as reality for a long while now, but I'm still very on-edge and my senses are still on full alert, how the hell do I hope to-

Wham. The blackness took me like a tidal wave. I'm not sure whether or not I managed to think 'That wasn't so hard after all' before I passed out.

And then I had a nightmare.

Chapter 11

Stone, chipped walls surrounded me, the ceiling being just as high as my head. Paths laid out in all different directions. I took one- the north one, I knew- and ran down the corridor, turning at right angles every so often. A T-junction was there- but a giant, white lion-beast was on the left. I ran to the right, leaping over flames and dodging traps, which the giant beast simply ignored. I continued- and a white dragon roared in front of me, and I ran to the right, navigating even more left-and-right turns. A flying demon- again, just as white as I am- screeched in front of me, and I ducked under it and kept running. And I kept going.. back to where I started, back through more passageways, into even more monsters, continuously being chased- and I KNEW, just KNEW that I couldn't get out, that there was simply no door to the outside at all, how the hell did I get here...

I sat up instantly, screaming with every ounce of power in my lungs, my throat burning and my diaphragm feeling bruised.

And almost screamed again as I remembered where I was. 'Calm down, dammit!!', I almost shouted out loud. 'You already know getting upset isn't going to help!'

Speaking of upset, the door opened, and Howard and Sarah were there, simply staring at me. For once I envisioned her being more dangerous than him; he was mildly annoyed and somewhat curious, while she had the Hell Hath No Fury™ scowl from hell.

"Uhh.. what time is it?", I asked, feeling more like a complete dick than anything else.

"Oh-dark-thirty.", Sarah responded in a grating voice. And she was right. Still no sunlight. Urgh.

"Billy," Howard commanded me, "never do that again."

"Do the rules for these things go something like 'if I can't control it, than neither can the implants'?" Wow! I was able to ask that question without sounding like I have something up my sleeve (which, unfortunately, I don't...)!

"Yes."

"Then that's not going to help." He rolled his eyes and muttered something in Latin. Sarah simply started chuckling darkly.

"They all scream.", she observed. "I screamed a bit at the start, you scream at night without thinking about it. Almost everyone in pain screams sooner or later. The only exceptions are those who don't live long enough to get the chance."

"Well, if he only screams at night, there are other solutions than commands..", Howard said, smiling. There was no need for me to ask what he had in mind.

"What the hell should I say? I didn't mean to, and I didn't like doing that.", I said, flopping back down on the bed. "Sorry." I closed my eyes.

"Billy, get up!", Howard shouted.

Damn it, am I going to be allowed to sleep or... I did sleep. The window proclaimed daytime. And I suppose now it's time for me to..

"Get dressed and make them work. I don't care what you do to them so long as every one of them can still work. If you ever intend to scare them, you may do it with this.", he said, setting down an incredibly large weapon that looked like a mutant cross between a bazooka and a shotgun.

I started putting on the same clothes as I had before (which were, surprisingly enough, off the floor and put away), and looked at the device. It looked like a shotgun with an extremely wide rifle clip attached to it. It must have been three feet long with a foot wide barrel, which had something strange in it- an automatic barrel blocker to close it up when not in use? "What do you kill with that?!"

He smiled, his grin reflecting every bit of his power. "Jets.. tanks.. battleships.. it's an atomic shotgun." The barrel blocker must be for the excess radiation, then. Holy shit. Now I'm carrying an atomic weapon, same as he was carrying a nuclear one.

"Ehh?! You managed to..?!" But as before, none of this really surprises me. Amazing, yes.. but weirdness continues to be par for the course here.

"That's right. We managed to micronize fission explosives as well. It's a good thing they can't get out of control."

I made a ka-boom sound and gesture in my all-black outfit. He nodded. I walked past him, down the stairs, across the thickly padded carpet, and out the door.

'I do not feel like putting up with any more shit than I absolutely have to.', I decided. And I didn't think I'd have to put up with much- the peasants, I knew, would be terrified. I did not have to walk far to get to the people- the farmland was only about fifty meters from the mansion itself, and the people stood on the edge of it.

Enforcers, all armed with assault rifles, physically blocked the terrified mass. A white line, I noticed, was painted around the rather large enclosure of farmland and the huts. The people tried to get as close as they could to the line, but not daring to try to push past the Enforcers and cross over- some had bruises on their faces, and I immediately realized what had happened. The Enforcers already had orders not to let them pass the line.

"Translate what I say, and what's directed at me.", I told the nearest Enforcer, who looked in my direction. "Attention!", I shouted, and the Enforcer did translate. Good. This should be relatively easy. "Let me make this perfectly clear- **YOU ARE NOT GOING TO ESCAPE!**" I used my echoed-voice trick, which immediately got their attention. "This, as has been said before, is an experiment! A test! And you will fulfill your roles in that test by doing what it was that I told you to do!"

"And what if we don't?", a young man asked, looking me right in the eye. I got the gist of his message before the Enforcer translated it back.

"If you don't, we will torture you." The reactions were predictable- shock and horror. I heard mutterings that I'm pretty sure were along the lines of 'America doesn't do that.' and 'That's insanely cruel!'"

"Let me make this clear again. There is no resistance, no hope, no solidarity, and no way out." There was more muttering, a general, growing unease. They didn't look at my face, didn't pay

attention, because they didn't want to- they couldn't, they refused to believe that a 5 foot tall ten year old was the one in charge.

I pointed the atomic shotgun at the sky and squeezed the trigger.

I will never forget the first time I heard that weapon. 'Incredibly loud' doesn't cover it- it was more like a concussion grenade than anything else. I was forced squarely on my ass by the recoil, and my ears felt like cotton had been smashed into them. The workers crammed their hands over their ears, shirking back. The Enforcers, as I could have guessed, did not react to the noise. 'Holy shit.', I thought, as I realized the power of the thing. I could have knocked a satellite out of orbit with that. "NOW do you understand?!"

They understood. Most of them, anyway. The worker who had spoken to me before told something short to another man, and I asked the Enforcer for a translation; what I got shouldn't have surprised me. "We can sneak out at night, kill them in our sleep." The Enforcer's near-monotone was chilling- I realized that it would use that same monotone no matter what I told it to do.

I remembered my strength, my power, the things I'd no longer be hiding anymore. "You're welcome to try if you think you can.", I said to the man, looking him in the eye. He was surprised that the Enforcer and I heard him- others were equally surprised and shrank away from him, leaving him exposed and afraid. "But you're going to have to deal with this." I lunged forward and kicked him in the diaphragm, sending him on his back and gasping for air. "Now get to work."

They got the tools and got to work. I walked back inside to find a chuckling Howard sitting on the couch, poring over something on the screen. "Not bad. That'll work- for maybe a few hours.", he said. "You will have to manage them in the long run. But fear should keep them going for a while."

"So what's that?", I asked him.

"Oh, just an ordinary IQ test..", he said, shrugging. "Ordinary for us, anyway." Which obviously means something like 'ridiculously hard'. "I'm just not allowed to make any mistakes."

"How many questions?", I asked.

"Twenty quick ones." I had expected more; these people obviously enjoy excess.

"Are you going to want help?"

"Not from you. Not yet, anyway. A lot of these questions talk about things you know nothing about." Why am I not surprised?

"So you have to get all the answers exactly right? What if you just ordinarily screw up? They're going to get rid of you just for one fucking question wrong?"

He looked at me, grimaced, and nodded. "Billy, you've never seen this kind of thing before. Almost nowhere in the normal world is there truly zero tolerance for errors. Remember, this is probably one of the few times they're ever going to be able to make demands of me, and so they want to make sure of one thing- that **I don't screw up**. Which I generally don't. Of course, that doesn't make it much **easier**..."

I shrugged. "You're going to get them all right and all done on time."

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't get sent here just to watch you get tossed into a cage on the first day." He started burbling, then laughing.

"That's anti-logic which makes sense. I've heard a lot of that. But no, improbability does not closely correspond with truth in this organization." I'll have to remember that. "Make me some pancakes. Oh, crap. Cancel that. Shit." His brain was obviously too wrapped around the problems.

"Potatoes in the morning, potatoes in the evening, potatoes at suppertime..", I sung softly.

"Billy, there are fruit-bearing trees on this island. Go to the kitchen, take one of the larger bowls, and get it back here filled with various types of fruit." And, of course, I did just that. The 'larger' bowls were obviously made for someone with our appetite- that is, about a foot and a half wide and a foot deep. I spotted a back door to the mansion and took it- I didn't want to let the peasants see what I was doing and let them know that I'm not the master around here. It also gave me the chance to do something I've been meaning to do- explore the island. I looked around as I walked, looking for.. anything, really. Anything worth looking at. And **everything** was worth looking at.

The only word to describe this place is **paradise**, complete with bubbling streams, tall trees, and chirping birds. Verdant, lush, and varied, with a single, rocky hilltop visible between the trees and green everywhere else, except for the sandbars next to the ocean. Some serious group of landscapers had decided to create the Garden of Eden; in the natural world, grapevines, bananas, and apple trees do not coexist on the same acre of land. This was decidedly not natural, but rather pseudo-natural.. much like me, Howard, and Sarah. Alive, and living well, but not created from nature.

Bioengineered.

What does that mean, anyway? I'll get the details of my creation later- that's not the issue- but what does it mean to be **created**? It means superiority, that's what the hell it means. It means I can kill people with relative ease. It means I have better reflexes than a jackrabbit. It means that a team of scientists sat down and decided what features, abilities, and powers to imbue me with (whether they were imbuing him and I happened to get the abilities or they actually had me in mind as well is a completely moot point). It also means that I'm fundamentally different from just about every other life form on this planet; they were created by the process of evolution, whereas I was pieced together from various sequences of DNA and processed into a complete whole. That's scary and unnerving when you think about it, but I have a lot more things to be scared and unnerved by at the moment, such as huge conspiracies, insane tests, and mind control.

I said it aloud, softly so as not to be heard. "Mind control. My mind is currently being controlled." Ten seconds passed, as I continued to follow Howard's command. "What the **hell**!?", I shouted, still relatively softly but loud enough to get the point across to myself. What the **hell**?! Absolute pure mind control. When the **HELL** did they learn how to do that?! Never mind **why** they did it- particularly to one of a pair of twins- but **how**? How could they possibly work? I can't know. Even if they explained it to me- which would be effectively giving a prisoner a map to the dungeon- it would probably take me years to understand the underlying science. It's probably another whole set of neuro.. damn, what's the word.. neuromechanism science might be what they call it. At any rate, this may be only the tip of the iceberg- it can, and probably does, get worse.

The bowl quickly became full and I brought it back the same way I came in, watching Sarah finish up checking Howard's answers. She was only wearing a tank top and a pair of shorts and I noticed the tone of her muscles, a slight layer of flesh and fat covering a structure of what could have been solid stone.

He looked back at me, clicked what was apparently the Send button, and sighed. "I get the feeling that they're going to make it easy for me the first time and then get serious in a couple of days."

"Didn't you just say earlier that it was hard?", I asked him. He only looked at me and smiled. "Ah. I get it." I offered him the bowl and he put it into his lap and leaned back, popping grapes into his

mouth.

"I suppose they want me to do that silly physical shit now.."

"It's **only** four weeks of it, Howard.", I replied.

"Taunt me all you want. Just make sure those peasants fucking work. I'll be back in eighteen minutes or I'll not be back at all." He put the bowl down on the couch's end table with a slight tink of metal, got up, and started walking out. Sarah and I followed him out, but went straight out the door and through the 70 yards of grass that separated us from the dirtier farmland, while Howard turned left to the chalk lines drawn on the grass to determine the start of his route.

"**Shit.**", Sarah said, looking at the rows of freshly-plowed land in front of us. "They don't realize how fast those damn potatoes grow. They'll die without soil." She walked over to one of the Enforcers, ordered it to translate, and shouted, "Put the potatoes in the soil NOW! You heard me, DO IT! Or Mr. Albino over here pulls out the shotgun again!" I forced down my urge to giggle at that, and instead decided to look intimidating, which was amazingly easy. The working peasants, startled, did as she commanded immediately.

"No resistance at all...", she said, sighing.

"Like Howard said, it's going to get harder. They're just still shocked at my This Is My Boomstick stunt."

"How do you keep in such good humor?", she asked. "I'm still trying to understand that."

"How do **you**?!", I countered. "His 'Daddy' stabbed you in the back!"

"Sanity retention? Because my wit is one of the few things keeping me from breaking down entirely?"

"Then there's your answer."

"Yeah, but I mean.. ah, screw it. I don't know why you are the way you are, any more than I know why he is the way he is. You just realized it so quickly.."

"Just what does that mean, anyway, 'realizing it'?"

"Psychological thing. It's when the shock finally just stops and the subject realizes he can't resist. It's even noticeable in animals."

"Great. Now I'm getting scared again."

"Oh, you'll get used to **that**. Be scared of what you want. Here's something else to be scared of: the life of a Dominator gets dangerous, and I assure you that he'll be fighting his battles with us."

"I'm not scared of that." Ass kicking is my strong suit.

"Then don't bother with fear at all. Don't be afraid of him. You could tell him off if you wanted to and he wouldn't do anything lasting."

"I'm afraid of.. losing myself.", I said, realizing how cheesy it sounded after it came out.

She started laughing. "A bit late, aren't we? If we would have been afraid of **that** before we got here, we just might have escaped this." She looked me in the eye. "We're gone. You know it." I knew it. "Enforcers, inform me if a work slowdown or stoppage occurs.", she told the stationary non-people.

"Well, it's good that we don't have to just stand here watching them.", I said, as we walked back to the mansion.

"Oh, I've learned Illuminated philosophy. If you can command someone or something else to do it, use them unless you can do it better or you **really** want to do it yourself. You know what he really wants you for. But you're going to be far too ignorant for that for a while."

"Well, being useful or not, I **don't** want to stay ignorant." I decided that yesterday.

"Then don't.", she said, turning on the screen and pressing the Windows-like operating system's bottom left button and moving to Search: All. "Search. All." I didn't need clarification. She walked back up to her room.

The text box's flashing cursor was mesmerizing, daring me to use it to insert letters.

Search:

Let's start with the obvious.

Search: mind control implants

Mind Control Implants: Go to Major Topic?

[Yes] [No] [Cancel]

Major Topic? Why am I not surprised? I clicked Yes and got a whole faceful of information about them. Insertion Procedure, Effects, Usage Information, Implant Withdrawal, and several others. I clicked on Implant Withdrawal- it was the most ominous- and I read through the jargon and learned something I didn't want to know. If I did manage to get the implants out of my head, I would die of my own brain frying itself with electrical signals. Even Enforcers can't handle it.

Freedom was already in the coffin but that bit of information buried it.

Okay.. I'll search for something else now..

Search: genetic engineering

As I should probably have expected, it was an overload of information. I read through the history- the first biologically modified human was born in 1968- and skimmed forward to 1984 and Project Dominator.

"I was wondering when your curiosity would get the better of you.", my own, slightly out-of-breath voice said from behind me. In reflex, I closed the search window and turned partway around.

"Are you kidding? As soon as Sarah told me about this, I had to start looking."

"Good. Sarah and the Enforcers can deal with the peasants, you'll have lots of extra time. I'm not going to be silly and try to command you to learn, but just remember that you're going to eventually have to know **everything** I know.. I'll help you with the Latin later." Eesh.

Snacking on the fruit, I learned far more than I expected was possible in a few hours, a period in which Howard did his route once more and Sarah shouted to the peasants twice. Eventually, Sarah left and returned, carrying an armful of potatoes on her way back.

"Hungry? Need I ask?"

"It would be just like them to make the things really bitter...", Howard said, pulling a potato out of Sarah's arms and biting into it raw. "Not bitter. Tasteless and a bit salty." I took one and ate. Bleh. Edible and that's about it. "Sarah, are we being watched?"

"Definitely. Not when we're in here, though. Just outside to make sure you're running."

"Can they tell us apart?"

"The implants transmit, Howard." He moved his head back a bit in a frustrated gesture. "If you want, I'll gladly spy on the spies and see what they're using."

"Get ready and do it.", he commanded her. She went upstairs. "So, Billy- what have you found out so far today?"

"A little bit of everything and a lot of mind control."

Howard nodded. "Good. For the rest of this test, when you don't have more pressing matters to attend to and it's not going to get anything of mine damaged or destroyed, you should listen to your curiosity." I walked upstairs, curiosity and command compelling. "Where are you going?"

"To follow Sarah. I want to know how you spy on Illuminati spies." He nodded some more and smiled.

I followed her upstairs to her room; she had finished putting on a suit that was covered by camouflage-colored hair. "Never seen a ghillie suit before?", she asked. I shook my head. "Check your closet." I left her room and went back in mine to search.

The clothing was a wide selection of styles, but almost all of it was stark black; there was nothing even remotely light-colored. There was a camouflage pattern, but nothing like what Sarah had. I left my room and found her waiting, a pair of binoculars in hand.

"Nothing?"

"Not like that, but there's camouflage."

She shook her head and I followed her out of the mansion, through the front door. "Forget it. Enforcers look for outlines. Just watch me from a distance. If I was sniping, I'd bring my thicker suit, but that might clue an Enforcer or someone in." As we stepped outside through the back door, she began looking around casually, and then pointed into the forest, into an area of thick underbrush. I looked carefully and saw nothing except plants. What the hell was she pointing at?

"Erm, Sarah?", I whispered.

"You don't see anything, right?", she said in an articulate but very quiet voice.

"Are our eyes different?", I asked, trying to mimic her tone and partially succeeding.

"Nope. I don't see it either. I can't even catch a glimpse. But I know it's there.", she continued in the same low tone. I tried listening and heard nothing but birds and peasants. I just looked at her. "It's where I would be. Watch, but don't follow." She walked a short distance into the forest, got down on her elbows and knees.. and just laid there. Huh? I doubt she can see it from that position either. Wait, she's moving.. slowly. Slow enough that it doesn't even look like motion. After about ten minutes (how does she stand the boredom?), I could no longer see her, she was too deep- I just squatted down and waited, thinking random thoughts. She wouldn't do it if it wasn't necessary, but damn that's slow.

Howard walked up to me. "Bored, Billy?", he asked next to my ear.

"Yeah.. what's that about?"

"It's how it's done. I watched someone do it on fast forward before, and still got bored watching it. I'll do the second circuit in a few minutes when she gets in a good spot. She'll come back, but it'll take time." I sighed. He passed the spy's point about five minutes later, and Sarah came back out about fifteen minutes after that.

"So tell me, exactly what did you do?", I asked.

"Crawled, looked, and crawled back. That's it."

"Why so slow?!", I asked, almost breaking my extra-quiet tone.

"Normals see motion and Enforcers are even worse.", she said, walking back inside. I followed her back in and her voice went back to normal. "The idea when wearing a ghillie suit is to look like nothing. Nothing doesn't move."

"Don't you get unbearably bored?"

"Training, Billy. Training."

"So what'd you find out?"

"No radio equipment of any kind. Just a stopwatch. The hard part was making sure that the stopwatch didn't have any radio equipment in it."

"So you had to look over his shoulder.."

"Its', Billy, 'its'.", she corrected me. "Sometimes it's important not to get the pronoun confused." I nodded. "And yes, that's basically it. It's annoying, but not really difficult. Not for me, anyway."

"And how do you know they're not listening now?"

"Because then they'd have to bug the whole house and they're not about to do that. If I found one bug- which is easy for me, considering that I was also trained to do that- I'd definitely look for more. And even during a test, that would piss Howard off and I don't think they're going to do that."

"Yes, because he'll rule the world if he passes the tests."

"When', Billy, not 'if'. Missions are accomplished in a 'when', not in an 'if'."

I found a verbal knife and decided to poke her with it. "Yes, and that'll be more important **if** we ever get out of this."

She growled. "It's also not a good idea to ascribe 'if' statements to what's not going to happen."

Howard entered through the front door, shaking his head. "Idiot peasants. One of them thought he could escape."

"What happened?", I asked.

"An Enforcer beat the shit out of him. They're still working, but they look at me like I'm Satan." I looked at him like he was Satan. He laughed. "So what's the answer?"

Sarah told him and he said I'd be doing half of it- which was an utter, total, bone-shocking surprise. Considering what our relationship is, I thought I'd be doing all of it. I didn't push my luck by asking him such silly questions as why. "Well, now to order a fake head of hair for you.", she told me. Oh crap! I totally forgot about that, and apparently Howard did too.

"Don't, Sarah.", Howard said. "No intentionally bringing anything except this jet or its current contents, remember?"

"Who were those rules given to?", she asked.

"Me. But you're my implanted servant, and commanding you to do something is.." Sarah grew a smile on her face from the word 'commanding'. "That really is the exact wording, isn't it? That **does** make things interesting. All right, you can do it if you want." She did, in moments. Wait, if she can do that, then- no, she can't bring down the food. That was covered separately. Definitely a violation of the spirit of the rules, but that means fuck all here. Similarly, he could command Sarah to bring stuff down anyway. Who'd know? He could always lie and say she did it on her own. Holy crap, I'm even starting to think like one of these guys...

"That reminds me- Billy, I forbid you to ever get your hair cut or otherwise have your body looking different from mine.", Howard told me, to my lack of surprise. But neither he nor Sarah noticed that they couldn't just get..

"Wait, wait.", I said. "Sarah, what do you mean, just order it? Obviously, if you're going to get something to make me look exactly like him, they'll know you're cheating."

"How?", she asked, shrugging. "They'd need to prove it. It's easy to claim that it scares the peasants more or something like that." Yes, I guess she's right, but..

"You two are so damn confident.", I said, and both Howard and Sarah laughed at me.

"Billy," Howard told me, smiling, "welcome to the Illuminati." Sarah ordered the fake head of hair to certain parameters and the Enforcer on the other end dutifully obeyed.

As per Howard's commands, we got more work out of the peasants and I satisfied as much of my curiosity as I could- it's sort of disappointing what the Illuminati don't do. No aliens, none of that mystical numerology shit, and orbital mind control lasers were not part of either the searchable index or Howard's big book of mind control devices- although there are such things as orbital **killing** lasers. Kept in reserve, of course; their use basically means instant destruction of secrecy.

Howard didn't say anything else particularly memorable, but I got a better look at his attitude towards life in general- which calmed me on one hand and chilled me to the bone on the other.

The nightmare, of course, was 100% bone-chill.

Chapter 12

Howard forced me to crawl back to my Chicago home, where my agent parents mocked me for being so stupid as not to see through them. When they were done, I was controlled to go and humiliate myself in front of everyone at my old school, as Howard watched, laughing uproariously. And then I was forced back to the island- prohibited from using any kind of transportation, I had to walk and swim, and then approached Howard on hands and knees, naked, on hard gravel, as he berated me for being late and snapped chains on my wrists and ankles. "You can't keep me waiting, Billy- I've got a world to control!", he shouted, laughing maniacally, and the sky turned dark. "I'm going to make you sit here and eat table scraps rolled in the dirt, build a cage around you and leave you right here on my lawn! And then I'm going to laugh and laugh, because every day I'll come out here and remind myself how glad I am not to be you!" And then he reached down- his hand didn't

look like a hand but more like a tentacle, and he-

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!! NOOOOO!! AAAHHHHH!!!!", I screamed, and curled into a ball, desperately crying and shivering. Howard opened the door and I knew he was going to do even worse things- I scurried back, closed my eyes, and prayed for it all to go away. I felt my head being lightly touched and opened them again- Howard, with a sympathetic look on his face, had walked around to the other side of the bed was reaching down, his hand- not a tentacle, a hand- gently resting on the top of my head.

"Billy," he asked me, his voice as gentle as his hand, "what was I just doing?"

God, he does all that and now he asks- "Howard, you were just.." Realization, and a growing sense of relief, slowly flowed into me. "Wait.. no. You were just sleeping. So was I.. I screamed again, didn't I.. oh man, I didn't mean to do that..", I apologized, still a bit desperate.

"Billy, shush.", he commanded. "You can talk again when the sun comes up. If you keep screaming at night, I'm just going to get this room soundproofed. Just relax for now." He squatted down on one knee and put his arm around me, and I was struck by the absurdity of it- wasn't I supposed to be bowing before him?- and then he got up and left, closing the door behind him. I relaxed, following his command, stretching out under the covers, utterly relieved at what hadn't been real. He'll never do anything remotely like what I dreamed. I live in a mansion, in my own spacious room, which was carefully designed by agents of the most powerful organization on Earth for utility and comfort. Howard would never chain or cage me, because it'd be **totally fucking pointless**. It didn't change the basic horror at all. Even with an atomic shotgun in one hand and a fusion-powered microwave laser in the other, wearing Illuminati body armor to block the bullets I didn't dodge, I'd still be Howard's plaything and servant, living at his tender mercy.

I fell asleep, and the sun was high in the sky when I woke up.

Today proceeded almost exactly as yesterday had, only I was doing the runs. They weren't terribly difficult, just mildly annoying with a few well-placed rock formations to climb over and a few low-hanging branches to dodge, and it's still Howard's island paradise, after all. The fake hair was Illuminati quality, far better than I expected; my regular hair simply fit into it and there was no telling us apart unless you knew what to look for (and then I understood Howard and Sarah's confidence- the Enforcers definitely would not know), and it felt comfortable, almost unnoticeable on my head. As I returned I realized another obvious solution that I definitely should have mentioned earlier. Will he even want to hear.. fuck that. If he doesn't want me to be blunt with him he'll have to fucking command me, which is highly unlikely.

"Howard, you know what?", I asked him as I stepped back inside, a bit winded from the running. "We didn't have to do that whole wig business after all."

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't it have been simpler and easier just to cut **your** hair?"

He replied with a smirk instead of annoyance that I had suggested it. "Blasphemer."

Later that day, it started to rain- the second run of the day, I only got drizzled on, but for the third one, it was a downpour. I still knew which way to go, of course, and the soles of the boots didn't slip on the wet rocks at all. The wig wasn't affected, either, simply laying on my soaked body like ordinary wet hair. The peasants thought they would stop working in the torrential rain, and a few made moments towards escape- when they realized that neither was going to happen, they kept working, probably with the promise of release filling their tiny minds. One of them actually tried to enter the mansion- the Enforcers stopped him first, but I'm sure that if he had gotten inside, Howard would have tossed him out like a sack of the tasteless potatoes we continued to eat. Lightning actually

struck the mansion once or twice, but it was apparently built to not care.

I kept on doing the research, of course. There's so much to know about the Illuminati. Pages and pages, volumes of stuff. Events, concepts, ideas that normals have barely even considered. Six thousand of the world's most intelligent people, in concert with an army of servants and Enforcers, can swiftly produce a lot of recorded material. Sifting through it to find interesting stuff wasn't hard, though. I found myself saying a lot of "Wow, I never knew that.", "Holy crap, I had no idea that was possible!", and "Woah, they can really do that?!" And since the database contains no misinformation- none- it's an incredibly effective learning tool.

One of the biggest things was how to control a lot of people with few of your own. Different people are controlled in different ways, in different environments and under different circumstances. A Congressman is very susceptible to a certain drug which makes him open to suggestions, and doesn't have any bad interactions with alcohol. A member of Parliament loves underage women and will vote however this one girl's father wants, within a wide range of reason. There's no pattern, no distinctive marks. It was extremely interesting at first, but quickly became dry, like reading a chemistry textbook. Howard doesn't concern himself personally with this stuff- he's above it, like a normal company president is above the product-assembly guys.

Eventually, after hours of reading things normals will never see, I had a more pressing need of sleep.

I found myself in a world of meaningless, nowhere, gray nothing. I could hear about twenty little children around me, laughing and singing something.. something that I haven't heard in a long time... "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family.." Where did I hear that before? It was something from TV.. something controlling... I knew that the song was **bad** somehow, that its lyrics were a lie, and the tune was a siren song. Panic rose in me as the song rose in pitch. A figure of reddish-purple and bright green faded into view and came towards me, arms in a ready-to-hug position. It looked almost comical, with two wide, sharp, short teeth covering its entire mouth, mittens for hands, strange awkward feet, a bulging belly, and what looked to be a tail.. then I remembered, in horror, who this was. It was that disgusting mound of purple lard. It was the Hellwurm. It was Barney, the mass manipulator of millions of kids, whose fat, grinning face was found on a hundred million dollars' worth of brightly colored shit. I've hated this guy since I was four, just like Ronald McDonald and all the other intentionally warped characters- they're unreal, disgusting, horrible, perversions of humanity (and dinosaurs), and just flat out evil. Especially this motherfucker. The sheer feeling of danger and evil I got from being directly confronted by this hideous monster turned my knees into Jello and my heart into a rabbit's. Dammit, now I know why Howard gives me weapons.

I pulled out the atomic shotgun, kicked down the quick-balance, and fired all five rounds into its chest. They sunk into the purple fat leaving no marks or blood- they didn't even knock him down. Son of a bitch, isn't there some Internet jihad that knows how to stop this asshole?

I turned to run from the abomination, but it called to me.. "Billy... come back to me, Billy. Come and hug me and love me forever. **You're my Special Friend!**", it said in its saccharine voice- and I came back to him and wrapped my arms tightly around him. I wanted to crush him, but you can't do that to something that plush. A growing sense of sickness and disgust flowed into me as I smelled the creature's vile body. The absolute terror I felt at this point was pushing me completely off the brink.

The beast began to sing. "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family, with a great big hug and a kiss from me to you"- and I felt something big and wet press down on my head- "won't you say you love me too?"

"Yes, I love you Barney, you're my bestest friend and I'll love you forever and ever!", I found myself saying like a five year old on way too much Prozac. As I drove my face further into the green patch

of processed vomit it had on its skin, something rose in me, total panic and vicious hate all rolled into one, and I came up- accelerating-

Into the mansion bedroom I was now growing accustomed to, owned by Howard. Damn, I thought crazily, if only I could do that wakeup bit again, outta this. The Inheritor, looking like he'd inherited some annoyance, was saying something- I couldn't hear him for some reason- then he shouted in the most authoritative voice I've heard him use yet, "**BILLY! STOP SCREAMING!**" I didn't even realize I was. I shut my mouth and calmed my aching vocal cords.

"Dammit..", he said with some annoyance, "is that **ever** going to stop? You sounded like you were dying in here!"

"Probably not.", I said, relieved at the loss of the lesser nightmare and still internally horrified at the presence of the greater one.

He sighed. "Ok, that's it, soundproofing comes tomorrow evening, or you're sleeping on the other end of the island.", he said under his breath. "And Billy.. just what was the nightmare this time?", he said in his usual half-curious tone with some exasperation.

I told him.

He waited until I finished telling it, and then he exploded. My previous screams of terror were nothing compared to his screams of laughter. He could barely stand up. "Billy... monsters, demons, sadists, unnamed horror, snakes, even me, I can understand easily. But BARNEY?! That fat happy piece of Illuminated kiddie-control inspiration is giving YOU nightmares?!", he said with a face full of mirth. "If.. haha.. if I grew coke on this island, I'd figure you snorted some. Now don't try- but don't try **not**- to get back to sleep." Makes sense; try to get to sleep, it won't happen. Don't really care, and you're out like a light.

I laid back to bed- in the next five seconds, a flash of black passed over my vision, and it was morning in the blink of an eye. Then I woke up and did the same things again that I've been doing for the past two days.

The peasants were slowing down, the carrot of eventual release no longer meaning as much. Time to get the stick. Make no mistake- the potatoes, even supplemented with fruit, are barely enough for energetic young engineereds. Having the peasants slow down their work on these super-growing plants would be intolerable. I was commanded to make the peasants work, so I carefully doled out physical pain, usually using the Enforcers, maximizing fear and awe. If they had the facilities to understand what I really am, they'd be awed indeed.

Howard did indeed have soundproofing installed, with the same ordering trick Sarah had used. (He did it himself- he's just me wearing the wig, right?), and after he did a run, I did a run, and he did a run again, they were installing it upstairs. As the black-clad men and Enforcers silently (almost **completely** silently, I have no idea what machines they used) worked on the walls, ceiling, floor, and door of my room, Howard took me to the viewscreen and proceeded to help me learn some Latin. Holy fuck, am I glad my brain's engineered. The tenses and sentence structure differ utterly from English, even in Illuminated modern Latin. The vocabulary I learned on my own, over time and with a lot of patience. But hey, it's not like I had anything better to do, other than keeping the peasants in line from time to time, a thing that Sarah usually did.

The freakish thing is that, except for the temporary partial starvation, I was actually starting to get **used** to living this way, if not used to the implants. None of my old worries were present at all, nothing I'd had to worry about meant jack shit anymore, although I missed my old friend Paul a bit. Every day that passed, the mansion and the surrounding island felt more and more like home. Although Howard often left me alone to study and learn- I had to catch up to him, after all- his attitude of treating me like his most prized possession never wavered. The annoyance at the lack of

good food and the constant tests, most of which I couldn't begin to help him with, was frustrating him, but he never reduced my or Sarah's portions of food and never got mad at us, no matter how pissed he was at everything else. Sometimes he would keep me or Sarah near him, just to keep him company, even if he wasn't doing much. I didn't hate him- how could I?- but I'd still kill him in a heartbeat given the chance. Hey, he knew the risks when he took this job. It didn't matter. Not once did he come remotely close to saying the 'wrong words' to release me and/or get himself killed.

Days passed by as they used to when I was living with normals, my brain no longer constantly in overdrive trying to find a way out. It was just life. I'd wake up, eat the same crappy potatoes (**man** am I going to be glad when **this** shit is over!), do stuff I needed to do, learn stuff I needed to learn (on that, Howard and I are utterly in agreement), be played with by Howard for a bit, and go to bed. The nightmares were still horrifying, the screams no less real, but Howard didn't hear them and I learned to put them out of my head when awake.

Chapter 13

It was about two weeks into it, and 10 PM. I was tired, but couldn't sleep- a rarity for me- and I wasn't curious at all about much of anything right now, and I had nothing else to do. Except feel hungry. Damn, maybe I'll run into some food out here, although we've pretty much already taken all the plants available. Maybe one of the pigs out here? Even if I don't, I'll be getting what I want, some relaxation out here in the dark. Wearing black would have meant my near invisibility, except for my albino face and growing head of hair.

I chuckled to myself, remembering all the admonitions Paul's parents had given him- 'Come home before dark, there's some real creeps out there!' Creeps in the bushes, waiting to grab kids. Unsurprisingly in retrospect, my 'parents' had said little on the subject, because if I was being watched from the shadows, it was certainly by other agents. And if I actually was attacked by some normal, we all know what would happen. Creeps in the bushes, what a joke. This island has the highest density of creeps per square mile outside of Langley, VA.

Walking, smiling, and thinking, I walked over some fallen branches which snapped audibly. "Okay, which one of you is it?", Howard's annoyed voice called down from a tree. (Wait.. Howard in a tree? He does what he wants..) Apparently he thought I was one of the other creeps who had forgotten his lessons of stealth, instead of me who was never told to care.

"It's me, Billy.", I called up.

"Billy.. what the fuck are you doing out here?" I could ask you the same thing!

"Couldn't sleep and figured a walk would help."

"Get up here.", he commanded. The tree he had selected was great for climbing, although it was very dark. Let's see.. there, there, there. The fabric gripped the tree bark very well and I got to where he was rapidly. Wearing white, he easily shows up even in the moonlight, although he looked like he was..

"Howard, are you upside down?", I asked.

"Yeah. And so are you, right next to me." He moved over and I knee-hanged in the same position he was in. Fortunately, this shirt won't fall out of these pants that easily. The reversal of gravity poured the blood into my head and for some reason I let out a huge yawn.

It also reminded me how empty my stomach felt. "This starvation fucking **sucks**.", I informed him, as if he didn't already know.

"Yeah, really. 'Hey Howard, you're going to be Dominator now! Oh, wait, you've got all this pointless

shit to do first!", he said, sarcastic and angry. "Right. Like four weeks of having to whip spics to get food is going to make the tiniest fucking bit of difference." Hearing Howard bitch is ironic; although he does have something to bitch about now, in three more weeks he won't at all. "At least they didn't think about the rainforest and the pigs."

"Yeah.. Hey, Howard, why are we hanging upside down anyway?"

"The ceiling's down there, and the floor's alllllll the way up there. Puts a new perspective on things. Everything looks so.. different upside down, ya know?" He was right, it did.

"Yeah, but it's dark out here. I can barely see anything. If it wasn't for the breeze, we might as well be inside where it's warm." I wasn't just asking him, I was also sort of asking myself why I came out here.

"But we're not. And you were walking around out here anyway."

"Yeah, I know. Didn't expect to find **you** out here though.", I said, as it started to drizzle, the rain hitting our knees, and clouds covered the moon, making it even darker. It was nice, in a way. It felt mysterious, spooky, even if all the spooks here belong to Howard. I imagined being in some sort of possible similar situation, out in the darkness and rain, fighting for my life and struggling to spot the snipers before they fired. Only thing is, I'd probably be doing something like that with Howard, now. Even in the continuing horror, at least it would be some good action.

"Well, here I am.", he said, smiling, and sighed, thinking of something else. "I wish I could understand them."

"Who, the Mexicans?"

"Normals in general. I understand how the manipulation works, if we do X then Y will happen because of mental element Z.. but.. even after two weeks, I don't understand **why** it works! How can those things go through their heads? How can they surrender themselves when they at least have a suspicion that all we really offer is their slavery?"

"Because they run on false hope, and not much goes through their heads.", I answered bluntly.

"Yeah, I know they can't think.."

"No, Howard, you don't understand. You think that it's that they can't think properly or logically or on the same level you can. Well, all of those are true- but the fact is that **they can't think at all**. Their brain cells may act, they may learn to some degree, but they can't step in and say 'Hey, wait a minute, what I've been doing hasn't been getting me anywhere, how about if I try something else.' They can't.. they can't **decide**, Howard. Not for themselves.. if they could, we wouldn't even exist." Normals making decisions for themselves means no Illuminati means no secret genetics means no Dominator and twin. "And the few of them who **can** think usually realize that there's no way out, because you and your merry men are simply too good at what you do, and either they realize that there is a conspiracy and they lose all hope, or they think that there's not and they run right into whatever traps you've set up. When you look at it from their perspective, it becomes miserable as shit." Isn't that why he came out here, to hang upside down, to gain a new perspective on things? On principle I always want Howard to understand, even if I want to kill him at the same time.

"Damn, you didn't tell me any of that earlier.", he said.

"You never asked, and I didn't really know. I've been studying misery for two weeks straight. The reference materials just **kick ass**." He started chortling to himself like a madman, a wide grin on his face.

"Billy, that made sense. I've been thinking of them in my terms and I don't know why." Because he's been spending too much time around me, would be a guess.

"Howard, just how genetically different do two things need to be before we start saying they're different species?", I asked, feeling my knees get soaked from the constant pitter-patter.

"It varies. You mean that they might not even be.."

"These guys aren't. Can't be. Not even smart normals, not really." White, black, brown, red, or yellow; Christian, Jew or Muslim; slum-dweller, middle-class, or normal rich-kid inherited wealth; male or female; it doesn't matter. Your intelligence and ability differences are to the Dominator the difference between breeds of normal dog.

"Then I definitely shouldn't be thinking of them in my terms."

"Nope. I can't wait until these spics die."

"You want to watch?"

"Watch? Watch?! No, no, no. I don't want to **watch**. I want to **do it**. With my own **bare hands**." The more we talk about it, the more homicidal I think.

"Well, when the time comes, you can kill as many as you want if the Enforcers don't get them first. I might take a crack at 'em myself."

"Enjoy.", I said, smiling, and we both heard a snorting at the bottom of the tree.

"Ssh!", he blurted at me. "Pig. Stay where you are." Damn, so he's going alone, taking the hunt for himself.. I'd love to be in on it, but I really don't care, I just want some of the meat. At first Howard was trying to be slow and stealthy, but then there was an enormous boom of lightning, the pig started running, and he swung down from branch to branch, a more-advanced primate doing less-advanced primate things. There was a lot of squealing and a lot of movement through branches, growing farther and farther away, then a crash of something hitting the ground. Then there was a snap and a loud squeal of pain. A thump and a squeal, another thump and a barely-audible whine. Then, at about the same time as another lightning bolt arced across the sky, a **SMASH** and no noise at all from the pig. Good job, Howard. Now mind letting me down before I get zapped?

"Billy, where are you?", he called, apparently having gotten lost. I answered and he told me to come inside, which I did eagerly, stepping out of the cold rain into the nice, cozy warmth of Howard's heated mansion. He came in right behind me, carrying the bloody pig, its leg broken and its skull smashed. I'm surprised it was so large. At a guess I'd have to say it weighed about forty pounds.

"That is what I call a meal.", he said, chucking it into the freezer for later use. Wait a minute.. gah!

"Don't tell me you're going to eat that whole thing yourself.", I muttered, half-expecting him to say something like 'Yes, but you'll get more potatoes to make up for it.' He looked at me and reconsidered saving it for later, re-opening the freezer and ripping off the broken leg of the pig with a single, savage yank, taking bites out of it.

"Take some.", he told me, and I did, attacking it. I went immediately for the throat, tearing it open with my teeth, lifting its body, and letting the blood dribble down my esophagus into my stomach. Then I bit down on the gristly windpipe, crushing it, and taking more and more bites of the fresh meat out of its neck, feeling the blood run down my face. Glorious! I've got a serious carnivorous streak, what can I say? Howard dropped what was left of the leg, found a butcher knife, and took the pig from me. He carved its stomach open, reaching in and ripping out the intestines. He took

several bites before throwing it back in the freezer, closing the door, and telling me not to eat any more pig until he said so. Damn! Oh well, that was yummy, at any rate. We were both covered in blood- there was a hamper built into the wall near his room and he chucked the white suit down it, then went to bed. I quickly did the same- these clothes are going to reek unless they get washed.

I went to bed and got a nightmare involving long pig.

Chapter 14

Just another day; I was doing various kinds of research when I received a very unexpected surprise: "Billy! Get out here, now!", Howard opened the door and commanded, and I was out of my room and facing him in less than a second. Sarah was giving him a neck massage as he talked. "There is one thing I need to do." He sounded a bit aggressive, and I realized he was quite annoyed indeed. Oh crap, he's pissed at me. What the hell did I do? "I said before that commanding a servant is the same as doing it yourself. You can't ever lift any of my standing orders on any of my servants." Wait, then he's probably going to give me- "Sarah- obey him the same way you do me!", he commanded, and I immediately figured out why. He must have called to her and she didn't know it was him and not me.. and when my hair grows to his length, there won't be any telling us apart anyway. So he's made me master over her, so it won't matter which one of us it is. In retrospect, all of us really should have seen this coming. "They'll probably obey you anyway, but I'm going to go tell the Enforcers the same thing." And he went down to the main viewscreen to do just that. Sarah motioned me into her room and quietly closed the door.

"Did that really..?", she asked.

"Well, I can't command you to kill him, because I can't kill him and he says it's the same. I can't allow you to kill him, because I can't lift that standing order. If you think of something else, let me know." I realized I had actually commanded her with that. Damn. Now I'm going to have to watch my words, too.

"Damn." She just shrugged and opened the door, and I walked out to do the first run of the day, grabbing the wig. When I went down, I noticed Howard laughing and grinning, as if he had something devious in mind.

"Howard, I've seen you look like that a couple times before... but this is different. What the hell do you plan to do?"

"Ohh... not much.." He started laughing harder, as if he was thinking of something really funny.. funny to him, anyway, but I was starting to get worried.

"Howard, you're scaring me. If you didn't need me for the tests so bad, I'd figure you were planning to do something extremely bad right about now. Come on man, what is it? Does it involve me and some practical joke?", I asked, setting the wig down on the end table.

"All right, Billy, you can relax. I'm not going to go through with it." I felt very relieved, even though I had no idea what it was. "And yes, Billy, it involves you and a practical joke. It's funny, but it's not worth it. It involves you and Sarah being put into a fake gas chamber, thinking that you're going to die, while you pull your own levers into extinction, begging every minute." And he'd do it in a spirit of childish playfulness, just to watch us squirm.

"Is that funny to you?!"

"Yup!"

"I used to think up shit like that. This one kid was really afraid of clowns, and so I had an idea that a lot of us would dress like clowns and come to school. Of course, we didn't have the money or the

resources for that or some other stuff we thought up. But Howard.. when **you** start making gags like that.." When talking about something, **actually being able to do it** makes all the difference.

"It gets really scary really fast. Billy, of course I'm toying with you." Because, as we all know, I'm his toy.. "I enjoy it. But I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"Not like it matters, but if you weren't me, I wouldn't believe you." He chuckled at that.

"Starvation and anxiety mean brainstorms to me, which means I think about the unwanted, the unlikely, and sometimes the impossible."

"I wish **that** explained all those crazy nightmares." It would be great if it was just simple outside pressures..

"Do I keep showing up in them?", he asked.

"Not every one. But some.. feature of you is there. You've got your own brand of fear in my mind." I might be confusing Howard with control, but that's splitting hairs. He is control incarnate.

"Illuminated Fear, super strength. It's only fear. It's not like you can't just think about something else and get most of it to go away."

In a way, he was right, but.. "That's so fucking easy for you to say."

"I know. It is easy for me to say. And I say that if you want to get rid of your fear, think about.. oh, say a month in the future when/if we're still alive and not in the middle of this bullshit."

"Yeah, but I'll still be..."

"Oh, yeah. That part will eventually go away." "No it won't, that's the point!", I was about to shout, before I realized he meant the feelings of horror and awfulness at no longer owning my own life. "You'll get used to it, Billy. Remember, it's me, and I'm right here."

"So what happens if I don't get used to it?"

"Then you live out the rest of your life suffering and screaming." I was a bit shocked, but I really am glad for his absolute honesty. If someone had come to me before this started and asked me how the leader of the world's biggest conspiracy speaks, I definitely would not have said 'Plainly, and with the intent to be completely understood.'

"Thu.. thanks, Howard. I really appreciate it."

"Billy, if there's something you need, or you're really worried about, tell me. Now."

"Howard.. I'm worried about what happens if you... well, if.." I couldn't get the words to come to mind, but they involved things he's only done in the nightmares. "I can't finish it."

"You don't have to. Billy, if I was going to do anything like that to you, don't you think I would have taken a few spare hours to do it to you by now?"

"Yeah.. yeah, you're right. If you could even spare me a few hours." That didn't come out quite right-it sounded like I was seeking his attention.

"Speaking of hours.. Billy, do this one." He showed me the problem he had onscreen, shifting back to the left side of the couch and giving me access to the outstretched keyboard. Damn... such a simple problem, too.. or so it looks at first glance.

You are in a room with three other people who are very intelligent. The rules dictate that whenever someone sees at least one black mark on the forehead of another person, that person must raise his hand. Marks can be black or white. All three of the others have black marks on their foreheads, and thus everyone's hand is raised. All of the others are trying to figure out what color their mark is, and would have answered out loud if they knew. Figure out what color the mark on your forehead is.

"This is impossible!!", I blurted out.

"They wouldn't give it to me if it was.", he replied. "It has a solution, and I don't know what the fuck it is."

"Ohhh..kay..", I muttered. "All right, deductive reasoning. If mine is black... dammit.." I thought about it and went in circles for a full fifteen seconds, wishing that there wasn't a restriction against looking it up on the Internet or the local database. (No, no 'I didn't do it, my servants did on their own' this time. The computer simply won't search for it.) "Fuck that.. okay, if it's white.. then they don't know what theirs is. So they see a white and two blacks.. and they.. what would they.." I spent another fifteen seconds figuring it out. "...of course, they're very intelligent, they use the same deductive reasoning.. Howard, how could you not have gotten this? It's right up your alley.", I said, my cognitive brain finalizing the answer.

"You figured it out already?"

"I think so.." I started typing in the text box what I thought was the solution, making lots of backspaces and text inserts and ensuring that it was all correct. It was slow going, but I knew I had it.

If I had a white mark on my forehead, one of the other people would have been faced with the same problem, only seeing two black marks and a white instead of three blacks. They would have done the deductive reasoning: 'If mine is white, then one of the others would have seen one black and two white marks, and seeing the other person with a black mark raise his hand, would have concluded that his was the one the other was raising it for. But neither of them did, and so mine is black.' And so one of the others would have already figured it out if mine was white. However, they did not, and the only other option is for me to have a black mark on my forehead.

"Fuck... Billy, that's it." I clicked 'Send' and waited for the human on the other end to answer. He did, affirmatively. "You're right. That **was** right up my alley." He put his right arm around me and squeezed gently. "I really should have had that." He patted my lengthening hair and laid back. That's odd.. he's not annoyed with himself or anything.

"I'm surprised.. it doesn't bother you that much that I figured it out and you didn't?" Maybe because it's his twin..

"Not in the least. You can outsmart me all you like." That was amazing to hear. "Actually.. Billy, if you ever see me making a bad decision, I **command** you to let me know." This, right here, is a critical difference between Howard and ordinary controllers- who else would actually order something like that? From a logistical perspective Howard's way makes far more sense, considering that a bad decision might mean his funeral (I wouldn't have any problem wearing black to **that**..). Which is better, to be unquestioned and dead, or embarrassed for a bit but still alive? I smiled at him and went to do the run.

The first test lasted for a few more ugly days, in which we ate potatoes and whatever we could find, continuing to 'convince' the peasants to keep working (they never tried anything new to escape), but it was ending soon. This isn't so much a 'test' as it is 'a pain in the ass'. The next two can't be as heavy on the long-term annoyance, at least..

Chapter 15

Near the end of the test, the potatoes had simply run out. We had to keep the peasants alive, of course, and rationing the food was a painful, maddening experience, right until the end.

I've never faced starvation as a concept before this. Hunger, yes, and maddening hunger very occasionally (which my 'parents' immediately satiated, and now I know why), but never like this. Thirty more minutes and I can butcher, rip, and tear, devour life for my own needs, feast on kidney beans and jerky, toasted bagels and raw, bloody flesh. Thirty. More. Minutes. I can't stand this, but I'm forced to. I know Howard hasn't been intentionally starving me- half an hour ago he ordered an enormous shipment of food to be delivered at precisely midnight- but right now, the island is almost completely divested of food, to the point where it would take more energy for us to find it than we'd get from eating it.

And, with the limit of this test set by time and time alone, I watched something I've watched before: the clock. 'A watched pot never boils' is doubly true for engineers who can divide time much thinner than normals- I literally waited for fractions of a second, staring at the time on Howard's big screen. 11:31:01.27 or so. Is it time yet? Nope. About 11:31:01.54. Is it time yet? Nope, still not time. 11:31:02. One whole second has passed! Finally! The combination of hunger and waiting was getting to Howard as well, I noticed, but that didn't stop me from continuing to watch the clock, holding myself still. I felt like I was going to start eating myself. C'mon, I'm not that starved, am I? I'm still in one piece.. but of course I am. My regenerative power will kill me before I can actually experience what normals see starvation as- I'd eat myself without having to take a single bite. I tried carefully to slow everything down, to prevent myself from suffering an autoconsumptive death.

I saw Howard, next to me, watching the clock as well. No.. no sense in it. "Bah. Forget it, Howard. Looking only makes it seem slower.", I told him.

"You sound like you've done this before.", he replied.

"I have. Every day to get out of school, I stared at the clock. I've done this so many times, it's not even funny." But it was never like this. "Damnit, I need some food!" I was shaking and tried again to calm myself down as much as possible. Almost 25 more minutes and that's it, this nonsense is over. Even Sarah is suffering from it, I can tell- she's actually breathing hard.

I tried to pretend that time didn't exist, an utterly hopeless thing to do. If time didn't exist, there's no way it could ever be midnight, and no way I could ever start eating. I tried to turn my body and brain off for a while- nothing doing. If I turn off, I'm off to **stay**. With this much hunger, there was no conceivable way I could approach anything resembling sleep. Or maybe I'll just eat those fucking peasants. They're alive and they're probably nutritious. I'll eat them like screaming pigs. The word 'cannibalism' reached my mind and I dismissed it as a meaningless concept. If it wasn't for Howard's command I'd just go over there and gobble them up like a giant in a fairy tale. 'You'll ruin your appetite!', a TV-mom's voice said in my head. (The agent I thought was my mother never said anything like that..)

For fifteen minutes I sat like that, struggling to keep my metabolism under control, knowing that all I had to do was wait long enough- just a few more minutes, no way I can starve to death in a few more minutes, right? I'll eat, I told my body, I **will eat!** Just not right now... "Now.. do you know.. what **desire** is, Howard?", I asked, knowing that he was feeling much the same.

"I think I'm beginning to learn.", he replied, sarcastic and aggravated.

Eventually, time finally got to where we needed it to be. 11:59, and Howard walked outside, and I followed him hungrily. Finally! Midnight! The food reached the ground the moment the clock hit 12, and Howard commanded the Enforcers to unpack the food and eat whatever they needed for their own bodies. Why the hell did he order that? I thought for sure Howard was going to rip open at least

one of the packages himself. I followed him walking over to the huts instead- what did he have in mind? Oh yes. I understand now. Yes, this'll be perfect. It looks like I get to eat them after all. As we left the mansion and approached the makeshift village, the light grew dim. It didn't really matter to me; I still had plenty of hearing and smell. And I smelled meat.

"Que la chingala?", one fifteen-year-old said, and I picked him as the first. I knew it'd take energy to attack, but I didn't care. It was time to **eat**. I simply tore his left arm off- it seemed to take no force at all- and started chowing down, feeling a splendid joy as blood and flesh ran down my throat unhindered, my stomach and my metabolism singing a hymn of praise. Dinner is served. The boy had died instantly from shock, but the other normals were screaming, and I was standing right there in the middle of it, gobbling up a human arm with gusto. The conventional wisdom is wrong- humans don't taste bad, at least not to me, although it would be better if these were cleaner. To a normal it would look like I had gone crazy, but I was perfectly *compos mentis* throughout. I was doing what I thought was the most logical thing to do, what made the most sense. I heard screaming and it fit into a generally pleasant mood, like an organ player in a fine dining hall.

A woman started screaming in a high-pitched air-raid siren voice, and Howard instantly silenced her by slamming her nose into her brain with an enormous discharge of blood and a loud snap of breaking bone. Well, kids, looks like the elementary-school question has been answered- this technique really does work. You just need a **lot** of force and accuracy to do it. I dropped the arm, which was reduced to little more than bone, and feasted on the rest of the body, drinking from the leaking arteries leading from its stopped heart. Another older boy, obviously in suicidal desperation, tried to attack me- I sent his wrist backwards to his shoulder in one smooth motion, snapping his elbow, and went back to my meal. An eight-year-old girl was trying not to be noticed, sitting silently in her bunk, completely motionless, probably thinking, praying, hoping that this was just a horrible nightmare. Don't worry, little girl. It'll all be over soon.

"Diablos blancos..", a woman said. Yes, we're white devils indeed. We ignored her and continued to feast, completely uncaring of the growing panic. Even if they were united and armed, these people could never be a match for us. I turned the body over and went for the thighs, chewing and swallowing bite after bite of stringy muscle, feeling its juicy warmth slide down my throat. Our carnivorous teeth aren't any longer or sharper than normals'- it's just the bite strength that's so much different.

I heard Fido's telltale bark. Want some doggie treats? "Go ahead, Fido! Eat, boy, eat!", Howard encouraged him, and he tore out the little girl's throat in a single stroke, splattering blood on everyone in the hut and ending her nightmare in death. She never even screamed. He continued hungrily savaging the body, viciously tearing at whatever flesh he could get, his powerful jaws like a hyena's. Good dog! The other dogs followed Fido's lead and began to chow down on the available meat.

Another woman on a taller bunk started pleading, a completely useless thing to do in the face of hungry engineered. "Por favor... por favor.." She may as well have been saying 'Por favor, mata me ahora.' Howard ripped her to the floor and kicked her repeatedly in the ribs, snapping them and sending bone fragments into her lungs and heart. The feast continued, with the still living peasants, even the one with the broken elbow, silent and unmoving, praying to their God that we'd fill up and not notice them.

I heard screaming, shouting, and the sound of rubbing sticks- torches were being lit. The hut was dimly lit by an orange glow from the door. A peasant held a torch aloft, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. "Dios mio...", he said before he fainted, and his torch fell on him and began immolating his clothes and his body, which stunk even worse when on fire. In seconds he was awake, screaming, as he burned to death. I would have laughed, but my mouth was full, and the moment it became empty again I took another bite.

And, surprisingly enough, so was my stomach. This was to be expected- normal adult humans can't

eat a ten-pound steak without being full, and I have no idea how much meat I just consumed, probably twice that much. I felt my body digest it as fast as it could, the nutrients waking me up inside, my white blood cells destroying whatever diseases they carried, the incredible pressure of "I have to eat right now" dissipating with every breath. I munched a bit more as Howard casually kicked down a wall of the hut (instead of jumping over the flaming body at the door) and walked out like a satisfied, confident predator. Through the wall I could hear the peasants' shouts more clearly: "Diablos!!" "Los jefes han matando Alicia!" They don't understand what's going to happen; they can't. They have no experiences to compare this slaughter with. After a few more bites I was completely filled up and I followed Howard out.

Sarah was outside, covered in blood (even her hair, which was soaked to the point that she looked like she had done some sort of weird dye-job), and surrounded by body parts (she must have been even more fierce than we were, whatever she did in there), fighting three aggressive males (one of whom had an erection, I noticed amusedly) who had somehow gotten the idea into their heads that they would be able to take a single naked, engineered teenage girl with only torches for weapons. I've never seen Sarah fight before, but I knew that this was distinctly their mistake. They rushed her- Sarah moved forward very quickly, wrapped her left arm backwards around one of their necks, snapping it almost immediately, and a fraction of a second later used the other hand to stick her fingers upside-down in the eye sockets of another one with her elbow above his head, then forced upwards on her fingers and downwards on her elbow, the seemingly leverage-less move peeling his skull open, the broken bone scooping out parts of his brain. I had no idea that was remotely possible- it probably wouldn't be without truly insane strength indeed. The third one was just a tad farther away, and he died by two quick blows to the jaw, the first one slamming it backwards several inches, the second sending his teeth upwards inside his brain. Their torches never even came close to touching her.

Most of the other peasants must have been watching that, because when they saw it, they ran for the trees en masse, dropping their torches so that it might be more difficult to find them in the dark. Not very effective against us, not effective at all against anyone with nightvision goggles, and that'll only work until daytime. I watched their normal struggles as I know Howard does- with detached bemusement. It hadn't been raining; the discarded torches quickly lit up the grass and wood structure of the huts, and although they were too far apart to start any real conflagration, several of them burned brightly. One woman dropped her baby on its skull, then picked it up and kept running. Hey, it wasn't going to use that brain anyway.

A black helicopter slowly hovered down to the grass between us and the mansion, and once its metal feet touched the ground, the motor immediately shut off and the blades quickly came to a stop. Sarah and I followed Howard to it, and out stepped a man Howard hates, 'The Bastard', Herbert Gladstone. Seeing us naked and covered in blood startled him, but not for long- considering his position and his experience, this guy's probably seen and done far worse. "Mighty Inheritor," Mighty indeed. "you have successfully completed the requirements of the first test for the abilities of Control and Patience. Now, we shall test you for the abilities of Endurance and Skill." I didn't ask why 'Endurance and Skill' were Illuminated requirements. Maybe they change the tests based on who becomes Dominator, and this is definitely their first time testing an engineered.

"I accept, you stupid bastard.", Howard said, and I could see the grin on his face even from behind.

The Bastard bent over a bit and dropped a single weighted parchment at Howard's feet. "You have twelve hours to prepare yourself before leaving." Hardly a limit at all- after the waiting I just did, twelve hours would feel like an eternity. "The details are here." He stepped back into the powerful helicopter, and it fanned our blood-soaked bodies with the cool air before it vanished into the sky.

It was then that the realization of exactly what I had just done caught up to me. "I can't believe I just did that. The fucking food was right here, and yet we.. you.. just fucking slaughtered them anyway.", I said, the events of the past few minutes flowing back into my mind from a different perspective. I hadn't just slaughtered people. I had torn the arm off a living man (the second person I ever killed,

and I knew there'd be many, many more) and eaten it raw, and I had enjoyed every moment of it. This wasn't the result of a command or self-defense- I **chose** to kill him. If I wanted to, I could have gone for one of the packages and started eating at exactly the same time, leaving Howard and Sarah to go after the peasants- Howard wouldn't have commanded me to follow him. I felt slight twinges of shame and horror, but those were artificial feelings caused by my exposure to normal society.

"They were going to die anyway. Besides, we all know why the fresh meat went first." Howard feels only his inborn emotions, and as such has no remorse. 'You don't ask why a lion kills and eats a gazelle. Why ask why we eat normals?', he'd reply if I asked him why. Howard has the correct approach. It wouldn't even matter if I was freed, because this is my place in this world. I was carefully engineered to kill.

An Enforcer walked up to Howard, and said in its uncaring monotone, "Howard, the peasants may be killed now. Do you wish Enforcer aid in that matter?" "No, I'm going to do it all myself. Thanks for asking, though.", I imagined humorously. Thanking an Enforcer is pointless, and I don't think Howard's exactly willing to track every one of the fleeing peasants down.

"Yes. Kill them all, as quickly as possible, with a minimum of damage to the island. Then resume normal duties. I'm taking a bath. And so are all three of you.", he said, gesturing to me, Sarah, and Fido. The dog barked in acknowledgement. I felt strangely relieved at being commanded; I wouldn't be deciding to do things like kill people. Howard dropped the piece of weighted paper on the end table to his couch, and we followed him down the elevator to his gigantic pool, and I realized I was quite tired after that kind of meal. Falling asleep while swimming- always a no-no- was unlikely, but a distinct possibility. "Water - fifty-five.", Howard said, obviously thinking the same thing.

But that was **way** too cold. "Fifty-five?! If you're worried about us sleeping in here, you really don't have to at **sixty**-fucking-five!", I exclaimed, shivering in advance.

"This is a lot easier for you than it is for me." Oh no, he's going to.. "Jump in.", he commanded us. We obeyed instantly, and I gasped loudly as soon as I hit the water. God damn, it was **COLD!** Sarah shrieked the moment it hit her flesh. Fido got out as soon as he jumped in, shaking madly and probably wondering just why his master had done that to him. Well, Howard, it worked- we're not sleepy anymore! Howard touched a toe to the water, and for a moment I thought he was going to raise the temperature himself before he got in. To his credit, he didn't- he muttered "the hell with it" and jumped in himself.

"Yaaa!! Water! Seventy! No- Water, eighty!", he shouted the moment his body hit the water, and Sarah and I started giggling. Hey, Howie, now you know. Next time, don't do that to us, all right? I felt a rush of current under me, and the water quickly heated to a much more sane temperature. Ah, much better. It was still funny- even after we have a death orgy of peasant-crushing bloodshed, he still acts like his usual self. "What the fuck's so damn funny?", he yelled at us.

"You.", I explained. It was the exact answer.

"That and everything that happened in the last thirty seconds.", Sarah added. Fido got back in, and dog-paddled around, his reddish, sticky fur becoming white and clean again. We treaded water, keeping our extra-dense bodies afloat, and the currents took the organic slop to the filters, quickly repurifying the water. There was a dispenser of powerful gelatinous soap on the wall here, like there is in the bathrooms, but we didn't need it.

"Thus ends the first test.", said Sarah, a bit happy and a bit anticipant.

"Hey, Howard.. didn't you say that the tests only last five weeks?", I asked.

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, then the next test can't be **that** bad, can it?", I asked. It couldn't be any kind of test like this, at any rate.

"There are a lot of bad things you can do to someone in a week, Billy." He, of course, has a point. There's also a lot of bad things you can do to people in half a second, as we've so recently proved.

The only way for something like that to happen would be... "Yeah, but like.. they're not going to just flat-out attack you with Enforcers or something, are they?"

"I doubt they'll do **that**, but they're inventive, Billy. Just remember that."

"Oh, don't I know it." If devious people with big ideas weren't inventive, we wouldn't exist. We swam around in the lukewarm water for a couple of minutes, relaxed. My hair was about as long as Howard's, now, and I felt it brushing against my shoulders in the water, and I realized what it did for Howard's overall effect.. Now only if it crackled with electricity when we were pissed- then we'd really have an effect going.

"Billy, I left the paper up there. Bring it here.", Howard commanded me. At least he didn't use the word 'fetch'. I rode up the elevator to the living room, and grabbed the corner of the paper with my wet forefinger and thumb (the 'don't damage my stuff' command)- but it didn't get wet. Of course. I read it on the way down:

1. You may not communicate with anyone not in the Illuminati.
2. You may not bring any kind of sustenance with you.
3. You may not bring electric devices of any type with you.
4. You may not bring Enforcers or non-implanted agents. ('Oh joy! We get to come too!', I automatically thought, sarcastically. The truth is that I was actually glad to go with him.)
5. Illuminated secrecy must be kept. (They have a very exact definition for that. Don't let anyone find any evidence we were there- if there is evidence, it should logically lead to another conclusion entirely.)
6. You may not bring any form of transportation.
7. You may not bring any weapons except blunt weapons and blades.
8. You may not light fire.
9. You must arrive at Point X, an area two hundred miles away from the starting point, within 168 hours of the beginning of this test.
10. You must start at the designated starting point, and at the designated time.

Below that was a precise crosshair on a map of South America with exact latitude and longitude coordinates. Right in the middle of the jungle. Oh, shit. But it could have been much worse, like somewhere in the Himalayas, or maybe Siberia or Antarctica- or a canoe in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. As the elevator reached ground floor and I walked over to the pool, Howard saw the expression on my face. "Howard- you better take a look at this. I think I jinxed it.", I joked. They, indeed, can do a lot to us in one week.

He did. "YAAAAAAAAAAAA!! Holy shit!! Sarah, how the fuck are we supposed to do **this**?" Sarah climbed out, sighing, and looked at the paper.

"Hooooo... very carefully? Well, where's Point X?"

"I guess we'll have to find that out when we get there.", Howard replied.

"Billy," Sarah said, sighing again, "you did jinx it."

"Sarah, is this even remotely possible?"

"Yes... remotely. Two hundred miles in... 168 hours. And not all of that will be daytime. You'll have to average a daytime speed of about two miles an hour, without guns, gathering your own food, crossing a couple of rivers I'm sure, and not being seen. It can, technically, be done. And why are you saying 'we'? It says..." Sarah had misread Rule 4. "Oh dammit. I usually don't miss those either."

"Oh come on, Sarah, they wouldn't leave **us** behind now would they?", I said with a bit of sarcasm.

"Considering their inclination for making tests hard, I figured they'd make him do it alone.", she replied.

"How many tests did they give you, anyway, Sarah?", Howard asked.

"About thirty big ones and constant little ones, like a total thousand or something. It was a weekly schedule." Really not that many when compared to all the constant testing annoyances of normal-world school. "They changed it a few times though."

"Tell me how the one you most remember went.", Howard commanded, and I saw her mind drifting back, looking for the answer.

"Well.. I was eight years old at the time. I had just a little bit of training and experience with actual fighting, but, well, enough to get by." 'Enough to get by' for an engineered Illuminati assassin is almost certainly 'enough to slaughter trained soldiers' for the rest of the world. "Then they put me alone in a room with one of those one-way mirrors on the wall, then they bring in this kid... he was a few inches taller than me and he was really aggressive. I think he was basically the meanest kid they could find. Anyway, they brought him in the room, and.. I don't know what they told him, but I think it was somewhere along the lines of 'do whatever you want to her.' He started pulling my hair, I told him to stop it," I'm surprised Sarah showed that much restraint. "then he started trying to kick me... then my training kicked in." I winced, imagining it. Funny for me to wince at something like that, after what we just did, but the situation was totally different.

"Ouch! What happened to him?", Howard asked.

"I forget all of it.. but I know it was something like several cracked ribs, a fractured neck, three separate concussions, bruises up and down his body, cuts everywhere.. I know I didn't kill him. But I used leverage, my steel shoes, my fingernails, everything." It must have been horribly painful, but she could have killed him in an instant, especially with her training. Why the hell didn't she?

"Did you have the metal fingernails then?", I asked.

"Yeah, I got those when I was like six. It took two guys to rip me off of him. I didn't knock him unconscious either, you probably would have loved his screaming." Howard started giggling.

"I suppose you passed the test.", I said.

"With flying colors."

"So what were they testing for?"

"The ability to kill. The ways came later." Ah, that's why. She would have beaten him to bits instead of a targeted kill... just like she did to those peasants. I think it's her natural method of killing.

"I thought you did that naturally.", I replied.

"Well, I do, but they needed to check." Something about the way she said that reminded me of the Illuminati's perfectionism with all of its products, and for some reason that made me slightly

depressed.

"They always do.", I said, sighing, and watched Fido get out of the pool and shake off faster and harder than any normal dog, flinging water every which way. The traditional wet-dog smell is absent from him; he has his own, and it's much less stinky.

"So we've got twelve hours before we get to go on a safari of pure aggravation and the risk of death or worse. Great.", Sarah said, mildly annoyed.

"Yes.", Howard agreed. "Okay, how to spend them?"

My stomach answered that question. "I'm still fucking hungry.", I replied, amazed at it. Normals, going swimming after a meal like that, would almost certainly get stomach cramps. For us, the effect is negligible, the water pressure not affecting our accelerated digestion one bit. The intestines are going, but the stomach is empty, and the stomach wants more.

"Let's eat.", Howard replied. We went back up the elevator and ate a smorgasbord. It wasn't the traditional course-by-course meal of royalty. It was a disorganized, rapid feast of a wide variety of ordinary food shipped in from a normal supermarket, with whole packages being devoured at a time, with everything that ordinarily would be oven-cooked thrown into the microwave and nuked instead by Sarah, who alternated between bringing out and serving the food, and eating gigantic portions herself. The only table manners we observed were the ones useful for getting food down our throats faster. For the second time today, I couldn't laugh because my mouth was full, but it was funny, even though I've laughed at it four weeks ago. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the true face of the controller of the world! Not only have you been lied to about the identity of your leader, you've been lied to about his manners, behavior, and basic genetic makeup! Your Rex eats like a hominid tyrannosaurus!

Howard walked away from the dining room table and plopped down on the couch; I followed him.

"Damn, all this food and we munched on the peasants." The thing wasn't that we had killed people, the thing was that this food had tasted much better than the raw humans. Or at least that's what I told myself.

"Billy, it's not like they wouldn't have died anyway. You know that."

I had already thought about this.. but I still had to say something. "Yeah.. but after watching your dog rip out the throat of that eight-year-old while I was chowing down on that other guy.. I dunno man, there's just something about that." I honestly couldn't put my finger on what.

"You were taught for ten years that life is precious, that no one deserves to die, that violence is a disgusting, horrible thing not practiced by advanced civilizations, right?" Sarah cackled at that.

"Basically, except for wars." In which case, hey, it must be done.

"And you now know who taught that to you."

"The Illuminati."

"Of course. It was a lie, Billy. There are six **billion** human beings on Earth. Almost none of them are anything but generic, replaceable sheep. There's just so many of them, we can take a few and the rest don't care. Except if we want them to. Human life is next to worthless." Which, as I thought before, is the correct approach. An American doesn't care about the fate of Africans. The Middle East doesn't give a damn one way or the other about Mexico's poor. Why should any of us here in the Illuminati, masters or servants, give a damn about any of them?

"So why do you tell everyone that it's not?" The whole world already behaves as if it isn't- what benefit can be gained from lying? Other societies in the past surely lived without such illusions.

"Duh! Because Big Brother has to love them back. People won't love the system unless they think the system loves them, or at least is essentially good according to the moral codes which we put down for them." I thought something was slightly wrong with that control philosophy, but I didn't know enough world-control theory to formulate a serious base for questioning it.

"So you and your Illuminated friends really don't give a fuck.", I said, obviously.

"About most sheeple, hell no. Of course, there are certain sheeple that we use to keep the rest of them in line. People will follow those chosen leaders straight into Hell if they lead the way. That's where we got the term 'sheeple' from. Do you understand?", Howard replied.

"Yeah. Yeah, I get it. They're like ants, right?" They may act like sheep, but the Illuminati doesn't treat them like sheep at all, really. A shepherd would care if members of his flock were butchered indiscriminately. With six billion anonymous, largely interchangeable ants, millions can die and it doesn't matter.

"You got the idea. Let's get some sleep." Very good idea, Howard. I walked upstairs and didn't even bother pulling the covers over my naked body before entering dreamland.

And what ugly dreams they were. Instead of eating humans, I was being commanded to eat giant mounds of **shit**, and I obediently gobbled the shit up like it was actual food, feeling its brown stickiness go down my throat and smelling its awful stink. I woke up- screaming, naturally- and realized immediately why the dream contained what it did. I walked into the bathroom, sat down, and a gigantic black snake of bacteria and stench ripped its way out of my anus. No more Mexican food for me, I said to myself, chuckling. Then I went back to bed and pulled the covers up this time and easily fell back asleep.

Chapter 16

At Howard's order, Sarah and I inventoried the shit we'd need for a 200-mile trek into the rainforest. High-quality, specialized, barbed grappling hook with about a fifty-meter rope, three sharper-than-razor machetes, assorted antivenins, water canteens, specialized clothing, a giant sleeping bag, a good map, a complete guide to rainforest food, three perfect compasses, and oops, almost forgot- a copy of The Rules. I re-read them just to confirm my fear.

Oy. Geez. I had the sense I'd die as his servant- but not like this. As if the first test wasn't enough, now they want to send us (Damn them, their stupidity, and their Billy and Sarah-sized loophole in Rule 4!!) in the middle of untamed rainforest with no help, no fire, no food, no guns, and no hope?

Howard showed up, unexpectedly sat on the floor, folded his hands, and stared into space for a full three minutes. I spent that time considering all the ways to die. Starvation, thirst, poisonous snakes, poisonous spiders, poisonous mosquitoes, poisoned water, poisoned food, assorted carnivorous beasts (wait, scratch that, we'll kill and eat **them**), falling, traps, sniper shots, heatstroke, being used as a human dartboard by natives (scratch that too), crashing into a rock and suffering near-fatal damage then being left behind and suffering a horrible agonizing death of attrition and fatigue, breaking the rules (wait.. that's not a way to die.. that's worse. For him, anyway.), piranhas, alligators, being impaled, being ripped apart by army ants, being dragged underwater by the current and drowning, making a severe misstep and becoming a sacrifice to a volcano god, smashed by falling rocks, crushed by falling trees, let's see, what else...

Howard finally got up. "Got everything?", he asked, in a resigned tone.

"Yeah.", I answered.

"Let's go."

We went. An Enforcer did the piloting, took us in the direction of the "designated point" somewhere in the middle of Brazil, and the jet took off with its usual thooooom. None of us said anything for a good fifteen minutes.

"I do have a chance, you know.", said Howard, his voice strangely echoing hollowly in the plane (although he wasn't using echo), as if his own plane were silently laughing at him. Sarah said nothing. I just looked at him.

"No fire, no food, no help. Howard, are you sure there's not someone else they'd want to be Dominator?" Don't most of those fuckers have children? As Mr. Spock would say, logic does suggest...

"When you asked me that three weeks ago I figured no. Now I'm not even sure if they want one at all. Damn it... damn it, **DAMMIT!!!**", he exploded in a fearful rage. It took me a full twenty seconds to notice it- fear. He's actually starting to fear. Oh dear god. This is the first time I've seen him do that. The guy who tried to blow his head off? No problem. Starvation? Annoying, but he can get over it. A week in the jungle without the ability to do things usually considered necessary to wilderness survival? And having a deadline to keep, two rivers to cross, and some other restrictions on top of it? We are so fucking doomed.

"It's possible.", muttered Sarah. "All we have to do is just keep going and forget where we are."

"Sarah, how the hell are we going to get across two very large, piranha-filled rivers without being able to ask someone for a boat?"

"Well.. most species of piranhas don't attack unless they see blood or wounds, Howard. Didn't you look that up?"

"No, almost everything else though. But **most** species. With my luck.." He didn't need to finish it. Fish chow, anyone? They **shouldn't** be able to get through the suits..

"Yeah, there's that and the fact we'll have no light! I think someone's really out to get you, not in the usual sense. I just want to know how the hell the rest of them could authorize something like that. We'll have about eight hours, every day, with no source of light at all in deep forest, in the flood season at that. And then there's predators, we'll probably kill them but they might call attention to us.", she continued, slightly pissed.

"Maybe I should have brought Fido.."

"Howard, dogs don't have the stealth we need, especially white ones. Also, he can't climb if we meet a rock wall or something."

"Yeah, you're right... oh, damn it all, sum præcipito, the Hall is just waiting for me.."

"What does præcipito mean?", I asked. Although I have been able to pick up some Latin, I haven't gotten to that one yet.

"Directly translated, it means falling. But it really means, Billy, that I'm doomed. I'm going down. The ten-year lifespan of the Inheritor is going to be cut.. either by simple killing, something out there has my flesh in its jaws.. or I'm just going to fail or crap out and .. live in the worst zoo there is." I could have sworn that there were tears in his eyes. There probably were. Oh dear god.

"Howard.. I've never seen you depressed before. You're worrying me."

"What do you care? I thought you wanted me dead.."

"Yeah.. still sorta do, but if you croak, what happens to us?"

"You get.. given away, or traded off, or sent to Northberg for experimentation.. or something. I don't know how you'll end up or who you'll end up with."

"Howard, four weeks ago, you commanded us to follow the rules of the tests and save your ass in case it needed saving. Well, it does. I can't let you give up."

"I can't let me give up either, Billy. There are, after all, many ways to look at this, and here's two that are correct. Two ten-year-olds and a thirteen-year-old left in the middle of nowhere, to go two hundred miles in one week, not knowing exactly where we are or precisely where to go, unable to seek help, light fire, or even have a flashlight. The other way is three highly-engineered Illuminated creations walking only about 30 miles a day in a nice climate in a food-abundant place."

"In other words, the only way to survive is to look on the bright side."

"I think you're getting the hint."

Two hours into the flight, I came to the conclusion that there is no bright side to this one- the hazards are enormous, the chances of success frighteningly low. But, genetic and mental superiority in hand, I- even as a servant- started to use my ego as a shield against the fear and growing despair, and I had a feeling that Howard and Sarah were doing the same. Sure, it'll be impossible. But then again, the impossible is what we do best..

Yoda decided to say hello inside my head and I was suddenly ready and steeled. If it's physically possible, I'll do it, fuckers. I'll drag both of them along if I have to. But there is no way that I am going to end up in a situation even worse than this one. Not if I can help it.

We all ended up falling asleep again before we landed.

Chapter 17

We landed with a blast of bottom jets and a soft thud. We got out of the plane to meet the entire first level - all of it. Gates, Turner, Kennedy, Mao, the three fat people Howard lovingly calls The Bastard and The Bitches, Judas Rockefeller, and the rest of the unnamable real in-crowd were standing there, in the small, fenced-off clearing with brick buildings (obviously the locals thought it was a government institution). Some had smiles on their faces, arms folded. Others looked at us with sternness and diffidence, doing what they could to act regal and/or professional. Still others were visibly restraining themselves from either laughing or cheering for him. They looked a bit strange against the lush rainforest background, with a single dirt road leading away.

The Bastard stepped forward from the mass of conspirators, midway to us. Howard stepped forward to meet him, taking part in an impromptu ritual.

"Inheritor Howard, do you accept the challenge of the Second Test?"

"Yes." Like he has a choice, and like we'd be here if he didn't accept.

"Then let it be so. Inheritor, your second test begins in.."- the fat guy pulled back a thick sleeve and checked his watch- "thirty minutes and nineteen seconds. Do you have any questions?" Umm, didn't this guy forget to say something?

"Yes. Where the **fuck** is Point X?" Yeah, that's it. I vaguely wondered what would have happened

had Howard not asked that question. I realized and stopped vaguely wondering.

"Point X is approximately 320 kilometers away from here at a bearing of 173 degrees, 11 minutes, from geographic north."

"How big is it?"

"Point X is a circle one meter in diameter." Oh, how ridiculous does it get? Needles and haystacks don't even come close...

"**What??** Okay, is it in a prominent, easy-to-find place?"

"Yes."

"Very well then." Howard re-entered the plane - oh, I know why, he's checking the onboard computer's maps. We followed him in, and he researched local landmarks and came up with a satellite image of the area - there didn't seem to be anything there, except a funny-looking foliage-covered hill (Green Hill Zone, I thought randomly) in the middle of the picture. It's certainly not just a hill, of course.

"So, if anyone has any suggestions as for what we do for thirty minutes...", Howard said with a bitter look on his face.

"We look at the direct route's satellite maps, check valleys, rivers, everything.", said Sarah, her training doing the talking.

"All right then." And Sarah did. For a full twenty minutes we looked at them, until we had an excellent idea of the area. Most of it was just naked travel space- no cliffs, some hills, no difference in terrain type- and not many human settlements to dodge. There were, however, numerous roads to worry about, and a lot of water. Look both ways and make sure no one sees you when you cross the street, kids. I grinned just a touch at the thought-

Then overwhelming despair gripped me like King Kong holding his latest bitch. And I thought I was fucked before. Now I am fucking dog food. Two. Hundred. Miles. In the middle of everfucking nowhere, through mud and water. With no fire, no help, no way. And forced to just keep going. And going. And going, as if I were the Energizer Billy with his battery drained. With a start I realized Howard would say it's easy for us as servants- because it **is** easy for us. Our legs suffer. Our minds don't have to do the work of making them keep going. And if he gets tired he'll probably make us fucking carry him.

'No he won't.', one of my inner voices pointed out. 'He's not **that** decadent.'

'Oh, yes he is.', I replied to it in the growling of the accursed. 'If food wasn't as plentiful as it is here, he might use us for it.' I wondered if I had said that out loud and realized I hadn't.

"Oh shit. I just realized something.", said Howard, a startled look on his face.

"What?", responded Sarah immediately.

"Billy screams at night." Oh shit. Oh... shit. How could we all have forgotten?

"Oh, the fuck.", Sarah muttered.

"Billy, I already know there's nothing you can consciously do to stop it. But I don't know of anything in the forest that can gag you during the night without you choking on it. If you scream too loud, you know as well as I do what happens.", Howard said, his teeth gritted. Oh shit and turtle wax.

Involuntary suicide, anyone?

"Looks like I'll have to control my own dreams.. or something.", I mumbled.

"Uh huh."

"Sarah, what are our odds on surviving this?", Howard asked in a too-pleasant voice.

"Hmm.. if everything goes right, if we manage to do everything perfectly, a hundred percent. This test was designed to be passed, not failed."

"You're being optimistic.", I muttered.

"Only a little. If you scream, it'll be one in a thousand or something similar even if we don't sleep near populated areas.", she replied in a scathing tone. Uurrrrk.

"I must not scream. I must not scream.", I repeated to myself in a low voice. I realized I was starting to panic. My muscles were tense and my breathing was too quick.

"Inheritor! Bring your servants and come to me.", said Herbert in his official voice again. Howard gestured for us to follow, and we came back to Herbert, stiffly standing in the exact same spot he was before. "Enforcers, check their backpacks for violations of the rules." An Enforcer came to each one of us and searched through our packs. I was going to just leave it on, but Sarah removed hers, watching it carefully, and we followed- the Enforcers adeptly searched through each one and examined every item, our watchful eyes making sure they didn't pocket anything. In less than half a minute, they were finished.

"Very well, Inheritor Howard. First Level Gates has something to say to you." They obviously planned every minute of this introduction, then. They obviously expected me to arrive a few minutes early, but not so early as I did. An extremely nerdy man somewhere in his 30's sauntered over, squatted down a bit, and said directly in Howard's face, "Don't get your ass kicked.", he said in a low tone. "If you don't get in there...", he finished, motioning his head slightly in the direction of Herbert. He then got up silently and went back to the gossiping crowd. Did that mean Herbert would be the Dominator if Howard failed?

The rest of the time was like hell in its purest form, an eternity of time compacted into a few hundred seconds. Tick... Tick... Tick... we couldn't begin until five more minutes... tick..

I realized both Howard and I were really shaky at this point and ready to break down. Some of the Illuminati watching took note of that. Sarah was cool, focused, and nonchalant - then I realized she was making an effort at it.

Three minutes.

Then I realized something. If the rules are to be followed to the letter..

"HOLY SHIT HOWARD WE CAN'T LET THEM SEE US AFTER THE TEST STARTS!!", I screamed.

"Yaaaaaak!!", he screamed, heading for the bushes as fast as he possibly could. He headed in the direction away from our destination- he couldn't be closer than the starting point. We heard a gale of laughter behind us before we ducked into the brush. Sarah and I took off after him, and we were well in the jungle, invisible, before the test began. We hid under some dirt-and-bush cover, our specialized cammo gear covering us from detection.

Definitely more than three minutes passed before we got out our hiding place, looked back in and

saw that the Illuminati all had left, and we went around the clearing as carefully and as quickly as possible and began the second test.

"That was close.", muttered Howard.

"Yeah, really.", I replied in the low, near-silent voice I'd need to speak in for stealth. "That would have sucked mondo."

"Well, now comes the boring part. We need to move pretty quick. If you two really, really start to hurt, tell me. Sarah, you're the navigator for this test. Both of you, don't ever get more than about seven meters away from me. Let's go.", Howard commanded us. So we did, at a good clip, Sarah leading the way. I looked around, in wonder, seeing the bright colors of birds and hearing the yowls of monkeys high above. I figured the excitement and the sheer adrenaline rush of being in uncharted territory would keep me going with no problems. That, of course, and the fear of what would happen if we fail.

Rainforest travel is not all that difficult, considering most people think of it as "jungle". It's not jungle. We only used our machetes twice in a half-hour period, and both times were mostly unnecessary. The rainforest floor is actually shady and barren of everything except decay- very little sunlight breaks through the trees and reaches the ground, so almost nothing can grow. We did sweat, and bugs did bounce off our suits, but it wasn't nearly the Vietnamese tropical hell (as seen in Rambo) most people think of. There was no sun or signs of human habitation, not even a road. My legs started to annoy me and I ignored them.

Being seen wasn't really a concern. The spies, sure, were lurking, but we didn't really notice or care about them. Animals saw us - some bolted in fright, others held their ground and stared from their safe place among the trees. We just kept walking.. and walking.. and walking. The novelty of this started to wear off and sheer boredom took its place. We passed tree after tree, flower after flower, climbed steadily over logs, went on and on.. My thoughts drifted to months ago when something like this was totally beyond the point of "out of the question" and would have been cause for laughter or puzzlement, back when I had friends, back when I was a normal... I shook them off. Paul's probably taking care of himself just fine without me anyway.

The suit did its job well. I sweated, but I wasn't about to die of heat prostration, especially not here in the shade, and especially since we're in the southern hemisphere where summer is winter and vice versa. A tree full of red ants went by on the right. I saw a bird's nest as I passed to the left. I wonder... can Howard stop this place from being chopped down? Greed knows no bounds, but this is the Illuminati's planet. If they wanted to, they could surely stop slash-and-burn destructive agriculture with a word. Hell, maybe they already have, and all the hullabaloo is just lots of whining about it.. or maybe they just don't care.

Every one of us wanted to say something, to break the tension, to pretend it's all just a game. Oh, it's a game all right. A boring, annoying game where one fall loses all and there is no reset button. A game where the only adrenalin rushes come from fear or anger and you can't type in any codes for god mode. A game where none of us have anything to talk about because we all know what we have to do. A game where the master is just as annoyed, frustrated, grim, and scared as the servants - that thought made me grimace evilly for a bit. Of course, none of this is really Howard's fault. Everyone's a puppet in some way. If they all gang up to take him on- which they ritually do as a matter of course- he can't just stop them or kill them all.

Howard kept going grimly on, his camouflage suit wrinkling and un-wrinkling with every step. Back and forth, back and forth, just like us, straight through uncharted wilderness, the backpacks going along with his and our movements, this way and that, mile after mile. My legs hurt after 45 minutes, then the pain started to steadily grow. I wished whoever engineered us would have thought of shit like this- our specialty is obviously short bursts of action. I was starting to strain, the muscles simply couldn't take much more of this. "Howard, I think it's time to rest."

"My entire lower body agrees with you.", he said, a large mosquito desperately trying to get through his face shield. He smashed it and wiped the stain from the non-reflective plastic. "But we're going to have to get used to more than that.", he said, sitting down and resting his legs. I laid down immediately, my entire body getting some relief from the strain, laying on my stomach so the grappling hook in my backpack wouldn't turn me into Billy-kabob. Dirt crumbled under my weight.

"Yeah..", muttered Sarah, leaning against a tree. "I just kinda wish they had trained me for this, too. Long-distance concealment wasn't part of the regimen."

"Are we still going the right way?", I asked, suddenly concerned that we had made a wrong turn. Sarah whipped out her map and her compass.

"Yes. After we got in the forest, we went in the right direction, and we did go pretty much straight. Besides, if it's in a prominent place, we should be able to find it.", Sarah said, and I appreciated her confidence.

"Think anyone saw us?", said Howard in a tone that declared either the answer's no or it's panic time.

"Not out here.", said Sarah evenly. "Even the bravest tourists aren't going out this far and I don't see any natives."

"Yeah, would be some tour, nothing but forest and fear.", I muttered. "Hope we're going fast enough..."

"That was about.. oh, three, three and a half miles an hour.", Sarah said. "The thing is, we'll have to keep going at that speed, and find food, and cross those fucking rivers to boot.. and you know the rest."

"Well, I'm not hungry.. yet.", said Howard with a shrug. "Let's keep going." He got up and we did. It started raining five minutes after that, started as a drizzle... then as a shower.. then it started just pounding from the trees and on our heads like the machinegun version of Chinese water torture.

"At least the rain will keep us cool...", muttered Howard, as the steady shower bounced off our heads and soaked into our suits, running in miniature rivers down our backs. It will keep us cool, and this would actually be cool in the American sense if this entire scenario were quite a bit different. Three kids in the middle of nowhere on an adventure, that's the stuff movies are made of! It's like a fucked up version of *The Neverending Story*. But the only thing being saved by this is our own asses... not the world, not even some princess.. unless you want to try to think of this professional killer as a damsel in distress, a thing you can't do without serious quantities of mind-altering drugs. I giggled to myself at the thought. Neither of them asked what I was giggling about. We took a long, good drink from a puddle shortly after that, a couple of dead leaves floating in the cool, rippling water. Since nothing had yet stirred the sediment, the water was fresh from the sky. We pissed shortly afterwards, and it was a thick yellow.

And it kept raining- for an hour.. and another hour. it was repetitive as hell, trying to make sure we went in the same direction when we went around large obstacles, using our hyper-sharp machetes when scrub got in our way, our rubber soles going splash, splash, splash whenever we hit a puddle- but not the invigorated splashing of preschoolers, the steady, military plod of soldiers on a mission. No one was out here to hear us, and it became difficult to see each other through the constant, pouring rain, it distorting the view from our face shields, the darkness aiding it in making everything invisible. Most of the animals had returned to whatever dens and hidey-holes they called home, leaving us out here to plod on and on in camouflage gear. A couple of times we heard rustling or what sounded like humans - we laid low, but every time, we couldn't hear any other signs of activity- must have been just more animals- and we kept plodding on at a necessarily rapid pace. After a

while, even walking through the most exotic places just becomes boring as hell, the giant trees and the occasional majestic view being just another part of the scenery. But we couldn't afford to be bored - if we get lax, we could end up... the weight of the responsibility- and the rain- fell heavy on my head. I didn't want to be out here, none of us did. But if they demand it, if Howard is forced to go, and he forces us.. and.. dammit, what the hell did I do to get into this mess?

Nothing, I reminded myself. There is no justice. I keep forgetting that. And as I kept walking on and on, past leaf and tree and bird, my legs and heart pounding and begging me to stop, and as Howard sighed to himself many times, I tried to realize something, to find a value in all of this, to rationalize or reason the motivations behind this trip, as well as the existence of the Illuminati, how could people be so manipulable and blind as to be cannon fodder, hell, **food** for their betters..

I failed my rationalization miserably- why was I making it anyway?- and just kept plodding on.

"All right, let's stop again.", said Howard, sitting down on the muddy ground, unconcerned about the wetness on his ass. We sat down very close to him- I realized that was because of the human instinct to get close to people when you're in a lonely, cold, odd, or dangerous situation. This was all of the above. "Shit, I bet I could scream as loud as possible and no one would hear me.", he loudly muttered, some anger trailing out of his voice.

"Don't.", said Sarah quickly. "Murphy's Law." Whatever can go wrong...

"I know, I know. I'm starting to get hungry, too."

"Yeah, so am I.", I said, my stomach jumping into my throat at the word 'hungry'.

"Shit..", Sarah muttered. "Yeah, me too, but it's almost impossible to see anything out here!"

"At least we've got plenty to drink...", Howard quipped. "Anyway, this rain isn't going to end any time soon."

"So what are you saying we should do?", Sarah asked grimly. "Look for food in this?"

"Well... dammit, it might be like this all day. So.. well, we can't even really see anything, but if you see anything, make sure I know." We were lucky indeed- Sarah saw something just then.

"How about that.", Sarah said, pointing at something. I couldn't tell for sure what she was pointing at. Then I looked.. and I saw a monkey, hiding in the low branches, watching us curiously.

"Got Rocks?", Howard said in a low voice. She quickly uncovered and picked one up, took aim, the monkey moved to scurry up - and then Sarah just **fired** the stone into the monkey, knocking it off the tree. In a flash, all three of us were at the beast, popping our face shields, tearing it apart and eating it bite by bite, and relocking the shields with a satisfying click. There wasn't all that much meat on it, but enough to keep us going for another couple of hours or so.

"Damn..", I said. "Wasn't expecting it to be **that** easy." Not that I mind.

"Neither was I... hey.. Sarah, check up the tree the monkey was in for fruit.", he said, thinking maybe the monkey was at its food source. Sarah climb-jumped up the branches, and climbed.. and climbed. Then I heard a crash as Sarah jumped - to another tree! She then quickly hopped down its branches, carrying some mangoes. They were gone into our stomachs in less than a minute.

For a brief moment I felt alive as I never had before. Sensory input flooded me with images of a time lost, a time when my ancestors were doing this again and again, a time when... ancestors, what the fuck am I talking about? I don't even have any parents, and I'm not a product of evolution; my birthplace is the incubator, not the womb. Being out here in the middle of nowhere may be

refreshing in a strange sort of way, but as for ancestral memory, nope. Of course none of that personal history crap changed my surroundings any, nor their meaning or their function. It was still a land of dirt, trees, rocks, and insects.

We trudged on, crossing a log over a river and sliding down a small cliff, using nothing except the compass, the map, and memory of viewed places to guide us. I did mention to Howard that my legs were really starting to hurt me, but he did the expected: he did the mental math and said that we'd have to keep going anyway. We were walking in identical patterns, so I can only take some small comfort in the fact that he's physically suffering just as much as I am. The rain gradually eased up.

We heard a scurrying to my left and we all turned at the same time - oh shit, who spotted us? - then nothing. "We're getting paranoid...", muttered Howard after getting closer to us. "That was a small animal." We then continued, never knowing what the disturbance was. Since no one popped out and said 'You've been spotted!', I assumed it wasn't a human or an Enforcer. Just thinking about the idea of someone doing that made me cringe in total fear.

If they see us breaking the rules, I know exactly what will happen. They'll let us fight for a while, then with their unlimited resources, finally wear out Howard and take him, then us. He'll end up a captive for eternity.. and what do we get? Suddenly I was filled with a sense of not just fear, but largeness- it is my life at stake here, but there's something more, something else to this whole business than just the obvious. And as much as I'd like to torture him for what he is and does, I really wouldn't want Howie to end up a captive for eternity.

I cracked open a jar of power (Similar to a can of whoopass) and continued following him furiously. He sensed my growing power and matched it, lengthening his steps from a plod to a determined stride, and Sarah did the same. No way we're going to stop now. Let's find this fucking place, and let's pray to Satan we're going the right way. That compass better not be broke, nah, what the hell am I thinking? That thing would probably laugh at a sledgehammer swung by Sarah. They make their equipment tough around here.

We continued for hours, in the on-again, off-again rain, not resting at all anymore, losing our determined strides yet happy at the fact we gained ground by using them, as thunder occasionally cracked overhead. Twice we thought something was a human but it was an animal; the second time, Sarah immediately threw a rock at it, bloodily hitting it in the face, and chased it as it ran; it turned out to be a young deer-like creature. She lunged, cut it with her machete, it stumbled, she darted forward, opened it up- and we feasted once more, tearing the dirty skin off and eating the bloody meat. We continued on and the sun began to set.

"Ugh.. after this shit I'm not going outside for at least a week.", Howard muttered as we all sat down closely, after another half hour. "I'm going to stay home, take all my clothes off, and just re-the-fucking-lax for a solid week. No, make that more like a month." Sarah chuckled. I envisioned an hours-long bath, followed by a nice, soft towel..

"Howard, you mind if I join you on that one?", I replied.

"If you **live**, I wouldn't have it any other way. Ah hell, what am I saying, I'm not going to let you die."

"Yeah, we can't, but you won't because we're not easily replaceable." Actually, our DNA is, but then he'd lose all the years we've lived, having to start over from scratch, and the next incarnation of me would never be quite as old as him.

"Yup. I refuse to lose anything permanent because of these damn tests.", he said, smiling. "We're done for the day. It's getting dark and I'm tired as shit.", he said, looking for some good ground to sleep on.

"Yeah.. yeah, I guess we can afford it. First light we gotta move though. We might lose time on the

rivers.", Sarah said. "And I'd hate to think of what the third test is."

"We'll find out soon enough, or we'll die."

"Not die, Howard.", Sarah replied with a raised eyebrow, reminding Howard what would really happen.

"Yes, die, Sarah. They come and I'll whack my own head off, might tell you two to, too." I realized that he had said three homonyms in a row without sounding stupid or funny.

"Bull shit.", she replied evenly. "There is no way. You'd die fighting but you would not cut off your own head." And she was right.

"Howard, you wouldn't.", I affirmed. "But don't think about that. Death and that cell are about the same anyway."

"Yeah.. I don't want to think about it, either." And you don't wanna think about my situation either, Howie. "Let's get some sleep.", he said, finding a slightly elevated, level spot of ground. Sarah brought out the thin, camouflaged bag, and we climbed in away from the rain, with him putting himself in the middle like usual.

"Remind me to take your clothes off too, Sarah.", he said lasciviously and I realized he was feeling her up.

"Howard, are you actually ready yet?" was her reply. Ready for - oh, duh, puberty. Unlike the media-saturated goobers in the normal world, Howard has never been encouraged by anyone to rush his natural impulses. He'll come when they come..

"Not yet. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy myself.. heh heh."

"Go ahead. Just make sure you get to sleep quick.. wouldn't want to see your endurance flagging out there."

"You say that for selfish reasons too, don't you."

"Oh fuck yes, Howard. Horny, annoying, and as much of a bastard as you are, it can always get worse, and it will if you croak. Besides, I'd rather have a 10 year old do it to me than some 300-pound 40 year old." I absolutely cracked up after hearing that one. "And you will be woken up early tomorrow." She turned her back to us, and started trying to sleep.

"Ugh, woken early, I hate that shit. But if she didn't.. damnit. I'm not sure why, but I feel strangely **good** right now.", he said. I don't feel anything except anxiety and frustration.. I looked and found some bit of resilient pleasure. No idea why, considering the circumstances.

"Yeah, so do I.. hey wait, which kind of 'good' are you talking about?", I replied.

"The pleasurable kind. To me, not other people."

"Oh yeah, then same. I'm going to hate tonight though.. get woken up early in the middle of a tropical forest, and I'm actually sweating a bit right now. Also can't take this suit off.." Exposed skin is a needless risk in a land of poisonous animals, and no amount of discomfort is worth death... especially if you're a valuable servant.

"It could be worse, we could be wearing normal clothes."

"Boy Scouts from Hell, here we come..", I said. He chortled. "Only Boy Scouts don't have to worry

about having nightmares and giving away their position..."

"Billy, remember, if you get a nightmare, I'm right here."

"Yeah, that's the thing..."

"Oh, I know I'm in most of them in some form or another. But if you can't get any anchor to reality, just remember that I'm not them."

"I'll.. I'll try, Howard." I was a hair's breadth from calling him 'Howie'.. I laid back, closed my eyes, and fell asleep in a fraction of a second, but not before feeling a warmth and a slight pressure on my right side.

Chapter 18

The nightmare was the expected, but I remained totally lucid throughout.

"Hey Billy... come here...", Howard called to me in it, grinning like an evil clown, the grin somehow larger than the rest of his face. "Come into my **home!!**", he said, gesturing to a rainforest temple with a pit full of snakes, evil mummies, and all kinds of traps.

I didn't move an inch.

"I said **come here!!**", he called again, this time in an angry, frustrated, thin voice.

"Fuck you.", I said to his apparition. "You're not Howard. You're just a bad dream. Howie's right next to me and I'm sound asleep. And you know what, fucker? I'm not going to even wake up because of you."

The figure and the rest of the dream vanished, I felt something coming after me, and I did wake up- at Sarah's touch. It was first light and my head was pounding, screaming at me to get back to bed. Nope. We gotta keep going. Sorry, brain.

"Ow...", Howard muttered to himself. "Six more nights of that? This is going to suck...", he said, before looking around and trying to hear something, anything. There was not a thing- no people, no animals, the faraway jabbering of birds the only sound. And a hissing sound in the bushes- the sound of a snake lazily moving around, either hunting or full from eating some mammal or other.

"Well, we survive another day.", I muttered. "It could be worse.. How far did we go?"

"I'd say.. well, we were going all day. Thirty miles would be my guess.", Sarah said. "At least we better hope it was that much."

We trod on like tired horses, spurred on by the fear of death and worse. Pain meant nothing to me on the second day, and it probably meant nothing to him. If we stopped now, for any length of time, we would be dead meat. Period. He'd end up in a small glass cage for the rest of his life - or dead - and we'd... we'd... 'Hey! Who wants these servants?' The thought chilled me in spite of the tropical, humid climate.

Boredom set in immediately. Sheer... boredom. Boredom and fear don't go well together. I had to stop.. but I couldn't stop, that was the command, and if he stopped... we would... he's not gonna stop.. gotta keep going.. the only thing that interrupted the sound of feet in mud was the assorted hills and logs we've got to get over...

..how far, how long, **NO**, can't start watching the clock, or I'll go crazy in an hour... just like school... except that instead of asleep at my desk, I'm asleep on my feet.. the sights are grand, the

atmosphere is excellent, the forest is beautiful and alive... and I'm trudging through it in a death march.

We did stop again, even if it only was to piss.

slish, slosh, slish, slosh, sound of feet going through the puddles.. no one to hide from, no one out here, just us and the animals.. and the **pain!** Legs feeling cramped and chest just annoying. Not a candy bar, not a car, not a computer for miles...

.. just another week of painful hell, if we survive, another eternity of slightly less painful hell.. does this forest even end?

slish, slosh... the mud's sticky and slippery at the same time, loves to stick to feet (the suit stops some of that, but not all) but hates providing traction... the deep, soft puddles are practically invisible until you step in them... tree roots will avoid mud but then you have to walk on a slippery, uneven surface..

...oh god.. "...this **SUCKS!!!**", I heard myself say out loud.

"No shit, Billy. This sucks big. Too big. I'm going to rape the guy who thought this one up.", Howard said, clenching his fist and examining his blades. "Let's rest for a few minutes...", he said, slowing to a stop and sitting on his ass, then reclining onto his elbows and eventually laying all the way down. I sat as well, but didn't want to lay down and make my body actually think it was going to get some sleep. Sarah shrugged, and leaned on a nearby tree, stretching her legs.

"Howard.. I get the feeling that if we stay stopped for too long... we won't be able to get up. You wanna sleep as much as I do..", I said. It would be so easy...

"Yeah.. I hate this shit. Secrecy my ass. There probably isn't a Homo Sapiens within a ten mile radius, except for the spies. Hey spies, and hey whoever's watching through their eyes, fuck you. Hard. You've got mental deficiencies thinking this shit up." he said in an average-volumed voice- although he probably could have whispered it and they would have heard every word. Then he muttered "Fucking.. let's go.", got up, looked at the ground, shook his head, and we kept going.

For a brief moment I envisioned a possible outcome- some tribe member, expert in the ways of forest stealth, would see us, and run back to his tribe to tell them all about it. And of course we'd just have to spot him, or we'd have to kill every man, woman, and child in the village. It was possible, and I looked around nervously- before I just shook my head and kept going.

It didn't take long before we started to get hungry. "Sarah, we need food.", Howard said casually.

"Let's see...", she said, looking around and up. "Leaves look about right.." She led us about a hundred yards under a large tree with big leaves.. and yellowish-brown spotted bananas hanging from it about thirty feet up. There we go. She smiled, grabbed the grappling hook from her pack, easily snagged them, and with a quick, sharp jerk, sent them hurtling down. She caught the bunch as it fell and handed both of us our breakfast.

Howard ripped off the top, peeled it, and took a bite- and immediately spit it out. "Gah!", he shouted, spitting. "Fuck that!" I was about to dig in to mine, too.

"What's wrong with it?", I asked.

"Look for yourself!", he replied, showing us what he'd taken Sarah and I did. The colored spots were seeds- it was full of them, much worse than an average seeded watermelon. "It tastes like shit, too." I dropped the one I was holding, and Sarah made a 'shit, should have seen that coming' expression- she didn't realize they'd be like this. Howard threw the banana to the ground, annoyed,

and stomped on it. She tossed the bunch to the ground as well, shaking her head. "Sarah, there's more than this out here, isn't there?"

"Definitely. I saw some Brazil nuts ten minutes ago, probably should have said something. Let's keep going." Since she was actively looking for food now, she found it in five minutes- a large tree more than a hundred feet tall, with what looked to be black coconuts around it that had fallen into the muddy ground. On the other side of the tree, an animal that looked like a big, tailless rat saw us, and immediately ran away. It knew predators when it saw them.

Sarah looked at the coconuts and slashed the top off one with her machete. It was full of... Brazil nuts! So that's how these things grow. With blades, claws, and engineered strength, we quickly broke the shells of the nuts to get to the sweet, oily nutmeat within. It took three more coconuts like that one before we were satisfied.

And then, surprisingly, Sarah picked up all four shells- and smashed them to pieces, using her feet, her hands, and the tree trunk itself. "The cuts were too clean.", she explained, as she scattered the shell pieces randomly around the tree. Ah, yes. Can't have people asking 'Who the heck turned these coconuts into open cans and left them here?' If they weren't so much of a pain in the ass to carry, they'd make great water containers... which is something else we need.

"Sarah, what water should we drink?", I asked. There was water everywhere.

"Water that hasn't had time to stagnate." Finding a small nearby mini-stream pouring off a rock was easy.

Three hours later, we did see a small human settlement (Camp? Tribe? None of us could tell from the distance), but avoided it by at least a quarter of a mile. I think the steady amounts of worry were actually causing all of us to speed up, much to my legs' protest. Sarah pretended not to mind, but I knew she was hurting as well, and the paranoia's even worse in her case. She's trained to avoid people anyway, but not when covering this much ground for days.

Fifteen minutes later, Howard and I climbed up two nearby trees, leapt, and simultaneously took down a sloth from the tree in between, each of us breaking one of its forelegs on one of our legs with a double **SNAP**, Sarah used her fingernails to rip out the beast's back leg muscles, and the three of us tore off the fur and dined on the flesh and the vital organs as it cried its death screams. It was quick as the kill of any predator. Grab and tear. It's the law of the jungle- does that make genetic engineering and bladed weapons a form of cheating? Nope. Rule #1: There are no rules.

About a half hour later, we met a river. Not a big one- we'll have to cross the Amazon and its bigger tributaries at some point, and this ain't it- but it was still flowing pretty damn fast, even if it was only thirty feet or so wide. "Shit.", we all muttered upon seeing it.

"How deep?", Howard and I simultaneously asked. Sarah looked into it, but couldn't tell. There was about two feet of embankment to the river, and it was dirty (almost black) enough to not see the bottom- which meant there was really no way of knowing.

She sighed. "Well.. these are long enough, we can grapple and swim it.. but that's going to be a pain."

"Shit. We can eat predators and we're having problems with a fucking river.", I said with a sigh.

"Predatory animals don't have that many watts' worth of push. Oh, we could hang on, all right.. but that's going to be a pain. Isn't there an easier way?", Howard replied.

"One word for you, Howard.", I said.

"What?"

"Tarzan." The trees' upper limbs were close together and thick enough to support us.

"Good choice.", he said, as the three of us made our way across the limbs, bending most and breaking a few. That was the high point of the day. We spotted a few signs of civilization- a couple of dirt roads and a small village- and went past all of them with no interference and no spying natives wondering who was moving through their forest. The real spies, of course, couldn't be seen.

More treading, more meat, more fruit, more bowel movements (whatever we're eating is really fucking with our insides- the food guides don't say what they'll do to your guts, just if they're poisonous or not), more annoying pain. I felt like it was about time to go to sleep (even though it was the afternoon), another hour's worth of walking through increasingly slushy, infirm ground with increasing amounts of near-impenetrable vegetation- but then we came to it, then I felt that lump in my throat, then it was time to find a damn good way to try to cross. We had reached a tributary of the Amazon. Sure, we could probably swim across it (it was wide, probably deep, very dark, and not flowing all that fast) if we tried hard enough, but then if we kept walking, we'd reach the Amazon itself with no real way to cross- if we really wanted to, we could probably swim that too.. but then there's tourists and other boaters to potentially deal with. Also, if anyone saw us, it would destroy secrecy.. and if we got tangled up in anything on the bottom, that's that.

We shared a three-way look. Now what do we do?

"Grapple-swim this one, find a way to cross a bigger one when we get to it.", suggested Sarah. And what other immediate choice did we have? Howard said to do it. She expertly slung her grappling hook in the bend between a limb of a tree and the trunk, almost running the rope out of slack, pulled on it hard to make sure it was secure, and we grabbed hold and plunged into the water, letting the laws of physics push us to the other side, then clambering up the dirty embankment. We were soaked and filthy, but this clothing is everything-proof and we didn't get slammed into any rocks.

"Sarah, how're we doing?", asked Howard after we finished getting up.

She pulled the hook off the tree and recoiled the rope. "If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll be there on time. But.."

"But what?"

"You remember about the ecology here. Rainforest proper is easy to walk through. As we get closer, we're going to have more and more jungle to deal with, we're going to be wade-swimming quite a bit, some of the forest is flooded and the water levels are high... what we need to do is commandeer a boat. We can go straight from here to near our destination very fast if we use one.", she said, checking her map. "We can't keep walking.. not for very long, anyway."

"Sarah.. dammit.. I thought that wouldn't be so much of a problem."

"Heh, you wish. This place doesn't have as many tourists as I thought. We need to steal one from some village or something.. a jet-boat, if we can get it. Canoes are too slow, propellers can get stuck on shit.", Sarah said.

"A jet boat. A fucking jet boat. Out here?", Howard said.

"Not impossible. Missionaries are out here..", she replied.

"So instead of avoiding civilization, we need to find it, without it finding us.", I said. "Nothing like challenge." Alternatively, they spot us, and we kill **every last one** of them... which is next to impossible if they scatter in different directions.

"This is more than challenge.", Howard said, shaking his head. "This is luck." Genetics do not affect statistics...

"You think I don't know that?", Sarah asked rhetorically, as we finally picked up our feet to drudge on again some more. "But there is no other solution. We can't swim it and it might take days upon days for us to smuggle ourselves. I hate not being able to plan as much as you do, but this defies planning.. this is just one of those take-it-as-you-can deals. Whatever you do, don't get depressed again."

"Yeah.. that's certain failure.", he said in Latin, and I'm surprised I immediately understood it. "We just keep going for now. Next village we find, we look for a boat." We kept going through the same general monotony. My legs constantly protested as they tried to regenerate the slight muscle damage I was still causing by walking. We used a machete to break off a long branch and pole-vaulted a river with it. A small bird with a broken wing was twittering its last- Sarah put it out of its misery by biting a large cavity in its torso, and then put the carcass in another nearby river. Piranhas snapped at it hungrily, and she simply pulled the splashing mess out very fast with both hands and we had a small fishy snack, spitting out the heads and their razor-sharp jaws. The water was dirty, but it was natural dirt, not toxic chemicals.

The problem was that there was no next village. Who the hell would build one out here? There's almost no solid ground to build it on! Crap. We can't be getting close to a major river already! Not the Amazon, not yet, something probably much smaller.. but we'd have to actually swim it, wearing packs and these suits. I groaned audibly.

"Relax.", Sarah said. "Maybe you didn't take a careful enough look at the map, but I did. This is going to end soon." Howard breathed a sigh of relief. "You didn't know either?"

"No, I figured you were taking us around something, or upstream of something before we hit a river."

Sarah shook her head. "I am taking you strictly as the crow flies. I don't know how fast the current will be and I don't know when or if we'll have a boat or of what type. You thought this was solid ground looking at it from the air, didn't you." Howard and I both sighed and nodded. "Like I said, relax. There's a hill a few miles from here and swimming through the trees shouldn't be that hard." 'Swimming through the trees' isn't a concept I'd had until today.

Sarah was right. It wasn't that hard. As the soggy ground became muddy water, we stayed on as many roots as possible before swimming to the next batch of roots. We didn't always need to swim- occasionally the water was only waist-deep, or for a few fleeting moments, knee-deep. Occasionally we power-leaped from tree to tree to avoid having to climb in and back out of the water, a thing we found ourselves doing anyway. Had we been in better spirits and without threats hanging over our heads, we could have made a game out of it. A long game. Jump when you can, stay in the shallow spots, try to avoid swimming as much as possible.

Sarah was in a waist-deep spot when she looked startled, reached down into the water, and came back up holding up a huge fish, which gulped the air, its body expanding and contracting with its breaths. Huh? Must be a lungfish..

"Arapaima gigas.", Sarah said. "Hangs out in warm water, breathes air, rather rare find." The fish must have been as heavy as Sarah herself, and thrashed to and fro in her vise-like grip. Sarah used the struggling fish's body to flip open her face shield before taking a bite as wide as she could possibly take. "It's a local delicacy when it's cooked right, but it's still good raw." Sarah walked-swam over to a nearby tree, climbed onto the roots, and held the still-struggling fish in her lap. It had only been an hour or so before we ate the piranhas, but we didn't care. Howard and I found room next to her and the lungfish was shortly deprived of much of the muscle it used to

struggle with, and it bled to death long before we threw it into the water for the scavengers to finish. We were full. Incredibly, unbelievably full. And yet I knew that with our continued exertion of our dense, powerful bodies, we would eat another, similar meal sometime soon, assuming we could find it. Ugh. I didn't **want** continued exertion. I wanted a nice, soft bed, or Howard's plush couch would be nice. I wanted to close my eyes and sleep for as long as I fucking felt like, and whatever Howard needed me to do the next day would really be all right with me, because I would have gotten some **fucking rest**.

It was not to be. "Billy, Sarah, you know the old adage about not swimming right after you eat?", Howard asked. I nodded.

"The one we broke after we ate those peasants?", Sarah replied.

"Yes, we're disfollowing it again.", he replied, and set off into the dirty water once more.

We continued what could have been our long game. The rain started up again and quickly turned into a full-on torrential downpour. After what felt like too long of a time- we weren't going fast at all- we finally reached the hill, and became able to walk instead of the wading we were doing. Dirty water ran down our feet in rivulets as the constant rain pounded the ground sibilantly. Unfortunately, the hill didn't last for as long as we would have liked, instead sloping downwards into more flooded forest.

"This is bullshit.", Howard observed.

"Yes, it is. I wonder if-", I started.

"Be quiet.", Sarah said instantly, turning around.. and actively listening for something. It was a slight r-r-r sound.. an engine, a boat! "This way, quickly." We wade-swam in a direction about perpendicular to the way we were going, no longer screwing around but going as fast as we could, effectively sprinting in a place where it was practically impossible to sprint. "And above all, just stay the hell out of sight." As if we needed a reminder for that.

Eventually she got us where she wanted us- the edge of a river- and we listened and looked at the yacht coming our way. A whole fucking luxury liner, two stories tall. Wouldn't it kick ass if we could just sail there in that? Or at least a little ways, which seems to be Sarah's idea. "Hmm.. all right. No, we can't..", Sarah thought out loud. "ah, it has those. All right, let's do it this way. You two go about.. eighty meters down that way. Stay out of sight, and climb on the same way I do when it finally gets there. We're going to kill everyone on that boat, but when you start killing, do it bloodlessly." I'm so glad we have an expert for this.

"Your plan is the best way to ensure my success?", Howard asked her.

"The best that I can see.", she replied.

"All right, the seven-meter command is gone.", Howard said, releasing us from his proximity. "C'mon, Billy. We're going to follow her plan." And we went ninety yards or so away from her, where the boat was going to pass, waited, and watched.

Sarah was barely visible as she swam to the ladder on the side of the boat. She grabbed it immediately as it passed, and climbed with unearthly silence and speed... all the way to the top of the boat! What the hell is she doing? She started attacking.. the radio antenna. Ah, yes. Can't have anyone sending distress signals, can we? She then found a door and opened it. The ladder made its way to us, and we climbed up and inside, quickly learning the layout of the small cruise boat as we would a map in a game.

The next few minutes were a nightmare for the normals and sport for us. We didn't waste time

talking or mocking- we just killed. Four guys were in a recreation room playing pool and we snapped their necks instantly. Out on the deck, we overheard two half-drunk fat guys talking about who to sue next in the game of mass tort lawsuits- Howard crushed one of their skulls by simply pushing his hands together (but not too hard, so as not to splatter it), and I imploded the rib cage of the other (again, not too hard, it pierced the heart but the blood didn't leak out of the skin), both of us doing the world a huge favor. Locked cabins were kicked in, bathrooms were raided (god that woman was ugly.. it didn't even feel like I killed her, she looked like she died already some weeks ago.. and I got to see her naked, gag!), and the crew was exterminated right along with the passengers. None of them, not even the stronger ones, reacted well enough to put up any kind of fight. One guy did actually have a rifle in his room (what the fuck kind of endangered species was he going to hunt?), but never got the chance to even pick it up. I killed a baby by simply shaking it back and forth with engineered force. We killed them all in a few minutes, and spent another few minutes making sure they were all, indeed, dead. Yup, we got 'em. Nothing alive on this boat but us, we confirmed.

"Okay, plain English, here's what we have to do.", Sarah said. "We have to make most of them look like they died naturally, which should be doable, because most of them are going to go near the fire," Fire? Ah yes, she's going to burn this boat.. and it's the same sort of servants-are-doing-it trick Howard used in the first test. "but put a few of them under something heavy. Some you'll have to toss overboard, and for those, cut them open first, don't get any blood on the boat, but pierce the organs. Otherwise they'll bloat up and float instead of sink.", Sarah told us, going down to the engine room. "Hopefully they'll have a lot of fuel and we'll be able to blow this boat to bits, but if not, the rest of it has to look natural." An incredible string of bad luck, in other words, with no survivors because of things that could happen, not some secret organization killing people. Hey, how many secret organizations do you know that can exterminate everyone on a boat without even spilling a drop of blood?

"What, we're going to burn it now?", Howard asked, as I started repositioning some nearby bodies.

Sarah stopped, turned around, and said, "Of course we are. C'mon guys- the boat has to go down at about the same spot it went when the GPS signal died. We're going to nuke it right here, but we're taking one of those lifeboats." Howard and I nodded and smiled. Said lifeboats were small, and ran on propellers. Much easier for secrecy than this big yacht! "By the way, when you're done faking the deaths, each of you bring a body on the lifeboat- for secrecy we might need them." We moved bodies to various positions, lifting heavy objects and pinning the normals under them, pretending that those had killed them instead of engineered hits; Sarah had already taken a few of them down to be burned. Some others that we couldn't plausibly fake were slashed and tossed. Howard outsmarted me for the lifeboat bodies; he found a 60-pound girl, and I carried the 200-pound lardass I'd ruptured the heart of. Oh well. We tossed the corpses into it and then went back to where we were before, and I heard Sarah moving some heavy objects around down there, and then she came rushing out of the engine room like a bat out of Hell. "Let's get the fuck out of here!" We ran and got into the boat immediately, Sarah jumped in, she turned the propeller on with a single hard yank, and we hauled ass. "Fortunately for us the sides of the boat are pretty high. Just stay down.", she said. She then did something I didn't expect- she flipped up the face shield and forced her whole head through it, stretching the fabric to its limit, so as not to look like the cloaked assassin she is. Damn, these things don't have removable headpieces. She piloted it well, but unfortunately, since we were actually following her plan and keeping our heads down, we couldn't tell which way she was going, or even look up to find out what got blown up as we heard a terrific **BOOM** behind us. Howard was probably more embarrassed than I was.. Sarah's like our big, all-knowing sister for this sort of thing, leading her little brothers so they don't get killed. Laying down and doing nothing as we were, I promptly let myself relax.. and then fell asleep.

"All right.. we're going to hide ourselves.. here.", Sarah woke me (and Howard, too, I noticed) up with, carefully piloting the small boat under a large tree's roots, scraping its sides against the wood, and making me feel like it was some monster's fingers clamping down on us. Son of a bitch, I'm having childish fears, and I just finished killing even more people.. Sarah turned off the engine, then

forced her head through the face-shield again, wearing it properly once more. She got out of the boat, broke off large branches from the trees, and proceeded to cover the boat's engine with them, putting them into a position where it would be blocked from the air. "The bag will protect us against infrared detection, but not this thing.", she explained.

"You intend to get more use out of it, then.", Howard said.

"Bet your albino ass I do.", Sarah replied. "By the way, you can slice and toss the bodies now- take some bites of them now if you want." We did. Although it wasn't fresh as we usually eat it, we took sizable hunks out of them with our teeth. Looks like my decision to bring the meatier guy wasn't so bad after all. When we were full, we ripped holes in the organs that would bloat them, and tossed them overboard. "And you two are going to like this one- it's time to sleep. We can't afford to move now." We, indeed, did like that one, after taking a few drinks of water from the river.

Before we actually went to sleep in the slowly rocking boat, we heard a splish-splash, the sound of piranhas chewing the carcasses we'd tossed. Those little guys really do make secrecy easier, don't they?

Chapter 19

I managed to fight off the nightmare again, although convincing myself it wasn't real was harder than last time. Instead of to my own screams, I woke up to the r-r-r-r of a propeller. It was still black out, with only a tiny amount of moonlight to see by. Sarah, with her head sticking out of the face area, had climbed out of the sleeping bag and started the engine. I had a head full of questions to ask her, stuff I've managed to wonder even through the nightmare.

"Sarah.. we killed everyone on that boat. In almost every major accident, at least someone survives. Won't that raise questions of its own?"

"That's the wrong direction of thinking, because weird stuff happens, and most of it without us. The right one is to ask yourself this: **what will the normals see?** You two weren't there when I made the fuse and set up all the flammables. Fortunately for us, they had an almost completely full tank and a lot of other stuff to burn as well, including alcohol. People check fire patterns these days so I didn't pour gasoline all over everything. You two probably didn't notice, but I moved your more smashy kills" Heh, I guess some of them were a bit 'smashy'. "closer to the main blast. What the normals will see is a missing lifeboat, a few people dead from falling objects and blunt trauma, some missing people- and there's always missing people- and a lot of charred, broken skeletons. I also put a few packs of cigarettes in the right place- someone was just smoking way too close to the engine when the gas cap was off. Even if someone does suspect foul play, what are they going to come up with? You two probably didn't see him, either, but one of those guys was a major coke dealer." And we killed lawyers, and from the way they talked it sounded like people would want to kill them, too.

"But you didn't know that before you went in there.", I said.

"No, I didn't. Every operation is a calculated risk. We **needed** a boat, and stealing one without nuking the main boat wouldn't have worked at all." She took her hands off the steering wheel, and leaned very close to us, speaking in a very, very quiet whisper. "Besides, if anyone does determine things to make it a secrecy breach of any level, you'll be the Dominator by then, so don't fucking worry about it." Even for me, that sentence was an amazing relief. "And get back to sleep." My bladder protested that, but I forced myself to ignore that for now and managed to get a few more hours of sleep.

"All right, guys, this is where we stop.", Howard and I were awoken with. It was dawn, and there was a fairly large cacophony of insects and birds everywhere.

"Is there no one around?", he asked.

"It's clear." He got up to take a piss off the side of the boat and I joined him, spelling relief U-R-I-N-E. "Just so you two know," Sarah said playfully, "there's a fish that can swim up your stream of piss and lodge itself in your dick. It's called the candiru. Of course, since you two regenerate, it's just a one-swipe fix." Wow, that's not something I want to think about this morning. Or ever, for that matter.

"You.. can't delude me, Sarah.", Howard said, warily.

"I'm not. It actually happens." Both Howard and I watched our streams and saw no candiru. "In more pleasant news, we're across the Amazon and we're making wonderful time." Whew. "That's no reason to slow down, though.", Sarah said, rolling up the sleeping bag. When we got out of the boat, Sarah pulled it out of the water, and we both looked at her quizzically. "Guys, we're not downstream of where the yacht was. We have to destroy this thing.", she said, pulling out her super-sharp machete.

It is a testament to the power of Illuminated engineering that our weapons were not damaged in our hacking-up of the boat. It took almost an hour to do it the way Sarah wanted it, and she used a big piece of the boat to dig various holes in the dirt, burying every piece. Neither of us questioned whether this was worth it.

Then we set out again. Sarah looked bleary-eyed all day, but that wasn't a surprise at all, considering how little sleep she's gotten. We did the same thing for the rest of the second test. Each day was the same old drudge, each night, the nightmare got a little closer, a little harder to fight off. A few times we had to make secrecy-necessary detours, once around a military camp. We were probably slowing down- it **felt** like we were, despite our efforts to the contrary- but Sarah said that we'd get there on time..

..and, to our great relief, we did.

The green-covered hill we saw from the satellite photographs appeared to be an Incan temple from the ground, but there's no way it actually was under all the overgrown stone. I have no idea how they're keeping this place a secret, but this thing is definitely not for normal eyes. I visualized the inside being full of traps, for Illuminati that always wanted to build a hero-killing supervillain base and never got the chance.

"About.. nine hours to spare.", Sarah said. "I'm surprised. In a way, I was expecting a few minutes."

"But it looks like we're going to need those hours.", Howard said. "As I should have expected, there's no door." The stairs ended onto what was effectively a block face, covered in stones bearing pictograms, some of which seemed to be faces, some of which seemed to be Illuminati symbols. "And I had to leave all my entrance-makers at home." I think it was Caesar who cut that knot in half with his sword instead of bothering to untangle it.

Sarah thought for a minute, looking up and down the sides of the green-covered temple, then back up again. "I know what you're thinking, Sarah.", Howard said. So did I.

"He never gave us a height measurement.", I pointed out.

"Well, it's easy to climb, so I doubt it's up there..", she said, shrugging.

"Climb it and check anyway.", Howard commanded her, and she moved from block to block with the ease of a mountain goat. "Billy, do you see anything that I don't?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be standing here puzzling over how to get in. You know, it would be just like these

guys to put all these symbols and stuff here, but put the actual entrance in some obscure place on one of the sides." I really, really wished I had one of Howard's entrance-makers.

"Or put some weird push-the-blocks puzzle to open up the entrance, only the blocks are everywhere around the temple and need to be hit in a certain order. These symbols are a clue. That one's me.", he said, pointing to the figure with the long hair. "And I think that's you.", he said, pointing to one with shorter hair.

"And I think they're mocking us.", I said. Near the corners of the pictogram wall were pictures of us engaged in acts I hope he never considers doing.

"Yes. They are most definitely mocking us. I really doubt that's what we have to do to get in." I sure as hell hope not. "But these aren't push-blocks, so if we look at them a certain way, they almost certainly tell us how to get in."

"This time, I think it's you who's forgotten your Illumination, Howard. This isn't Indiana Jones. This might be just one large block, but who the hell says it doesn't have sensors?" I noticed Sarah climbing down, shaking her head.

"Shit. You're right. I have definitely been getting way too far into this. Okay. This one.. this.. no. No. THIS one symbolizes the Dominator." He pushed on a pyramid that had an eye in its center. "It's the floating top of the larger pyramid."

"Then this is my picture, and.. this symbolizes me.", Sarah said, pushing on two other blocks- a female symbol (the only one on the wall, I noticed) and a brick falling from the top of a flat-topped pyramid- the pyramid that Howard's symbol floats above. "They're mocking me, too. I was supposed to be a first."

"I don't think I have a symbol.", I said, looking them over, looking around Howard and Sarah. I don't belong here, and the guys who designed this thing know it. "I'm not really supposed to be here, I guess. Wait." There was a pyramid with no eye, of the exact same size as Howard's. I pushed on it and the short-haired symbol of myself. All of us pushed on our chosen symbols, enough to trigger any sensor. Nothing.

"Fuck.", Howard said. "That's obviously not it."

"Wait. I'm being a dumbass. How long is my hair now?", I said. I reached around Sarah to touch with my left hand the same long-haired symbol that Howard touched with his right.

"How's it going to know there's two of us?"

"Touch the others, but push this one real hard. Maybe it takes both of us." The new configuration pushed in the long-haired block- and the entire wall fell over. There was a sharp 90 degree angle to the left in front of the collapsed block- the stone hall that went that way instantly lit up with an odd glow. It sloped downwards and gradually to the right, and from what I could see, I guessed our path was a spiral.

"Well, it's a good thing we didn't bother looking around the rest of the pyramid. Okay, Sarah, how many traps?", Howard asked.

"**LOTS.**", Sarah said. "And just look at how that hall curves around. Come on guys, you know what that means."

"Rolling rock fun.", I said. Howard just groaned and nodded.

"Well, it's not impossible and we don't have anywhere else to go. Fuck it, I'll take point.", he said.

"Wait a minute, Howard. Depending on how big that rock is, how fast it moves..", I said, making pushing motions with my arms. Both Howard and Sarah got the idea instantly.

"Stick together until it triggers, then.", Howard ordered us. "And once it does, I'm either going to run or push that thing, and of those two you're going to do what I do." He always watches his words. "Let's try this."

We walked not five feet down the hall when the stone wall directly behind us (perpendicular to the crashed pictogram wall) crashed down to reveal a rolling rock. I estimated its speed at twenty-five miles per hour and its weight at maybe a ton and a half.

Howard ran at it, screaming. We followed him- his palms hit it just before mine did, and Sarah hit it right afterwards. We pushed not just against the rock, but against its rotation, as that pushed down on our hands- we needed to lift our hands and keep hitting it again to prevent getting our arms forced under it. The three of us gave a little ground (we can't give too much- other traps!!) to its momentum.. and then the tide turned. The rotational velocity lessened and the three of us pushed upwards on it.. my muscles hurt like hell pushing a rock this size, but I was damned if this wasn't going to work. The thing finally began to roll the other way, back up the slope. Howard smiled and began to push it to the right, out the door. We followed.

It was incredibly enjoyable watching that rock of death bounce down the stairs and into the forest below with an enormous crash. I flipped it two middle fingers, laughing. Sarah was a bit giddy, and Howard looked impressed.

"Fucking excellent, Billy. That probably pissed them off a good deal and made this a whole lot easier.", Howard said, smiling.

"Billy, I think you just ruined a lot of other people's fun.", Sarah said. "That was fucking hilarious. Howard, still taking point?"

"Of course." He **sauntered** down the hall. There were various arrow traps- he grabbed the flying projectiles leisurely and threw them to the side. There was a spike trap that popped up at his foot immediately after he stepped on a stone- he simply moved his foot out of the way of the spike which then retracted. He grinned, pushed his left foot where the spike would trigger but not hurt him, and simply kicked the spike with his right, sharply bending it and wrecking the trap out of sheer spite. I can't blame him for enjoying it- after all, they were going to enjoy his panic.

The hall was quite a distance- apparently they wanted to have enough for memories for a long time to come- but despite the traps it didn't seem to take very long and, at the end, there was a passage (just narrow enough to block a rolling rock) leading to a large, circular room- we stepped through.

Chapter 20

So we entered what looked to be the last room. No other exits, no way up, still lit by that same phosphorescent wall-glow. Is this the place? As Howard jumped into the X-marked circle with a "**Nyahahaha!**", I relaxed a bit. That's it, then. The Indiana Jones bullshit is over. Now we just have to survive whatever's thrown at us next- and it can't be nearly as long as what we've faced so far. A quickie, then. My thoughts were interrupted by the THUMP of the exit sealing off behind us. Just like in some Sonic game.. they seal the exit and then they make the hero(es) fight the final boss in a confined space. Nah. Who the hell would they make Howard fight? We'd ream the poor bastards, unless.. unless they're throwing something other than regular humans at us. I half-expected to see a five meter tall robot come crashing out of the wall, lasers blasting.

"Mighty Inheritor, you have successfully completed the requirements of the second test for the abilities of Endurance and Skill. Now, we shall test you for the abilities of Strength and Speed.",

Gladstone's voice proclaimed from a loudspeaker, further giving the impression of a console game's boss. Oh shit... it is a fight. Got to be. Unless, of course, they're going to start throwing big rocks at us from the ceiling, which I wouldn't be surprised about. I felt myself tensing up, readying for battle, a nagging sensation of danger pulling at my head- pulling even harder than that Indiana Jones bullshit. "Being of sound mind and able body, do you accept or reject this next challenge?", it continued. Like he even has a choice. I'll save the question 'Where the hell do these motherfuckers get off doing this shit to the future controller of the world?!' for later.

"I ACCEPT, YOU ORWELLIAN MOTHERFUCKER!!!", Howard screamed, his echo being echoed off the walls and creating a cacophony of reverberated sound. **"I FUCKING ACCEPT!!! BRING IT RIGHT THE FUCK ON!!!"** Oh, they will. They always do. I'll have to hand it to him- he's good at sounding like a badass ready for serious ass kicking. The dim lights turned off and spotlights hit us in the face, furthering my impressions of a final-fight idea. A very, very faint scuffling in the darkness confirmed them completely- those can be only one thing.

"Inheritor- there is only one rule now.", the Bastard said, and I could almost hear the venom dripping from his lips. "Survive."

"You don't think they'll send Enforcers after us, Howard?", I grated, drawing my machete, my eyes and ears attempting to track their motion.

"Billy... fight."

The Enforcers came hard, fast, with two longswords apiece compared to our single machetes, and all at once. Good! I attacked with the machete, attempting to put three of them away with a single stroke. It didn't work. As they jumped back out of range of the stroke, I took a few milliseconds to consider just how fucking **big** they were. Seven feet tall, versus a 5'1" ten year old. Even better! It means they're bigger targets. 1, 2, and 3, I mentally labeled them, from left to right. I clenched my left fist, extending the blades, attacking 3 with an upward stroke of the machete, one it leaned back from while bringing its blades up. 1 tried to swipe me with its swords, but I grabbed the left swordarm first and kicked the right one, retracting the fist-blades about a tenth of a second after I had extended them. 2 was going to do something, now having lots of room to attack, but I drew back and kicked it in the chest with a ridiculously hard blow, using the foot I had stomped on 1's wrist with, the steel toe going partway into and under its ribcage, smashing back the skin and flesh. If these things could feel pain, this one would have been out for the count- but as it was, it was still active, and I drew my leg back before it could cut it off, and attacked 3 some more with the machete. It dodged and partially parried the first stroke- and then 1 was active again, attempting to slash me with its left arm. I clenched my fist yet again, moved ridiculously fast yet again, and put my blades into the attacking arm's wrist. I twisted the blades, cutting its hand off, feeling the red warmth yet again. At the same time, I moved to the right, getting in close to 3 and dodging a sword stroke from 2. My first stroke missed, and it moved as to parry my second one- and then before it knew what had happened, I had removed its throat, my blade going under its blades, and blood spurted everywhere. I was expecting it to keep attacking, but it was falling over dead instead. I yanked the blade out and jumped back, then rushed 2, keeping an eye on 1 that was coming around it. I moved back and forth with the blade very rapidly, causing 2 to parry my strokes, and then used my left hand's blades to carve it from its stomach to its neck, severing the aorta and causing a massive gush of blood- I heard a resounding CLANG and realized it wasn't my fight that sound came from. Jumping back several paces, I pondered how to take out 1 for a split instant- then I got an idea, sheathed the machete in another split instant, and rushed it with my bare hands. Predictably, it tried to slash at me- I rushed inwards and grabbed its forearm with my left hand, held onto it with my right, put my feet on its chest, and as the momentum drove us to the ground, I pulled its arm off, standing on the rest of the body as it fell to the ground. How to finish- oh, yes. I took the severed arm and plunged the still-clenched sword deep into 1's lower neck and spinal cord, hearing a muffled *tink* as the point hit the floor.

I turned left a bit and watched Sarah take on one last Enforcer. She kicked it in the back with her left

leg, and I heard the telltale snap of bone breaking. She then finished it with a two-handed swipe of her machete, spilling more blood on all of us in a spray worthy of Mortal Kombat, and its head went thump and rolled a few inches. Turning back and forth, we looked for more targets- none in sight.

That was the end of the fight- nothing remained but us.

The third test was over.

The spotlights turned off and the phosphorescence came back on. There was a double *schink* as Howard's and Sarah's machetes returned to their scabbards, soaked in blood. Speaking of blood, this place better be made with Teflon.. if they're ever going to use it again, that is. It started raining, and I knew that it was pure water, washing off our suits so that the Dominator and his servants wouldn't be blood-bathed at the reception. A panel revealed a fan blowing hot, dry air and Howard squatted next to it with a tired thump, us edging closer to it and feeling the drying warmth, the antithesis of everything we've been through in the past week. He took off his helmet and let his sweat-soaked hair hang down, and Sarah and I immediately did the same- damn, I had no idea how humid that was. In the rainforest, the humidity is 100% both in and out of a suit- but this air is obviously filtered.

The room turned out to be a rather large elevator, taking us to the top of this faux temple, into a room of Illuminati, some clapping, some just astonished. Others were more industrious, putting their notepads away. I wonder how many notes they have? Probably plenty, chock-full of revealing character traits they can use in the future- use them against him, if they have the guts to shorten their projected lifespan by a good margin. I can picture it now- and you thought he was mean when he was the **Inheritor**..

I looked at the generally cheerful people surrounding us, and.. just looked. Damn them all. They actually expected us to survive that shit? They wear us down, tire us out, then send us all into the cold embrace of ten high-speed Enforcers with mondo swords and orders to kill? Maybe they are as smart as they think they are.. most of them, anyway.

A woman with C-cup breasts and a smile handed Howard a cup of hot chocolate, and the Bastard proclaimed Howard the Dominator of the Illuminati with predictable, well-hidden anger. I don't think he said it right, though:

Howard is the **DOMINATOR** of the **ILLUMINATI!!**

I faded into the shadows (not as hard as it sounds- for a society used to watching their backs, these guys leave a lot of their rooms dimly lit) and pondered things in silence, only darting out for split-instants to get food; I noticed that everyone was avoiding talking about world politics; and it continued like that for two straight hours, until everyone simply started leaving and we began the flight home.

Well, at least **that's** over. What's next?

Chapter 21

Someone had been smart enough to leave fresh clothes on the jet so we could get out of the worn rainforest gear. Hey, cool, I hadn't even thought to ask- a suit just like Howard's. Only black, of course. We changed in moments, and although the fabric was the same, it wasn't polluted by a week's worth of sweat.

Howard leaned against the seat, stretching and giving an "Ahhhhhh..." of relief as the jet accelerated. Of course he's relieved. We're finished with the damn tests. No one- at least, no one in his right mind- is going to challenge his power. The world is his to command now, although right now I seriously doubt he's in the mood to command much of anything. He needs a break; so do we,

and we're probably going to get at least something of one if he isn't going to do much. Good. I need the fucking rest. "I don't think I've ever been this relieved in my whole life."

Murphy said hello in my head. "Yeah, now watch them ask you to be everywhere, fixing their problems and being places as the leader, just as soon as you get home.", I said, grinning a bit. Implantation begets pessimism. Of course, as funny as that would be, I'd fucking hate it. He'd use me even more; he'd have to.

"Billy, since that is actually possible, I declare you a very efficient killjoy."

"Thank you, Howard.", I replied.

"They're not gonna do that.", Sarah said. "Something I do know, when the Dominator's away, they tend to be very cautious of one another. The last guy had to be somewhere for like a week- not sure if you remember it, Howard- and everyone steered clear of fighting. I think it's because of the low patience of the position.. Ah, so all the previous Dominators were impatient as well?"

He was more surprised at that than I was. "What? I thought I was the one with the low patience."

"Nope. One of my previous employers- the guy died recently- told me he lived through three Dominators before you, and he said they were all the same, basically. Lots of patience for learning, lots of patience for understanding, no patience for assholes. And now, you especially. They **made** you that way." So it's both, then. Hey.. wait a minute, three Dominators before Howard? What's a guy **THAT** old doing sending people on assassination missions? I pondered asking that out loud and just put it on my things-to-research list.

"So in other words, they have a healthy dose of fear." Previous Dominators or no, I'd have a healthy dose of fear if I were a normal and I watched that last fight.

"Not so much 'fear', Howard, but.. ah.. respect. And something like fear, but more calculated. Basically, they know you have a bad side, and they avoid it. Especially after **that**. The battle's fresh in everyone's mind, and when they think about you, they think about bloody Enforcer pieces." Yup, just what I was thinking.

"That makes sense. Good, I'll have some peace for once in my life.." Him? **PEACE**? Considering we're the walking incarnations of violence, that is very odd to hear.

"You know, you're the second to last person I'd expect to hear that from.", I noted.

"Then who's the last?" I pointed at Sarah and clicked my tongue.

"Ha! Billy, I need the relaxation just as much as you two do. I always liked the occasional long pause in training. Now that I'm not a mercenary anymore or in training, I guess I'll have a lot more time on my hands. Even with you, Howard, you're still only one man.", she said, smiling a bit. I wonder just how correct she is. Wishful thinking or not? She's not going to be assassinating many normals as the Dominator's servant, but as for the Illuminati Howard keeps control over.. I guess it depends on how much real violence he needs to use.

"Yes, and hopefully I won't have to do **too** much assassinating. That gets a lot uglier for me than it did anyone you worked for.", he replied, informing us that violence won't be his first resort. She nodded rapidly.

"Great. So I've got this big all-expenses-paid summer vacation, and look where I'm spending it.", I said, in a joking tone. "A couple of months of straight summer camp in the **best** possible place and the **worst** possible company." Howard giggled; Sarah laughed evilly to herself. I realized how much more this would suck if neither of them had a sense of humor. "Which reminds me to ask- can you

vanish from known existence for months at a time?"

"As much as I'd like to, I can't really be gone from their sight for even a day or two. I would go on a regular vacation somewhere, but I think I've had my fill of the tropics." I laughed at that, then stretched in the same position Howard was in and rested. For the first time since this whole mess began, I actually drifted into pleasant fantasy for more than a moment. She could have been my older sister, and he could have been my true twin brother, and instead of Illuminated, we could merely have been very, very rich. Since no one was talking, I allowed the fantasy to dominate my thinking for a good half hour, until my constant reality checks caught up with me.

The jet calmly floated down to the ground on a cushion of powerful thrusters, and Howard looked visibly relieved as he climbed out of the plane. "Now, after five weeks of that crap.. where was I?", Howard said, as his dogs rushed towards us, barking and wagging their tails. Good boy, Fido! Good boy! Here you go, have a treat- a live, screaming normal! Of course since there weren't any live normals on the island, we had to make do with just petting their thick fur instead.

"Remember to take my clothes off, Howard.", Sarah said in a conversational tone. In a way, that sounds like a great idea, but what the fuck?! Why the.. ah, yes. He'd commanded her to remind him, and she'd logically interpreted it as 'when we get home'. He didn't actually do that, instead choosing to simply grin at her.

"I'm not sure what you were going to do next.", I replied. Whatever it is, it's going to involve him having fun, and in this case, probably at no one else's expense. Probably. The other dogs didn't follow us into the mansion as did Fido.

"Don't look at me.", Sarah said. "No idea."

"Oh, yes, that's right.. you had just been delivered here.", Howard said to me. "And instead of tossing you two into the grinder with me for that testing crap, I was going to properly spend time showing you the way of things around here." Howard sat down heavily on the couch, his body position a familiar 'I'm here and I'm not going to be moving any time soon' pose. "But you've already seen quite a bit and you've already learned a good deal of Latin." Fido jumped on Howard's knees and licked his face.

"I've also looked up the super technology, means of concealment, the engineering of the Dominator, the important stuff.", I replied. I sat down next to him, remembering everything. It's all so detailed, so technical in areas, yet so.. weird. If one of my friends (probably Paul- he was always into this kind of thing) tried to tell me any of this two months ago, I would have told him he's a paranoid lunatic. "Had to make myself believe it..". Fido nuzzled my left arm and hand as I petted his neck.

"And it'll only get worse.", Sarah said, and I didn't have to look to know that she was smiling. Either she knows something important that I don't, or she's just making a good prediction. It's not going to get any better, and Howard might have to open the book of tricks a few times to solidify his power, so I'm guessing the latter.

"Sarah, hot chocolate, tall cup." He hesitated for a split second. "Two of them." Although it doesn't stop me from wanting to kill him, I truly appreciate Howard's brand of generosity.

Howard made some selections on the screen, going for a new game that apparently was released today. 'What the hell?!', I thought, as three things from the viewscreen popped out at about thirty miles an hour, one of them towards me. I noticed Howard reaching out to catch one and I did the same- it's a game controller, and it looks as if it was specifically made to fit my ten-year-old, six-fingered hands. Oh, wait. **It was.**

Howard pressed Start, and started laughing. "WHAT THE FUCK?!", I shouted, and Fido probably walked away from me and out the door because of that. The game in question was apparently a

simulation of the rainforest, temple of doom, and Enforcer fight we had **just done**. "What the fuck, Howard? Who the hell makes this shit? And how can they be so fast?"

"The collective computer genius of the Illuminati makes this shit, and you know about our speed and efficiency." There was a level select, and Howard looked through the screenshots, including one that had us running away from the rolling rock instead of what really happened. "Or, maybe someone working for a first level started on this thing before we even went there. Not hard to do. Probably only took whoever it was a few hours for the characters and a few hours for the levels."

Sarah brought us our chocolate and went back for more for herself, as Howard looked through the various menus and instructions. Yup, it's a simulation, all right. It had one life, no health bar, and the screenshots suggested lots of difficulty- obviously made for us. Sarah came back, put her chocolate on the table, took the controller, and we proceeded to play as ourselves.

Although we were forced to dodge the rock instead of what we actually did do (the game's designer obviously didn't conceive of us being able to push it), it was realistic and fun, with much of the dodging automated as we only had the controllers to move with.

Playing games (he didn't want to do much else- neither did I, considering last week) with Howard is weird. He has, very literally, every game in existence- apparently he's got some sort of universal emulator in his system. And he'd never command me to play anything other than my hardest- I don't think he's even capable of considering it. And as he plays his hardest as well, it's almost always, depending on the game, real close or stalemate when we're going after each other.

On the other hand, in any cooperative game or mode, there's no challenge at all. It doesn't matter what it is, nor at what difficulty (and I know some of these don't exist in the normal world) we play it at. I've never played S&K3 as Tails to an excellent Sonic before (Paul almost always played Tails.); of course, since the second player is nigh-invincible, Howard just laughed and dodged as I whacked the crap out of the foolish Doctor's latest robotic creation. Gunstar Heroes? Destroyed. The original Double Dragon? Crunch. Metal Slug, Super Buster Bros., even the rather difficult original Mario Brothers? Annihilated. He doesn't command my actions in the games. He doesn't have to. It's all covered under 'Play your hardest.'

It was then that I understood something critical. Alone, Howard's a powerhouse far beyond normal capability. With me, in games or real life, he's **almost completely unstoppable**. And he knows it. I wondered if the previous Dominator knew this would happen. I wasn't sure how many of the other Illuminati, even the first levels, understood this. We probably could have killed thirty or more Enforcers back there.

After a couple of hours, he took us down to the pool to have a long, hot bath, which we all badly needed, the sticky sweat coming off our bodies from the application of powerful soap and pure water. And when we were all clean, he went back upstairs with us, laying down on his couch, commanding Sarah to massage his legs and me to brush his hair. As we did it, he made soft, purring noises, like a contented cat. "Stop, carry me to bed..", was his last command of the day, but fortunately, between me and Sarah, he was very easy to lift, and Sarah actually tucked him in. It's nice having power, isn't it, Howie? Seeing his peaceful, sleeping face made me want to go to bed as well, which I did, falling asleep in seconds.

I was completely unprepared for what happened that night.

Chapter 22

No words in existence could completely describe this nightmare. It had everything in it, everything I've ever been afraid of, death, a terrible Howard (only, here, he really was me, my own self torturing me in ways that were worse than anything the Illuminati could dream up, even the mockeries of having fun were awful), every little worry from normal-land magnified to Illuminated proportions, the

entire fucking world one of absolute mind-breaking despair. Several times I thought I was actually going to go insane. I screamed and screamed until I couldn't keep it up because my vocal cords were hurting too much. I put on the black suit which some agent had dutifully hung up ('it's your color after all') and walked to the railing, sobbing. I almost, but not quite, wanted to throw myself over headfirst, but of course I couldn't anyway.

Howard must have heard me, and came out wearing his usual, looking at me with a bit of worry on his face. I was afraid, but this was the real Howard, who would never stand to see his dearest friend and most valuable possession come to harm. Of course he figured out what happened and approached me slowly. "Billy.. are you actually.. hurt?"

"No..", I croaked out. God, it hurt to talk. "it's not killing any of my brain cells," I knew that for a certainty. "it's not hurting anything except my vocal cords, and they'll regenerate." He was visibly relieved. "But it was horrible, Howie..", I finished, putting my arms around him. Crap.. I'm hugging him and I actually called him Howie, and he basically owns the planet and can make me do anything he wants with a few words. I didn't know how he'd respond- on an intellectual level I figured he wouldn't get mad, mean, or sarcastic- yet the fear remained.

He responded by putting his arms around me and hugging me back. "Billy, I can't do anything about the nightmares.. you know why." He fucks with the implants, even looking for answers, and I'm at risk of withdrawal. And he sure as hell can't afford to fuck with my brain. He let go and I did as well, and he faced me with a smile. "I'm just going to watch the ocean for a bit. C'mon." I wiped away the tears as if they had never existed (because, well, the reason for them didn't exist either) and followed him to the long, rough, sandy beach. He simply found a good spot and sat down in the middle of the sand. A bit surprised, I slowly joined him. It's not like we have to worry about sand sticking to these suits.

The grade is, naturally, considerably steeper than a normal beach here. I don't know whether the people who manage this place keep it that way- they're obviously not doing anything about the seashells and driftwood all over the place. The water made a constant hissing sound, wave after wave breaking on the sand and flowing back in. Of course I've heard this sound before, seen the waves breaking, but I've never really paid attention to it- I had a lot else on my mind, after all.

The ocean.. what's interesting about it, why is he looking at it? But that's a one-sided question. You might as well ask the same thing about the land- what's so interesting about it? Hey, it's his planet after all, and most of it's covered by water, an inhospitable environment for any land-dwelling creature except seals, penguins, and the like. Between the genetics and the technology, though, I figure Howard and his Illuminati will find ways to better explore and exploit it. But the idea of greedy Illuminated polluters destroying the land and sea isn't accurate, either- Howard has eternity to look forward to, after all, and I know that he isn't in the business of damaging what he owns.

The surf was having an entrancing, almost hypnotic effect on me. It really is relaxing, just another piece of this island's true paradise. And that's what Howard came out here to enjoy. "It is nice out here, isn't it..", I said.

"It has its own peace.", he replied, and indeed it does. "Hey.. dolphins." A few grey objects were barely visible far to the left of where we were, bobbing up and down in the water.

"They probably love it here. Nothing can disturb them.", I said. They knew nothing of Illuminated secrecy, but they likely learned that this is where the fishing boats just don't go. We watched them pass in silence as they jumped through the waves.

After they exited, stage right, I realized I was hungry, but didn't want to get up to eat. Howard turned to me- ah yes, he's hungry and he doesn't want to move either. "Billy-", he started a command, turning to me, before spotting something else. I turned to look at it. Someone with thin, barely-visible footprints and a keen sense of stealth- we both knew who- had left us a covered bowl

of normal treats without wrappers and bottled drinks. We smiled and didn't get up for a long time, enjoying the food and the sea breeze, even the drizzle that came down on our heads.

When the food was almost finished, Howard started to get up. "Well, that's enough time looking over the sea. Now we're going to go under it." He wordlessly beckoned and I followed him back inside. For a moment I realized we'd left the empty bottles and bowl behind, but what a silly thought- he has people who pick up after him. Another silly thought would be for me to ask why he's taking me. Because he wants to, duh. And it doesn't surprise me at all that he has a submarine.

The elevator took us to level 4. The submarine dock was small, but functional. A single small sub of a design I've never seen before was there, and Howard simply popped off the top hatch with a yank and I followed him inside. There would probably be enough room for me, Howard, and Sarah to sit in here, but it'd be close. Howard sat into the pilot's seat and directed the sub downward immediately, not even seeming to need to turn it on in any way- he simply pointed the nose upwards and moved it in reverse, then slowly, carefully turned it around as a metal plate slammed closed above us. He finished turning it around and I noticed that the wall had opened up, and he expertly guided the sub out, and moved it for a ways into the dark, deep blue ocean. "Okay, Billy.", he said, getting up from the controls, which looked similar to the ones on the jet. "Sit down."

"Let me guess.", I said, sitting down at the pilot's seat, putting my hands on the steering wheel-like structure on top. "You want me to know how to pilot this thing."

"Yup. First things first- never press the buttons on the wheel, on this vehicle or any other with similar controls, unless you're attacking something." It strikes me not odd at all that Howard's tiny, toy-like submarine has serious weapons. "Left one is missiles, right one is an electrical harpoon. There's autotracking, so don't worry about your aim. Turn the wheel and it'll bank, push it left and right and it'll just turn. Up and down are directly nose up and down, not the reverse like some normal stuff. Pedals are reverse and forward, not gas and brake. And I am going to hang on.", he said, holding onto the back of the chair. I experimented with the controls and realized why he was. This thing is touchy as hell! A bit too much of a turn and the sub lurched to the left. "You can turn it all the way upside down, you won't lose your seat.", he informed me, and I did just that- a seat belt instantly snapped into place, holding me in the chair- as he ran around the submarine's walls as up became down. "Absolutely everything is jet-impeller driven and computer controlled. None of the stuff normals think about when talking about submarines, and the two of us have one and a half hours of oxygen."

"It's like playing a video game.", I noticed, as I continued to move the sub every which way.

"Exactly. Easier to use controls with superior armament and reflexes? The sheeple won't stand a chance when secrecy ends if their shit is just as bad as it is now." I laughed. And here I was thinking I'd need actual training instead of a minute of practice.

He wanted me to keep piloting and told me where to find the lights button- it gave off very little light, but he told me it was heavily amplified by the computerized cockpit glass and various windows on and near the bottom. I kept going for about an hour (he knew where the secrecy lines were and told me to turn around when I got too close), and impressed him when I parked it backwards without getting close to the walls.

Then he told me to do something else I didn't expect- he had me fly the jet the same way, including performing a VTOL takeoff. To my mild surprise, there was an extreme similarity between the jet's controls and the submarine's. Different features, yes, a much different speed level, and different things to be concerned with (special secrecy rules, for example), but fundamentally the same, and before long I was doing incredible barrel rolls and insane loops. Of course, I knew why he was doing it- to make me more effective. It's an inescapable truth: the more I can do, the more he can do with me.

I landed it as I had taken off, we went back inside for another Sarah-cooked meal and had just finished it when-

BZZZZZERT!

I can tell from Howard's face that he hates that sound- it's loud, obtrusive, and annoying. Appropriate, though, as I imagine that a good number of people who are going to call him will share those characteristics.

"Damien Gladstone", the bottom of the screen read, as a fourteen-year-old with a mild acne problem came on it. Gladstone? Isn't that the Bastard's last name? "Master Howard! Congratulations on your succession to Dominator. I would like to individually salute you personally and discuss matters of the future. May I arrive at midnight tonight?" I could tell just by Howard's body language that this was indeed one of his enemies; Damien couldn't.

"You may arrive.", Howard said neutrally, ending the conversation. He obviously didn't want to start pissing people off, at least not yet.

After the screen clicked, Howard leaned back and threw an arm around me and Sarah. I noticed, with mild interest, he was touching Sarah's left breast.

"So he's coming over here? I thought no one was supposed to be on your island except you and your stuff.", I said. His stuff, including the people and part-people he owns.

"Not usually. But since only him and his servant are coming, he's basically at my mercy. Sure, we could do this over the screen, but he probably wants to see this place for himself and get near the Dominator. I don't know why, but I'm getting the feeling that some of them just want to be near me, to put their wet lips to my ass or what I don't know.", he replied in his annoyed-master voice.

"Sounds like taking a field trip to Chernobyl." Sarah grinned and chuckled, as if she was going to say something like that to someone right before they died. And if all this shit's right she'll have plenty of opportunities. And if she's right, these people really do like flirting with danger; who really wants to fuck with someone like Howard? Unless he's actually your friend (or **you're** actually **his** friend, I corrected myself), what would you have to gain?

"Yeah, really, as if I didn't flaunt enough power already, they gotta get closer to it, just like those fucking Californian sun-worshippers who wear melanoma as a badge of honor. 'Ooh, hey, look at us, we can burn up like roast chicken!'... stupid normals. Anyway, I have 8 hours to kill. If you've got any ideas, I wanna hear em.", he commanded as he absently fiddled with Sarah's left breast. Great. The Ultimate Secret Master can fiddle with his servant girl's tit but can't even find meaningless ways to burn time like normals can. Then again, if I were him...

"Get on Quake or Quake 2 and snipe with a 15 ping- Reach out and crush someone!", I suggested. I've always loved those games, even on a substandard, second-hand computer. If it wasn't for secrecy, I'd mail id Software the money I stole from them by warezing.. or better yet, just take them over and keep them going.

"That gets boring after the two hundredth gib."

"Mortal Kombat.", I offered.

"Why? I can kick the living fuck out of the stupid comp on all levels, Enforcers the same, and playing against you or Sarah gets very pointless very fast. Come on, Billy. You've lived among normals. What would one of them do?"

"How, your average normal would blow the time watching TV, biking, inviting friends over, or just

sleeping. Or getting porno off the Net, or sitting in AOL chat rooms for a couple hours shooting the bull." He made an ugly face at the last, his usual response whenever The Sheeple Of Earth™ act stupid again. Then again... who's acting? That's one of the things I agree with him about when it comes to the world- the average person is a total fucking moron.

I felt my stomach beg for more food. "Or eating.", I added. I distinctly remember Howard vowing we'd live it up in the food department.

Naturally, we were hungry simultaneously again. Dinner turned out to be high-calorie fat-filled ground porkbutt that was burned to hell, chocolate candy, and (chemical-free) potato chips- a menu oozing with cholesterol and saturated fat. That's still something I find funny. Normals die because they eat too much fat and calories- we'd die a painful death if we ate too little. And yes, Howard still eats like a rabid pig, the man-hours put into expensive (and cheap) food crammed down his throat like a dehydrated guy in the desert crams down water. Mouth wide open, soon as the first bite's gone, the next big one gets shoved right in and eaten at the same speed we fight. Sure I gobble, but not like that. Not usually, anyway.

"What the fuck are you staring at?", he said while I watched him cram it down.

"You eating. You're a fucking Viking at a feast. I thought it was just for that one time after that starvation shit ended, but you do it all the time." He started laughing mid-bite, and for a fleeting yet glorious instant I thought he was going to choke to death. (gurk.. choke) pleasepleaseplease.. (gasp... burble.. ahhhh gasp.. ahhh) Damn it! He lives.

He just smiled and told me that now he remembers why he keeps me around, as the work of the normals was gobbled up.

It turned out he killed the eight hours as your average rich normal would- TV (extremely nasty stuff, too), super-speed jetskis, computer games played at head-smashingly hard skill, and sleep-making a point of bringing me along with him every time. Quite a bit of sleep, actually, and when he made the severe mistake of sleeping on the couch with both me and Sarah on the floor next to him, my inevitable nightmare screams woke him straight the fuck up at 11:30. And he was, of course, pissed. And I, of course, was in a cold sweat after his evil (okay, **more** evil) dream-self commanded the Invisible Ones to turn me into an Enforcer with a large scalpel and no anaesthesia.

"Billy, you fucker, if you're ever about to go to sleep again and I can hear you scream from where you are, fucking tell me!", he commanded angrily, with more pissed-off-boy in his voice than secret-master. Sarah, who Howard often keeps near when he's sleeping now, giggled in a schoolgirl voice. Howard looked at the clock and muttered, then we ate again and once again, we had to crap at the same time. Thank God for multiple bathrooms- and the fact that he will wait for his servants to get off the can before he makes them do things.

A lone Enforcer came running up to Howard a little while after that and asked him what to do with the incoming helicopter, which was giving off authorized Level Two signals. For a brief instant I saw Howard saying "Shoot it down!", but he didn't, he just told the Enforcer to allow it to land and the Enforcer gibbered into its cellphone in Enforcer-speak. Drats. No gibs from heaven tonight.

I then realized how much my wish for violence has increased, to provide an outlet for the horror. And even back when I was... a normal, I thought violence was cool. Now it's a must have. I wanted to kill, to slay, to defeat, to destroy, not as Howard's weapon but for my own purposes- a thing that I knew couldn't happen, which pissed me off further. But, then again, no one ever gets what they really want, not even the Illuminati- except one person.

The black helicopter landed in the grassy field in an open spot, right on top of Howard's buried jet. Howard winced then sighed. Whatever steel the hiding spot was made of could easily hold a helicopter.

A figure clad in white and a figure clad in black stepped out. For a minute I thought I recognized the servant- nah, I didn't, that's not him.

But it was.

But it.. no way.

But it **just plain fucking couldn't be**, there's no way **he** could be here, there's no way **he** could be caught up in this shit, he's not even involved...

Chapter 23

But yes indeedy, we have a winner, it's indeed him, now you get your \$64,000 and a free trip to Hell, where you will be tortured for all eternity, because boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, it's him, it's your old buddy Paul.

Paul used to be my best friend. A week after the beginning of first grade, we just clicked- we were together all the time after that. It was like we were parts of each other sometimes, and when our families went to do something fun (in his case much more often than mine), the question was always "Can Paul (or Billy) come?" Lady Luck was on Prozac and we lived within a block of each other. And of course, we shared the things you don't tell anyone except your absolute best friend, we went down to the creek together to skip stones, and no one dared jump him when I was around- at least not after that one incident.

And I remember it well, now. We were in fourth grade, about a month after my ninth birthday. Three seventh grade niggers tried to jump him for "dissin one of our homeboys, yo" or some other monkey shit. They came from behind, all three six inches taller than him and two inches taller than me, smashing his face into the wall and bloodying his nose. One of them was going to give a kick to him when I activated my full power. I didn't do that often as a normal, seeing as how I was taught it'd call unwanted attention to myself and make me a freak. That time, I didn't care.

I grabbed the degenerate's kicking leg and turned it in circles. The other two monkeys could do nothing but stare as I turned his leg around until I heard something snap deep within his hip. He screamed like a girl. The other one made the horrible mistake of trying to punch me- I grabbed his hand and his arm, and twisted. And twisted. And twisted. Eventually his radius, ulna, and various wrist and finger bones were broken in several places. I learned later that it would be weeks before he could hold a cup again. The other one broke from his frozen panic and tried to run. I lunged forward and grabbed his fuzzy monkey head, smashing the side and back of it into the wall again and again, until he eventually lost consciousness and several hundred million (largely unused) brain cells. After I did all that, I felt...satisfied somehow, as if bloodletting were my purpose for living. I grinned. Paul just stared at me as if Jesus had come down and decided to stay for tea- he always idolized me after that, more than he ever did. For what was an unknown reason at the time, I was never prosecuted. The niggers' families never even sued. Eventually the incident faded back into the dark recesses of memory, but it's still one of the first things I think about when I remember Paul.

When my 'parents' died and I freaked and ran, I had wanted to go to his house before I realized that'd be a bad decision. I loved him, the way he would get sarcastic when you least expected it, his flippant attitude, the way his ordinary, blemish-free face smiled.

But he wasn't going to be doing much smiling anymore.

Because Paul is wearing black, and we all know what that means, and if you think it's a funeral you're just wishfully thinking. Because he's in Hell already, not just some coffin.

My best friend is an implanted servant.

I'm so glad I crapped earlier, otherwise my loosening bladder and bowels would have made a mess all over the plush carpet and certainly myself. Some drool started to drip out of my gaping mouth and I wiped it off. Howard glanced at me briefly, then personally opened the door to greet the incoming Illuminated visitor, who shone in white from the open door's emissions. The two masters said things in Latin then the fourteen-year-old, lanky Illuminatus with his face coated in something (probably some sort of super-strength zit cream) stepped in out of the drizzle, seemingly astonished at the nakedness presented before him by all three of the residents. Then he ignored it. The Dominator does as he will.

I wanted to do something but had no idea what to do, and Howard would have probably made me stop it as soon as I started; so I did nothing except stand woodenly, as if I was a pervert's dick in a porn shop. Of course, my dick was shriveled and small at the moment.

Paul followed Damien in closely, at a set distance of about five feet. He looked haggard and used, which I reckon he was. Other than that, he looked almost the same... but there was something wrong with him, not just the implantation. Something was missing.. something very, very bad happened to Paul. Oh no. He's lobotomized... no, he's not, he's looking at me the same as I'm looking at him. He's still there. Whew. At least.. at least his mind is still his. I was not crying, but I was about to. There. Now you've done it, you Illuminated bastards. Now you've taken everything. For myself, you knew you had to have me, I'm the clone of the Dominator, but you had no business taking Paul. He's a normal. Let him live and die as one, innocent of this madness.

Howard flung the door closed and he and Damien stared at each other for a little while, in a mental evaluation of sorts. Eventually Damien asked where he should sit, and Howard said "Anywhere." Damien plopped down on the plush couch and Howard did an acrobatic one-handed vault over it- not to show off but because **he could** with ease- to sit next to him.

"Business or pleasure first, Howard?", said Damien with a hint of insecurity hidden behind his status. He was probably very, very scared and respectful of Howard.

"Business."

"Privacy?"

"Yeah. Sarah, Billy," and he tossed his thumb in the direction of the bedrooms. We went up without a word.. but the implants weren't affecting me not saying anything- what could I possibly say to this?

"Paul, follow him.", said Damien and I could hear Paul's telltale footprints coming up the stairs behind me. For the first time in a week I found myself thanking God (not the local one, the metaphysical one), an entity which I had little respect for until recently. At least I'd be able to talk to Paul for the first time in what felt like eternity.

When we came in my room and Sarah closed the door, Paul just stared at me. Tears started to well up in his eyes, and he lunged to me with amazing speed, his arms wide open. I stooped down a bit and encircled his body below his arms and we stood like that, hugging tightly, for a good half minute. His salty tears dripped down my naked back, intermixing with my hair. I could feel the bump of a gun in his back pocket. "Paul...", I said, crying, hugging a person I thought I had lost forever. At that moment, I knew I would lose Paul sometime in the future anyway.. he was but a mortal. He would last an infinitesimal amount of time in comparison to my immortality, unless by some freak chance (or planned attack..) I bite the dust violently. But his body was still here, and young, and almost exactly the same as I had left it, only a couple of months older and much more terrified. And something else, too, although I couldn't put my finger on it.

"Billy.. is it really you.. or him?", he said in a voice that I had almost forgotten existed.

"I'm Billy, Paul. It's me. He's Howard. Yes, he's my clone, and yes, he's my master.", I said, answering his questions before he asked them and slowly breaking off our hug.

"At least... he didn't make you cut off your own.. your .. own..." He couldn't finish it. He broke down in tears and sat on the floor. Cut off what? Oh.. god. Not that. I looked down at Paul's crotch. No bulge. None. His pants clamped down right between his legs. He had all the anatomy of a Ken doll. NO!!! He didn't.. they made him... they took his.. oh God.

Out of the anger and frustration rose a single, simple thought.

Damien has got to die. Right now.

It doesn't matter how, it doesn't matter how much pain or blood, the entity known as 'Damien' must perish from this earth forever, as soon as possible. And I can't kill him. And Sarah can't kill him. And Paul definitely can't kill him. And Howard won't kill him. And none of us can or will make the Enforcers kill him. The only person left on this list was Damien himself.

Now how the hell.. I came up with a plan instantly. A brutal, simple plan. It made me feel a lot better, but I couldn't reveal it to either Sarah or Paul, or even the fact I had a plan. If it works, Howard may do any number of things to me, or he may make me do any number of horrific things to myself. But I don't give a fuck. What more can he do that he hasn't already? Go ahead! Torture me, Howie! Make me beat the crap out of myself, douse my face in sulfuric acid! For all intents and purposes, I'm **already dead!!** (Besides, if my resolve does break down, I know that whatever physical injury he does cause to me will eventually regenerate.)

"I guess I wouldn't have used it anyway.", Paul said, trying to mentally lessen his own pain and loss. It didn't work. He sat on the carpet, sobbing again and again, bemoaning the loss of his dick and his freedom, in front of probably the only person who gave a fuck. "Billy...", he whined, tears coming out of his face. He just couldn't stop. He laid on the floor and sniffled, unconsciously curling into a fetal position, a black-clad mass. "It won't be okay, will it? There's no way to stop them, is there? First us and now the whole fucking world and there's no way to stop it!"

"Paul... if there was a way to stop them don't you think someone would have **done it by now???**", I said in a semi-furious voice I've used several times with him. Sure, it's not kosher to talk like that to someone who got his dick cut off (correction: was forced to do it himself), but this is Paul. And for my plan to work, I need his anger, not his sorrow.

He sat up and sighed. "Billy, what the fuck are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm here because I'm his.. clone. Turns out I was born for this. They got me on my tenth birthday, with bad guys and gas. Why the hell did they take you, Paul? What did you do? You're just a normal.."

"Not anymore.. at least that's what **he** says." As he talked, I noticed a slight discoloration on one of his front teeth.

"I mean.. genetically. You remember that time when we fell off the hill, and you thought you saw blood on my knee? And when I let you see it a few minutes later there was no wound and I told you it just got bumped? Paul, there really was blood there. You were right too, the force of my knee hitting that rock should have broken my leg."

He looked up at me with shining eyes. "You're either kidding.. or crazy. They took my dick, they took your sanity. Oh, god, GOD!" I could have sworn I heard him whimpering for his mother, but I wasn't listening intently enough and I didn't want to hear it. Not from Paul.

"Paul, I'm no crazier than this whole thing is."

"That's not sayin' much.", he muttered through his tears.

I tried to think of something to say. As if there was something. What the hell do you say to your best friend who's the property of a sadist so twisted, he made your friend cut off his own dick? Nothing. You ax the sadist, any way you can. Oh, how glorious it would be to take a large bladed object, such as a longsword or woodsman's axe, to Damien's throat. His skin would be sliced open like nothing, the jugular's blood would spill in a huge radius, and his voicebox would be chopped in half, its tiny muscles flailing around in a small spurt of crimson every time he tried to talk. But I couldn't. And even my own plan didn't call for that.

"B.. Billy.. just.. hold me.. it might be the last time **ever!**..", he said, sniffing. I dropped to one knee and hugged him. He put his right hand in my left and we did our secret special handshake- secret and special because I was the only one who he could physically do it with, him putting his four fingers in the wedges of my five, our thumbs crossing. I wanted to tell him it would be okay, that we'd get out of here, but that would be bullshit.

"Just remember you hate him, Paul.. remember you want to kill him."

A person I utterly forgot was in the room spoke up. "This is way too touching.. you guys are even making **me** sad.", she said in her high, pretty, assassin's voice. Paul chuckled a bit even through his sorrow. I'm surprised Sarah said anything- the presence of a female (especially a naked one) near a man with no dick causes frustration in itself. Again, I felt that absolute need to kill Damien, to watch his head explode like he got sniped in Quake, his body explode as if he was on the wrong end of The Postal Dude's shotgun.

We stayed hugging for a long while, until the intercom clicked on, Howard told us to get down there and Damien told Paul to come down and follow him. Paul wiped away his tears, looked something like the boy I knew, and I mustered every bit of self-control I had to put my plan into action.

After we came down, Damien bid his goodbyes, walked out, and I knew I'd only have one chance at this. "Howard,", I said in a perfectly normal voice, "can I ask Damien a question? It's important."

"Yeah, go ahead."

I ran out the door into the drizzle and Damien turned around with some surprise. "Damien,", I asked in a 'geez, this is obvious, you better say yes' voice, "you **are** letting your servants do the **one** thing they want most, aren't you?"

"Oh, of course.", he said in a semi-worried voice. It was at that point I realized he mistook me for Howard- an implication I hadn't thought of, probably necessary for him to fall for it- but hey, whatever works. I was about to scream for joy when Paul did the obvious- he pulled the gun out of his back pocket and aimed it at the back of Damien's head as Damien said "N--" It was very clear that Damien meant for Paul to not do it, that he realized his mistake, that he didn't want this to happen.

It happened anyway. Paul's normal brain was too slow to process the information before his trigger finger fired and turned the inside of Damien's head into gibs with a sharp crack of compact thunder. The gun was rather powerful, maybe a .45, and bits of brain and skull flew from the gaping exit wound on the top of Damien's forehead. The lifeless corpse fell into the grass, blood seeping out of the gaping holes, feeding the plants with its red warmth. (At least he's good for something.)

Paul: 1 Assholes: 0

Then Paul turned the gun to himself and in that instant I realized Damien must have used a suicide command, for his servants to kill themselves after he died. I ripped the gun out of his hand and flung

it into the ocean. I saw Paul bite down on something- the tooth! Must be cyanide. I yanked Paul's jaw down, ripped the poison tooth out of his mouth with my full strength, it created less blood than a real one would have, and I flung the white pellet of death into the ocean too. Paul's hands moved elsewhere and I held them tightly.

I heard my own voice scream "What the **fuck**?! Enforcers! Hold the dark-haired one and prevent him from hurting himself." Two tall, black-clad figures came from the darkness and grabbed Paul after I let go. I turned around and saw Howard come running out with a look of utter surprise on his face.

"Billy.. what the fuck did you ask him?", he screamed at me.

"If he let his servants do the one thing they wanted most."

"And he said yes?!"

"Yup."

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! But Billy- **why** did you ask him that?!"

"Because I knew Paul, Howard.. from before.", I said. "He was my best friend, and Damien made him cut off his own dick.". I heard struggling noises, half-turned around, and watched an Enforcer silently, calmly hold Paul's jaw down to prevent himself from biting off his own tongue. The other one was holding his head.

"Awwrgh.", he muttered and sighed. "I told you not to kill Illuminati!"

"I didn't kill him. I handed him the dynamite and the detonator. He pushed the button."

"Actually, the dynamite was already there. But.." He sighed, rolled his eyes somewhat, and shook his head a bit. "This is why only **intelligent** people are supposed to have access to the implants." Ha, ha, ha. That good enough for ya, Howie? You don't think you can fuck up too? In eternity, every eventuality must happen, remember? I can wait... after all, I have forever on my side.

"Now what do I do with him?", Howard said. Oh damn. My super-engineered brain had given absolutely no thought to this topic, as if killing Damien would solve all of Paul's problems. Yeah. Right. Paul's still here, still in direct contact with the world controllers, still either dead or a slave. I felt as stupid as Damien.

"You always said you needed someone to do more personal spy shit.", said Sarah, and again she was invisible until she talked, her assassin training in action. I'm starting to like it. She steps back and hides until she can do something major, such as save my best friend's life in one sentence.

"Yeah.. yeah, some other stuff too. All right. Enforcers, take him to the Northberg Medical Facility. Use the chopper, but refuel first." Damien wasn't going to use it anymore. The Enforcers gibbered in their fast language (still not sure of all of it, it's a clipped, modified version of Latin..), then one shouted for aid. Two more came out, one pressed something on a small control pad, a section of ground simply flipped upwards, and the Enforcer pressed a few buttons on it and pulled a hose out. I never even knew that was there.

In fifteen seconds the chopper was refueled, the hose pushed back in and the ground closed, the Enforcers holding Paul forced him inside the chopper with ridiculous ease, the others stepped in, and the black helicopter did its quiet whup-whup-whup high into the blackness and the rain.

"Sarah, call up Northberg and tell 'em he's coming." She walked inside, and through the untinted window I could see her talking to the viewscreen.

Howard and I stood in the drizzle, our bodies ignoring the cold wetness. Our eyes locked for a dozen seconds or so- I didn't know what he was thinking for once. We just stood looking at each other, eyes blinking in normal intervals at the exact same time. Do whatever you want to me, Howard. I'm just your poor, dependent servant, who laid utter and complete waste to one of your little Illuminated fuckers with a few words. "Billy, at least now you understand the basics of manipulation.", he finally said with some resignation in his voice.

"But I didn't manipulate. I just took advantage of his stupidity."

"Exactly."

We went back inside to hear an angry 40-ish man, red in the face, obviously terminally anal, shout at Sarah "And I want to know why he is sending here a servant that he does not own! Where is Damien Gladstone?" The man looked past Sarah and saw Howard. "Dominator! Explain this!"

"First off, you diaper-chafed piece of shit, you do not use that tone of voice with me.", Howard said in an even tone of bone-crunching authority. "If you continue, I will torture you to death and find a better man to replace you with. Second, it was a suicide. His own servant killed him, and that is whom I am sending to you. Third, you will replace this servant's anatomy, heal his scars, and his implants will be reset so that I will be his new master. Am I being clear, Night Operator?" The Night Operator didn't seem too happy about getting told what to do by a ten-year-old, but he knew that Howard would make good on his threats. He held his temper and his breath.

And it was a suicide, technically. Howard didn't want to blame me. Probably because, as my master, he is responsible for my actions, and the supposedly unwarranted killing of Illuminati is something that might get more fools trying to snipe his ass into oblivion.

"Where is his body?"

"On my front lawn, feeding the grass."

"What?! We could save him if the damage is less than complete!"

"Most of his brain decided to take a vacation out of the top of his skull. If you want another vegetable to do experiments on, I think you can clone some, can't you?" The Head Night Operator grimaced and got even redder.

"You will pay for this!", he screamed.

"Do you take American Express?", a completely unintimidated Howard replied. "And I distinctly told you not to use that tone of voice with me." The man was purple when he slammed the close button and the viewscreen winked out. Howard chuckled slightly. "Circumcised a bit low, wasn't he?"

"Yup.", I said.

"With a chainsaw.", muttered Sarah. The thought of one of these assholes getting the tip.. whoops, mistake, sorry, **most** of his dick getting cut off with a spinning metal blade of pain, with bits of skin, fleshy pulp, and blood flying every which way, while he screamed to no avail, made me smile and chuckle. Especially after what happened to Paul. Let **them** get the axe to the penis. Howard stood doing nothing for about half a minute, pondering the events- his good servant had set in motion a chain of events to blow away the guy he talked to for the last few minutes, the young Illuminatus with a promising future and probably some support on Howard's part. Or, maybe not. One does not make derogatory comments about the death of one's Illuminated friends.

We were all about to head off to sleep, when the fat guy Howard refers to as the Bastard came on

the screen. He was mad. Really fucking mad. I don't think I've ever seen anyone that pissed, present company included.

"You... you.. Howard.. grrr... killed my **son**.."

"Having trouble forming sentences, happy boy?", Howard said, with a smirk on his face, purposefully goading Gladstone into further anger.

"You little bastard.. how could you.. I'll talk to you LATER!!", he screamed as he winked out, not daring to say any more in a fit of rage and inadvertently cause his own death- not that Howard's going to let him live very long anyway. Howard chuckled, then started to giggle a bit.

"Fiddlefucks. There is one more thing I have to do, though.", he said. He then, to my utter surprise, entered into public records a direct, concise statement of exactly what happened.

"You're telling the exact truth..", I said, amazed.

"The Operator could get the truth by resetting Paul's implants to himself before he resets them to me." I hadn't even considered that. "Anyway, it's time to sleep. We'll go pick up Paul tomorrow night. I haven't been to Northberg in a while anyway." Howard grabbed the mouse, clicked a few buttons on the screen, turning all communication off- Asshole Guard™. We walked upstairs to our rooms, me grinning like crazy. Paul got ultimate revenge on his tormentor, it turned out to be the asshole's son, and Howard's doing nothing but laughing at the whole thing and taking Paul in. 'Thank you, Howard. Thank you so fucking much.', I would have said, if I didn't want to send him straight to Hell so damn hard, and maybe if.. maybe if.. fuck. We all know the maybe-if, don't we, Howie?

I heard a slight growling sound coming from the front side of the house before I closed the soundproof door, and I knew it was only the dogs, Fido leading the pack, munching on Damien's corpse. None of us needed to look back to know what was going on; they were snapping him up like they did the peasants. Only Damien has a bit more meat on him, is all.

I had a nameless nightmare filled with fear, evil, massacre, and torment. In its own way, it was quite refreshing. For some strange reason I screamed in absolute terror and didn't mind a bit.

I woke up early, restless. The killing of Damien, and the assorted meanness Howard had bestowed upon his relatives, had felt like a party, the consequences to be dealt with in the morning. Well, guess what, now it's the morning. I thought for a bit, put on the black suit, and opened the door to find Howard already reading things on the viewscreen. I walked downstairs, curious.

Theodore Roosevelt: (Haha, is that actually his name?) A servant just killed an Illuminatus, and another servant manipulated him into letting it happen. Both of them are implanted.. what do we do in cases like this?

Jean Chirac: Killing them probably isn't an option, at least not in this case. The Dominator, I'm sure, has reasons for taking the normal one, and there's obvious reasons he's not about to kill the engineered one. Punishment is the usual answer for transgressions. (Shit. Double shit.)

Theodore Roosevelt: That's not going to accomplish anything, is it?

Jean Chirac: It's not meant to accomplish anything, Ted. Damien's dead. The point is to show that we're not going to just let people die. Besides, look at it this way- if the Dominator's taking a murderous servant, he's more likely to get killed himself. (Paul? Kill **Howard**? I guess it's possible, but I couldn't imagine it.)

Theodore Roosevelt: He might disagree, especially if it's in public. If the servant that looks exactly like him is punished in public..

Jean Chirac: I see what you're saying, but if the higher levels determine that he needs to do it, he'll do it. He

can still be overpowered.

"So what the hell's going on? If you don't punish me in front of them, they'll come over here with an army?", I asked from behind him. I prayed to every God that man ever believed in that Howard wouldn't. Those torture devices he has are evil. And since I regenerate, he can do basically whatever they want without ever having to worry about what I'll look like in a week or so. Branding? No problem! A vise on the balls, clamped tightly, slowly getting tighter and tighter, crushing the male glands, causing screams of pain straight from the very bowels of Hell? Sure, it'll heal up. But what if the intended target was Paul, not me, doing damage not even the medical technology of Illuminated doctors can cure? I didn't want to think about that at all. Paul's still a normal, dammit, don't you fuckers know when to stop? He doesn't belong here, let him go back to the normal world and let him worry about school and college and what girls to date! Not whether or not he's going to get his ass kicked if his master gets bored enough, not whether or not he is going to get tortured for killing the guy who made him cut off his own dick. Again, I felt that same sort of protectiveness towards him- I'm the reason he's here, so I have to do what I can- which isn't much- to stop him from feeling the pain which my bioengineered body can take.

Howard motioned, and I vaulted over the couch to sit beside him. "If they try anything like that, I'm going to get the Micro, you're going to get the atomic shotgun, Sarah'll get the rapid fire mini-missiles, Paul'll get the automatic bazooka, the Enforcers'll get everything else, and we're going to have ourselves an ass kicking.", he said with some fury in his voice. His eyes and mine brimmed with the same bloodlust. A Quake 2 fraglist danced in my mind. He'd probably get the top of it- that Micro kicks a lot of ass. "But most of them don't want your torture, especially because they know of the regeneration and the fact that you can't be Pavloved. A lot of them want my public apology, and that's it. Some of them want **Paul** tortured." That's what I was worried about- hey, assholes, just remember what happened to the **last** guy who did it. "A few of them want you dead, although they don't say it directly. Probably, a few of them want **me** dead. Having a grisly reminder that they can die really ticks them off."

"So what are you going to do?"

He sighed, and shook his head. "Billy.. if you really were me, what would you do?"

Howard, once more, got my honesty and bluntness, which he seems to enjoy. "I'd probably tell them all that it was his own damn fault for falling for it, and anyone who thinks an Illuminatus should be protected from his own stupidity, especially some second level, should go fuck himself. Howard.. when I came up with that, I thought it was the smartest thing in the world. Now it just seems silly. Why the hell did he say yes?!" Chuckling, Sarah sat down to Howard's left.

"Anyone who would has no business being in the Illuminati at all, let alone the second level. Billy, it's not your fault. He got what he deserved. Any idiot could have seen the first thing Paul wanted to do was to blow that fucker's brains out. Yeah, he still supported me.. or at least pretended to, and I'm still ready to strangle you for that part of it. But he **was** an idiot. He had it coming. But.. I can't tell them to go fuck themselves. Even in our organization, any large-scale stupidity insult is political suicide. Sure I can stop 'em from getting on the island, but we'll all be trapped here for a very long time if I do that." His hate almost matched mine for their stupidity in power, the idea that they were somehow superior to created superior beings. He muttered to himself and vowed he'd never, ever, ever overestimate the levels' intelligence again. "By the way, let's make no mistake about this. Billy, Sarah- if either of you think anyone else will fall for that, you have my express permission to do the same damn thing to him or her.", he said, enunciating the words carefully.

"Don't think it'll work for me like it did for him.", Sarah pointed out.

"It just might. If it does, the victim gets what he deserves.", Howard replied evenly.

"For an organization that prides itself on intelligence, you sure must have a lot of idiots.", I said.

Howard and Sarah laughed very loud. I started smiling and chuckling.

"Don't tell me you just figured that out!", Howard exclaimed, still laughing. Sarah just shook her head.

"I had the feeling earlier.. how did they get in here, then?" Now I know the full reason that Howard's initial oath contained a promise not to admit the unworthy. This sort of thing is likely a chronic problem.

"They were smart when they did. Power corruption, Billy. They **have** the minds- they just don't **use** them." A mind is a terrible thing to waste. (An asshole, on the other hand..) "There's no cure for it- once they get in here, their ego goes over their brainpower. Reversible in some once they figure it out.. some never do. And of course they're real Illuminati at that point, so we can't annihilate them indiscriminately.. not yet, anyway."

"Got it."

Howard decided to go to Paul that evening, even if he wasn't fully healed yet. On the plane I tried to think of things to say to Paul, but couldn't. I'd have to make it up when I got there.

Chapter 24

Northberg Medical Facility is an enormous place, but I didn't pay any attention to the layout. I'd probably be here again sometime, anyway. I didn't even really care about the other engineered kids there at the educational department, at least for the moment. All my thoughts were focused on Paul, all the way through the tram ride until we walked up to his hospital-room door. It was guarded by an Enforcer, which walked inside the moment it spotted Howard.

"Billy, Sarah, no one is to come inside this door until I exit it. Not you, not anyone.", he commanded us, and we took typical guard positions next to the door. So Howie wants privacy with Paul. Hmm. I can only guess as to what he's saying, word for word. I do, of course, know what he's doing- he's telling Paul the truth, in person, with a calm demeanor and an even tone. When Howard's in Manipulation Mode, I know it, and Sarah almost certainly knows it too. Everyone else probably just thinks it's another slight behavioral quirk of the Dominator- and that belief is fine for everybody.

I started to get bored before realizing it had only been ten seconds or so. Oh, come **on**. Not even in school do I get bored this quick. He should be only five minutes or less... I watched a blond-haired man, with a white clothing selection that was probably uncomfortable, walk by- no, wait, he's not walking by.

"You're Sarah, right?", he said, pointing to her.

"Yeah." The door opened from behind us, but it wasn't Howard, only the Enforcer, which walked away.

"And you're...", he went on quickly, pointing to me.

"Billy." Question: Is he really so dim as to need to ask our names? It's not like we're not distinctive or anything..

"All right, good. I need to talk to your master, right now."

"Tough luck.", Sarah said, shrugging. "He's not to be disturbed."

"When will he be done?"

"Whenever he feels like it." Howard said not to harm Illuminati. He didn't mention lie to, torment, or embarrass... and he did that intentionally, to keep people from trying to use his servants. And from Sarah's tone, I can tell that she's developed an instant dislike for this asshole (some people just radiate annoyance, ya know?) and is going to toy with him.

"Look, miss." From the instant scowl on her face, I could tell Sarah didn't like being called that. Maybe because she doesn't miss? Or maybe because the man's talking as if to a child... that pisses **every** teenager off. "I need.. to talk to Howard.. right now. It's really urgent." He then made Grievous Mistake A. He tried to go between us. Instantly, my right and her left arms shot out and pushed him to the floor, knocking him on his ass without inflicting so much as a mark.

"I'm not sure you understand..", he began.

"I'm not sure **you** understand.", Sarah replied, in that same offhand tone she's perfected to a science. "The next time you try that, you'll get knocked into the wall. The time after that, I'll break your arm. And the time after that, well..." Sarah brought out her left hand and made a downward-claw gesture, much like the reverse of a referee's 'face mask' gesture. It was all I could do to hold a straight face and not laugh like a maniac. Oh yeah. She can lie, all right.

The man's face grew slightly red, as if he was offended in some way, and Howard's timing could not have been more perfect. "Howard! I need to talk to you, in private. Is now a good time?", the man said, in exactly the wrong tone of voice: pushy and like a telemarketer. One look on Howard's face- an angry sneer- and I could tell the man was making Potentially Fatal Mistake B. Fortunately for him, the man did not make Horribly Painful And Unspeakably Gory Mistake C, and hurried off.

"Billy, come in. Sarah, keep guarding the door." I came in, Sarah took a menacing spot in front of the door- and there was Paul, fucked up to shit. That's the only way to put it. I didn't get a good look at his body when I saw him yesterday- but looking at him now, and every single bandaged, healing part, it was obvious that he had been seriously scarred several times. Plastic bandages covered several areas of his body. His eyes.. no, they looked the same as when I saw him as a servant, but not before.. ah. His eyes were changed, I remember that his parents were considering getting him close-work glasses, but the Illuminati apparently fixed that before he even reached Damien. A plastic device filled with an odd fluid covered his genital area. Shit. They really can replace his anatomy.. I'll have to find out just what they did some other time. I was less interested in how they managed to do it than relieved that it was being done.

"Billy!! That is you, right?", Paul asked, in the same tone of voice I remember him with, in the same tone of voice I was so used to when we weren't servants, back when the world was a mystery that couldn't be unraveled with a few search words and a few left-clicks of the mouse, back when.. well, we'll always be friends, especially since I'm going to be seeing a lot more of him. For the rest of his life, in fact. Yeah, no more parents around, no more school, just live with your friends, go for it! There's just a small price to pay..

"Yeah, Paul, it's me." I shook my head as I said it, as I got closer and the details of the bandages became more evident. A long scab? Patch it up. Ugly scar? Cut away scar tissue, add special biochemicals, seal closed. On what's left of principle, I avoided looking at his regrowing dick.

"Oh, Billy..", Paul said, holding his arms out. It was all I could do to not cry, to just hold him and pretend for a few instants that everything really would be all right in the end. Ha. What a fucking joke that is.. but he's not in any more immediate suffering and he needs something to hold onto, until he realizes that there's no shelter for him except the power of Howard. "Billy.. tell me this isn't real.. tell me we're going home!", he said, as he grasped onto me for dear life for the second time.

I could not lie to him. "Paul... this is real. But we are going home, as soon as you're healed up." I could feel him wondering for a couple instants where I meant by 'home', until logic crept up on him and pounced, causing him to recoil very slightly. Yes, Paul, it's home, the place you go when your

job's done, the place where your family is- that, of course, is an entirely bad metaphor, but except for the technical terminology that details our exact relationship (and causes me to grit my teeth), a 'family' and 'home' would be the best way to put it. Welcome to the fold, Paul.. it's not exactly always pleasant and you're not exactly ever going to be able to leave, but it's a hell of a lot better than where you were.

"He really fucked me up, didn't he.."

The wisecrack just came to me, as they always do, regardless of situation or tact. "Nothing a couple gallons of Neosporin won't cure."

"Aww.. heh heh.." he chuckled, slowly withdrawing his hands. "Howard.. I suppose I have to thank you.. if you're not going to do any of.. that.."

"I'm not, Paul. And I never will.", he said. I remembered what Howard had said about the practice of 'toying', during the first test.

"At least that's a fucking relief.. can I go back to sleep?"

"Yes, Paul, you're going to be doing a lot of that. And if you do wake up, don't fuck with the bandages even if they start to itch. Paul, you're going to be okay now." There was no glimmer of evil in the way Howard said 'okay'. There didn't need to be.. Paul looked at me, smiling faintly (I noticed they had replaced his tooth), and dozed off. I thought we were going to pick up Paul while we were here, but I was wrong; he badly needs sleep and hours of recuperation first.

Well.. shit, it's better than where he was. And at least he'll be with me.. damn. Sorry to have inadvertently dragged you into this, my friend. At least we're never going to get separated again.. because we're shackled together in this plush cage. Arrrgh... fuck, damn! No way to get him out of this, not even sure if 'out of this' is any kind of escape. These people run the world! It's just a matter of directness of control. And now he's being healed and taken care of by the good graces.. no, make that the **whim** of the most powerful being on the planet. A powerful being who is going to have to deal with idiots accusing him of murder by double proxy. The fools. Even if you do convince everyone else in the organization- which isn't likely- what are you going to do to him? Leave yourself out in the open, he'll flat-out kill you. Stick yourself in a bunker and he'll pour concrete over the air holes. Surround yourself with Enforcers? I think the third test showed exactly what happens with regards to that maneuver.

And, as we quietly left the room, we met one of those fools. The Night Operator stood directly in front of Howard with his arms folded. **HELLO?! Are YOU going to try to intimidate HIM?! Maybe I'll end up taking on the role of prophet- I think about people dying due to the stupidity of trying to prosecute him, and what happens next?**

Howard moved towards him, quickly- but he didn't rush him as he appeared to start. The Operator took a step back in surprise. "What do you want?", Howard growled at him, and he instinctively took a couple more steps back.

"My.. cousin's son is dead, and I've spent hours working on your servant's **dick**." Yeah asshole, well maybe if your cousin's son hadn't cut it off, you wouldn't have had to do that! "You.. you'll pay, Howard, you'll pay.. your servants and your 'Daddy' will pay too." Okay. How the HELL do these people get into the organization of the highest elite? Talk about a death wish. He's really going to threaten to attack Howard's retired mentor? The guy's got zero power now- what the hell would that do, other than piss the Dominator off? Maybe that's what he's trying to do. CLUE: Despite how much you want to do it, that's not a good idea!! Surprisingly enough, Howard didn't take him apart- the guy simply turned around and walked the other way. I just shook my head, and Sarah gave a snort of derision.

"Operator.", Howard said, casually on the surface but with absolute authority beneath. The Night Operator turned around quickly and angrily. "You will have my servant returned to my home when he is fully healed." For a moment I thought the Operator was going to do something like give a Nazi salute, but instead, he visibly held his temper, meekly turned around again, and walked off.

"That guy needs a replacement.", Sarah said.

"Really. C'mon, kill him. Just one hit.", I suggested. Maybe I just like to be right in my prophecies, but that guy could actually make trouble for Howard if allowed to live.

"Not yet. Naaaaut yet. He's just pissed. I'll give him some time to get over it and get the hint.", Howard said, and led us to the tram going back to the jet. Yes, that's probably the diplomatic thing to do. But when has diplomacy ever affected this place?

The idiot ran up to us (you'd think he'd learn? Nope, that's why he's an idiot) and started talking in a rather servile voice. "H-How-Howard.. there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Spit it out.", Howard replied. I could feel the patience leaking out of him.

"Well, I think it's kindofa touchy issue.." Yeah, a lot of things in this place are touchy issues.

"Get. To. The. Point." Or the point will get to you.

"Well, it's about you and your servants and I think there's something going on.." There's more than one way to take **that** statement. Let's stay away from that, shall we?

"What the **FUCK** do you **think** is going on?!" Howard shouted at him, almost out of patience.

"Well, it has to deal with Damien.." That ended it.

Howard's force came out of his mouth instead of his hands, in an insulting, patronizing voice. "Oh! You want to talk to me about Damien! **Clue time!** Everyone wants to talk to me about Damien. To ask me why, or to get more details, or just to whine at me about general predictable crap. If you want the information, I've put it into the open records. You can get it from the Real News or from the database. But **no**, you **can't** have a moment of my time to ask me stuff that I've chosen not to tell everyone else. If you keep pissing me off, I'll kill you, and if your mind allows, have a nice day." The Illuminati-grade tard counted as a blessing the fact that he was still breathing and slunk away. Sarah grinned at him and we got into the tram.

A few minutes later we blasted our way home at about 1200 miles an hour. Like a normal kid on Christmas Eve, I couldn't wait for Paul, and I admonished myself for thinking that way; it's how Howard was thinking before he got me. I should be scared instead- scared that Paul's going to have to fight in our battles, battles of speed and reflexes and instant death. Howard's not going to invite him to any, but if we ever get surprise attacked (a distinct possibility), that might end him right there no matter how many fools and their servants we kill. I was very happy anyway, though, both triumphant and grateful- I'm the one who made it happen and Howard had went right along with it. Hey, he's getting a new servant out of it.

We got home and I looked for the place where Paul's room would be. There wasn't even the beginnings of one, wasn't room for one in the current setup. "Wait a minute. I don't see any rooms added.. did those guys you have even know he was coming?", I asked Howard, who just stood there smirking. Maybe my room- ah, yes. There's still only one bed (doesn't matter- it's big enough for two people not to even notice each other in), but lots of Paul-sized clothing, and two computers in there, seamlessly integrated into the wall, as if they've always been there. How the hell do they do it? That would take a normal work crew weeks! I noticed Howard chuckling from behind me and turned around.

"Billy, I stopped doubting their abilities when I was seven. Can you imagine if all my problems were solved this way?" I nodded. People who got in Howard's way would just kinda die; he wouldn't even have to order it or do it himself. For some reason that got me thinking about telepathic implants. Nah- they'd need to put something in Howard's head for that to work, too, and he wouldn't want that. "I could command them to do things one way or the other, but that would spoil the point. Sometimes they know more than I do. You two really care about each other, don't you?" I understood the question, but it came as a curveball and the way he asked it unnerved me.

"Yeah.. yeah, we do. Howard, I know you have no respect for almost all normals. Paul falls outside the almost all. Wasn't that how the Illuminati got started, with some people realizing they were better than everyone else? Compared to the manipulators, engineered, and ultra-rare supergeniuses he'd be compared to now, he'd never get in. Not even close. But if this was the year 1776, he'd be invited in a heartbeat." Howard nodded and smiled a bit. "You seem to care about him a lot, too. Why?"

"Because I trust your taste in friends." I know Howard's definition of friend all too well, and I delivered Paul right to him. My God, what have I **done**? The best thing I could have, I reminded myself. "I know what you're thinking- that I'm favoring him over the various Illuminati who hate me, the Night Operator, the Gladstone family, those guys." He was right. "People only get respect from me if they're on my side, Billy. You three **have** to be on my side. I will always favor people on my side over those who aren't, no matter what title they hold, because I can remove their title from them right along with their lives."

I realized immediately that this was not a new philosophy in the least. "You're not the first Dominator to say something like that.", I said, and from the smile on his face I could tell that I was right.

"You're beginning to understand how Dominators keep loyalty.", Howard told me, and he was right. "If the buzzer goes off tonight, you pretend to be me, and **you** answer it.", he said, going to bed. I went to bed as well, finding it hard to sleep, my thoughts all going to Paul. Eventually, I did.

Paul was being tortured in ways that I couldn't even begin to comprehend. I didn't know whether Howard had ordered it or not, but he was just standing there smiling as the screams began. I couldn't take it and screamed too, sitting up in bed. Usual type of nightmare, usual relief at finding out it is, usual flop-back-down and sleep again.

There was a buzz, and I woke up, annoyed. Most likely Howard's going to tell the Illuminatus who buzzed him in the middle of the night to eat shit and die, or Howard would facilitate exactly that.

"Paul's here.", Howard called over the intercom instead. I reacted instantly, rushing downstairs, chiding myself again for acting like a kid on Christmas.

In a few minutes we watched Paul walk in slowly, thinking, looking at us through the window as he opened the door. "Paul, who do you think I am?", Howard asked as he stepped inside. Paul didn't understand at first, but then looked between us- both naked and indistinguishable- and immediately realized what the question meant.

"You're Howard."

"Good, you're able to tell us apart. There might be a time when you won't be." Here it comes.. "Obey him as you do me.", he said. Paul was a bit shocked- this is going to make for some **very** awkward moments- but he understood why. "I'm surprised you were back so soon. I'm going back to bed." He walked up. I looked at Paul, shrugged, and he followed me up the stairs. Wow, I'm not used to hearing his footsteps, although they're such a welcome sound.

"Just one bed?", Paul asked, quietly. I nodded. "Yeah, it's big enough.", he said, undressing and

getting in. "Woah, this is a lot nicer." I didn't ask what it was a lot nicer than, just getting in. The moment I was in, he grabbed me, throwing his arms over my chest and clutching me like a life raft, or like a bodyguard cyborg teddy bear that could kill all the monsters threatening him. "Billy, I'm so glad I'm not alone anymore...", he whispered into my ear.

'Don't bother whispering', I almost said, before I realized that that would be a command. Crap, I'm going to have to rephrase with my best friend! "You don't have to whisper, Paul.", I told him.

"Why not? I know you have really good hearing.", he continued to whisper, letting go a bit.

"Because the room's soundproof."

"Soundproof?", he asked, no longer whispering. "Why?"

"Because I've been waking up screaming every single night, uncontrollably, at the top of my lungs, ever since I was implanted. I've already screamed tonight, and I only do it once, so you'll have to wait until tomorrow to hear what I'm talking about."

"Holy shit! Billy, I had no idea, I'm sorry man!"

"It's all right. It's not that big a deal. It's just dreams, really bad ones, but my brain's not actually being hurt by them."

"Oh.. all right. That's fine. If it's just dreams." He went back to clutching me.

"Paul.." I didn't need to ask why- it's obvious. He's a terrified normal kid who has had unspeakable acts done to him and mind control implants in his head. He's just plain scared, scared of everything that might happen, scared of the things he remembers. I've never seen Paul like this before, but then again, that was back when things like grades and skinned knees were a big deal. I don't know if he ever stopped holding onto me that night, as I fell asleep.

Chapter 25

The next day I found myself sitting next to Howard at the highest peak of the island. The view from the cliff is amazing, nothing short of wonderful, made doubly great by its total uniqueness. Howard's mansion doesn't shine, and so much of it is buried underground, but it's a sight to behold from above anyway, its architecture a testament to complete futurism. Acres of forest rolled out before us, carefully managed but looking like a natural tropical paradise. Some flat grassland, unmowed and waving. a bit of a beach, and miles and miles of ocean, with a grey, overcast sky in the distance. It looked intentionally serene, as if whoever manages this island stands on this cliff daily to check to make sure there aren't any problems. It was slightly cloudy, but with a lot of sun. Definitely a good day, and an excellent place, to be outside.

"Billy, you've never told me about the people you thought were your parents. What were they like?"

"Nothing like the parents of everyone else I knew. They were polite and all, but they were just.. weird. I didn't know they were weird until I was like 8 though. They did everything, but when it came to all that parental happy crap, you know, taking me with them to where I didn't wanna go, like everyone else at school had.. they never did any of that, not really. Also, there's the food thing, the sleep thing, and well.. they basically stayed out of my way. Now I know why..."

"Ha! That's because they didn't want you developing any Oedipal complexes or any other shit before you got here."

"Oh, to preserve my mental integrity, right?", I said sarcastically. That's a laugh. What could they possibly do to me in the normal world that would top this for insanity-inducing effects?

"Billy, do the words 'damaged goods' mean anything to you?"

I chuckled at that. It wasn't insulting, not from Howard. "Yup. But Oedipal complexes? I imagine if the guy pissed me off, I would have killed him.." I had no idea I could, which probably would have meant I would be surprised at his death when I hit him too hard... "but to marry the wench? Uuugh!"

"Oh, it applies to me, too.. just not with the parents." Yes, I can command her, but Howard **has** Sarah. A girl all his own, who can't ever say no to him, with no possibility of ever going to anyone else.

"Ha. So what were their parents like?" It's such a nice day, Howard, and you're going to talk about normal parents in it? Of course, he's got an eternity of nice days to ask such questions, anyway.

"Okay... they were almost like.. like masters, of implanted servants. Only the implants didn't work right, and the servants were pavloved all to hell, and there was a lot of psychological shit that you keep saying you hate. They didn't really.. raise their children, you know? Most of them just did a lot of threatening. They didn't think about what it would make." Howard understood.

"Ick. How'd you deal with all those normals anyway?" He wouldn't want to, would he? To him, this place, with its wonderful views, amazing technology, and people conspiring for a brighter future, is normal, and the 'normal' world is a polluted, disgusting hellhole, like a giant cesspool of retards eating their own shit.

"I ignored most of them, threatened some of them, kicked the shit out of seven of them, and made friends with .. four of them." In three cases, the friendships either didn't last or we kinda drifted apart. "Believe me, Howard, dealing with normals is a hell of a lot easier than dealing with you." I can do so many more things to them, so much more easily. It's like playing on Easy mode in a game instead of Bioengineered Hard.

"So you want to go back?" The question shattered this like a hammer breaking glass. The thing is that I knew this was real, made real by powerful technology and dutiful, careful servants who exist to make Howard's world a better place, made real by people who determine what reality will be, and the normal world was utterly fake, with duplicitous manipulators everywhere, a broken system shaping behavior, and the normals drunken, miserable actors who didn't know their lines on stage. For a moment it seemed reversed, like this was fake, and the normal world was the rightful reality. There, I determined my own actions in it. Here, I ultimately don't, because an independent actor is not who the people who run this place placed me to be.

"Yeah. What the fuck did you think, Howard?", I screamed at him. "That I want to stay here with you and be your servant for all eternity? I don't care if they're stupid! I don't care if they're sheeple! You didn't know that the first thing I wanted was to go back and be with the reality and the freedom I'm used to again, even if it is fake?"

I was expecting him to laugh at me, to powertrip a bit, and to chuckle and have fun with me. Instead, his reply was gentle. "It was painfully obvious as soon as you got here. But I can't send you back with them, Billy. Even if you did, even if absolutely nothing wrong happened, if no one found out about your abilities, even if no one remembered you, even if no one got a hold of your DNA, what would you do? You live forever, Billy. Sooner or later, someone would find out." Or the End of Secrecy would happen and I'd be with the Illuminati again anyway. "You're living proof of our existence. So I can't send you back. And even if I could, I don't think I'd want to."

I knew the answer, at least I thought I did- but I was upset and had to ask anyway. "Why not?"

"Billy, before Sarah, then you, got here, you know how much time I've had to talk to anyone anywhere near my age? How much research I've done on people and how little I've talked to them?"

Then she came along and finally there was someone, now you're here and I have someone else. Hell, even if you were a normal I still couldn't let you go. You're too fucking valuable." That's not even counting actual usefulness when, say, pushing rocks, solving problems, or killing Enforcers. And that's all I- or anyone else- am to him: something to be used.

"Howard, the only thing that's comforting me right now is what you said about every eventuality happening sometime in an immortal's life. That means one of these days, you are going to get knocked off your fucking high horse."

"Ha. I welcome it.", he replied, haughtily.

"Bullshit.", I called him on.

"Fuck you. Not literally, I don't want to see that."

I heard someone walking behind us and knew it had to be Paul. "Hello, Howard. Hello, Billy.", he called, tired from walking. "Overseeing your kingdom, young master?" Howard doesn't need his own eyes to do that, but if he was, this would be the place to do it. Since this is a round Earth and you can't see the whole world from a high place, all he needs are some giant space-based mirrors to see every inch of it. A silly daydream, but silly daydreams in this place are often too close to reality.

"Yes.. Paul, there's a dissident frog in Korea I need you to capture." Paul turned around to do just that. I looked at Howard, wondering what the hell he was doing.

"Do you mind being more specific?"

"North Korea." Howard started laughing. "I'm just kidding! Get back here."

"Howard, that was **not** funny.", I told him. Paul came and sat between us, elbows on knees, looking over the cliff. "Paul, why the fuck did you come up here?"

"I got bored and felt a little masochistic."

"A little masochistic? More like suicidal!", I exclaimed. Paul, c'mon, Howard's nice as evil overlords go, but don't tempt him, okay? It was getting windy out, and a little bit cooler. The grey clouds I saw to the west were moving in. Time for more Northwest rain.

"No, suicidal is when you ask for something to do." I was waiting for it, but it didn't happen. "**Not** unless you tell me.", Paul said.

"Argh! Am I that predictable?", Howard asked.

"Not really.", I replied, as Paul said, "Pretty much."

"All right, Paul- what am I going to do next?", Howard asked.

"You're going to tell us to get inside before we get hit by lightning." Paul's prediction was based on logic. The grey clouds weren't slowing down, and it's a slight walk to the mansion.

"You guessed it. Get inside before you get hit by lightning." Would it fry the implants? Certainly... and take a good chunk of our brains with them. We walked back down the small mountain, sliding a bit on the loose rocks, and jogging through the paradise forest. We made it just in time- the clouds were coming in very fast indeed, and discharged their loud, thunderous payload, with wind and rain, a massive load of torrentous weather on a place that the Weather Channel would never cover. Howard's mansion is soundproof to the outside, but we could still sense it buffeting the glass.

Sarah walked down the stairs, as if she's been waiting for us. "Howard, Damien's dad called again. As you probably guessed, he's pissed. He and a few other jokers want you to go to a meeting of theirs about this. He also wanted you to call him." First bad weather, now idiots. What a way to ruin a perfectly good day.

"I didn't know that assfuck **had** a dad.", Paul said, angrily. He didn't? He never even got the chance to see... Out of everything I've done in my life, that plan to execute Damien was my very, very best.

"Actually, if he didn't, he'd probably be much smarter. And still alive. But noooo...", Howard said, annoyance in his voice. He thought a bit and then looked at me.

"Billy, take off all your clothes, go up to my room, put on the white suit, get back down here, and **you** deal with the asshole as would best prevent bad shit from happening to me. While pretending to be me, of course." Oh! So you're finally making me impersonate you, making this my problem now. Gladly. One cheap excuse and it's eternal nighty-night for that Bastard. There are some commands that you don't need the implants for, Howie. I'll enjoy this. In moments I was dressed, and Howard wore the black clothing, gleefully pretending to be me. "No giving it away, everyone.", Howard said as I came back down, and Paul made an effort to hide his smile.

Let's see... Viewscreen on, last message, yup, it was from him. Start talking and... "You killed my son, you little bastard!!" My, he's frisky today. Time to take him down a notch.

"Bullshit! He killed himself. He let his fucking servant shoot him in the head.", I shouted, sounding like Howard, probably a bit more loudly than usual.

"After your servant told him to do it, him thinking it was you!" **IF YOU ONLY KNEW, ASSHOLE!** I wanted to laugh badly, everyone in the room did. I certainly hope Howie lets me be him more often. This is fun!

"Look, I am not responsible for anyone's stupidity. I let him ask the question..", I said, gesturing to Howard, "...because I thought your precious son couldn't be killed by a few words. He was a fucking second level. I **thought** he could take care of himself.", I said, sneering at him. He tried to talk but I overrode him. "**Now, I am going to** ask you a question, and I want you to answer it! Do you doubt what I have told you about the facts of the incident is the truth?"

"No. I do not doubt the facts you have told me. I doubt your reaction to them. I have seen no justice." Justice? **Justice?!** Your son fucking tortured my friend for the fun of it, made him cut off his own dick, and now you want to talk to me about **justice**, you cockswallowing shiteating pathetic excuse for a world controller? You don't deserve justice, you deserve nothing but painful, agonizing death, you fucking asshole!

Of course, I didn't actually say any of that. "All right then, I want to hear exactly what you want and why you want it."

"I want you, and that servant who asked the question, to come to a meeting, so that we may best talk about what should be done." Um. Can you say 'trap', boys and girls? I knew you could!

"And who will be at this meeting?", I asked.

"You and your servant, myself, and several other Illuminati who have an interest in this matter." You're **kidding**, right?! I laughed hard. So did Howard. "Oh- so you mean everyone who agrees with you? I don't think so. If we're going to have a meeting it will be with at least the top two levels. If, of course, this matter is as important as you say it is." Your son's life was an aberration. Killing him was like popping an infected zit, and we're all better off without him. Drink piss, you writhing maggot.

"You listen to ME!!", he started to scream, and I felt something open up in response.

"**NO. YOU LISTEN TO ME.**", I said, all-controlling force coming out of my diaphragm, through my vocal cords, and out of my mouth. This is the essence of the Dominator: pure, absolute control, and I felt Howard's complete authority pour from my lungs like a bucket of napalm. The Bastard recoiled like he'd been hit. I clenched my fists, feeling the blades pop forth. "I will not tolerate this shit any longer. The meeting will be held between all members of the top two levels at the main headquarters exactly fifty-three hours from now." The math came instantly to me. It would be midnight there, three nights in the future. "You will come to that meeting respectfully and you will never use that tone of voice with me again, or I will personally cut you into tiny pieces. Am I making myself clear?" I was indeed. The man on the screen hated me, hated me with all his fury and might, but his fury and might were nothing compared to mine (shit, I'm even thinking like Howard now), and both of us knew it.

"Yes, Dominator.", The Bastard said, before turning his end of the screen off.

"Uuugh... my throat hurts.", I said, as Paul pumped his fist, chanting "Yes! Yes! That was glorious!" I'd overdone it with that death voice, but it was worth it.

Howard took off the black clothing, smiling. "Billy, that was good. Excellent, in fact. And yes, take it off.", he commanded. Aww.

"Howard, are they always like that?", I asked him.

"Sure as hell seems like it, doesn't it?", he replied, nodding.

"Yup."

"That was a good call, that meeting thing. If it'll finish this, anyway.", Howard said, as Paul continued to cheer more quietly. I realized what I had done- I'd made a decision affecting Howard's future actions. Then again, I'd been commanded to do it; he told me to pretend to be him, and he's decisive like that.

Howard spent the next two days with us, doing things that normals didn't even know were possible.

Chapter 26

It was time for the cards to be laid out on the table. And Howard never folds.

This is what I really respect him for. Not the power, not the control, and definitely not his position- it's just that he won't fold. It doesn't matter what kind of predicament he's in, what kind of forces oppose him, he doesn't back down. Period. Nothing can stop him... or nothing yet has, rather. I don't know what he plans to do with the top two levels.. from everything he's said, that dumbfuck Gladstone has.. not quite control, but influence over most of them. Blackmail and all that other crap. Lots of people have nice, large skeletons in their closets- especially Illuminati- and most of these guys have done something to piss off the previous Dominator at one point or another. And ever since I put that bullet in that one fucko's head more than five weeks ago, they've all been very, very scared of Howie. I stopped to ponder the sheer irony of Gladstone blackmailing others with their actions against the Dominator, while the Dominator is ready to beat the shit out of- or kill- him.

But then again, Illuminati don't like to think of themselves as being controlled, do they? So they may go with the Dominator simply because he represents freedom from their own demons.. I cackled in bitter irony at that. He'll implant you all sooner or later, fuckers. Enjoy your stay in Hell. And if he wants me to help him do that, I'll give him everything possible, implant effects or no. You bloated pseudo-Illuminated dipshits made a slave of the world, and your engineered creation(s) will make a

slave of you. Pure hate almost literally blinded me... so when Paul came into my room, closing the door behind him, he was sort of shocked at the look on my face.

"Holy shit, Billy.. you all right?"

"Why, yes, Paul, I'm just fine. I'm under the control of my exact clone, I've learned that there's a secret organization that's running the world, I'm eventually going to have to watch my best friend die, said best friend is in this hellhole with me, so everything is just **peachy keen everfucking god damned ALL RIGHT!!**" He flinched some and even I winced at the burning hatred in my voice.

"It's time to go, ya know."

"Going." I put on the requisite black suit, and I looked like a vampire once more. I didn't even bother with the stairs and just vaulted over the railing and jumped down the twelve feet instead, the plush carpet cushioned my landing, and I did a quickie forward flip after I hit to avoid any impact damage. Paul considered following my path, thought better of it, and used the stairs instead. Howard looked at me quizzically, but he knows as well as I do that there's no such thing as danger- either you get injured or you don't. And I don't get injured from things I do intentionally.. especially now, with his damned commands in effect.

"Billy, you look like you're ready to kill something. Is it all at me?", he asked.

"No.. not just you, Howard. It's them I want. They made you and me the way we are. They fucking enslaved the world.. and all this is their fault. And something tells me you don't want a few of them around either."

"You guessed it. Okay.. Sarah, when I get in that throne, you sit to my left, Billy, to my right, and Paul.. hmm.. behind me. And listen carefully to this one- exactly one half second after I finish the sentence 'Ladies and gentlemen, I have a statement to make.', Billy, you kill the bitch to Gladstone's left, Sarah, the one to his right. One bullet death. You know what bitches I speak of?"

"Sandra and Wilma. How could I not.", said Sarah grimly.

"Of course. The fat whores he has for chorus girls.", I said with bloodlust and anger decorating my face.

"Bingo." It's nice to know that he has similar opinions on some of them, and that lightened my mood a bit.

"Hee hee.. Howie, that's a good trigger phrase.. 'I'm resigning - wait, no I'm not, THEY are!'"

"Heh heh heh. Let's go."

When we got to the plane, something parked in the back of my mind came to the front- it's not only the rooms that have only three spots. The jet has a pilot's seat, though.

"Oh.. damn. Hmm .. the floor, the seat or.. ah. Okay, Sarah, you stay in the .. nah.. Better idea. Paul, Billy, get in the back. Sarah, fly us to headquarters, cruising speed."

Through my hate I could see what was to happen again. "Oh, no..", I said as my legs took me inside the plane.

"Not again!", Sarah griped, as she got in the pilot's seat. Howard only grinned as he got in. Once more, the VTOL took us high, ceased, and the scramjets kicked it on to 1200 mph, Paul grunting from the acceleration.

"Sarah, get back here.", said Howard, grinning. Paul still looked a little puzzled. And as again, she got in the back, and he laid back on a human cushion, his head on her belly, his ass on Paul (for a brief instant I visualized Paul fucking him from that position, a thing that could have been easily done) and his feet on my stomach.

"Does he always do this?", muttered Paul.

"Sometimes.", I replied grimly.

"Hehehe... Feel lucky. I could be Sandra." I visualized at least three hundred pounds of lard sitting on poor Paul. No way he could fuck **her** up the ass. A big black guy's dick could probably reach through all that fat.. but it would be a close call.

"Well, then we wouldn't be going anywhere.", said Sarah, with the smile of evil on her face.

"Why not?", asked my white-clad clone.

"The plane wouldn't get off the ground!", she blurted, the nasty punchline coming out of her mouth like acid venom, and we all laughed at that. I took a moment to ponder the irony- Howard's Daddy is responsible for most of my and her pain (although Paul has a few things to thank Howard for), he considers us his toys, he's fucking **laying on us** as if we were a comforter right now, and we're cracking jokes with him like this is all just some fucking charade. Damn it all straight to Hell. Oh well. Right now I didn't care much- we were cracking jokes, but all of us wanted to crack skulls. Paul, the normal, appeared totally oblivious to that fact.

"Could she even fit in here?", cracked Paul.

"Well, now that depends, Paul. I imagine if we used an industrial press..", Howard said with my evil grin on his face. Everyone cracked up, and I laughed at both images going into my head at once- the silly one, of an extremely large mound of fat being compressed to fit into the plane without spilling over, and the gory one, which featured the actual Sandra being put in an actual industrial press. First, she would be driven to her knees, then she would be forced to lay flat, then her stomach would be gradually flattened out like a tortilla, she'd be screaming in pain, her ribs would snap like twigs, her pelvic bone would break messily, and her suffering would be ended when the unyielding steel met with her thin skull and pulpy brain. Crunch-splat. Then, the piston would probably spin for maximum pressure and compactness of heterogeneous waste. When the press came back up, there would be nothing but a jumbled, compressed mass of bone, muscle, skin, a few nerves, plenty of blood, and lots of fat, globs of the stinking, odious mess sticking to the rising piston. Eeyuck.

"She'd just pop back up!", Paul snapped. Howard kicked me in the stomach with his laughter. I tried to visualize her going from flat to fat and really didn't like what I saw. Sarah shook her head in the traditional 'that's disgusting' fashion.

"Okay, okay, no more fat jokes for the next 3 hours. I don't want to hear much more of that.", Howard said after he was finished laughing. "But seriously, she wouldn't fit in here. At least not leaving room for anyone else."

Then I noticed something. "Howard, speaking of fitting.. this thing could hold what? A six foot four guy? And if we're going to be seven foot two.." Paul looked at me and Howard with an amazed look on his face.

"Billy, you forgot who you're talking to. If this jet has room problems, I get a new jet, and let the taxpayers pay for it. A lot of Illuminati could probably use this thing anyway. And yes, Paul, 2.2 meters, about seven foot two. Don't worry, you won't look **too** much like a midget.", he said, smiling and patting Paul on the chest. He took a breath, thought for a second, then told me to thoroughly

search the transcript database of all communications involving top-level Illuminati (which is a fucking huge amount of shit, to put it bluntly) since Damien's death for anything he might find important that has to deal with Paul, Damien, or some idiot like Gladstone getting back at Howard. I lifted Howard's legs to swap places with Paul, got into the database, and silently vowed to kill Howard last as the implants once more tore my body from my brain and I searched for the information, unable to move the pages down until I scanned every last line. Ugh. Fuck you, Howard. Good thing I read fast. The secret plots of the secret masters were, however, good reading material, and I read several discussions about power juggling, various public illusions, possible mini-threats (I didn't see anything about medium or major threats, though), and general deluding of the Illuminati who delude the sheeple. Most of the batch was re-transfer of plans due to a dead Illuminatus. Some of it was jokes, anger, and resentment that a second-level Illuminatus could get axed by his own servant. And a few things, much fewer than I expected, involved anything that would be of any interest or threat to the Dominator. I wonder who writes all these conversations down? Enforcers. Gotta be. These don't look like anything created from voice recognition software, the homonym usage is too perfect.

"Howard, most of it's just replacement stuff, who's going to do what now that Damien's a corpse. And most of the ones who talked about it agree it's a suicide." Publicly, anyway. There's no way of knowing how much super-secret communication is going on between whoever. "There are eight things you should probably take a look at though.", I said a half hour later.

"Say when the conversations happened, who they are, then read them aloud so I understand them.", he said from his relaxed position.

I sighed. "June 4, 1998, 0017 hours. Night Operator: 'Herbert, I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but I have horrible news.'"

"Gladstone: 'What are you talking about, horrible news? What is it?'"

"'Herbert, your son, Damien Gladstone of the Second Level of the Illuminati is dead.'"

"'Dead? **How?** He was supposed to be on that damn Dominator's island by now! He can't be dead.. can't be..' He was crying, How." He nodded.

"'He was shot in the head, sir. By his own servant, as a matter of fact.'"

"'What?! What happened?!'"

"'I don't know, sir. You'll have to ask the Dominator. I spoke with him less than five minutes ago. He was very arrogant.'" I sensed Howard's teeth clench. They were talking about him as if he was less than them, and that pissed him off considerably.

"'I'll call him up right now. Are you sure Damien's .. dead?'" I did a good Gladstone impression with the anger and hurt he must have felt.

"'Very much so, sir. The Dominator confirmed a powerful head shot with fatal brain injury.'" Howard giggled uncontrollably when I recited that.

"'Damn it, I'll call him up **right now**. Gladstone out.' End of transmission."

"Okay, Billy, stop.", Howard said, and sighed. "I wish I would have remembered those two were cousins before this whole mess began." Cousins?! They sure as hell don't act like it- but then again, neither do we, and we are definitely technically brothers. "Can't track everyone, I guess. Oh well. Paul, read the next one."

"June 11, 1998, 2315 hours.", he monotoned.

"Tim Castle: 'Dave, Dave, wake up Dave!'"

"Dave Control: 'Tim? What's going on, why are you waking me up?'"

"'Dave, Damien's dead!'" Paul was reciting the words, not mimicking how they must have sounded.

"'What?! How?!'"

"'It's all confused up, happened on the Dominator's island.. yeah, Howard says Damien's own servant killed him, but Herbert's going apeshit saying how it was all Howard's fault. No intelligence gatherable, Howard's not letting anyone **near** that island right now.'"

"'Is the damage recoverable?'"

"'No way. Howard says his brain is in little pieces. Something bad happened out there, Dave.'" Then I saw the fear that Paul forgot to add into his recanting. These guys are scared, and it's pretty obvious why. If one of them can die, they all can die. Never mind stupid people that piss off or try to shoot Howie, their own servants can prove them fatal. And their mighty egos don't like it. Wussies. They set the fire and they can't take the heat.

"'Oh, god. Look, that kid is becoming a serious threat here. Herbert said he shoulda been stopped earlier but..'"

"Stop, Paul.", said Howard, who knew what that meant. They were not referring to a 'should' as in 'Geez, I really should have done that.' but as in 'Fuck, that plan should have worked!'. If they were not being monitored, they would have said 'Herbert's test should have stopped him.', but instead they thought they could bury the message in language. Ha, ha, ha. Those idiots underestimated Howie- again. "All right, keep going."

"..he wasn't, and here he is wreaking havoc. What the fuck was that old guy thinking, putting in this damn kid?" I felt power of all sorts come out of Howard, mixed with a little hate. His teeth were gritted.

"Dunno. Look, let's let this sit for a day or two, all right Dave? Don't want Howard freaking out and using that damn superweapon of his." Superweapon my ass. The Micro has serious heat problems- that's why they're developing a sink for that. Sure, it can shoot a death-beam, but Howie's always complaining about the operative time - less than a minute at half power, like ten seconds at full. Also, these guys are second levels- shouldn't they know more about it?

"All right, Tim. Thanks for callin' me up. Night.' End of transmission."

Howard sighed a bit. "Were the rest of 'em like this?"

"Yeah. All the same theme. They don't know what to do, so I don't think they're going to do anything.", I told him. "They're not sure what happened, they don't really know if what you said was the truth, they don't know what to believe. They're surprised and confused."

"Just the way I like them." Howard's manipulative side (manipulative side, what the fuck am I thinking.. if he has a manipulative side, he's a fucking Mobius strip) showed itself again. "And yet again we see the nature of humanity exposing itself once more."

"How do you mean?", I asked.

"Remember when I told you they all wanted whatever tortures, and how some wanted me dead or you dead?" I nodded. "This is a demonstration of that. They made up that sort of thing right at that

moment. They clamored immediately. They knew that I'd be reading the logs, and so it was a way of sending it to me."

"Yeah, I really don't get that. If they were so horribly angered.. then why isn't there more of this stuff? Why didn't they send whatever requests to you directly? I mean, it would piss you off the same amount, they must know that.."

"Because they're doing their piece of manipulation."

"..now I'm really confused.", I replied.

"It's always hard to understand.", Sarah said, shaking her head a bit.

"All right.. here goes. They wanted to express to me and their friends, for the record- and believe me, they **all** have ways of communicating off the record- that they did not approve of this, even if it was technically a suicide. They might even be joyful about the target- the Bastard's son, to be sure, wasn't widely loved. However, by doing what they did, they sent me a message saying that I shouldn't allow any killing. When they indirectly told me to do something like torture him or kill you, most of them weren't actually expecting me to do it. Now, to be sure, many of them probably really do want me to do that sort of thing, and some of them probably really do want me dead because of this. However, they know when they're not going to get what they want, so, if they presumably have control over their own egos, they'll just deal with it and go on."

His explanation might have been textbook Illuminism, but I had doubts about it. "Either that, or they're just whining and talking to each other like normals when someone gets killed because they're afraid, hoping for some sort of mutant justice that they'll never see, not bothering to conceal their messages because they don't think to do it."

"Or a combination of both.", Howard replied. "It worries me that you might be right for the majority of them." He wants to run an organization of smart manipulators, not idiotic small-minded normal-politician imitators.

Which reminded me.. "One thing I want to know.. why do you call them The Bastards, anyway?" Sarah sighed, as if she could list reasons for hours.

"That's a long one. Well, she had her own concerns when dealing with them. But it's pretty damn simple. They try every fucking day to use manipulation to steal from and try to control other Illuminati." Using manipulation is obviously okay, it's just when they use it in a detrimental, organization-harming way that it becomes a problem. "One time, the guy said something like 'Well, now you're in a position of weakness because you went and got that, and now I'm just profiting off your greed.' Shit like that. That barely makes sense, no Illuminatus is stronger because someone else got greedy, the guy who grabbed and didn't burn too many resources in grabbing now has more power, and the other guy doesn't. Another time, the Bastard kept going on and on, in a public meeting, about how he was owed shit and how he needs it, et cetera, everyone was bored and pissed- the guy he was bitching about didn't give him anything, but another guy did a bad trade with him. I'm surprised no one has killed him yet." The way he tells it, so am I. "He tries to be a fucking demagogue to us."

"Demagogue...", I muttered aloud, thinking if I could have seen this guy before on televangelist TV. Gladstone's not a public, is he?

Howard knew the question I had in mind. "He's not a public, Billy. He doesn't pose as any of the demagogues you're thinking of, Pat Robertson, Tammy Faye, or that one fat guy, I forget his name.. I think they're all servants of fourth levels or something like that. Could have changed since I last heard it." So much for the Christians opposing the New World Order.

Sarah hated him and wanted to speak her piece. "Heh. Yeah. I think just about everyone who knows about him hates his guts **almost** to the point of killing him outright. And did I ever want to. Damn, I hated that guy. He sent me on the most worthless missions to do the most worthless shit, sometimes for fun, like just stealing stuff and then putting it back, just to see if I could do it or for some bet." Shit, how the hell'd he get away with **that**? "And yes, Billy, it was the important and treasured stuff. No one found out it had ever left, except guys who we replaced." One thing I know is that the organization, or at least the Dominator's side, frowns upon the waste of resources. That was definitely a waste of resources.

"Sarah, that's actually really bad. I'd think Daddy or somebody would have done something. Even a third level I don't think would have gotten away with that, maybe not even a second.", Howard said.

"I know! He had a fixation on me or something. I think he **wanted** me, but he was.. that's right. He knew in advance, so he was pissed that you were getting me instead of him or his son." Having Sarah be Damien's servant was a concept I didn't want to think about, but she'd probably have found a way to instantly kill him.

Paul, who had the most reason to hate the Gladstone family, said nothing at all through any of this. Which is okay, and expected- he's a normal, after all.

We landed and took the same path to the auditorium as we had before.

Chapter 27

I'm surprised I actually remember the way- we landed at the same spot as we did about a month and a half ago, and walked in the same entrance, going directly to the main podium.

As we took positions again, Paul directly behind Howard, the dim lights came on to reveal two rows of white-clad figures. This is the second time I've been here, and this time I got a better look. Howard was around three meters from the bastard whose son his new servant had recently killed, looking down at the fat man from about one meter. I half-consciously realized that Howard didn't need us at all; he could just leap from the podium, and in two swipes of his blades (or one particularly long one), all three of them would be dead as doorknobs, their throats with an extra breathing hole. They might not even scream in time. But he doesn't want to intimidate anyone that much with his physical power, and that's what the guns are for- to make people believe he needs them.

If, of course, we use them, which we might not.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati, this gathering is now in open session.", Howard declared, formally bringing the matter into the voices of the people below him. "Before we begin discussion, I would speak the known facts. If anyone is in dispute with these facts, let yourself be heard." He took a deep breath. "On the night of June 5th, 1998, Damien Gladstone was shot and killed by his servant, Paul Smith. The implement of killing was a .45 caliber pistol. The cause of death was brain obliteration." Assuming he had a brain to begin with, of course.

Howard took another deep breath and was obviously going to struggle to keep a straight face. Watching him do that is one of the few things that sometimes make me glad I'm not him. "Immediately before that happened, my servant, Billy Bohecker, suggested to Damien that he should allow his servants to do the one thing they want most." After he finished saying that, I felt the room crackle with even more tension than usual.

A twenty-something first level mightily tried and succeeded in smashing down his growing smile, a twelve-year-old of the second chuckled and had to almost choke himself to stop, and a 18-23 year old Illuminatus of the second level started burbling and then just exploded "**WHAT?! He did what?! You mean to tell us that he believed...**" He lost coherent speech and just started laughing

uncontrollably. After a few seconds he got a hold of himself and apologized, "I'm sorry, Master Howard. But that's just too funny."

"I agree. And I cannot condemn you because when I first really realized what had happen, I couldn't stop laughing either because it really is too funny. That is not a fact I am entering, however."

Of course, during all of this, all three of the bastards' faces were getting steadily redder- but not one of them said a thing. Howard, of course, is definitely going to capitalize on that with more demoralizing, more demeaning, more infuriating, and just plain flat-out more **evil** behavior and comments.

"Do you have anything to **say**, Mr. Gladstone?", he said in an overly condescending voice. Yup, Howie's that predictable.

"Yes, I have something to say, I have to ask a question. What are you going to do about your servant who **killed my son**? What are you going to do about him? Are you going to kill him, torture him, even fucking **punish him**?" Exactly what is punishment supposed to mean to an implanted?

"No. I personally don't plan to do a thing to him."

"**And why not?!**", the Bastard almost screamed. At this rate, Howard won't have to kill the fatass; he will have died of a heart attack first. Wait.. no. Damn you, Northberg.

"Because I don't fucking feel like it. Besides, if we tortured every implanted servant who wanted to kill his owner, implants would be utterly worthless."

"But he **killed** him!"

"What's your point? He just got the opportunity to do it, that's all."

"And your other servant--"

"Said a thing which **I** should have said." The Bastard's face grew red- not the purple face of rage we saw three nights ago, but a more controlled anger- he **is** an Illuminatus, after all. But his rage is interfering with his questionable manipulation abilities. If he's trying to make an impression, it's not working- Illuminati in general are soulless bastards, no matter who croaks.

He finally opened his mouth and I could envision a fly coming out, and a sticky tongue reeling it back in. "You are horrible, contemptible, disgusting, uncouth, destructive, out of your league, and wholly inappropriate for your position!" Woah. This guy must want to join his kid pretty damn soon. If there's one thing Howard usually grants, it's assholes' death wishes. "How can we possibly hope to tolerate this kind of thing?", he asked, rhetorically, to the group. "One of ours is **dead** and this so-called Dominator doesn't even care! Have we all lost touch with reality?! The death of a young Illuminatus by one of his servants is a horrible thing, a thing of no small meaning, a thing that should not happen!" This guy's voice is starting to get on my nerves.

"And I must say that you have run roughshod over all of us as a whole by flaunting that kind of action! What kind of masters are we when we allow servants to kill other masters?", he continued, turning to Howard again, asking questions that he isn't expecting an answer to. I could almost feel Howard ready to answer the obvious- 'Smart and stupid, respectively.'- but he didn't. He's just going to let this guy eventually run out of gas, and then he's probably going to say the phrase and **BLAM**, no more idiot. Guns kill idiots dead. You can almost hear Smith & Wesson cheering from beyond the grave..

"We cannot allow this to continue!" I agree. Shut the fuck up! It's bad enough having to deal with Howard, I don't need to listen to this polluted air. "We cannot allow an immature, poorly trained,

poorly educated Dominator in here. We just can't allow it! This is just an example of the kind of thing we are inviting, if we keep going the way we're going!" I listened carefully for signs of Howard's anger, and found none.

"Now we know who has the egotism, eh? He who defiles us with atrocities within our own hierarchy, he who dares abuse his power for the ill of the whole!" Howard's said it before, he'll say it again- if you can't abuse it, it's not power. "Lack of sense, lack of internal discipline.. is this where we are headed? Where egotists take it upon themselves to kill those whom they dislike, simply for the sake of killing them? Who let their misbegotten servants annihilate masters with impunity?" I was almost ready to laugh maniacally for the sheer hell of it. This is funny! The guy sounds like he got thrown out of the first episodes of *Star Trek* for being too melodramatic...

From the sounds of it, I figure that this Bastard's speech was developed in the same way as Howard's original speech: with help. Only the Bastard used his two fat whores instead of highly intelligent engineered youth. But, he did the job he probably intended to do- he's conveying feelings of guilt, shame, and potential punishment, much like the threatening voice of a father or the condemning voice of a mother. And neither the feelings nor the subliminal parental references are in any way applicable to Howard, and are only serving to piss him off.. and me, vicariously. C'mon, Howie, say the phrase so this guy'll **shut up!**

"And now what do we have? A poorly-qualified boy dancing on our graves simply because of genetic engineering." Bingo! "And because of this, we are seeing the effects of his misrule already! It's barely been more than a week and now we have this! What next, genocide? We've disposed of tyrants in the past, why can't we do it **now?**"

"You've been talking way too long.", one unidentified second level man said, in a flat voice, interrupting the Bastard's tirade. Said Bastard and his Bitches proceeded to sharply turn around to glare at the transgressor.

"Let him speak. He has that right. Besides, he has to run out of hot air sooner or later.", Howard replied coolly. A tacit wave of general assent, with a few hidden semi-smiles and a barely-audible low chuckle. Wow, they really don't like this guy either..

"Hot air.. you really have no respect for us at all, do you? Not at all! Not even the people who created you! For once in a thousand years," I have no idea why he exaggerated. "we have a Dominator who doesn't give two shits whether we live or die!" Well, he kind of wants you in particular to die. The Bastard turned around in his chair and addressed the crowd, looking back and forth behind him. "You've seen what he's capable of, and what he can do to us, and what he'll do if we let this continue! Do any of you want to join my son?" ...in Hell, I mentally added. Does Fido count as Cerberus? "He talks about mutualism, and working together, and what do we get? This! And this is what we can expect to keep getting! I didn't think apathy and uncaring could make it all the way up **here.**" In addition to Smith & Wesson's cheering, you can also almost hear the patience meter slowly dwindling to zero.. but that really is an 'almost' hear, as Howard isn't showing any signs of anything at all.

"Damn it, doesn't anyone understand? If this is the way of things to come, we're all going to be gone! This attitude is something we can't accept! He's almost saying himself that he's the harbinger of our downfall, and I seem to be the only one here talking about it!" No, yapping about it, repeating bullshit claims with lots of screaming, lots of rhetoric, and very little actual logical argument.

"We're with you, Herbert.", the Bitches said artificially.

Then he committed a sin I doubt he would commit, a thing I rank right up there with Russian Roulette with a bazooka. He looked Howard directly in the eye and proceeded to insult him some more. "You are a freak. I'm not sure who screwed up in Northberg, but it's obvious someone did. And now we're all paying for it. For your own sake and everyone's, I have to ask you to step down

from your position, get out of here, and never be seen again." The room was deathly still, almost as deathly still as Herbert is sure to be very, very soon.

After all that, Howard was not angry. He was calm and deliberate, and, of course, when he's calm and deliberate... byebye, Mr. Bastard. No wonder he hasn't been pissed off. No sense in getting angry at the dead. "Is that your honest opinion, Mr. Gladstone?", he asked in an half-patronizing, even tone.

"Yes, of course it is!", Herbert spat out sibilantly, even more anger decorating his face with a blush of red.

"Oh. Oh well.", Howard sadly uttered, allowing a sigh to escape his lips. Here it comes.. "I guess I really have no choice, then. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati," Howard stood up and said, his left hand sweeping across the room with all six fingers partially outstretched, "I have a statement to make." There was a collective gasp as five hundred milliseconds passed.

Wilma, Sandra, and Herbert all got a bullet in their foreheads, all exactly at the same time with a maximum variation of maybe a hundredth of a second; the sound was that of one shot from three places, noticeably startling everyone else in the room. The dead fools' eyes, brightened by the prospect of Howard's departure, rolled up into their heads as their corpses slumped back in their chairs. Alive, they were annoyances; dead, they looked almost cute. The Illuminati sitting next to them instinctively leaned away from the bodies as they realized what had been done, and then proceeded to smile.

"That", Howard said, "is my statement."

A wave of thunderous applause and the occasional cheer came from the room, as someone from Howard's left- sounded like Gates- said, "Well, now **that** wasn't too surprising, was it?" Now this I wasn't expecting. I was expecting some pissed off people, some applause, and some general confusion. Okay, so one guy wasn't clapping- it was the Head Night Operator, spitting foulness at the guy to his right to get him to stop clapping. The applause died down when he stood up.

"I don't believe this!", he shouted with a purple face full of rage. "This upstart Dominator" (I was expecting Howie to kill him on the spot for saying that) "just walks in here and kills three first level Illuminati, and you cheer him on? What is wrong with you? If we let this continue, he'll destroy us all!" Maybe two people in the crowd seriously listened to him.

"Would you like to know **why** they are clapping, Head Night Operator?"

"God damn you... **Yes! Tell me!**"

"Because no one liked those three.", Howard began, in a dark tone. "Because they gave nothing. They had a lot of power, and they didn't do anything with it except try to bully the rest of their fellow Illuminati with it. I'm surprised none of you already killed them by the time I got in here. Because, as I understand it, they were trying to kill me with the tests. Because he was a nepotist. Because he didn't support anyone else's plans, and he could not work together, and he committed the sin of trying to manipulate Illuminati, oh, what am I saying 'trying' for, he did do it, let's face it. We all wanted him dead. Any one of us could have pulled the trigger. And, if I remember right, he threatened a few people back in 1995 with a crime no one should have let him live for- he threatened to expose the holdings of various Illuminati, and two of them have had to create a normal connection between themselves because of it. And, because he committed another great sin; he believed that his power really existed."

"**This is a game, people!**", Howard said with majesty, fury, and the heavy hint of total dominance which marks his position. "We are playing a game. The name of this game is Global Domination. We rule the world, and I know some of you have gone too far from it to realize that. We are not to

play politics with our fellow Illuminati, it's a form of cheating and just bad manners here. Because we're not competing against ourselves, we're competing against the normals. I know that might seem like a pretty imbalanced game, but they have an advantage we don't. **They** will exist if **we** fall, but if they begin a descent, **so do we**. So before any of you start threatening to start telling various unwanted truths on your news organizations or threatening to use the government against corporations or any of that other happy crap that might hurt the societies we command or our influence with them, remember that it's **all just a game**. We all have what we want, and if anyone wants more, then they'll have to get it the slow way, like the rest of us."

The Night Operator looked to be on the verge of a heart attack, and if not for the medical technology aiding his life, may have had one. He could say nothing, yet he wanted to. The man Howard had killed was his blood relative, but Herbert was guilty of all the sins Howard had mentioned, and probably more. "You... little..", he muttered, and at that moment I realized what he was angry at.

The Night Operator of Northberg probably had a hand in Howard's development. This man had supported the people who engineered us. He had probably put some of his own resources into the project, not only time and materials, but people and other-project planning. When Herbert, his cousin, wanted Damien to be Dominator, he had probably muttered and cursed to himself, but Howard was already completed and growing up. There was nothing he could do. He had literally helped his cousin's doom along. And he was angry at his cousin's fallacies, his cousin's son's fallacies, and his own. Deep denial is definitely never something Illuminati should experience. When you're juggling world power, would you people mind **not** adding your own mental problems into the mix? For a moment, I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He was human- petty, conniving, and egotistical- in an evil paradise where inhumanity is literally king.

"That's it! I know I can't kill you- but I'm not going to let you kill me!", he screamed, and everyone wondered what he would do- that is, if they haven't figured it out already by his words and their tone. The room grew steadily tenser.

He pulled out a small pistol, put it to his right temple, did not hesitate, and blew his own brains out through an exit at the very left of his forehead. For an instant I pondered the bullet ricocheting, then had an internal laugh at the fact that the walls were designed to not ricochet bullets. They think of everything... including inevitable gun violence in the masters' domain.

Any of us could have easily shot the gun out of his hand, but we didn't. Howard lost his master-aura for a moment in a fit of giggling. Everyone else had their mouths wide open. Why did he do that? Was his situation that hopeless, or did he simply want to join the rest of his family in Hell and wasn't willing to wait?

"This is **crazy!**", a middle-aged man shouted. "First we have Damien dying of his own stupidity. Then we have our beloved Dominator and his servants killing the people that **yes**, we hated. I admit, I clapped with the rest of you because of what they did and what they threatened to do, and because I was waiting for that moment like the rest of you. But now one of Northberg's Operators blows his own brains out?! What is this, some kind of sick joke? Howard- what did you do to him beforehand?!", he demanded.

"I know this is going to be tough to believe, and I really don't have any way of proving it, but I did nothing beforehand. I **was** prepared to kill those three; that statement was a trigger phrase. I didn't think the Operator would do what he did. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm as shocked as the rest of you, about a few things. The fact that this organization has seemed to lose its edge, and the fact that nepotism still has an effect. We are the Illuminati, and I'd like to remind everyone again of that. Don't come whining to me because people are stupid. I killed those three because they deserved it. I didn't kill the Operator. But, to get rid of all blame, I will say right here and now that I will have no part in the selection of the replacements for the five dead people. My vote will not be a part of those calculations, and I will not help anyone acquire any of the resources gleaned from the dead." Some of the faces could be seen changing on some of the people as they mentally changed their plans for

placing whom they wanted in the newly-available positions, and recomputed their possible share of the newly-available power. I'm not sure how many people Howard really appeased- Howard's resources aren't managed by him, from what he told me, other Illuminati decide who does that. But it was a worthy gesture.

"It is also true that the three people whom I assassinated were Illuminati of the first level, and that they did oppose some of my plans that would have hampered their growth of power. But I believe that is true for all of us. If there is any of you who has anything to say about that, do so freely and without fear." Freely, maybe. Without fear? Not a chance. Four dead bodies are in the room, going through rigor mortis. Of course these guys are scared. And Howard would be scared, if everyone in the room wasn't so positive about the deaths. Maybe they're faking it.. no, not all of them at once.

The 18-23 year old, who had laughed before, stood up. "Howard, if it would have been any of us up there, we would have certainly done the same thing. You have nothing to apologize for." He then sat down. A general murmur of quiet assent flowed through the assembly. Howard didn't pay that guy, either- but it would have been a good choice had he did.

"Thank you, Mr. Beckett. Anyone else?"

"Yes..", a 50-55 year old, skinny, second level woman with wrinkles on her face and an Illuminated glint in her eye said, "I have something to say. I'd like to say that when we accept the five replacements, we better be damn well more careful to pick the **best**. We should have never let them in here, they ruined all our plans, and he was going to put that young scumbucket Damien in our Dominator's place." So there's the answer. Or maybe just a general intuition which makes good logical sense. "Howard, I support you here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Adams. Is there anyone else?" A couple of people pondered saying something, but either thought they didn't have much to say or it wasn't worth saying. "Now let's get back to the business at hand. Seeing as how the person who initiated this is now very much **dead**, is there anyone who feels this matter needs to be continued?"

No one did.

Howard adjourned the session, and we all went home.

Chapter 28

As soon as we got into the jet, Sarah said, "You gave them what they wanted, Howard."

"You think they really wanted to croak?", he asked, surprised.

Sarah rolled her eyes a bit, gave Howard an 'Are you kidding?!' look, and said, "Come on, Howard! Just about everyone in the room had to have smelled the suicide. They all know that's instant death! I'm just surprised none of those three told that Night Operator their plan, or maybe he was in on it too. Do you know what suicide by cop is?", she asked, turning the jet around to point out the door.

"Never heard that term before.", he replied.

"Suicide by cop is when normals threaten or in some other way force police officers to shoot them dead. Since normal police have to shoot first or risk dying to criminals, the technique usually works. Suicide by Dominator, obviously, has the same effect.", she said, and blasted the jet into the sky with the usual enormous blast of force. I started laughing a bit. Suicide by Dominator! Lower the patience meter enough and BLAM! Really quick way to go here, folks.

"You actually might be right. But it's been said- never attribute to malice, or anything else for that matter, what can be adequately explained by stupidity."

"Actually," I pointed out, "it could have been both. They finally get the chance to tell you off as much as they want right before they croak. All of them probably already knew that Damien's death was because of stupidity- they didn't want to admit it, but they probably knew it- but after that and the fact that their popularity was getting dangerously low already, they might have just said 'Fuck it, life's not worth living anymore, we're broken and our lineage is destroyed, let's go.' Or maybe they even thought you wouldn't dare to kill them." Howard blinked at that. Social restrictions on killing at the wrong time and the wrong place are what would stop normals, but Howard probably has a hard time even conceiving of it. I have no idea what the hell Howard may do- exactly what concerns he uses to make his policy decisions are still alien to me- and so I can't really be surprised no matter what he does. It'll be rational, at least. "But watch it, some of those other guys might have faking the cheerfulness and might be gunning for you now."

"Hmm... maybe I'll look up examples of their crap, have some ready if someone thinks twice.", said Howard, after a moment's thought. But that wasn't all.. there was something else there.

"Howard... wait, something strange about all this." As soon as I said it, I realized immediately what was strange. "Those guys.. aren't really Illuminati."

"Ha! How so?"

"Well, for one thing, you said they knew how to work together. They don't, Howard. They were just mumbling assent, like sheep. I don't even think any of them really thought about why it happened or what could have been done to prevent it, or what those three did wrong. And... well, it just seems silly!"

"Billy, these are the first rational things I've really heard in three straight days. Details."

I had only limited understanding, but I gave it to him as best I knew how. "It's like they don't know what they're doing, Howard. They don't know. I don't really get it either, but you were right, it is a game. But if they all already control the world, then why do they keep fighting over things that don't exist? I looked it up that back in 1991, Herbert wanted to get a news organization to get people protesting the Persian Gulf war? Well.. why? Who cares if there's hippies or there's loyal Americans? If they're all sheep, why does it matter?"

"Heh, heh, heh. Billy, **now** you see it. You see, this organization was founded on one thing alone, ego. The founders knew that, eventually, the organization would fall if people came in only pretending to understand it. So what they did was they prepared for it. They wrote all the texts, so that even if they all didn't know what they were doing- which a lot of them don't- the organization would still function exactly as planned. But at least one person **does** have to know, and that's what I'm here for. They are fucking around, Billy. They want to gain and grow and manipulate in an environment where some of them can't really do that anymore, not because of their own lack of talent but because of the steady, consistent-growth plan. They're living in the past, a lot of them. They want to do more mind control than is needed, just so they can say 'Hey, these people follow me, see how great I am.' They want to make a difference where only time, steadiness, and cooperation will make a difference- so they do meaningless shit like that instead. They want to just jump out with some marvelous plan that will completely control everyone, where there already is such a plan. They fight among each other because they want respect, and that's what scares me."

"Scares? Why?" Sarah chuckled as soon as I said that.

"Because like I said, power doesn't really exist. Respect doesn't really exist. It's all just in the mind, Billy. They're fighting for emotions, and if they don't watch it, their petty feuds will fuck this whole organization to shit. And that's just what they are, petty. They can pretend to know, and they can say the knowledge, and they can practice manipulation and their multiple-layer shit, but too many of them don't really **understand** it. Too many of them can't control their own egos for the life of them-

they can control almost everybody else, which makes them Illuminati, but the tail's wagging the dog. Normally, the Dominator would step in with recruitments, and try to show these people the way again, but he didn't, and for a reason. One reason is the partially-engineered and the other reason is the implants."

"Because you won't even need the normal Illuminati anymore, will you, Howard? They'll just be your motherfucking servants. Divide and conquer."

"Bingo. But the problem is, I have to get this planet implanted before they tear us apart- I'll probably, hell, I'll almost certainly do that, but Murphy's Laws should always be counted upon."

"You're a trans-manipulative bastard.", I said, faintly. He's using the controllers of the world for his own purposes now.

"Thank you, Billy. But it's not as bad as you think. It's some of them, a lot of them, not all of them. You know all that murmured assent? A lot of that was just cover for other, real plans. Because some of them really **do** have an interest in the total control of the world. Now that those five are gone, their resources can be taken. For instance, I know that Herbert ran several major news organizations, and they'll probably go to some other Illuminatus specializing in that field. If a single Illuminatus is in charge of one sort of thing- which is ideal- he can orchestrate cover-ups with more efficiency than is done automatically for secrecy's sake. He could fix mistakes more quickly, he could target select groups of normals with experiments more easily and not have it reported, he could do a number of things. He could turn a 'bad' locale into a 'good' one where other Illuminati will find things easier to do. And **then** he'll have his respect anyway."

"And it's **those** guys who really run the organization.", I replied.

"And it's **those** guys I'll be counting on. Besides, the next batch of Illuminated children are almost all genetically engineered. In other words, they'll be several cuts above most of those guys. So, I probably won't be using the implants on the morons. Actually.. none of em."

"Yeah, it's better if you don't. Let them die out on their own and then get people who know what's going on. Damn, then you really will have the world. Six thousand of **you** deciding what to do with everything... ugh."

"All speculation so far, and I'll deal with that when I get to it."

"There is one more thing I'm trying to understand..", I said.

"What?"

"They were suggesting all that stuff at first. A lot of those same people that we saw in there. Some of them wanted you to do yadda yadda yadda suggesting that what you did was horribly wrong. And yet now we hear the cheering. What am I missing?" Paul looked at me and just shook his head. He hadn't said anything for a very long while and no one was going to make him.

"One word- context. They're afraid of me in person, you know that; also they were appeased by me coming to speak to them. That and they didn't understand it completely at first. When they heard word of even that bastard's son dying, they got scared because all they really knew was the bare facts of it. But when they find out that the course of actions would lead to those four getting the kibosh..."

"They realized that the danger didn't extend to them and they could breathe easier."

"In theory. It's complicated. We have an unknown number of people acting on emotions. We have an unknown number of people acting on reason. We have an unknown number of people just trying

to get by and not really caring who croaks. We have an unknown number of people who really do trust me completely. And, since these **are** Illuminati, we have an unknown number of people who really want X, who are pretending to really want Y, with their facade being that they want Z. Now, that last number is probably low, as it's hard for a normal brain to pretend to want too many different things and do too much manipulation without just losing track and majorly screwing up."

"..is this just more of that multiple-layer shit you were talking about before?"

"Yes. It is. And on top of all of it, we have people with varying degrees of egotism, varying degrees of loyalty, and varying degrees of stupidity," His use of 'stupidity' instead of 'intelligence' caused me to smile a bit. "all of which may fluctuate in any given length of time."

"Yes, I **have** noticed this before, so don't laugh this time- this is an annoying business.", I stated. Sarah, Paul, and Howard all just nodded.

"And now you see why I've adopted my philosophy.", Howard said. "If I need to, I'll appease them with gestures and whatever tokens they need to ensure I'm really on their side after all. But I cut through the bullshit. I don't have the patience to try to figure out what every last one of them is doing."

"Hence the inevitable use or direct threat of physical force."

"Ehhhhhh-xactly.", he replied. I just nodded. Makes a good deal of sense, the direct approach. You don't try to push a path through the jungle by moving around vines and such, you use a machete. When the knot is so twisted it's impossible to untangle, you do what Caesar did and cut it in half. Ka-chop.

Howard did some more research after that, looking up the twelve-year-old second level Alfred Williams. Just your typical partially engineered (as if there could be such a thing!), runs various large non-governmental organizations (which, if I'm not mistaken, oppose each other publicly), good sniper, loves ping-pong. A partially engineered would have no problems playing it by himself, would he? Just another one of the modified boys and girls growing up to rule the world. Howard checked out some more details about people's conversations after he left- they didn't mind him exterminating them. Some were gleeful, in fact, or at least pretending to be. He eventually fell asleep, and I was right behind him in that.

The jet reached home too soon for me to ride the night mare on it.

Chapter 29

The nightmare reminded me- I never learned exactly what Damien did to Paul. I could try to find out, of course; my morbid curiosity outweighed my apprehension. Paul went back to sleep almost immediately after I screamed, knowing what it was. I don't even think it interrupted his dreams. Yup, he's out like a light, and so I could use the computer without him waking up. I turned the brightness almost all the way down on the computer to the right, and silently looked for Damien's records. 'Maybe there won't be anything.', I said to myself. 'Maybe he kept it a big secret, even from his father. It's not something you advertise.'

In Damien's case, it was. Twelve parts of four-hour-long video files, in fact. I gritted my teeth- which felt a bit weird- and started the first one, because I just had to fucking **know**. I started the video.

'The Beauty of the Servant, Paul Smith - Produced by Damien Gladstone'.

Oh, dear **fuck**.

Paul was on his knees, bent all the way over, wearing an ugly leather costume right from a gay bar

in Nightmare World. He was holding his arms behind him, silent and unmoving. If this was shown to someone who had no idea of the existence of mind control implants, it would be assumed that Paul had **chosen** to do this, and that imaginary person with that bad assumption horrified me. Damien walked onscreen, carrying a whip and smiling. 'You're not smiling anymore, you son of a bitch.', I would have said aloud if Paul wasn't asleep. "Greetings, ladies and gentlemen. I'm your host, Damien Gladstone. Today, we'll be observing the implanted sentient servant in his most natural state.", Damien said, as if he was hosting a documentary for National Geographic. "There is more here than meets the eye. Inside his suit are several steel burrs, carefully aligned with his joints and nerves. Even as I stand here speaking to you, he is suffering in agony." If there's such a place as hell, you asshole, give Satan my regards! "Yet he cannot scream. This, of course, is due to no gag, but instead is due to the power of mind control implants.", he said, for the benefit of that mythical witless viewer. "Observe carefully." I didn't want to watch Damien hitting Paul three times on his exposed ass with the whip, causing angry red marks and Paul to jerk forward. "See how he moves? I have commanded him not to. Prohibited from reacting voluntarily, we know that all his reactions are not. This show shall contain no pretending. Everything you shall see is the true beauty of the implanted servant." He then pulled out something from a nightmare indeed, a foot-long dildo with spikes, and-

That's it! I wanted to force myself to watch enough for a representative sample of just what Damien had done, but I realized I couldn't take it. I stopped the video, closed the file, turned the brightness back to normal, and shut everything down. Then I returned to bed and put my arm around Paul protectively, enraged at Damien for what he'd done to my best friend. The asshole was already dead, of course, so the rage could go nowhere, but I was pissed off enough to want to resurrect him and kill him again, over and over. My hatred and I fell asleep.

I woke up in the morning to feel Paul pushing on my arm, and I lifted it off of him. He sat up, looked at me, and said "Good morning, Billy.", in a chipper, pleasant voice that was astounding to hear from the subject of Damien's ghastly videos.

"Paul, I command you never to look for any of Damien's available materials, or even watch them if you happen to find them accidentally." That was entirely for his benefit, and he knew it. His face looked blank for a split second, as if he was hammering down memories, a thing that my command would help him do.

"Okay, Billy.", he simply said in the same chipper voice. I smiled at him and went back to sleep for a couple more hours.

I woke up again with something else on my mind. Howard hasn't seen this, I'm sure. Does he even have... yes, I'm sure he does have at least some idea of what normals are capable of doing to each other, but I doubt he's seen anything like this. For a moment I didn't want to give him any ideas, but that was a silly concept, and I knew it.

I thought for a bit, got out of bed, put on a pair of black pants, and walked into Howard's room silently, closing the door behind me. "Howard... I'm not even sure if I should show this to you or not... but I guess you should probably see it.", I said, noticing his game of Starcraft.

"Is it urgent?", he asked, not looking behind him.

"No." I sat down on the floor by his side and watched him play. It was either a 1 on 1, or a larger game that had its members destroyed down to a 1 on 1. The enemy knew where Howard was- map hack, I'm sure- but Howard clobbered the hell out of him anyway. Knowledge is only some power. Howard choked him to death, preventing him from gathering resources and massing a slaughterhouse attack against the enemy's last base, when the enemy tried disconnection hacks, which showed immediately on Howard's screen as what they were. I love it when Illuminati modify games. Howard simply used another window to flick the fool off the Internet like a booger. He closed the windows and looked down at me from his chair.

"Now what is it you're not sure you should show me?", he asked, and I answered him by standing up, getting in front of him, and using the Search function to find the videos the exact same way I had before. He knew what they were immediately; I didn't need to say anything.

"Is this going to be unpleasant to watch?", he asked. I certainly hope he doesn't find any pleasure in it.

"It was for me, I only could take a minute or so of the first part. I **really** don't know why I'm showing you this. I just.. think you should see it for yourself."

"I doubt I'll even watch one of these in a sitting.", he said, double-clicking on Part 1.

"One thing.", I said, as the video started up. "I told Paul never to even search for Damien's stuff or to even touch it if he did find it."

"Probably a very good decision."

I didn't watch the tape this time. I watched Howard. And, carefully observing his reactions- his open mouth, his befuddled look, his slow head-shaking, I realized something predictable and comforting.

He didn't understand. On a very fundamental level, he simply didn't understand. To him it's just awful normal stupidity. How could any of us imagine Howard could ever possibly do something like this? He's having a hard time just watching it. I smelled a very faint trace of vomit, and Howard closed his mouth, immediately closed the video window and its accompanying search list, swallowed, and turned to me, and I knew I'd get a very solid command of some sort.

"Billy, I command you to explain, in a way that maximizes my understanding and minimizes my confusion, the reason why Damien has done this." There it is.

I would love to have been able to obey that immediately, but I didn't understand, either. Saying 'because he's a sadist' would explain nothing. That part is obvious. "Because.. because he wants to assert dominance, to feel powerful. Maybe he's got something to prove.", I lamely explained.

I hadn't been able to minimize his confusion at all. "Assert dominance? **Feel** powerful? **Prove**?! That must be the most screwed up normal psychology ever. He's an implanted servant, what the hell was there to prove?" The fact that he was an asshole? The fact that he loves causing misery? The fact that he was a fucking dickhead? Those, too, would explain nothing.

"His own ego. Howard, what I want to say is that it's because he was an asshole, or a dick. In normal land it would explain everything. Telling it to you... this is what he valued, what he cared about doing. It gave him pleasure to do it. If you want to know why **that's** the case," He did. "I don't know." I could- well, actually, since it wouldn't help and could possibly delude Howard I **couldn't**- make unsupported psychological guesses about Damien's family history.

"What a fucking waste.", Howard said, with finality. R. I. P. Fucking Waste. "You may stop trying to make sense of it. I can't make sense of it either. I'm going to simply say that his brain was misconfigured," My opinion exactly. "and otherwise pretend I never saw this. Now that you've shown me something that made me almost puke" Yup, I noticed that. "and given me my ugh of the month, make Sarah cook my usual plate of good food, if she hasn't already." I got up and walked out the door. "And yours, while she's at it." Howard didn't notice my slight smile as I walked out the door to relay the command to Sarah, who left her monitor full of scientific information to cook us breakfast.

It was ready about ten minutes later, and I hungrily went down and sat at the table. Mmm... meat and donuts go well together when done right.

Chewing and swallowing my first bite, I felt a pain in my molars, like they were pushing against parts of the gum they shouldn't be, and looking at Howard I could tell that he did too. Sarah turned from her cooking and looked at us sharply and then down at the food, thinking it was something she'd done or was in the meal; Howard held up his hand to Sarah, signifying that it was all right. We were just going to lose some teeth. For about two minutes, we sat there, wiggling and prying. Get... out! There's the top right one gone, yank, then the top left one... then bottom left, bottom right. It hurt yanking them out, but it would have been more annoying to wait. I held out four teeth in my left hand, Howard held out four teeth in his right, and we put them in a pile, chuckling. I licked the holes where they used to be and felt an unfamiliar point deep in the gum instead of the usual flat surface of my baby tooth molars. Sarah just nodded, as if she should have known.

Paul tentatively reached out and took the teeth in his hand, shaking them, and offered a suggestion as to what to do with them. "Shotgun.", he said, simply, and we laughed- that would be a great thing to kill someone with, wouldn't it?- and went back to eating, which was a bit different without our first molars.

"Paul," I asked, "did Damien in any way teach you how to use that gun you carried?", Howard asked as we almost finished our breakfast.

"No, not really.", Paul replied.

"Sarah, order whatever is needed to train him in how to pose a serious threat to a non-Enforcer combatant in an automatic pistol duel." I knew immediately why Howard was doing it. He wants his servants as powerful as he can get us. Extensions of the self, right? "When it gets here, you're going to use it to do just that. Paul, the reason you're being trained is because I want you to actually know enough and have enough skill to fight against Illuminati agents with normal genetics, if necessary."

"Yes.. yes, Howard. But.. considering what you are and who else you have.. why would you bother?", Paul asked. If he wasn't a servant, I'm sure he wouldn't be reluctant- c'mon Paul, you're going to get to **play with guns**. It's not going to be that difficult or tiring. I know you'll never fight at my side with your normal DNA, but you can learn to protect yourself.

"Because I want you at your peak.", Howard replied. "And it just might mean something someday."

Sarah called it down, Paul went downstairs to play some light-gun games as practice, and Howard killed the time with me as usual as the stuff was flown in and Sarah set it up. When it was ready, I climbed a tree to watch from a nice overhead angle- Howard just stayed inside, watching him through the big window at the living room.

It's like a fine art- the fine art of killing shit, taught by the Princess of Death herself. Hmm. I don't know how the hell she can do what Howard told her, frankly. The agents have years of training and experience with their weapons, and all Paul would have is his gun and a few lessons. Then again, Paul's always been a quick study, his youth means he learns faster, and his teacher is the princess of assassination- and since this is Illuminated teaching, she's not going to bother with too much happy crap, it's just going to be a lesson in **shooting**. "All right, Paul, I'm not going to bother with any introductory shit, I'm **tired** and you know how things work. This is your weapon. .357 caliber, thirteen bullets a clip, fully or semi-automatic, depending on which way this switch is flipped.", Sarah said, moving the small lever back and forth. "Fore sight, rear sight, and you know what not to point it at. And there's no safeties on our guns."

"Yeah, what would be the point?", he said, in his young voice.

That's another thing that just seems fundamentally wrong about this, not the training, just the fact of him being here. Howard and I are, of course, more advanced than normals- we could easily be

mistaken for high school freshmen now. And although Sarah's voice will probably never crack, she looks a few years older than she really is. Paul, on the other hand, looks and thinks like an unusually intelligent, but otherwise normal 11-year-old boy. There's a new psychological twist for ya- what happens when someone is constantly exposed to role models they can never live up to, especially in this environment? He's trying to make up some ground by exposing himself to Illuminated learning- he knows he's limited, he just doesn't know his limitations, and he's always been an optimist. He has only partially reached puberty, he has no hair on his body, he's fighting off the remains of lingering childhood fears (redoubled by that asshole Damien), and he's much weaker than anyone else within miles.

Then again, since the weapon of choice is a handgun of the highest manufacture, none of that is going to affect anything very much. How old were those Jonesboro kids taking the head shots? 11, 13? Or was one 10 at the time? Sarah was obviously thinking along the same lines as I was- the next thing I heard from her was, "One more fact about guns- muzzle velocity is not affected by age, experience, temperament, cognitive abilities, or even aim."

"Yeah, exactly, not even aim, which is why you've got all that ammo sitting there. I suppose you're going to start me on **that**?", he said, pointing to a three meter wide, three meter tall bullseye-style target 50 meters away, with blue, yellow, and red circles.

"Yes, I am. You have to trace a line, Paul. Rear sight, fore sight, target. Aim for the center. Don't think about anything other than the center of the target, look at it, picture a bullet in it. Line the sights up and get it good, and don't let fear or frustration get you or we'll be here all night." She looked at his stance- a brace-for-recoil stance, the left arm supporting the right arm as seen in some Westerns- and then at his hands. "Oh, shit. I forgot your muscles shake. Don't hold the gun tightly, it doesn't do anything for us but it's really fucking you up. Look at the target, and think about the line." He relaxed a bit, concentrated, relaxed more, aimed, looked at the target with his surgery-modified eyes- and then fired one time.

Directly into the center of the target.

Holy SHIT! Damn, I was expecting him to miss a few times, be counseled on his stance, and then get closer and closer to the center as he steadily learned the actions of guns. His very first shot (okay, second, but point-blank doesn't count) of his entire fucking life, a bullseye from fifty meters out. He raised the gun in a Soldier of Fortune stance and started laughing.

"Oh shit, this is going to be easier than I thought.", Sarah said, sounding surprised- a rarity for her.

"Would you like another?", Paul said, grinning and laughing.

"Sure, gimme another one."

He gave her a second demonstration of his obvious talent. There's still only one hole in the target- did he miss entirely? No, wait, there's two, one partially touching the other, the second one slightly down and left of the first one. Cops can't shoot like this, and Paul's putting holes into red material like a starving me eating a young piglet? "**How the FUCK?!**", I exploded from my perch.

"Shut up Billy, you'll jinx it!", he called back. Sarah just giggled. "So I'm good at this!" He fired three more times, two in the red and the last in the yellow.

"Heh. Not bad. All right, Paul, next shots are moving."

"Ugh, moving targets..."

"No, not moving targets. You moving. It's still stationary, but you should be able to run back and forth as you hit it. Use whatever move comes naturally and remember the line." He jogged forwards

and backwards, keeping his left hand (Why his left? He's right handed. He'll probably swap a few times anyway, though.) out in front of him, firing once- completely missing the target- and then stopping for brief instants the second two times he fired, smacking the blue and then the yellow.

"Paul, as you run, you jiggle a bit. That's okay- as long as you know how you're jiggling. If you have to move the line around, remember where it's going. It is a small target."

"Damn it! All right, the line, the line." He swapped hands and ran back and forth some more, trying to keep a bead on the thing as he ran, straining to keep the weapon steady and keep his line of sight between the sights. He hit yellow and then a lucky one (I could tell) touching both yellow and red. Damn, he really is good. Is it just talent or a sort of determination? Sarah pressed a button on her body and a robot arm took a layer off the top of the target, revealing a brand new one beneath. A variant of Kevlar, I figured.

The training continued in this vein for thirty more minutes of straight shooting- he stopped running when the target started moving and he didn't have too many problems with that, then both of them were moving at the same time and he started missing again. I wonder why normals would never do it this way, but I figured I understood- they don't have an Illuminated effectively infinite budget, and this is costing a lot more ammo than they'd dare spend.

"The line still applies, Paul.", she said after he missed the circles entirely six times, hit blue fourteen, and hit yellow twice. All of those shots would have missed a dodging, weaving human.

"Yeah, I know. It's just that.." He started running back and forth again as the target's motorized system guided it around randomly. "I'm **sick**," BLAM "**sick**," BLAM "**sick**" BLAM "of being considered some monkey of a lesser being compared to the assholes around here!" I heard something in his voice and saw something in his movements I never expected from Paul. We all turned to look at his shots.

They were in a tight, triangular pattern near the center of the target.

Sarah grinned and laughed. I started cheering.

"How tired are you?", she asked.

"Very.", he replied with a sigh.

"All right, Paul- you've got most of the offensive part down pat. I don't-"

"Hold up- **offensive** part?!", Paul interrupted with some surprise. "Sarah, I can't dodge bullets like **any** of you can."

"You don't have to **dodge**, just make yourself harder to hit. I don't think you'll be able to do some of the trick shots around here most of these people train in, but that's for special situations only."

Sarah paused a minute to reflect on it- from looking at the side of her face, I could read her thoughts- 'what the fuck is Howard thinking?' I know what he's thinking. He wanted Paul to be at his peak, and that peak turned out to be higher than I expected. Paul has demonstrated that something extra, the thing we thought was reserved to engineered only, the talent and willpower to overcome insane odds, merging the conscious and subconscious in the same way we do, to create a fighting machine. And that's what Howard wants Paul to have in him, and considering how much violence we end up in, it's the logical decision.

Of course, the uber-joke is that Paul's already lost to the insane odds, but never mind that for now.

"Fatigue's going to affect you too much. We can finish this tomorrow." Paul had fired about three hundred and fifty shots total, in a bit more than thirty minutes, and done a good deal of running back

and forth. He really is good. There's not much to it- it's just a matter of aiming the barrel towards the target, and having enough self-control (another uber-joke for ya..) to not screw up and aim the barrel slightly in the wrong direction. Illuminated weapons operation is user-friendly- shoot, shoot, reload, that's it.

After we got in, I asked Sarah about it, and she told me that, even for the types of long rifle that normally would require several steps to load, the machinery inside these things does it automatically. Even the pump-action is automatically done with the battery-operated internals.

He fell asleep quickly that night, and my nightmare was incoherent but having to do with him and guns.

Sarah woke us up early the next morning, and it continued. Tired as I was, I watched from my perch- watched Paul learn that you can move your body around without severely screwing up your aim, assuming you have some idea what you're doing. For us, it's just natural. For him, it's a tedious learning process, and the repeated combination of defensive and offensive maneuvering quickly wore him out after twenty minutes or so, a crash course. I further realized how quickly people can be taught certain manual skills if you cut away the bullshit.

"Paul.. all right, you're not the best, but you'll do.. okay, time for a better challenge."

"What?" Sarah took four leaps backwards, for a total of about thirty feet.

And then Sarah asked Paul to do a thing I didn't expect.

"Shoot me."

"WHAT?! Sarah, you know the-"

"Paul, I have a better chance of getting hit by lightning than being shot by you with that thing. You should know that by now."

"All right.. it's part of the training.." Paul got into the stance he had been in with his first shot, but more relaxed, and much more confident.

"Aim for the head." Three bullets whizzed through the place where Sarah's head had been. "You're not following my dodging, Paul." Three more bullets came, each in different areas, Sarah's head easily moving out of the way of each one. "Good.. damn good.. although you were a little off on that last one. Center of the chest." One bullet would have pierced the area between Sarah's breasts, had she not twisted out of the way. The next bullet she lunged forward from, the next was going for her head and she leaned back, the next was low and she jerked forward, and the last went wild. "Keep on trying, Paul!" He did, for almost ten whole minutes, throwing bullet after bullet into empty air and continuing to reload; I looked and made sure, nope, there's nothing down there for him to accidentally hit. "Okay, stop.", she said, and then turned to the window. "Howard- he's good."- from this position, I couldn't see him at all.

"Good enough?", he replied in his usual tone.

"I wouldn't make him an agent just yet.. but I wouldn't pit any normals I wanted to keep against him, either. He'd have to take a regimen of courses to get appreciably better, and even that might not really help."

"All right. Paul, try to shoot me with the next bullet in that gun.", Howard said, obviously watching his words.

Paul fired, I heard a loud TING, and saw Paul dodge away a bit, holding the right side of his head. Is

he- nope, he's not bleeding, and Howard and Sarah are laughing heartily.

"You now know about ricochets.", Howard said, and I could hear the grin in his voice. "You also now know that this glass laughs at those bullets." It's probably not even marked. Fuck 'bulletproof' glass (which basically absorbs bullets like a kevlar vest and will shatter from repeated attacks)... his is probably manufactured down to the molecule. A hard blade-punch would probably go through it, but nothing with less force behind it. "Any more training that you might want is up to you, that command's over." Paul didn't want to do any more training, and I climbed down the tree and followed him and Sarah inside. Yup, it's not marked.

Sarah then made breakfast, which of course was delicious; then Howard and I used up the rest of the Kevlar targets Sarah had brought, testing out various items in his complete arsenal. The day went by as usual after that.

Chapter 30

Is something going to happen today, or is nothing going to happen today? It was early, but we'd already had breakfast, so it looked like nothing. When Howard wants me with him, he commands it- so I just decided to play with Paul for a bit, before getting bored and deciding to go out. "Yup. Looks like this guy's doing something very, very bad over there.", I heard Howard say to Sarah as I opened the door to my room.

"You gonna raid him?" Looks like something might happen today after all.

"No. I can't afford that in secrecy damages. I'm tempted to just blow the whistle the usual way and have him executed or something, but with this... who the hell knows what could happen. And I don't plan on telling any more people than I have to."

"What's going on?", I asked, walking downstairs.

"Billy- read this." On the screen was the requisition information for a fourth level Illuminatus by the name of James Baker for some kind of youth camp. Ten Enforcers, some restraints and other stuff, and five extra sets of implants. What would he need those for?

"So he's hoarding them, or..?"

"He runs a youth camp.", Howard replied. Gah! Holy shit! I thought these guys were supposed to respect secrecy better than that! Is this guy really going to implant normal children?

"Howard, you really don't think he's using them on those kids do ya?" The irony, of course, is that we're not quite adults either. But that sentence sounded good anyway.

"Looks like it."

My wit came instantly. "Well, I remember you distinctly saying you planned to implant everyone."

"Yeah. **Not like this!** Five deaths with cloned or questionable bodies? Oh, we can keep investigators out, cover it all up, but you know as well as I do, **bad shit happens!** One false move and he could as one of his last actions blow the secrecy on them and there could be a panic. It'd take us years to clean that shit up. We need to find out what he's doing, exactly.", Howard said, agitated. Not that he doesn't have reason to be.

"A young Enforcer?", suggested Sarah.

"No, no, if the guy came around he could tell. But.. oooh. Hey.", Howard said, closing the window displaying Baker's requisition information. As he pulled up the place's demographic information, I

realized what kind of youth camp this really was- the requisition for the restraints should have told me but it took some other assorted tidbits on the screen to clue me in. I don't know much about those places- I'll have to look it all up- the only things I'm sure of are that the kids are sent there 24 hours a day and that it ain't summer camp. And with an Illuminatus running the place, God only knows what goes on in there. Mind Control R Us, most likely.

"Oh, Paaaaaul!", Howard called through the intercom. What the **FUCK** are you **DOING**, Howard?! You can't **POSSIBLY** be.. I noticed Sarah shrugging and remembered what she said. Spy shit. Murphy's fucking Law...

"What?, Paul answered, as he continued his game of Starcraft.

"You are to put on normal clothing and eat a good meal 71 and a half hours from now. You are to be ready for further instructions 72 hours from now." I'll have to find out why Howard decided to wait that long. Probably needs to set things up where he's going.

"What for?"

"You, my dear Paul, are going spying."

"Oh fucker, can't you make Sarah do it?" We all chuckled, me in spite of myself. Males only for this place.

"Not in this place."

"This wouldn't happen to be one of those boys' ranch places would it?", he said, a note of intense fear in his voice. How the hell did he figure it out?

"How the **fuck** did you know?!", Howard shouted.

"Educated guess. By the way, those places **suck**."

"Yup. Which is why **you're** going. You don't have to be worried, though, as soon as you find out what he's doing, you'll be back to your regular hell in no time!", Howard said. He's going to be put through enough hell as it is.. which is why Howard's toying with him.

"Yes, I guess it does need some variety.", Paul replied in a low voice. Howard clicked the screen off.

"Howard, can't you send someone else?!" He controls the fucking Illuminati and he can't contact **one** person to summon someone else?!

"Hardly. I don't want to discuss this one with anyone until I'm sure. Any contact could trigger something that I don't want, namely all hell breaking loose." The one temper on his power is his paranoia. When secrecy breaks, 'all hell breaking loose' won't cut it. "Relax. He's in any trouble and I'll get medieval on this guy's ass."

"You can't teleport, Howie.. what if he's dead before you show up?", I asked him.

"Not likely. The worst thing that could happen to him is that he gets found out, and then we'll have a brief hostage situation." Brief until someone just fucking snipes the asshole, probably through a wall. Paul came down just then. "He's not dumb enough to kill him, especially if he finds out who he is."

"Are you betting my life on someone not being stupid enough to kill me?", Paul asked.

"Yes, I am.", Howard answered casually.

"So much for that twelfth birthday party I wanted.", he replied. Sarah found that funny and I pondered how Paul might die if he did. They probably wouldn't kill him there, they'd.. oh, wait.

"Wait a minute.", I said. "What if they take him somewhere else?"

"It works like this, Billy.", Sarah said, in operative's-tutorial mode. "We contact Paul on a regular basis. If we can't get through, we use Illuminated methods of data acquisition or we send operatives. We continue until we feel the need to end the mission."

"What I mean, is exactly what are we going to do if he gets sent somewhere else, we want to end the mission, and we have to go and retrieve him? What if this guy takes him somewhere normal and we'd have to sift through normals to find him?!"

"Billy, I've had to find and kill a disguised Illuminatus three times in the middle of normal areas before. Finding and retrieving is actually more difficult, but it won't be that hard."

"Speaking of which, is that what you're going to do, disguise Paul?" Howard and Sarah nodded. "But how do you plan to keep track of him, though?", I asked I was expecting her to say something like 'DNA sniffer' or 'By scent, how else?'.

"Hmm... subdermal implants?", Howard suggested.

"Subdermal?", said Paul in a panicky voice.

"Under the skin, Paul.", Sarah said. Paul gasped and shuddered, not eager for more maiming. C'mon Paul, it's not like you don't already have them attached to your **brain**. "But it doesn't matter. All that stuff's done at Northberg..."

"Yeah.. hmm, I'm pretty sure they do a full body cavity search...", Howard thought aloud.

"Full body cavity search? You mean they're going to..", Paul began, and I noticed him instinctively clenching his ass cheeks.

"Yes, Paul. They are. But since this guy's Illuminated he's not going to do anything esoteric or permanently hurtful. He can't, it would attract attention.", Howard said, not reassuring Paul in the least.

"Well, good.. guys, I really don't wanna listen to this.. Howard, just make your **damn** decision and then tell me what's going on.", he said, running back up to my room, not wanting to think about this. Howard chose to remain silent.

"You're not going to..", I began, wondering why Howard just didn't keep Paul here and feed it to him full-on.

"No. I'm not.", he said, shaking his head. "I don't need to and he doesn't need it." 'Exactly! He doesn't need it! Now go find someone else!', I almost said, but Howard's too paranoid- and rightly so- to involve anyone other than his servants and agents in this.

"That guy doesn't want to attract any more attention than he has to, especially if he's running what I think he's running.", Howard said, shaking his head a bit. The guy has to know he's operating on a razor's edge.

"What if he tries it on Paul?", I asked. Howard obviously didn't think of that.

"Then he'll **really** be surprised, won't he?", Howard replied. I could imagine it. First the initial oh-shit response, and then panic, and then screaming, and then either a futile hope of running for safety

(which would be found where, exactly?) or an equally futile pleading for mercy. "I hope that doesn't happen. He might freak out and kill him, or try some other shit."

"Some other shit, maybe. I don't think he'll kill him.", Sarah said.

"Yeah, he'll check to see who he is, and when he finds out, he's just going to head for the fucking hills. Of course, I'm going to have guys making sure James doesn't go very far.", Howard replied evenly.

"Let's hope this works and that Paul doesn't go any crazier than he already is.", I said. I'm having enough insanity of my own, thank you.

"He won't. That's why I can do this with complete confidence, because I know he has the resilience for this.", Howard replied, smiling. It's a good thing **you're** confident, because Paul sure as hell isn't.

"I've got it.", Sarah said. "We don't need Northberg for this. I can put a good transmitter in the back of his neck, covered by hair, stitch it up no problem. He can have a list of code phrases, we can make sure he calls regularly, and we get a good idea of what's going on as well as a signal if we decide to raid the place. Oh, I'm such a fool... I don't need to."

"Why not?", I asked.

"How could I forget? The implants already transmit, Billy." Howard realized something and moved his head back sharply. Oh, yes. He intended to have that disabled a while ago and we all forgot. "They transmit a unique, coded signal every three seconds. It takes very little of the brain's energy because the signal is very weak. The transmission can be turned off, but his are almost certainly still going."

"Yes, we can pick it up.", Howard said, irritated at his own mistake. "Both of you get dressed, get down to Northberg, and get your implant transmitters turned off. Now. And don't go hinting at what I'm going to do with Paul or try to ask for other solutions to this." Damn you. Put some salt and some ketchup on your secrecy and eat it.

I explained the situation to Paul as I put on the usual black clothing. He seemed mildly pacified that there were at least minimal thoughts for his safety, but from the look in his eyes I could see him imagining a return to torture. But this, like his previous torment, is likely to end in the tormentor's bloody, violent, horrifying demise.

We flew to Northberg (I actually flew the plane most of the way, which was interesting if nothing else), had our heads cut open under anaesthesia, implant transmitters turned off (which Sarah actually bothered to confirm), and flew home. I was wondering if I'd feel less energy use from my brain, as I know that takes a small amount of energy to do, but I felt nothing. It was a completely uneventful trip, and we regenerated the cuts long before we landed. It's a shame the implants don't regenerate out.

"So how long is he going to be there, anyway?", I asked Howard when we came back.

"Heh, Paul already asked.", he replied. "I'm thinking.. three weeks tops if he can't find anything. On the other hand, this might be a **very** short stay." Depending on how well Baker hides himself, that is.

I was hoping for a short trip, but the two days before Paul left felt like a funeral wake, as if he was going away forever. It's like that. When you lose someone you don't want to lose for a while, you never want him to go away again. Especially since he was tortured the last time he went away, and especially in a situation like this, where we don't own our own bodies and Paul's life is in potentially mortal danger. I resolved to at least pretend like I didn't care, so as not to worsen Paul's mood.

When the time to go came close, Sarah gave Paul a lot of instructions, which Howard told him to follow. Search, but don't get too nosy. Find, but don't **be** found. Sarah went over about twenty code phrases with Paul and how to use them; he's smart, he memorized them quickly. "All right, disguise time.", she eventually said. She then carefully applied the disguise to his face, the big peelings of carefully-made fake skin sticking to him like glue. The effect worked; he looked like another boy entirely and I was half-tempted to welcome him to Howard's house as a newcomer. "Now, look, these things are meant to be worn a long time, so don't worry about that. Oil will go through them to the surface, just like natural skin, and you'll be able to wash your face okay. But they **can** peel off." Other than that, there was little more to do.

With a quick "Goodbye, Paul." from Howard and me (damn, I **hate** those words coming out of my mouth), he was gone.

I was nervous for almost all of the next four days, and I made no secret of it, although we got into contact with Paul every day and he was okay, and reporting nothing suspicious. It's always best to be paranoid here, anyway- this is, after all, the Illuminati. Damn. I kind of wish he **did** find something suspicious, just so we could raid that goatfelcher Baker and end this. On the bright side, Howard showed me and Sarah the results of two of his dogs breeding. Fido and Magma had done it (fortunately she survived the experience of giving birth to half-engineered puppies with wildly varying energy needs, and fortunately all the puppies lived as well), and the six pups, their fur a mixture of white and red, suckled eagerly on a machine apparently built for the purpose. He's going to give them away at some point, but I'm sure there's plenty of kids who would love to have them.

"So, Paul, how's it all coming along, okay in there?", Sarah had the agent ask on day four. I know it's best to use the same first name, it keeps him from mis-reacting- but it still sounds weird on a spy mission.

"Yeah.. yeah I think life here is pretty good, they still feed me, everything's A-OK." The code phrase for 'I'm really starting to get suspicious but I don't have any hard evidence.' "So, yeah..." He was suddenly cut off.

"Sorry, Mrs. Abrams. That's all the time we're allowed to give, other people need to use the phone.", a male voice said, in the familiar tone of an Enforcer. "Rest assured that your son is perfectly healthy and is receiving the best care we can give. Have a nice day." *click* Something's.. very wrong.

"Do you smell it, Howie?", I said to his laying figure, in a semi-aggressive voice. I'm sure he smells it. He has to smell it. He's the Dominator, for fuck's sake.

"Yeah...", he said in a low voice. Then his nose began twitching, as if he really did smell it in the air. "Yeah.. **yeah I smell it, I can't help from smelling it, same as you!! Billy!! Sarah!! Get ready then let's get over there and let's ROCK!!**", he screamed, his echo pounding the walls.

"Us, Howie?!", I asked as his command took me up the stairs to ready myself for battle. If I didn't know Howard, I'd think he'd use local agents for this, alerting the other Illuminati at the last possible moment. That would be faster, and with less personal risk. But no.. he enjoys the battle too much, and he doesn't want Enforcer vs. Enforcer combat anyway. If they're evenly matched, it can end up to be lengthy in a secrecy-damaging way.

"Yeah.. **us.**" I went up the stairs and readied myself in the smooth motions gained from repetition. Boy, is that Illuminated fucker going to get a surprise when he sees Paul's implants. I can already see the look on his face...

I heard Sarah say, "I'm ready. I suppose we're raiding that asshole the quick way?", through the half-open door.

"Oh yeah.", I heard Howard say, in a sneering tone, angry at the thought of one of his servants being harmed by someone who dared to take more than his share of servants, and in this way to boot. I was ready and came back down the stairs. He flung open the window- not the door, but the patio-style window- and marched outside to the jet, his cape's movements the reverse of his legs. Sarah punched the button to turn it over. "I'm flying this thing this time.", he said in that sneering voice again.

"Sarah, is he fucking up?", I asked as Howard quickly performed the routine pre-takeoff checks.

"No, he's not, not technically. But he's being hasty."

"So are you going to tell him he's being hasty?", I asked her. Howard could overhear us, of course, but I didn't really care and neither did he.

"He already knows **that**.. and that's **not** going to stop him." What ever does? What possibly can? "I just wish I could go berserk with as much precision as he does." She's talking about the slaughterhouse end of it, what always happens to people who fuck with him. I suppose she's not really worried about the logistical stuff.

Of course she isn't, because that's her department, and Howard knew it. After blasting the jet at an extremely high altitude, he immediately started talking to her about what to bring. They arranged a fairly simple plan- get in, kill Baker, retrieve Paul, replace one of Baker's assistants with an Enforcer to lie about what happened, get out. I realized that Paul's disappearance didn't have to be arranged; Baker certainly already had arranged that end of it and Paul's fake parents know to keep things secret. They also brought a headless corpse in a plastic bag, to pretend to be the gunman, just in case anyone stepped in just after the slaughter and wondered who the killer was. Sarah figured out the rest of it mostly without Howard; she simply made it so that Illuminated agents would be doing the investigation under the guise of the FBI. It amazed me how efficiently she arranged the extraction and cleanup, figuring out all the little things, deciding what to do if anyone learned too much. It took a mere half hour for them to create a disguised fake assistant with everything he'd need to know to guard secrecy.

It took only 40 minutes to get there as Howard was burning the fuel with abandon. The stealth gear and other necessities were taken, and we piled in a car which took us to the surrounded-by-Enforcers building in a half hour. Everything was done surely, but unbelievably fast. The Illuminati moves at Internet speed.

Our replacement for Baker's assistant had tracked the signal to somewhere on the top floor; Sarah, with the aid of the Enforcers, decided what side of the building to climb and when. At the right moment, we simply flipped over the barbed-wire fence and grappled our way up the five-story building. Damn. Doesn't this shit usually happen in the basement? The Enforcers watched the normal guards and we had time to spare- since we're all engineered we simply pulled on the BioSteel rope, pushed with our feet, and scuttled up the wall.

Okay, now we're up- now what do we do? The Enforcer triangulated the signal to Paul's general location but we're in the middle of the ceiling! We'd have to take the stairs down and risk being seen. Damn it. Sarah didn't bother trying to plan this part because she didn't know where he was and there were no available blueprints. She stood in silence, and I knew her mind was roiling. Howard idly swatted a mosquito. Fucking hell! We've got all the shit in the world, my friend is less than ten feet away, I've got the fucking overlord of the entire fucking Illuminati here with me determined to get him out, and we can't get in simply because of some bitch-ass secrecy dogshit? He's got the most powerful gun on Earth, and we're just standing here in the middle of fucking nowhere, and he's fooling with his clothes a bit because of the stifling heat and humidity, which is almost as bad as the sheer embarrassment he must be feeling because he can't fucking..

Wait a minute.

"Heat lightning.", I said, grinning just a bit. Howard immediately got the idea, fooled with his Micro a bit, and held the weapon high into the air, firing diagonally downwards. The air exploded with a tremendous crack of thunder, and the concrete melted, burning. Howard pulled out the normal weapons; we followed suit. I felt the heat surround me as I jumped into the large hole, the warmth quickly dissipated into rage as Sarah exterminated the terrified Baker and I emptied the unused heads of two of the normals in the room. Howard killed two of his own. The shell casings went plink-plink. Oh, yes, these are truly normal weapons, they leave brass.

The four others in the room were Enforcers, trying to aim at us, a hopeless task. Howard and I each took half of them, as they fruitlessly tried to dodge our inerrant, quick aim. Our Enforcer wasn't able to kill any of them, and Sarah only killed Baker today.

I looked at Paul. He was obviously drugged, only slightly conscious, the two giant, gaping holes in his skull revealing the implants. His skull pieces were right next to the chair. As Sarah took the plastic bag from the Enforcer, I reattached the two skull pieces (which were attached to special tape which obviously intentionally made that task easy), Howard and I carried him out the hole in the ceiling- then Sarah reattached the grappling hook and we rappelled quickly back down, a button press and the hook was off the wall, Sarah threw Paul over the fence into my arms, and we were out of there even faster than we got in. That was easy. Sarah called in the fake agents to "investigate", Howard called in a medical team to take care of Paul- they made sure everything was going to heal okay (with the aid of some regenerative gel) before injecting him with something to clear the drug from his system. In ten minutes we were back in the car, and a half an hour later we were in the jet again. Howard called up a first-level Illuminatus literally at random and told him to deal with it and to take as many of Baker's resources as he wanted, Howard obviously being through with this entire deal, and the Illuminatus gladly took the responsibility to inherit the resources.

Sarah was in the pilot's seat, and Paul had Howard to his left and me to his right. "Howard?", Paul asked in a fairly sure voice, turning his head to his left and nothing else. He obviously had waited until the drug was gone from his system before talking to him.

"Yes?"

"Don't you **ever** do anything like that to me, ever again." I could tell that he was holding back his anger.

"Which was it, the place or the implantation?", Howard answered casually.

"The place."

"You've seen worse.", Howard reminded him, shrugging, and Paul's anger flared up and he tried to backhand Howard as hard as he could. Wait- how can he.. oh, yes. Paul feels free to do it because he knows there's no way in hell he can actually hurt Howard, who caught his wrist and held.

"**DAMN YOU HOWARD!**", he screamed as loud as possible, and I could tell he was blushing deeply, even crying. "You're the fucking **DOMINATOR!!** You didn't need me to do that! You could have done anything else and yet you did **that!** I know you don't give a rat's ass about other people's suffering, but I thought you were my **friend!**" Don't go there, Paul. "You saved me from whatever was going to happen to me when I killed Damien, and then you put me there. First it was extremely bad, next up to bad, then down to very bad and now back up to bad again. Make up your mind. I just had to keep telling myself that I was on a mission." Which he was, of course, but that didn't seem to help him much.

In response, Howard only smiled at him, apparently making a special effort to earn Asshole Points.

Paul just shook his head, sighing, and we flew at a pace substantially slower than the power-blasting that took us to that raid, going first to Northberg to turn off Paul's implant transmitters before we went home.

Even in the privacy of my soundproof room, Paul didn't want to talk about what all had gone on at that place, and I didn't push it for the same reason I never asked him details about Damien. And even though I'd helped rescue my best friend once again, the night's scream-dream was simply death.

I was awakened by screaming for a second time that night and instinctively closed my mouth- the screaming did not stop when I did. I looked left to see Paul sitting bolt upright, yelling "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!! No, don't!" and whimpering.

"Paul- I thought I was supposed to be the one with the nightmares. I thought you didn't get them.", I said, examining him. I don't think I've ever actually seen someone break out in a cold sweat before- his face was slightly shiny, and he was breathing like a rabbit.

He looked at me for a split second and seemed not to recognize me at all. Then his consciousness gradually broke through, he blinked, shook his head, and muttered, "Aw man, what a dream. Billy- I dreamt Howard sent me back to Damien." He was whimpering slightly as he talked, like a frightened puppy. Which reminded me, I'd want to show him the recently-born dogs.

"Pfft- there's only one way he could do that." Blam. Or crunch, as the case may be. Which poses an interesting theological question for all the Jehovahites out there- are we enslaved to our most hated foes in some circle of Hell?

"Yeah.. yeah, I know. But.. but that was just so fucking scary." Paul then looked down to make sure that he was still in one piece and that Northberg's healing had not been mysteriously undone during the night. "All right, it's still you, and it's still.. him. May the both of you never die."

"Wish. Careful. Be you what for.", I said. A retrovirus could make him immortal to go right along with us.

"That is careful. What are the alternatives?"

"You already know, Paul. If he dies, you get sacrificed. To who or what is anyone's guess. You're probably going to get used for information before then, but that'll take about five minutes..."

"And you, then..?"

"Me? I'm too precious. No, they've probably got something worse in store for me. And her.. well... she's female, and she assassinates. A brief show of power by some horny and power-hungry man- or serious lesbo- and.."

"Ugh. There's nothing like playing a game you can't win with really high stakes." Paul's novel view of the matter woke me up some more.

"Yup. That's about it. So let's keep playing."

"Yeah. Is he up?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Actually.. I think I probably was. All right. I **am** Colonel Shephard." Paul then proceeded to create a new Difficult game of Opposing Force and I proceeded to join him, the second player having been easily hacked in by some grinning Illuminatus, and we only paused the game once to eat breakfast.

Paul's at his most winsome when he tries to keep up with me.

After we were done, out of morbid curiosity, I decided to read some western Nevada news. A great tragedy. An as-of-yet unidentified man (read: they didn't make up his identity yet) decided to use some firebombs, guns, and grenades inside a boys' ranch, maiming and killing staff members, including the man in charge of the ranch, James Baker, father of two. (Now I know who he's getting the kids for.. is this friends-factory deal becoming a bit of a trend? Also, he was one of the minority of Illuminati with public presences.) One of the perpetrator's makeshift ('makeshift', so no one who recognized the sound of a grenade would talk about the difference.. **NICE** verbiage, guys.) grenades had even taken out a large portion of the ceiling- 'like a crack of thunder', as some witnesses put it. Additionally, the ranch has had several reports of suicide within the last few months. It is now closed, pending further investigation. When no one will care and the organization's lower technical staff can make up anything they want, of course. And I am certain that although it was seen as newsworthy by the locals, national organizations will never carry the story, because it's 'too graphic' or some other sorry-ass explanation. "A job well done.", I muttered out loud.

"I know. I love doing that on short notice.", my voice said from behind me.

"Howard, I'm still trying to figure out how you can have a temporary replacement in thirty minutes."

"Easy. Especially in crises, where everyone behaves the same."

"And as for the rest of that.."

"And as for the rest of that, there are a lot of Illuminati who specialize in nothing but secrecy, and Sarah's always been good at it. It's an art and a science."

"So that was my first lesson.."

"No, that was your second lesson. You were subjected to your first lesson." He's right. Being on the wrong end of one really does tell you something about Illuminated operations..

"Yeah, I think that was my second lesson too..", said Paul, who patted the regenerative strip of plastic on his head. "and I sure learned a lot from it."

"Like what?", Howard said with a slight grin.

"Oh, let's see.. how to engage in a direct assault from the ceiling, what that maniac was thinking- other maniacs probably think the same.. how to deal with lots of assholes instead of only one or a few.." I grinned and Howard chuckled to himself. "Oh, yeah, and to maybe think up better ways so **you** won't tell me to do that shit anymore!" Ordinarily, I would have laughed, only it wasn't funny. Howard smiled.

"Paul, there's other ways, but I didn't want to have to warn anyone that I was doing it until I did- you know that."

"Well, it worked, so I guess you're happy..", he said with a sigh. "Now let's just hope there's no more of that shit going around.." He absolutely did not want to be doing that ever again, and it showed in his eyes.

"Well, if there is, they know to tone it down quite a bit and not make it **that** easy for me to find out. You all right?"

Paul could have been scathing, but he chose to be jovial instead. "Completely and totally annoyed, amazingly pissed off, and probably going to go completely bonkers by the time I'm thirteen, but

otherwise, I'm okay." This time it was funny- Howard and I broke up laughing.

"Then it was a success.", Howard said with a grin. "All right, you two- you know that's not gonna happen again any time soon, so you can probably relax for at least a few weeks." 'Probably' and Murphy's Law don't mix. "So, Paul- what do you want to do, as of this moment?" Why the hell did he ask that?

"Other than the usual, which is get the hell out of this place and never come back, I want to hurt someone or something, anything, and I don't care what with. Watching you three murder that bastard and all his pals wasn't enough." Nor, apparently, was our game.

"So I suppose you'll be good at Quake right about now."

"Not good in your terms, just bloodthirsty."

"That'll do." We proceeded to frag the living fuck out of everything for hours, and time passed by as it always does here. I did show those puppies to him- for half-engineered critters that will grow up to be able to rip the throat out of people like Paul, they sure were cute.

Chapter 31

Paul didn't look right the next day. His face was a bit red, and his sleep's breathing seemed interrupted, uneven. I got up before he did, and went to the computer, occasionally looking at him to make sure he was okay. About twenty minutes after I woke up, he immediately got up and looked out the door. "Ugh...", he said, coughing loudly. "Howard.. I do not feel well today.. *cough*" Ah, yes, that's what was wrong with him- he was sick. Being engineered and effectively immune to disease, I've almost forgotten it happens.

"Why not? What's wrong? Some after-effect I didn't know about?", Howard asked from downstairs. He's seen even less sickness than I have.

"Nah... I think one of those assholes gave me the *cough* flu. Is there any aspirin or cough medicine in here?" I fucking doubt that. Why would we?

"No, never was. I completely forgot- you can get sick."

"And you can't... figures."

"Well, actually, yes- for maybe a half hour for what you've got, maybe less. Our white blood cells kill that shit too fast for us to care." And if there's anything we **can** get infected by, we haven't seen it yet.

"You mind lending me some?"

"Well, Paul, that would be the ideal solution.", Howard replied. "Only one problem. They destroy all foreign matter. You are considered foreign matter to any of our white blood cells."

"Great, I'll add being eaten from the inside out cell by *COUGH, cough* cell to my list of bad fates."

I had an idea, though. "Paul, if you want to get rid of it, go take a bath in water a hundred and seven degrees Fahrenheit for at least twenty minutes. Swim in it downstairs, it'll keep you awake. That should help bust it... cough medicine and aspirin don't really **cure** anything." He went to do that. I had actually commanded him.. but at least it'll fix what's wrong.

"Actually, Billy, there are things at Northberg that can help... but for most of them, the cure's worse than the disease." Huh?

"Okay, Howard- if the cure's worse than the disease, why would they make anything like that?"

"Experiments, and such... we've made a drug combination that can kill 99.999% of all bacteria, and a good amount of virii with it."

"And you haven't released it to the population." Do the Illuminati really need disease in the world as a control on the normals?

"It would be a great way to kill them. Do you understand what happens in normals when the local microorganisms die? If they were ever taken off the drug, they'd be pneumonia bait. Superinfection, I believe it's called."

"But you've got an entire medical lab... Howard, that is pretty pathetic, if you don't have things to get rid of the simple shit.", I replied, looking down at him from the railing.

"Yes, we do have **things**. But Billy, I have seen way too many of my brethren rely too much on **things**." He sounded like he wanted to rant. "They don't understand that every medical action they take upon themselves, there is a reaction, something else happens, some of them are even addicted a bit. They want.. they want to be like us, only they can't. For example, Paul could be given antibodies to the flu, and it'll be gone in less than a day. But then his system will never develop them itself, and the next time someone gives it to him, he'll get it again." I've heard of that before.

"Fever-reducing drugs will destroy the heat he needs to help, and anything to stop the runny nose will make the process of nasal germ removal slower. So many of them don't understand... they don't understand that they're not meant to live forever and that their bodies have ways of making them live a specified time. If you're going to use artifice, you have to make the **people** artificial. Remember that, Billy.. he'll kill it himself, he doesn't need anyone's help. If I believed that he did, I would have given him Prozac for his occasional depression." Prozac being a cheap substitute for freedom, of course. Just ask the school administrations of America, and if you display the right credentials (or a gun), they'll tell you the truth, if of course they consciously know it. There's also that one side effect..

"Which makes people psychotic, if I remember right. Howard... this is about a lot more than just Paul, isn't it. You're a little.. no, forget that, you're fucking **pissed off**. What the hell happened?", I asked.

"I don't think that was hard to figure out. It's this.", he replied, whacking the paper. "I think I caused this, Billy. I said I would complete the final objective and now everyone's trying to live long enough to see it even if they know they won't. A new super antioxidant that slows down the human body, 'blood-checkers', and some other shit. They're already doing all the stuff that won't hurt them, eating the right foods, doing the right exercises, making sure they don't die of heart attacks and whatnot, getting Northberg to modify what DNA they can afford to, all the natural stuff and the unnatural that won't hurt them, but now they're doing more. It'll all improve their quantity of life, but blow their quality to shit, some of that will slow down their thinking and some of it will require them to stick needles in themselves all day, or take pills that will fuck around with their emotions. What the hell is wrong with these people? These are **Illuminati** here! Even if a retrovirus for everyone comes tomorrow, the ones today should be able to accept death!" He might say that, but he won't die unless he's killed.

"Howard, you say that because you're immortal. They're not. They don't know what happens when they die. And it's coming up to them, slowly but surely, it's the Grim Reaper. That's where that comes from.. a guy in a cloak with infinite stamina coming along faster than they can run steadily, they can sprint faster, but they can't stay ahead.. but they're trying to outrun it anyway, because when it catches them, that's it, they're gone, off to a place no one knows. It's their **fear**, Howie. They're afraid... and you'd be afraid too."

"Yeah.. you're right, I'm just pissed. They're **all** going to be engineered someday anyway and the Reaper will catch up to the current ones. Not a really long-term problem, I know. I just hate reading about" BZZZZZERT "it.", he said, the buzzer interrupting his last word.

"Dominator! I absolutely.. need that you get this woman, Claire Sanders, out of my Malaysian operations!", screeched a fat, thirty-something, fourth level woman named Deborah Puff. I think that 'need' was almost a 'demand', and I'm sure Howard heard it as well.

Hey, look. Claire Sanders. Howard, grinning slightly, pressed a few keys and sent the screen into split-screen mode, making it a three-way call. Claire was thin, also fourth level, and older than Deborah. If they were normals, I mused, they'd be fighting over cheap trinkets at a yard sale. The moment they saw each other, they started yammering back and forth in what might as well have been monkey-speak.

"Both of you shut up.", Howard said, softly. They wanted badly to continue to scream and rant, but both shut up. Howard had his left fist clenched, the fist-blades adding more than enough threat. "One of my servants has become ill and I am not in a very good mood.", he said, in a careful, cultured voice. He's laying it on thick; if they think he's a low-patience spoiled kid with the power to kill them instantly (which isn't exactly false), they'll be less likely to piss him off. "If the two of you are incapable of having this conversation civilly, then I'm simply going to kill you both and have a single person settle the result. Now, Deborah, you called me first, explain what you do there and your grievance against Ms. Sanders as concisely and as accurately as possible."

"I'm in charge of a lot of Islamic control in the region. I was instructed by a third level, Mr. Arnold Hobbes, to use all available communication means and controllers to hold the loyalty of the largest Islamic paramilitary force in the area. I took control of RTM as part of that. A couple of weeks later, I had a few agents report that they were running into agents of another Illuminatus, and that's Claire Sanders." Claire wanted to interrupt Deborah- it was on her face- but she didn't dare.

Howard didn't ask any details, instead saying, "Claire, explain what you do there and your grievance against Ms. Puff as concisely and as accurately as possible."

"I've had the responsibility of trying to keep Asia pretty much unified for years. One of the ways I've been doing this is by keeping the broadcasts and various cultural stuff aligned as much as possible. I've had eminent control for a long time, I just went to taking RTM, which is when I suddenly found my people running into her agents." Deborah wanted to interrupt that, but didn't dare either. Howard's a peacemaker that way.

"Oh, I see what's going on.", Howard said calmly. "You're stepping on each other's toes. And both of you are so thoroughly, utterly convinced that you are right that right now there's very little chance of a resolution. Now, Deborah, did you even bother to research any possible eminent control over those kinds of operations in that region? Did you notice that there was a Pan-Asian control system put into place?"

"No.. no, I didn't.", she replied, sheepishly if not sheeple-like.

"Claire, did you perform any checks or research to determine if there was another Illuminatus who had taken control of that particular broadcast outlet?"

"I didn't think that-", she started loudly. Howard simply stared at her, transfixing her with his white gaze. It's not a mystical power, but it might as well be. "No, Howard."

"Listen to me carefully.", Howard said, seemingly unperturbed. "Your goals are not in direct opposition." The two women shook their heads to say no, no they weren't. "The two of you are to share this resource with each other's interests in mind, as both of you have a legitimate claim to it. You will cooperate in good faith. And if I hear of any more childish silliness between the two of you,

"I am going to be the one throwing the temper tantrum." It's an easy thing to visualize, and a grotesque thing to clean up after. Give the Enforcers the mops and the soapy squeegees, and start picking the embedded bits out of the wall. "I do believe you both understand?" They nodded and said things to the general affirmative. "Good.", Howard concluded, and turned off the communication with a click. Sarah and I were flanking him, and he turned to each of us, sighing. "Now, you see, if they had bothered to have any kind of reasonable discussion **before** calling the Dominator, I wouldn't have had to deal with that." Howard then proceeded to look up details about Malaysian broadcast control.

"Ugh... god damn this hurts..", Paul said through the intercom a few minutes later. Howard looked startled and rushed to the elevator, impatiently waiting the few seconds for it to come back up. I didn't follow him; I got a vague sense of guilt. Maybe I told Paul entirely the wrong thing...

"Hmm, now that's an emotion I haven't seen in a while.", Sarah said, recognizing the look on my face. "What'd you tell him?"

"To take a hot bath..." Sarah just shrugged. She didn't know what was wrong with it, either. Crap! What the hell happened? I waited, and Howard came out on the second floor, carrying Paul. I went upstairs to follow him as he placed Paul in our bed.

"Billy, hold very still.", he commanded me as I reached the top of the stairs.

I saw it coming but could do nothing about it- his right hand whacked me across my face with what I could tell was a calculated amount of force. It hurt, but it didn't knock me off my feet or cause any real damage. But- he just- "You can move again."

"Howard- you've never-", I said, surprised.

"Caused you any physical pain intentionally. I know. That was a requested courtesy to Paul, and considering what you did to him I'd say you deserved it."

"I didn't mean it!" Shit, especially not after what he's been through!

"I know that. You're not a normal, Billy. Unless you study it, you don't know their biology."

"I did study it, and even I didn't know that one.", Sarah said.

"Neither did I.", Howard said. "**But I didn't tell him to do that.**" The worst part was that he was absolutely right. I had commanded Paul, and I had hurt him in doing so, which was one of the worst things I could conceivably do. Paul trusted me completely, I care for him immensely, and my ignorance had stabbed him in the back. And that ignorance is why Howard's annoyed- I had thought I knew when I didn't- and if Howard's going to train me to be his duplicate, he can't allow that. It could get him killed.

I looked at the ground and walked past Howard into Paul's room. There were few words to describe it: he had it awful. I could smell him sweating, but he was shivering at the same time, and he laid in a fetal position on the bed in agony.

"Paul... are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah, Billy, I will... in maybe the next couple of days!", he tried to yell, but that only came out as a croak. His fist launched up and I let it catch me on the left cheek where Howard had hit me. It didn't hurt nearly as much physically, but I felt injured just the same.

"I'm sorry.. I had no idea."

"It's all right... you're forgiven. Just don't.. ever command me.. to do anything like that.. ever again!"

"I don't plan to. Is there anything you want me to get you?"

"No. Just.. time." They say time heals all wounds, but that only applies to engineered regenerators. It did, however, get Paul out of bed and drinking lots of grapefruit juice in a few hours. I ordered several two-foot by two-foot wads of fluid-absorbing cloth for him- Howard didn't understand why until he realized just what respiratory illness does. Down the incinerator with the sticky, goopy remains, for a whole week- fortunately we didn't need to go on any raids during that time, although Howard did need to make a few more threats to various people, like usual.

Chapter 32

The nightmare was bad, but I don't remember very much of it, only that it included fighting. Lots and lots of fighting, and some nifty technological goodies interspersed.. which in no way differentiates it from the usual warmongering around here. I lay in bed for a while- Paul wasn't there- and dozed into a train of half-thought which danced around various daydreams and led to a question I can't believe I never asked. The Illuminati's goal is to get eventually power itself up to the day when they can take off their mask and not have to worry about resistance- but what about after that? What happens when Howard finally gets what he wants? Trans-dictatorship? I was idly wondering if I really wanted to know that- before I realized that it would be more annoying to keep wondering, got up, put the usual black on, and looked around. He wasn't in his room- he wasn't in the main part of the house. Maybe the basement? Or, more likely.. I took one look outside.

Yup, there he is. The usual spot, fifty feet in the air, hanging upside down without a care in the world because lots of technological death separates him from harm and the masses. I climbed up and hung down next to him, and finally asked him the question I've been wondering all day.

I did predict his reply correctly, of course- it's just the details that were interesting. "I'll advance mankind. Everyone will have a purpose to life, everyone will be working for a common goal, to better the planet and take the stars. No more war or famine, no more massive head games, no more useless bickering between private groups that don't know anything, and no more mega-recruitment by the public groups to get more followers and sycophants for their own petty games. No more bullshit, no more illusions, no more wasted lives on things that never existed. I'm just glad we came into existence before nuclear weapons did." Paradise. A completely controlled paradise. Get rid of most of the human parasites, prevent war, remove stupidity and mindless lashing-out and instead instill a kind of general need for more total power of humanity instead, with him and his organization at the fore. All the useless people will be dead- he has no reason to keep them alive- and the rest will be engineered through the roof. And of course he'll have total control... implants, no question. He's going to do it.

"Yeah, some idiot would push the little red button sooner or later.", I replied. "You mind if I just stay here?"

I got what I expected: "Stay, Billy. I like you here." And then he put his arm around me once more, I put my arm around him, as we hung upside down together, and a variant of 'that other thing' struck me again like a bolt of lightning. How can I possibly explain this? Being hugged by Howard is.. almost a religious experience. He's got all this totalitarian power and he puts it away like a temporarily-retired toy in a drawer. And he's letting me have some, after all, he's got plenty. He can do anything he wants, and yet he chooses to do this. Of course I know why.. after almost ten straight years of near-solitude, three months of having people to.. (wait, that's just a 'having people', isn't it) isn't enough. And I'm starting to feel the same way.. with the exception of Paul, all those masses of normals just don't cut it when you naturally talk over their heads. Like it or not, this is what I was made for, here is where I belong- as the eternal companion of Howard. If I knew terror anymore, I probably would have been internally screaming. Instead, I felt a slight tingling, like an ant walking across my brain.

Time disappeared. I have no idea how much.

"Howie.. what happens if your plan.. doesn't work?", I asked, half-expecting him to say 'My plans **DON'T** fail!' in a traditional Evil Overlord voice.

"Billy, there is no such thing as failure to a determined Illuminatus. There is either death, the plan changes, or I keep trying. Since the plan won't change and we're immortal, unless I get my head blown off, the plan will eventually happen." Not only is he cannibalistic, all-controlling, and a total bastard, he's relentless as well...

"God.. everyone implanted... Howard, I have real problems just.. just conceiving that. When I start thinking about it, it goes right into the part of my brain marked 'fantasy', you know?"

"That's because you have no idea of the power we wield. All governments, organizations, beliefs start out small, because while they're small, they don't usually have lots of people pushing against them. Then they come in one fell swoop and make big, loud promises, winning the sheeple over, and then when they're in power, they can do what they want- until, of course, they inevitably get overthrown. We're just there to make sure we control that one, too. But when we, ourselves, come- we'll sweep over everything, because we have everything. Normals don't understand social change very well and they like to think that the way things are, are the way things have always been." Which is also the reason for the 'generation gap'. "We just let them keep believing that. If we do it right there won't be any resistance."

"Yeah... ah hell, you're right, I am thinking like a normal. But.. that's what I've been."

"Culturally, not genetically. This, exactly this, is why you were created. You're to help me with whatever goals or sub-goals I need to perform. And that's what you've been doing." He held me a bit tighter.

"Yeah.. and those goals... will... will.." What was that word..

"Will what, Billy?"

"Will remove hope, Howard." That's the word. Hope. "When you finally succeed.. there will be no more hope." Howard emitted a traditional, diabolic, but not very loud, "MUA HA HA HA HA HA!!" Echo, of course, added something not seen with most evil overlords.

"Well, nope, there won't. Not much fear either, and very little anger. No more head games. Just humanity, doing what it should have been doing for the last seven thousand years, instead of circle-jerking with various styles of bullshit. And this planet will be a whole lot better for it."

"So what should humanity have been doing?"

"Expanding my inheritance. I got this solar system. If there's a way to do it, you know damn well what I plan to do."

"That will take.. oh, you really don't care, do you? Fuck, what the fuck am I thinking? I shouldn't care either." Immortality changes your whole line of thinking.

"Heh, heh, heh. Oh, it'll be sweeeet... just have to wait a couple hundred years."

"Yeah.. but you'll be the only one who can.."

"Make his own decisions? Possibly, but there are other engineered. The world only needs one guy like that anyway, and it's not like everyone else won't be a hell of a lot better off."

"Well, won't they just be.. you know, living as slaves?"

"Ha. The Communists tried that. Nothing reduces efficiency like having no purpose. They'll do stuff, they'll just do it slow and wrong. Besides, why the hell would I want to live on a planet like that? No, you just let them know that they're not free, and then you make them happy about it." Which makes a great deal of sense. Make somebody do it, and yes, they'll do it. Make somebody want to do it, and they'll make sure they do it right.

"Is that what you're doing to me?"

"Of course! What - you think I wouldn't?" Emotion took me and I started cry-laughing for a while. So fucking funny, so fucking sad. "It's just harder than if you were a normal."

"Howie.. heh heh.. I still can't think like you."

"Like I said, it takes a very long time. Nine times outta ten, you do though. Don't worry, Billy. In a couple of years no one'll be able to tell us apart without an X-ray."

"And you'll be able to be in two places at once."

"Which is just one of the many benefits."

"Howard, if you list all the benefits, you're probably going to freak me out. Again."

"Oh really? Well let's see now.. two places at once, someone to help with assaults, someone to help plan things.. you can pretend you're me 95% of the time.. assorted other crap I wouldn't want to do myself or by myself.. oh, and Billy, you're someone to talk to, a warm body if nothing else."

"So you really do consider me your friend.."

"Well, of course! Billy, just because I completely control you doesn't mean we can't be friends." Something about that phrase opened something in my mind that I never wanted to see opened. He's got to be joking, though. But wait.. if he's joking with me, then.. I think I'm running into a mental block that doesn't belong there. He's half-joking. Ha ha, only serious. It's dark humor to hear spoken, but there's a funnier, blacker joke inside.

"You know, if anyone would have said that to or near me on or before April 26, 1998, I would have laughed my ass off." He started chuckling. "But, as you've probably guessed, I don't find that funny anymore."

"That's okay. I wasn't really joking." The mental block opened and I realized something fairly obvious, but that I refused to see anyway, until now. To him, control just is. Controlling people is just what he does. Although he loves to play the part (who wouldn't?), he's not a true egomaniac. He just happens to control me.. having me obey his every command is as natural as breathing to him. Emotion started boiling in my head again.

"I should have figured that." I had something I needed to tell him and no words to tell it to him with. "Oh, Howie... I love you.." was as close as I could come. I held him tightly, wishing for something that can't happen.

"Billy.. I love you too. You're one of the few people I can actually trust. I know even being here next to me has to be horrible, but.. it's the good life. And like you said, it can always get worse."

"Let's hope it doesn't."

"It won't. I won't let it. I told you, Billy, I won't let anything happen to you. It can get worse, but it won't. And I've got 6,000 Illuminati, basically as many Enforcers as I want, and the resources of a planet to make sure that nothing in my life gets nailed." 'Now **THAT**'s protection!', an unfamiliar female voice said in my head.

"After hearing that, I don't think I'm going to take anyone else's confidence seriously again..." Howard started laughing and we stayed, upside down, the blood weighing down on the top of our skulls, for another indeterminate period of time.

The rest of the day didn't matter very much and I was in bed before I knew it.

Chapter 33

Just another day, and I became curious about something, so I walked into Sarah's room slowly and carefully, although I knew I didn't have to. She looked up at me from the computer, curiously- I was wearing black, so she knew who I was. "Hey, Sarah, how long were you here before me?", I asked.

"Three weeks, a little less.. I don't know. Wait, that was Saturday, Sunday... Monday, they.. Twenty days."

"Was he different to you then?"

"Billy.. I'm not sure how to explain this. He didn't know.. he didn't do anything stupid or say something ridiculous or make a fool of himself, but he.. to put it bluntly, he didn't know what to do with me. The first things he told me were self and property protection, then he told me to hold still. And he walked around me, and he just.. looked at me. Like.. like he's never seen a person before, studying me. Now you gotta remember, I had just woken up and I didn't know where the fuck I was. And then he asked me my name.. and then.. you can guess the rest. He didn't know some subtleties of talking or humanity, but he learned. Fast. Both of you learn fucking **fast**. He learned how to use me like he would anything else, and of course he was happy- with the same smile he had when he had **you** acquired." People, at base, are objects, and so he treats them like it again. Only Sarah and myself are slightly more useful than the average human object.

"He's a 21st Century Digital Boy.", I mused.

"What?"

"Song I heard, don't know the name or the author. It went something like "'I'm a 21st Century Digital Boy.. don't know how to live, but I've got a lot of toys'.. something like that."

"Well, I imagine when you spend the formative years of your life **learning how to control people...**"

"Well, it figures that he'd be somewhat strange. We're on Xen, Sarah. I'm surprised the trees haven't started attacking us yet. This place is a twisted variation of the world I used to know. Besides, like you said, it could be worse." I'm not sure how much of this needs to be said. But talking to Sarah reminds me that she's an engineered human and not one of the Enforcers she can act like.

"Yes, and thank you for mentioning Xen. I have the urge to kill something right now." I pondered that in the third person: the world's greatest assassin currently has the urge to kill something. (Be afraid. Be very afraid.)

On a sudden, whimsical urge I whipped out my arm with speed, grabbed her back, and kissed her firmly on the lips. She did not resist. In the middle of that, I heard an electronic boom from Howard's room. "Hey.. if you want to kill something, I bet if he's online..", I said, a bit deviously. She grinned,

went to look, and then rushed back into her room.

"Yup! Duke Nukem, and if he's on.. there.. there he is! All right.. you know, he might get rather irritated at this."

"Is that going to stop you?"

"Of course not." If Howard wants us not to do something, he's going to have to tell us. "He's in a game, I'm in the game, the sheeple are in the game.. let's do this." I watched Sarah and her slaughter on warfortr.map. Howard was playing casually (really, who in normal land is going to stand a chance against him?), she was playing aggressively, and she outpaced him by two frags quickly. The bullets in that game are instant-hit, and so were the only way for Sarah and Howard to hurt each other. The normals couldn't even begin to compete, and watched for a bit until they left. The two engineered's killed each other three times, then Howard was clued in:

"Billy! Get your ass in here, **now!**", he shouted over the intercom. Well, almost clued in.

Delay or hesitation was, of course, impossible. "Yes, Howard?", I asked innocently, as I arrived in his room.

"Just what were you trying to pull?", he asked, annoyed.

"Me? Why, nothing. I wasn't doing a thing.", I said, far too innocently, but hey, he's going to know.

"Then who was?"

"Her.", I said, loud enough for Sarah to hear, and we could hear her giggling at that.

"Sarah, turn that thing off and get in here." She did, and arrived in Howard's room promptly. "Sarah, why did you do that?"

"Oh, just for the hell of it, really." Howard sneered, very slightly. "Also, I was really bored and didn't want little Paul to think you were good or something.", she said jocularly.

"Hey!", Paul shouted. C'mon, Paul, compared to us, you **are** little.

"You bitch.", Howard said, and Sarah shrugged as if to say 'Yeah, your point?' He was taking his time- thinking of a command, I could tell- but he decided not to give it. "All right, since everyone in here seems hell-bent on kicking my ass," And we were. "Billy, Sarah, get back to your computers and let's play local. Paul-"

"Lemme guess.", he interrupted. "I'm not invited to play because the three of you will beat the shit out of me."

"No, I need an easy target in case I get bored. Go to the living room and play from there." So we can't communicate next to each other.

The game quickly became complete shotgun war, and we engineered's finished it with about 30 frags each. Paul got ten, mostly from playing like a vulture, although all of us were happy to see him spawn in front of us- free frag! It was fun, and that was the thing. He doesn't stay mad for long, because we provide his immediate entertainment. Howard has fun with us.

After that, the day passed uneventfully until Howard called me down to help him with some boring, detailed shit- but it needed to be done and it involved meting out judgment and punishment. This guy gets this, that guy gets that. The details didn't matter, because nobody questioned that decision (as we spent time making sure it was a good one), and I don't recall hearing from any of the

Illuminati involved ever again.

Chapter 34

Paul was awake, lying in bed, when I woke up. "Good morning, Billy.", he said, smiling. It always makes me happy when he says that. It reminds me of why he's here in the first place, reminds me of how I saved him. It's a welcome antidote to the nightmares. The sun shining through the window was equally happy and bright, but of course that's asking for trouble for an albino. Better just to stay in.

"Good morning, Paul.", I said, realizing immediately my body's needs. "I'm hungry." I put on some black pants and a loose black T-shirt and went downstairs for some food. Howard was going for it at about the same time I was, and Sarah had already cooked it. We feasted and Howard went to read the Real News. It's always struck me as weird how the Illuminati can actually publish something like that and never have it break secrecy. It wouldn't surprise me if the paper decayed fast.

"Hooo...", Howard sighed, reading an article in it. Curious, I looked over his shoulder at it.

Some normal named the Anarch had raided an Illuminated home (a **normal** did **what**?!), and the Illuminatus barely escaped with his life, losing a few Enforcers and hitting the self-destruct on his Illuminated equipment. That's got to suck. His forces managed to kill several normals, with a few being left wounded to get interrogated and swiftly killed. So there's someone who's attacking Illuminati.. I find it hard to believe he's actually a normal, but it's confirmed by the normals he left behind..

"So what are you going to do about this guy?", I asked.

"You're being silly. He's not **my** problem." I was being silly. Howard has people who spend their lives dealing with crap similar to this.

We did indeed not go outside that day. Howard, as usual, had me as his constant companion, even when playing single-player RPGs, where he gave me a few turns and I did the same thing he did. Fido came in- he likely hates sunlight as much as we do- and we tickled his furry back with our feet. After some more games we went down for a swim.

We were in the pool when the buzzer went off. Howard glanced at the clothes I'd taken off- am I going to pretend to be him?- but took his own white pants instead. I got dressed and followed him up the elevator.

To our surprise, the two opposing guys were on the same screen. It was the military-industrial complex; one guy's military, the other guy's industrial, and they had a serious overlap of power. Fortunately, both Illuminati behaved civilly, and looked to Howard for an untangling answer, and Howard said something I wasn't expecting: "This is complicated, damn complicated. I'll have to call you back." He clicked the screen and we worked on it for about a half an hour, looking up this and that, poring over things like normal defense contracts and various names of people. Eventually we did actually solve it and they were both surprised and pleased with the answer. Howard decided to let me do other things and I went back up to my room. Wow, it's late already? He really was with me all day. The time fucking flew...

"Hey, Paul." I closed the door as I entered the room, gently put my hands on his shoulders, and watched him kick the shit out of random Starcraft opponents.

"Hey, Billy. Did you have to pretend you were him?"

"Who says I'm not now?", I said, in Howard's master tone, a subtly more evil and pleasant-sounding voice.

"Dammit, Billy, don't fuck with me like that."

"How can you tell?"

"I can't anymore when you pretend. Both of you know enough about each other to fool me. If I asked the personal stuff, you wouldn't answer, right."

"God dammit Paul, I had a whole thing set up. I was going to tell you basically what you just said, that you can't know which of us is which."

"Not unless you want me to, and Billy, I do know it's you now. Howard never refers to God. Ever." He happens to be right. If Howard is going to use that kind of expression, he always inserts a generic expletive instead of referring to a deity. I haven't heard him do it yet.

"I suppose I could just keep going 'that was part of the illusion' and all that, but that would just piss you off and I'm **tired**." I flopped down on the bed. Paul obligingly turned down the sounds of music, death, and chaos.

"Billy, don't pretend to be him... please, don't pretend to be him."

"Why not? It's the obvious, isn't it."

"It's the obvious. One of him is fucking bad enough. If Northberg is going to make everyone's kids like him, that's just.. that's just going to be insane."

"It'll shake things up a bit. I don't know how, there's a million things that can happen, but it's going to make the gap a whole lot wider. I think they're going to start becoming more.. it's not really inbred, is it? More.. not integrated, although that could happen too, more.. their own people. Instead of having a people exchange with the normal world.."

"They're going to make them right here. I know. And they're going to do an even better job of totally controlling everyone, and there will be a huge gap between who's elite and who isn't."

"Yeah, welcome to the future."

Paul finished obliterating whatever idiot was on the wrong end of his Hydralisks and his partner's Marines, and laid down beside me. "I just realized, if I walked into school again, right now... I'd just kick so much ass."

"Whose?"

"Everybody's. We'd be in sixth grade, so.. I'd use this database to find where most of them were going to middle school, then I'd just walk in there and say hello to every one of them. If the teachers got in my way, I'd flip em off, and if they kept getting in my way, I'd blow their heads off. And then I'd find that fucking loudmouth jerk- I remember what you did to him-" That would be bruises, a fractured hip, and a concussion. I had very low patience for that asshole, and his pride made him claim it was an accident. "and I'd just take that fucking Micro and I'd ram it up his ass, and then fry his insides like a burrito."

"Damn, now **you're** starting to talk like Howie."

"Good! Because then, I'd call one of you guys to come in, and then..." We broke up into mad laughter, pondering the possibilities. The entire school would probably be nothing more than a heap of molten rubble by the time we were done, with a ring of SWAT team members' bodies around it. Corpses would litter the wreckage, and people would compare them to Nazi war films. To put it

shortly, all hell would break loose.

"Over KILL!", I shouted in my laughter. "Damn, Paul, that **is** mean."

"Well, of course it's fucking mean! They didn't even do their fucking jobs!"

"No, they didn't do their stated jobs."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, their real jobs, aka making the sheeple bleat the right way. God, that sickens me. I want.. I want to do to them what that fucker Damien did to me."

"Paul, you already know that there ain't no justice. You already got your revenge, feel lucky you could do that. But we **are** the system now."

"Yeah, and it **sucks**. But you're right, it could always be worse. I could still be without you or any other friends." He put his arm around me in the hug of the damned and angry. I reciprocated and drifted off to the land of nightmares.

Chapter 35

Every day, in the time before I become fully conscious, I realistically worry about being woken up by some command. 'Billy, put on your black clothing, take this gun, and get in the plane. Some joker betrayed me- we have people to kill.', he'd say. The commands are annoying (the people-killing not even being an issue), but it's the idea of being forced to get up early that bugs me. Of course, for Howard to command me up early, he'd also have to get up himself, so I'd at least have the mild satisfaction of his shared annoyance.

He's never actually had to do that before, though. I woke up, put on the black suit (no pretending, not today), and noticed his door was open- he's gone somewhere. I looked down and noticed the empty couch and big screen. Howard wasn't there, so, why not? I turned on the big screen and started playing some old single player games. Ninjas. I'm in the mood for ninjas.

About fifteen minutes into it, the resident ninja showed up. "Do you like his spot?", Sarah asked from behind me. I've gotten used to her natural sneaking. "I suppose you wouldn't like me to tell you that it suits you?"

"That helps a whole fucking lot, Sarah.", I said sarcastically.

"This situation is broken, someone call tech support.", she said. She realized I didn't fully understand, so she flipped over the couch to sit next to me, and continued. "They taught me a special definition of 'situation' in training. A situation is an environment, like, say, a map in Quake. The situation is everything in your environment that can affect you or the mission. A broken situation is one so disfavorable that you can't accomplish the mission, like if the exit to the map was closed off by a solid wall. Unlike most situations, this one can't be fixed by any power of ours."

"By Howard?"

"Technically yes, but realistically no. This isn't just about freedom." I didn't look in her direction- I was paying close attention to my 8-bit ninja who resides in deathtrap land- but she could tell I wondered what she meant. "This is about balance. And possibly even necessity. This is about **life**."

"You're talking in platitudes that mean everything to you but jack all to me." The problem with what she was saying was that there were so many ways to interpret it that it was meaningless. "You are the absolute last person I'd expect to get metaphysical on me."

"Humans do this, don't they? Even engineereds. Maybe it's my training that has me trying to make

situational sense out of the whole world. And that's what this means, Billy. Not the Bavarian headquarters, not Northberg- **this island** is the capital of the world. Now, if you'd like to come with me, I'm going to go spy on your twin master."

"Why spy on him?", I asked, saving state and closing the emulator.

"For my own amusement. No sense in changing clothes, I know where he is, he's not going to see us at all. This way." She led me on a roundabout route around the house, through a part of the forest and a little bit into the grassy area where those peasants used to farm. Howard was there, sitting next to Paul, and Sarah and I simply walked up to about ten feet behind him.

"Don't you get it?", Howard said. "You guys are the only people I can talk to who I can trust. They want to stab me in the back, Paul!" And we don't? "I can't talk to them without watching **every single word** to see if I'm giving something away!" And you can't talk to us without watching **every single word** to make sure it didn't form a sentence that will get you instantly killed! "And talking to Enforcers.. well, it's kind of like having a friendly conversation with a brick wall."

"I've done that.", said Paul.

"Having a friendly-", Paul started, as Howard said, "What- had a friendly conversation with a brick wall?" Paul started nodding.

"Brick walls are great, actually.", Howard said educationally. "They're good listeners, they don't get excited, and they never talk back or argue. They also don't devote their lives to pissing you off."

"Oh, I get it, so you implant people to do that for you."

"Paul- believe me here. I do not need any more people to piss me off unless it's necessary. Especially you three. I get enough shit as it is." Howard's blunt honesty moved through the conversation like a hammer through water.

"Join the fucking club.", Paul muttered with some anger.

"I'm already in the fucking club, remember?"

"Yeah, the Shitluminati." Howard laughed heartily, and I heard Paul's tone change from jovial to deadly almost instantly. He wasn't trying to sound evil, I could tell- he really did have as much anger and hatred as it sounded like. "But Howard, you still have your freedom. Feel lucky. This is the ultimate shit. Living hell, an eternity of pain, oh, that's worse in the agony department. But if I wanted to wish the most brutal and torturous fate on my worst enemy that I could fucking ever think of, this would be it. Not ending up with someone like Damien, either. With you." I'm sorry, Paul- most of the time I understand you. I've seen the videos, and I'm sure Howard hasn't rescinded his no-delusion command. What the **fuck**?

"Paul, I don't torture you, I don't kick you around, you have things to play with and food to eat, the only orders I give are the ones that directly benefit me- so why?"

I really should have known the answer to that. "Because it means that **we can't hate you**.", he said, pointing his shaking forefinger at Howard. "Or at least we have more trouble with it. But you **can**, Howard. You can." He, indeed, can. "At any time, without any fucking warning at all, you could do to us worse than what you did to those peasants Billy was telling me about. And there's nothin' any of us can do to stop it." This is a rarity- Howard didn't know how to reply. Paul was right. Killing normals, oh well. Killing bad Illuminati, sayonara, good riddance to bad rubbish. Killing Howard, although I would not hesitate, would feel like murder. I decided to let him know I was here and started breathing a bit harder.

Howard spun half-around to look at us. "How much did you two hear?", he shouted.

"Umm...", Sarah started.

"From 'don't you get it' to 'do to stop it'.", Billy said.

"Yeah.", Sarah said, nodding. She wasn't sure why I gave us away. It seemed like the correct thing to do.

"Fuck. Do both of you agree with what he said?"

"Pretty much.", Sarah said, nodding, as I said "Yeah."

"Then this is going to add some more complications... going to have to have a hundred percent protection all the time from every servant, no matter who it is." Shouldn't you be doing that anyway? "Why didn't you say something about this before?"

"You never asked.", Sarah and I replied simultaneously and immediately. I didn't stop to smile about that.

I was pissed and I let him have it. "What the hell were you thinking, anyway? That you could just implant everyone, and sooner or later they'd start to like it? Howard, the people you said were best to implant, the smart people that didn't always do what they were told, the ones that you said would get used to it- they won't completely. Ever. The only people you don't have to worry about killing you after some miscommand are the ones you said weren't worth it at first- the stupid people."

"Dammit.", Howard muttered. "Do all of you still want to kill me.. even after the tests?"

"Uh huh.", I said, nodding. Welcome to reality, enjoy your stay.. while you're still here. "Oh, yeah.", said Sarah.

"I .. I dunno.", said Paul, to my surprise. "Howard- it's really not your fault, is it?" Not his fault?! Like hell!

"He's the one who's going to implant **everyone**, if you **remember**, Paul!", I shouted at him.

"Yeah, but weren't you like.. taught to be like this?", Paul asked Howard. That's silly.

"Paul, I do everything that I do **because I want to do it**, not because of what I was taught, or beliefs, or anything like that. The same should be true of any other Illuminatus." At least Howard's intellectually honest; he would never consider blaming anyone else for what he does. "So why do you two want to kill me?" You seriously don't know, Howard? You know, or can know in moments, practically anything else.

"General principle.", I said, as Sarah said, "Because I fucking hate all of you." That's a surprise. Even after everything she said earlier, this is about hatred? But it makes sense. It's about balance, necessity, and life, isn't it? This is imbalanced, unnecessary (and being able to disobey Howard may one day be necessary indeed), and servants no longer own their lives. So she hates him, and everyone who put the structure in place for him to do what he's doing to her.

"Billy, what's general principle?"

"Everything that needs to be done, that should be done, that common sense dictates must be done, but no one really knows why." Cognito ergo sum. Me domino ergo finitus. It's that simple.

"Yes, and we have a word for it here too- bullshit." He fundamentally doesn't understand. He

wouldn't, would he? "Sarah, you've worked for us for years. You want to kill every Illuminatus there is?"

"Not just you, but all of your puppets, every one of your willing servants (though I'll save them for last), your scientists, and I also want to blow up your governments, your science facilities, your operations, when I'm done nothing will be left except a shattered husk. Only a few words, Howard. Only a couple of words and you and this whole fucking business will be nothing more than a stain on Earth's carpet." This isn't idle talk. With adequate preparation, there's no doubt that Sarah, like some lone hero in a game, has a good chance of actually doing it against insane odds. "I used to think that only a few more kills, only a few more moves, only a few more operations and I'd be out of this, I'd be one of you, I'd be up in the highest levels. And then, of course, they offered to make me a first level Illuminatus. Well, here I am, with my life forfeit and my cunt waiting. Sometimes I try not to think about it, try to pretend I'm something that I'm not just to keep from losing it completely and ending up a mindless servant slut. But I'm a killing machine, Howard. I was made for it. And if you want your life to last longer, you better watch just who I'm killing." And she was right. And this didn't have to happen. Paul started clapping, and so did Howard, as if Sarah had just finished a one-girl show. But that's what it was, wasn't it? A show of anger. I clapped too, with a smirk. But I know what exactly she means. There is no overstating this- this is the **world** we're talking about. The whole planet, the whole situation. Eternal suffering, eternal servitude. All for someone who I really don't want to blame because he's my fucking **identical twin**. I was enraged, at myself as well. I would do this? Would the advantage be worth this insanity? What kind of benefit would this be to me, other than a sick one?

"Encore! Encore!" shouted Paul.

"Hey- **can** you repeat that?", Howard asked with a grin. Of course it's a joke to him.

"Not perfectly.", she said, scowling. She gets the joke, too. I get it, I just don't want it.

"Is there anything else any of you wanna say to me about this?", Howard asked.

"Yes. I hope **you** get implanted and given to someone five times worse than the whole Gladstone family. I don't care what happens to me anymore.", I said, pissed off. Howard can do **anything**, and here we are in this. This is the existence of the best of the best in human engineering? This whole species is a farce. Time for God to hit the reset button. Let's restart the universe, maybe change a couple of starting values, and try again.

"That wouldn't be too bad, actually. He'd be **dead** in the first five minutes. You forgot how stupid they were. But that's not happening. I'm too damn paranoid, especially now."

"Oh, no fucking surprise. Could that have something to do with the fact that we're all out to get you?", I replied instantly. Paul started giggling.

"Billy, have you ever considered Illuminating yourself and seeing things from another point of view, like mine? Do you think this is easy? Why the fuck do you think I **have** servants, anyway?", he replied.

Let's take them one by one. "Yes, and I've determined that it's better to have a risk of death than be effectively already dead, no, I don't think it's all that easy, and because you're the ultimate spoiled rich brat. Any more questions, Howard?", I replied, angry.

"Nope.", he replied, almost casually. I hadn't really aggravated him with my answers- he was expecting them- but I honestly didn't want to upset him, and not just because of what he can do to me. Kill him, yes, because it was crucially necessary, but not upset him. Let his days on earth be happy, joyful, and few.

"Howard.. in another universe, it could all be different.", I said, regretful and still angry. I was instantly able to visualize four others that would be preferable to this- in three of them, implants weren't invented, and in the fourth, they sure as hell weren't used on me.

"In another universe, it could always be different. But, if I do terminally slip up, just remember- what happens when I die?" The answer he was leading me to was right, but it changed nothing.

"We move to a new level of Hell."

"You are still alive, Billy, and I am certain you care about yourself. And you've been here long enough to know what they'll do to you if I bite it. And if you really do consider yourself dead, how would you like to spend your afterlife?" I was not compelled to answer him, because I didn't have any idea. I didn't think about the future, I just **wanted**. Wanted to be free of this. Wanted to have my own life, my own goals, my own power. No matter how many times I fight for my life here, it doesn't matter because it's really not my life. Even if Howard gave me a list of several hundred Illuminati, said 'Exterminate them, use their resources for your new power base, and let's actually start to govern this world.'- a task he could plausibly command and I would enjoy doing, make no mistake- it wouldn't be my actions. I have no choice. The reason Howard's asking me is because he wants to, and he does what he wants.

"Howard, you're a manipulative bastard.", Sarah said. Yes, and the sky's blue and the sun's yellow.

"Hello! **Job description!**", Paul shouted at her.

"Howard.. I'm not sure what to believe or plan for or even if I should waste my mind thinking about it, because this all doesn't matter because you never make mistakes like that.", I said.

"And you'll miss me if something bad does happen, won't you?"

"Yeah.. I guess I will. Especially if some crazy luck does happen and I live another thousand years. There will probably be more people living that long then.. but I'll always be the oldest, always watching, always wondering what the hell would have happened had the coin flipped the other way."

"In that situation, the coin flipping the other way? You would have made some foolish mistake and died at the hands of your own servant." For what wasn't exactly the first time, I visualized myself as Howard, with his incredible control. That would suck, wouldn't it?

"That makes various kinds of sense. I should probably ask now- are you the only one doing this, using your.. servants like this?" I doubt he is, but I have to ask.

"Of course not. And the more I think about it, the more I realize the effects. There's going to be a body count ten meters high if too many fuckups happen." They aren't nearly as flawless with word-watching as Howard is. "And there are almost certainly, so far, a dozen or two Illuminati who decided to acquire some normal.. friends in this manner. Really easy. The only reason more haven't done it is that by and large, we hate being near normals at all."

"Is this going to become common?", I asked. In a fraction of a second, I visualized **all of society** being like this. The Illuminati could and would set up a hierarchy with everyone except Howard- and some Levels who made sure they'd escape it- implanted servants. It'd go all the way down to the elementary schools (which would, of course, be heavily modified)- Tommy, that kid who once said he wanted to rule the world, would own Bobby (a black kid- this slavery transcends race), who owned Lee and Kimberly; Tommy'd also own Jill who owned Cindy and Tim, but he'd be owned himself by a local engineer. There wouldn't be any questions as to who sat at whose table for lunch...

"Well, we've basically just stuck our toe in the water as far as implant use is concerned. Some higher up guys, a lot of servants, but as for all the possible applications, we haven't come close. It's a huge field, just waiting for someone to describe a new way of use-" That hadn't been a command, and I had no intentions of telling Howard my visualization. "or better yet, an emotional add-on with universal compatibility." Holy crap- that'll mean he can-

"Emotional- will you-", I started. It would be a very slight addition, he'd put it somewhere on my brain, and then I'd be happy whenever he wanted me to be. The part of my mind that strives for completeness felt a strange kind of fulfillment in that, some other parts felt a weird sort of relief ('hey, at least I won't be so angry over all of this, and it is Howie after all'), and the rest of me felt abject, unspeakable horror.

"No. Wouldn't work, wouldn't work, and I'm not even gonna try. When I said universal, I didn't mean engineered, and I didn't mean.. well, whatever the hell happened to you."

"You think I'm too screwed-up, don't you!", Paul said in a joking tone.

"Of course I do.", Howard replied, joking.

"Good, you're right." Paul's voice instantly changed again, from childish and casual to dark and serious. "But seriously, Howard. Even if it turns out I'm not so screwed up, **please** do not use that shit." He couldn't hide his complete terror, at least not from us.

"Why not? Wouldn't you like to walk around happy all the time?", Howard asked, smiling. Since his vocal inflections are the same as mine, I could tell that he wasn't serious by some very slight changes in his tone. Paul, on the other hand, was taking him quite seriously indeed. You're being a real asshole, Howard.

"**Seriously**, man!!", Paul shouted, obviously visualizing something his brain could barely handle.

"Bah. Between your constant feeling of low-level joy and your unquestioning love for me, I don't think you'll worry too much when it's all done. Don't worry, you'll still be able to think straight.. you'll just like me a **whole lot more**." Which is exactly how Howard would want it to work, too. Even if our engineered brains wouldn't freak at artificial emotional stimuli (which is what I see 'not work' as meaning), he wouldn't dare use this on me or Sarah, it might hurt our battle efficiency- but I could easily envision him using this on Paul. Don't interfere with his thoughts, that would be pointlessly mean- just Pavlov him with artificial pleasure, and he'll become a much better friend. To Howard, using something like that would be second nature.

"Howard.. please, man, I like you enough already, don't use that crap, you don't know.. what.." Every single word was inflected with pure, utter terror. His facial skin was pulled back, showing his teeth in a distorted death-mask grimace. Howard hasn't given me any commands not to, but I'm not going to interfere with this. I'm going to let Paul know just how much of an asshole Howard can be.

Sarah obviously didn't share that view. "He's fucking with you, Paul.", she said, offhand.

"You're sure?" Sarah and I both nodded at him.

"You're an **ASSHOLE**, Howard!", he shouted, surprised and relieved. Sky is blue, sun is yellow...

"Since you can't read my mind, I'm not going to command you to not tell me things I already know." And that, as they say, ended that.

Chapter 36

The moment of truth is nigh. Figures. We lay around for weeks and weeks, nothing happens, then

boom, he has to be somewhere in person and some sub-group wants to talk to him at the exact same time. Does he decline and save it for a later time? Nahhh... why would he do that? He'd rather have some more fun by sending his clone to do one of the jobs, flaunting his power, saying to the rest of them 'Ha! You don't even know if I'm really me.' while doing a thing that is fundamentally impossible: being in two places at once. Then again, he's always been a nasty one-upsmen and he did prepare me for something like this. And it's not like I could have said no...

Boredom and jet planes still mix and I paid more attention to my never-idle brain. I had brought Paul; I doubt Howard would have gone alone, and his most important command was 'Above all, for this meeting, do as I would do.' He had taken Sarah to make sure that no one tried to kill him; of course, if someone did try, the idiot's in for a quick trip to Hell anyway. She's just there to look menacing. Paul isn't combat-trained and doesn't have fingernails of death, but the person I'm visiting, second level Michael Stevenson, didn't have any information about exactly how much training he had received and what kind of weapons he carries; as Sarah said, muzzle velocity is not affected by age, experience, or even aim. Besides, with one of us being Howard, Mike wouldn't have the **balls** to risk guessing wrong.

Didn't I hear of a book about this sort of thing? Dammit.. what the hell was that. Emperor? Courtman.. noo.. pauper.. That's it. The Prince and the Pauper, by Mark Twain. I called it up (having learned how to configure the autopilot) and in seconds I was reading it.

"Oh, geez. I almost can't believe you're reading that.", muttered Paul. "It fits this so fucking well."

"You've read it?"

"Know the plot. Read it at your speed. It gets boring."

Ordinarily, it would have, but given its relevance, I read every word and found myself almost memorizing it while enjoying Twain's sense of satire. I put myself in the position of Tom Canty and, no matter how hard I tried, simply could not visualize myself admitting that I wasn't the King and letting someone else take my place. But that's just me..

Eventually, the jet came to a halt at Michael's mansion. I jumped out and looked around- it's normal-grade material. He obviously lives the 'double life'. Guards everywhere, pool, tennis court, and large mansion with marble facade. We walked down the cobbled road into the too-big double doors, pushed them open, and I almost broke out laughing when I saw what I did. A very large, high-ceiling room with a dais, about eight high total, with a large throne on top of it. A viewscreen covered the right wall. Everywhere there was opulence, soft carpeting, chandeliers, the works- Mike's got an ego. Oh well. Doesn't bug me. Mike turned the throne around in typical corporate/bad guy fashion, and looked at me. I. Am. Not. Impressed.

"Master Howard!" The way he said 'Howard' bugged me slightly. "So good to see you here." He's got an attitude to match his mansion. Oh well.

"So, what do you want, anyway?"

"Ah, yes, down to business." I'm not really sure why, but this guy is getting on my nerves. "Before you ask, we're not a true sub-group, just a loose confederation of-" His viewscreen buzzed and he turned it on with a console at his too-big throne. "The Dominator, or his clone?", he asked no one in particular- the viewscreen showed Howard coming to the front of the mansion, opening the door- and then I turned around to meet him face-to-face as he walked up to me with his usual stride. Why is he here? And this was just going to get interesting, too.

"Howard! What are you doing here?"

"Stupid jokers called it off, so I wanted to talk to Mike in person." Howard was a tad bit miffed about

it- I imagine I would be too, had I been called halfway across the world for a no-show.

"Damn. There goes that. Surprised you showed up in front of him."

"Pfft. Not like he couldn't have searched the records and found out anyway." Something's wrong here. I don't know what... I'm just getting the feeling that something is wrong. What is it? Better question- why is he exposing himself? This is strange..

"Oh well. Want me here while you talk?"

"Yeah. And one more thing, Billy- kill y---" His speech was punctuated by Paul whipping the shotgun out of his black trenchcoat and cleanly blowing his head off. Pieces of metal flew out in a wide spray. Bits of bloodless scalp flew across the room. Metallic skeleton, surrounded by fleshlike substance, smashed into steel floor with the thump of a dead body, not the clang of a robot. When Paul had done it, I wondered how he could- then when I saw the results, I wondered how I could have ever been fooled for a split instant.

"Oh shit!!", screamed Michael Stevenson, acutely aware of his own damnation. What was that Howard told me? Do as he would do? I know exactly what Howard would do in a situation like this. And it isn't going to be exactly pleasant for Mike. "Enforcers!!", he yelled, hoping that they would kill me and save him from his certain doom. Six Enforcers came out of hiding and I whipped the guns out of the weapon-carriers cross-armed, blowing the Enforcers' heads off in rapid succession, starting with the outer two and going in. Only three quick bangs were heard; the Enforcers probably saw the bullets coming, but they never saw the arms. I then put the guns back in the same manner that I had put them in. Bullets are not necessary for him.

Mike pressed a button on his throne and it was starting to descend. Without hesitation, I rushed up the stairs to him and ripped him out of it before his supervillain-style getaway could even come close to working, pulling him out before a plastic bubble could enclose the chair with a snap. Pity. I wonder if that thing would have kept going, at the loss of incoming- or outgoing- limbs? That would be a way to die, killed by his own escape apparatus, the Illuminated plastic cracking his bones like a hammer and anvil cracking a nut. Oh well. There's lots more ways to terminate this fucker than that.

I put my back into it and flung his struggling body one-handed down the dais, and onto the metal floor, where friction was low. He bounced once and hit the wall between the entrances with a loud thump, clutching his head and moaning. Paul just stood and shook his head, knowing what was about to happen. I hopped down the few steps, grabbed his neck with my right hand, and lifted him into the air.

"Tell me, Mike, why would someone with so much to lose as you and so much obvious planning ability do something so stupid as that? Tell the truth and this won't last long."

"No, no.. it wasn't what you're thinking.." I pulled out a pistol again and blew his right kneecap off. He screamed.

"Information, Mike. Information or pain."

"They.. they want to kill you. They... they, they said that.. that you would be a threat.. they said that you'd be the doom of us all, they threatened to kill me if I didn't cooperate.."

"You're still lying to me, Mike." I doubt that any more pain would cause him to tell the truth.

"No, no.. please believe me, please don't kill me!" I put the gun to his forehead and left a grisly, greyish-red exit wound on the wall, and let his corpse fall to the ground with a thump. I then used his screen to have Paul contact Howard (don't want to confuse the people on the other end), who was

well into the meeting, and was almost stupefied at the story when I told him what was going on. He told me he was coming, but not before telling me to search for evidence- I reminded him of his own danger, while looking around for anything obvious, and he showed the thing I hate watching him show: fear. What kind of person tries to kill the Dominator's servant with Illuminated designs? It's like they're better than us... they conspire to kill us and we're not even sure who they are. Mike had to be one. He was a fucking second level... but what if the mastermind is a fifth... ugh. I extended my search to the computer and Paul began searching Mike's body. Damn, how the hell did Mike know.. and how the hell did Paul know?

The search turned up nothing. Nothing dealing with the robot, nothing dealing with records, nothing remotely involving any of this. I searched books, I searched databases, nothing. Even his personal files were completely devoid of evidence. Perhaps he had done the obvious and simply not written it down... we stopped searching after about twenty minutes. There was nothing to be found. "Paul... how did you know?", I asked with some wonder. In retrospect, its behavior was really weird, but there was nothing in its mannerisms.. Paul's a normal, if he knew, I definitely should have..

"I've been trying to figure that out. I'm not sure. Somethin' in his speech, maybe? I think he didn't move right. Anyway, I just knew, like it was so obvious or something. Shit. Forget immortality, Billy. We'll be lucky to see fifteen if this keeps up." He wasn't really kidding. The truth of what he said crashed down on me. Is something Howard's doing or not doing causing this? What's with all the assassination attempts? And if he knew it was me- only a servant- why would he try to kill me at the risk of his own life? Paul wondered the same thing, staring at the body. I squatted down and waited for Howard.

Three hours later (damn, he must have been going at super speed), the sounds of a jet-helicopter hybrid were heard in the background and Howard came in to find us empty-handed, with Sarah close behind. "I didn't think there would be anything.", he muttered. "Fuck." He stopped to look at the robot's remains. "Well, this'll go to headquarters, but who the hell manufactured it?" He then glanced at the corpse that was once Michael Stevenson and shook his head slightly. "Damn it..", he muttered. "**Damn it!!** I want to know **why!**! What is **wrong** with these people?!" Had he not been the color he is, he would have turned beet red- as it was, he was blushing with anger.

"Don't look at us.", Paul said. "Stupidity burst?"

"Yeah, obviously.. something along those lines. He knew who you were, Billy. He knew.. he just knew." The same reason Paul blew away the robot clone. He just knew, too. Is there something I'm missing here or is this all just insane? "He probably predicted my moves." Oh. Damn. It would make sense.. he didn't need any special clairvoyance to figure this one out, just a good guess. That.. nutjob.. risked his fucking life on a good guess.. guessed right, but died anyway. "It's a good thing you caught it."

"I didn't. Paul did. It was in mid-sentence when Paul blew its head off."

"You mean that if you didn't bring... then.."

"Bingo." A wave of pure, unrefined hatred emanated from Howard.

"Okay, it's official." Howard strided up on top of the dais, took the keyboard on Mike's throne, and called up the editor of the Real News, who immediately perked up at Howard's calling him from Mike's terminal. "Let it be known, to you and to everyone you report to, that I **fucking hate this**. I want to know who was responsible for trying to harm the property of the Dominator; I want to know where that robot clone- don't worry, editor, you'll find about it later- came from, and I want to know what a motherfucking **sec-ond lev-el** is doing trying this shit. That is all I have to say. Anyone with information should go public about it or risk my wrath." His wrath being more pain, more destruction, more compact anarchy for the higher-ups who felt stupidity attacks coming.

Howard also had Enforcers with him who seized anything and everything, the full team, listing everything as evidence, making a mockery of the FBI. They'll feed him and the Real News a report later. I suppose it'll be interesting reading material.. but I'd lay 100:1 odds that there'll be nothing of value in it.

"Billy, I...", he began, and then said nothing. What the hell could he have said? There's nothing he can tell me to do that would prevent this- and he already knows that if he comes near me unexpectedly, I'm going to be testing him if there's any remote chance someone got a hold of a similar robot.

"Forget it. He's dead, and we're wise to the tactic. Can we just go home and pretend none of this happened?" I had no desire to remember anything that happened this day. To think that people would impersonate **him**- just for the sake of killing **ME**! Hello?! I thought I was the fucking less important person in this picture... but the fact that it was a vulnerability, and could become one in the future.. no, I'm going to fucking make sure every time now.

"Except for whatever I'll have to say regarding it, yes. Let's get out of here; I don't like looking at that.", he said, motioning to the decapitated robot and Mike's nearby corpse.

Sarah had already taken her cue and got in the cockpit- the three of us hopped in and we were gone from that place in the usual fashion. Howard leaned back and sighed, Paul looked immensely relieved, and I was ready to kill something. If I'd have known I'd be this nervous, I probably should have literally torn Mike apart to work off the anxiety. I doubt there's any evidence on his person.. but what did I lose? Shit, that was a quick decision, he might have named his backers if he had them..

"Ya know, Howard.. I think I made a major mistake back there."

"What?"

"I didn't torture him enough to get the truth.."

"Wouldn't have worked. He probably had several ways to kill himself on- or in- his body. Torture him and he just dies."

"So I guess Sodium Pentathol.."

"He'd kill himself first. Even if you did manage to somehow incapacitate him, Billy, as soon as he woke up, he'd do some small movement and axe himself. It's almost certain, taken for granted, that anyone doing anything like this for anyone else's benefit is going to kill himself if caught. And if we do get information he was told by someone, it might be misinformation or just bullshit."

"And if it was for his own benefit.."

"Then it doesn't matter now, does it?" We both laughed. Howard popped open the screen, on some random impulse, went to Recent Documents, and found what I've been reading. Paul bit his tongue. I said nothing. "I remember reading this a couple years ago.. and I remember wondering why Edward never used Tom for a duplicate." Paul went into paroxysms of laughter and Sarah just cackled madly. I bent over a bit and just chuckled rapidly and hard, barely breathing. That's just **funny**. "I know, that was just the most fucking **ironic** thing I have ever said, especially **now**.", he said with a grin. That's just screwed up.

He turned to me then, his face turning serious. "Billy..", he began in a still-friendly voice, "I can accept losing servants on a mission or in my defense, or similar circumstances. Comes with the territory. But there is no way- and I mean **none**-" His right hand was gripping the seat firmly, tightly compressing the soft cushion, his voice growing in ferocity. "that I am going to lose any of you to that line of **BULL SHIT!!!**"

Paul gently gripped Howard's left arm. "Thank you, Howard. A lot."

"No problem, Paul."

As the jet continued on its way, I realized something I hadn't thought about before- I was actually being comforted by the thought of a horror I previously would have considered evil beyond imagination. Yes, there's no way out, but at least I'm not going to **die** there...

Chapter 37

"Howard!!", a twenty-something man yelled into the screen. I recognized him at the one who had laughed at Damien's death. His name, Donald Simpson, appeared at the bottom left of the screen. "Good thing you're close. We need you here, right now. Here's the coordinates." A very precise latitude and longitude appeared at the left-hand corner of the screen. It would take me about two and a half hours to fly to that location in middle Alaska.

"What's this all about?"

"A second level's base just got overrun. And the circumstances... are pretty **weird**. I'll explain on the way."

"Ah hell, it should be interesting. This better be worth my time, though.", Howard said evenly, and the man simply nodded before he turned off his screen. Howard told us to get ready, and I went upstairs to dress and arm myself; Paul had turned off the computer and was getting dressed. Black suit, check. Guns, check. We're ready. We went downstairs and saw Howard come up from the elevator, the Micro in his suit; he ordered us inside the jet, and seconds later we were in the air with Sarah flying. The jet's screen flashed on with the same guy.

"All right... where do I start... oh shit, how about with this?!", the guy said, swinging the camera over to the blown-apart entrance to what appeared to be a military installation. An Enforcer came out, but not the usual Enforcer, with a relaxed stance. This one moved woodenly.

"I'm a little teapot, short and stout. Here is my handle, here is my spout.", the Enforcer said, in a kiddie, saccharine voice, going through the song's motions, as a dozen other Enforcers trained their guns on it. As it turned its head I noticed it was bleeding from its ears. "When I get all steamed up, then I shout- tip me over, and pour me out!", it finished, then pulling out a gun and blowing its own brains out as the other Enforcers pumped it full of bullets. I stared on in horror, as if Howard had commanded me to. That was beyond just 'weird'. That was... **wrong** somehow, other than just the obvious.

"JESUS!!", Paul screamed.

"What the **FUCK** was that??", Howard shouted. I remained mute with my mouth partially open.

"That's just the beginning. Every three hours or so, one of the dolls comes out and blows up whatever it touches. What you just saw is our most recent attempt to probe the place with Enforcers. We're not sure what to do now. We've sent in two heavily armored Enforcers, but our recon is getting jammed, and any wires or relay beacons we put in just get cut."

"Okay, what the hell started all this?", Howard asked, keeping calm.

"The guy's name is Peter Brenk. We thought he was just a bit eccentric, a hobbyist with things like that.. until we saw this. He's got a whole factory down there, and he's helped with a lot of our technology. As I said, he's a second level, and we're pretty sure he's in there. But we... god, what the hell did he do to make **those**?! We came after we heard reports of trees being blown up from

Enforcers who couldn't contact their master. When I sent an Enforcer here, they were... like that. And then so was mine. We've managed to keep a perimeter. The immediate threat is gone, but we don't know what to do about Peter, or even if he's doing this. That's why we've come to you."

"Who else is there with you?" The camera panned out to reveal three more Illuminati standing near each other in a specially-made tent, keeping warm and discussing the details of strategy.

"Ah... we've got Warner, Mao, and Tim Johnson at the moment. Gates is on his way too."

"Well, this is definitely worth it. We'll get to the bottom of this. First real action I've had in a while." I hope we don't have to get too deep in this. Battles I can deal with, but this is just weirding me out. Gee, I wonder what tonight's nightmare will be about.

"All right. I've got some other calls to make. Thanks, Howard." Howard clicked the screen off.

"Okay, is there **anything** at all any of you can tell me about that?", he shouted, confused and a bit annoyed.

"Howard, how many horror movies have you watched?", I asked.

"Not many. Why?"

"Well, in the plots of horror movies, violent dolls and people acting strangely are sometimes included for extra fear. What you just saw could have come from one. The idea is to combine the images of childhood- dolls and clowns and the like- with insanity and violence. Which is what's going on."

"So whoever or whatever's down there is trying to scare us."

"Well, I think it's starting to work."

"Yeah.. it is. It's bugging me to hell. I'm tempted to give the order to just turn the place into rubble."

"Yeah. If I were you, I'd blow the place straight to hell. There's something nasty down there, Howie.", Paul said in a partially scared voice.

"No shit. I want to know what the hell can do that to Enforcers. They got... re-controlled somehow. You saw the ear-bleeding..", Howard replied. Paul shook his head.

"I did. Some machine... of some sort down there put spikes into that Enforcer's head. Must have been faster than lightning. You send any more down there without special shielding...", I said.

Sarah spoke up, slowly and carefully. "Shit.. if Brenk's still alive, he's probably hiding where that shit can't find him. Enforcers getting spikes through their heads... I haven't been this scared in a while." Coming from Sarah, that means something. "I can't think of anything that would control those kinds of things and do something like this. I doubt the Anarch or some pissed Illuminatus... might have been that, some other Illuminatus got pissed. But this is beyond crazy. If it **was** that, someone had a lot of time on his hands and a whole lot of hate."

"And/or a whole lot of dementia. We've got our fair share of mad scientists. I just wonder why anyone would do something this.. this insane.", said Howard in a 'Why the hell' voice.

Howard researched Brenk, your basic mad scientist. Interests in computer engineering, purely robotic humanoids (Enforcers ticked him off as he tried to engineer something mechanical and better), and some mind control. A loner, Brenk seldom socializes in the real world, and prefers the company of machines to people. Yeah, Brenk could have done everything we've seen so far. But..

he's obviously trapped himself, or screwed up, or something. This is not the work of a sane Illuminatus, at least not the one whose base is overrun. What reconnaissance could be gathered said one thing and one thing alone: that base was fucked, with giant robots running around doing insane things, banging their heads on walls, or lifting things that were not there. Some of the robots seemed to be policing the place, like guards in a mental asylum. Those guards had enormous weapons on them- weapons that caused Sarah to sigh and mutter.

We were almost there when the camera relayed another image- the two heavy metal-armored Enforcers walked out of the building in the same manner that the other Enforcer did. They moved with the same small, stiff, robotic, very un-Enforcerlike steps, both holding their left arms in the air and waving them and their ear-bleeding (the helmets were broken open by whatever got them) heads back and forth, back and forth, just waving to nothing, goofy smiles on their faces, looking much like a moving billboard sign or a cheap computer program. Then they were blown to bits by two ordinary Enforcers carrying bazookas.

"Well, **fuck**.", Howard said. For a moment I almost asked him to say 'Fuck this shit' and take us home and let someone else handle this. He wouldn't, though. This is what they have a Dominator for, the shit they can't handle on their own. Sarah climbed into the pilot's seat and slowed us down, and we landed vertically on a grassy field.

"Howard, am I going to be in any way possibly useful for this?", Paul asked, not wanting to be involved.

"Probably not.", Howard answered.

"Then let me just stay in the jet where it's safe and I won't have to face those things, all right? I mean, if I was one of you or had a retrovirus or something, I could. And I think fighting them would be cool. But.. no way." The difference between fighting big, mean enemies in games and fighting big, mean enemies in real life is that if the enemies prove to be too big and mean in the games, you get to try again.

"All right. You can stay here for now.", Howard told him, to Paul's enormous relief. Unfortunately, the rest of us couldn't. We left the jet and outside was a big resupply camp, with Enforcers setting up stockpiles of weapons. The Illuminati are regular Boy Scouts. Howard shook hands with an older, hair-dyed man who, although dressed in the usual, comfortable, white clothing of an Illuminatus, looked like an politician or possibly some sort of actor. "Pleased to meet you, Dominator. Mr. Simpson and his other colleagues have decided that they could set up a command post in view of, ah, Brenk's facility." The man sounded like a politician, although I didn't recognize him at all. "They said they've got those things' patterns down to a routine, but.."

"But you're not silly enough to go up there and find out for yourself, right?", Howard asked.

"Um.. yes.", the older man said, nodding and smiling a bit. "It's not that Donald's, ah.." Oh, can it. You're not on normal TV. You can insult him all you want, Howard doesn't care.

"No, he's just more confident than you are.", Howard said, even more confidently. "If he thinks it's safe enough for him, I'm going up there too, because I dodge bullets and he doesn't. Now where is it?"

"About three hundred meters that way.", the man replied, pointing. Before we left, an Enforcer came up to me and Sarah and handed us communicators. Normal operating procedure, apparently. In the direction the man had pointed, I saw a metal structure- apparently Brenk's base- and then a small, semi-camouflaged tent near it.

"Dominator!", Donald greeted Howard, poking his head out of the tent and smiling. "You came at a good time. In about... three minutes, maybe you can tell us if you've seen anything like this before."

Howard's seen a lot of things, but whatever the hell this is, I'm thinking 'Fat fucking chance of that.'

We found chairs and in three minutes the answer was clear- Howard hadn't seen anything like that before, and neither have I. And I didn't want to. An eight-foot-tall figure with a pasty white face, circles of red on its cheeks, no expression, a very doll-like appearance, and a giant, orange, pointy hat walked out the door mechanically, as Enforcers cut it to ribbons with armor-piercing bullets. It exploded, doing no damage- except even more to the entrance, which was pretty much in pieces.

"Shit!", Howard exclaimed. "Why would anyone **build** something like that?" No one answered him, because no one knew. "All right- what kind of strike team would we need to go down there and control the place?", he said, his voice more like a statement than a question. Donald's face became something like a smirk and his eyes rolled back a bit.

"A big one, Howard. We'd need heavy equipment of all kinds, and a lot of time. And even then, the weaponry would probably blow most of everything in there away." At least we're not going to be in danger. Howard's just going to throw Enforcers, machines, and tactics at this problem until it's.. dominated.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Nothing. I really don't know. Peter might already be dead. But he's important enough to warrant it.. the problem is, the kind of weaponry on the ones inside is ugly, and the kind of weaponry we need to defeat them will put holes in the place."

"Shit, I don't know what the hell... he could be holed up someplace, or he could be masterminding it, crazy as that is. But you're right, he is worth it." Howard put his hand on his chin and thought, then stuck a finger out as he seemed to have something of an idea.

"Show me the schematics.", Howard said, in a thoughtful voice. Donald pressed a few buttons and showed Howard something he's obviously been looking at quite a bit, the blueprints to the base. It was seven floors deep, the living quarters being at the bottom and the computer database being on the very bottom. Each floor was approximately 100 yards by 100 yards, not counting the giant manufacturing bays. Hmm. This reminds me of someplace.. yup, the bottom is just like the mansion, and Brenk probably never has to leave it...

"Hey, wait a second.", I said.

"What?", Howard immediately asked, knowing that I had one of the rare intellectual moments known as a 'plan'.

"Howard, you know how you are, when you want to control something, you don't even have to leave your room, really. So why would some introvert like Brenk go up a few floors, especially if something like this happened? Screw 'not on the top', he's probably on the bottom if he's still alive."

His face brightened with understanding, hard as that is to envision an albino doing. "Holy crap, you're right. Donald- can we efficiently nuke that place floor by floor?"

"Yeah, we sure can. We won't even damage the air vents. It's worth a shot. But we **will** lose everything on top, as evidence.."

"The database is on the bottom. Even if Brenk has something we don't know about, the research must be in there.", the older, portly Illuminatus said.

"Then let's do it.", Howard said. Donald, with assistance from the oriental Illuminatus, Sarah, and a few other trained servants, began the tedious process of designing and implementing the covert, slow bombing of Brenk's facility. Since this is a 'military base', any normal hearing the faint echoes

of powerful blasts would assume it's just some tests. Of course, this place is fenced off for miles around. Howard climbed partway up a tree and began to doze off- I joined him. This would take a while. It sure beats the direct approach, though. No way in hell Howie's leading us in there.

It was decided upon- helicopters would use high explosives to obliterate the place piece by piece. No super big bombs, but a systematic destruction of each floor. It took only one hour for the explosives to be shipped in, the temporary camp (and Howard's jet and other expensive equipment) was moved away, and from a safe distance of a few hundred meters, we watched the destruction.

It was a bit like fireworks. One boom and debris would fly into the air. Another boom and large chunks of metal would fly up and fall down. Dust was everywhere as the facility was steadily turned into smoke and ash. The only corner remaining was that of the large air vent.

There was a deep, computerized scream from somewhere inside, which was immediately cut off by more bombs. I thought it was my imagination until everyone around shared the same surprised look. No one said anything, no one would make theories in this place without supporting evidence. It was probably a deluding tactic- someone might have thought we would believe an AI was behind this. Bullshit... only humans are this insane.

And then it was done. The others stayed behind, but Howard led me and Sarah steadily towards the rubble, surrounded by a squad of Enforcers. Large excavation machines rolled towards us, began lifting the debris out of the ground, and carried it away. And then we heard and saw a thing.. a thing I didn't want to see. A metal spike of a tower, five stories tall, emerged from the bottom, pushing up debris.. it seemed to be looking at us, as panels opened from its sides. I immediately realized what it was- and why it was a foolish decision to come closer, in person. I should have thought about this, I should have warned him...

We ran. Long, thin beams of microwave death began spinning this way and that, randomly turning off and on, obliterating everything, chopping Enforcers into pieces as they tried to shoot it. We ran and dodged and jumped and got into the forest, but the trees weren't any cover against the sheer power, and often fell in our way, having their trunks lasered, the sounds reminiscent of a wet log being thrown into a very hot fire during a lightning storm.

One of the beams was too close, way too close- Howard dodged left towards me, but I saw the beam's path get much closer to his arm than it should- and I watched, silently, as it fell off his body into the brush. Thick, engineered blood gushed out of the stump, immediately soaking his whole right side and the nearby ground. I screamed in immediate response, and so did Sarah.

My first thought was 'It's all right, he'll grow it back.' My second thought was 'He'll grow it back, but this is definitely not all right!' I looked for more beams coming our way and saw none- Illuminated missile launchers were blowing the fuck out of the tower. Only one thing I can do.. press the Enforcer button on this and.. "Enforcer, we need medical assistance here NOW!", I shouted into the communicator, as Howard, in panic and shock, ordered Sarah to give him hers and pressed a button on it. She did, and promptly took off her shirt to wrap it around Howard's upper body tightly, trying to stem the flow of blood.

"Blow that thing to BITS!!", Howard commanded whoever was on the other end, and I could tell from his face that he hadn't started feeling any pain yet. It's already being attacked, but losing limbs kind of narrows your thinking a bit.

"Medical assistance will arrive in a maximum of three minutes. What hominids have suffered what injuries?", the Enforcer asked in my ear.

"I don't give a fuck!!! Bomb the place, that's a fucking direct order!!", Howard shouted into his communicator.

"One engineered Illuminatus has lost an arm. He's losing a lot of blood.", I replied to the Enforcer, reminding myself to be calm and precise, as we've always been told in school to talk to 911 dispatchers. Howard was starting to feel the pain, gritting his teeth and groaning, then screaming with full echo in unbridled agony. Ungodly amounts of firepower poured into the base of the spire in an orgy of death, resources be damned. (Besides, I seriously doubt it costs the Illuminati as much as it costs the American government to make missiles like that.)

Howard fell to the ground, clutching his stump tightly, the blood soaking Sarah's shirt as she tried to squeeze the flow shut. It actually was probably slowing down- the wound would regenerate shut before it started growing back. Without prompt medical attention, Howard's blood loss would surely kill him anyway, and I pondered if it was possible to give him some of mine. 'Don't be stupid!', my own voice shouted in my head. 'You want to kill him, remember? You're not being commanded to save his ass- let him fucking die!' I almost- but not quite- said the same thing to Sarah. Why the hell did I call for medical attention anyway, and why the hell is Sarah trying to bandage him up?

My thoughts were interrupted by Howard screaming into the communicator, with his second set of vocal cords only. "Yeah... I'm fucking fine.. come see for yourself.. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

I gave myself a halfhearted explanation. 'I've still got standing commands anyway. I can't take my revenge even if he does die..' He didn't, of course. The Enforcer medical attention arrived in two minutes, and they didn't need any of my blood, preferring instead to fill Howard's body with a special nutrient solution instead, pumping it directly into his aorta at his throat just above his ribs. Sarah stepped back and they removed her tourniquet and bent a piece of plastic over Howard's stump, and taped it in place in a few swift movements, immediately stopping the leak. They didn't bother with a stretcher, instead they simply carried him out, back to the support base, with their graceless, machinelike precision, one of them carrying Howard's fallen arm with a similar plastic cap over it, nutrients injected into the forearm as if it was its own casualty. There was nothing else they could or needed to do. Howard was squinting his eyes and saying nothing, having retreated mentally due to the unholy amounts of pain. Sarah and I looked at each other and we followed them.

Five minutes later, we were there. One of the Enforcers handed Howard's arm to another Enforcer, who nodded and immediately got into a jet-helicopter.

"Recommend immediate evacuation to Northberg Medical Facility.", another Enforcer said. Sounds good to me.

"I'll take that recommendation.", Sarah said casually, and she led the Enforcers to carry Howard into the jet.

"Howard!", Donald shouted, running up to us. "Shit, we had no idea- that was definitely a bad-"

"Save it.", Sarah snapped. "I don't even think he can hear you right now. It's over for now, talk to him when we're all calmed down.", she said, sitting Howard in his usual position next to a very horrified Paul, who had almost certainly been watching on the viewscreen, his eyes wide and his mouth going 'Holy shit...' repeatedly.

"Oh... okay.", Donald said, a bit relieved and a bit frightened, as I closed the jet's door and Sarah blasted us into the sky. Brenk's was an Alaskan base- by Illuminated standards, Northberg was right on top of the place. Paul didn't say anything, just looked at Howard for signs of consciousness.

In a couple of minutes, there were. Howard looked at each of us from right to left. Sarah looked back at him from the pilot's seat, her emotions unreadable. Paul was still stunned, watching Howard reach with his left arm to peel off the tape and plastic covering his right, revealing a healed-over

stump of what looked to be bruised skin. "Holy fuck..", Paul muttered. "Your arm... Howard.. we're going to have to do everything for you now.." Has he forgotten?

"Quite a few things... and it'll be one of the most annoying one and a half weeks of your lives.", Howard replied.

"That slow?", Sarah asked.

"One and a half weeks is by itself.. depends on what Northberg can do about it.", Howard said, and went for the food and water dispensers. Of course he's hungry, and blood loss always makes people thirsty, injected nutrients be damned. Of course, he only had one arm to go after it with, slowing him down somewhat.

"Damn, Howard.. for once in my life, I'm glad I'm not you.", I said, looking at his healed stump.

"Relax.. nothing permanently lost.. not even my pride. But that **hurt**..", Howard said, a bit giddy. Endorphins, I think. Or maybe just plain old relief at **being alive**. If he hadn't dodged the little bit that he did, he would have been killed instantly.

"Howard.. you're not going to use Billy as.. well, uh.. spare parts, are you?" Bad Paul! No giving him ideas!

"No.", Howard replied after a second of thought. Whew. "But I do need him to play." Howard used the mouse to kill as I did the movement, blowing people apart on some normal server. Which reminds me- we didn't get to do any of that here. I expected a firefight, or at least an investigation, but I got nothing but lasers and a dismembered Howard instead. This, ladies and gentlemen, was a prime example of a trip not worth taking. Bugs Bunny, from a WWII-era cartoon, appeared in my mind and held up a sign saying 'Was this trip REALLY necessary?'

We only played for fifteen minutes and left, to the normals' relief, as abruptly as we came. Northberg's covered hangar opened and Sarah casually guided the plane down, a normal plane's descent instead of the usual VTOL blast.

The Day Operator of Northberg called as the plane touched down. "Dominator, your severed arm is waiting for you in a growth tank.", he said, hiding his emotions of relief and worry.

"How long, then?", Howard asked.

"With you? Six hours at most. That was lucky. Any closer and you could have lost some of your lung.", the Operator said, accurately realizing the danger.

"It was going for my whole body..", Howard replied.

"Well, if it hit where it was going for, we wouldn't be here talking about it. We need to prep you." Howard nodded, turned off the screen, and left the plane.

"You ever wanted to tour this place, Billy?", Sarah asked, casually. "He's gonna be gone, we might as well."

"There's something I want to discuss first.", I said, gravely, and both Sarah and Paul quickly turned to look at me when I said it. "The moment he got chopped by that thing, I called in for medical attention and you took your shirt off to tourniquet him!"

"Yeah... so?", Sarah asked, although she was beginning to understand what I really meant.

"So we didn't have to do it! Why, Sarah? You said you'd kill him if you got the chance, did you mean

that?"

"Of course I meant it!", she shouted sharply, commanded to answer.

"I would too! But we did, Sarah, we saved him automatically and without hesitation. Why the hell did we make even the slightest uncommanded movements to save his life?"

She didn't know, and so didn't have to answer directly. "He probably would have lived anyway..."

"'Probably' isn't worth jack and you know it! We could have tossed the communicators into the trees the moment he was hit, we weren't commanded not to do that, either! Without you slowing the blood flow and with medical attention delayed by a couple of minutes or longer, he would have lost even more blood, greatly increasing his chance of dying. My point is that **we had a chance**, and **neither** of us even **tried** to take it."

"Look at it this way, Billy.", Sarah said, calmly. "First off, even with us tossing the communicators, he would have still probably lived. He might have lived even if he **never** got any medical attention. And of course if we did that instead of what we actually did do, he'd control our every motion from then on. Our lives would become nothing more than a series of commands and you know it. What's more, the blood loss might have caused non-fatal brain damage. That would increase the chance of a fatal miscommand in the future, but do you really want to live with an brain-damaged, all-controlling Howard and you to blame?"

"You're right, on all counts, and if you don't believe in freedom at any cost," How any of us could believe in freedom at all anymore was a mystery to me, but I did. Sort of. "those are excellent reasons to do what we did. But that's a post-operation explanation.", I said. Just like the one I made up about the standing commands. "You weren't thinking that when you did it."

"No.. no, I wasn't. Not consciously, anyway. You're saying we instinctively saved him, aren't you?" I nodded. "For me it was an operation and he was the operation leader. That's how I think in situations like that. That's how I was thinking during that whole rainforest business, that he had given me leadership responsibilities. Billy, I'm an Illuminati-trained assassin, the best professional killer in the world with training in group operations." She sat in the pilot's seat, half-turned around, thinking. I looked at Paul, who was listening to our conversation intently and silently. "That's what you should expect me to act like. Not like a desperate servant out to kill her master, because, when it comes down to it, I'd save him again in a situation like that. Of course, if he says the wrong words, his ass is still mine." I understood completely. "Why'd you do it?"

"Instinct. Utter instinct. I didn't even think about it at all. I just saw him hurt and called for medical attention, no hesitation. I can't be counted on either to let him die." The truth of it frightened me. Even if he was holding onto a rock in a waterfall, his commands rendered inaudible by the rushing water, would I **want** to go out there and save his life? Even if I did want to, I resolved, unless he commanded it, I would stop myself from doing it. Dead is dead and I don't care who or what kills him, just so long as it puts this shit to a stop! "I'll probably let him die, but I can't be counted on.", I said, honestly, before thinking about something else as well. "But... why did the Enforcer give just us communicators? Why not him?"

"Because he was not considered to be a part of the operation; he was a visiting Illuminatus. We got them because we were recognized as participating agents. Even though four of them were there, Illuminati aren't expected to participate in this stuff. I know, it's a shitty philosophy, and I should have probably said something when it didn't. So, care for the tour?" I nodded. "I want to take a look at that dragon for myself, so we're going to head east, to the experimental area near the Enforcer manufacturing. If we headed west, we'd go to the medical ward where Howard is," I remember that part from when Paul was in there. "or the educational facility with the engineered kids. Almost all of them are just partially engineered, some more heavily than others." We got into the twenty-seat tram and she selected the experiments department. "I know they're using a lot of our DNA for the

modifications, too, but that's okay. We can kill them.", Sarah continued, casually. Paul turned to look at her sharply. "They're not Illuminati and they're not anyone's property. Their guardian Enforcers would of course attack us, and then we could butcher them in self-defense. Start with the babies, and go up to the toddlers and see if we can make it to the three-year-olds before we're stopped by either Howard or overwhelming force. The older children here could kill us if they attacked as a group, but we'd get a lot of kills in before that." Her voice did not hesitate or falter in the slightest. Holy crap. She's serious.

"I'm not about to kill innocent engineered children, Sarah.", I said, quietly.

"Neither am I.", she replied. "But if they were normals, you wouldn't have a second thought. Think about why that is." Instinct, again. If I put other concerns aside- like what Howard would do or what would happen to us- if they were normals, I'd consider them the spawn of the organization that enslaved me and squish them like so many evil alien eggs. Since they're engineered, I consider them beautiful, healthy children with an eternal bright future, even though I haven't seen a single one. It's the same reason I called the medics for Howard, and, I suspect, at least part of the reason he refuses to cause harm to me or Sarah.

'Then fight it.', the worst part of my mind said to me, cold and dirty. 'Fight this miserable engineered instinct. It isn't stronger than you are. Butcher the children- **command** Sarah and Paul to butcher these spawn of the ones who enslaved you. Howard will take his revenge, but it doesn't really matter. Either you die or you'll have a possibility of a chance to kill him later, just the same way you do now. Or are you intimidated?'

'Fuck you!', I shouted at it mentally. 'I don't care who their parents or creators work for! I'm not killing smart, engineered kids!' "We shouldn't even be thinking about this at all!", I shouted to Sarah. "This is a command, both of you, and this can't override Howard's standing orders, but never harm engineered children- Howard not included- except if you have no other choice in self-defense." Paul audibly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. You might not understand why, but you understand what.", Sarah said, smiling. She didn't explain further. "We're here." The tram had slowed to a stop, and we walked out.

The scenery was typical Illuminated institution- steel walls and corridors. Here the halls were built wider than usual.. either for shipments of large biologicals... or the possibility of large biologicals walking around in them. I didn't see any, though. From what I saw- Enforcers walking around with sealed test tubes and a couple of objects that looked like clear plastic slides- the vast majority of the research is done on the microscopic level. Sarah appeared to know exactly where she was going, and Paul and I followed her into a wide hallway labeled 'D. Draconis'. "And this is...", Sarah announced, opening the big double doors, "...largely unoccupied." It was just a giant steel room with a retractable ceiling, and that was it. It looked like it could easily be built into a living area for dragons.

"Expecting something?", a middle-aged man wearing a lab coat asked from behind us. He had what looked to be a reptile perched watchfully on his shoulder, looking at us through yellow eyes, with what I guessed were the beginnings of intelligence.

"I thought you'd have something to show for this. Is that on your shoulder..?", Sarah asked.

"Just a mature Draconis Minimis, I'm afraid. I can show you what we've got now. Where's your master?"

"Lost his arm and doesn't want to wait to get it back. That's why we're here.", she replied.

"Must not have been forewarned." I got the joke, but didn't want it. Forewarned is forearmed. "If I was in your business, I wouldn't want to stay disarmed either.", he joked, opening a door to a lab full

of scientific equipment (with which a few Enforcers were performing a few repetitive tasks) and a giant viewscreen, through which we followed him to another door to what appeared to be jars full of dragon parts, some badly misshapen. All of them were in tanks full of nutrient fluid. Some of the parts appeared to be trying to regenerate the rest of the dragon but failing miserably. Others were moving by electrodes injected into their tissue, and at least two looked to be rotting. The lizard on the scientist's shoulder recoiled sharply and clinged to the man's fabric lab coat tightly. "Bitey doesn't like it in here. As you can see, we've got a lot of work to do."

Suddenly I had a vision- of white heads floating in tanks, their brains failing in some way, white arms and legs being tested for speed and grace of movement, and digestive systems being tested for efficiency and dealing with various kinds of bacteria, each old model being destroyed to make room for the latest improvement.. "Howard was like this, wasn't he..", I asked, turning. Paul's eyes glimmered with understanding.

The man in the lab coat nodded and laughed. "Guess what program I was on before I started this. So much of our research has been exclusively on humans, as if we should stay a planet with one species of intelligent life just because we ended up that way. It took a lot of work to get the Operator to respect me enough to let me start this." The man led us to the lab's large viewscreen, which he quickly navigated to a growth diagram. From an egg.. to a small flying one about the size of a cat.. to a wingless six-legged one about the size of a bus. Then they'll climb out of the retractable ceiling.. I could easily visualize that, too. Hopefully there will be some sort of padding to prevent the wham, wham, wham these creatures must make. With sufficient armor plating and engineered speed, one full-grown dragon would be able to destroy dozens of normal modern tanks. The regular bullets would bounce off the plate, and how would you hope to hit it with easily avoidable tank shells? It would be vulnerable from the air..

"Two-stage growth?", Sarah asked.

"From a small butterfly to a giant caterpillar. You can't make a large dragon fly, not without mechanical help I'm afraid." If there really is a mechanical solution... steel, jet-propelled wings, and a body that can withstand supersonic travel.. no human pilot could hope to defeat it. This thing would dodge missiles and literally chew F-15s to pieces. "It's just a problem we can't solve with genetics in Earth's gravity. Small they can, but as they grow older, their wings grow back in like the tail of a tadpole. I'd love to tell you about their personalities and all, but..."

"You're just not that far yet.", Paul said, speaking up for the first time in a while. "I want to see one. Maybe even ride one, if it'll let me. A fire-breathing- hey wait, do these.." The draconian answered him by feeding Bitey what looked to be a berry of some sort. The dragon munched it up greedily with its hands (like a rat or a squirrel) and shot a brief, bright-blue jet of methane flame out of its nose.

"Before you ask, I don't smoke.", the scientist said. That would be one hell of a cigarette lighter, though.

"Nice..", Paul said. In so many ways, he's still a kid- so are Howard and I, really- and kids love dragons. Fire-breathing, gigantic, nearly immortal, intelligent... yes, boys and girls, we're going to have a bright future indeed. Paul reached his hand forward tentatively to the Draconis Minimis, which looked at his hand with reptilian, strangely curious eyes. "Can I pet.."

"**No**. He's named Bitey for a reason. It took time just to get him trained not to bite **me**.", the scientist said, decisively.

"Oh. Okay.", Paul said, smiling. "We'll be back sometime." And we took our leave of the man and his tiny dragon. We did take a further look around the experimental wing, but most of it was either so incomplete or so uninteresting (or so **small**, as in microns) that it wasn't really worth looking at in any detail; after wandering around for a bit, we took the tram back to the jet and waited for Howard.

It wasn't an unpleasant wait, only a few hours, and we had the world at our fingertips on the screen to pass the time.

Paul was obviously expecting to wait much longer, as the two-armed Howard (with a full suit, carrying one with one sleeve) walked back to the jet, smiling some. "Holy fuck.. already?", he asked, amazed, as Howard sat between me and Paul, Sarah turning the jet around to point at the hangar's exit.

"Yup.", Howard gladly replied.

"No way. That's insane."

"No, insane would be a fourth of that time. That would also be nice.", Howard said, and Sarah blasted the jet out the door with its usual force.

"Fucking.. you don't feel anything if I do this?", Paul asked, reaching across Howard and pressing his fingers into the regenerated arm where it was severed.

"I feel you poking me." For a fleeting moment I pictured Howard saying 'Stop poking me!' in an Warcraft 2 Orcish voice, and giggled at the thought.

"We found some records.", Howard explained. "Brenk was dead before we got there. We found out how those things were made and what was being done to the Enforcers. Lots of technical reasons how, but no information on why.", he said, shaking his head.

"Then damn, Howard.. other than the arm, that operation was amazing. All that annoyance you saved."

"Yeah, no kidding."

"It could have been worse, you could have ran us down there like some RPG's dungeon run or something." Which would have likely lead us into an inescapable crushing room, an inescapable flood of boiling oil (or trap door opening into same), or suchlike. They haven't finished analyzing just what was down there, but the preliminary reports tell of all sorts of nastiness.

"Was that what you were thinking?"

"Yes!"

"Strange, because I was thinking that too, until I remembered what the better part of valor is. Oh, and Billy, there's something else you should know."

"And that is.." I was expecting some sort of logical, intricate command.

"Our cell division happened by chance." Yeah, and that ooh-ooh, aah-aah sound you hear is the monkeys flying out of my butt! I cracked up laughing. I greatly appreciate Howard having a sense of humor.

"Bull-**shit**! Happy April Fool's Day to you too, Howie!"

"The Operator just told me. Total accident. Took him three seconds to think of what he'd do with you." No fucking way. You have got to be fucking kidding me. Sending the Dominator's twin to be his eternal servant is not a decision you make in three seconds. Okay, either Howard's sense of humor has taken a turn for the worse, or...

"Okay, I laughed already. No joke?"

"No joke."

Rage filled me like a firehose in a bucket, my face twisting and my head brimming with pure, soul-destroying hate. "That **FUCKER**!! That absolute shit-eating fuck monkey! Instant decision for him.. I suppose he's too valuable to let me just crush his head?"

"He is. That is one man I actually trust." I sighed. He has good reason to trust him, too.

"Damn it. Figures. Plans my ass, they just found some luck and ran with it. What the hell were the odds of **that** cell dividing like that? Unless they fucked up somehow, which they **don't**.. How the hell? How the fucking hell?! Our cells only divide when they're meant to, that's one of the key parts of the specification!

"Somewhere between 'low' and 'nil'.", Paul suggested.

"Okay, that's the final nail in the coffin of sanity. Total blind luck. Gotta love it. I knew our places were a coin flip but that.." Let's take the parallel universes theory. For every universe where we do exist as twins, there are.. there isn't any math for this, so I'll just say 'billions'.. of parallel universes where there is only one Dominator. One.. what? Movement of a DNA strand? Something that got activated chemically? They would have fixed it if it was a design flaw. But for the final version, the cell just split itself..

Chapter 38

I was in the middle of the arcade, playing Die Hard with Paul (and saving his ass, not like it mattered with infinite lives) when I heard Howard's voice over the speaker, semi-giddy: "Guys, get your butts up here, because I'm going to have some real fun." Paul and I looked over our shoulders and watched our guys' asses get kicked as we walked out and went up the elevator.

When we got up to the floor under the stairs, we could hear Howard and Sarah talking as we joined them. Sarah was saying "So you're going to go there with no one else in the whole place, sounds like fun, but those things are high... I don't get it, you have the jet for that shit."

"Yeah, but the jet's just predictable. Also there's all that other crap to worry about while I'm using it, you know, the fuel, the risk of being seen, all that crap. I only go up there like twice every three months in it, and it's basically the same, I turn, I know where the acceleration goes, I go pretty damn fast. It just doesn't seem.. well, real. Like a giant video game is more like it, only if I don't land it right, game over. Besides, this is for another reason. I have to know what these places would be like. Remember, millions of normals are exposed to this all the time, and it's their idea of fun..", Howard happily explained as we sat next to him in the regular places, looking at the place we were going.

"I get it, Howard. But what about someone seeing you?", Sarah said casually.

"Sarah, at a distance I'm not all that discernable from anyone else, except for the albinism, which I'm not gonna disguise- too annoying. I can cloak the hair with a good sweater though, and no one will see the fingers. Also their security guards were made ill by a.. heh heh.. 'flu' going around and they had to have some replacements."

"So you've planned all this out in advance... I suppose all the clothes will be normal-looking, you've selected a place where the weather will be fairly cold, and you've got the transportation down too.", she replied, checking out the details on the screen. Cold? Oh, yes, realism. Sweaters in warm weather tend to arouse suspicion.

"Yup."

"I was not expecting you to think of the cold part. You're, well.. well, after the second test I shouldn't be too surprised."

"An Illuminatus. I don't forget the real world." I started chuckling, so did Paul.

The trip itself was very simple. Howard's jet flew to the hidden airfield closest to the place (owned, legally, by the US military), we got out, and a generic (yet certainly souped-up and reinforced) limousine- stark white, of course- parked right next to the jet. There was a handful of Enforcers watching the area- that was it. No one around, no other aircraft, no other vehicles.

"And no normal is watching us at all.", I noticed out loud.

"And no normal can.", Howard replied with a grin.

"You guys are.."

"More ingrained into the system than you thought. Unfortunately, this is about it. A lot of things that would symbolize power.. but just not enough direct. You know better than to worry about that.", he said, as we stepped inside and laid back in the roomy interior. Of course I do. Power increases for the Illuminati. It does not decrease.

Sarah informed us that this particular limo was outfitted with specialized, computerized windows that changed the appearance of what was behind them. We'd look like other people through those filters, she said, Paul almost disbelieving his ears. I had no trouble believing it. Amazing? Yes. But.. still.. technically possible, if you have the time and the money. I briefly thought about this car getting into a crash and then discounted it. They certainly have a contingency plan for that.

After about 45 minutes of driving, the normal-looking limousine pulled up to a gate, which automatically opened. It then drove to the parking lot, and I noticed that there was a spot for us next to the front door- along with almost every other spot in the entire place. When the limo opened its two back doors and we got out, a weird feeling of loneliness hit me like a brick. No one was here. **NO ONE.** I knew that would be the case when Howard first started talking about his plan, but the sheer absence of people- especially at an amusement park as large as this one- was simply another one of those Fear Moments. I knew it would show up in my nightmare that night.

We walked towards the giant rides, wholly bypassing the empty ticket windows. More than one horror story, I remembered, has the premise of a deserted amusement park. Someone should make a B-movie about that. Genetically engineered agents of a vast conspiracy, fighting ghouls and devils and clowns in some freakish amusement park in the middle of absolute nowhere.

The Enforcers who had replaced the guards opened up the too-large, too-colorful doors of the main entrance, and we stepped into.. whatever the hell it was. Twinkling lights and a giant clown face rose above a merry-go-round to our right. A gigantic Old West-style facade stretched out to our left. The larger rides (including a centrifugal-force mega-swing and the largest roller coaster) were to the center. A fountain.. holy fuck, they even dyed the water blue.. was right in front of us. Countless distractions- everything from an arcade to the tourist-trap souvenir shops- were all over the place. Everything was on. Everything was making noise. Even the smells of artificial food assaulted my nose- although the food shops were closed. To describe the net effect of it is impossible- but I'd suppose that's the point, to disorient, to confuse.. the only good thing is that we're the only ones within a very large radius, adding the idiot hordes to the stench and this kiddy-crap would really be bad. No, make that kiddy-crap™. This sort of kiddy-crap™, I remembered vaguely, is an all-too-common sight in the normal world. Not sure why they do the expensive decorations, really. Four-year-olds aren't going anywhere without their parents and anyone above the age of.. eight?.. isn't going to be attracted in any way by this.. this amazing display of dementia. Sarah just looked at it. Paul and I, of course, have seen this sort of thing before.

Howard, of course, had not. He blinked his eyes several times and held his head, shaking it slowly back and forth. "Uuugh.. if I had the time and the secrecy I'd redecorate this whole place.." And were it not for secrecy, he could charge exorbitant amounts of admission for people to watch it. I'd pay hundreds to see the bright red paint of the roller coasters torched off by a flamethrower, watch the unbelievably ridiculous-looking Old West facade get burned to a crisp by thousands of degrees of Micro-induced heat, see the sharp crack of the atomic shotgun turn the hideous blue-watered fountain into pieces of simple ugliness.

And, decades from now, if secrecy finally vanishes and this place is still around, I'm going to ask him to do it just for memories and old times' sake.

"Well.. I'm glad I came here just for that, anyway. It's an art gallery of the disturbed. And the closer you look at it, the more disturbing it becomes. I've never seen this much insanity in any one place.", Howard continued, looking around.

"This place is hell.", Sarah said, sighing. "Guys, I've been trained to react to every strange light, every strange movement, every strange smell- what the hell is that, anyway?" I told her and she continued. "...and every strange noise. You think about that.. and you look around you."

"Yeah.. none of you jump at little shit because there's never any little shit to jump at.. but in a place like this..", Paul said.

"For you.. it might be annoying.", Howard responded. "But for an engineered- no, more like anyone with quick reaction time and a better sense of aesthetics.. this is just plain lunus."

"When secrecy ends, so does this place..", Sarah said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking.", I replied.

"Yes, and we could use the metal to build a far superior one in its place. Come on.", Howard said, and we followed him to the largest coaster, we engineered easily doing a series of hand-vaults over the series of railings where a long line of tourists would normally be, never touching the ground until there wasn't anything to vault to, moving as fast as possible. Paul just ducked under them.

We took a look at the thing from the platform the coaster's carriages were on. Yup, it's big, yup, there are tall humps and loop-de-loops. Paul might not meet the height requirement, I mused, but who's going to stop him? You Must Be This Tall Or Have This Many Illuminated Friends To Ride. Paul arrived at the coaster itself about seven seconds after we did. "So who's going to operate this thing?", he asked. Yes, even these modern ones almost certainly need a constant operator- you can't just turn it on, can you?

"Enforcer, here quickly.", Howard said in an ordinary, conversational voice. Within fifteen seconds, a 5'10", female Enforcer, which looked like a security guard, was six feet from him, looking for further orders. "Do you know how to operate this equipment?"

"No."

"Learn." The Enforcer immediately began inspecting the operator's controls, and found a slightly thick manual in one of the shelves under it.

In twenty seconds, the Enforcer looked up and said, "Task complete."

I hopped onto the first coaster's front seat from the left- Howard's approach moved me to the right. Sarah got behind me, Paul got behind Howard. "Send us around this coaster's course once.", Howard instructed the homiform.

The Enforcer complied, the padded restraining bar fell into place, and we were on our way, slowly climbing the first ascent, which was a good seventy stories up. Howard began pushing at the restraining bar.. with growing, manic force. Shit, what's he.. "**BILLY, HELP ME!!**", he shouted, pushing with all his force, and I pushed as well, not nearly as scared as he was, because I immediately realized his misconception- but I couldn't explain in time, and between the two of us, the bar gave way with a creEEeak-THUNK (tilted a good ways towards his side) and Howard moved as to climb out, about to shout to the Enforcer.

"Don't!", I immediately shouted.

"Explain!", he turned to me and shouted exactly as I had, within fifty milliseconds of me shouting not to.

"They always go there! They're always there for everybody! They're a safety feature, you sheltered moron!", I said, as fast as I could. Paul was laughing somewhat and I just knew that Sarah was smiling in amusement.

"Shit..", he said, as we continued upwards. I'm surprised we're still going- I guess the safety people didn't think of some superhumans pushing their steel-locked restraint bar out of alignment.

"You're not going to chicken out just for that, are ya?", Sarah asked, grinning widely, Paul still laughing to himself. Oh, we can survive the ride if we keep our lower legs tucked under the seats and we push up on the bar.. providing a good counter-force for when the Gs get into the negative.. and deceleration pushing us forwards into the bar shouldn't be a problem. Or he (actually, any of us) can call the Enforcer to stop it.. which is what she probably means by chickening out.

"Not sure calling it would be wise.", Howard said, and I realized that I didn't know enough about these machines to make a judgment call on that either. An 'all stop' thing might halt it relatively permanently, with a very slight chance of secrecy violations- or stop at the wrong time, with such force that even we'd be thrown out. That bar's padded for a reason.. "You should have warned me about this..", he said, looking me in the eye.

"Fuck if I know your logic..", I said, looking at him in return, as we reached the top of the slope.

I had no idea how steep it was going down. It was almost vertical. "Oh, shit.", we all said- and felt the back of the seat pushing on us as we were forced downwards at some obscene number of miles per hour. We did not scream- it would definitely violate secrecy- people might see testers on the coaster, but if they scream in our young voices... I thought about these things, I thought about the people that made this whole Illuminated business possible, I thought about his reaction to the safety restraining bar.. I thought about everything but the speed and the incline. I looked around to my back and left, my full-length hair pushing against my head from the wind. Howard was just looking straight ahead and holding onto the bar (easier for me than him, my end's closer), Sarah hadn't reacted much, and Paul was very pale. I'd probably be very pale too, if that was even possible for an albino.. and then the corkscrew loops came. They pushed us down and to the left- if not for my knees tightly gripping the seat and my hands tightly gripping the bar, I probably would have been pressed into Howard.

"Billy, when this is over, I'm going to command you as to what telling me things really means.." He almost certainly was not going to follow through on that- I could tell by the tone of his voice. And then we both noticed what was coming up next- a very large, very fast nose-downward loop, creating negative Gs that tried to push us up and away from the seats.

"When **this** is over, you can command my **carcass**, you **assmeister!**", I said in the loudest voice permissible, provoking quite a bit of girlish and boyish laughter from behind. Were we normals, we may or may not have actually survived it. As it was, it looked more daunting than it felt, and our power was enough to easily keep us in the seats, although the blood rushed straight to our

foreheads.

The rest of the ride was less thrilling, although the designers made a few slight comebacks later. The other coaster had been moved forward, Sarah and Paul's restraint bar moved up (ours made a faint click), and we all stepped out, shaking off the effects.

"Billy..", he said, wiggling his arms and stretching his legs, "Illuminated safety devices do not work like that." I immediately realized why.

"Howard, Illuminated safety devices are designed with the rider's sense of authority in mind- they serve people who are used to a certain degree of mastery over their environment. This park's rides were designed with the opposite of that mentality."

"Ugh."

Two more large coasters followed, an exercise of G-forces. Nothing intense at all. I imagine that the park would get sued for having them so intense as to really excite us..

"Why haven't you guys gotten on **that** one?", Paul said, pointing to a ride that said Gravitron. I looked at it, wondering what it would do. Gravity.. hmm.. "Don't you remember, Billy? When you stood up?"

"Oh, that's like **that** one!", I realized. "But that one was up in the air. Yeah, I remember."

"Yeah, and the park guy was going 'Lay down! Lie the fuck down!' and everyone else was trying to stand up too?", Paul said, excited and walking towards the ride. The memory came back to me easily. At the time I really didn't see what the big deal was. So I stood up, so what? It wasn't that hard.

"That's right! And if I remember right they almost kicked me out of the park. If they only knew, right?" This is an opportunity- this time I get to do almost whatever the fuck I want on this kind of ride.

"Okay. What the hell are you two talking about?", Howard asked us.

"G-forces, Howard. We're talking about G-forces.", Paul replied. It was a satisfactory answer, and Paul further answered him by opening up the door to the centrifuge, a place with angled bed-like cushions on the perimeter and a light/speaker system on the ceiling.

I noticed Howard realizing what the device did, and I saw a grin grow on his face. I knew he planned to do something dramatic, probably along the lines of jump up and down in a place where all normals can do is struggle to sit up.

Howard called for an Enforcer and ordered it to tell him how fast it goes. Another flip through the manual and the Enforcer answered him immediately. "Twelve meters per second recommended, fourteen meters per second maximum.", it said.

"How many Earth gravities is that?", he asked.

"Users should experience approximately three at recommended and four maximum."

"Oh, of course. The room's ten meters wide.", he said, laying- more like leaning- on one of the beds.

"Huh?", Paul said, baffled, also leaning.

"He knows his physics, Paul.", I said, looking for where to go. Hmm, I want to watch him and I don't want the thing to be imbalanced.. "What's the equation?", I asked Howard, choosing a bed exactly

opposite his to lean on.

"V squared over R.", he answered. "Enforcer, keep these safe." Howard tossed his guns to the Enforcer; I did the same. "Turn this thing on maximum speed." Yeah, like Howard would choose anything else. The machine started spinning counter-clockwise, but the lights and speakers didn't- good, those are separate and they're not going to bug us. Howard was just laying down, waiting for it to spin up, as a metal plate covered the exit to prevent normals from flying out like juice drops from a blender. The Enforcer was able to casually sit down- next to angular momentum where he is, apparently- but for us, the direction of gravity changed, and I found out the beds were on rollers when they started moving towards the sides and the ceiling. Howard grinned, and prepared to do whatever it was he'd planned.

"Is this what it's like to be normal?", Sarah asked. Interesting question. The centrifuge reached maximum spin, and Howard moved his body so that his legs were pointing clockwise of his head. I was about to mirror him when I realized that would be stupid- mirroring him would put my legs counter-clockwise. I had to match him, not mirror him. I put my legs clockwise of my head and prepared to actually get up. That would be difficult- I'd be picking up three of me the whole way.

"Worse in many ways, probably better in others, it doesn't.. correspond.", Paul replied. "But for you it's probably closer to it." As Paul was the only one within miles who could answer that question with any clarity, I couldn't really help him be more precise.

I watched Howard try to get up and walk, and did the same.. with maximum effort, power, and some pain. My own weight multiplied by four.. impossible for normals. But I slowly started walking.. faster.. felt the weight slowly decrease, the world start getting fuzzy, and Howard's form dimming in my eyes.. is this because of his technique or.. no, wait! I'm getting dizzy and blind because all the fucking blood's being drawn out of my head! I knew what he had to do and I mimicked it. I forced myself to start running, a slow, painful plod, then going into a run as the weight slowly became less and less.. then I saw Howard moving towards the center- as I followed him inward the weight simply disappeared and the feeling of dizziness slowly broke up into solid awareness. Of course it did. We're not rotating anymore.

"That's not four G's where you guys are, is it?", Paul asked.

"We're not moving, so it's just Earth.", Howard answered. We ran at an even jog, the rotation a simple treadmill. I love this. First the rolling-rock trap and now this; we're never short on figuring out ways to manipulate physics.

"Heh, we beat this one. I wonder if we could do it at five?", I said, smiling.

"We'd have to fuck with the machine, but do you really want to try?", he replied, with a strong hint of 'Then I'll let **you** try it.'

"No, actually. That wasn't nice to my head. Or the rest of me, for that matter." The pain was annoying, my body voicing its protests at being tugged downwards four times the usual in the form of muscle aches.

"Enforcer, slow it to a stop and return our weapons.", Howard told it. As opposed to 'Stop it immediately and see what happens', which would probably leave permanent dents in the walls and lots of painful regeneration? As it slowed, I noticed Paul finally becoming able to move.

"Aww, but I liked feeling helplessly crucified with glue!", Paul said sarcastically. Hey, beats being helplessly crucified with implants..

"You **did**? I'll have to keep that in mind.", Howard replied with a smile, adding yet another item to the 'Things I don't want to think about but probably will anyway' bucket.

It handed us our guns back and Howard thought for a moment, then spied an arcade and headed towards it. It took Howard all of five seconds to find a machine, hidden among all the crap, that looked interesting.

Oh. Yes. We didn't bring **quarters**. It was wholly ironic - an Illuminatus stopped temporarily by a very simple apparatus aimed at collecting from all and giving to only someone with the proper key. And I don't think he can use brute force short of just shooting the thing, and I doubt he'll do that..

"Damnit.. I bring everything useful and forget that these need tokens.", he muttered.

"Heh heh.. well, you could just.."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do." He then tried to force his fist-blades into the lock on the metal panel holding the quarters.. to no avail. He punched at it with them and made some medium-sized dents with small holes- he could easily punch through, but too hard and he might damage some hidden wiring of the machine. Then he pulled out one of his guns. Guess I was wrong.

"Howie, let a professional handle this.", Sarah sighed and said, picking a bent paper clip off the ground, and proceeding to twist it in half and pick the lock with it. Shit, now I've seen everything. She picks locks with paper clips. It's like she just **knows** where the tumblers are.. and can keep them all up.

We didn't bother to go past the first play on it. It was cheesy, cheap, the guns didn't shoot properly, and there were lots of free hits (and believe me, when an engineered tells you a hit is unpreventable..).

"Worthless. To think real money was spent making it.", Howard proclaimed. We walked out- and I saw things I haven't seen in person for a long time. Normal teenagers.

The Enforcers saw them at about the same time we did. One of the Enforcers said, in an even tone, "Get out of here. The park is closed.", while we took a look at them - a couple of 14-15 year olds and a couple of 16-17 year olds, sneaking in the amusement park after hours to get a few thrills. Poor fools. They'll get a thrill all right.

"Dude.. if the park is closed then who are they?", one of the younger ones said, pointing at us. Of course, the Enforcer did not reply. For a brief moment, I utterly and completely **realized** what would happen in the next few minutes. Howard just couldn't afford to let them live..

"Enforcers, ignore them.", Howard said in a dark voice. We all knew what was going to happen next, except the victims.

"Enforcers?!", the same younger boy exploded. "Who the hell are you, the manager's faggot kids or something?", he said, with some condescension in his voice. Hey idiot, you're making a miiiiistaaaaake...

The first older boy next to him said, with paranoia in his voice, "Ryan, I think they're something a bit different than that. Let's just get out of here." No chance of that.

"I wanna know what the hell's going on. Dude, who **are** you?", Ryan replied, his good old American pride standing out even though he snuck into the park illegally.

"And what's with the fingers?", the other younger boy chimed in. I think that tore it...

In three seconds, Howard had cleared the twenty yards from us to them. In another fraction of a second, his left hand clenched around Ryan's throat and his right hand around the other younger

boy's. He lifted both of them off the ground. "Hey, let them go!", the second older boy blurted out before he realized Howard was indeed holding them off the ground. Surprisingly enough, Howard obeyed, throwing both of them to the ground, then fiercely backhanding that boy. The fool's cheekbone snapped in half and he fell to the ground, clutching his face and yowling like an animal in a trap. The three of us approached the melee slowly, not interfering. Like we'd even need to. Talk about your unfair fights..

Ryan just screamed. "Dude, what the hell are you?!", he yelled, scrambling to his feet, completely freaked out by the Enforcers and Howard's raw power. Howard just called back, "Paul, get over here, I'm going to teach you how to kill today." Paul got at Howard's side in two seconds. Then Ryan made a huge mistake.

He tried to punch Howard.

What happened was easy to guess. Howard could have probably just ignored it and let it land; it wasn't coming fast enough to even leave a mark. But he calmly whisked it out of the air like a frog's tongue on a fly, and grabbed it. And squeezed.

The fist broke like a ripe watermelon, with chunks of bone cutting away large folds of skin. The boy who formerly had uses for it screamed and screamed and screamed, yelling, it seemed, for his mother. Howard let go of the soggy mess and turned his attention to the younger boy on his right, who was trying to crawl away and get to a standing position at the same time. A firm kick to the gut lifted the fool off the ground temporarily, causing the boy to choke out a small glob of blood, and ending his struggles. Ryan, clutching his shattered hand, got on his knees before Howard - and was **begging!** Idiot.. like Howie really knows mercy.

"Paul, punt his face like a football player.", Howard evenly said, pointing at Ryan and stepping out of the way so Paul could have maximum room and speed with his foot. The speed and power weren't quite at our level, but were admirable, breaking the boy's nose and sending him on his back, knocking his skull against the unyielding concrete, causing him to moan half-consciously, his crushed hand spurting crimson all over his groin.

Then the first older boy, so far untouched, started shrieking like a maniac and running for his life. "Enforcers, bring him back to me.", Howard said calmly, and pointed at the fleeing boy. Two Enforcers were at the boy in seconds, each one holding onto an arm, restraining him and walking back to Howard with the still-screaming boy between them.

"That one might have some use... he did figure out you were something more than you seem.", I advised Howard.

"Hmm.. I wonder... could we have uses for this one?", he said, examining the boy, seeming to study his physical features.

"I don't think so, Howard.", said Sarah. I knew that she was right. As per any bell curve, too many people have **almost** enough intelligence.

"Pity.", he replied, shrugging his shoulders and replacing the boy's nose with the palm of his hand. The nose, obeying the laws of physics, was forced to take another place- namely the inside of the boy's brain, which was squishy and soft, and so could accommodate the bone and cartilage with relatively little resistance. The Enforcers dropped the dead body like a sack of rotten meat. Paul sharply inhaled at the death.

"Paul, this is what you must learn. Their lives are worthless, and were forfeited the moment they came in here and saw my face. Had they obeyed the signs, they would have stayed out. Unfortunately, way too many normals get in way too far above their heads. Now, you see the whimpering one on the ground there?", Howard said, gesturing to the young boy who he hadn't

done anything to except throw on the ground and kick.

"Yes.."

"Kill him, without weapons." Paul started kicking the boy's head furiously, causing massive bruises and cracking his skull. When the boy continued moaning, Paul freaked out and just bashed the boy's head into the ground again and again and again until the struggles ceased. He continued pounding and I realized he had made the second kill of his life. "Good. Now let's see...", Howard continued, considering who to kill next.

"Now, Sarah, show Paul how you do it." Sarah walked up to the remaining older boy, lifted him up by the head, it looked like he was about to say something beginning with P, the air beginning to escape his lips- and then she twisted her arms sharply to break the boy's neck before he could speak a word. She allowed the corpse to fall to the ground with a dull thump.

"Dammit Howard, you know I'm not that strong!", Paul shouted.

"Oh, I know. That's not as important as you think. It just means it takes you longer. Now kill this one- with a weapon.", Howard said in his calm master voice (with a hint of cult leader this time), gesturing in the direction of the remaining boy, with a smile on his face. Paul pulled out his gun and blew a hole in Ryan's head with a single, silenced shot, turning his pained expression and muffled moans into a final O of surprise and silence. I realized that I had not killed any of the four victims myself- in fact, I wasn't much more than a bystander, just watching the violence as if it were on TV.

"Howard- did you have to do that?!", shouted Paul in as loud a voice as Howard's 'don't give away the fact that we're here' command would let him. What about the screaming? Well, this is an amusement park, we're in the middle, and they would have screamed as they died normally anyway, their bodies rearranged to make it look like they fucked with a ride. Paul's just being over-cautious.. or he, for whatever reason, still has morals.

"Did it matter? Paul, you're forgetting the simple fact that anyone who sees me is either dead, an Illuminatus, or a servant. And those four were not Illuminati-grade material nor were they fit to be servants, and I could not let them live as anything else."

"I **know** they were supposed to be dead anyway.. but.. dammit, you just killed them like... like baby chickens or something!"

Howard sighed a bit. "Paul... you still have those old morals, don't you."

"Y- yes, I- I guess I do! Even though you said I'd see this.." Howard sighed louder with a hint of groaning.

"Paul, this isn't very hard to grasp, back when you were in normal society, your conscious actions aided the death and suffering of human beings. I think you already knew that, you just didn't want to face it. Every time you bought something, every time you rode in a car or ate a banana, you set in motion or helped continue a chain of events that helped kill or torture someone, maybe someone close, maybe someone on the other side of the planet. This is no different. Decisions I make can kill tens of thousands, you know that. So for your own sanity's sake, lose the local morality." And he was right. What are four dead sheeple worth, anyway? They had feelings, beliefs, personality, friends, families, dreams, and hopes- none of which could save them from The Man's sheer power- same as everyone else. I thought about their death explanations again and how their obituaries will read- 'Local Teens Get Caught in Fatal Amusement Park Accident' would be a pretty good headline for tomorrow's paper. Don't sneak into amusement parks after hours, kids, and whatever you do, don't try to ride the rides. The temporary guards would be chastised for poor performance and a couple would be fired from their jobs for laziness, putting everything on the records. Then the Enforcers would just cycle and business would continue as usual, with a tried-and-true flu/guard

temps routine, or something similar. At any rate, their deaths would be seen by the sheeple as a tragic, though preventable, accident.

Then I realized that Paul's first reaction had been 'I'm not that strong!' instead of a moral one. Maybe he is getting used to this after all...

"Yeah.. you're right. I didn't know either of you had that kind of killer instinct though, even when you told me about those peasants in the first test. You", he said, pointing at Sarah, "I did."

"To kill or not to kill, that's not the question.", she said, smirking a bit.

Howard muttered a bit, called up a secrecy-expert Illuminatus, and told him to direct the Enforcers to make everything sound just normal. The people were testing the rides, some kids got in, tried to operate one themselves, and died tragically. Howard then told the guy that he'd leave the Enforcers there to do it, and asked the guy to put that on the record so that they'd be cycled the right way. The bad thing is, we couldn't keep riding- it was time to go home.

The limo was waiting for our arrival, and we stepped in.

"Not nearly as good as you hoped, Howard?", Sarah asked as the limousine drove out of the park.

"Not nearly as good, but many times as weird. Absolutely freakish."

"All a matter of perspective..", Paul said.

"No, Paul.", I told him. "Normals would find it freakish, if only they looked for the freakishness. But it's a cover for manipulation. They call those things tourist traps."

"If money meant anything to us anymore, I'd put that down on the list of ways to get idiots to give it to us.", Howard said. "A tiny part of it can be siphoned from the controlling corporation.. but that's no reason not to level the place. Let's see.. how many American dollars were spent on construction..". He checked the corporation's holdings with the onboard computer. About 5.6 billion dollars for that park.

"I've seen normal balance sheets before, Howard.", Sarah said. "'Woefully inefficient' doesn't cover it. Don't bother looking at the details of the spent money, they can move dollar amounts around to hide graft, mistakes, and other crap- the real information is nowhere. Even if it was, that still doesn't show how much was over-spent in places- unless you look up every item." Does it matter? Normal money is make-believe. "One of my kills did that."

Paul just smirked. "All right.. for the resident engineereds who don't know how normal business goes, let me explain.. my dad was middle management. When you guys are building something, what costs?"

"Parts and labor.", Sarah instantly answered. "Designs, planning, and a few setup procedures that can deal with secrecy.. but those aren't really considered costs except for research projects."

"And the labor's cheap, the designs are made by the best, and the planning is done with full knowledge of everything that's going on. The parts are also cheap, and I don't care how well you make them. You get them from yourselves, and the parts are made in the same efficient way. No competition. No capitalism. None of the stuff I'm going to list." He took a deep breath and began.

"Lawyers. Stupid managers. Human Resources Departments. Lazy workers. I'm sure you guys do your own testing.. there's another word for that.. oh, yeah, Q.A. Quality Assurance. Waste there. You guys **are** the government- taxes, compliance with federal regulations, that crap. Excess workers. Deadline problems. Everyone demanding more money for their part of the project."

Howard audibly groaned. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"That last one- yes, logic would dictate that normals do the infighting shuffle as well.", he replied.

"Some of these problems might be blamed on the Illuminati- the government shit- but it doesn't matter. Normals make crap, Howard. Normals. Make. CRAP. You have no idea how superior you really are. If you did, you wouldn't have come out here."

"Paul.. I'm not going to again." Not a normal amusement park, but somewhere else..? No problem for him. Just 'I want that place to myself for a few days', same as he did for this.

"Damn it, next time you do something like this, you mind asking us for suggestions first?", Paul asked.

"Next time, maybe. This time, I had the whole thing in mind, it just sucked more than I'd hoped."

Chapter 39

Watching violent movies with Howard, Sarah, and Paul is a little bit silly, particularly if we've watched it for the third time, but the fresh vampire slaughter of Blade goes well with the taste of cooked baby cows. Fido was at Howard's feet, munching on the gristlier parts. Howard wasn't taking non-urgent calls (damn, that makes him sound like a secretary..), so if we did get interrupted, it'd be for real violence.

Sarah was counting something- probably mistakes in combat. But she doesn't see the point, and likely neither does Howard. The point of violent movies is not to display realistic combat situations conducted by professional fighters. That would be boring, particularly to us, especially if portrayed by normals. The point is to show improbable events, physically impossible gravity-defying moves, and over-the-top fatalities. It's cheesy, and a bit weak in spots, and definitely intended for normal consumption, but it's fun. And that's the whole point.

But why is violence fun for us? I know it's a base response. We all want to kill things, even Sarah, which proves that this is a reflex beyond simple testosterone-created aggression. It probably has to do with our meat-eating metabolism, but this isn't a hunter instinct either- at least it doesn't feel like one. Perhaps it's a combination of our metabolism, our superiority, our frustration with idiotic normals, and our desire for simple solutions as opposed to the usual convoluted crap. Bashing someone's head in is just refreshing.

I can feel relieved, though, because no matter how long I live, the rest of my foreseeable future is going to be filled with violence. Free or never free, I'm going to get plenty of it either way. Perhaps after everyone's engineered and there's no one left to kill, it'll end in the real world and we'll just pretend-frag each other in virtual combat of some sort. Or maybe Northberg will rise to the challenge and make monsters just for us to slay- that would be kind of pointless, though. Or maybe among the stars, there's an infinite number of intelligent species, each of which want the universe all to themselves, intergalactic peace being a subject for normal wishful-thinking fiction alone. A galaxy of mortal enemies, all wanting to colonize habitable planets, and if we wake them up, they'll come gunning for us with technology far beyond our own.

I can't **wait**.

The screen hissed- ah, it's a non-urgent communication. The movie continued.

Fido left in the middle of it, going home to his den. There's no smell to the movie, is probably why he doesn't care.

The movie ended as violently as it started, and Howard checked out the communication. A man

answered wearing a black robe and white gloves. Huh? What position does this signify? The name on the bottom was 'Fourth level, Dimitri Luxington'- huh? He's an Illuminatus? What, then...

"Dominator.. I have a request.", Mr. Luxington said.

"You and six thousand other people.", Howard replied casually.

"I believe you will find this interesting. I- we- want to help you in something special. We will devote all our resources to you- whatever you need- so that we may see a dream come true." I realized immediately that this man was not going to get what he wanted, whatever it was. Trying to convince Howard in that kind of language is utterly pointless.

"And which dream is this, Beelzebub boy?", Howard asked flippantly. Beel.. ah. That's why the clothes. I didn't know they had them in the Illuminati- Dimitri is a Satanist.

"The dream of created personalities in genetic constructs. Think of what we could do with that!" Howard looked entirely nonplussed.

"You disgusting, wannabe-sneaky fuck. I knew you guys were after Artificial Human Companions when I was eight. This isn't anything new to me. If you fiddlefuckers want to do it, get the resources on your own, or talk to Northberg." Which would brush him and his group off as casually as Howard is.

"We already did. Northberg has it on 'medium priority.' It'll take years." The man was desperate, but Howard didn't care.

"And your poor, mortal body isn't going to stick around long enough to ever see them in action.", Howard replied knowingly.

The man fidgeted a bit and then decided to use truth, which won't work either. "You've hit the nail on the head, Howard. It's why I came to the Illuminati in the first place. I thought the dream could be realized. It's my seventieth birthday today. I'm going to die, really damn soon, widespread brain cancer." Ah, so that's why he's not afraid of annoying Howard to his own death. With brain cancer, I'm surprised he's sane enough to even talk as he has. "They're already using the drugs, but the disease will eventually conquer." His voice grew soft- he didn't want to talk about it. "They could rip out the disease, but the ones making up my personality will die.. not like it would make any difference anyway, the body is simply too weak now. If they had developed it sooner, and I had done the test earlier, maybe I could have been saved. But.. with my fading memory... I want to see the dream realized. Please.. Howard.. I'll give you everything I own!" The man was utterly, completely desperate, but he might as well have been begging to a wall. It wasn't because of what he's done to the normals that I didn't feel sorry for him- it was because his breed is simply, utterly, on the way out. 'You are not an object of pity by any measure, Mr. Luxington.', I envisioned Howard saying in a clinical, detached, authoritative voice. 'You are simply a dying manipulator to be replaced by manipulators who will never die. Begone.'

He didn't say that, but I was close. "Just because you're going to croak of a highly unpleasant degenerative disease does not make anything more important for me or the people at Northberg. Are there any holdings of yours that I can't already find out about?"

"No." There shouldn't be. Howard's the Dominator, after all.

"Did you already try to do this deal with anyone at Northberg?"

"Yes.. but not with everything. Howard.. I already know they won't make the research go any faster unless you order it. But please..."

Howard's reply was long, but sounded terse anyway. "Look, you joker. You and your ilk have been lobbying like crazy for this. It'll come when it comes. Even if I did put it on the highest priority, you'd probably be too damn senile to even know what you were looking at when it did come. We can't do the brain-cell mapping like that just yet. We're lucky the implants operate as simply as they do, and we're damn lucky we have the nanotechnology for them. But it would take even more decades to be able to create personalities. Think of all the connections we'd have to make. Sorry. You won't see your dream. Besides, there's nothing you have I want." Howard didn't check, didn't **need** to check. He doesn't own holdings, anyway, and parceling them out to various other Illuminati would yield little to him. "Now go follow your own Rule 2." Howard turned off the screen, and the man was not suicidal enough to call right back.

"What's their own Rule 2?", Sarah asked.

"Not telling someone else your problems unless you know they want to hear them."

"Ohhh... a bit hypocritical, aren't they?", she asked, half-rhetorically.

"People get hypocritical when they get desperate. That wasn't his only hypocrisy, by the way. He's supposed to understand and accept natural selection and survival of the fittest, instead of whining for his own way before he croaks.", Howard replied.

"What does he have to lose?", Paul pointed out.

"Not a damn thing. But he should have considered that I can make his last years on earth a living hell." Don't ever piss off the Dominator, no matter who you are. Maybe if you were falling off a building or something, you could press a button to use some automatic system to make him really mad, then you might be able to die sooner than he could have you tortured. I'm just hypothesizing- **nobody**, except the suicidal, the beyond-emotional, or the incredibly stupid, intentionally pisses Howard off.

"I thought he liked that, I mean, he is a Satanist.", Paul replied, half-jokingly.

"Not that kind of hell, Paul. Electricity straight to the pain center. Make him hurt like nothing else can." Paul was startled and I could detect a very faint trace of relief.

"Bad fate. Glad Damien didn't have that shit..." Ah. That's the relief.

"Actually, he probably **did**, he just didn't know about it. He probably got his shit out of a big box of torture items and didn't bother to do research on the shit he didn't understand." Which would have meant that the video was amateurish from beginning to end, which from Damien would be expected.

Paul didn't take that well, which was also to be expected. "Fucking... a big box of torture items? You're telling me that all that crap, the fucking rack, the electrical whip, whatever the fuck that big metal thing was.. you mean to say he just ordered a 'big box of torture items'?! Howard, what the **fuck?!"**

"He could have.", Howard explained. I'm so glad Howard explains things. Even though it might freak out Paul now, it makes it so much easier on everyone in the end. "There is a lot, and I mean a **lot**, of torture devices. He probably had no idea what he wanted so he ordered a mixed bag of shit. I know how this sounds to you. He picked it out at random because he wasn't too sure how to use it until he tried it, and I'm guessing he had all kinds of results, probably driving you closer to insanity every time he tried something. Actually, I'm surprised you're not already insane from the trauma and the assorted mental problems that creates. Most normals would probably have gone total looney tune by now, which, as you can probably guess, makes most of us put stringent controls over the kinds of normals used as servants." Insanity and implants don't mix.

"Howard... I don't get traumatized.", Paul said, quietly. That, I can believe. If he could, he would have been already.

"I know, that's why I put your DNA into the database as prime candidacy." He did what?! Howard never told me about that. When the hell did he do that? "That reminds me, I never did ask- you got any siblings?"

"An older brother, off in college... Howard, you're **not** going to-", Paul said, sharply.

"Probably not. The Illuminated demand isn't as high as you'd think."

There was another, better, reason not to. "Howard, you wouldn't want to. His older brother's a stupid asshole.", I told him. I wouldn't know, personally- I've only seen him once or twice- but Paul's convinced me with his myriad tales of annoyance, all of which look like happy fairyland when compared to what he's been through over the past half year.

"Yeah.. and that reminds me of something else, something I never understood.. Paul, tell me everything you know about sibling rivalry.", Howard commanded. Although I showed no signs, for a moment I almost broke out into hysterical, wild laughter- but I guess this doesn't really count as sibling rivalry, does it?

"Damn, how do I put this.. all right, let's say we have some nations on an island, and all of them are overpopulated and without enough resources. And all of them hate each other," Paul made no exceptions for siblings who actually care for each other; in the normal world I doubt he's seen any. "and some are more powerful than others, and so they fight for their resources. But this is in the modern world, and if they fight too much, a greater 'peace-keeping' power like America comes in and holds them back until they settle down. Then that intervention stops and they go back to fighting, and it keeps going back and forth like that, between war and peace. And they appeal to America to send them foreign aid all the time, and they always do what they can to get more resources, dirty tricks, lying to America about how badly they need aid, that kind of thing. All the time. Sibling rivalry is **just** like that."

Howard understood but was confused anyway. "Now that is the... Paul, that was good. I got that part.. but tell me, what the **fuck** could they possibly be fighting over?"

"Name it! They're what you'd call normal children, anything that normal children'd want is on the list." Paul made a fist and used his fingers to count off items, sticking out his left forefinger and whacking them against it. "Parental affection, toys, privileges, power (of course that's just a bad joke now)... Howard, seriously, if they can possibly get it, the whining will not end."

"That is petty as shit!", Howard replied. To him those things are nothing to be concerned about, and if Paul doesn't tell him why they are for them, I will.

"No kidding.", Paul replied. I guess he's not going to.

"Paul, that is just sad. Any idiot knows that if they worked together they could extort a lot more out of their parents, because they have a really hard time saying no to more than one at a time. From what I've seen, they're stupid like that.", Sarah said, annoyed with normal stupidity.

"They really are stupid like that, Sarah. And you know that.", Paul said, pointing at Sarah with his left forefinger. "And he knows that.", he continued, pointing at me. "And after listening to me say that combined with everything else he knows, he definitely knows that." Pointing at Howard. "And after I've thought about it, I know that." Pointing at himself. "But they don't know that." His left thumb over his shoulder. My turn, Paul. He should understand; let me try.

"It's because it's their whole world, Howard.", I explained, and Howard turned to look at me. "You fly around the world in a plane, dealing with things of world-class importance. Everything here is set up so that you don't even have to think about small stuff like what to eat or what you're going to be watching. Now, listen carefully and try to imagine this. Those little things are **these normal children's world**, Howard. Their whole lives revolve around television, cheap toys, pointless schoolwork, their siblings, whatever friends they've managed to pick up, and their parents, who are random idiots with functional reproductive organs. They have nothing else. Their geography is limited to a few square miles and their economics are measured in single dollars. They see the Earth on a globe but they really have no idea what they're looking at when they do. Things that you consider petty are matters of critical importance to them, because it's all they ever see or deal with. They're governed, loosely or tightly on a generally random basis, by people who have no real idea how to care for them, however much they pretend otherwise." A lot of this was from watching others, not anything I experienced. The agents I thought were my parents were absolute professionals, and next to perfect. "Things you don't even think about worrying about having are denied to them regularly, on idiotic reasons. Their entire boxed-in, shallow lives can be toppled by someone doing something crazy." So can mine, but Howard's infinitely more stable than the normal parents I'm talking about. "So they battle with their siblings, trying to squeeze every last bit of joy or property out of their meager existences. The smart ones retreat into fantasy and wait to grow up to get to see the big world. The stupid ones never see anything else, even when they're grown and have kids of their own. Now do you understand what being a normal kid is, Howard?" He nodded. If I had hours to make this one up, I would have done better- this was the best I could give on a moment's notice. But from the amazed and stunned expression on Howard's face, I think I got the message across rather well.

"Billy, let's play something fast and aggressive enough to get my mind off this for now.", Howard commanded, and I had no problems with that one. Two minutes later, two identical starships zoomed vertically up an alien landscape replete with powerups, enemies, and two-dimensional death in all directions, the difficulty set so unbelievably high that it needed even our full attention. All thoughts of anger or rivalry with anything but the masses of enemies quickly vanished- in a game like this, having Howard's full help was absolutely necessary for victory, as everything tried to kill us at once while we killed them in droves. In about half an hour, the (tough beyond compare) final boss was dead, Sarah and Paul clapped (I hadn't a clue they were even there), and Howard looked at me, relieved.

"Billy, I have an observation to make."

"Yes?"

"That was **totally insane!**"

"I know. Want to play it again, Howie?"

"Okay!" And we did it again.

Chapter 40

"I want total privacy until I say otherwise.", Paul and I heard Howard call into the intercom. That's okay- I wasn't planning to bug him anyway. That woke me up, so I decided to go downstairs for breakfast.

As I opened the door, I heard a strange noise.. a noise I haven't heard for a very, very long time. But these semi-repetitive movements usually are heard with creaking.. oh, yes. No wonder he wanted the privacy. I was wondering when he was going to do that.

"What are they doing in there?", Paul asked quietly.

The door to sarcasm was far too inviting not to step through. "Well, Paul, we've got a boy entering puberty, no morals, no parents, no restrictions whatsoever, with a teenage girl that cannot disobey him. What do you **think** they're doing in there?" I giggled a bit- it was funny, in a twisted sort of way.

"Oh, crap, that **was** an easy one..", he said, shaking his head in his palm. "Somebody get me an IQ pill, I think I'm becoming a dumbass."

"And I'm becoming horny. I wonder if he'll let me do her after he's done?"

"You really would.. oh yeah, keep forgetting, you **are** him. But.. oh, forget it. He told me the disadvantages of having morals and I remember them well. You'll get no blame from me if you screw her." 'Rape her', I'm sure he almost said.. but what kind of meaning does that word have here, or to people like us? Shit, comparing our kills to one rape is a joke. And this isn't some innocent, sensitive schoolgirl we're talking about, this is our Sarah, the most efficient killer on the planet. Her mind is **already** being violated in a way that goes far beyond fucking, so what's the big deal?

Because it **is** Sarah, that's what the big deal is. She's miles above everyone we kill in every conceivable way. Being fully engineered, she's beautiful and intelligent, and has so many different good qualities and so many different skills. Despite her general silence and her operative's nature, she's alluring, even lovely. And that's why I'm going to unabashedly fuck her until my balls run out. The concept 'You know, if she gets the chance, she just might kill you for this' crossed my mind, but didn't last long. At the moment it felt like it'd be worth it anyway.

Howard wanted privacy, so I simply waited in my room, closing the door, until I heard "Privacy over." on the intercom, when I went to his door. He stepped out with a satisfied smile on his face.

"May I?", I asked. I didn't really have to, but decided it was a good idea.

"You may." I closed the door behind me and looked at Sarah on the bed. I've seen her naked many, many times before, of course, but seeing her body never held so much emotional meaning as it did for me right then. It was as if someone had searched fantasy kingdoms far and wide for the prettiest girl, and then added muscle, intelligence, razor claws, and superhuman abilities. She wasn't crying or upset- if she was, I probably would have called it off right there- but instead, she had a satisfied smile as Howard had, her vagina wet with Howard's and her juices. She looked at me- there was no hiding my intentions, my dick was painfully hard as steel- and smiled a bit wider. 'Sloppy seconds', I thought, and went down on her.

There are various perks I've had as Howard's servant- a nice bed, cool games, my best friend back with me, the occasional opportunity to play Dominator- but none of them were anything remotely like this. She moaned as I went in and out repeatedly, my pelvis on automatic pilot. "Billy.. oh, Billy..", she moaned, as we went faster and faster. She flipped us over with a single arm movement and went down as I went up, taking my full ten-year-old length into her again and again. She was holding on to me tightly; fortunately she had the self-control not to let her claws dig my flesh. I flipped us again, continuing to pump as if I was a dehydrated man at a well.

I came- "**YES!!!**"- but it didn't stop me from continuing for another minute, giving her two more orgasms. The moment I pulled out of her, laying down with a wide, satisfied grin, I went back in my head on a lark and confronted the near-forgotten memories of the people I went to school with. '**THERE!**', I mentally shouted to them. 'Let's see any of you top **THAT** any time soon!' I then smiled, kissed her, and went downstairs to eat breakfast. Howard was already chowing down; I took my usual place next to him and started replacing the energy and matter I'd given in the name of reproduction. Speaking of which...

"What if she gets pregnant?", I asked Howard, who seemed to be amused by the question.

"Well, then she has a baby!", he wittily replied. "Seriously, there's nothing to be worried about." He

was right- there wasn't. The kid would grow up at Northberg, and become one of the growing badasses who will one day completely take over the world. And if her operational abilities were decreased because of it, she'd let Howard know.

"Don't be a dipshit, Paul.", we overheard Sarah say from upstairs. "Even if I had become a first, I probably would have done that sooner or later anyway." Howard and I simply grinned at each other and went back to our food. Sarah came down a moment later, wearing her blouse, as if nothing had happened. And what had, really? Just some engineered fulfilling their basic desires.

The day went by uneventfully; the buzzer went off two different times, one with a person with a legitimate complaint that Howard took, and one guy I got who just wanted to bitch at me about some other guy. Yadda.. yadda.. "Shut the fuck up." To Howard's amusement, I told the Illuminated tard (if that only was a logical contradiction..) that since he didn't have specific evidence to back up his accusations, I'd flip a coin to see if I'd kill him or not. (There was no such coin, and he got to live. I doubted he'd ever pull any more shit like that in the future.)

We'd have sex with Sarah every so often for as long as we lived.

Chapter 41

"Hey, Billy. Let's have some fun today.", Howard said, walking into my room at about noon, about a month before our eleventh birthday. I could tell that today was not going to be a normal day just looking at his face, which had a slight smile and a bit of a wistful look on it. "We can keep going until 5:00."

"What happens then?"

"I'm not going to tell you.", he replied. That's new.

We did practically everything- a rather ordinary (by normal standards) breakfast, then games, a long, beautiful submarine ride near curious dolphins, an excellent Japanese animated movie, then for lunch he had Sarah cook a wide variety of exotic food made with ingredients from several different countries. He played in earnest and with abandon, as if it was the end of the world, and he was making sure that I was actually having fun. Despite a few commands, I was. Howard's capable of almost anything, and to have him set himself to my joy like this was surprising, if nothing else. But all throughout, he kept checking the time, as if 2:30 would suddenly turn into 5:00 in five minutes. What the hell happens at 5:00?

"Are you still not going to tell me what happens?", I asked at 4:30 or so.

"I'm so sorry, Billy.", he said, shaking his head. "You don't have to worry about it. C'mon. Let's go play outside one more time, all right? We've got a bit more than twenty minutes. All the time in the world.", he said, and I saw tears in his eyes, and he was giggling to prevent himself from crying. He gets mad when he's upset, not sad, not like this. Something bad is going to happen. Something very bad. "But only if you want to."

"What?" He's said things like that before, but..

"Do you really want to play with me, Billy? You can answer that however you want. It's up to you." For him to say that... why? Why would it ever be up to me? What the hell is going on?!

I thought about it a bit. If something terrible is scheduled to happen (how can something bad be scheduled to happen to him? If only I knew what he wasn't telling me!), then if this request is genuine, it's the least I can do for him. "Yes. Yes, Howard, I'll go outside and play with you." He smiled widely, giggling some more, more tears in his eyes.

"Thank you. I'll always remember that you said that. We'll go anywhere on the island you want." I chose the stream, and we skinny-dipped into a pond. The waterfall cascading down my body was nice, if a little bit on the cold side. Watching the small fish in the pond it dropped into was nice, too, and I saw one of the bigger ones gulp a water skimmer with a plop. And the whole time, Howard was occasionally shaking his head, as if he didn't want to think about something.

Sooner rather than later, Howard looked at me slowly. "It's time to go in.", he said simply, we put our clothes back on, and I followed him back to the steel house.

As soon as we got inside, Howard turned on the intercom, and said, "Paul, Sarah. Come here, please." When was the last time he used **that** word?! Paul and Sarah came from upstairs. Paul looked nervous- he probably noticed how Howard was acting and heard some of the conversation. Sarah probably knew more, but she didn't look nervous at all. She never does.

"Paul, stand right there, facing the camera, and then don't try to move anything below your neck.", Howard said, pointing to a spot on the floor in front of a camcorder on a tripod, with an Enforcer near it. "Sarah, stand right there, same command I gave Paul.", he said, pointing to a spot five feet to what would be Paul's right. "Billy, stand right there, same command I gave Sarah.", he then said, pointing five feet to the right from where Sarah was going to stand. "And.. Billy? I forbid you to look to your left."

"What the hell is going to happen?!", I shouted. At roughly the same time, Paul shouted, "Howard, what's going on?!"

"You know how I can't stand up to all of them at once?", Howard asked rhetorically. "I should have been watching. I should have made sure nothing like this could happen. But now I'm either going to do this on camera.. or I'm dead. And no, I can't fake it. I'm sorry, all three of you. Especially for you, Sarah. I won't be able to save the baby, either." She gasped at that, but said nothing. Oh fuck... no wonder he was being so nice... my stomach contracted, and I forcefully held down my exotic last meal. It made sense. I didn't want it to make sense.

"No way- you're going to fucking kill us!", Paul shouted.

"I don't want to. I don't even want to think about it. This really is the way it has to be. I got the biggest threat I possibly could with the most amount of people behind it. It's pretty much you Billy, they don't want me in two places at once. The two of you are just to die pretty much for their **fucking** pleasure.", he spat out in anger and sorrow.

This was it. This was my turn to do manipulation, to convince him of the bad idea that this really was. "Bad decision, Howard. Very bad. You're losing your best assets, and you know it.", I said, with more than a tremor of fear in my voice. "This is one of the worst things you could possibly do, and you even said you'd never do it. This is foolish and stupid. If you let them make you kill us then you'll be easier prey for them, you know that. Tell them to go fuck themselves and start making examples. You've done it before."

"I can't, Billy.", he said, sniffing. Shit.. when was the last time he used **those** two words? This is bullshit... is he a- no, he couldn't possibly be a robot, if they could replace him with a robot here, they wouldn't need it for us.. "Not this time. You think I haven't thought about this? Uuuggh... Shit, Billy. It's been fun. I wish I could have had you longer.", he said, walking up to me and giving my motionless body a hug.

"NO WAY man! No way! No fucking way!!", Paul shouted, as Howard turned on the camera.

"Paul," Howard commanded him, "be quiet." Paul immediately shut up. I couldn't even see his face. I'll never see it again.

Howard went in front of us and faced the camera. "It is Thursday, 4:55 PM. This is Howard... the Dominator. Termination of servants is continuing, as per the mass request."

"Howard, you don't have to do this.", I told him matter-of-factly. "You really just don't."

He took a deep breath and a sniffle. "Do it to Paul.", he commanded the Enforcer, and I heard a single solitary bang. And I couldn't even watch it happen.

Oh my god no. Oh my god, no, no, no. "**NOOOOOOOO!!!**", I screamed, as I heard Paul's body crumple to the floor. Howard clenched his teeth. My best friend was dead. That's how it had to happen, I guess. That's what Howard needed to do. Oh fuck no.

"Enforcer... do it to Sarah.", he said. Sarah died as she had lived- quietly.

No. No, there's got to be some way out of this. I can still talk him out of this. But how could I? Sarah and Paul were already dead. He decided that he had to do this, using logic I would never understand. This was it. If reincarnation is real, at least I hopefully won't be implanted in my next life.

"Howard.. I forgive you..", I told him. He only smiled, gently.

Then- in super slow motion- I saw Howard point at me, say "Do it to Billy.", and I heard the gun go off.

"Billy," Howard asked as I continued to stand there, "what's today's date?"

Wait- the gun went off- Sarah and Paul are- Totally confused, I thought about the question. Sunday was the 28th, I know that, so... Monday, Tuesday... Wait. I know what day it is. "April first.", the command made me say, as I realized what had happened. "**You son of a bitch!!**", I burst, with a mixture of amazement, outrage, and relief. He went into paroxysms of laughter. I can't fucking believe this. Everything he did and said all day was nothing but an extremely elaborate April Fool's joke. "That was a- holy shit, you just made that whole thing up-"

"That was the greatest, the absolute greatest. Even I am never going to top that, Billy, never. I'll be watching this one every once in a while forever. You can move and look to the left again. Joke's over." Sarah got up, completely unmarked. The Enforcer walked out. Paul lay where he had fallen, completely still.

"Paul, get up.", he commanded, and Paul reluctantly got up. "I know, you wanted to at least fool me a little bit back. Nothing doing." Paul just sighed in response. "Howard.. I forgive you..", Howard said, imitating me, before laughing his ass off again.

"Shut the fuck up, you goddamned asshole!", I shouted, really spiteful and angry. No one has ever been able to execute a planned joke on me- **ever**. "You were the one who looked like you were going to cry!"

"Yes, I was, wasn't I? You have no idea how tough that is to do. It was worth it just to see the look on your face. I've seen you that scared before, but I've never got it on tape. And I don't ever think I've seen you this livid at me before, either."

"Fuck you dude, of course I'm pissed! How the fuck could you **DO** that to me?! You weren't just playing with me- you were fucking.. **PLAYING** with me!", I shouted, and he laughed at that. What I felt wasn't real rage, it was.. just.. he fucking.. eerrgh! I just wanted to get him back! Another concept came into my mind and I expressed it. "But you know, Howard.. I'm actually **honored**. You did all that pretending, all that hoaxing, just to play a really devious joke on me." He only grinned in reply. I would have said more, but I really didn't know what to say. He did it for his own amusement, at my expense, but the **way** he did it was what got me. All that feeling, all those smiles and tears. All of it was as genuine as a Saturday morning infomercial- were any of his shown feelings even based on reality, or did he just make them out of whole cloth? And is there really much of a difference to a manipulator like him?

He giggled and turned the camera off. "Billy... I think even you are going to laugh at this someday.", he said, smiling and gently patting me on the head, a gesture of 'it's all right, don't be too mad'. He's right. In an extremely aggravating way, it **is** pretty damn funny.

"I can't believe you fell for that.", Sarah said. "Seriously. You **knew** better than that. You even said so yourself at the end."

"If you would have determined that this was a joke, Billy, I would have ceased it.", Howard said. He's telling the truth; it would be in his spirit of fairness, and that made me even angrier- all I needed to do to knock him off his big white high horse was call him on his jokery. But I called **him** foolish instead! Arrgh! Had I but **known**! "A couple of times I thought you were going to get it, especially near the end. The real reason I didn't want you to look is because I didn't want to bother with fake blood. Had to use a fake gun, though."

"So Sarah and Paul..", I said.

"Unwilling actors.", Paul said. "Completely."

"I had no idea he'd even consider something like this. I had even less of an idea it'd actually work.", Sarah said.

"Sarah was right, Billy. You **know** I wouldn't even consider just capitulating like that.", Howard said, smiling. In retrospect that's a complete 'Duh!' "But now there is one thing I would like to know."

"Yes, Howard?"

"**Do** you actually forgive me?", he asked out of simple curiosity.

"Now? Hell no.", I replied. Paul chuckled.

"That's what I thought.", he said. "Billy, you have permission next April Fool's Day to use deceit to attempt to play a harmless joke on me."

"Do you consider what you just did to be harmless?", I asked.

"Yes."

"Good." Howard was trying to be fair, although it really wasn't. With deceit at my disposal I could pull practically any stunt I wanted, possibly even scarier, more deluding stuff than this. That wasn't the problem. The problem was him remembering his giving me that permission, or remembering April Fool's Day in general. After this ultimate prank, he almost certainly would.

He cordially invited me to attempt to kick his ass in games as revenge. As we played I wondered if I could deceit to.. no, he'd been pretty specific about that command. But what if I... as I fought him to numerous draws in numerous games, I hatched a truly devious plot indeed, and worked on making it actually harmless. Next April Fool's Day won't come soon enough.

Chapter 42

He really does love us, I realized a few nights later. He loves us more than most families love each other. He doesn't worry about any bad things happening because he **controls** the bad things, by force if necessary (Sarah just came back from killing someone else on his orders, not important enough to worry about, just another fool who needed to die). And of course he does, because for the first ten years of his life he has had next to no human (or whatever the fuck we are) companionship. He didn't even understand the meaning until we were with him for a few days. He won't hurt us because we are ... his friends, to him. Or close. There's another term that is all the way correct, instead of the equality-implying "friend" and the obvious "slave" or "servant", which are also only partially correct. And it's not just some perverted combination, it's a transmutation. Damn it, I will never get any fucking sleep until I learn that word...

...vassals? nooo... ..not lackeys or henchmen or even simply subordinates... no, wrong area...

...damn it, I can't get my mind off this and I don't think I really want to.

It's not quite "little friend"... it's more like..

When I received the answer, my brain took two seconds of its sweet time to relay it to me. When it did, it came like a freight train to the forebrain, with a huge cow-smasher on the front and steam belching out the coal engine.

I sat bolt upright in an instant. Paul, if he was sleeping, woke up.

"What is it, Billy?", he turned to me and said, surprise in his voice. For a moment I pondered not telling him. But he hasn't freaked out yet, and he won't freak out for this little thing.

"We're... not exactly his servants, Paul."

"Then what are we?"

"We're his...", I began, not wanting to clue him in to the full extent of the horror. I did anyway.
"..imaginary friends."

"Imaginary friends? But we're real..."

"Physically. I can't explain. You'll have to figure it out."

"I...", he started, his normal brain on the road to understanding. Then he grasped it entirely. "I understand, Billy, and I did not need to hear that. But it is true."

"But you know what I mean."

"Yeah... yeah, I do."

Everyone has had imaginary friends at some point in their lives. Some of us still have them, and some of us let them take us over and become alter egos or multiple personalities. Others talk to them, seeking advice from a third party when there is no third party in the real world. Still others act out fantasies with them, pretending they have a brother, a new best friend, a video game character, or a servant, someone who will never disobey them because he is a construct of the mind, and his attitude and behavior can be changed at will.

Through a certain type of thinking- not quite doublethink, but close- the friend comes to terms with his servitude and sometimes begs his creator for him not to change him, hurt him, or worse- forget about him. Because as soon as that friend is dismissed, he is **gone** and he won't be coming back unless the creator summons him back up again. What happens depends on the maturity and brainpower of the creator. Young ones are likely to summon up semi-permanent friends and only begin to notice the incorporeality as they get older. Depending on how quick they are to grasp concepts, occasionally there is a rift, an overlap of beliefs. The child knows that the friend is not real, and yet there is still compassion, a love of sorts. Depending on how fast and how logically the child can think, the child rationalizes the actions of the friend. And of course the top priority for any intelligence is self-preservation, so the imaginary friend immediately starts imploring not to be sent away simply because the child knows he's not real. Older children- sometimes teenagers, sometimes even adults- consciously summon up imaginary friends because they feel completely alone and have the imagination, brain capacity, and sheer want and willpower to continue with their fantasy. If the tender moments could be put into a drama, it would blow everything else straight out of the water and tear Emmy Awards out of the hands of everyone else, because there is no greater love than love for one's own thoughts, one's own constructs, things that are a part of the lover.

Which sums this up exactly, only we have physical form and Howie doesn't need to keep thinking about us for us not to vanish into thin air. Other than the laws of physics (which we beat around anyway), there are no rules. There are absolutely zero things on this planet that are stopping him from just summoning me up and asking me to come and play. Not a single thing I can do will change it- I've become immune to every other form of mind control, including those done by the self. Nothing I can do would stop my fate, should he choose to inflict it, but he won't- but I feel compelled to beg anyway, beg for my continued existence.. as his imaginary friend. And the more I thought about that, the more I felt drawn to him, to make him absolutely sure that I (I could hear Paul screaming "Hey!" in my mind as I thought in the first person singular) ... okay, **we** are his best, best friends on the face of the planet and he would absolutely never want to do anything to us, and also to make absolutely sure that he never dies because when he dies, we vanish forever. (Which is about right.) We love you, Howie. The tattered remains of my freedom illusion cried out and I stomped on them with a titanic robot boot. Shut the fuck up, I screamed at them. You don't apply here. Nothing does, except what he wants at the moment, which he eventually gets.

"He could call me in there right now and make me act like his best friend.", I said. Howard's never commanded any such thing, but that means nothing. He does what he wants. "We only exist the way we do because he cares about us." Paul nodded, silently, his eyes closed. "But I guess that's the difference between him and some asshole.."

I held Paul tightly- he snuggled next to me as he was likely thinking the same thoughts and had a good deal of fear in them- and I drifted off to sleep and the land of nightmares.

"Billy.. you'll always exist for me.", dream-Howard said, and the way he said it was absolutely demonic. Mere words cannot convey the overarching sense of fear, the dark **presence** in my nightmares that has no compare in the real world. "You're always going to do whatever I imagine, and there's so much I can imagine! So much I can do with you, so many places to go and things to see!" Howard may say things like that in the real world, but this was much, much worse. "Let's start by having you.."

"Billy, come into my room." I awoke and screamed like Satan had led a phalanx of hellbeasts right out of my throat.

"Billy.. dude, that wasn't a nightmare. He really did call you.", Paul said, freaking me out further.

"Whaat?! I don't believe this shit...", I said, but that was an exaggeration- I did believe it, and so I had to obey it.

"Howie.. if I wasn't..", I said as I walked into his room, gesturing to my forehead and the implants therein, "you would never believe this."

"Believe what?"

"Paul and I were talking about you doing something like this before I went to sleep."

"Paul, how long ago was that?", Howard asked over the intercom. Paul didn't know; he'd fallen asleep too. "What else were you talking about?"

"Imaginary friends, us, and you. I'm not sure how to explain."

"Oh **FUCK!**", he shouted, surprising me. "Okay, this telepathy shit has gone from interesting to strange to all-out weird." This is already all-out weird. "If I really believed in that shit, it would be time to break out the Zener cards. But if you've been thinking the same things I have, you already know what I'm going to say. I'm lonely as hell, Billy, and Sarah's jetlagged, and as you have probably guessed, I don't want to be alone. Come here, dude. Lie down. I know you won't scream again tonight." In my nightmares, he said such similar things, and they were horrifying. In the real world, his voice was casual, friendly, and gentle, as if he'd discovered some great font of happiness and joy and wanted to share it with me. Genuine care, from someone with ultimate power and dire plans for the world. I looked into his eyes, he looked back into mine, and we both chuckled and fell asleep. About an hour later, Fido scratched on the door, asking in doggish terms to be let in; Howard did so, and the dog eagerly hopped into bed with us, enjoying our warmth. Howard gently put his normal-killing arms around both me and his dog and we went back to sleep.

Chapter 43

"FWAAAAHAHAHAHA!!!" was the first thing I heard from him in hours, his laughter reaching me through the intercom into my room at about 4:30. Recently, I've been trying to avoid him, trying to live the good life while staying out of his way- of course, he uses me for the companionship every so often. Oh well. That is my curse. Death goes on.

"Hey, Billy. Check. This.", he shouted, still laughing his ass off. I came down next to him for what was probably the thousandth time, taking my requisite spot at his right side, Paul sitting on the far right end of the couch and Sarah to his left, and looked at the screen. A news reporter - not Illuminated - was attempting to scream at the public while not screaming at them. From what I could understand, two high schoolers had walked into their school with black trenchcoats and heavy weapons, blasting away an undisclosed number of people and then themselves.

"What the fuck?", I blurted out. Howard laughed even louder. Paul was just staring at the screen, somewhat confused as to what and why. The news reporter continued droning on about the

families and the victims, blah blah blah, and then got into specifics. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold also had a number of unexploded bombs inside.

As soon as she heard that, Sarah laughed her ass off. Hard. I've seen her laugh like that before, but it's always a surprise. Her voice changed in pitch rapidly, and she sounded giddy as hell.

"Unexploded.. unexploded.. all that trouble and they can't even make bombs that-hehehehahahaha!!"

"Duuuummmmmmb fuckers!", Howard said in his judgmental voice. "Up, UP, to 25 people! 25 people, all that weaponry. And the 1999 Darwin Award jointly goes to Eric and Dylan for their spectacular display of ultimate stupidity. Nice try, though." After a few minutes, the bitch got repetitive, so Howard turned off the screen. We got most of the details, which was enough- he wouldn't have any trouble finding anything more on this one.

"Okay, I'm confused.", he said, ceasing his laughter. "Why did they do it?"

"Revenge?", Paul suggested.

"Yeah, **that's** some revenge. I guess with normals, everything's weaker, even the body count.", he replied. Paul acknowledged that.

"Mental illness and revenge. Also probably family history, and just bad luck. Someone's gotta do it.", Sarah suggested evenly. "Can't think why they made bombs that don't even fucking explode.", she continued, laughing again.

"I have no fucking idea. Probably lots of hate and not enough patience or knowledge. They killed themselves, they probably meant to do it like that in the first place.", I said. Some things just don't make sense. If you want revenge, fuckers, attack the government, not your teachers and definitely not your peers. Oh well. They, after all, are only human normals, and they are expected and allowed to make huge mistakes.

"All right, I hate asking for this stuff, but.. what is a good way to put some spin on this? I know there's going to be 'public outcry' no matter what **we** do. But I think the Illuminati can use this."

"They automatically will.", Sarah said immediately.

"Yeah, but that's just the ordinary stuff. I mean something more.. cohesive. Something to further our plans a little more than usual."

"You mean like gun control.", she said.

"Yeah!", he said, grinning his usual evil, friendly grin. "But we can do more than that. What would people like to believe caused this violence, other than just the guns?"

"Heavy metal. That's probably what they listened to.", suggested Paul.

"They were Hitler freaks, right? Associate them with the far right, if you can do it.", Sarah said after a moment's thought. Then I had an idea.

"Hold up. Did they play any violent video games?", I suggested.

"Violent.. strange as that is, that might be a good one, Billy, I think you're on to something.", he said, grinning wider. "More censorship. So easy to do after something like this. Make more control wanted and needed, not just video games, but everything. Music, television, all that, and not just the usual stereotyped 'evil' stuff either. I'm going to do something more. I'm going to make people everywhere paranoid about what the big and horrible media is doing to their children, and I'm going

to do it in a way that will benefit the Illuminati." Of course, the media had already targeted video games, along with everything else, that's normal procedure. It's just what they eventually shut up about that's important.

"Yeah, but **you** don't want to put them out of business do you?", Paul said.

"Oh, don't worry about that. They'll stay in business with the fake rebellious crowd and everyone who likes home violence, I'm not going to legalize a thing. It's just that I don't want a complete lack of societal, tacit, unenforced- but important nonetheless- controls. And you know why."

"Lead down the road to anarchy, wouldn't it?"

"Close enough. Remember, it's not the stuff itself that's important- games, guns, television- but the underused minds of the sheeple consuming it." Howard then proceeded to gleefully call upon various members of the Illuminati to make his dream a reality, stating the primary goal of publicly approved censorship and the secondary goals of fear, stigmatization of sub-cultures, and even more dependence on government (all around the world, too- amazing what global media can do for local things), using the threat of another school shooting to prod the masses into easy compliance, using the multi-cyclical method he's told me about. Some of the people on the other end raised some eyebrows, some grinned, none dared to question him, as he copied his message and distributed it to every person he felt appropriate, watching their reactions with his steady gaze, making things easier on every Illuminatus by creating a foundation for further control. Which is what he does- let them do the specifics, but added generalities can be a huge boon. It's obviously worked so far..

"Ahhh... all right. That was easy enough. Let's go rock some normal Team Fortress server." And so we did, cracking Trenchcoat Mafia jokes and semi-inadvertently spreading them all over the Internet. Let's rename it to Carbine High School! Maybe these two should have picked up some tips from Keanu Reeves, eh? I guess the phrase "one shot, one kill" didn't go over too well with them. Trenchcoats: \$200. Guns: \$2000. Ammo: \$100. Pipe bombs: \$70. The look on your classmates' faces as you blow them away: Priceless. There are some things in life you can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard.

Mealtime came a few hours later, and this time Paul actually helped himself to a lot of food, not discouraged by being around engineereders who eat three times as much as he does. Mmm, veal, yams, down the throat- a good meal is the third most pleasurable thing for me, following a good kill, which follows a good fuck.

The screen buzzed, Howard answered it, and a fourth-level wearing an MTV hat (I wouldn't begin to ask why..) appeared on it.

"Master Howard! I was wondering if you could spare a few minutes."

"Just start talking."

"Howard, your plan, something about it just doesn't make sense." Which never seems to stop them from working.

"Hold up. Who the hell told you I had a plan?"

"Get off it, there's no other way it could have happened. I watch the news too."

"It's that obvious already?"

"Yes it is. You got every major news channel, Howard. I can't find anything else anywhere. But.. what do you plan to gain with this?"

"What do you mean, what do I plan to gain?!", Howard said, snickering a bit. "Isn't it bone-crunchingly obvious?"

"But.. Howard, you know what happens when you prod a subculture like this! This is self-defeating!"

"Not the way I'm doing it. You see, that isn't my whole plan. The media are going to circle around it, sometimes vilifying some parts of it and holding harmless others, and I'm going to keep bouncing this back and forth between subcultures, video games, and guns, and generally make the sheeple dislike all three. It's like taking care of a garden, you have to spread everything equally. And since there isn't anyone outside us with lots of clout that likes all three, any opposition will just be swept into the same whirlpool. And then when I'm all done, I'm going to have you guys say it was never any of their faults, when everyone already has it firmly into their brains that they're to blame."

"Oh... geez, is that the "multi-cyclical method" I was hearing about?" He nodded. "Sorry.. Howard.. I didn't mean.."

"Relax. I didn't make it complicated, I just told everyone basically what to do. They make it complicated with extra details, like it should be, when they start cooperating and seeming to compete at the same time, and sometimes they add their own goals to the mix. No normal would waste that much time trying to figure it out. I just let the bureaucracy work for me. So you saw the complicated part. You're not supposed to know as much as I do, remember?"

"I.. I understand, Howard. Thank you." He turned the screen off and I started pondering everything that was said. Where do we want you to go today? Really simple when you think about it. One guy arguing one side of an issue can be convincing. A few guys arguing 'all' the sides of an issue, all controlled by the same organization, is all-encompassing. We either control you more this way, or we control you more that way, now which is it?

"All that crap over a max of 25 kills...", muttered Sarah. "Damn, I don't get how anyone can see this as important. Sheeple will be sheeple, I guess.", she said, shaking her head gently and sighing a bit. That's my question.

"To the public, it's just a number.", I reminded her. "To them, the important thing is that people died. One death is a tragedy and a million deaths really is just a statistic. Their oh-so-precious babies got slaughtered like pigs and now they want to 'do something' about it. And of course they appeal to Big Brother, and Big Brother gives them exactly what they want." Which is more control, all around. The 'different' kids will get even more pressure, to prevent any of them from actually being opposition in the future. The gun industry will suffer. And everywhere- even places far from where it happened- there will be finger pointing and blame all around, with everyone appealing to their Master, the government, for help- all because a couple of lunatics decided to do a crappy job of exterminating their school. The fact that this entire system of manipulation works is no longer a surprise to me. The fact that it works based on principles, based on proven facts about humanity, and can be refined into a science when it needs to be, is no longer a surprise to me. The fact that no one on the business end of it knows what's going on is no longer a surprise to me. The fact that it works so **well**.. is no longer a surprise to me either. Shit.. I should have been wearing one of those trenchcoats, teach these assholes what killing's all about...

He checked it out the next day and we found out that only thirteen people got put to the axe.

Chapter 44

The nightmare was particularly horrible, but entertaining in a way. It featured pain, horror, and a shock I didn't recognize at first- shock I felt only once before... when was.. ah. When I was finally brought here and the mask was uncovered, that's when. But why now? Why the horror.. why the fuck.. the earth revolves around the sun once, what is that supposed to mean.. what's being done,

what's this evil, what's this pain, PAIN, PAIN NO STOP IT HOWARD -

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAdamnit." Ow. Vocal cords. I hate that. One can get used to the fear. A regenerator can not get used to the pain of double vocal overload from extra-strong lungs that comes from the daily dose of reflex screaming. But why the shock now? Why today? What is today, anyway? I clicked on the little time icon on the computer and it read 8:50 PM, Tuesday, April 27, 1999. Which is.. of course. I know what today is- how could I forget? We were preparing yesterday. It's my - his - our birthday. I wonder what he's getting this time. More servants? I wouldn't mind, really. More power? I'm not even sure how that's possible. A larger sum of some dead Illuminatus's reserved holdings to distribute? A bigger gun, maybe a new Micro? Who the fuck knows? Even he doesn't know, even the people who sent the presents don't know what the other ones are. It's just going to be like the last one, only this time he's having friends over. Or, to be precise, the high-power boys and girls who like to think they're his friends, some of whom might actually roughly be considered that. Howie's definition of 'friend' is very fucked up to a normal and definitely a part of my nightmares, but at least it's consistent. And sycophants do not qualify.

I realized I'd had my nightmare scream at the end of my usual sleep instead of in the middle, and laid back down in bed, thinking. A couple of minutes later, Howie said over the intercom with some strange happiness in his voice, "Billy, wake up, wear all black, and go down to the dining room."

"I suppose they'll **all** be there?", I asked as my body continued to fail to listen to me for exactly one year straight. Every boy and girl of the Illuminati, under the age of 17. Which isn't **that** many (recruitment usually takes those in their 20's), but it's a good sum- forty? Fifty, maybe? Exactly how many has Northberg been producing? Howard had made it clear that only actual Illuminati went, not the privileged stupid brats of them who simply couldn't make the cut to have any real power.

"Probably. Sarah made an extra-large cake. There's quite a few of them down here, not yet all though."

I finished putting on the black suit- it's new, I can tell- and went down to find out. Paul, the eternal early riser, was already there, checking identities of the entrants. I doubted they'd all come, considering Howard's Illuminated body count. Their parents probably forbade them, or they were simply too scared. Of course, since many of them have near-Howard physical power and are actual Illuminati, they can, of course, do whatever they want- any parental control is either a cheap excuse to avoid Howie or they have serious self-esteem problems.

Howard had already opened one present, but it appeared to be all he wanted right then, and he was already wearing it- the one formal garment of the Dominator. Only this time, in a very slightly larger size, built for an eleven-year-old instead of a 128-month-old; the fabric of these suits does stretch, but not perfectly. And I'm certain the one in my closet was recently replaced just in case I need to impersonate him again. He wore it and a smile- a smile devoid of most of the evil I'm used to seeing with it. He then told the Illuminati to sit near their servants and not to try to position themselves close to him.

As I walked to the dining room (which was set up for a few dozen people now), I noticed that there were no helicopters, planes, or boats on the horizon. "Looks like no one else is coming, Howard.", Paul said.

Howard nodded, then gestured at me, at the seat next to him, and I took it and waited. He then gestured at Paul, at the seat to my right, and Paul sat down there, a bit nervous.

Sarah brought in the cake, partially balancing it on her pregnant belly, and the baked mass was positively enormous, for all the gluttons to eat. There weren't any candles on it; 'Happy 11th Birthday Dominator Howard' was written on it in big letters of icing. He gestured at her, she took the other seat next to Howard and I could almost feel her wanting to sneer at them, to let them know that she should be wearing white, to possibly break their necks like sheep. And physically, it

would be so gloriously easy, as our normal-killing days in the tests proved. Or maybe not. I'm not sure just how powerful these children are compared to us..

Some latecomer opened the door, and everyone turned their heads to look at him. "I took a sub.", he explained, as he took one of the few remaining seats at the table. Some of the seats remained empty.

"Is it four hundred degrees this time, Sarah?", Howard said with sarcasm. A couple of kids on the other side of the table began to snicker, although there's no way they could even begin to get the year-old joke.

"No, probably about two hundred in the middle, though." Everyone in the room salivated as the cake began to smell. Like sugar, spices, and flour. But that wasn't the only smell- the room reeked of power games, manipulation, lies, fear, all sorts of weird shit, and everyone's favorite- desecration and subjugation of everything normals hold dear. The might and force of the Illuminati are governed in part by a classroom-sized bunch of kids, free from most physical ailments, all who hold no qualms against slaughtering people to gratify themselves. I wouldn't be surprised if this bunch started singing 'We are the world' impromptu. After all, they're the only ones it applies to. Another annoying song for the elementary-schoolers; another fact of life for the real rich kids. As a point of fact, I can remember some of the lyrics... they absently played in my head as the party went on.

We are the world... we are the children...

"All right, is there anything any of you manipulators wants to say to me? Don't wait until the end of the party, guys. I only have two ears, there's 43 of you, and I don't want people crowding for whispering space." There was a general chuckle.

"Are you really immortal?", chirped a kid from the middle who looked about six or seven. He obviously wasn't qualified to be at this party more than half a year ago, and considering he has to ask that, I'll assume his parents made the fatal mistake not to thoroughly engineer him. Some of the other children looked at him oddly, obviously assuming that he'd already know.

"Yes. Unless someone blows me into little pieces or something, I will live forever. Also I regenerate, and no, I don't give demonstrations." There was general laughter.

We are the ones who make a brighter day

"Howard, what **really** happened to Damien?", a twelve-year-old asked, with a slight smirk on his face.

"It's all in the public records. There weren't any lies or even any obfuscation of the truth. I know, it's pretty fucked up. But the world has one- wait, actually five less assholes, everyone learned their lesson, and I got a new servant out of the deal." A general chuckle and a nodding of heads. "Any more questions?"

so let's start giving

"Are you the anonymous asshole who keeps kicking my ass on our Quake 2 deathmatch server?", asked a ten-year-old Oriental boy, who was almost certainly partially engineered. Some kids cracked up in glorious laughter, including the twelve-year-old who previously spoke.

"As a matter of fact, yes I am." Some quiet 'ooh's. That's not perfectly accurate; sometimes it's me. Or both of us, in which case all kinds of ass gets kicked.

There's a choice we're making

"**I hate you!**" A gale of laughter swept the room, with everyone in it except us the servants. After all the blood Howie's spilled, someone loudly complains to him about his performance in some first person shooter. Figures.

"Oh, it's not a fair fight, remember? I've got a reaction time of next to nothing and even my eyes see more frames per second than yours." The kid groaned. Some of the other, younger ones grinned; apparently their skills are engineered closer to Howard's. "Any more questions?" There were none.

We're saving our own lives

"Sarah, Billy, pass out the cake." Sarah cut it into many equal pieces (a few of the kids noticed her skill with a blade) and I passed a piece- about a third of it total- to each of the salivating faces of the world controllers and their handful of implanted servants, with the first to Howard and the last to myself. Practically all of the masters and some of the servants (myself included) ate with unrestrained greed, paying no attention to any culture's manners; just open mouth, insert cake. Even if there were any adults around, no sane one would have dared tell any of them what to do, lest they get a lead enema or, better yet, systematically tortured to death in Howard's underused cellar.

It's a choice we're making

Some of them did come closer to whisper assorted private stuff into Howard's ears. Most of it was technicalities and random personal questions, some involving us and assorted sexual/social practices, most of those involving abusive S&M. The predictable stuff. No, kids, I don't suck his dick. No, kids, none of us has, as of yet, been forced to kneel before him. No, kids, he doesn't need it. Only one of them was actually begging for power, and he just got laughed at instead of thrown across the room at fifty miles per hour. Fido was hanging around, getting under the table- Howard motioned for me to pass him a piece too. He ate it with his usual ferocity, as the feet under the table idly tickled his furry back.

Just you and me...

Have you ever seen a flock of sheeple children at a birthday party? I'm certain you have. This was almost exactly like that, only there were no bullshit party hats, no one dressed in uncomfortable clothing (okay, so maybe that one girl's dress just **had to hurt**, but she did it herself and had sex appeal in mind), there were no obvious cameras, the screaming was more political and directed, and the birthday boy is an eternal badass surrounded by servants and intelligent young manipulators instead of some nerd surrounded by whiny parents, relatives, and shit-faced urchins. The atmosphere was one of gaiety and cheer, instead of the usual foolishness and who-struck-John. In a way, it was all somehow refreshing, although I haven't been part of the normal world for a year. There was no screaming, no whining, no begging, no tattling, and definitely no annoying, harmless fights- if step one was a fist in this crowd, step two would be a bullet or several, or maybe Howie would step in and take the fool apart piece by bloody piece. No Illuminatus fucks around with that, especially not the kids.

Then the party broke up a bit and everyone spread out around the mansion. A few girls broke off in a group of their own, to a random corner of the main room. An assorted group of boys and a girl went down the elevator. But most of them hung around Howard- they didn't approach him directly, but they always stayed near. We finished eating at the same time, and people started talking to Howard some more. I casually got up and walked into the living room, hoping that I'd be able to talk to a few servants.

I found an Illuminatus who wanted to talk to me instead. "Hello, Billy.", the brown-skinned boy said, his two younger female servants next to him. From.. India, I'm guessing, although he's not wearing a turban. He might be partially engineered, but it's hard to tell.

"Hello.", I replied, a bit off-balance. Illuminati don't usually talk to me if they know who I am, and this smiling, brown-skinned boy is from a different culture, which may or may not have anything to do with where he's actually from. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"It is Hadji, friend.", he said as if he were an equal. Probably, in his mind, I am. I'm close to the Dominator, after all. I shook his hand, being careful not to squeeze too tightly. Hadji.. I don't remember.. wasn't there another kid who lived on an island somewhere named that?

"Why are you talking to me and not Howard?", I asked him. "I must be blunt. I don't know what else to say."

"That's okay!", he exclaimed, laughing. "At least it is that you are honest. It is my sisters. I don't want to keep them as my own servants forever."

The girls were about eight and six years old. What's he.. wait, is he really.. Yes, he is. This is probably going to get awkward in a hurry. "You want to marry them off?", I asked.

"Yes!", he replied, smiling. To him it was perfectly natural..

"I can't help you. I have too many.. bad circumstances to be able to even consider something like that. Besides, they're too young."

"Yes.. yes, for now they are. I am looking to the future." Paul looked at the girls, and I knew what was going through his mind. To just have a wife handed to him is probably the only way he's going to be able to get any in the future (fucking Sarah would be like fucking an industrial robot to him); of course there were lots and lots of good reasons not to. Hadji'll be able to give them to somebody, I'm sure. I realized that he had commanded the girls into silence, realized how they surely must be treated, and carefully avoided screaming 'They're your fucking sisters, you jackass!' at him. Instead, I asked if he was actually engineered or not.

"My mother.", he explained. "She received an ovomutagen." The accent was slight, but the terminology flowed out of his mouth like water. "She was normal. I was so different from the others.. you lived as a normal in America, right?" I nodded. "Things must be so different in America." I just smiled. I'd really be a freak where he grew up, wouldn't I? He'll learn the cultural differences one day.

I overheard another conversation, because the conversers were getting louder. "Fine! Twenty kilounits on if he accepts, and another twenty kilounits on if he beats your ass." They walked into the dining room and I followed them to Howard.

"Howard, do you like bets?", one of them asked.

"Depends on the bet. What is your offer?"

"Well, the bet's not with you. I bet Jimmy twenty kilounits that you'd accept the challenge, and another twenty that I can beat you at Starcraft." One of the youths, obviously Jimmy, was grinning widely, obviously believing that Howard wouldn't take it, just to laugh at this young man of about 14. They were obviously lower levels- higher levels generally don't trade or bet with resources.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Ryan West."

"Ryan, I am going to kick your ass up and down the street. Get up there, go in that room," He pointed to my currently unused room. "load up the game, and prepare to die." I could almost smell the ownership from here. Howard's reaction time is nothing and his strategical sense is godlike, and

just by looking at Ryan I can tell he wasn't engineered heavily enough, if at all. Who the hell did this joker think he was fooling?

"Brood war or regular?", Ryan asked as he went up the stairs.

"Brood war, latest version.", Howard said, following Ryan up. I went to follow him. This'll be entertaining.

"So how are we going to make sure no one cheats?", Ryan asked.

"Well... if we just closed the doors to our rooms and let no one in, there's lots of programs either of us could use for network packets and that kind of thing. Soo.. to make sure no one's cheating, let's have people watching." Howard's voice grew loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. "Oh, and if anyone tells anyone about anything, or even gives any vague hints... well...", Howard called down with a strange happiness, then clenched his fist, releasing blades very slightly longer than the ones he used to have. No one was going to give either one of them any hints. Howard motioned us to sit next to him, and I watched him start the game.

It was a smallish map, ice terrain, three main bases, plenty of expands to grab. Not sure if I've played it before. Howard randomly got Terrans and his foe got the Zerg. Howard quickly made a Barracks and a Bunker near the middle of his base; that was a good decision, as a 6-Zling force headed his way rather quickly when he only had two Marines, a few of the lings dying right away, some others managing to attack SCVs out of the Bunker's range. Howard popped the Marines from the Bunker and they finished off the lings as he ran his SCVs from them.

Howard went Academy/Eng Bay, building Missile Turrets for cloak detection (Lurkers are a pain in the ass, although you should hear the normals when we can actually move some units fast enough to dodge them, even timing it right on Extra High Latency) as well as a Comsat. Ryan poured a decent force into Howard's base, but Howard had Medics and the Bunker, and only lost a few units as Ryan's force got slaughtered.

That's when Howard went into Dominator mode, trying to take over the whole map. It's what he does, after all. He built Bunkers before CCs at the expansions, and got some air and some Sci Vessels with Irradiate; this proved to be a very good idea as Ryan tried a Mutalisk/Guardian force, one that Howard's Comsat saw coming. Waste the Overlords with Irradiate, then send the cloaked Wraiths in for the kill. Howard continued to mercilessly spy on Ryan's unit production, as well as checking out his nearby expansion.

A couple of people were running back and forth, looking at the screens, and I could hear them very carefully trying not to laugh at something. Is something wrong? Does Ryan have some massive expansion that Howard doesn't see? Nope.. quite the opposite, as we discovered in half a minute. Ryan only took the nearby mineral expansion, and his forces and base couldn't withstand Howard's massive output of angry Terrans. It's okay, Ryan, some Terrans want to kill Howard as well. If it weren't for these neural implants, he'd be a smokin' crater by now.

Ryan left the game instead of waiting for his base to get pounded into nothing, and walked into Howard's room with a grimace on his face. "Howard! You.." He didn't dare finish it. Howard can kill him, after all. "You mind if I swear at you?"

"You can for five seconds.", Howard replied magnanimously, putting his thumb into his palm and using his five fingers to count down as Ryan spewed some hastily-made flamewar-worthy diatribe; when the fingers were clenched, Ryan stopped instantly. "Anyone else want to try me at this?" Nobody did.

We separated from Howard and got asked various questions by various Illuminated fools. Some of them we answered, some we refused to on principle. **Damn**, some of these people treat their

servants like shit, and a lot of them didn't bring theirs to the party- a few regretted that. A few of the more Damien-esque ones retreated quickly when they realized we weren't commanded or obligated to treat them with any sort of respect. Paul, I noticed, had disappeared Sarah-style, although Sarah herself was with me. She gestured and we went down the elevator wordlessly, after we had stopped being badgered by people.

"You're not actually threatening me, are you?", I heard Paul ask in a quiet voice the moment the elevator reached the bottom and its doors opened. Another black-wearing, older, aggressive boy was in his face, obviously highly perturbed. We'd walked in the middle of a rather heated conversation. I heard a few kids playing in the pool, and two teenage servants, male and female, were standing by the weapons room, watching the conversation as well.

"No! I can't even fucking hurt you! I can't even mess with you, since you belong to an Illumy-natus.", he mispronounced in a similarly quiet voice. "And I'm not! I just want to know what the hell you and Mr. Baker really did to make me the servant of that Jap!"

"I didn't do anything, Brian.", Paul said. "And, like I said, I didn't know you had the implants- I'm surprised Baker let you back in the general population with them in your head. I had them way before that- I was sent there to find out what the hell he was doing with them. He wasn't allowed to be doing that. The Dominator **killed** him for it. Akira got you at **random**."

Brian backed away, slowly. "So he told us the truth after all.."

"And if I remember right, you were being a big dick to me in that place.", Paul said.

"Look- I'm **sorry**, seriously. It doesn't matter anymore, all right? I'll even do anything **you** want for a while if you can help me get out of here!" The boy was lying, I could tell, but it didn't matter.

Paul just shook his head slowly. "Look behind you.", he said, and the other boy turned around to see me and Sarah watching him. "**They** don't have a way out of this. If **they** can't do it, what the hell makes you think **you and I** can? I don't know what commands are on you now, but the only way out would be for Akira to say the wrong thing. But if he's smart, don't count on that happening any time soon."

"Damn it..", Brian said. "Bet you don't wash **your** master's feet every day." Paul shook his head. "I'm just lucky he didn't make me stay quiet next to him again. I've been in hellholes my whole life and this is the **worst!**", he said, his voice rising as he consciously (or commandedly) tried to keep it down. "And the worst part is that he says that I can commit suicide any time I want, but if I do that I really will go to Hell."

I was going to say something, but Sarah did first. "That's a bunch of bullshit. I can't believe you still believe in that crap. There's a room full of guns right there.", she said, gesturing near the still-watching servants to the room. There was a small, metal sign somehow attached to the wall next to it labeled 'Don't mess with the Dominator's weapons. - The Management'- yup, 'The Management' of the island put it there in an act of foresight. "I'll hand you a good one if you'll use it." For a moment I worried that it would crash Howard's party if Brian really did do that, but then realized he'd just laugh about it.

"No, despite whatever I see going on here, I still believe in God.", the boy devoutly said. "'Sides, Akira's already got me carrying one. Look... listen, if you can't help me, then apparently only Jesus can." He pretended to ignore Sarah's and my snickering. "If my body can't be saved from this, then maybe my soul can.", he said, going back up the elevator.

The two other servants were still watching us silently. "So what do you two think of that?", I asked them.

"Funny in a way. And we can only speak when spoken to.", the boy replied. The girl nodded.

"You two were ogling Howard's weapons, weren't you?", Sarah asked them. They both replied in the affirmative. "Like the sign says, don't fuck with them. I'm surprised this place is open at all right now."

"Hey, stop, stop!", we heard from the pool, and walked over to it. A boy and a girl stopped splashing another boy- for a minute I thought they were servants, but there were nothing but white clothes left behind next to the pool. They were having fun, and didn't really acknowledge our presence, so we didn't acknowledge theirs, just went back and talked to the other two servants for a while- one of the kids in the pool was their master.

They wanted to kill him, of course, and were sad that the 'Damien trick' (we were all unsurprised that it had a name of its own) wouldn't work- their master had talked about it in their presence, but they badly wanted to do something like that. "We probably wouldn't if he was **a little bit NICER!**", the girl shouted, intentionally loud enough for their master to hear. He laughed uproariously in response. They'll probably be all right, if he's doing that.

We took the elevator up to find the tightly-dressed girl getting intimate with Howard. "This!", the fourteen-year-old exclaimed, approaching the couch-sitting Howard smiling. Sarah watched, not looking shocked or jealous at all, as the girl thrust her barely-covered breasts into Howard and started kissing his face repeatedly.

"Oh, you can do better than that.", Howie said, as he grinned his trademark secret-master grin. He took her to the floor, quickly lifted up her dress, kissed her breasts repeatedly, and ravished her in front of all the gawking kids, his cock obviously ready and willing, and her legs and cunt just as willing. The engineered seed of the Dominator is the most precious on Earth and her daddy would certainly be happy about any pregnancy. Not that she cared. She was an Illuminatus by her own merit... yet another reason to let only the best in. And to get in the best, for that matter. She's a little bit engineered, but there would probably be complications- Sarah looks like she's in her eighth month now, but it's only been about two and a half months since we had sex with her. Damn. I wonder why we engineered don't look like adults already, if growth in the womb can be that fast?

Now, supposedly, he can do this with no problem and the baby will be perfectly normal (normal as in healthy).. but if it doesn't.. oh well. They have Northberg for that shit. They could give her an abortion faster than you can say 'tear it out of her womb!'

"Holy shit!", a nine-year-old said. That was all that was said for a while. The rest of them were too busy staring with their mouths wide open, watching their beloved Dominator fornicate for a full three minutes. Her body arched and bucked, he grinned widely and pounded into her with a good deal of his might. From the red flush on her body and the fact that Howie was actually gasping, it was obvious that both of them were enjoying themselves. What better way to enjoy yourself at a party? Well, there, you Illuminated brats. For those of you who haven't seen it yet, now you know what sex is, not to mention why he's called the Dominator. I idly wondered how many of them would use this experience as a way to think about getting some for themselves- not that it wasn't getting easier, with the advent of implanted servants. Get em, implant em, and fuck em. Even Damien knew that, although he didn't understand the difference between an asshole and a cunt.

He stood up and helped her to her feet, hugging her. "That was great.", she said, smiling widely.

"We'll have to do that again sometime, Carlie.", he said, putting his wet dick back in his suit. A few of the others clapped and cheered.

She kissed him once more. "I'll remember you." More clapping, more cheering, a few positive shouts.

The rest of the party went on in much the same way. Kids talked and played and fucked and laughed, enjoying their Dominator's hospitality. Everyone wanted to be the last to leave (to get some private, personal time with Howard), so he simply told everyone to get out at 8:00 PM. It'd been a long day, and by the time that rolled around, we were all rather exhausted. When the guests all left, he sat down on the viewscreen and began to perform a typical Illuminated task.

"You're running an acquisition?", I asked curiously.

"Yup. This fifth can't do it himself so I'm letting him acquire a friend of his." Wait.. **what?**!

"Acquire a friend-", I blurted. "Does he know what he's doing?!"

"Oh, yes, Billy. He does indeed know exactly what he's doing." Then that says it all. Apparently this young man has decided to start using Howard's definition of 'friend'. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't make sure of that." That didn't surprise me. I had nothing whatsoever to say to this.

"Howard.. if you could get it, I'd say that girl was trying to kill you with AIDS or something.", Sarah said. Howard only chuckled as she retired to her room, as he hopped up the stairs two at a time.

"Wow... Howard, I can't believe it's been a full year.", I said, following him to his room.

"I thought time was going slow for you and you were suffering."

"Oh, I am, but I've stopped caring about that." He put his arm around me as he always does. "The time effect went away after your first test. If you think about it... living with you has been rather quiet, considering."

"What the fuck could you be considering?!", he exploded, with some mirth on his face. After everything that's happened- most notably that fucking impersonation robot and his arm getting lasered off- it shouldn't be a wonder he's surprised at that.

"Howard, you're the controller of the world. People want to kill you. People want things from you, and we're talking a lot of people. The only reason we haven't seen more action is because you delegate everything to lower levels, but even still.."

"Exactly. Which is the point. Being able to delegate has got to be one of the top responsibilities of the position, and the default framework caught most of it anyway. The only reason I wouldn't delegate something to any of them is if I or you three were the only ones who could do it."

"Or...", I began, with a slight grin.

"Or I'm particularly pissed off. I know. But that helps, and you know why."

"Yeah, there's nothing like the master of everything running at you with the Superweapon of Death. Howie, you're the fucking bogeyman. I wonder how many times they've threatened each other with what you'd do if you found out about something or heard something."

"Hopefully, few... but probably plenty."

"Yeah, a lot of talk, so little action. You get them to do it. I guess that comes with the territory. We do several hundred times more simulated killing than in person.."

"Well, for most Illuminati it's the same, and for most sheeple, that's infinite times. Technology is a wonderful thing, Billy. Even the most tame normal can spend hours killing computer-generated images or even other humans if he has computer connections. If I have the urge for blood and death, I'm not going to waste precious people or resources going out and getting them, even though

I could easily. I'm going to do the same thing all my brethren do and I'm going to play some violent videogame. It's funny, but not really that ironic. I could lead armies into battle for the hell of it, like what previous rulers used to do. But there's too many strings to pull for that sort of action today, and why bother? One of the things I don't do is blow resources just because I feel like it. That's why we don't see much action. I'm more conservative than most people take me for." Obviously, he was using 'conservative' in its true, non-political sense. And it makes sense. He could be more active-but why? He needs those people to dominate the world. He's not going to call any more attention to his activities than he has to. Instead, like a true puppetmaster, he sits back and lets other people put their lives and their stuff on the line for his cause, using his visage and personal force as both a subconscious and conscious threat. Will he send Enforcers? Will he snipe you in the dark? Will he call his expert servants to ream you? Will he go himself, decorating your internal organs all over your front wall? Or a mean, ugly combination of all of the above?

"You're still a trans-manipulative bastard, Howie." He smiled widely and held me a bit tighter.

"Thank you, Billy. Oh.. and Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Happy birthday." Those two words, coming from him, meant everything.

"Happy birthday, Howie." I was about to fall asleep next to him and then I remembered his command.

"The nightmares-", I began.

"You can stay." We fell asleep together on top of the covers, wearing white and black, like two chess pieces who after centuries of fighting each other have decided that maybe the board isn't worth the war after all.

Chapter 45

He, indeed, didn't care about the nightmare scream.

We woke up again, simultaneously, and went downstairs to eat breakfast. No leftover birthday food for this 11-year-old; Sarah had cooked lots of meat and eggs (which weren't chicken, that's for sure), and we scarfed them down. I went upstairs as Howard read the Real News.

"Billy, come down here.", Howard called through the intercom after fifteen minutes. Damn! And right in the middle of this game of Starcraft, too. Fortunately, Paul was there to play for me (I can only guess the opponents' relief at finding one of their foes' skill diminished, although they're still going to lose; my teammate is Shylandro). I walked downstairs to find Howard holding out a controller, the game being Secret of Mana. Ah, yes. The computer can never be as good an ally as I am. I never played it before, but I quickly learned how to use the little kid I had as my character, and his large amounts of offensive magic. Paul came down after he and his Queen-mongering ally declared victory.

As we fought a two-headed dragon (I briefly imagined the Northberg dragons fighting two-headed giant humans), an ugly man with glasses came on, the game moving to the bottom right of the screen. Dave Wilson of the fifth level. Howard paused it and asked what the guy wanted.

"Master Howard.. umm.. can we have some privacy?", he said in a whining voice. Privacy? From **us**, his **servants**? You know how annoying it is to Howard when you ask that, isn't it?

"No. Now **what** did you call for?", Howard replied.

"Umm.. Master Howard... I believe I know the names of some people who want to kill you." **Some** people?! The only way to end that well is with a punchline of pulling out an enormous phone book!

Howard and I laughed. "Oh, **there's** a new one! People want to kill me. How thoughtful of you to notice. Newsflash!! Only.. oh.. a couple dozen want to do that, I presume?"

"Well, you see, I have a list.." This guy's voice was like fingernails on chalkboard.

"Give me the list, and get off my screen. Now.", Howard said, and got the list instantly.

"Goodbye, Master Howard.", the man's painful voice said, and Howard maximized the game again and we continued to play.

"You're not even gonna look at it?!", exclaimed an amazed Paul. Not until we're done our game! It took lots of time, but we rampaged through the game, using the best weapons and armor to kick lots and lots of ass. Howard's played this before, but probably alone- now that he always has people to play with, games like this are much more fun. The big, ugly dragon at the end died a big, ugly death, and Howard looked at the list that the fool had sent him. People Who Want To Kill You. At least he's direct about it.

What the list had was a bunch of names, from a couple of firsts all the way down to fifths. What it **didn't** have was evidence. Howard looked down it, and noticed one of the names that was on it- the last one listed, Jeremy Jorgenson. Hey, wait. Isn't that the same kid that Howard acquired the servant for? Howard called him up to find out what was going on.

Jeremy, a twelve-year-old with a round, slightly freckled face and a full head of blond hair, woke up and answered immediately. "Howard!", he shouted, a bit happy to see his Dominator, but a bit nervous as well. "What.. what are you here for?"

"Jeremy.. you know a Dave Wilson?", Howard asked.

"Dave .. Will.. Oh, yeah, **him**. He tried to steal some of my power with umm.. some promises of somethin, think it had to do with a few cults, wasn't worth the shit I already have. He pissin' you off too?" Yes. Yes, he most definitely is.

"Check this.", Howard said, sending the file. "From Dave, to me." I felt Paul moving around on top of the couch as Jeremy looked at the list quizzically.

"What the hell is this shit?" That's what I'd like to know. How can anyone be stupid enough to send Howard something like that, which contains no proof and is so easily disproven? "I don't even think a lot of these people really know you at all. Howard, you mind killin him?" Oh, I don't think you have to worry about **that**, Jeremy. "I .. I know this is a lot for a fifth to ask.. but.. he's a real pain in the ass.", the boy pretty much begged. There's no sense in that.

"Ah, I'll do it anyway. He tried to feed the Dominator misinformation, Jeremy." That's what I thought. Jeremy grinned in reply.

"So you're gonna.."

"Uh huh. Actually... I'll have my forces jam the communications and wipe out his defenses, but, if possible, I'll let you...", Howard said, finishing by running his finger over his throat and making a *KOUUICK* noise, the symbol of a sliced throat.

"So in other words, you're going to make it clear to everyone that I'm the plaintiff here." For making false accusations against him, yes. Actually I figured that that had little to do with it. I think Howard just wants to see if the kid can kill.

"Very much so. I want this to be clear to everyone as to who did the killing and why. I'm sure he's tried this shit on other people as well. By the way.. what were the details of that cult thing?" A cult has got to be one of the most useless things I can think of. How could a leader of such get into the Illuminati? I knew Howard was thinking the same thing.

"Oh.. lemme think.. he said he had the strings to a few cult leaders, and I could get some better guys from him.." Better guys than Enforcers? I doubt that! "He said some more shit about growth potential, some kinda medical business, and somethin about some mail-order schemes for more money.. I turned him down but he kept goin on about it, had to shut him off." Jeremy probably misheard him somehow, or something. To me it sounded like Dave was trying to run a scam or something similar that didn't even make sense in an Illuminated context. Or, Jeremy heard him right- it's hard to misremember something that badly- and Dave was totally, utterly unfit to join the Enlightened Ones. Then how the fuck did he get in?!

Howard reaction was explosive. "Oh, the **FUCK!** Okay, he dies in 48 hours or less, guaranteed." Jeremy snickered. "By the way.. how's your friend coming?" I still had nothing I wanted to say regarding that.

"He's almost here.. six more hours.", he said, and didn't say something else.

"And let me guess, after I woke you up, you won't be able to go to sleep again tonight.", Howard said. That was it.

"Yeah, you guessed it. Now I have two things to wait for." Like a normal on Christmas Eve.

"We're hitting him tomorrow night. I'll call you in twelve hours."

"All right, Howie. Thanks." He facially reacted a bit after he said 'Howie'- but it wasn't a problem. He doesn't mind it, not from his friends.

"See ya, Jeremy.", Howard amiably said, turning off the screen.

"Uh.. Howard, was that such a good idea? Killing someone you hardly know based on a few things from someone you just met?", Paul asked from his perch on top of the couch, and Howard smiled. I was half-expecting Howard to say 'Well, a friend of mine wants someone dead who's demonstrably lying to me, so it's not really a hard decision.' But Howard never kills

"I really don't think Jeremy's lying to me, Paul. But, I'm going to check this guy- wait, no, you are. Search everything on Dave, put down the location of everything you find, and if there's more than twenty bad things about him, tell me, also if you search absolutely everything and can't find 20. I'm going for a swim." The twenty bad things would establish a pattern but wouldn't be direct evidence. Similarly, maybe that idiot really did believe that his list of people would kill Howard.

"Wait... what if Dave had some kind of evidence? Even if it was bad evidence, planted by someone else?", I asked, as Howard walked to the elevator and Paul started his search.

"Well, it's either terminal stupidity or lying, Billy." Both of which are capital offenses. "And if he did have evidence of some sort, he sure as hell didn't provide me with it, which, again, is stupid."

"So it's back to the meatgrinder..", I said. I smelled the ass kicking to come. Howard's going to rip the shit out of him, and I'm going to help.

"Good. Haven't had something like this in a long time.", Sarah said. "Gotta brush up on my skills..." I couldn't imagine someone like her ever getting out of practice.

"And he left you to do all the dirty work...", I said to Paul, who just nodded and continued to search. "I'm gonna help. Sarah.."

"All right, I'll help too.", she said quickly, and we both went to our rooms as Paul kept using the large screen. Let's see. 'David Wilson'.. no, that's not it, there is a 'David Wilson' but that's a servant. This guy is 'Dave Wilson'. That alone got a lot of his logs, some annoyances and such, but it took time to find real bad things. Ah, yes. Trying to sell that stuff to this guy here, who obviously doesn't need it... he's pestering the heck out of that guy, there, and I'm pretty sure.. yup, he's lying on that one. Wow, I'm surprised this idiot's not dead already.

I found twelve, which was probably more than enough. I started walking downstairs when Sarah told me she'd found three. "Well, Paul, we found some for ya."

"He told me to search..", Paul replied.

"Yes, but he didn't tell you what direction to search in.", I replied. "Try 'Dave Wilson' and 'Kofi Annan'."

"I've seen that guy's name somewhere..", Paul said, as he searched and easily found the bad thing.

"He was listed as a public, so you probably have." I showed Paul good search terms for the other eleven- he immediately knew what was wrong with Dave doing those (bullshit lies to other Illuminati trying to do something productive, and some very slight uses of power without regard for secrecy)- then Sarah went in with her three. Hers are resource issues; Dave wasted Illuminated resources on normal shit that was ultimately far less valuable. He's a waste, and we're going to waste him.

Howard came up the elevator and Paul told him he was done. Howard looked at us- we were sitting next to him. "Did you help him?", he asked, as if he wanted Paul to do this himself as part of a rather aggravating lesson.

I shrugged. "Yeah. You didn't say not to. We found ours separately and just told him where to search."

"So who actually found what?" We showed him our contributions to the Prove Dave Wilson Needs To Be Torn A New One brain trust. Howard looked at them with mounting disgust.

"It's a wonder this guy's still alive.", Howard said. Damn right it is. Isn't it his job to kill idiots? And don't other Illuminati hate putting up with shit like this?

"That's what I was thinking.", I replied. "You know what gets me? How you can just tell someone to find twenty bad things about him and it's not that hard and they're all pretty bad. Shouldn't someone have figured something was wrong with this guy?"

"No, actually.", I told him. "Sometimes otherwise good Illuminati do stupid shit. Sometimes annoying people with many dumb requests and utter resource wastes can come up with some brilliant ideas. This guy's not like the Bastards, where everyone **knew** what was wrong with them. Some people might see the search results differently, so I'm gathering enough supporting evidence to show that I had a very reasonable belief that killing this guy was a generally good idea, even if he was misinformed making that list." Howard was talking like a normal prosecutor trying to get circumstantial evidence, but in this case it was pointless.

"Because an otherwise smart person could have been tricked into sending you that list.", I said, and he understood that it was laughable.

"That's the theory.", he replied. Fuck that. That part of the theory that they taught him can get on its theoretical knees and give me a theoretical blowjob.

"That's total bullshit." One of the best things about Howard is that I can say that to his face and he won't get mad. "If you had a zero-tolerance idiot policy, that guy probably wouldn't have even tried this shit." I was going to mention Damien, but I think his record was actually pretty clean for things detrimental to the organization. The Illuminati don't care about torture, after all. "I haven't looked, but I'd wager that guy doing that boy's ranch bullshit had a lot of bad things and stupid shit on his record, too." Howard nodded. "Maybe you should start looking them up and killing them just for being stupid." I could tell on his face that it would be a great thing to do...

...but he couldn't do it, and he explained why. "I'll be taking that advice when the engineered's grow more numerous and start pushing the old Illuminati out. Then maybe it'll be done well. But now? We can't afford a witch hunt. Even the bad ones help support the system. It causes some minor havoc when one of them dies. The twenty remaining First Levels were dividing the Bastard's and Bitches' holdings among themselves without having to call me, but I'm pretty sure some of them were planning on their deaths in advance. Do you think if I killed a hundred Fifth Levels, with the whole Illuminati being eligible to take their holdings, that it would be anything short of a massive clusterfuck?" I shook my head. "Not even counting the fear it would start. They **have** hurt me by being stupid, but it **looks** as if they hadn't, and imagine if I went and killed them." Our kung fu's about the same, but his argument was stronger than my argument.

"One thing, Howard.. how'd you know it was him for sure?", Paul asked.

"Paul, signals don't get through unless they have identification, based on a 1000-character encryption key.", Howard said. There's no breaking that. Not even Howard's computer could. "Now, unless Dave gave his out to someone willing to spoof his voice and likeness, which is pretty much a death sentence anyway, that was him. And all the keys are stored here.", he said, pointing down to his mainframe.

"So you could.." Manipulate the keys for his own benefit. Howard shook his head.

"I wish. I'd have to get some super-experienced computer guys in here, and even then.. the whole first level has monitors on the system to make sure I don't fuck around with that." Of course. Checks and balances, after all. "I heard Daddy almost got his ass kicked for that when he lived here. At any rate, bad idea."

Howard commanded Sarah to set up the raid we had two days later.

Chapter 46

It was time to kick his ass. Strange. All this time I've been here and I've only been on one true raid in the past, the raid to get Paul back from the evil clutches of James Baker, putting him back into the evil clutches of Howard. Now it's my second one, and I'm not worried. Maybe because Howard's twenty times more prepared this time, or maybe because this guy wouldn't stand a chance against any one of us - even Paul could probably nuke his ass before he knew what hit him. But we're all here, all armed to the teeth, sitting at a point ten miles from the guy's home, in a specially-designed covered offroad vehicle with computerized windows that make us look like normals. It looked like a family & friends outing to the outside observer: a man and a woman in the front (both Enforcers), and six similarly-aged kids in the back. And that it is. Howard and I sat in the next two seats in the front, Sarah and Paul in the second row, and Joey (a dark-haired eleven-year-old with a few freckles who slightly resembles Paul) and Jeremy in the back.

"This might seem like a really stupid time to bring this up, but I've never killed anyone before.", said Joey in an uncertain voice. Howard and I simultaneously laughed.

"Don't worry. You'll get used to it.", said Sarah in a semi-flippant, semi-sarcastic voice, mirroring my thoughts. "Even for normal society's purest normals, you don't even notice you're doing it after the

tenth one or so. Besides, even if morals still mean anything to you", she said with a brief snicker, "it's not like the people going to be shooting at us are actually **people**."

"Yeah, shooting at us too.. Jeremy, why didn't you just tell me I was that expendable?"

"You're not.", Jeremy instantly replied.

The next one came from Paul, in an impatient, informative voice. "Joey, look.", he spun around and said. "The Massacre Twins and Madame Bloodlust up here are going to kill every fucking thing they see before you even know they saw it. You probably won't even get a **chance** to shoot while they try to outdo each other in **frags**. Before you even look at one of the guys, he's probably already dead, you're here just for **show**, that's all. Just to follow Jeremy around because he needs to officially be a part of this and he obviously wants you with him. And unless Howard **lets you**, Jeremy, you're not going to get any kills either."

The three of us engineereds simultaneously began involuntarily laughing like crazy. "Why did you say that, Paul?", I said in an muffled, inaudible voice through my chuckles.

"Was that..?!", said Jeremy in a startled voice.

"Everything he said was perfectly true, Jeremy. He didn't tell you enn-eeee lies.", Howard said with a huge grin on his face, still chuckling.

"Howard- do you mind if I make a completely unbiased comment?", Jeremy said with some wit behind his voice.

"Go ahead, that's the kind of comment you should make anyway.", Howard said with a smirk and a chuckle.

"All three- no, all four of you are **completely fucking nuts**. You deserve your servants, Howard, and the three of you deserve him just the same. All of you are just fucking **crazy**. Three of you are **immortal** and the other one's more likely to die. How can you just walk right into the field of carnage and put your goddamn motherfucking lives on the line if and when you don't have to, especially **you**, Howard?"

"And let someone else have all the fun?!", Sarah cracked. The four of us grinned and giggled like the madmen he believed we were. Death has no meaning to us, none. We avoid it. It happens to other people, never to us. Period. Of course, that's because we can avoid it with powerful technology and electrobiochemistry.

"Because we **can**, Jeremy.", Howard said slowly, in a totally serious voice. "**We can**. Your fear inhibits you. You think you're going to die if you get into a risky situation. Well, like Paul said, this isn't even a risky situation, and you are not supposed to fear. If you honestly don't think you'll survive, you think a stray bullet will hit you, whatever, stay out of the fight and just send big bad Enforcers. If you lose any, I'll personally replace them out of my own pocket. But I like killing, I don't like doing it alone so much, they like killing, we kill. If you're worried about Paul and his less-than-engineered reaction time, he knows how to stay out of the way of bullets.", I heard from my left ear as I faced forward, looking at the special fabric back of the headrest of the seat in front of me, absently thinking about the events to come. How will he kill Dave, or will he let Jeremy do it?

"I get it. I understand. You're not just crazy, you're absolutely fucking psychotic.", Jeremy replied in a half-wondering, half-accusing voice.

"Comes with the territory.", I called back.

"Okay, that's it, I know where I am, I'm in somebody **else's** dream world. Not my own dream world.

Somebody **else's** dream world.", Joey said in a semi-loud voice. "This. Whole. Thing. Is. Crazy. Even you, Jeremy, you know you don't really have to be here. Let these maniacs do the slaughter and just computerize your face in!"

"Worried about catching a stray bullet, Joey? You're in such a sad state, if I were you, I'd welcome death. Yeah, sure, you got implanted, your life **is** over. But that doesn't mean you can't still enjoy it.", Sarah snapped. She probably can't understand why someone **wouldn't** enjoy killing.. I guess if I was her, I'd think the same way. Kills probably meant short vacations for her when she was the public servant, the general assassin.

"You really do like killing people, don't you Sarah.", Joey said. It was more of a statement than a question.

"You didn't stop him from asking stupid questions?", Howard called back, himself now facing forward and doing some rapid drum-beat on the back of the seat in front of him. The male Enforcer sitting there didn't mind.

"There are no stupid questions.", Jeremy said.

"Only stupid people.", all six of us finished simultaneously, afterwards taking a moment to be astonished at the general telepathy.

"So when do we kick his ass?", Jeremy asked uncertainly.

"About five more minutes and this car starts moving. This is going to be a full, by-the-book Illuminated strike.", Howard said formally.

"Not like last time.", I said with a smirk.

"Nothing like that. That was fun, but looking back.. no. Not again. Jeremy, that time we **were** a little too close to being shot or having to do a secrecy shuffle. I didn't like that.", Howard replied.

"How was that anyway... just you three taking on a whole base, about.", Jeremy asked, and I could see some mild astonishment in his eyes.

"It wasn't a base.", Sarah said. "Wasn't even close. Just some boys' ranch with some Enforcers on it. We basically just... well, dropped in on him. You should have seen the look on his face."

"Ha, you should have seen the look on his face when he found out I was already implanted... he fucking shit his pants.", Paul said with some nastiness and a slight grin.

"I never knew that was from you! I thought I caused that!", she replied. "Dammit. There goes the moral victory, anyway." A loud 'pfft' could be heard from Jeremy in the back. Even hearing Sarah say the word 'moral' caused me to grin a bit.

"I've been thinking.. you should probably do the deed, Jeremy. Everything else gets mortified, and you walk in and...oh, I don't know. How would you like to get rid of him?", Howard asked with a grin.

"Hmm. His servants run MLM scams, that kind of thing, so..." I felt my stomach turn. Well, kids, now we know who's at the top of **those** things, the guy whose name is first on the list, the guy who's really making money. "Fire might be nice. Got a flamethrower?", the unengineered Illuminatus replied, after some consideration.

"How about a drip torch?", Paul suggested.

"What's that?", Jeremy asked. What is that, anyway? I've never heard of it.

"You know how firemen have to put out fires by making fire breaks? Well, they drip flaming stuff onto grass as they walk along, drop by drop." Damn, I didn't know Paul had the bloodlust... that is a **mean** thing to do! Howard and I giggled and grinned, considering the possibilities of its use. Sarah emitted a low 'ooooh' sound.

"Ooooh.", Jeremy said, then breaking out into a wide grin. "That is **nasty**. Howard, can you..?"

"No problem.", Howard said, ordering the Enforcer in front of him to call for one. "It'll be there by the time we get in." Then the car started moving. "All right, it's time." A few minutes later, we were rolling into position, ready to kick some ass.

When the van pulled to a stop, we stepped out, the female Enforcer followed us and began recording, and we walked less than a quarter mile through the forest to the designated spot. About eight Enforcers, various in physical form, were waiting for us, in their usual combat-ready stance. As we approached, they moved to their positions through the trees and brush- one stopped to hand Jeremy his drip torch.

"This is a completely formal raid, and we're doing this with at least most of the usual procedures, by the book. The three of you", he said, gesturing to us servants, "must as of right now shut the fuck up and stay that way, unless you have something urgent to say. You can talk after the target is eliminated.", Howard said. He then just stood there, waiting for the Enforcers to surround the place. It'd take a few minutes, I realized. Damn. This is the right way to conduct a raid- quick, informal, with full knowledge of the surrounding area, and with the confirmed target in there. And with only a handful of guards to protect him, Dave would be dogmeat by the time he knew what was going on. I further realized that Dave's wish for isolation (common among Illuminati) would be his downfall- secrecy rules would prevent this kind of thing if we were near normals.

"Joey, you too.", Jeremy said quickly.

Sarah put her ghillie suit on in a few swift movements and she moved with more stealth than usual- but I noticed a very slight irregularity in her movement. Her? Nervous? Bah. She's the princess of this shit. Two hundred meters for a sniper shot is easy for a professional and a joke to her- that is, if there are sentries in the first place. So we waited for the Enforcers and for her, and...

I got two with two shots. I wasn't sure how many Howard and Sarah got; I heard four shots from them, though. I thought for a split second why Howie just didn't melt the fence with the Micro, then I remembered the reflection rules.

Enforcers started shooting at us, we leapt out of the way- then our Enforcers shot into the windows and blew them to Hell. As we approached the building at maximum speed, nothing else shot at us. Nothing. Is that it?! Is he out of guys? Did we really rock his forces like that? Howard wasn't willing to find out. We continued running at the structure at thirty miles per hour, reaching the double back doors. We simultaneously fired at the door locks and kicked the hinges backwards, breaking the doors. Too bad no one's awarding style points- but an Enforcer is recording our entry, and there are almost certainly security cameras in this building- meant to protect Dave from hostiles, but instead recording the hostiles' attack.

Okay, so he did bring all his forces. Four security guards ran at us from the main hallway, two from the sides, blasting- wait, these aren't ordinary security guards, they're Enforcers, normals can't move like that. If the ones shooting at us from the windows were also Enforcers.. this guy's either pretty well-defended for a fifth level, or he's one of those guys that has more power than most of his level.

Howard put his guns away and clenched his fists, drawing the blades. I think he just **likes** melee combat (for that matter, so do I, and so does Sarah), and at this range with these combatants, a fist

is actually better than a bullet of any type. And if the third test was any indication, these guys don't have a chance.

He seemed to follow his own commands as he fought- he shut the fuck up, not calling out orders, advice, or warnings to any of the combatants. Mostly because this was more a slaughter than a combat. Six Enforcers can't withstand the Badass Squad.

At least that's what I thought until I realized that these guys were moving faster than the ten we fought, one of them trying to machinegun-punch Sarah, her breasts and pregnant belly staying out of the way of the bladed fists, before she grabbed its upper arms and dislocated them, being not quite strong enough to just tear them off.

Two attacked me and then I just realized a logical course of action. I jumped up and spun-kicked at their heads with full power. They leaned back- fuck! The left one tried to shoot me, other tried to grab me, fuck, bullet's going to Sarah.. she dodged it. As I landed, I delivered a panicked, angry kick into the stomach of the left one. I didn't break any bones, but the impact sent it on its back. I turned it up and just delivered into the right one, aiming my blades into its throat with about eight full-force attacks a second. Its hands couldn't move that fast, and it got torn open, its jugular spilling rich, thick blood. I then darted towards the remaining one, got on top of it, stepped on its gun-hand before it could aim, and turned it into my personal pincushion, the ultrasharp blades easily sliding in and out of its kevlar-based body armor, and even the metal plate beneath (note to future assholes: use the same metal we do). Blood welled out of its body like oil.

I turned around to see what had become of the others. They had killed a total of six. "Was one of those a normal?", Howard asked, as I reached down to the dead Enforcer which was to my right, picking it up, slicing off its right shoulder's clothes, and munching a chunk of the tricep. It's a perfect combo- we get hungry after fights, and fresh meat's always right there when our fights are over.

"Yeah, one was." She then briefly looked down at her pregnancy. I took a split instant to realize just how well trained she really is. She could be going through labor right now and never say anything about it until the raid was over. I have no idea what's going on inside her.. should probably find out just what the hell happens when an engineered gets pregnant.

"So where is he?"

"Hmm, the guy's stupid... bet he's on the top floor in the most obvious room, making himself a perfect target.", she replied evenly. Egotism hath its downfalls. We took the stairs and went through the largest doors we could find- a pair of double mahogany doors, sure enough, marked the entrance to his room, a movie-esque corporate headquarters, with all the trimmings, perfectly designed to inflate the ego of the occupant and intimidate visitors. Only he wasn't there. I figured he was hiding under the desk, so I ran up to it- then saw, through the large window, an armored vehicle speeding away through a rain of Enforcer bullets. Idiot. Does he think he can escape Howie? As I looked up at it, Sarah and Howard simultaneously aimed and fired, creating crack-surrounded holes in the plexiglass window, shredding the vehicle's lower left tire (which was less well-armored from the back), and nearly overturning it as Dave struggled for control, turning too hard and skidding to a stop, turning the vehicle on its side. Damn, I should have fired one of those. Oh well.

Howard drew his blades again and cleaved off a huge section of the plexiglass with the ease of an Exacto knife through a fresh cucumber. After a single, long stroke, there was a hole big enough to easily go through- we're three floors up, though, what does he plan to do?

"Sarah, grab Billy's arms and lower him down.", he said- no way, that's still too far- then when he grabbed my legs, I knew what he planned. A flesh ladder. She dangled us out, and he dropped down about fifteen feet into grass, taking the impact easily and rushing at the panicked Dave. We took the stairs to see if we could see anything before Howard killed the fool.

As we rushed up to see more details, Howard was calmly holding the geek up with his right hand.

The first thing I heard was Howard, in a too-pleasant, too-powerful voice, say with a small amount of glee, "Well, why not, Dave? The normals certainly want to kill you. If I remember right, you're a champion of multi-level marketing, chain letters, and Internet spam." He paused for a minute to grin. "If I were to put them into a pit, and then I were to throw you into that pit, they would tear you apart, limb from limb, which is what I'm going to do to you!!" The poor son of a bitch (which were the only words I could think of for his situation.. 'pathetic' didn't quite cut it) would have ran and hid in a corner, had his neck not been held up by Howard's fully outstretched arm. Which was obviously getting tired, so he chucked Dave up a few inches and caught him with his left, holding him in the same way he was before.

"But you're lucky today. I'm not really going to kill you." He chucked his thumb back at Jeremy, who was jogging up to us, half-out of breath, Joey close behind. "He is."

"So you are giving this one to me.. all right.", Jeremy sighed and said, pulling the drip torch from the back of his light combat armor. "You mind dropping him?" Howard opened his hand and the fool fell to the ground, not choking for air because Howard had not held his windpipe.

Jeremy calmly walked up to Dave and dripped flame on him, starting with his lower abdomen, grinning all the while.

"Do you know why I'm doing it this way, Dave?", Jeremy asked in a loud but calm voice, over the screams, obviously not expecting the agonized man to answer. "My sources tell me that you're in charge of some of the largest marketing campaigns in the world- you've got servants in junk mail, television advertising, mass E-mail.. cyberpromotions.com, wasn't that? Sanford Wallace, right?" I felt some amusement at this. His subsidiary, transient, normal-world dealings in that sort of thing have nothing to do with why Jeremy and Howard are killing him, and they're not even serving as an excuse- but I'm sure that the Illuminati watching the recording of this will be mildly amused at Jeremy's monologue.

Dave screamed in unearthly pain as his dick and balls were suddenly encompassed by a burning substance reminiscent of napalm, turning the sensitive organs into carbon dioxide and soot. Jeremy smiled and continued to drip randomly on his body, missing a few times, charring the neatly-mowed grass.

"**Oh JESUS MAKE IT STOP!!!**" was the man's only reply.

"All really great business, sure. If they were normal-owned corporations, they'd get enough wealth for us to look at them. And so **your** wealth is absolutely astronomical for your level. But there is a bad side to it as well. Some people don't like what you're doing, even if it is just to normals, and they call it 'spam'. I use that term as well. And you know what, Dave?"

The screaming continued. Dave tried to choke out the word 'mercy' with his screams, and failed. Not like Jeremy'd show him any.

"I **hate** spam."

Then Jeremy pulled out a small pistol and blew both of Dave's kneecaps to pieces, one right after the other, either trying to display his willingness for senseless violence or just **enjoying** it. Blood and shattered bone flew out of both the entry holes and the exit holes of both wounds. Dave didn't feel anything at first- then the split second of shock wore off and he screamed like a maniac, even louder than he did when his dick was put to the torch. "Aww, he's so cute like that...", said Jeremy, with a smile. "Oh well. Bye, Dave." Another bullet penetrated Dave's forehead. That one, he never felt. "That felt so right."

"Well, that's it, mission accomplished.", Howard said, shrugging. Damn, that was quick. It felt more like a mini-level than any kind of true raid. We just walked in and nuked the place. I found myself regretting the simplicity of it. Damn it, if I'm going to be forced into this dirty business of laying waste to people he doesn't like, I want more **challenge** than that! A few more armed guards, some auto-defenses.. his whole place could have used a talented level designer straight from the halls of Valve Software to at least **try** to stop people rushing his ass.

"Good timing.", Sarah said, laying on her back. "Now there's something I just have to do, **right now**... nnggh..", she grunted, taking off her pants. What could she-- it must be that time. We all understood immediately, and Howard was ready to give her a C-section at any time, worried about his child (or children- wouldn't it be fucking hilarious if she had identical twins?).

She didn't need one. The delivery was faster than anything on TV. She grunted and strained for about half a minute (no one was dumb enough to tell her to push, as if she's stupid enough not to), and then the baby, covered in amniotic fluid, pulled out its head, then revealed a pair of arms.

Then another pair of arms.

Then a perfectly formed penis and lower body. He didn't have any obvious defects, other than the extra set of arms. There were no marks on him and his hair was almost white, with a touch of blonde. He had six fingers on his top two hands, and five on the bottom two. He had four toes on each of his feet. He started crying a bit, showing that the air passages were free and open. Sarah took the baby to her chest as she expelled the afterbirth, using her left forefinger's blade to slice off the umbilical cord near the base. Man. What a time to have a kid. Of course, since death is her element, it sort of figures that the time would be now.

We were all watching silently. "First death, then life.", Jeremy said poetically, looking at the baby. "But.. what's with the arms?"

"Northberg obviously never expected us to breed.", Howard said with a sigh. "And that's where I'm sending him, for the education and nurture I had." Teaching yet another Illuminatus that human contact was not as precious as machinery and technology, a lesson all Illuminati should learn. And everyone else, for that matter. Humans are unpredictable and mean bastards. Machines operate based on principles. "Let's hope he's not crippled by the arms. Because if we cut them off.."

"They'll grow right back, won't they.", said Jeremy.

Howard nodded. "That part of the DNA's the same. Let's go home. I'm almost never up this early." Bothering to show excessive concern for the newborn's problem would solve nothing- Howard simply needs to deal with however it ends up. Which is why he's changing the subject.

"Howard... no one's going to try to kill me for this, are they?", asked Jeremy in a worried voice, as if he may suffer the same fate he dealt out so happily. Who can blame him? These guys are the Illuminati. They dish out pain, they don't receive it, and they certainly don't bother with fairness when it gets in the way of their plans. It's part of what makes them powerful, and I've developed mostly the same philosophy.

"Probably not, not while they know I'm behind it. But you can spend a couple of days at the island if you want." Sarah put on her pants with one hand and cradled her son with the other. So much for post-natal care.

"Thanks, Howard. I think I'll do that. Your jet's not big enough, is it?"

"Nope." They'd use the helicopter they came in.

And so the raid ended, with Sarah opening her shirt so that she may suckle her newborn baby

before it is taught and trained in the same way that all home-born Illuminati are.

"Well, that answers a question I've had..", Sarah said nonchalantly, as we walked back to the van that took us here, Jeremy and Joey a few feet behind the four of us.

"Which was...?", Howard asked.

"Whether or not our child would be more physically powerful than you are. Hybrid vigor, strange DNA combinations no one foresaw.." She chuckled to herself a bit. "I guess I got what I was hoping for. Now all we have to do is wait ten years and see if he's smarter." Howard only smiled in response.

"This is getting weirder by the minute..", I heard Joey say in a very quiet voice, probably next to Jeremy's ear.

"It's called 'progress'..", Sarah replied to him. Paul laughed, Howard and I grinned, and Jeremy and Joey were surprised at her hearing.

"Yeah, progress. He has a point..", Jeremy said. "What happened just now? I know you three are just part of it, and he's probably gotten used to it, but this really is very strange to normals. You guys just waltzed into a defended compound, killed everyone inside, I cooked an asshole with a drip torch while talking about what's wrong with Net spam, she had a baby with four arms, and we're all walking back like none of this is really a big deal!" All four of us found what he had to say very humorous, laughing as we slipped in the hole in the fence Paul had originally made. "And my saying that is funny!"

"Jeremy, you want the full explanation?", Howard asked him, turning his head to look at him while slipping under the branches.

"Even if it all goes over my head, I still want to hear it."

"This whole thing, what we're doing, is just a successful plan. The only thing I wasn't prepared for was your spam commentary, and that was just amusing for recent recruits. If anything large had happened unexpectedly, then we'd care more about it. I knew she could give birth in the middle of it. I knew we'd have to face quite a few Enforcers. It's just me, the Dominator, doing what I do. This **is** the usual."

"With a usual like that, I could never think of you raising a kid- even with all the servants in the world..", Joey said.

"You didn't tell him, Jeremy?", Sarah asked.

"Never actually researched that myself..", he replied, as we got into the car, the male Enforcer turning it on and putting it into reverse gear. "A from-birth educational institution, I suppose?"

"Right, first try..", Howard replied. "They put it right next to the genetics facility at Northberg."

"That makes sense..", Jeremy and Joey said, simultaneously. I realized how close they have to be to have simultaneity like that, and they're.. forget it. I don't want to know what being your friend's servant does to a normal. It must suck.

After the van took us back to the airfield, Sarah went by herself in a propeller plane to take the baby to Northberg, I got in the jet with Howard and Paul and flew them home, and Jeremy and Joey took the helicopter they came in.

Even at a leisurely mach 1.7, Howard's jet far outpaces Jeremy's helicopter. Howard had things to do anyway, and did them both in the jet and on the big screen- allocate resources, decide what stuff of Dave's was worth taking (so much of it, like that cult shit, was marked for toast-dom). It's a careful balance of power. Howard can't be seen as playing any favorites- and indeed he wasn't, allocating by need and usefulness instead of names, and Jeremy got none of it- and the Levels could agree to distribute the resources some other way if they really wanted. But Howard's still the Dominator, and just by reading them I knew that his resource allocations would be accepted.

In a couple of hours, Jeremy and Joey arrived with a whup-whup-whup of helicopter blades, Howard having told the Enforcers in advance that they were cleared to land.

I didn't miss the similarities between their visit and Damien and Paul's, the key differences being that Jeremy was younger, weaker in the Illuminati, and much smarter than Damien- and also has the advantage of not being an asshole (I can't blame him at all for what he did to Dave). I wanted to talk to Joey without having to worry about commands on him in the middle of it, so I beckoned him upstairs to my room. Howard and Jeremy let us go; they wanted to talk to each other anyway.

Even though it was theoretically designed for one occupant, three people didn't make my room appear crowded at all. He looked at Paul, then at me- and he was looking for something to say to me, but he couldn't even find an idea to put words to, let alone the words to say one with.

"Billy..", he eventually sputtered out.

"Yeah?"

"I still don't get something. How the hell can.. you and him.."

"Well, '**how**' is easy, they just put me as a normal for ten years until they pick me up again. The question you probably mean is 'why', and, if you didn't know, it was at the whim of the Day Operator of Northberg when he found two cells instead of one." After I said it, I realized what that knowledge made public might do to some of Howard's reputation, but he didn't consider it a real secret.. and besides, everyone knows what his reputation is **really** based on. Personal mudslinging and allusions to freakdom are simply not advisable when dealing with someone who is perfectly capable and willing to firmly kick your ass and carve your headstone.

"That's just fucked up. So you're...", he said, looking in Paul's direction.

"Paul Smith."

"And you're Billy.." 'Well, yes, I'm Billy', I was about to say, until I realized he was looking for my last name. Oh shit. What **is** my last name?! How the hell could I have forgotten, and how can I remember.. oh yeah, I wrote it on school papers all the time.

"Boecker.", I replied, my fast thinking saving me the embarrassment of being seen to forget my own last name. That would, after all, be pretty pathetic.

"Joseph Freeman.", he said, slightly gesturing to himself. I found myself involuntarily cracking a smile and Paul broke out in a grin. "**DON'T** say it! I've already thought up all the jokes and none of em are funny." Paul was biting his lip with a grin, and I looked at him, wondering if Paul could resist. Actually, Joey was wrong- given time, the plot of Half-Life, and the technological insanity of Illuminated society, I could probably crack a couple solid Freeman jokes without resorting to the obvious.

"Oh, all right. Joey.", Paul said. "They're in bad taste anyway. So how did you get here?" Oh, yeah, I didn't tell Paul about that.

"Jeremy's my friend." For Jeremy to say that about Joey is Howardian. For Joey to say that about Jeremy is insane!

"Pff-**WHAT?!'**", Paul exploded, as I said with forced echo, "Some fucking friend!"

"Joey..", I continued, "it's been said before and it is something of a cliché, but for general principle's sake, I'm going to say it again. With friends like those..."

"...who needs enemies.", Paul finished.

"Well, I don't have any enemies that mean anything to me anymore, remember?", he replied. He has a point. Even Eric and Dylan knew that tattling children can do little against shotguns.

"There is that.", I acknowledged.

"So how'd you get into this mess?", he asked Paul.

"I knew too much about Billy. The abilities and all that. I said the wrong things to too many people and ended up.. well, not here, I had that shithhead Damien.. I won't tell details, don't want to get into it."

"Urgh, yeah, I read Damien's profile.. also I read about what happened to him." He laughed a bit. "That guy had it so fucking coming, too. You got lucky."

"Isn't there anything more pleasant to talk about?", Paul asked.

"Paul, where are we?", I asked rhetorically, reminding him that the topical subjects happen to be some of the ugliest possible.

"I'll take that as a no."

"Yeah, there is.", Joey said. "There's a new movie comin out, Illuminati-produced, Illuminati viewers only. It's called The Nights."

"Nights of what?", Paul asked.

"Well, let's just say they have a different sense of honor than most of the traditional ones." Huh? That didn't make sense. I ran that through my head, Paul seemed to get it.. Ah. The Knights, not The Nights. There's a new one.. the Illuminated version of a fantasy movie.

I'm almost afraid to ask... but I might as well anyway. "What's it about?"

"A really badass film. War, chivalry, women, the works. Chauvinistic as hell. They're not fighting for honor; they're fighting for **land**, basically. And no, it's not a power and control movie.. it's more like a really nasty version of King Arthur, only with different magic and definitely better-developed characters."

"You know about the characters? You've ruined it for yourself.", I said. Paul nodded and looked as if he was about to say something very similar.

"I know! I know! It's all CGI, though. One hundred percent computers and a lotta special effects. Remember, these guys got **time** on their hands." Oh, hell yes. Every piece of Illuminated technology or creativity I've seen so far has been optimized, balanced, and retouched to the point of insanity. And it stands to reason that normal media simply cannot produce Illuminated fare.

"No shit.", said Paul. "No restrictions on content either. Something tells me more than one 'fair maiden' is going to be.. ah, devirginized.. what was that..?"

"Deflowered is probably what you mean.", I told him.

"Yeah. Deflowered. Fucked."

"Sex and violence.", remarked Joey. "Even up here, the basic desires are the same. Sex and violence." I started laughing, and Paul joined in.

"No shit!", I exclaimed through my laughter. "You have no idea, do you. You're right, sex and violence are natural human desires. These people get what they want. I leave the logic to you."

"Already figured it out, my friend, already figured it out. That's the thing with this place.. everything kicks so much ass."

"With a couple of obvious exceptions..." said Paul with a sigh, "but like I said, I don't want to get into it. So what got Jeremy into this place anyway? I thought they'd be breeding everybody by now."

"Recruitment continues. Jeremy's a fucking MacGyver, Paul. The only reason he didn't use his problem-solving ability in that last raid was because you had complete overwhelming force on your side. He told me they took a sample of his blood and a.. what was that.. encephalogram to find out what makes him so good."

"Which means that he's.. no, that if that part of him were integrated with the existing DNA, the result would be even better than what they have.", I said. The best they have is presumably a slightly enhanced version of us, that they never produced.

"Possibly.", Joey said. "Intelligence and DNA.. you know it's a tough nut to crack. But they did say they're sure it's genetic and it goes beyond environment."

"Damn. How'd they find it out?", Paul asked.

"He got lucky. They heard reports from one of their randomly-placed agents.. a teacher, I believe.. went to his house, and gave him what looked to be an IQ test. Now, usually- I looked this stuff up- it's the side questions they ask.. like 'how are you doing in school' and then they get into that and see if the prospect understands human nature and has the capacity for real loyalty, et cetera, and the IQ test just becomes.." He searched his head for the word. "superfluous. But they decided to have some super-hard questions on there just to see.. turns out Jeremy figured out how to build a complicated electrical system after they told him what a transistor did. He put the circuits right and everything. And of course he can at least marginally manipulate the masses.." There's an alliteration for ya. "so boom. They walk out, say they'll contact him later.. he disappears from his school one day with unknown people in a black car with a stolen license plate. Half the witnesses say he was dragged in.. and the other half say he stepped in voluntarily. This is going to sound weird, but I just always knew he wasn't hurt, that he really did want to go to where they were taking him.. I just thought I'd never see him again." He was smiling, apparently glad he did get to see him again after all. "The cops, of course, are always slow as hell. No one found his body.. gee, where could he be."

"And of course everyone's thinking 'pedophile' and assume he's in a ditch somewhere.", I replied.

"Of course. The parents had their suspicions, but the testers called up again asking for him, and of course they pretended not to know what happened. So what's left is a lot of half-thought suspicions, raised questions, ad nauseum.." Jeremy must have been giving Joey something of a literary education, or Joey was simply much smarter to begin with. Name me a public-schooled, normal twelve-year-old who can go on like this, for this long, with this size of a vocabulary. Of course,

shock and fear make great teachers. "the parents track down the testing organization and find out it's just a recruiting station for MENSA members and their gifted and talented program. Since nothing like this has happened before in the area, it's reported in the newspaper in the crime section, quickly forgotten.. you know how it goes."

"They always do their jobs well.", said Paul. "Believe me, these guys **always** do their jobs well when it comes to secrecy."

"We're pros. Yes, I'm one of the guys doing spying."

"Who do you spy on and why, anyway?", I asked.

"I spy on everybody from thousands of miles away.", he said with some pride. "Wiretapping, mostly. 'Our enemies come from all walks of life.', they said a bunch of times. It's true, dude. I've only been here two days and I've found myself spying on everybody from some Russian mafias- they got executed like fish in a barrel, Jeremy was laughing his head off at that- to some butt burglars in Africa. Just one faction against another sort of thing, with maybe some guys who want to challenge us along the way."

"Guys who want to challenge us', what?!", Paul asked. The look on my face certainly said the same.

"Oh, just idiots. You know all those television shows about guys trying to conquer the world through some local takeover? Silly, yeah, but sometimes they partially succeed with the local part. Doesn't happen very often, I haven't really seen anyone interested in taking down the current system whole. But those factions all wanted whatever kind of power we didn't want them to have."

"You sound like a fifth level.", I noted.

"I fucking should. Jeremy's been telling me everything." The way he said his friend's name denoted a certain amount of love.

"Guys, I don't know why, but I gotta get some sleep.", I told them. "If I wake up screaming, just ignore me."

"Wake up screaming?!", Joey asked incredulously.

"Yeah, he.." I didn't catch the rest of what Paul said because I passed out on the bed immediately.

"Hey, Billy. Get dressed, not a bladed suit, and come down. We're going to play some volleyball.", I was woken up with by Howard over the intercom. I was dressed from neck to toe (I hate sunlight) and down in two minutes.

"Why aren't you wearing your usual, anyway?", Sarah asked us as Howard and I stepped outside, where they had already set up a full volleyball court, with the poles spiked into the ground and the

"Because he doesn't want to tear open the ball if he ever punched it, remember?", Paul pointed out.

"Oh. Duh. Forgot about that." She wears her weapons all the time and never accidentally cuts anything open with them.

"Yeah, he'd spike the ball all right. Howard, why **do** you wear so much, anyway?", Jeremy asked.

"Jeremy, the Sun and I are not exactly on good terms. Although I do reflect a good deal of UV rays, being albino does leave me open to some of it. And although it does drastically shorten its effect time, regeneration does not protect from the pain of sunburn." I hear that. I'd play outside on a

sunny day at recess, deal with burning eyes for a bit in class, and go home and peel off layers of skin. It was cloudy now, though.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. All right, simple version of the rules with no stupid shit. 7 foot 6 high net, 20 foot wide by 25 foot long playing squares, ya have to hit the ball (it can't come to rest on your hand), have to hit it over the net, one hit at a time per player, that means the same guy can't hit it twice in a row.. ahh.. three hits in a row per team, no intentionally touching the net, team members take turns doing serves, serves are done by the team that got the point, feet have to stay in bounds, play to 21 points, serves are done behind the back line..." He tried to keep going. "balls hitting the post are out, you can use any part of your body, and you have to hit the **ball**, not the **players**.", he said, grinning slightly. Howard chuckled a bit- there's no way he could **accidentally** smash Jeremy's head when spiking it over the net. "You know how to play, I assume?"

"Saw it a couple of times on TV." Although I've seen it on TV myself, I found it odd- us watching normals play sports is like watching a three-legged dog fetch the paper.

"All right.. teams?"

"I can't play for shit, Jeremy, remember?", Joey said.

"Oh, yeah. I remember. All right.. we should probably use Enforcers.", Jeremy said.

"I can already tell this is a height-based game. But.. hmm. All right." There was only one remotely balanced team conceivable. "Me, Paul, and Sarah against you, Billy, and an Enforcer."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking.", Jeremy replied.

"Billy, Sarah, Paul, you already know." Yep, we do. "Enforcer! Did you hear the rules being spoken?"

Like the antithesis of a normal cop, there's always an Enforcer around when you need one. "Yes, Howard."

"Follow them while playing on Jeremy's team, which you are now on. If you're unclear on any part of the rules, watch us and learn as you play." We were ready. Howard hit it first, aiming it directly to the middle of the court on our side, and then ran up to defend against what he knew would happen- I slammed it. He jumped up and put it into the air with a backhand, Sarah slammed it in the Enforcer's direction, which put it to me- I arced it above Howard's head, Paul hit it up, Howard put it to the back of our court, Jeremy managed to get it into the air, the Enforcer hit it to the left near Paul, who hit it out of bounds. Jeremy served it right to the middle of the court, I was expecting Howard to slam it as I had, but nope- he hit it into the air instead. Way up... way too far up. The wind got it and it landed far out of bounds, and all the sentients except Howard laughed. He swore, muttered, got the ball, and tossed it to the Enforcer, whose serve was exactly like Jeremy's in style.

As the clouds drifted away, back and forth the game went, engineered hammering each other at the front and normals staying back to return the high-arc'd ones. It's exhausting, but that's part of the fun. Paul and Jeremy were hyperventilating, and we engineered were simply breathing hard as we always do. The Enforcer had about a foot of height on Sarah, making them a fairly even match. The score went to 3-2 in our favor, my turn to serve this thing, so here you go- I hit it, Howard returned it close to the net, the Enforcer put it in the air... and then I rushed and jumped with a grin, slamming it down with folded hands, aiming for a spot of ground without any hominids near it. **Whack-crack!** Howard returned it with a solid punch.. sort of. The ball lay in two barely-connected pieces on our side of the court. Howard looked stunned for a second, then realized what had happened, and we all laughed. I've heard of baseballs being obliterated, but I've never seen a volleyball destroyed.

"Howard!! You killed the ball!", Jeremy said between laughs. "It's dead, dude! May it rest in peace- or is that pieces? Heh, heh.. I was worried about this. Joey, go get the other one."

"You predicted this, then.", Howard said, as Joey fetched the spare ball.

"Yeah, didn't want to use this other ball though, it's a little heavier. But it's reinforced, Illuminati style. You **shouldn't** be able to break this. All right, 3-2 still, do-over on account of destroyed ball." And we did it again, slamming the ball back and forth. Yup, it's not going to break no matter how much we try to kill it.

The next different thing to happen was when Jeremy tried to do exactly what I had, grinning and slamming the ball down with folded hands. Um, that's not going to work against Howie. For a moment I had a vision of Jeremy's head flying away, its place on his neck juxtaposed with the ball. Of course, that didn't happen, but Howard did send the ball flying into his hands with a smack, turning them red and unfolding them, and sending the ball into the air. The Enforcer whacked it hard and to the side, Paul got an arm on it, Sarah punted it into the air, and then Howard sent it crashing down directly at Jeremy's head. Fortunately for him, he got his palms on it, put it into the air, and the angle was such that I could send it into their court where neither Howard nor anyone else could get it.

"Damn, Jeremy, it's a good thing that thing's soft!", Paul said, rubbing his arm.

"Oh, of course, I knew it would be like this.", he said, opening and closing his hands, which must have hurt. "But I like it! You aren't pulling punches, are ya Howard?" **Howard pulling punches?!** It's a good thing he likes you, Jeremy, otherwise you might not want to have said that!

"Jeremy- am I known for pulling punches? It's just that I've never played this before." We continued whacking it back and forth. The Enforcer made a mistake, whacking it off the post. Sarah took Jeremy by surprise and tied it up, 10-10. The round after that, Howard and I got too close together with our whacks, and it was going to sit on my hand- I let it go, it rolled on the net, and Sarah smacked it- Jeremy got it this time, sending it back up to Paul, who happily and unexpectedly spiked it to the back-middle of our court. The Enforcer sent it to Sarah, who aggressively sent it to Jeremy again- this time he didn't make it and skidded into the grass trying to dive for it, his white Illuminatus clothes turning light green from the chlorophyll.

Similar, entertaining things happened until it went to 15-17, their lead. Howard expertly put it to the back, I popped it up, the Enforcer slammed it into a back corner of theirs (hey, it's getting **good** at this), Sarah got it, Howard slammed it, Jeremy managed to pop it up and set me up for the spike, then Sarah hit it and it went to the side of the Enforcer's head, who was moving and couldn't react.

The weird thing was when a similar situation happened next round and the Enforcer failed to react in the exact same way.

"That, gentlemen, is a **bug**.", Sarah said, sneering and pointing at it. Bug.. oh, she means technical bug.

"They better not have that problem in combat.", Jeremy said, shaking his head.

"Oh, it's that.. Yeah, I remember hearing about that. That shouldn't work in combat.. but Murphy's Law dictates that it probably does.", Howard said. Good. If we find ourselves in Enforcer combat again and we find a bug, and it's common among all Enforcers of that type, we can continuously exploit it like a normal hacker in a badly-programmed game. Better get the patches going, guys. The 15-19 lead they had over us cinched it- despite my repeat hammering, it ended in their favor 16-21. Jeremy was a bit better than Paul, being obviously somewhat experienced at the game, but the Enforcer's no match for Sarah.

"Well, Jeremy, I was thinking... how much of that was actually regulation?", Howard asked, grinning.

"All right, Howard, I admit. Both balls were softer, the court was a bit smaller, and the net wasn't quite so high as it is in regulation. And I bet you can figure out why." Heh, let's see.. other than the fact that it would hurt like hell if he did, there's no way in hell he could hope to react to engineered (or even strong normal) hits on a hard ball, he couldn't move far enough fast enough on a large court, and if that net was higher than his jumping height, he'd be completely unable to play any real offense.

Howard summed it up. "So that you'd actually get a chance to play without getting your ass too kicked." Jeremy smiled, laughed, and nodded. "I'm not surprised. I would have done the same." Our bodies hurt, but

Sigh. All that fun and we get to deal with an asshole when we go in. Howard turned on the screen, hoping to hear some sense from whoever was on the other end, and got some crap from one Jack Butcher instead. Butcher indeed- this lardass looks like he eats a pig every day with his normal metabolism. "How... **dare**... you.. you have disgraced your position... you... you've shot a messenger.." If the message is bullshit, the guy's not a 'messenger', he's what we call a 'liar', a 'useless scumbag', and 'Dominator bait'. "Howard, you can't just run us and control us by killing who you don't like!!" Isn't that what he's been doing this whole time? Damn, I'm glad Howard's doing this and not me. My eyes are starting to itch.

"Why not? It's worked so far.", Howard said, annoyed. Of course, his eyes are itching, too. Damn sun. "Did you even bother to find out what happened, or are you just annoying me for the fun and the suicide?" In this case, I'd have to say 'the suicide', definitely.

"You killed the man trying to save your life!!"

"Bullll...**shit**!", Howard said, grinning. I don't think the Illuminati have life insurance, but if they did, it would be a good time to cancel this guy's policy. "Now, I don't know what's going on with all you idiots trying to delude me, and I don't really care if you're all unified or separate. It really doesn't matter to me. I'll kill you all anyway. But, if you want me to spare this miserable life of yours, you'll tell me who's been letting these people in and why, and why you are trying to delude me as to who's trying to kill me. Dave had no place here. Several people I've met had no business in the Illuminati- they couldn't figure out a conspiracy if we all beat the shit out of them. Neither, I imagine, do you. **Who let you in??**" It's the \$64,000 ($\times 10^6$) question. Howard's force of threat broke the man's facade like a hammer on cheap glass.

"I... I... he swore he'd... it wasn't supposed to.. oh **please** Howard, spare me!" Not unless you give him a very, very good reason to. But, although Howard's realizing that someone else has designs of getting people he wants in there, it wasn't a direct answer.

"You will speak the **truth** or I will torture you to **death**.", Howard said, his way of getting hard evidence. Truth or dare? Nah. Truth or death? Sure, let's play.

"Howard... all right!! But I seek asylum for telling you what I will!" Loony bin asylum, maybe.

"Granted. Now speak!" Howard's telling him to speak like a normal would a dog, because this guy is Howard's **bitch**.

"His name is.. his name is McCough. A-Andrew McCough, he's a third level. Howard.. you weren't supposed to know." Um, asshole? He's Howard. Y'know, Dominator of the Illuminati? He knows. It's his job. "He started this when you started the tests." And here we thought nobody was going to try to do things to piss off the future Dominator then. Silly us. "What.. what he's trying to do is to promote people he wants into the ranks. He wants to have more power, more clout.. he even gave me the

answers to some of the.. the questions." I smell death in Andrew's future. Or this guy's, if he's lying. Or both, even if he's telling the truth. Maybe we should beat their heads together and see whose breaks first. "Howard.. he thought.. he thinks.. that you won't notice it. He told me that, and I quote.. 'Nah, the Dominator isn't going to pay any attention to us, he's got his young head too into the clouds.. your position is secure.' That's what he said! Howard.. the reason for all the delusion.. and Dave's fake shit.. is because we've been committing one of the highest sins." 'Highest' would explain it. Don't conspire when on the bong. It doesn't work.

"Say it."

"We've had a conspiracy inside the conspiracy." I was half-expecting Howard to kill this guy and rip the information out of his computers right away, then go to other people and rip them apart and jump from place to place until they were all bloody carcasses. "Dave read you that list under Andrew's orders.. we had some proof of those guys talking... he didn't know that you had.. relationships with any of them.. those guys were getting in our way and rejecting our offers, making things harder." And now some guys (or maybe just one girl) are going to reject your lungs, making it harder for you to live. Howard started laughing.

"Hold up. This Andrew is a third level and he's trying this shit? What did he think, that Illuminati could just be pulled around like normal puppets?" Maybe he got confused and thought that Illuminated genetic normals were the equivalent of sheeple. "Now I'll be honest with **you**. I don't understand what's going on. All I've been getting is assorted obvious lies and lots of bullshit about guys trying to stab me in the back. I don't understand. What did Andrew hope to **gain** by this? He couldn't get power from a lot of fifth level idiots, people around him would figure it out sooner or later." How long would the Illuminati last if they let people invite just anyone to build their petty empires with? Sooner or later they'd get someone stupid enough to break secrecy, and there's only so much real control to be done in the world anyway. Trying to think of what Andrew had in mind is a pointless, headache-inducing experience, because it assumes that Andrew has a capable mind or it has anything in it. Just another dead dumbass. There was another slight buzz- someone's on hold.

"Howard.. the idea.. was eventual rebellion."

"Then he's dead. And you may remain a fifth level." Howard may or may not be lying- if he's not, I'm surprised. "But I want you to study, to become more than just a pawn. We are the Illuminati. The next time someone tries anything like this- you hear about it, see it, even if it looks like something small or just a couple of guys- you go directly to me."

"Yes, Master Howard. Th..thank you."

The next caller was Andrew McCough. What the hell? This better be good. He tried to stammer out a sentence, and I heard Paul humming Taps at low volume. This.. guy's dead... yes.. he is...

"It was lies!! All lies!! Howard, you can't believe a word he said! I didn't tell Dave to send you that list! I didn't invite people! I didn't do any of that! He's trying his own manipulative games! Howard, please!" What the fuck? Seriously, what the fuck?

Howard actually bothered to tell him the reason this was bullshit. "Andrew, has anyone told you you're a fucking idiot? And that if you weren't listening in on him, you wouldn't have known what he said, and I don't think there's a reason for you to have bugs on him unless you're trying to control him? You can't listen in from my side, pal." Howard waited for an explanation; none was forthcoming. "I'm glad to meet you. It means that I can put an end to this annoying shit. Sarah!!" Get the shovel, we've got buryin' to do. Although I'm sure it doesn't mean much, I'm surprised Howard warned him.

"Yes, Howard?", she asked, a slight grin on her face, relishing the next command.

"He is still alive.", Howard said, calmly, and pointed to the red-flushed face of Andrew McCough. It's okay, it'll be devoid of blood soon enough. "That is a bad situation. Rectify it."

"Yes, Howard." She went upstairs to get her killing gear. He didn't want to bother going himself- we're tired and we just did a raid, after all. Let the professional handle it this time.

"**NOOO!!! NOT HER!! NOT SARAH!! PLEASE, HOWARD, PLEASE..**", the desperate man screamed. If this were a movie, this guy would get his Oscar nomination taken away for excessive melodrama. Howard answered his pleas by turning off the screen, blocking his calls, and sending the conversation to the public logs. Ah, yes. He warned him as a warning to everyone else. This one is going to get a lot of yuks among people who read it. Howard then completely removed the man's access to everything, preventing him from going out in a blaze of spite by breaking secrecy on a major scale.

"Howard, did anyone ever tell you you had a way of dealing with things that everyone envies?", Jeremy asked, awe in his voice.

"How so, Jeremy?"

"Well.. all right. Most people would have pointed out to others of us that something was wrong, and started something to expose what was going on. You.. you don't even **care** who's in their sub-conspiracy. Every time someone tries to lie to you... you just kill them." It makes an excellent precedent, doesn't it?

"Because I **don't** care, Jeremy.", Howard replied. "I really don't care. Human relationships come and go, especially among these idiots. They might be conspiring together one minute and having a power struggle the next. It's just my job to make sure that these bugs don't infest the greater scheme of things. In fact, I'm going to start some hard testing of every Illuminatus to make sure that they aren't involved in shit like this. A kind of cleanout, if you will. Although I will be discussing this with the first and second levels, you're invited to watch, and I want everyone's help making a plan." As he was saying that, Sarah came down the stairs wearing normal clothing over her assassin gear, carrying a large purse full of what I'm sure was folded-up equipment. As she looked interestingly beautiful in normal clothes, we all watched her leave.

The next few hours were spent brainstorming and developing ways to implement ideas, as we munched on snack foods. We can't regularly test- it'd be a pain in the ass- so we focused on initial tests that would mean more, would better weed out people. The thing was that the tests had already been developed, by people more experienced and willing to spend a lot more time than we were. So instead of reinventing the wheel, we simply tried to put a better tire on it. A lot of the tests were developed before various spying and technological innovations, and we (Paul and Joey were actually able to help) swiftly developed ways to use this. Before you get to be on the giving end of the serious spying, you have to be on the receiving end.

I wondered what a normal conspiracy buff would have thought of this intellectual labor, as if we were a bunch of preteen corporate leaders trying to hammer out a business plan. Well, of course it's difficult and time-consuming! Conspiracies don't just exist on their own, guys! Although it usually isn't done by the Dominator, it takes **work**! You need elbow grease, careful planning, and rigorous enforcement of certain rules (and sometimes judicious lax enforcement when you need to make exceptions) to be able to keep it running. Although we wouldn't be dealing with this particular problem if we were all engineered, there would still need to be lots of discussion and planning until the End of Secrecy- and more after that as the Illuminati start the direct management of the world. Although the attitude and methods are completely different, like a normal bureaucracy, the job of the conspiracy is to make sure the conspiracy exists tomorrow. I idly scratched my face with my gloved fingertips.

Loyalty, an absolutely necessary attribute (remember, it only takes **one** asshole breaking secrecy to ruin things), is always hard to test for. To become an Illuminatus, you usually have to be **disloyal** to something or other- freedom, your country, your loved ones, everything you've ever been taught, et cetera. Furthermore, Illuminati are supposed to be good at lying. What we tried to test for, then, were people who would be loyal to Howard and the organization while able to stab everyone else in the back. Courage was another thing- we need people bold enough to act on their own and make hard decisions, but not foolhardy enough to act against the Dominator. It's impossible to be perfect, but we can try anyway.

Of course, there was the issue of people being artificially helped, and Howard instituted careful logging of records and monitoring of recruits to put a stop to that shit. Sorry, fucktards, this organization won't belong to you simply because you can manipulate some lamers. It's Howard's organization, and he's going to keep it. You could have asked me- I would have told you that.

Eventually we finished it, turning it into a suitable object for Howard to present to the Illuminati. After a bit of thinking, he decided not to present it to anyone else- instead, he just sent it up as policy, and if they don't like it, they can complain. (Yeah, right.) Now that that was finished, I still had thoughts about the asshole who Sarah was out killing.

"I still don't get why he did something that would hurt him like that- did he really not know that he'd get found out sooner or later?", I asked, and my mouth moving kept making my skin itch.

"I don't understand it either, Billy. It's a silly thing to do. Damien was silly and now these guys are silly. I guess it's just a really bad case of overinflated ego and wishful thinking. Or maybe he has some psychological problem that the testing didn't catch. This goes beyond the thing with the Bastards. They had a plan. These guys..", he began, scratching his face. These guys don't have a plan, or their plan is so close to nonsense that they might as well not have one. And those guys with mass implanted servants..

"I'm glad you're starting these tests. Imagine if people like that got world implant power..", I said.

"People like that with a million implanted people. The blind leading the blind... no, worse than that. The stupid, dimwitted, and self-destructive leading the blind off a fucking cliff. I've told you before, this is my planet, and I'll eat shit if I'm going to let imbeciles like that wreck its people." Of course, Howard ultimately decides who 'its people' are, and who is cannon fodder. "I hope we just stop recruiting from the normal population. The kids who came over were..."

Compared to the idiots we've been talking about protecting the organization against, they were gods. "Quick, brilliant, understanding, and had control over their own egos, right, Howie?", I asked. They weren't all superior, and some of them were considerably better than others, but the difference was remarkable. They're kids- they don't have experience on their side. How much better will they be (and us, for that matter) when they **do**?

"Bingo. And they knew what they were doing. These guys don't know what they're doing. They're trying to play a role that they can't fill. They can't live it, they need to pretend it, and so they are destroyed by their own real selves. I wish they could just rise to the challenge, you know? They need to learn to accept that they're part of a greater whole, that **we** run the world, not just me, not just them, but that it takes more than one person to really have a handle on the chaos that is this planet." Howard, I noticed, is trying to strike a balance between being a micromanager and a figurehead, but finds that hard to do with retards. "But no, they need to play politics and ignore real problems. Their resource portfolios were in tatters.." My facial skin is in tatters. Were we really out there that long?

"Yeah, I saw that. Someone should have got them on that too. Howard.. why?", I asked.

"Why what?"

"The same question you're asking. Why are all these guys doing all this shit? Why would people in the best organization on the planet add people who would fuck it up, just to pretend they're cooler when they know what those people would do?" Howard wasn't able to answer, but I was ranting, and he didn't mind. "What the hell? Look, when I first got here, I got the impression that the eye in the pyramid was literally unstoppable. Now this shit? Yes. Make them all locally. Damn it-" Okay, this facial skin business is really starting to piss me off. I grabbed a corner of it and peeled; so did Howard. And I peeled, peeled.. peeled it all the way from the collar of my shirt to where the hair began on my head, and Howard had a similar shedding of skin, like we'd just peeled off plastic wrap.

Jeremy took the skin from Howard's hands and held it onto his face like a mask. "These guys don't know what they're doing!", he exclaimed in a very bad imitation of Howard's voice. After all that serious stuff, it was hilarious, and Joey, Paul, and I all cracked up.

Joey held out his hand and I put my shedded skin into it. "Now this shit? Yes. Make them all locally.", he said, holding my skin to his face. It was a different imitation that Jeremy's, but it was just as funny- Joey and Jeremy started giggling, and Howard started laughing with us.

"You guys- Jeremy, you- Damn!", he said, slight indignation peeking out from his laughter.

"Okay, now that you've taken advantage of our dense skin, can we go back to being serious?", I asked, laughing. I wanted to finish this shit.

Jeremy and Joey quietly pocketed our skin- I knew they'd play with it more later. Howard started talking seriously again. "Well, as much as I hate to admit it, these new ones are sheeple. They don't deserve the name Illuminati, they don't deserve anything, really, except bullets sent air-mail. The good thing about detecting them is that they usually work for the idiots who let them in, so we can get big clumps of them at once. The problem is, in this case, they sometimes start in a different place, and because we're **supposed** to be ubiquitous and unified, the people who initially contact them aren't written down on principle.." Not a thing changed in the plan.

"Yeah, and they get there through Illuminati swindling other ones, saying 'here, have this new recruit, you said you needed one..' when the recruit will just do the recruiter's bidding like a good nescient. I know that part. And I can also guess why this isn't usually a problem.", I replied.

"The same reason it's not going to be a problem now." Because Howard solves problems the violent way. Which is interesting..

"You know, thinking about it, I'm getting the impression that these guys are just put here for the three of us.", I said.

"Why's that?"

"Cannon fodder. Come on, Howard, you know how much a good- or even a bad- fight invigorates you. And when you just send her, she's almost licking her lips in anticipation of the pure slaughter."

"You know, you're right in that the meatgrinding is nice. It reaffirms my power, gives us all something to do, sends a message encouraging greater local creation.. there are benefits. But you know I'd much prefer it if the sheeple were kept **out**, which is why I **am** doing something about this. But another nice thing is, although there's lots of details, the principles aren't all that complicated."

"Thank God, like this place needs any more intrigue..", I said. I hate dealing with conflicts between normal asstards, and although he's been trained from birth in it and related subjects, so does he.

"Speaking of intrigue, one of the games I used to play a while ago and got sick of was

expanded-board Illuminated Net Monopoly, with unseen players. Not only could you cut the plotting with a knife, you could also spoon it up and spread it on your bread. We're talking absolute free-for-all. I realized mid-game that two guys were in cahoots from the start, right? They're at each other's throats by the end. The trading is insane, and I learned something else about this organization. Not only do we plot for what we want, a lot of us also plot because there's plotting to be done, plotting for just the sheer sake of plotting." On a rational level, how could you expect much else from an organization that thrives on it?

"Yeah, I kind of figured that out. Howard, remember, this is the place that everyone thinks plotting is to be done. And so when they get here..."

"That is why, as much as I hate to admit it. I'm not sure how many of them really get it. Maybe they can't. The way to real Illumination is to ignore your preconceptions, quit going on stereotypes, and fuck, look around! Damn these people. Plot against the fucking.. oh, hell, you know all this shit, I'm ranting again." It's okay, Howie. So was I.

"You do that a lot."

"It could be worse. I could be doing it in Latin." He chuckled and I broke out laughing. He'd very literally sound like Caesar if he started doing that. "But I'm going to enjoy getting indignant and angry while I can."

"Because once they're all dead and the rest of them get the fucking **hint**, you'll be bored again."

He nodded. "In a way, I'm too good for this. It just makes me happy that we're engineering the brains for real jobs, like sheeple manipulation, even more genetic engineering, and better computers."

"Well, come on, you already know this, if they didn't have you, who else would they have to keep the idiocy in check?", I asked rhetorically.

"That is my purpose in life, isn't it." In a way, it's a big waste. If people didn't need a Dominator, wouldn't our brains be put to better use in advanced science of some sort? "To be a guard against something we shouldn't even be talking about. I always knew that I was making much less work for myself when I did certain things effectively, but I didn't actually consider phasing myself out."

"Howard, you won't be phased out.", I told him.

"How do you know?"

"Because if you do lack things to do, your own boredom will just catch up to you and the next thing I'll hear is 'Hey Billy, help me finish this guy's research.'"

Howard nodded. "Point taken. And I'm bored **now**." He had sent Sarah because he didn't feel like going, but he was probably wishing he hadn't.. "I think I'm going to do some research and maybe later see about taking the axe to some of the new recruits if they can't toe the mark."

"Good, I can't wait.", I replied. Nothing like a gory massacre to get that good buzz going again.

The whole time, Jeremy, Joey, and Paul were quiet, listening to us. I wonder what Jeremy and Joey will really have to say about us on their flight home? Howard generally doesn't treat me like a slave, and similarly, I don't act like I'd separate his head from his body at the earliest available opportunity. Jeremy looks up to Howard- with good reason- and is probably going to imitate him in many ways.

Howard's research was on Andrew. He looked for evidence, there was no tracking the guys Andrew'd invited (no tracing of resources or manipulation on Andrew's public records, damn), and

they were sure as hell not going to show themselves now. Actually, the guy was mostly smart, just did really stupid shit once in a while. He knew intentionally inviting inferior Illuminati was a capital crime (so many things are, here), he just thought he could get away with it. He had a superiority complex, which is beyond idiotic with Howard at the helm. He simply had no idea what he was really up against, and thought he could make it to the top. Now he's going to the bottom. Say hello to Satan for me, Andrew. Howard stopped doing research and decided to have some fun instead- hey, five computers in the house (the people who do Howard's upgrades don't give any thought to his guests), five people. FFAs with both me and Howard in them always end up with us at each other's throats; since we play to win and he would never command anything less than that, being the most powerful opponents, we go after each other rabidly in order to have any chance of winning.

The gaming was interrupted by Sarah reporting in from Andrew's computer; she'd killed him (he'd tried to stop her with various forces, but all she said was that she got a bigger gun), and the logs showed that it was indeed him who did the stupid shit, but he stored his contact information for his nescient Illuminati on a second computer and melted the hard drive before she got there. Why'd he have to be smart in doing that and stupid in other decisions?

Jeremy went to sleep on Howard's couch that night, and Joey slept on the carpet next to him.

Chapter 48

I was woken up by Joey opening the door a crack with a sheepish look on his face. "Hey.. you in the bathroom.. ah, guess not. I was knocking.. and are both of you naked?" The covers were half off.

"It's soundproof.", Paul reminded him. "And we just sleep like that. If you don't want to see it, just turn around." Joey did, and Paul got dressed- I did the same. Sarah walked into the room silently, as usual- she wanted in on the conversation. "Hey, I was wondering.. what has Jeremy told you not to do?" Joey looked at him curiously. "Like, permanently, never do this or that, what commands like that?"

"Right now? None.", Joey said, turning back around slowly. Wait.. no standing orders..

"You mean he didn't tell you not to kill him?!", I asked in absolute amazement. Either Jeremy never got his hands on the little black book, or he ignored it entirely.

"No, he didn't.", Joey said, as if the question was irrelevant and/or stupid.

"So you're just going to let him..." I didn't want to finish the sentence, and Joey interrupted quickly enough so I wouldn't have to.

"Let him? **Let him do what?** Billy, are you crazy or something? He's my friend! If it wasn't for him, I'd be stuck in some halfass, fuckwit town in the middle of nowhere, reading schoolbooks and not knowing half what I know now, dealing with parents, annoyed to hell by bullies and idiots and all kinds of shitheads. It's not like he makes me do his chores and shit." Of course not. Enforcers do that. But how could Joey just... surrender himself when he can... I was at a total loss for words.

"Billy, let me handle this.", said Sarah, her professionalism in her voice. "Look, Joey, that kid might be your friend but he is a fucking Illuminatus! And let me tell you-"

"Sarah, Billy, can I talk to you guys for a second?" The inflection was Howard's, but the voice was Paul's. We turned our heads around and allowed him to gently grab our necks and pull us down for an impromptu huddle.

"Look at him, guys. **He's happy.** Do you mind doing him a fucking favor and leaving him that way?" I wanted to smack Paul across the face, make him realize- then Sarah nodded slowly, and I realized in a second what a fool I would be to smash Joey's illusions. They're probably the only

thing keeping him from depression or outright insanity. He can kill that boy if he wants to. If he chooses not to, that's entirely his business. I'm not going to hurt friendly people just because they've got reality problems. Hell, this whole thing is a reality problem.

"Joey... I'm sorry for..", I said, realizing what my words could do to his mind.

"Billy. I understand. And it's okay. But it's not like you think it is, not between me and Jeremy. He's still my friend, it's not like he's going to.. you know."

"Believe me, we know."

"I could tell you all about the things that we've done together.. but I mean, come **on**. I **know** you guys have a lot better stuff than that to talk about." Yes, and particularly in Paul's case, a lot **worse**.

Sarah took a deep breath. "All right.. if we're going to start sharing stories, I'm going to say one of mine, and let's not volunteer any information to anyone else." Meaning Howard, certainly.

"Wow, Sarah, you're really going to start talking about something on your own?", Paul asked, mockingly. She smirked, a bit smug, as if she were the Queen of Silence (which she is) and everyone should respect when she chooses to break it.

"I was eight years old. This one Illuminatus had done something potentially damaging to secrecy- I don't remember the level or the crime or anything- but the thing was, he didn't ever want to come to any meetings or any event where it was just Illuminati. He knew what he was doing might be assassination-worthy, so he thought he could just avoid it by always having bodyguards and other people near him- he didn't have Enforcers, I remember that much- but there was no way anyone could get close to him or be certain to shoot him and get away. The way he did things, even snipers wouldn't have been possible. He was a 45-year-old guy who smoked cigars, so I walked in there to poison his drink and give him a heart attack.

"Now remember, this was about five years ago. The Enforcers I had weren't all that smart. This one could hold a conversation among drunk rich idiots okay, but not much else. It wouldn't have been able to follow me out secretly in the same way the guy left, so I went that way without it. There was no contingency plan, this was all being played by ear-transmitter. Here's the thing. It was late at night, and this was a fancy party this guy was having. I was wearing a poofy pink dress and heeled shoes it was almost impossible to walk silently in." I was expecting Joey, or more probably Paul, to guffaw at that, but neither of them did. "Obviously, I couldn't follow him directly. I had to have another guy following him and reporting on his movements." The way she spoke, I could tell it was an embarrassment. "I was looking around for other people, I had a bullshit story ready if anyone asked me where I was going. This one pedophile jackhole sees this helpless little girl walking past, takes it as an opportunity, jumps out of an alley, and tries to grab me." We all smiled- there's only one way this story can end. "They were painted pink, but I had the nails. His arms never even really got close. I slashed them vertically before he'd finished making his grab, and then I turned around, jumped up, and just tore open his throat. I was just so fucking **pissed**."

"So what happened?", Joey asked.

"What do you think happened? I was covered in blood. They had their van there and me in it in less than five seconds."

"And the guy..?"

"One of my guys recalculated the risk and took him out with a dart gun to the face. Same stuff I would have used to poison him. He had his heart attack after all." A brief pause. "That was the last time I ever wore a dress or any kind of shoes like that. I don't even have any in my closet."

"So you don't want us to tell Howard and give him any ideas."

"Actually, even if you tell him, he almost certainly won't." The emphasis on 'almost' was very slight, but enough for everyone to hear it.

"Also.. about him and you..", Joey said. "You had his son, Sarah. Right after a fight. And then you let him be shipped off without even worrying. You do care, I can tell. But there's just no emotional bond. You didn't mind him being taken at all."

"To **Northberg**.", Sarah said, as if that explained everything. In an important way, it did.

"But what about **his** emotional attachment to **you**?", Joey asked. She shook her head at him, as if his words held no value.

"For an engineered? Even if I am his mother," The words sounded alien from Sarah's mouth. "he won't care. He's one of the Northberg kids now, and when he gets to be seven or so, he'll be an Illuminatus. I don't know what he'll be doing, or what he's going to hold in those four hands of his, but that'll be up to him."

"Yeah. They have it all, don't they?" Yes, and in so many ways. We all nodded. "You guys ever read Milton's Paradise Lost?" None of us have. "There's a line in there where Lucifer says it's better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven," I've read that line somewhere else before. "but that's just sour grapes, because he knows damn well that Heaven is better than Hell. See guys, this is why I don't mind. I've gone from a questionable existence in sheepville to serving here. Paul, make no mistake,", he said, turning to him, "this is a lot better than anything you could possibly have had." He turned to us with a wry look. "You two just got hosed."

"Not so heavenly then, is it?", Sarah got him with.

Joey shook his head and smiled demurely. "No. But I mean, look around you. I know Christianity is bullshit, but so much of it just so **fits**. I thought you guys were homicidal maniacs, but you're not. You're avenging angels, sent by your Master to punish the sins of stupidity and personal greed. The Illuminati even has its own Revelations, the End of Secrecy. For what he can do, for what he can control, Howard might as well be God. You two, maybe you three, are smarter than I am, so you'll probably find a million things wrong with what I'm saying, but.. you guys want to fall. Don't fall. It'll just make things worse." There were a thousand comebacks I could have said- 'Spoken like a true servant', 'You just love being his bitch', 'Maybe one day you'll actually be told to do something you don't want to do', ad nauseum- but I said none of them. Because, as much as I hate to admit it, he has a valid point.

Paul just shrugged. "You tell a story, Joey."

"What?"

"C'mon, Sarah told hers, I don't have much to say, and Billy has even less unless you count the times he's beat up normals. You can just look up all our Illuminated stuff." The tests, for example, are a matter of public record.

"Oh.. all right, I will. It's not much of a story, but I guess it's worth telling anyway. All right, so I was eight, and I was living like a couple miles away from Jeremy. If there were sidewalks or a path or something and I was older, I could have probably just biked there. After school, Jeremy called me up- he did that a lot- and he asked if I wanted to come over. Of course, I did, but my dad was going 'He spends too much time with that boy', and my mom was like 'They're friends, you have to let Joey spend time with his friends'.. this went on for fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes for a five minute drive. I just did homework while they yelled at each other." Paul and I laughed. "Anyway, my mom just comes out and says 'Is this how you really want to act in front of Becky?' That's my little sister. And

my dad just says 'C'mon, I'll take you', and so we're driving there and he doesn't say anything. So we get there, he goes to McDonald's- he doesn't even ask if we want anything, he just goes. Jeremy's dad was at work, his mom leaves us alone, so we were up in his room. We thought we had hours, so he starts sitting at his desk, and he was halfway through his homework. I just massaged his neck the whole time." I almost asked why, but it was obvious- he's Joey's friend, so why wouldn't he do something like that for him? "Fifteen minutes, he's done, he flops down on the bed, and guess what I say. 'Know what, bud? I would give my motherfucking **soul** for more time like this and a fuckload less time with my dipshit family.' Yes, I actually said that." This would have been a solid case of 'be careful what you wish for' if Joey wasn't actually happy with the results. "And Jeremy says 'Yeah, Joey, I'd give your soul too!' Yes, he actually said that, too!" Joey started laughing and Paul and I joined him a bit, Sarah simply listening. "So we're together laying there, just talking for like five minutes, and then my dad comes marching up the stairs and says it's time to go home. I just fucking got there. So I get off the bed, he bursts into the room without knocking, he pretty much drags me out the door, and when we're leaving Jeremy's house he says, 'You're not queer for him, are you?' And I'm like 'No.', and he says 'You've been spending too much time with him, you should spend more time with me' or some shit.. and I just wanted to reach over, hit the emergency brake, and pulverize his face with the steering wheel.. I'm not gay. I'll be honest, I **love** Jeremy, but seriously, it's not like that."

"Joey, we know.", I said. "C'mon, you walked in on us. Two computers, one bed. Paul and I are like you and Jeremy." Joey realized, smiled, and nodded.

"See, this is one of the cool things about this place. I can talk to people who know what I'm talking about." Joey was interrupted by Jeremy opening the door (without knocking, just like Joey's dad- oh wait, knocking would do Jeremy no good on a soundproof door.) and saying, "Hey, Joey. You know that asshole dad of yours?" Coincidence happens.

"We were **just** talking about him!", Joey shouted. We all laughed, and I heard Howard crack up laughing as well from downstairs.

"Well, guess what, I'm only a fifth so I can't kill him," Sarah nodded at that. "so I added him to a list of people to inflict undirected fear and anxiety on. I can take him off if you really want but-"

"Take him off? Hell no!", Joey shouted. "Undirected fear and anxiety is exactly what that bastard deserves!" We all laughed some more and went to play games (six-player beat-em-ups with six actual players, three of whom are bioengineered, own all ass) and run around. Jeremy and Joey hadn't seen the beauty of Howard's island, and enjoyed exploring its reaches. There was even a small cave that I've never been in, and we had to wade in ankle-deep water to get inside, although there were lots of dry areas. It was nice. A great hang-out spot for when you don't want to be inside but the sun (or heavy rain- being in here with a storm outside would just be cool) is coming down too hard.

"I think I'm going to start relaxing here.", Sarah said.

"And avoid my commands, Sarah?", Howard asked, raising an eyebrow. In reply, she pointed to an intercom that looked like it was part of the rock walls. Nice. We fooled around in there for about fifteen minutes, Jeremy being silly enough to try to get into a splash fight with Howard (he dodges **bullets**, remember?) and giving up loudly when he got lots of salt water thrown into his mouth and nose. After that, we ran around on the island, doing various fun and imaginative things, until a few hours later when Jeremy and Joey had to go home, waving and smiling from Jeremy's helicopter as it whup-whup-whupped into the sky.

Chapter 49

The next day, it was just the usual, Howard killing time with me, anticipating a call from someone needing the services of the One who rules the world. But this time, we knew that the call was

coming, it would just be a matter of when- Howard stayed near the large screen. He wanted me with him, but I was going to stay anyway- I wanted to see the report on what was really going on with Sarah's four-armed son, as soon as possible. It'll be interesting, if nothing else.

And he did come on, a bit after noon. Howard hit the key to react to the buzzer a tenth of a second after it rang, reaching up from his bored position and no longer looking bored at all. "Howard, the report you wanted? It's here, in full." A few clicks later, and it was downloaded. "He's fine, Howard. Just.. fine. Heartbeat is regular, blood pressure normal, no respiratory ailments.. and with his advanced strength, I doubt those arms of his are going to pose much of a problem- and they are, in fact, fully usable." The Operator closed his eyes and shook his head just a bit. "A miracle. An absolute miracle."

"Operator, one thing I didn't ask for on the report was **why** it happened. I want you to tell me that yourself." Good. Thank you, Howard. More information.

"Why?" The man onscreen shrugged slightly. "We screwed up, that's why. None of us had the foresight to predict that you two might be breeding." Umm.. guys? You **knew** you were going to make her his servant. You **knew** he'd reach puberty. What the **hell** are you talking about, not having the foresight to see the painfully inevitable?!

Howard chose not to make a point of that. "Technical explanation.", he simply said.

"That would be the 'how', then, and telling you the whole technical explanation would take more than two hours, I'd need to seek outside help, and it would be an enormous adventure into the fun-filled world of jargon, and even your Latin isn't going to help much against **that**." The Operator's tone suggested that his profession was a complicated, hard, and tiring job. (Well, of course it is, but look at the fruits of your labor.) "To put it concisely, we managed to pack genetic information in different places than it was supposed to be, the two of you bred, and the genetics for the arms (it's actually more of a fractal pattern, but that's even more jargon for you..) was copied twice, telling the organism that it needed two pair, each in different places. The miracle is that it didn't hurt anything on him, and an even greater miracle is placement. They're right at the bottom of his lungs, but you can find all that out in the report."

"Why did you have them in different places? I thought I was just an advanced version of her?" Howard has absolutely no problem referring to himself as a product.

"Well, what you're seeing is the results of a larger policy, for any kind of modern engineering. Every person, or every Enforcer now, does a little piece of the job. Even if you devoted your whole life to it, it would take you fifty years to understand everything that went on in your creation, or any genetics project for that matter. The principle's very simple. For every problem, one person, or a small team, devises a solution or a workaround. For example, her arms are in the wrong chromosome portion-done all wrong, really, but it was the best fix at the time- while yours are in the exact same place as a normal human's. No four-armed babies will come from her and a normal, because her eggs that contain that chromosome portion aren't supposed to be fertilizable. A workaround for the workaround. But, since we screwed around too much, we ended up changing your fertilization chemicals just a bit- just a little bit, mind you- and boom. It's too many cooks, really, but we can't have any fewer."

Howard said it an instant after I thought it. "You talk about it as if it were a programming language, and Quad's just a bad blend of recompiled code."

"I am, and in certain ways, he is. The DNA samples say that.. oh, it's in the report. Oh, and by the way- is that his name? Quad?"

"Quadrus Dominus." I've never been a fan of names that include physical characteristics, but that Latin and the four-armed badass the kid is certainly going to grow up to be will go well together. The

Operator typed it in. "Is there anything else you want or have to say?"

"Yeah, actually.. Howard, although the report does say it's unlikely for you two to create any more.. modifieds.." That's a fairly crappy euphemism for what he really means, which is 'freaks'. "I'd recommend that you two not produce any more offspring. There's a million things that can go wrong, and even though her gestation time **is** much shorter and she will **certainly** not be affected much, and quickly recover.."

"You're worried about my reaction upon seeing an even more fucked-up kid come out."

"It's not pleasant and it's certainly not productive. Personal recommendation, Howard: if you intend to procreate any more, just say so. If it's the screwing you care about, I can whip up suitable morning-after pills for her in a couple of days, no question." Pragmatic, the Operator is. "Given her biology, she won't even feel it after a few minutes."

"Recommendation heard. Ship them to me when you've developed them, and make sure you list every last effect and side effect. There is one more thing I'd like to mention, while you're here."

"What's that?"

"The retrovirus. What of it?"

"It's hard to make and even harder to test. It's our top priority and we're doing everything we can. There is no ETA." In other words, he has no idea when the fuck he'll be done with it.

"Then that's all." Howard and the Operator switched off at about the same time.

"Being referred to as a genetics project really doesn't bug you, does it?", Paul asked.

"No, actually, I quite like it. Technology has power over mankind, who created technology. Why should this be any different?" I smiled a bit.

"Oh, I **love** that.", I said, chuckling slightly. "We're the Terminator. Dipshits create technology, technology replaces dipshits. Only this time it's not computers, it's superior DNA. Even their own children are becoming part of it."

"Yeah, and that saves me so much hassle. You remember the birthday party." If there is anything the two of us can agree on, it's that we'd rather be dealing with engineereds than normals.

"Yeah, and the differences. I remember that, I remember you saying that they'll surpass us."

"I welcome it. It would be **nice** to have a few hundred more ass kickers around here." That'll be hilarious. Okay, assholes, your Enforcers can fight three angry engineereds? Fine! Can they fight.. **three hundred**? It's Clobberin' Time!

"And we actually have opposition in Quake!", we both said simultaneously. We proceeded to enjoy such a battle, but my mind was roiling and I'm sure his was too. Bad blends of recompiled code, that's all the failures are. Good blends of recompiled code, that's all **we** are. Not that I'm complaining about that particular facet of my existence; this awful situation is mitigated by the fact that I can crush people's heads in my bare hands, which is always refreshing. But we're still products, the manufactured wish of an Operator who found his project unexpectedly doubled. Howard has absolutely no problem with this, but then again it's been a simple fact of his existence from Day One. But, technology can be surpassed.. but it's been more than eleven years and I haven't heard of any truly significant improvements. Howard would definitely have shown me if there were. But if there is some new breakthrough, what's Howard going to do? Order the Operators not to continue researching it? I fucking doubt that. He can't hold that position forever.

Even though the other engineeredds would benefit from that position, it's a capitalist ethic here. Grow or die. Become more powerful as an organization or shrivel up and blow away.

That's when I realized something else- the next crop of engineeredds couldn't afford to institute a real overthrow. Unless they made a move to quash it- which I doubt would happen- the capitalist ethic would continue, and those new masters would eventually be faced with the same thing. That's my logic, anyway- I can't foretell the future and the End of Secrecy may change things. But I do know that there is something of a bond between engineeredds, which seems to be something more than a 'we're all in the same elite group' tribalism. Probably because we all share a good deal of the same DNA. And, as I thought earlier, it's been eleven years. This combination of chromosomes is going to last a while, but when the newer ones do come.. I have a feeling we're probably going to be friends and it's not going to be a usurpation meatgrinder. That would fucking suck.. as in this game, we can't possibly hope to defeat an entire armada of people even remotely close to being as powerful as we are.

The game eventually ended, I went back downstairs and noticed Howard looking up something I've never heard of... what appears to be an attempt at replacing or at least supplementing the Dominator. A three-year-old version of Howard.. but they had some problems with his mental development and all they said for his fate is 'removed'. Ouch. Nice obituary, there. But what else can they do? The Illuminati is not a liberal, take-care-of-the-weak society. Now it's 'Project Restarted', but they don't appear to be getting anywhere. Yes, this current combination of chromosomes is going to be around for a very long time indeed. The only improvement I can think of is the four-arms one, letting the future engineeredds annihilate enemies via weaponry twice as fast as they could before.

I could almost hear Howard thinking. Judging by his body language, he's worried about the same things I've been considering- the idea that his power is going to be either usurped or eroded.. eroded, yes, that's a possibility. Normals, certainly, but do engineeredds really need Domination?

"Sucks, doesn't it?", I asked him.

"Has to happen sometime, no two ways about it.", he replied.

"Don't let yourself get demoted, or there's no way back up." He knew I was right.

"Billy.. you've figured it out, and you know why there's no point in talking about this."

"Because it's inevitable, yeah, I know. No problem. Just make sure they're your **friends**.." Oh damn. What the hell did I just say? How's he going to take that one? Just because he completely controls everybody doesn't mean that... wait a damn minute. He **can't** do that. He's going to have a moshpit of knives in the back.. isn't he? And since they're engineeredds and don't.. hey.. "Hey, wait a minute. What were we thinking? What the hell is power going to mean by then anyway? Internally, I mean."

"Damn, I didn't think about it like that. You're right- when the 'I must be better than everyone else' ego is suppressed, the only logical solution is not to deal with the normals at all, they're not necessary. All those normal institutions will be gone, and the authority of the Illuminati..."

"There won't be any more authority, unless you really do implant everybody. When you break the secrecy barrier.. it's just a matter of how far up." Unless you're going to use technology, engineeredds do not respect authority in the traditional sense. Only if it's useful in getting things done, only if it's necessary on an organizational level.. but we simply don't follow primate alpha-male logic and that's what the Illuminati are currently running on.

"Are we the only ones who realize this?"

"We might be, but probably not. I don't think many people want to think about it. **They** won't live that

long. The other engineered might not have been actively considering it, but they know.. I think we all know if we look ahead far enough." And, as a cynical slap in the face to this new enlightened future, Sarah and I will still be implanted servants, and so too will be a lot of others.. many of which may be engineered. Screw authoritarianism, **usefulness** is the issue.. servants are great, why not give a couple to every citizen? Normals have authoritarian hunger for power, engineered have a more pragmatic greed, either way it's the same- the elite will make its own utopia and it doesn't care who it ends up stepping on to do it. (That's how we know it's an elite. Want a piece of the pie? Contact your local Illuminated recruiter today!)

Howard didn't say anything more and neither did I. He's just going to use his superior brain and his pragmatic greed to come up with a solution to the problem, if there is one. I started thinking of one myself before I realized it was futile- he's lived here his whole life, he's got his neurons better configured in this department than mine. And there's simply no way he's going to ask me for help. This is decidedly his problem.

But he didn't think about all that right away- he checked the report out first. Almost unreadable to the layman, it detailed each and every piece of the four-armed boy (What is he referred to as, anyway? He's not dictionary-definition engineered, and he's decidedly not normal. Engineered-progeny is probably the best way of putting it.), and I do mean **everything**. I had to use some of the Latin I learned to figure out just what some of the medical terms meant, also puzzling out some Greek roots. But through all the jargon, a single, clear message stood out: He's what you'd expect from such a union, except for the arms.

'What if Howard implanted everyone? How could he?', my mind asked before I fell asleep that night. How could Howard possibly implant everyone without causing worldwide revolution? It just doesn't make sense. People fear that stuff, fear it with their hearts, fear it at a primal level that even the Illuminati would be hard-pressed to manipulate. So how would they? How would they.... I drifted off.

So many people. So many... and they've all got their fists in the air, what are they chanting? "Space... space.. space.." And they're all standing on a sphere...

"Will you listen to me?", either Howard or I shouted, trying to be heard above the clamor of the mob. "**Will you listen to me?!**", one of us shouted again, and the mob finally looked up to see my form (which I could see from a third-person perspective.. maybe that **is** Howie?) floating in the air above the sphere. "As you know, spaceships are limited! There isn't enough for everyone, it just can't be done! But I can tell you that the only people who achieve space are the ones who get the identification implants! Identification implants are available worldwide at terminals for no charge!"

Then I saw a line, a huge line, forming outside and steadily flowing into a building, then I noticed another door near the entrance and people started walking out of it. "Hey cool!", shouted a twelve-year-old. "I got in first, all right!" His seven-year-old brother followed him out saying out loud to all the world, "I was second! I was second! And I can't believe we got to see **Howard!**" Even more people got in the unbelievably long line... then it faded out and reality met me once more.

I emitted a brief echoed yell before I flopped back down on the bed to really go to sleep.

Chapter 50

It is a scene etched into my memory, and for the life of me I couldn't tell why- it is simple and ordinary, as simple and ordinary go here. Howard is sitting on the couch, using the footrest, calmly laying back with pen and paper in his hand, wearing a pair of white pajama bottoms and nothing else, his muscular structure shining with his albinism. A remote control sits next to him, and he occasionally pushes a button on it to freeze frame, point the eraser at the screen, and scribble some more notes down. Some of his long hair hangs behind the couch, as his head is deeply embedded in the soft cushioning. His expression is one I would not recognize from the normal world without some context help- one of genuine interest without reservation.

Which would simply be a use of my extended observational abilities, had I not heard part of the audio and seen an angle view of the screen. For Howard appeared to be watching an educational documentary of the use and misuse of implanted servants. I approached closer, watching from the railing, and I saw what it was he was looking at- Illuminati self-records. "There!", he exclaimed, sitting up. "No wonder! That fucker phrased it all wrong! I didn't **think** there were any technology flaws!", he continued, to no one in particular. He then used the remote to shift to a different sub-set of clips. This isn't a documentary; it's sets of Illuminati home videos. The next one appeared to be in a work environment, with over twenty servants at desks, busily marking, filing, and occasionally transferring a piece of information into another bin. These weren't ordinary implanteds, though, nor were they Enforcers... something's wrong with them. What it was came onto the screen- a long, chemical name with numbers in it that I didn't fully catch, and '5 mg per 30 min'.

"Xenol again, these guys never give up.", Howard said, pausing the screen, scribbling something, and resuming it. I saw the words '2 hours, 30 minutes later' appear on the screen. "Well, they aren't getting tired.. check him... check him.. There we go.", he continued, pausing the screen at another point with the word Mistake on the top right. He then looked at various parts of it- they had that shot from different angles- and Howard was busily studying the servant's face and mistaken paperwork. The servant had written something far outside the box he was apparently supposed to have written it in.

"Nothing different... except it's in the wrong place. Real simple, too... fuck, it's not a side effect, it's the fucking **main** effect! That's it.. Xenol's down the crapper. They just lose **too** much. Somebody at Northberg just did not do the right tests." Howard then opened another window, typed a few paragraphs of information, and sent it off.

"What is Xenol?", I asked, slowly coming down the stairs.

"Drug we've been testing. The effects are, presumably, to enhance efficiency. Well.. it usually works, but the affected make mistakes, big ones, and they don't realize they're doing it. They've tried various chemical configurations of what is essentially the same drug, and none of 'em work."

"Why would you bother with that?"

"I wouldn't! It's just that, even with Enforcers, some old-school Illuminati simply don't give up. Those filing guys might have had their efficiency tripled- they couldn't think about much else, couldn't daydream, couldn't anything- but if any of their brain cells involved in the task die, they don't realize it and don't catch themselves, as they're not thinking about their jobs too much, either. Oh, and it slowly rips their nervous systems from the inside out. The reason we call it Xenol is because it makes them act like aliens.", he finished with a chuckle. I had a passing thought about Howard using that on us- maybe it'll be in tonight's nightmare- and then discarded it.

"Oh, that's always fun."

"So tell me, Billy, if you always did the most efficient thing and you were dead-set on using a drug with a much more efficient Enforcer alternative, what would you do?"

"..There's no answer to that, it's a paradox."

"Exactly my point. Which is what I'm trying to get through to these people with this report. There's a lot of drugs that can fuck up human minds, and research on all of em would take years.. no, decades and we'd be doing nothing else."

"And now you've got the simple solution, scrap the human mind."

"Bingo." I sat next to him. He continued taking notes. I looked at his pad- if it were not in some kind

of order, I would have assumed he had scribbled randomly. "Billy, my shorthand is illegible to everyone, even you. I use expressions and symbols wholly of my own making."

"Why not? You don't actually write anything for anybody. I do get some of it." It was a scribbled (Like he'd learn handwriting when everything is done by computer..) combination of English, symbols, and predominantly Latin- most of it negative and derogatory, with big fat X's in it, obviously his symbol for negation or disapproval. He had numbered them item by item- there was an X on most. He was up to number 19, and examining two fat women- one of which was a servant. 'Pure Manipulation Procedure', the screen read. He paused it to write a double-underlined Pure under it.

"Pure? Is that what I think it is?", I asked.

"Yep. No implants, no drugs, and if it is truly **pure**, no threat or use of force."

"What?! No.. force?! Must be some serious sheep..", I muttered, genuinely astounded. It is possible, with the right people. But I thought the 'right' people in this sense were useless to Illuminati in every other..

"Ohhhh, yeah. No question. It's amazing to watch in action, though." He unpaused it.

The room looked like something out of an RPG. The sunlight filtered perfectly through yellow drapes, casting its rays on the woman in the bed. All sorts of trinkets, many of Christian origin, lined the shelves.

The black-clad servant awoke from the bed that was just big enough to hold her. "Unnh.. where am I?"

"Barbara? Wake up.", the large, white gown-clad Illuminatus said in a harmonic, pleasant, slightly trans-human voice; she could easily be a voice actor for computer recordings, automated phone systems, and such. There was a smile on her face, and I had to remind myself that this normal doesn't get creeped out when people clad all in white smile...

"Ugh.. who are you?"

"You can call me Angela.", the Illuminatus said. Howard paused it and wrote some more things down.

"Billy, note the tone of voice. Pleased, expectant, and respectful."

"I recognize two of those from somewhere.." Howard only grinned at me. "By the way, she's got a Christianity thing going."

"Uh?"

"See that gown, Howard? See the way her hair's done?" It was blonde, and flowing back behind her head- like Howard's, only with curls. "She might as well be wearing wings and a halo. And since she's wearing white, and her name is everfucking **Angela**.. or at least she says it is."

"Gotcha. I didn't really catch that." Hmm. I imagine with so many world religions he didn't have time to memorize them and their symbolisms. He wrote some more things down and unpaused it again.

"Anngela? What is this place?", the servant asked.

"This is my house, Barb."

"Your house.. what am I doing here?"

"Well, because we selected you, Barb. We hand-picked you to help us with our important work." She spoke with authority and said the word 'important' as if it meant 'sacred'.

"Yeah? Well, what if I don't want to help you? And why did you bring me here, anyway?"

"Barbara, please don't refuse us. It takes us time and money to get people as gifted as you. We saved your life, to give you a second chance." Howard paused it again and wrote down some more things.

"Old school.", I noted. "Flattery, authority, appeal to pity, the fucking works."

"Yup- it **works!**", he said in his happy-master voice, unpausing it again.

"To do what?", the servant said, a bit suspicious but influenced by her surroundings- which were obviously designed to pacify and calm. I looked back and saw Sarah looking on from the railing with mild interest.

"To guard the world, Barb, guard it from Satan's followers."

"Ha! You were right!", Howard exclaimed with some mirth.

"Satan's followers?", Barbara asked, obviously stupid and Christian, willing to believe anything fed to her. Shock treatment in the right fashion does miracles. I thought back to my tenth birthday and pondered the effects of such shock on one of these. Well, that and some serious manipulation gets this result..

"Yes, Barb. Satan. I know how horrible that sounds. Which is why we need people like you, to help us fight them."

"Well.. well, what will I be doing? And who do you work for?" Hook, line, sinker, and leg irons..

"Administrative stuff, at first. Even we have our bureaucracy.", Angela (if that was even her name) said with a polite smile. "And we are known simply as the Enlightened." Howard and I shared a giggle.

"So why me? Because of what happened to Russ and Don?"

"Because of your abilities, Barb. We know you're willing to support Christ." Manipulation at its finest. "And yes, we never take people with familial obligations, it wouldn't be fair." Whether the Illuminati killed Barb's family is, I realized, completely irrelevant. "I'm sorry for what happened. We pray for the souls of families lost." With all kindness, respect, and seemingly honest pity. Wow! This really is pure manipulation!

"And why am I wearing black?"

"Oh- that's just because you're a neophyte. It's just to show who's who." Howard paused it for a laughter break, which we both took loudly.

"Neophyte my motherfuckin ass!", I exploded with more incredulity than amusement, although there was plenty of both. "Neophyte! Fuckin neophyte.. That is **pathetic!**"

"**No. Shit!**", Howard replied with laughter. "That really is bad." He scribbled some more and unpaused it for the final time.

"You guys aren't a cult, are you?"

"No, Barbara- we are not a cult. We are in fact Methodist." Barbara's denomination, obviously. "You are free to leave at any time, and we respect your right to privacy." The pair o' lies paralyze... "I apologize for the circumstances under which you were brought here, but we can't be too careful. But, if you do choose to stay, we will support you with comfortable living, we can do that."

"Okay, so tell me about these devil-worshippers." The tone of her voice and her mannerisms told me she bought it all.

"Well, we call them the Misguided, because that's what they really are.." The manipulator's kind, gentle voice trailed off as the screen faded to black. Howard was just grinning and giggling. To me it wasn't quite as funny- I've seen this shit before. There is no manipulation like religious manipulation. Pull those strings! One, two, three, four! Pull! Pull! All to the tune of an aerobics track... I just started chuckling.

"That was unrealistic.", Sarah said.

"Oh, yeah.", Howard replied. "It was an extreme example. But that was real- although they did have her planned out welllll in advance."

"I'm trying to understand that. I am really trying to understand that. I can't understand that. There is just **so much** she didn't notice! I know that's kind of the point, you don't need to tell me that, but.. that's just **BAD!**", I exclaimed. Forget it, I told myself, which is probably exactly what they told Howie. Don't try to understand them, it'll only make your head hurt... just manipulate them and deal with your own kind.

"You were the one who told me that they don't think at all.", he pointed out.

"This is different... or maybe it's not, not in this case. But they have to teach some skepticism sometimes or cults would get them all the time.. I guess this one.."

"Was cult-prone. That's why they could do it.", Sarah finished for me.

"Stupidity is entertaining, but stupid people are useless.", Howard concluded, and began typing up his report. Useless for the future, anyway. I watched him type with a certain level of curiosity- he'd been spending time watching people get controlled by all sorts of things. The gist of it was simple: For efficiency, safety, and reliability, nothing beats the implants.

Chapter 51

Howard, of course, got what he wanted with commanding the newly recruited Illuminati. I'm glad he didn't have me take his place this time; even after more than a year and a half here, I really wouldn't have known what to do. Instead, I'm sitting here in this small room in the main Bavarian headquarters, commanded into silence and relative motionlessness (a very rare thing) as Howard runs his own mini-inquisition on the new Illuminati. He actually said it: we're just along for the ride for this one. Oh well, at least the chair's comfy.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am going to be fair, and I am going to let you all ask **me** questions before I get started with you. Go ahead; unless it's really stupid, I won't kill you for it." It wasn't meant to be funny, because Howard wasn't joking.

"Is it true that the first levels just sit back and use us to do their secretarial work while they sit back and eat us up, using us like specially-educated servants? Because if it is, I'm outta here, kill me if you want but I'm not going to get used.", an older man asked. Howard has the power of the implants; if he really wanted to, you'd get used anyway.

"You won't get used for them. Just me.", Howard replied.

"And so you just sit up on high giving out orders while the rest of us do all the tasks that the world needs to keep going."

"Exactly, although I actually usually never give specific orders at all. Yes, I know I have a lot more free time than any of you will ever hope to have, and that my unique abilities don't exactly get used all the time for the best interests of everyone. I admit that, it wasn't designed for fairness, none of this was. Some of you lower levels have taken to thinking that I run the world. No, I don't. Firsts and seconds run the world. It's just my job to see that everyone works together for our cause, and if you remember, I'm always on call for that. I really am the public servant, the biggest assassin in here, the guy you dial up when someone has seriously wronged you."

"So wait a minute.", a young man asked. "They just said, 'Okay, we need someone to get between us when we've got problems with each other because we don't want to have to handle it ourselves?'"

"Right again. They thought it over and they figured they did need someone to do the job, someone with no biases and nothing that would stop him from doing his job. We created every position in here for a reason. Several of you have commented on the efficiency you've never seen in your normal jobs." Howard did research before he came here. "We have our own way of getting rid of waste. We have our own customs. We are still our own society, and we will always be." And sooner or later, they'll be everyone **else's** society, too.

"All right, Dominator, so you're the guy to call whenever anyone starts blowing the lid on Plot A or Secret Plan B.", a twenty-something woman asked, her breasts pushing on her sweater. You're cute, lady, but you're not Howard's type.

"Actually, if anyone does that, I invite you to kill him yourself if it's faster and the risk's low. This'll be hard to believe, but there hasn't been an Illuminated leak in over forty years." They were shocked, as I had been when I first learned that. "Yeah, I know, six thousand people. That's because we only accept people who can keep secrets. All of you, whether you know it or not, have been tested on your loyalty and ability to keep a secret."

"You hired her, didn't you?", said a rather large thirty-year-old with a mustache and a bit of a beard.

I was half-expecting to hear Howard say 'That's a secret!' or somesuch. "You can figure that out by yourself. Any recruitment information is accessible to you on the database and it **does** include such details.", he said instead.

"Speaking of databases, if we're all supposed to be able to keep secrets, then why are there things that aren't accessible to us?", a middle-aged woman asked.

"Because they don't want anyone knowing about it because they might become entranced with the idea and try to take it, because they don't believe in risking anything for any reason, because they don't want anyone opposing what they do, and also because they like to feel powerful when they make something super top secret." They all chuckled at that. Again, Howard's forthright honesty wins him respect in a world of backstabbing.

"Did they create you in a factory?", another woman asked.

"You have good insight.", Howard replied, not splitting hairs.

"I figured. They're not making any **more** of you, are they?" I would have chuckled if I wasn't commanded to be silent. That **would** be weird. One of Howard, and more than one of me? I couldn't even fathom it, really.

"Not me in particular, but other engineered, full and partial, both the complete creations of the facility and the modified children of the other Illuminati. So don't be surprised if you get outperformed by an eight year old from time to time." Or constantly, for that matter.

"Speaking of which.. Howard, how old are you?", was another question from the pudgy thirty-year-old.

"Eleven and a half.", I said, watching his face light up with curiosity and incredulity.

"You don't look it."

"Of course not. When your projected maximum height is 7'2", people tend to think you're older."

"Balls..", someone said in the back.

"No, those are normal size." They laughed at that. "All right, serious stuff time. For now I'm going to stick to the basics. Show of hands, who here got in of their own merit?" If both of anyone's hands stayed down at that one, Howard would have blown their owner's head off. "Who here has completely subordinated all other loyalties to the Illuminati?" Another no-brainer. Nobody hesitated, nobody looked nervous. "Who here is at the behest of another Illuminatus whom you know by name?" That was a real question- three people's hands shot up, and everyone else's didn't, and both groups were surprised at each other. Howard wasn't, of course, and started asking the individuals from left to right.

"How do you know the person who introduced you to the Illuminati?", Howard asked a bespectacled 35-year-old. Still wearing glasses? You and the Operator of Northberg need to have a talk, bub..

"George came to me after the tests, and said he'd pointed the recruiters at me, and he'd set up my resources so that I could help him with his part of the world. He said he needed a master's help, not a servant's.", the man replied.

"He set up all your resources? So, really, whose resources are they?"

"**Mine.**", he replied, with the only right answer.

The twenty-something woman with the perky breasts was next. "How do you know the person who introduced you to the Illuminati?"

"I don't, really. I don't work with him at all. Or anything else.", she added, before anyone started wondering. "He just came to me after the testing, smiled, and said he saw me in the normal world and knew I'd make a good Mistress." The term is correct, but I don't think I've ever heard it before in the Illuminati.

The next man was about sixty or so and visibly scared; hey, your life's almost over already. It would really make an impression if Howard killed one of them here, wouldn't it? Or maybe he'd go the master route and tell one of us to do it instead. "How do you know the person who introduced you to the Illuminati?"

"He's an old friend of mine." As if a guy like him could have any other kind of friend. (Well, okay, he can have whatever kind of friend he wants now, but I'd rather not think about that.) "He said he was watching me and that he thought I was ready for it, having changed over the years, so he had me selected for testing."

"So how many questions did he help you with?", Howard asked. Another no-brainer.

"What? None! He didn't tell me **jack!**" He sounded truthful to my perceptive ears, at least.

"And do you work in a department near his?"

"Not even close. He's in global radio, I make parts for Northberg Medical Facility. Got a bunch of Enforcers to do it with, too." Howard smiled at him and his nervousness dropped by an order of magnitude.

"Okay. Now I'm going to find out what everyone else is doing here." He then went around the room asking people to describe exactly what they did in the organization, and he got solid, if complicated, answers. Then he asked why they accepted the invitations- again, he got a lot of various, but well-reasoned answers. This was because they understood the seriousness of what they were asked. This isn't like some normal go-around where it's a bunch of weenies introducing themselves. Every Illuminatus must have a hard, easily-accessible answer to these questions, even if it requires some technical explanation or several paragraphs- or they're likely to end up on the wrong end of an engineered punch. "Good. You're all still alive, so you all pass.", Howard declared, and we followed them out. They started to talk to each other after we left, but that was part of the point, as well- to get them into the community.

Chapter 52

BZZZZERT!

It's a shame the buzzer uses the intercom, isn't it?

Paul was bored and playing on the computer; I was just laying in bed, basically daydreaming, as I got up to answer it. I hope this doesn't involve killing anyone. It's not that I don't want to kill people, it's that I don't feel like going anywhere today.

Or answer any viewscreen calls, but Howard didn't want to take it. Naked, I proceeded with my usual Howard imitation. It was the Day Operator, and he had a calm look on his face. "Hello, Howard. Now that it's months after you've thoroughly quashed the stupidity plan, I feel that I have to bring you some news.. actually, it's history, but it is news to you."

"Operator, you know what happens to people who keep things from me.", I replied, having perfected Howard's casually threatening tone. Strange that I'd have to use this on the Day Operator. He's one of Howard's most trusted, insofar as Howard trusts anyone. Sarah looked at me as if I was going to order an assassination. Bloodthirsty as always.

"Yes, but this is a plot you'll actually like."

"Spill it all.", I replied.

"Well, Howard, the cause was a mixture of things. The first was a .. conversation I happened to overhear, back when you were still the Inheritor. It turns out that someone you're probably not too familiar with, Walter Kramovitch, had something of a grudge against your predecessor, and wanted you removed from power before you got in." Walter who? "You didn't know this, of course, since I instructed him to never even get close to letting you on. Yes, I approached him." Huh? How's this supposed to work, again? Walter would never want to include in his plans anyone in favor of the then-Inheritor, and the Day Operator, for obvious reasons..

"But you're the guy who was in charge of creating **me!**", I replied.

"Not even a setback. In fact, it made things easier. He couldn't believe his luck. I had him believe that your predecessor forced me to do the whole project." That bridge sure cost a lot of money, eh

Walter? "And then when you killed the old Night Operator, who I could have probably manipulated a bit, I took a replacement who I knew agreed with me to the core." Being able to choose the people to be, presumably, your equals is a boon.

The question remains. "So why?"

"Well, you see, I told Walter that he'd need lots of followers to take you on, and that numbers were the key, and so I had him spawn all those sheeple you so hated in the organization. I actually had him spawn sheeple who would spawn more sheeple."

"**WHAT?!**" Okay, let me get this straight. He was key to creating the engineered, the only people who can lead the Illuminati to the golden End of Secrecy, yadda yadda. And now he's going to put nearly mindless normals in the Illuminati? The engineered would slaughter them in a rotating meatgrinder of horrible pain, and the other Illuminati would be quite irritated with the newcomers quite rapidly. Ah. And that's probably why. "Oh, I think I know.."

"Oh, I know how it sounds, it sounds positively horrible for the organization. But you behaved almost exactly as I thought you would. You took steps to remove the problem, you killed just about all the virus, and helped to inoculate the organization from more outside-world members, creating a generally benevolent effect."

"The spread of the belief that all Illuminati should be born native."

"Exactly. And since I knew that you believed it yourself, I knew what you'd do." And it's hard to get worked up about slaughtering sheeple-as-Illuminati if you know it's just for some purpose. "And that's my same goal, more or less. Don't worry, Howard- all active threats to you that I know about have been removed. I killed the one you spared," I didn't laugh out loud- it would have been a bit annoying- but that deserves a BWAHAHAHA anyway. He's being meaner than Howie! "I killed another one who apparently hated you all on his own, and I imagine you can now guess what really happened to Walter." The Operator runs a medical facility full of bioengineered creatures and ethics-free experiments. Whatever happened to Walter, it wasn't pleasant.

"And so you used an enemy of mine to help seal up the place, all without the notice of anyone and all without any seeming relation to you. But why not just tell me?"

"Two reasons- first off, if you knew you had an enemy, you probably would just kill him immediately, and, second, it would add a random factor into an otherwise fool-proof plan. That's why I waited so long to tell you, to make sure the situation was really over."

"Operator, you made a good decision and a bad decision. The whole plan was, generally, a good decision, and its results will allow me to forgive your.. bad decision of not telling me. You should know that I'd go along with any good decision, you **were** responsible for me." If he knew who I was, he would have gotten the double entendre in that sentence.

"Oh well. Goal achieved. Oh, and before you ask, I never knew all that much about the Bastard Squad and nothing whatsoever about that idiot with that robot." He wouldn't hide information like **that**. "That's the problem with this place, we don't really know each other, because so much is shrouded in secrecy, false motives, and outright lies.. but that's another large problem for another day." And his palace of engineering is going to help solve that, too, by replacing the Illuminati.

"For a normal-born, you really like to target large problems with giant plans.", I noticed.

"If I find a way to undo this one in the near future, I **will** tell you. But for now, I just like the idea that we're all **having** to cooperate because of the actual work being done."

"Very well, Operator. Keep raising the in-born percentage.", I told him.

"As you command." Much like some commands Howard gives me, it's not a command he has any problems obeying. The Operator turned off the screen.

"SO! Turns out that guy's got his own share of plans. I like that. Someone does something other than get in my way for a change.", Howard said, grinning.

"Howard, aren't you feeling a little left out?", Sarah said. "I mean, everyone else has plans.."
Howard doesn't need them, and so just looked at her.

"Sarah, what the hell would he plan **for**? He already has the long-term stuff down.", I told her.
"Think about it. I mean, the only things that he doesn't have are solid unity and better technology, everyone's working their ass off for the second and there's no such thing as a plot that can do the first!"

"Well, you could do plots for small gains.. but I see your point. Too much work, too much hassle, too much unpredictability and not enough gravy. Besides, you guys can always just apply more **time** to something.", Sarah said, nodding slightly. I noticed Paul up on the railing, listening to us talk.

"Yeah.. but frankly, I want to be able to make a plan for something. We all heard him, he didn't know about the loony with the robot. Don't **think** he'd lie about that." No, not to Howard he wouldn't. "And there's still nothing new on what happened to Brenk."

"Well, since we haven't seen any more impersonation robots or insane dolls, we should probably just assume that that was it.", I said.

"That's all we can do, and that **bugs** me.", Howard said. He hates loose ends, but I got the feeling that they'd be tied up someday. "Oh fucking well. We'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

I watched Howie do some research on the Day Operator, not just to verify his statements, but to help to explain them. He looked through the Operator's logged, public journals, which were rather rare, but did contain some interesting, mostly extremely scientific, tidbits of this and that. And then there was this one.

Northberg Day Operator
7/17/99
Re: The Dominator's Creation

It is about time that I wrote this here. Since you are reading this, no matter who you are, you should know that the previous Night Operator and I were less than friends. We were not enemies, either.. but it should be known that we had different agendas. At the time, I took that for granted. I should not have. But everything proceeded smoothly, and so I did not inquire as to his behavior, or the things he was hiding from me. Most of those are of little interest and no consequence, but there is one matter that I must discuss.

The Night Operator attempted to partially sabotage the Dominator's creation. (Howard and I simultaneously read and gasped at that sentence.) The nature of this sabotage was not directly harmful- in fact, on the surface, it was not a true sabotage at all. It was more of a rushing. When we talked, which was seldom, he would always try to emphasize time and attempt to quickly muddle through it. Looking back, I can see what the plan was. He attempted to make an inferior Dominator.

It took me a deliberate, concerted effort to ensure that everything was done slowly and carefully, and to have the important decisions done during the day. He did not dare contest anything that I did, he pretended to agree that time must be taken, but he was internally frustrated. He would attempt to belittle things, to move them forward.. I will not give examples as that will only take more of my time and bore the reader; if you wish, you can listen to the old recordings of our early talks about this subject. If you require more proof, I can give it to you myself... but this is a thing that I would like to put behind me.

I should have said something about this, but out of my own cowardice, I did not. It is that simple.

Howard, if you are reading this, I apologize. Everything that I can think of, everything that I can list,

was done right. I spent all of my time thinking about you; I made sure that nothing was rushed or skipped over. You would probably like to know that the new Operator is far superior in every way to the old.

"Damn.", was Howard's only voiced opinion.

"I don't think he's bullshitting you, Howard.", Sarah said, shaking her head a bit. Had the Night Operator's attempted manipulation happened with Sarah as well? No.. I doubt that. The Dominator would be the place to focus those efforts. Howard read through various pages of very old logs, things between the two Operators, his creation history- and then I realized something. A lot of the time, the Night Operator's haste wasn't just the attempt to stop needed additional development- it was the **cue** for it! I started laughing as I continued to read, noticing what was going on. Sometimes the old Night Operator, that laughable idiot, would clue the Day Operator in to problems by quietly trying to push the project past them!

"What? What's so funny?" It shouldn't anymore, but it always pleases me when I know something that Howard doesn't.

"Howard.. have you ever heard of the term 'devil's advocate'?", I asked.

"Someone who always argues for the wrong side of something. I think I see what you're getting at."

"Yup. He was **helping** you, Howard.", I explained. "See that? Every time someone would suggest something to speed things up, he would quietly go for it, every time they wanted to be careful, he would say something mildly against it. He didn't dare go outright, he was fearful for his life the whole time. But every time he said something.."

"..it was the cue for everyone else to realize what was wrong with it.", Howard realized. "You're right. You're absolutely correct. I don't believe this!! That **idiot**, that absolutely foolhardy **twit**, was helping the project the whole time! If he wouldn't have said anything.. oh, in **this** one..", he said, gesturing to the screen.

"..they probably **wouldn't** have done those tests at all!". I finished. We laughed simultaneously, loudly, and with echo. "I don't believe this shit!", I shouted joyfully, my faith in my engineered abilities higher than ever. "Fool, fool, fool!" Hindsight is definitely 20/20. I wonder how often this sort of thing happens, one guy trying to do something and ending up doing the opposite? That's why people study history.. because they don't want to make similar mistakes. Beating around the bush and playing devil's advocate to a project with an infinite budget isn't what I'd ever try, after seeing this...

I wouldn't have more faith in bioengineering until next month, when we went with Howard to Northberg Educational.

Chapter 53

The rails at Northberg, as always, were silent. Magnetic levitation makes no sound, and the driving wind and snow simply bounces off the soundproof, insulated plastic bubble.

There we were, Howard for the third time. Before, he'd preferred to deal with the children by himself, until he considered that the children pretty much know that he with the most followers is considered the most powerful, at least on a subconscious level. And that's what Howard is aiming for- for the children to treat him as a friendly, familiar face in the back of their minds, early in life. What's learned in the cradle lasts till.. well, these kids are almost as impossible to kill as we are.

It's inarguable: Northberg is the most important location within the Illuminati infrastructure; this is the only genetics facility and school they have. This is where the Elite is created and brought up- in a heavily-defended piece of land in the middle of a snow-covered forest in northern Canada. Brrr. It

really is that fucking cold out here. These kids must only go outside bundled in the most insulating fabrics technology can create. But I'm certain they go on vacations- after watching Howard clear out an amusement park, figuring out how they do that is easy.

Howard pulled up some data on a screen in the railcar; this facility holds 139 children up to 90 months old (Only 139? With six thousand Illuminati? Either there's a lot of too-old people in this organization, they aren't putting their kids in this facility, or they're just plain not breeding very much.. probably a mix of all of the above.), the oldest going to become its director.

As we passed through the railway entrance, I noticed an overhanging plaque:

Northberg Educational Facility

E Progenies Dominatus Æternum (From our progeny comes everlasting power)

June 28, 1987

That would put our birthdate exactly ten months later, suggesting that Howard's development was an influence on its creation. He didn't even look up at the sign; he's probably seen it many, many times before.

The railway car came to a stop and we exited, and there was no one waiting for him; the only audible sound was that of the railcar door sliding closed behind us. Oh, that's right. Howard didn't announce his arrival. He knew where he was going; walking to a nearby door set in the always-steel walls of Illuminated facilities, he opened it up to reveal something I've seen before, but never so young.

Engineered children.

I watched them. Howard didn't need to, but I did. They are far more intelligent, stronger, and faster than their normal counterparts, but there's more to it than that. For one thing, there is the matter of their education; apparently the screen overhead and the wall speakers are designed to give a maximum amount of information at once. Then there's their physical appearance. Normal infants have healthy, unblemished faces only because nothing has come along to blemish them yet. Normal infants are often clothed in garish, uncomfortable, confining clothing because their parents force them to try to look cute. These infants, wearing brightly-colored bodysuits made of the best materials available, simply are cute, and anyone forcing them to wear some of the shit I've seen would go from zero to dead courtesy of the nearest available engineered old enough to do it.

Whether these babies technically have parents or not is immaterial. Once the engineers changed them into what they are now, they became the children of normal humans no longer.

I tried to look deeper. I've never thought of myself as being prescient or able to predict the future- at least not after being surprised at that orphanage so long ago- but in these babies' mannerisms I could see what they would be like as grown-up Illuminati. I visualized the girl in green as a mechanical scientist, a pair of safety goggles protecting her beautiful eyes as she carefully puts finely-machined parts together of a new prototype. The boy in yellow will fly giant fusion-powered rockets through space, becoming the lead colonist of Mars until he goes to further explore the stars. And the four-armed boy in blue- Quadrus Dominus- will personally lead the last and most decisive military victory in Earth's history, his brilliant, Dominator-approved strategy eradicating the vastly superior numbers of the normals with finesse, powerful strikes, and his own four weapon-holding hands.

It was a large room- about sixty feet by sixty feet square, with several five foot wide screens overhead for the children to watch and corresponding speakers around the sides of the room. Some of the children didn't notice Howard's entrance or were too engrossed in what they were doing- mostly playing around the room- to respond. Quad was among them, playing an odd game of wrestling with three other children, as they tested their growing bodies' abilities for what was

likely the first time. Some just watched silently, looking at us like a museum artifact. One little girl who I'd estimate at about eight months old looked up at Howard and said, "White hair. Long white hair." in Latin, focusing on the syllables.

Howard squatted down to look her in the eye, said, "Yes, that's me. Howard has long white hair." in clearly spoken Latin, and picked up the little girl and put her on his left shoulder, and walked over to Quad, who broke off from the other children to look at him, using his lower pair of arms and apparently a good deal of his power to struggle to his feet.

"Hi, Quad-Braach!", the little girl shouted, right next to Howard's ear.

"Kay-ti.", Quad said, looking at her. "Hi, Ka-tie. Tih- tih- tibi nomen. Tibi nomen.", he said to Howard, unable to enunciate his voice to differentiate statements and questions. Many of the other children had stopped their ongoing activity to look at the stranger in their midst.

"Howard."

"How-ad. Howad.", Quad said, uncertain how to pronounce it. He then curiously looked at Howard, then at me, then back to Howard. I could almost read his mind: 'What the hell is going on here? Enforcers wear black and the controllers wear white. These two are the same person. Why are they dressed like that?' Quad, believe me when I tell you that I understand your frustration perfectly.

Howard sat down in front of Quad, and Katie jumped off his shoulder. "Quad.. you don't remember who I am, and you're probably not going to understand this. I'm your father.", Howard said in carefully articulated Latin. He started laughing in response. What's going on? Does he know what that means, and if so, why is he laughing at it?! Some of the other children started laughing with him, and then every other child in the room, simply out of imitation.

Then he started frowning an exaggerated frown, and I realized his undeveloped speech center was thinking of the right words. "Duu..braki! Dubraucki!", he then spat out. Dubraucki? What? Oh. He means du bracchi, two arms. Which means that apparently he knows that children are supposed to at least remotely look like their parents (in a facility full of partial engineered, many of them won't look like them very much at all). And which also means that these children are being taught very, very fast indeed. At this rate, they'll probably have the equivalent of at least one college degree before they become our age. "I'm not surprised you don't believe me.", Howard said again in Latin, just to say something- the kid didn't understand him.

Howard made a point of personally talking to every child in the room. One of them apparently wanted to be tossed into the air, and Howard obliged him; he giggled as he flew up and down. Another space explorer, there. Most of them just watched him, up until the point when he left and all the children suddenly became very sad. The basics of language and the rudiments of logic they may have, but patience is not something they understand yet. I realized what one of the children was trying to say, with arm movements, cries, and half-formed words. He was attempting to communicate with me in the same way he did the Enforcers, with a simple message: Keep him from leaving. Had it been funny, I would have laughed. I don't think Howard noticed.

The next room was full of toddlers, who knew Howard on sight. "Howard!", a boy shrieked. "Dom-ee-nus!", another girl yelled. 'Or an identical-looking robot, kids.', I wanted to say.

"So you kids know who I am. I didn't think they were teaching that at your age.", Howard said in Latin, and they only smiled at him in reply. Their area was similar to that of the infants, but different in certain ways- they had more separate rooms, including a bathroom filled with very small toilets. Of course, the sleeping areas were one large room again- I then realized something important.

I've read articles about socialization before. What do you get when you keep normal children with their families and not put them with very many other children? A close-knit family structure. What do

you get when you put normal children in a school or an orphanage with strict rules and controlled thought? The children learn to police each other and you get groupthink. Those same children, but in a no-rules setting? The beginnings of a basic, barbaric society.

And what do you get when you take highly intelligent, extremely dangerous engineered children and put them together in a place where they are taught- not incorrectly!- that they are alone in a world full of normals, that their only hope is to work together to control it, and that their only leader is a similarly-engineered Dominator who simply wants them to become the future of all humanity? (I don't have to do any research to know these things. They simply make logical sense.) What you get is the most effective leadership to exist anywhere on Earth- powerful geniuses devoted to reaching a common goal, individuals in thought but all of them using everything in their substantial power to further the common cause. The only force that can topple the governments of the world from within and take the entire planet in one fell swoop.

These little kids, who are crowding around the Dominator, wanting to touch him, to prove to themselves that he's real, so Howard can comfort them with the knowledge that he loves them and will always be their friend, will one day run the **entire fucking world**. Here I am at the beginnings of the future. This is almost like time travel. He picked them all up, spending quite a deal of time. I didn't get bored. I don't think I could get bored in a place like this.

The next room was children just slightly older, children ages three and four, but the area was substantially larger. Ah. This is almost certainly because children that age start to want **stuff** and they need somewhere to put it. Don't worry, kids- this is the Illuminati. Stuff you shall have.

And stuff they did have, and they were playing with it. Brightly-colored balls were being tossed around, and a few were playing with a magnetic puzzle (I didn't even need to look at it to tell that it was based on something for normal, intelligent adults). I'm certain they weren't taught the same kind of 'sharing' crap that normal children are. I'm just not sure if they share with each other naturally, or they are following the examples set by the viewscreen, which right now is showing computer-generated images of children just like them. My guess is a combination of both. Their play just.. slowly.. stopped, as they gave up their games to sit down in a semicircle around the Dominator. And although their play contained half-English, half-Latin chatter, when they sat down near Howard, none of them said a single word. Say it with me, everybody: what the fuck? They know he's not leaving that soon, so they casually stop what it is that they're doing.. normal children, when exposed to a stimulus like that.. how much could the engineers have changed?

"None of you are saying anything.", Howard said to them in Latin, and they only smiled a bit in response. "Is this somebody's practical joke?", he asked, still not using English. Many of the children laughed, almost simultaneously.

"No...", what looked to be the oldest child said, slowly and carefully, in English. I looked at his eyes and I could see the pure intelligence staring back out. This boy is going to invent something some day, probably a lot of things, that will change the fate of more than just this planet. "After last time you came.. I talked to Jimmy, he talked to Cain, we talked to Beth.. we passed it around and we all decided that we'd.. let you talk." The screen overhead ceased producing its background noise.

"Ohhhhh.", said one of the younger children. "I dint know." Something told me that he wasn't doing it because everybody did it, as normals are wont to do. He was doing it because he knew that the others had a plan, and he didn't want to ruin it.

I can't describe what I was thinking just then, surrounded by all the young, smiling, engineered faces. Jealousy? Protectiveness? Love? In the normal world, the vast majority of people are born as nothing, grow up as nothing, become nothing, mean nothing. Each one of these kids **means something**. They are **alive** in a world populated by the walking dead. I've long known the difference between worthy and worthless people, but I've never seen so much worthiness staring me in the face at once, like a room full of powerful lightbulbs in a world lit by candles. And here they

were, waiting for my controlling twin to speak.

Howard squatted down and motioned for us to go with him. "Well, what do you want me to say?", he replied to them.

"Why's he wearing black?", asked one. "Weird duplication!", asked another in Latin. From the oldest, "What the fuck is going on with that twin stuff?" What, indeed? Don't look at me, Howie. These worthy children asked a solid question and they deserve a Dominator's answer.

He gave it to them. Not every detail, but enough to grant understanding. Some of them laughed, a reaction I should have expected but didn't. Some of them muttered about the insanity of it under their breath in Latin. A pair of twins looked at each other in befuddlement and I could almost hear them saying 'You wouldn't- would you?!' simultaneously. Although I didn't laugh, **that** was funny. There were some that didn't visibly react, and there were a few that laughed in a miniature version of Howard's power laugh. I had no idea a four-year-old could laugh like that. Are the people who run this place teaching these kids how to laugh like that, or are the kids simply imitating something they know their Dominator does?

"You..", a blonde girl started in English, before reverting to her natural Latin. "You should let him go." I would have given both testicles and my regeneration to shout a loud 'Amen!' right then.

Howard made a finger-to-head suicide gesture. "That's suicide. You'll eventually learn why.", he replied in Latin. She didn't believe him. "Anything else?"

"Can I have my own servant?", another girl asked, smiling in a way that I haven't seen before, outside of television. That's another thing about being in a room full of engineered- it looks like television, because everyone's visually perfect. There are no scars, no blemishes, and of the children whose skins do feature some noticeable pigmentation, it's uniform. From the perspective of that being the usual, normal humans are cavemen. They'll look back on the days that Earth was ruled by normals as the Dark Ages...

"You'll have to ask the Director.", Howard replied. She nodded rapidly. I found it odd that these kids **didn't** have one. They're so useful, after all, and would be excellent for these kids to practice mastery on, the same mastery they'll be using for the rest of their indefinitely-long lives. They're too young, that's why, too apt to make miscommands. I bet in the next room there's going to be a bunch of them.

"Howard, when I become a dult.. adult, can I be first le-level?", an ambitious young boy asked, sitting up from his casual, hands-behind-head position.

"You're going to have to wait until you're old enough to try it, but you won't have to become an adult. Wait a few more years.", Howard replied. The hierarchy of the Illuminati is likely to get shaken up a bit. Every one of these kids will probably become First Level worthy, which means that it's time to raise standards.

"Okay.", he replied, smiling, and laid back down.

"Howard..", a boy started. "I get a lot of nightmares. Can you help?" In a normal setting with this many normal children of these children's intellectual age (8-10 normal equivalent? Hell if I know.), there would have been some derision and laughter. No one laughed at this little boy, although I did notice the irony of one of these kids asking that.

"Billy, you help him." Howard's command only increased the irony.

The kid had ordinary nightmares, though, not implant-caused hellbeast visions. "All right.. best thing to do is just to **enjoy** them. Seriously. No matter how much they scare you, or if you wake up

screaming, or what, just pretend they're a movie, something on the screen.", I said, pointing up to the giga-TV. "Watch them and have fun. They can't hurt you." He sputtered out a thanks and grinned, obviously willing to take mastery of his own mind. If only I could join him.

There wasn't anything else there to do but hugs. They wanted to be near Howard, to touch him, as a normal kid might hug a teddy bear for protection, which made lots of sense. Howard's protection encompasses the whole world, to make a new life for these kids who can't yet even be seen in what normals refer to as public. And, even if they've not yet understood exactly what the End of Secrecy means, they know what he'll ultimately do for them.

We went to the next room.. which was larger, had more rooms going off of it.. and was almost empty. Seven kids, two of them servants, were tossing a frisbee around the room. 'The kids don't discriminate.', I noticed, immediately. 'To them, a servant is just another kid who has to obey someone.' None of them, of course, was normal, although one did screw up and tossed it in the direction of an Enforcer, which tossed it back exactly in the direction it came from.

"Where is everyone?", Howard asked, and they all turned to look at him.

"Oh.. they're in the gym.", a girl said, her blond hair not reaching to her loose pink clothing, and I knew that in less than a decade engineered boys would want to make love to her. "We didn't know you were coming. Hey.. is that **the** Sarah?"

"Yeah, it's me.", Sarah replied.

"Oh.. I didn't know you.." 'Were implanted', she didn't finish. She looked at Howard again and then at me, a bit disappointed. "It's nice to meet you, Sarah. I've seen all your work."

"All of it?", Sarah asked. That's quite a bit of killing, after all.

"Every one. You're good. You got screwed though.", the little cute girl replied with the beginnings of a frown, and a few of the other kids giggled slightly.

"Yeah, tell me about it.. Murphy's Law, kid... but they've probably already taught you not to trust anyone." And in case they haven't, that's a friendly reminder from Sarah.

"I know. At least you're alive."

"So Dominator..", a blond-haired boy asked, sitting down, resting on his hands. His black-clad, dark-haired servants squatted next to him as he talked. I was struck by his appearance. A red, patterned shirt hung down on his arms to his six-fingered hands covered by fingerless gloves. Tan pants went down to white shoes, and I idly wondered if there were steel toes in them like ours. I realized why I was looking at him so intently- it was because this kid, except for hair color and a slight complexion difference, looked a lot like me. It was as if his parents were so genetically inferior that they had to replace almost everything with the basic Dominator template.. "You're not gonna.. acquire anyone else, are ya?" Funny question from someone who has servants himself, isn't it? Although they were probably made for the purpose.

"Not planning to.", Howard replied.

"Okay.. good."

The boy who had mistakenly tossed it to the Enforcer and had it returned continued the game, tossing it to the pink-clad girl. She caught it, cat-claws poking out of her fingers to help her with the grab. She played with the frisbee a bit before tossing it to another boy with light blue hair and a suit to match. "What's it like? I mean.. being the Dominator and all."

"It's a pain in the ass.", Howard glibly replied, and all the kids in the room laughed, the girl receiving the frisbee almost missing her catch because of it. "Of course, power has its privileges, but I get lots of crap. Just ask Billy."

They didn't need to. "Yes, kids.. he does get a lot of crap. Guys seeking power, morons wanting overthrow.. assorted random assholes who, happy days," I used it as a replacement to 'Thank God' as these kids wouldn't know what I was talking about. "will eventually get replaced by you. Fortunately for him, he has someone to take a lot of that crap for him."

"It's worth it, though, isn't it.", the boy replied. I had the strange feeling that he was talking to me and not Howard. In which case, I wouldn't know how to answer him.

"You know the answer to that.", Howard replied with a smile. "Anything I should know from any of you? Any problems?" Problems? Here, in this paradise? Of course not. Howard led us downstairs to the gym.

It was gigantic, especially for its distance underground. Illuminati truly spare no expense. An enormous swimming pool, indoor field (bioengineered grass, I'm sure), and a basketball court were the larger areas. Whatever it took to build was worth it; they were getting good use out of it, and probably would for the next thousand years. The kids were playing basketball, boys against girls. I semi-automatically scanned the fast-moving children for black or very dark clothes. A few servants, but not many. Guess they don't need them after all. Oh, duh. I'm forgetting common sense. These are little kids, still, who aren't knowledgeable or savvy enough to always avoid saying the magical 'wrong words' that can get someone creamed. There's almost certainly a test or something like that.

"Hey, Howard!", a boy happily shouted, as a servant teammate passed the ball forward to another boy. The rest of them joined in with greetings, not looking away from their game, happily playing with each other as if nothing else in the world mattered. I felt a pang of intense envy. THIS is where I should have been as a child! THESE are the peers I never had! HERE is where I should have grown up! Fuck the normal world and its bullshit! At least these are the people I'll be with in the future, even as a servant..

"Hello, all.", Howard greeted them. "Anything any of you want to tell me? Anything at all."

"Yeah. I wish I was fully engineered.", a very young boy said, and the other kids laughed. "It would make me better at this and I'd get the ball more often!" Someone did pass him the ball right then, but he was way too heavily covered and had to toss it to another boy. who shot and scored on the six-foot-high nets.

"You might be even better engineered than I am.", Howard informed him. "'Fully' is meaning less and less."

"I know that most of those girls are better than I am.", I heard Sarah say into Howard's ear. "Those throws, that coordination, at that age? I didn't have it." 'Better than Sarah' means 'fucking incredible'. Paul was following behind Howard and went to the side to get a better look. He must have been amazed. The children were fast, extremely fast, and played with astounding grace and style, like the harbingers of an engineered future that they are. I remembered Sarah telling me I understood what to do in not hurting them, but not why. Now I understood why. I'd give my life for these kids, I realized, and probably, so would Howard. If an angry Illuminatus with a dark plot, a lot of heavy weapons, and a thousand Enforcers descended on Northberg like a plague, Howard and I would either defeat the overwhelmingly powerful foe- a thing we're known for- or die trying.

"We're not gonna win this.. we're down by 6, one minute to go.", one of the oldest boys said, and I noticed a few female smiles. He was right. A minute later, the girls had won, 42-37, a few boys yelling their annoyance in response. One boy made a few practice shots and wanted to keep playing, and a few of the kids agreed with him. The rest of them approached us curiously and

started asking questions. They weren't the exact same kind of questions as Howard was asked by the Illuminated children at his party, but some were close- what's it like being the Dominator (Howard gave the same answer he had to the other boy, with the same result of laughter), what does he do for fun, what's the coolest thing he's ever done (finished the tests and became the Dominator), that stuff. Some of them even asked me, Sarah, and Paul some questions as well, what's it like flying the jet, how many people have you killed, that stuff. One of them even had the idea that he could use me as a duplicate and was disappointed that it's already been thought of and done. A lot of them looked at me as if I were an unfortunate amputee. One of the servant boys simply held onto my hand and smiled at me, and I smiled back. Eventually they waved goodbye, all smiling and joyful.

"Hey, Howard. The rest of us against you and your servants.", suggested the boy who had invited the others to keep playing.

"All right, you've got it.", Howard answered, and we followed him onto the court.

"They'll kick our butts!", a girl exclaimed. "They'll just toss it from the back court."

"Okay, fine- no tossing it from behind the half-line, then, and no passing it high." Although the ball was smaller and the nets lower to the ground, this was a full adult-sized basketball court. As engineered we could toss it in from behind the half-line easily. If we were all normals, this would be so much different.

"Ralphie, I told you before.. five years of genetics doesn't DO all that!", the girl objected. "They're lots bigger than us, and they **are** fully engineered."

"Paul's a normal.", Howard said, and they were amazed.

"Whaat?! He's a normal?!", Ralphie shouted in surprise, running up to Paul. "Other than.. than the Operator and some of the biotechnicians," Ever hear a six-year-old say 'biotechnicians' before? "I've never even SEEN one before! What's your name?"

"Paul.", he replied, and I knew Paul was a bit unconsciously frightened of the grinning, obviously superior boy.

"You wouldn't even.." Ralphie jumped up and slashed his fingers a tiny distance from Paul's throat, intentionally moving relatively slow for engineered. Paul flinched back about a tenth of a second after Ralphie's move, and the kids laughed.

"Fine. Ten on three, but we're still going to lose.", the girl said. Just like that, Paul was discounted, as if his existence wasn't something to worry about. The worst part was that it was based on logic, because his comparable abilities were as nothing compared to theirs. I hated it. Someone, I silently begged, please give my dear friend a retrovirus.

"Ten minutes.", one of the boys said, and the Enforcer set the clock for that long. When we were ready on opposite sides of the court, Ralphie started with the ball, the Enforcer started the game, and they rushed at our defense. I'm on him, ball's going that way, but there it goes to her, then to him. One ran and dribbled, Howard tried to snag it, but another boy grabbed it first and passed it to another girl. She tried to pass it, but Sarah zipped her fingers out (good thing she didn't claw it), it bounced forward, she grabbed it, dribbling, tossed it in the air and whacked it with her other hand right into the net. The Enforcer blew the whistle on the double hit.

"Count it.", Ralphie commanded the Enforcer, and a 3 appeared on our side. "But don't double-hit it anymore!", he shouted at Sarah, who nodded, a bit embarrassed. She doesn't usually make mistakes like that.

They went back and forth rapidly; being more numerous, they were hard to defend against. The girl who had discounted Paul's existence passed it too high to Ralphie, and Sarah got in the way, grabbing the ball, darting forward, and scoring again. Inerrant accuracy is a game-winning quality.

"We can't **WIN** this!", a boy shouted. "They don't have to **go** far enough!"

"How about we go within the three-point line?", Howard suggested, and got a positive response.

One girl tossed it forward to another girl, and Howard got in front of her to grab it- the girl actually passed it between Howard's legs (an amazing feat indeed) to another boy, who went for the hoop. I went for the ball- no way he was going to be able to get it between my legs with this positioning- but he tossed it to the girl who discounted Paul, and then Paul must have surprised her indeed- he was actually able to tip it. Unfortunately, he tipped it right to Ralphie, who got in to make the 2-point shot.

As we started our offense, the kids kept on us- Howard passed it to me, and instantly a blue blur of a kid grabbed it with a crack of ball on flesh and went for the hoop. Howard was fast enough to get there to stop the shot, and he passed it to Sarah, who, surprisingly enough, was able to dribble past the fast kids to score.

The whole game was like that. These kids' speed is undeniable, and their group strategy and thinking is amazing. A few years from now, these kids in gun battles... there's no beating this. I don't care what the normals have. They'll get mown down like grass. We won, 30-20, only because of our size.

"That was good. You guys are good.", the earlier blue blur of a boy said, smiling. "So why did you come here to play with us?"

"I have to let you all know that I'm here, that I'm not just some face on the screen." As his victims would tell you if they weren't, well, dead. "This is your Dominator speaking, I'd like you to know who I am." They laughed a bit.

"Well, we know that, we even know about him and her.", he said, gesturing to me and Sarah. "Or someone definitely would have asked!" The kids know it's messed up; then again, this is the Illuminati, and they should all be quite used to 'messed up'.

"They taught that to you?", Howard replied. How does one go about teaching children that young about.. never mind. I can guess, but I'm not sure I want to know the details.

"Lots of stuff about you." Howard was actually surprised at this. He wouldn't want to change it, though. Better that the kids know than they don't.

"I probably should have checked that out.. I had no clue."

"Yeah. We know allllll of it.", Ralphie replied, causing the other kids to laugh. Yes, and the results of what they know happened is in the infants' section of the educational facility, his four tiny arms learning how to manipulate objects and his tiny mouth learning how to speak Latin.

"I guess I don't have to talk about **me** much more, then.", Howard replied, getting laughter in response. "But I suppose I could ask you all how it is here, although you have nothing else to judge it by.."

"They couldn't make it much better.", a girl said. "And we do have something else. They show us what normal life is like on the screen."

"Yeah! And if I didn't know it was necessary, I'd ask them to turn it off!!", a young boy exclaimed,

and everyone turned to look at him. "That crap gives me nightmares!" Congratulations. You are now an official member of the club. I get the normal world in my nightmares too.

"When I become Night Director, I'm not going to change it.", an older boy said.

"They've decided it?", a girl asked.

"Yeah. I'm a lot like the Assistant Day Director for this place. Hey, maybe you should go talk to him?", the older boy said.

"I think I'll do that. Remember, I'll always be here for you.", Howard said, and the kids believed him absolutely. As he's done before, he's claiming something that he doesn't have to worry about being wrong about.

We followed Howard back upstairs, and into a room at the far side of the hall. Inside was something that normals might have taken as a joke of some sort- a kid not more than eight years old in a swivel chair that was jacked high enough for him to use the computer, with an apparently smaller keyboard and mouse for his young hands, doing adult work. 'Xavier A. Burgard Assistant Day Director' read the plaque on the desk.

"Hello, Howard.", he said, and his tone was that of an authority respecting a higher one. "Taking another tour, I see."

"Yeah. Hey, where's the Director?"

"You're looking at him." If this was anything but the Illuminati, I would have been amazed. "Six months and it's official- but the guy's basically in retirement already. I just call him up when I need help. Did you come to see me just to finish seeing everyone here?", Xavier asked.

"Basically.", Howard replied. "The place has changed over the years, more efficient. Who gave the directive to tell them about me?"

"He did." He put his hands up as if to say 'I didn't do it.' "Don't look at me- it was his suggestion."

"Don't worry, I'm not hunting heads, just curious. I came here to introduce myself and it turns out that they already know more about me than I'd be willing to talk about." The boy smiled. Is Howard actually embarrassed by something, or does he simply not want to talk about it? The latter is possible, the former I find a bit hard to conceive of.

"Howard, I know what you were trying to do. And it worked. It's good that they all saw you in person."

"It was worth the trip.", Howard replied, nodding. "Anything **you** want to say to me?"

"Not really.. might want to tell you that we're going to give Quad special things for his macroability when he gets older." What is that word? The opposite of 'disability', probably. I'd just use politically-correct speak and call him 'differently abled'... **much** different, depending on who's speaking. "Four-armed weapons and a four-armed flight simulator. He'll have lots of fun and the mech engineers will figure out what works. But that stuff's what we're here for."

"You're doing a good job. A few years from now, I'll **really** appreciate your work.", Howard said. He most definitely will. These kids will facilitate his total domination.

Xavier let out a laugh. "Thanks, Howard."

"I'll be back sometime. Goodbye, Xavier. You know that I'm always around."

"Bye, Howard." We left him and walked back to the tram. I noticed that Paul was thinking of something to say, but was looking for ways to say it. There's so many questions he could be asking, so much he doesn't, can't, fundamentally understand about this place and the people in it, because he's not one of us, just a normal, sentenced to die after a time, not having any of the abilities that make us engineered. Again, I wished for a retrovirus, as a normal kid would want a treatment for his best friend to be able to get out of a wheelchair.

"I don't get it.", he finally said, after we got on the tram and started heading back to the jet. "No, not the obvious stuff, I see why you're doing things the way you are.. everything they can want at their age, advanced learning procedures.. but.. there's something.." The way they act, maybe? The.. ah, I know.

"You're not thinking about the fact that those kids aren't attacking each other, are you?", I asked.

"Yeah- yeah, that's **it!** No spankings or discipline or... there's nothing to stop them from.." From doing what they just don't do. I'm engineered and I don't understand it completely myself; I'd never be able to explain it to someone who isn't.

Howard explained it instead. "You didn't learn, did you, Paul. You didn't learn at my birthday party, and your normal-born ass isn't learning now. I suppose you didn't observe the ones at my party very well, and you obviously didn't see it here."

"Oookay, Howard Dominus, what the **fuck?!**", Paul shouted, confused.

"You obviously need a psychology lesson.. but it would take years for you to learn it properly. I'll give you a quick version. Tell me, what psychological rules do normal children of that age follow to make them do those kinds of things?"

"The need for..", Paul said, snapping his fingers. "The need for control. Tribalism. Pack leadership. That can't be gone from humanity, or you guys wouldn't be here."

"Our organization was crafted on such things, yes. But you don't understand where those things come from. It's partially taught, partially inborn. The need for control, that bullying instinct of pack animals, that idea of becoming top dog- it is mildly lessened in humans and completely absent for engineered. The learned part comes from the parents, who teach their children that physical violence is okay with one's so-called loved ones. If one of these children starts hitting or something- always about five, six months of age if they ever do it, and of course they have no clue what they're really doing- and the other one isn't fighting back, the Enforcers move the aggressor to the other side of the room. If they're both going at it, we leave them alone. They understand very quickly what it is. Theft, vandalism, mockery.. we both teach against these things and they're not inclined to do them." These children learn to function as a group, having individuality without ever stepping on each other's toes. They know what's what, semi-instinctively. Although they may compete for whatever reason, they won't get into real fights.. with each other, anyway. Any normal standing against them at any point in the future is going to get his ass chucked into the fucking meatgrinder...

"Waaait. You said that the need for control didn't exist in engineered. and yet you're..", Paul started. His objection makes sense, but it's different, critically different. Powermongering normals want control. To Howard, control is a means, not an end. He wants to upgrade the world, and control is the only way to do it.

"Different kind of control entirely. I only threaten people as psychological manipulation, to get them out of my way. They threaten people because their subconscious demands it. No engineered Illuminatus has ever threatened another one. If I was like normals in that way, I'd be throwing a lot more physical power around, talking sharply to everybody, demanding everything- you've got the mental picture. Uh-uh. I don't throw people around or break limbs as a warning, you know what

happens when I get pissed. I'm not the alpha male of the herd, I'm the fucking predator. Keeps the herd in line." Sarah nodded. I realized how effective, how utterly effective, this makes Howard and the people who follow his practices. His goal is to do something, and it's going to be done, and he mostly doesn't care who he has to control and how to do it. And I found myself agreeing with his philosophy. There is no other path for this world but the Dominator's, and I had no emotional objection to that at all.

"Yeah, if you're gonna bother touching them.. it's over. That's exactly why they did it that way, makes you more deadly.. and that answers something else, too.", Paul said.

"You understand. Good.", Howard replied.

"Just one more thing.. those **were** servants of those kids that I saw, right?", Paul asked, as Sarah did the usual maneuvering with the jet to point it out the hangar.

"Yes, they were."

"So.. do any of those kids want a big house with lots of servants or.."

"None of them do, Paul.", Howard explained, as the jet rocketed into the sky. "This has been documented. Normals, like you, conjure up those kinds of fantasies because they don't feel cared-for, because they want more material things, or because they hunger for power. These kids might want someone to control- but they just want to **have** someone." What must it be like for a six-year-old who has been taught all about control, well enough to be protected from wrong-word problems, but hasn't ever really used it? 'Wow, I really can make him do anything I want him to! This is so cool! Hey guys, check **this** out!' The servants are probably made that way from birth as well, taught somewhere else, waiting for the day when they can have a master and so join the rest of the children.

After we ate some nutrient bars and water (running around with those kids burns energy!), Howard rested his head on my shoulder on the flight back, a satisfied smile on his lips. He's seen the future, and he likes it.

After it was too late in the day for Howard to be likely to disturb us, I looked it up with Paul. Yup, I was right. The servant kids are kept in another, separate wing of Northberg Educational until they have a master. What could that be like? For them it was probably just the way life went. They'd have everything except the freedom of the other kids to choose their destinies, and they'd probably never even want it.

You can guess the nightmare.

Chapter 54

The nightmare was new and original, but then again they all are in some way.

I looked at a 7:24 12-22-99 embedded in the wall, wondering why I woke up to see a three digit time instead of the usual four. Paul's still snoozing, I'll leave him where he is. I put on some generic black pants to suit my mood and my position, and pondered how to kill the morning. Shit, Howard's not going to be up for a while.. might as well go use the big screen to play some.. damn, Howard is up, doing what I was thinking of- using his Barbarian to ream the shit out of the various undead hordes and demonic minions that comprise Diablo 2's enemies, mutilating and maiming with a ferocity only bested by our real-world power. Only I didn't think of Sarah massaging my shoulders while I'm playing. Good idea, that. I idly watched him play from the railing- he's using all the strategy of a bulldozer, and it seems to be working, as the combination of low ping, ultra computer, and godly reflexes provide more than enough resources to obtain levels and power with. To the spoiled go the victories.

"It's snowing out.", she said in his left ear, in a position usually reserved for whispering 'sweet nothings'. Snow? There wasn't any here last year. One look out the large window and I could see a steady fall of white flakes.

"Still?", he turned and said. Sarah jerked back slightly to avoid his cheek whacking her nose.

"Yeah, about an inch now."

"What the hell? It's never snowed here before and now this?"

"Weather is strange. What are you doing up so early? Buzzer ring and I missed it?" I ambled down the stairs to go get some food.

"No.. had a nightmare, couldn't get back to sleep." Him? A nightmare? There's a new one. But considering the large amount of crap we've fought through and how nightmare-worthy some of it is, it's not all that surprising.

"And I thought only I had the nightmares.", I muttered.

"Usually, you do. So what was yours this time?"

I reached back into my brain to provide him with an answer I didn't particularly want to remember myself. "Okay.. you in a chariot, whip in hand." He started giggling, lost concentration just a bit, and had to leap his Barbarian out of the way of some hideous demon. "But you're not using horses, you're using lions. You're in this great big coliseum, the lions go forward, and there's this guy... I don't know what he looks like, at all. The lions you're whipping run towards him and eat him, and all the while you're just sitting back in the chariot, smiling."

"So you're not in this one."

"Except just as an observer, not this time." If the target of the lions had been me, I would have known it.

"Screwy enough." No, the nightmares are never screwy enough- that's why they keep getting screwier. The wind started whipping a bit, and the snow was falling just a bit harder than it had a minute ago. I thought for a minute on Howard's dogs and realized that they'd be okay- even if whatever burrow they're using gets too cold, Fido can figure out a way to keep it warm without having to come in here. Engineereds are resourceful bastards.

He saved, clicked the screen off, and laid back. "Damn.. hey, maybe I'll go enjoy it while it's still here." Eh? Him? Just going outside? That is weird. He's sort of acting like.. no, we're not Christopher Robin unless someone slipped the kid a concoction of crack, brain-boosters, and a mega-dose of human growth hormone.

"You're going to go play in the snow? Even just saying that sounds weird."

"The Dominator does as he will, and none may know his true motive.", Sarah said. Oh yes. I seem to have forgotten. He does what he feels like. How could it have ever slipped my mind? "Sometimes, not even him." I chuckled. That's one way to make yourself unpredictable- let your subconscious make all the important decisions.

"That's right. I haven't enjoyed the feel of powdered ice in a long time. Billy, come out with me. And wear all white." I'm not going to ask why.

"Isn't that thing too light?", I asked instead.

"Nope. It exchanges heat a lot slower in cold." I idly wondered why I hadn't found that out yet. Oh yeah. It almost never gets cold here, that's why. Semi-tropical islands usually never see it- but then there's the freakish stuff like this. I'm fairly sure that one of these days, he's just going to get a helicopter to serve basically as a flying freezer, and rain down snow whenever he feels like it.

And he was right- I felt a slight chill as I stepped into the snow, and felt the fabric tightening on itself to prevent air exchange, in addition to whatever else it was doing- they think of everything, always have. Howard casually picked up a handful of snow and compressed it into an iceball, then flinging and skipping it on the ocean.

"We got a lot of this back in Illinois. Didn't think we could get it here.", I said, looking at the snow idly. When was the last time I had seen this stuff up-close? I remember.. when I was 9. I was with my... wait, that was just with Paul.. I fought through the swamp of half-memories and dreams to try to remember what I was even doing then. It didn't matter. None of my normal-life memories are relevant anymore.

"Didn't think we could get it here either. Strange- little bit of frozen water on the ground makes all the difference." Yes, it does.. and it did even more for me back in school days. Snow wasn't the thing, ice was. A little bit of ice meant school's out, lots of snow might not accomplish the same. I opened up a memory cap and it flooded into my mind. After I took the masses out of the picture- I avoided them anyway so they didn't occupy that much mental room- I remembered the joy of at least temporary, partial freedom from the annoyances of society, being deep in suburbia, surrounded by houses whose owners might as well have been dead. I remembered everything on one day- from the original realization that school was out and the quick phone call to Paul, to the tree bashing a dent in the plastic sled, to the lunch at my house, to the afternoon, and finally to the annoying early darkness.

"Yeah. This wouldn't be enough to get me out of school though. It was like this all winter two years ago."

"And it's probably like this over there now." I heard a lot of barking from the other side of the open area and an extremely quick pitter-patter of feet in snow. One of Howard's dogs- Magma, the red one- was going at usual dog speed, but Fido was running at.. what? Faster than a cheetah.. eighty miles an hour, looks like. I never knew he could do that.. then again, we don't see much of Fido, because Howard is perfectly content to leave him alone as long as he regularly comes back. And he is coming back- slowing down, looking at both of us, and just picking one to jump onto. It was Howard- and Howard anticipated him, did not dodge, and accepted the dog playfully leaping onto him to lick his face- but instead, Howard gracefully back-rolled to be on top of the dog instead. The two shared face-to-face contact for about a second. Magma was sniffing me and barking appreciatively, and I scratched the back of his ears. Fido got up, and then tore off into the forest again.

"What's he going for?", I asked, Magma nuzzling the side of my leg.

"Something valuable, maybe?" What would be valuable to a dog? Food? Yup, that's it- Fido came back, dragging the carcass of a half-eaten pig in his jaws, its skin tinted blue. Froze to death, looks like. Not enough hair, not enough insulating fat. Perhaps these guys will start genetically engineering the pigs as well...

"Natural selection at work.", Howard commented.

"Mmm, what I always wanted, yummy fresh pigsicle. I haven't had meat this fresh since the tests."

"Actually, this isn't that fresh." He was right- there would be more blood around the places that Fido had eaten, instead of just ice.

"Yeah, and the dogs ate most of the good parts." Howard snapped off a leg and chewed it, warming it in his mouth to avoid brain freeze.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah, tough to eat though. It doesn't taste the same as it does fresh." I popped off another leg and tiny ice crystals flew into the air. I nibbled on it- and of course my taste buds replied with a 'This is good. Eat more of this.'

"I still can't believe this stuff tastes good to us."

"Why not? It's protein and fat, the two things we need most." The engineers, of course, couldn't just let it go as 'They know they need meat, so let's leave it at that'- they made it 'Let's have them crave the stuff so they'll always have enough fuel.'

"It's.. well, it's raw, unadulterated, frozen pig! Look at it Howie, it's the other blue meat!" We shared a laugh. But it is weird.. every time I eat meat, especially when I can see what the animal looks like, the reflex, although subtle, is always instant- it's the kill impulse again. The same kill impulse that drove our personal body count where it is, the same kill impulse that's gotten us this far, the same kill impulse that screams '**MURDER IT**' every time either of us gets pissed off. And the same carnivorous, voracious kill impulse that drives the hunger for the flesh of animals.

And of course that wasn't really considered a problem by either of us, and Howard laid back in the snow munching the dead meat.

"Take the pig back to your children, Fido. They need it more than I do." The dog barked and dragged the pig back to whatever deep hole in the ground he's been using as a burrow. I'm not surprised it understands English well enough to do that.

"I think that was your Christmas present, Howie."

"Heh heh. It's not quite as worthless as some other shit I've gotten, though."

"Who would give **you** worthless shit?"

"Some idiot would, anonymously. I don't know if he intended it as an insult or a joke or what, but when I was six years old, on December 25th, someone sent me a sock with a big lump of black stuff in it." Oh, damn. I wonder what happened to him? And of course at the age of six, no one told Howie what coal in the stocking meant..

"A lump of coal in your stocking, for Christmas."

"I didn't know the symbolism at the time, Billy, or even what it was for that matter.", he said matter-of-factly. I didn't hide my smile.

"So what'd you do with it?"

"Experiments. Daddy wasn't reachable for another forty-eight hours or so, the Enforcers weren't really available at the time, and I had to find out what it was. I got curious, crumbled a little bit with my fingers, it turned things black. I put my fingers to my mouth, spat a bunch of times.. eeyuck! Then I climbed up, turned the stove on, waited until it was red, and sprinkled some on." I could picture the burning.

"Oh geez! Did you get hurt?" I idly wondered how many scars he would have gotten from doing that, if he could get them.

"Nope. It was cool to look at, but I stayed away from the smoke though. Then I put the whole lump on another part, turned that on to max, jumped off the counter and stepped back."

"Home science experiments, the young Illuminatus way." Important thing to remember about powerful overlords- they were once at an age when even they didn't know any better. I looked at this particular overlord and noticed a fine covering of snow on his body and some melted water on his face- our blood circulates quickly and so frostbite is unlikely.

"Yup. I had to find out. The funny thing is, when Daddy called up, I wanted to know the guy's name so I could send him my thanks for giving me something that fun."

"Did you ever find out who it was?"

"Well, anyone third level or higher could give me any present he wanted without having to worry, because it's assumed anyone in the third level is advanced and understanding enough not to send bombs or something. Yeah, I know, bad assumption.." Woop! Woop! Woop! Understatement alert! "I don't know if anyone checked it before it got to me, though."

"Enforcers probably checked it."

"Yeah, you're right, the older ones wouldn't know what it meant. The ones I have now would."

"And now you're doing another experiment just being in the snow."

"Oh yeah, Billy. I can't learn everything from books. What I figure out here from just fooling around in this snow might mean the difference between life and death if I ever end up in a lot of it. I've been taught almost everything there is to know about anything and I've still got so fucking much to learn. Besides, I needed a nature break anyway, and I might as well get to know this stuff- most of our installations are covered in it." The unused portions of the Northern Hemisphere, as well as Antarctica, are great to hide large, mostly underground complexes in.

"Yes, that's right, the calls of nature can not be denied for long." He calmly gripped the back of my neck and pulled me down next to him. I laughed a bit. "Howie, I think I finally understand why you do some things now."

"I think I know what things you're talking about but I'm not sure why you just finally understood them."

"Well, like going out in the snow, eating raw pig, playing with your dog.. you're not being The Dominator, you're being yourself." I'm not sure why I'm saying this but there's something I don't understand. And he looked at me funny for a bit, and then something- probably his memorized psychological studies- told him what it was.

"And now I understand why you had problems figuring it out. Billy, I don't have to answer to anyone. Unlike just about everyone you've ever met, I will do whatever the fuck suits me at the fucking moment. There is no code of conduct, there are no rules, there are no expectations. I just come whenever things need straightening out, to hold everything together, I keep my assets in line, and that's just the stuff I have to do as Dominator to keep things the way they are and make sure I can do whatever else I feel like. Then I go out and do it like I've been doing for the past one and a half years. And the amount of stuff I can do keeps growing. It's life without inhibition, Billy. I can do whatever I want."

And then I immediately understood as well. It was a set of problems with my thinking, assumptions I've been going on, mistakes in my thinking that haven't had the opportunity to show themselves in manipulative situations- because, when dealing with the masses and even with some Illuminati,

they're not mistakes. I've always considered the world rulers to be faceless, conniving bastards- and by and large, they are. But they are also people, people with their own particular traits and quirks. This is the first thing most conspiracy theorists forget, and a thing that's so hard to realize even when you're right next to the master of bastards. Regardless of power, people internally try to act like themselves, unless they feel they have to act a certain way. Howard does everything for some ulterior gain, but he does it in a way that is pleasant to him. He's not trying to fit any mold, or abuse his Ultimate Rich Boy™ privileges simply because he's supposed to- he's abusing them literally because he can and he feels like it, and what I haven't been understanding is the fact that he doesn't have any little guys in his head, any society-based behavioral restrictions, any of what Freud termed the superego. He has none at all, nothing to stop him from killing, nothing to stop him from doing as he damn well pleases. He can literally jack off in the middle of a meeting and, because of his position, no one would seem to care.

In sum, because he is all-powerful, he doesn't have to act like it.

I've known this was true before- it's fairly obvious when you put it in your forebrain- but for the first time I internally **realized** it.

For a tiny fraction of a second I felt an intense murderous rage and it went as quickly as it came.

"You put other rich people to shame."

"Of course I do. I don't live with any imaginary parents or peers or anyone watching me or checking me or telling me to mind my manners. And Billy, in case you didn't notice, neither do you. The only person you have to listen to is me."

"Except when they come over or you take me to them, then you always say..."

"Yeah, and you know why that is. I have to get all high and mighty and I have to make sure all customs are followed."

"Yeah, I know. But as for that no-inhibition thing.. why didn't I realize or enjoy that before? It's been twenty months!"

"You did enjoy it. You just didn't notice you were. The remains of your freedom illusion were still in the way." He was right. I **did** enjoy it.

"Howie, if all you're saying is true, then that term is just wrong. It's not the freedom illusion, it's the chains illusion. The real chains aren't seen quite as clearly as they should be, and there's some fake ones that aren't there at all."

"That, dearest Billy, is something I have not considered." I put my hands behind my head and looked at the falling snow, and realized that we were covered by maybe a half inch of it. Howard gently slid his arm under me and I did the same to him.

"So you do have some Christmas spirit.", I said, looking at him. He answered me by gently plopping a loose handful of snow in my face. Of course my reflexes didn't catch it- it wasn't fast or harmful, after all, and this was Howard so I wasn't in instant-defense mode- but it was highly annoying just the same, mostly because I can't do anything about it.

"Hey, you know I can't-"

"You can now, with the snow." If that's the way he wants it... I grabbed a large handful in my right hand, jumped up to my feet, compressed it as much as possible (which is, of course, a lot), and intended to smash his head with it. His reflexes zipped his head out of the way just before it smacked into the ground. The rest was predictable- a normal snowball fight played in fast forward.

We pumped it up and made it faster still. Not like I can actually hit him with one of these things, and not like he can hit me. They're coming off the ground and into the air faster than most normal eyes can follow, but after dodging bullets, even this is a joke. We ended up moving in and out, circling- we were simply eating up too much snow and large grassy areas were forming.

At the corner of my vision, I saw a green-clad figure, probably Paul, stepping out of the mansion. "Holy shit!", he blurted, the usual response. We continued circling and I noticed Paul holding a snowball and just shaking his head as he realized that he wouldn't even be a factor. It kept going for another half minute or so- muscle ache started coming in- and Howard just said to stop it because there wouldn't be any hits for hours anyway, as he sat down on the ground and stretched his arms. I came up with a quick idea and idly wondered if it would work. No sense in not trying.

"Yeah.. but there's still one thing I wanna show you, Howie.", I said, squatting down next to him and putting my left arm around him again.

"What's that?" This is almost **too** good.

I gently chucked a handful of loose snow in his face. His immediate physical reaction- squinting of eyes, wiping it off- was immediate, as was Paul's laughter.

"Billy," he crooned in a pleasant voice, "I hope your finely-tuned sense of revenge does not extend into other areas."

"You hope wrong, asshole.", I said, smiling. "But that was fun." Paul's laughter died down and I noticed the snow had as well- some wind was carrying it back and forth, but there wasn't any new snow coming down. Bah. Of course, that's really all an island like this is going to get.

"Hey, Howard, do you have a sled?", Paul asked, gesturing to the ex-volcano. I suppose we wouldn't get creamed sliding down that.. and the best thing is that there's no solid objects such as buildings and cars to crash into.

"Ahh.. no.. Call a couple down! They'll be here inside twenty minutes." Paul started running back inside to do it. I suppose they'd be taken from normal stores and parachuted down the usual way. Time-efficient and secrecy-solid if it's done cleanly. Buy something, ship to airfield, just get plane started in right direction- if it gives the correct signals, don't blow it out of the air. Since no one follows people around enough to see such assorted strangeness (even if they did, the airfields are all on private land), no one notices.

"Wood or plastic?", he called back.

"Big and plastic!", I called back. I don't think they have sleds specially made for this. Snowboards, maybe, but you don't want to hit a dry patch with any part of a snowboard. It gets stopped in front and the back keeps going... thud, thud, thud, the body rolls down the hill, unless super acrobatics prevent it. "Wooden sleds fucking **suck** in wet snow and no one even sells them anymore. And the ones with metal on them get stopped so easy."

"What about just metal?"

"Howard, there are no such things, and by the time you make one there'd be no use for it, at least not today."

"Damn, would make sense, it's slick enough."

"Exactly how many other eleven-year-olds would want to carry a metal sled up a hill every time to go down?" He looked startled for a fourth of a second and then realized his mistake. He hates dealing with normals, and so does not think about them.

"Good point. And now I remember why I keep you around."

"I thought you kept me around as a decoy."

"That's just a nifty bonus feature." I muttered to myself about white snow traveling between white suit and white skin.

"What are you thinking about?", he asked, smiling at me.

"Exactly how much snow will fit down the back of that suit of yours."

"You know what? I really don't know that either. However, I do know a way to find out.."

A quick half-memory came to me (damn if I know when from) of having a lot of packed snow stuck up my sleeve and in my mitten, and I cringed a bit. "AAAAAAACK! No! Howie!" 'You bastard.', I almost said in addition. 'You don't have to go about using the goddamn-'

"Billy, stand up and hold still." He proceeded to get a large handful of snow and put it just next to my neck, and then plopped it aside. "All right, you can move."

"Oh.. you didn't."

"Of course not. Why would I waste good snow?"

"Howard, that was a cheap shot.", Sarah said, from entirely the wrong direction. How the hell did she... never mind, she's a professional. Her white-grey camouflage suit fit snugly around every curve of her body- the effect was enticing, to say the least.

"Sarah, how the **hell** did you get behind me in snow?", Howard whirled and asked.

"Thin snow, special shoes, and your distracted senses.", she said, smiling. I looked at her feet and at the footprints- the material was slightly snowshoe-like, but much softer and she didn't leave obvious footprints.

"And I didn't even know you were out here.", he replied.

"That made it easier. I suppose you're taking the steepest way down you can find?" An image of cliff-diving without a parachute immediately came up.

"Sarah, that's a cliff. But I have one in mind." He probably intends the less-steep way up the cliff- the one with all the small, loose pebbles that run down it when disturbed. There aren't enough trees in the way to worry about a crash and it's steep enough to get a lot of speed going. In a normal neighborhood, it would probably be called the Hill of Doom.

"Cool, now what were you doing with these things?", she asked, grinning and packing a good snowball. I shook my head.

"Sarah. No.", he said, using his left hand to gesture that he was through with that for now.

"Then I suppose you're just out here for the freeze?"

"Actually, there's things you can do in snow that you can't anywhere else. Like sled riding, if whoever Paul's calling it down to can get it here anytime soon.. hey, I wonder how the Micro would work out here." I realized I wasn't saying very much. Nah.. he's the master.. let him talk.

"Howard, bad idea, you know what happens if you shine that thing onto reflective shit. And if you do get lucky, you'll just melt huge patches of snow." I pictured the beam of the Micro fracturing into many, many different sub-beams, bouncing off various particles of snow and melting everything in sight, and even spraying us with some heat waves. Fortunately, we can regenerate from that very quickly- it's internal, after all, and there's no particles being lodged in the body- but that's just not pleasant.

"Yeah, would be funny though. Anyway.." Howard picked up a large snowball, crushed it extremely tightly, and aimed for a twig deep in the forest. His throw blew the twig in half. Of course it isn't tough.. it's iced over and brittle. These trees aren't meant for sub-zero temperatures. I noticed Paul coming out of the house, jogging towards us.

"Nice aim. Watch this.", I said, chucking a similar handful at a farther-away small branch, blowing it in half immediately. Sarah then followed suit and blew two branches in half with one solid hit. Of course, no normal could do the things we were doing- not with this snow and from this far away. Even if they did manage to hit one of them, they couldn't blow them apart.

Howard grinned and chucked a fast one- right under the branch he was aiming for., prompting Sarah and me to laugh a bit. "ARGH!", he yelled, taking another snowball and hitting his mark, blasting the small branch, leaving it hanging by a thread of bark.

"And even more impossible shit.", Paul muttered, marveling once again at engineered power.

"Paul, even though you are a normal, you can do shit like this, you've done it before.", Howard said, shrugging.

"Howard, that wasn't quite as impossible as this. That was just some guns and some military special moves that we poor normals do all the time. And if you mean some of that training shit, that was nothing like breaking far-away twigs with snowballs."

"Paul, you see that frozen twig, that one with the three pine needles sticking out of it?" It was an obvious one, the pine needles gave it away, and it was a straight, slightly upward shot of about fifteen meters. It was also very well iced and brittle.

"Yeah, that one's far away though."

"Okay, pick up a fat handful of snow, as big as you can, now just crush, as hard as you can.", Howard said instructively. Paul gave a mighty effort. Hitting and destroying small branches about fifty feet away is not easy for normals- it's all concentration and targeting. And using snowballs means that you have to compress it insanely hard in order to get it. I could see Paul's arm straining through the green winter fabric, and his teeth gritted a bit. "Paul, the implants don't do more than that. But you can. You've seen it in action, you know you have some - use your power!", Howard continued, and Paul attempted to squeeze it farther still. "The stuff you're hiding, Paul." He realized what his body had to do in that instant, and the snowball became almost as solid as they come. I wonder how he's able to do this. Probably all the crap he's endured, probably all the bullshit with Damien. It's made him tougher inside, given him more subconscious power, because his body is used to being adrenalized and panicked.

"Good. Now aim for that twig I showed you, just look at it - and see that twig as it should be, in half, broken by the force of your snowball." Visualization is good for this sort of thing.

"All right."

"Now, pull back, release your power, and just throw, Paul." Paul threw a blistering sidearm directly into the branch. There was a smack, not a crack- the snowball blew into pieces. The branch wasn't damaged.

"Dammit Howard, I can do that." He tried again with a similarly-compressed snowball- it would have probably broken it, if it wasn't three feet over the mark.

"FUCK!", he yelled, making an even tighter iceball, aiming, and then I saw it in his eyes- the power, the hidden reserves. He knew what he was doing; his subconscious was with his conscious. He broke the end of the twig straight off. Physically, it's a minor feat to accomplish; but what's important is what he had. I wonder if he can do that when it counts, in the deadly battles we see far too often? 'That's a definite maybe.', I told myself.

Paul was looking at his light grey gloves and the hands within them as if they had done something completely unexpected. "Shit, I've never been able to do that before." Sarah grinned and I applauded; he's obviously beginning to understand the power gained when your whole body works in unison. Then this is really nuts, I realized. The parts of the human mind and body work together, and yet some joker can make a device to control one part and the others don't- can't- even realize what's being done. Damn...

Howard laid down on the soft snow. "Ahh... my arms hurt." There was a general murmur of agreement. Paul better watch it- if he tries too hard to throw like us, he'll dislocate his own shoulder.

"Now I see why you come out here.", Sarah said.

"Yeah, it's great stuff. And check it- here come the sleds." A jet flew overhead, a parachute automatically opened, and the sleds landed directly on top of Howard's jet. One circular, one larger and elongated.. probably could fit all four of us on that.

"Billy, Sarah, bring em and follow me.", he said, and we dragged the sleds after him through the ice-covered forest and up the steep hill of icy rocks, grass, and pebbles. I had to get on all fours to climb up while pushing the sled, glad that the fabric is basically invulnerable to scrapes as I kicked holes deep enough to use as a ladder.

"Shit. Howard, are you sure you want to do this?", Sarah said, looking downwards. It's not the speed that gets ya.. it's what you can land on and how you can land on it. As engineers, we can probably jump off a 50 mph car, hit the ground running, and come away with nothing but burned shoes to show for it- but our tissue is denser than normals', and the increased toughness will probably balance with the increased kinetic energy, should we hit a solid object.. wham.

"Yup. I love playing it dangerous." Bullets are dodgeable. The ground isn't.

"Hmm.. guinea pigs, guinea pigs.." Yeah, Howard, I love you too. "All right, Paul, get in the circular sled... Sarah, you push him as fast as you possibly can then jump in yourself. And don't crash. That would be bad." I found myself chuckling. Sarah doesn't make screwups like that..

..but Paul does. He pitched forward as Sarah jumped in, and the result caused both to fall out of their seats, Paul yelling and doing some rolls, and Sarah backflipping, then skidding down on her butt. The sled flipped over 360 degrees end-to-end and continued down as usual. Howard and I were beside ourselves (wait.. that makes the wrong kind of sense) with laughter.

"You little fucker! You could have killed us both!!", she yelled. Bah, that's a remote chance.

"Yeah, well it wasn't my fault you decided to push us like that!", Paul shouted back. She's engineered, you clown- what the hell did you expect?

"Howard--", Sarah began. I don't want to know how she would have finished that.

"I distinctly said not to crash.", Howard said, reminding me of a time when some schoolkid said

"Hey, don't fall!" to the schoolkid he was tripping. Sarah made a catlike snarling sound at him in lieu of speech. "I think we can do it without, well... hehe, don't you Billy?" Howard aligned the sled for going straight down and I took a look at how steep the hill really is. Hmm. Yup, it's steep, all right..

"Oh, yeah."

"Push and jump in.", he said. I pushed in three steps with plenty of power (but not all- all of it would have sent him and the sled flying) and we were going 40 mph midway down the hill. We flew over a rock for a bit, passing a tree ten feet away, and we were getting closer to the forest. Howard jumped off to the left and I jumped off from the back, using my butt and the soles to friction the sled to a stop. The forest was still about a hundred feet away, but better safe than sorry- I visualized the wood-crack and flesh-thud of engineered bodies vs. trees.

Sarah was carrying the sled back up the hill, using her knowledge of vocabulary to request that Paul do everything from shoving his head up his ass to having his dick cut off (that's definitely a cheap shot, but she knows that). They went again, and Paul screamed all the way down before he bailed- Sarah kept going towards the tree! "Sarah!!", Howard shouted, as she demonstrated what she was going to do- she grabbed the branch, grabbed the sled with her legs, and flipped the whole sled over the branch to the side before landing on her feet. All of us clapped. She took a few bows before picking up the sled and going back up for more.

We went down in various combinations- me and Paul, him and Sarah. He held on to her breasts all the way down- I did the same shortly afterwards. The exhilaration from this isn't from the speed itself- which is relatively slow- but the closeness of the sleds to the ground and the proximity of obstacles. This is actually fun, I realized.

And, right in the middle of my twentieth or so trip down, taking me completely by surprise, was a voice coming right out and asking me: 'Don't you have any humanity anymore?' Hmm, maybe I shouldn't have noticed that this was actually fun- things tend to interrupt me when I do.

I waited until I jumped off the sled to answer it, listening to Paul bail out once again. 'I never had all that much humanity to begin with. Why you and why now?'

'Oh, come on.', it asked as Paul and I climbed back up the hill yet again. 'You know what I am. You know why now. You know that you're losing a lot of your memories, letting them fade away. Your dreams figure more prominently in your mind than your past reality.'

'A lot of that bullcrap was just school and other useless crap anyway.', I answered in a nasty tone, physically gritting my teeth and forcing the steady crunch of footsteps in snow into my mental voice.

It continued regardless. 'Furthermore- and probably most importantly- you're becoming more like him every minute.'

There was only one way to answer that: **'GOOD!'**

And then it tried to strike a blow I've been expecting for a long time. 'And you've given up on freedom.' I envisioned the voice striking a blow against a powerful shield and the shield automatically counterattacking with an energy blast.

'SHUT THE **FUCK** UP!!', I railed at it, as I laughed all the way down, holding onto Paul at 40-50 miles an hour, not giving any external clues to the war in my head. 'You just **SHUT THE FUCK UP** and never use that word again!!' The f-word, I joked to myself as we climbed back up, Paul holding onto my body for support all the way back up, as I pounded the ground for more traction. The other f-word.

Paul and I went back down alone later. "This is exhausting. I'll keep going as long as you will, but

ugh.", he said as he got off the sled.

"You know this already, Paul. We can't last all that long either." The furnace, not the candle.

"Yeah, but you just keep coming back. Howard's going to be at the screen doing something within five seconds of coming home. Watch." There was some wonder in his voice. His amazement with our abilities never really left after all this time. It probably never will leave until/unless he gets the abilities for himself in the form of a retrovirus.

"Nah. Sixty. He'll eat first."

We went down again and again, for hours, in all physically possible combinations. I held onto Sarah's mid-chest with my right hand and her legs with my right as we flew down the long sled. The ground grew wetter and speed increased; but soon enough, the entire island turned to its more usual tropical state and slushy water gave way to wet rocks, the cheap plastic sleds having their bottoms slowly shredded. When Howard didn't come up for another run I knew it was time to quit.

"I'm dizzy as shit.", Paul mumbled, shaking his head to clear the effect of taking a sled down time and time again. "Tired too. Thought you three didn't have that much endurance."

"Usually, we don't.", replied Sarah. "But that was too.. interesting to come inside early."

"Yeah.. refreshing too.", Howard said, watching the melted snow run off his fingers and onto the ground. "But can one of you please tell me why I just did all that?"

"Boredom?", Paul offered. "You said at the time that you basically just felt like it."

"Fun?", Sarah offered. "Although getting used to the stuff is a good idea, I've had to work in it."

"Actually, he said that he hasn't touched powdered ice in a long time. But the point's the same, we don't really know.", I said. "Even he doesn't really know why he does things. Now I am scared.."
Howard, if you're going to use us, do you mind making sure you know exactly why you're doing something? This was just for fun but the next time might be more serious. I considered telling him that out loud and decided against it.

"Which is in perfect accordance with tradition and zero accordance with logic. But it's not like I don't have the time to kill."

"Actually, I was thinking about that, Howie. We sorta don't.", I said.

"What do you mean? Yeah, we'll die eventually, but..."

"Not that. We'll never be young again, remember? 'Always 18' is what you said." These are not the bodies we will be walking around in for the rest of eternity or until we finally get killed.

"Oohhhh... Well, that means a hell of a lot more to normals than it does to us. But yeah, you're right, we'll never be five foot six and without full musculature again, but biofunctions will be about the same. But Billy, worrying about that crap is pointless. People who live in the past or the future forget what time it is." He has a point.

"Not to mention they get stabbed in the back a whole lot easier.", Sarah said. I laughed. Yes, remembering to watch your back- can't forget about **that** little necessity, can we?

We went back inside. The screen had a window displaying "Non-immediate message", Sarah clicked on the button on it, and a recording of a older, stone-faced, half-bald guy I didn't recognize came up. Howard sat down to listen, and I didn't qualify this as 'sitting down in front of the screen'.

"Master Howard, I have good news.", the recording said. Good news? **GOOD** news?

"There's a new one.", Howard muttered, matching my thoughts. I sat down next to him. This must be worth listening to.

"Our general world plan is, so far, operating with negligible drawbacks. We did multiple tests, looking for problems, but the sheeple are happy and obedient. The only real problem seems to be isolated non-government mass shootings, and they are not of threat level." They're either just a fad or a new form of public entertainment. No big deal, really. It would take incredible chance for an Illuminatus to get killed by one, and an engineered.. let's just say that the engineered would teach the guy a thing or two about ultraviolet murder. "Howard, your ah.. 'advanced recursive encompassization' technique is absolutely excellent and we of the Second Level particularly commend you for it." It's not that complicated. Then again, neither is a bicycle, a revolutionary invention in its time.

"Ha! I knew it would work.", Howard said in the traditional Dominator tone. "Well, there's another few calls I won't get."

"And the sheeple fall even farther into the dark pit of despair.", said Sarah, chuckling slightly. "All right, Howard, I imagine you're hungry.", she said, taking off her snowsuit, the one piece of clothing on her body. And yes, of course, we're hungry.

"You guessed it. Turkey with stuffing." Bioengineered turkey. Regular turkeys don't have nearly enough meat. She went to cook it and Howard was judging the accuracy of the older man's statements by looking at Illuminated reports. Yup, he'll be there a while...

"Damn! You win, Paul.", I said.

"What do you mean, Billy?", Howard asked.

"Ah, he said you'd be in front of the screen doing something within five seconds. I guessed sixty, thought you'd eat first."

"Tya ha ha. And I would, only I can wait for the turkey." He checked numerical data. Fewer problems than last year. Fewer problems? The Illuminati gain in strength. More and more expansion. More and more slow, tentacle-like intrusion into the minds of the sheeple. More bold endeavors. And.. **fewer** problems? As an organization grows, its problems do too, what the hell... and no current serious organized opposition, according to the data on the screen. None. "'Tis the everfucking season! Santa came early this year!", Howard said, laughing.

"And once more I am reminded why you use the term 'sheeple'.", I said. Paul just looked down and shook his head. Howard power-laughed and I joined him. Why the hell not? Paul tried to do it too, partially succeeding. Sarah walked in and decided to join the fun. Five seconds of that went on before the maniacal laughter faucet (a shiny, Illuminated-metal sink faucet clearly marked MUAHAHA) turned off.

"Shit. If this keeps up, I'm going to start believing in Santa Claus.", Howard said.

"Yeah, and here comes the Easter Bunny. Howard, I have not felt this displaced from reality since I got here.", I said, chuckling. It was just beyond amazing. With Howard keeping the Levels in line and the normals in complete non-opposition (I'm pretty sure Howard's suggestion of using recursive encompassization had something to do with that), the future is going just the way he wants it. Why wouldn't it? He's Howard, the Dominator! This is his planet; what he wants, he eventually gets!

"Reality is malleable anyway.", Howard told me. "And I've got a pretty big hammer."

"Yeah, just watch where you're pointing it.", Paul replied. Howard grinned at him. He was sharing his joy again, the joy of **having**, powers and abilities and cool stuff and friends who could never betray him. I shared in the joy eagerly. Why not? It's real happiness, the comfort of a true home, the caring touch and kind words of a boy who can do anything, the awesome power of technology, the warmth of a bright Illuminated future without worry or fear.

The turkey, an enormous whopper of a bird that could never fit in a normal oven, was done quickly, being both baked and nuked at the same time, and we munched on it hungrily, gobbling up the meat like hyenas. We gleefully ate until we were bloated and took a nap for a few hours shortly afterwards, then woke up to have some more fun with Howard's viewscreen and effectively infinite supply of games.

Both of us enjoyed Sarah (and she enjoyed it, too) that night.

Three days later, we took a vacation to a human research center in Siberia with nearby mountains. It was cold as hell, but we were bundled in Illuminated fabrics and so felt nothing. We used special snowboards to surf down an avalanche we started with our powerful echoed voices. The snow moved with us, and the snowboards could jump by pressurized air, making for an incredible experience. No two ways about it- it was the best Christmas I've ever had. And we continued to do things like that, playing games and having fun that is utterly out of reach of normals, solving the serious stuff with our usual amount of fact-finding, threats, and Domination. (Yes, **our** Domination- Howard makes it my Domination when he tells me to pretend to be him). Howard will be having fun for the rest of his life, and probably, so will I..

Chapter 55

I woke up, but didn't want to move- I was bored, and didn't see anything better to do. Having lived for about twenty-two months with mind control implants in my head, I generally do just what I want. It's not that counterintuitive; when Howard wants me to do something else, either for the moment or on a permanent basis, he'll tell me. Paul was probably awake, too, but neither of us said anything to each other. His head was resting on my arm, and he was certainly as comfortable as I was.

Sarah walked into our room, closing the door behind her. "You two look content.", she said, getting on top of us. Now I was **really** comfortable. Paul pretended to be asleep, but from his smile we knew he wasn't- one of Sarah's breasts was on his face.

"For the moment, yes.", I replied. "Is Howard going to change that with people to kill or errands for us to run?" My philosophy has become frighteningly close to his- I must do a thing, therefore I shall do it, get it completely and utterly done, make sure there's nothing else I have to do (so I don't get interrupted again), and then go back to doing what I want.

"Nope! He didn't let me kill myself this morning," C'mon Sarah, I don't want to see you die. I'm sure Howard told you you're too valuable to him, but the truth is that I feel the same way. "but he hasn't given any new commands."

"Yeah, that's gotten to me too, Sarah.. he's got infinite power, but he so rarely uses it.", I said.

"Oh, it's like that everywhere, in any of these jobs. If you're to only come when you're needed in a crisis, you're not going to be coming a lot. You're going to be sitting around, or I suppose in your case it's laying around. I know. The duty of a soldier is also his duty: to wait. That Micro is useless without a target."

"You're right. But on a planet with six billion people.."

"Correction, Billy, six billion **sheeple**. They don't fight him, and if they did, we wouldn't be here

talking about it. It's really simple and widely agreed. The more the Dominator has to do anything or even order anything major done, the more instability there is. This organization rejoices at his boredom." That made perfect sense. It is his job to stay in one place, like a cop in a low-crime area. So he's bored- he isn't exactly going to lose vigilance. And he's certainly not going to start nitpicking, looking for things to do, not with this crowd. What he will do is stay at home, lazily waiting, filling his mind and body with whatever he wants, until it's time to strike again. And when he strikes, it sends out a loud, clear message to everyone: 'Why did you make me do that? You know full well what happens when you make me do that...'. Then he goes back to hibernation and no one wakes the bear up for a while again.

"Yeah. But what about you? You had.. what was that?"

"I can't remember how many I've been killing. A couple of hundred."

"What were the old ones, mostly?"

"People who learned too much was the majority, followed by people who wouldn't obey, followed by.. oh, just assorted miscellaneous reasons. So and so had to be dead for this plan to work, so and so would be killed and shown to the media, so and so had to have a heart attack to influence Person B to influence Person C... I'm just going on evidence, I never was told and I don't really care."

"And you spent most of that time waiting."

"Yes, but obviously, not the same kind of waiting. Billy, I had to sit through everything. Just sit. Like I said, a soldier's duty is to wait. And sometimes, I wouldn't get the opportunity at **all**. I wasted hours and hours and hours, just sitting, sometimes standing, but waiting. And could I unleash power and rip the mark to shreds when it was time? Hell no. It was one bullet, one poke, sometimes poison, a couple of times a needle. Poke N' Dead. All that pent-up energy."

"So boredom is generally universal."

"So boredom is not just generally universal, boredom is something **no one** is immune to. He has it, you have it, I have it, Paul has it, Jeremy and Joey have it, even our enemies have it. And with a metabolism like ours.."

"You're reminding me of school!" A thing I'd long forgotten about, almost.

"Sorry. But Billy, there is one eternal cure. You're just going to have to find something to do." Some things never change.

In response, I fondled her breasts for five straight minutes before getting up and spending the day as usual. The buzzer went off, but Howard didn't tell me to do anything in response to it.

Chapter 56

Just another afternoon- the buzzer went off, but since Howard didn't command me to respond, I didn't bother. Paul and I were in the middle of a game, and my opinion hasn't changed one bit- he needs a retrovirus.

"Sarah!! It's time to go kill!", Paul and I heard over the intercom, seconds later.

"Who?"

"The Anarch!", Howard yelled back. Wow, just her? I guess he doesn't need me or himself, though. He's a normal and she's killed much worse by herself.

"You know where he is?" She sounded like she was eager to kill him, probably just for the fun of it.

"He's assaulting Brutus Mando's base right now! I told them to delay him.. get ready and get the fuck over there NOW! The Anarch's a normal and he has lots of them. Don't break secrecy."

"On it." Click.

The Anarch, eh? Well, that ends it for him. Sarah rips throats like she chops cucumbers. If he's as good as we think he is, he'll get to last a whole five seconds before she just opens up on him and he falls in pieces, either through gunfire or the blades o' death. Byebye, Mr. Anarch. Nice not knowing ya...

"Shit, that guy is so much meat unless he gets outta there.", Paul muttered, thinking my exact thoughts.

"He's so much meat anyway. You really think any one man can stand against Howie and his stormtroopers? Wait, screw the stormtroopers.. what about her?"

"Yeah, she'll kick his ass. But it's interesting how that guy knew where to attack."

"He's just a freak, that's all. An aberration. You'd think they would have already killed or recruited him if he had any hope in the first place. But yeah, that is weird. He's so much like an Enforcer it isn't funny."

"Not much weirder than the rest of this."

"Nothing is much weirder than the rest of this."

Several hours later, as Howard was down at the viewscreen playing with me, Sarah came onscreen, in as bad a mood as I've seen her in, ever. The reason was as unexpected as her anger- she didn't manage to kill him, and she told us that she'd simply be writing a report and didn't want to talk about it. Howard turned off the screen, silently, saving her the trouble. He didn't say anything after he turned the screen off.

Woah. She actually didn't succeed for once?! Sarah really didn't kill the son of a bitch? Shit, this guy **is** good. I figured that once Sarah got into weapon range- let alone close-combat range- he'd be Anarch gibs before he knew what hit him. But he actually managed to avoid a few of Sarah's strikes? Damn. Howard wasn't visibly upset- obviously a bit pissed off, but not visibly upset- but I haven't seen Sarah that angry at anything before. She's obviously not used to not actually getting whoever she was assigned to kill- she's always been considered the best killer in the organization. And she is- I doubt there's anyone in the Illuminati, except maybe Howard and me, who can kill as efficiently as she can. The Anarch is going to die a painful and bloody death sooner or later, I know, but where will he strike next? Probably nowhere.. when the Illuminati get paranoid, up goes the security.

Howard, of course, had already researched everything I could find on the Anarch before Sarah called- which wasn't much. No birth records, no fingerprint matches, nothing. It's like he popped out of thin air, which got the both of us thinking about the same thing; nothing needed to be said. Some Illuminatus probably has a hand in this. Howard didn't bother to contact any Illuminati about it- there was no information that could be exchanged. Sarah prepared her report as she flew home, and Howard and I read over it. Even though it was written in a dry, technical style, Sarah's rage shone through. He sacrificed normals and got away. She shot at him a few times, but it was from too far away and he managed to evade (actually dodge?) the bullets. Enough said, really. It's how he evades the search afterwards that I'm really curious about.

And, of course, she was absolutely fucking furious at herself when she got home, punching walls as hard as the implants would let her and uttering profanity continuously. "**I FAILED!!** I fucking **FAILED!!** That Orwellian motherfucker's still out there somewhere, doing who knows what, and I couldn't motherfucking **STOP HIM!!**" Howard didn't bother to look up.

"Sarah, shit happens.", he said without expression. "You know that as well as I do. If it wasn't for secrecy he'd be dead meat."

"Yeah.. I know.. but.. **DAMN IT!!**", she almost screeched, flat-handing the nearest wall with plenty of power. If not for the advanced construction, it would have reverberated throughout the mansion-as it was, it was just a loud slap of flesh on metal.

"Sarah.. it probably ended up being impossible.", I consoled her.

"No- you guys don't get it! I could have **had** him! Damn!"

"This was your first mistake in.. how long?", I asked.

"One and three quarters of a year for serious mistakes.", Howard said. "But until now, her targets have always ended up dead."

"So then.. why?", I asked.

"He.. dodged me. The fucker dodged me. He knew what I was doing, he knew how to move.. and I even think he knew about the secrecy rules! He might not be human.. he might be an Enforcer.", she finally concluded, sighing and plopping down on the couch next to me.

"One hell of an Enforcer.", Howard and I said simultaneously.

"Yeah.. well, if he shows his ugly mug anywhere around here again.."

"If I get the chance, I'll kill him.", Howard said. "He'll show up again."

"Not for a while..", she said, shaking her head. "He managed to escape, but his forces are gone.. he had dozens of normals with him.. a lot of this was in my report. I personally wasted three fourths of his guys."

"Anyone who can control that many normals in that society..", I began.

"Yeah.. we should assume someone's behind this. Can't think why.", Howard said. "There's better ways to go about this. He'd have to be in constant contact with that Enforcer, and if we start checking things, which has already been done as a matter of course..."

"Annoying business, this is.", I noticed. He nodded at me as if to say 'No shit.'

"Yeah.. guess Murphy's at it again.", Sarah yawned and said. "Some asshole thinks he can follow in the footsteps of the guys you waste. Gotta love the stupidity. I'm still so pissed about this. If you wouldn't have remembered to command secrecy I would have probably broken it. I'm going to go sleep this off." Nobody stopped her.

Howard just shook his head as she went upstairs. "If **we** would have went...", he said, slightly morose.

"He'd be dead, yes.", I said. "C'mon, now you're acting like her, like you should have known what would have happened before it did. You can pretend to omniscience, can even approximate it with computers and all that, but **nobody** knows everything. You **know** that. And I doubt anyone will

blame you for something your servant, the best assassin in the world, wasn't able to do. They have the report and they **know** she was seriously going after him."

Howard turned to me and smiled a bit. "You're cheering me up, as usual. Next time that asshole shows up we're going to eat him for lunch. But that made me look bad. Oh well. That's it for him. Let's get my mind off this." And we played.

Chapter 57

The nightmare showed that, no matter what I did to Howard today, I was the real fool here, in a freakish clown costume with a jester's cap on my head, strings on my wrists and ankles, dancing around and being made to perform foolish acts on myself, pie to my own face, weird positions, being pointed at, laughed at, until I just became a smiling, dancing puppet with no mind, my face a painted-on smile on a wooden sphere-

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYYYYYAAAAAAGHHHHH!!!" Paul did his normal wakeup-sleep thing and I quickly fell asleep again.

I woke up and went immediately to the computer- I knew how to finish my plan, and the last word went into place. Was I really done? Yes... everything I could possibly think of was there. I have the time-advantage here; Howard will have seconds to make his decisions, whereas I've got all day. Plan-making is like that. "Well, Paul, I'm done.", I said to him. He looked bored and quietly disdainful, as he's had during the couple of hours over the past few days that I've been making this plan, almost certainly because he didn't think it would work but didn't want to just say that. That attitude was out of assumption and ignorance; I hadn't told him anything about it yet.

I quietly opened Sarah's door- she was doing research of some sort- and I silently beckoned her out and into my room, and shut the soundproof door.

"This is about that April Fool's thing, isn't it.", she asked. I nodded. "He's going to remember, you know. If he doesn't remember it in advance, he's definitely going to know it when you start doing something. Prob-"

"I know. That's what I'm counting on.", I interrupted.

She looked at me curiously, and Paul's interest shot up immensely. "All right, plan man, let's hear it.", Sarah said, smiling a bit.

I gave her and Paul exact, complicated instructions, and lots and lots of if-then statements. If Howard does X, do Y, and if he does A, do B, and above all, don't let him find out what's really going on until it's over. I told them what props I was putting into place, and what measures I was taking to make sure this harmless joke was just that.

Paul was laughing his ass off at the end, and Sarah was cackling lightly, but apprehensively, as if she would love the plan to succeed but didn't really think it would. "This is very well-planned. But it still has a considerable chance of not working, Billy. Especially near the beginning. If he even says not to...", she said, trailing off.

"Do you have any improvements?", I replied.

"No. I don't.", she readily admitted. "I just thought you should know."

"I already do. And I seriously think this is going to work."

"I know what my new favorite video's going to be if it does. Make sure you get a close-up! This is going to be great, Billy- this is going to kick some ass!" Paul shouted, grinning and laughing. "But..

this won't piss him off that badly, will it?"

"He'll be pissed, but he invited me to do it. He's not going to do something to me if I do it well." Paul slowly nodded. Howard's intellectual consistency can be counted on.

"Do you already have the stuff?", Sarah asked.

"Ordered it a few days ago, it'll be delivered tonight." I knew what I'd need before I knew exactly how I'd need it. It was unbelievably easy to get quietly, because the Enforcers I get the stuff from never ask questions. I simply say 'I want this, this, and this dropped by silent helicopter on the lawn at this time' and it's done. There is no delivery confirmation, and Howard is never reminded of the incoming stuff. It just shows up.

"Paul, remember..." He held up his hand to get me to stop talking.

"Billy, I won't give him any hints, and he won't ask me anything." I smiled. He'd read my mind. Sarah quietly left the room.

The day passed by fairly uneventfully, as days here go. It's amazing how differently you can see people, even Howard, when you've got something in store for them that they don't know about. I didn't clue him in at all, of course, and he did his usual daily regimen of games, light physical activity, and a mild disagreement between a first and a fourth level Illuminatus which he pretty much solved with a simple "No!"

I set a computer alarm for the night, but didn't need it; my scream came at 2:23 AM and I had set the alarm for 3:15. It took time to replace what I'd need to at the bottom of the elevator, and a bit more time to set up the cameras. After a bit of figuring, I set them to transmit wirelessly, the data going to the mainframe; these logs are for safekeeping. Hey, nice, there's a wireless port on the downstairs mainframe after all- I could put cameras there, not having to worry about transmitting through yards and yards of rock and metal. The more information the better. But I couldn't put a camera in Howard's room, these cameras can't record for themselves (should have got ones that could, silly me), and he might notice it when he wakes up.

So, after I got some more sleep and set the alarm again, Sarah and I patiently waited outside his room, waiting for him to wake up, like actors waiting for their employer to start a private show, waiting for the curtain to rise.

There was a very slight shuffling of blankets- that was our cue. "Sarah, no!", I said, just quiet enough for Howard to barely hear me.

"Dammit, I don't know how you did it but if you mean to-", she said, seemingly annoyed.

"I mean to kill him, it's just that I don't want him getting you!", I replied. "Look, let's wait until Paul either wakes up or dies, then hopefully all three of us can hit him with the sprayers. No way he can dodge it. And how I did it was simple- he said I could use deceit to play a harmless joke, so I deceived the Enforcers into thinking he ordered us gassed and unimplanted at night." I can't hear him, but I know Howard's listening, probably (and hopefully) in utter terror. "It's harmless, isn't it? I mean, not obeying him doesn't make me hurt him." Remembering our lines is the easy part. The hard part might come if Howard comes bursting out that door to attack Sarah... he won't succeed, not before we can tell him what's really going on (it has to be harmless.), but it'll be stressful nonetheless. Of course, **causing** stress is what this is all about.

"But if it was supposed to be harmless, now-", Sarah started.

"**Now** we're unimplanted, so what difference does it make?", I asked. Sarah laughed in reply. There's no such thing as telepathy. Nevertheless, I could **feel** Howard, scared out of his shit,

listening against the door like Death itself was walking up to him. We walked back into my soundproof room- he must have turned the intercom on by now. "We can bide our time. I had the Enforcers sabotage the guns and the sub. Everything'll explode on him except the Micro, I didn't want to fuck with that thing."

"What, you just **left** it there?"

"Sarah, everything here's made of metal, remember? He'll probably go for the shotguns instead, we'd have a harder time dodging. You've waited before, almost two years for this. You're a profess-

"He's out!", Paul shouted, watching the cameras. "And he's down the elevator. He's got the Micro and.."

"Get a head start, Paul!", I said to him, and he jumped out of the computer chair and headed for the door, opening it and running out. "He's heading.. for the other elevator, like I said!" We rushed, Paul sprinting like crazy to try to keep up, to the outdoor exit of the service elevator, a small, almost invisible thing hidden in a tree grove.

We arrived about a half second before he was there, and we had our spray guns pointed at him. He'd have to go forward to get out; no room to dodge at the sides. He's going to shoot it- yup!

"April Fool!", the Micro shouted in my voice. The look on his face- surprise, disappointment, horror- was worth every bit of trouble it'd been to get it, but we've just started the fun part. Oh fucking **yes**. Just the fact that he believes that **I have him at my mercy** instead of the other way around makes this all so very worth it.

"Any last words, Howard?", I asked him angrily, and I could hear the gears in his mind turning, struggling to find the right words.

"Billy, I'm sorry.. please don't kill me. I can get you anything you want, brother. Anything. And you'll never be controlled again." Even if they were born of desperate hope and the result of my trickery, not to last for more than another few seconds, hearing him say those words brought a unique gladness to my heart.

"Not good enough." I would have said that to anything he said, to finish the joke properly if nothing else. "**GET HIM!**" There really was nowhere to dodge. He tried to crouch, to avoid some of it, and covered up with his arms, but it didn't help. By the time we were done, he was soaked.

And he stood there, utterly stupefied, looking at us like a deer in headlights, wondering why he wasn't dying or hadn't died already.

"Howard, what's today's date?", I asked him, grinning. Realization tore its way across his face and he looked at me with his mouth stark open as he realized exactly what I had done to him, the fake Micro falling from his fingers to the ground. "That was a... the whole thing, just..", he sputtered out, and Paul, Sarah, and I started laughing hysterically. I've seen humorous, I've seen funny, and I've seen hilarious. This was well beyond hilarious. I had him- totally, utterly, **had** him.

"Billy, I'm sorry, please don't kill me..", I mocked. "Oh, the look on your **face**! I never thought I'd see it! That was **so** completely worth it.", I said, laughing again. "And, like you said last year, I'm never going to top that, never. That was fucking incredible. I'm so glad it went all the way. And yes, I **did** catch it on camera." I pointed behind me to the tiny camera in the tree.

"You still have to do everything I say, Billy?", Howard asked, getting angry.

"Unfortunately, yes.", I replied, still smiling.

He raised his finger in the air, as if to get ready to point it at me with finality. Sarah and Paul were probably worried that he'd do something rash, not permanent- he's not stupid- but enough to make me remember it badly. Howard was probably thinking of such things, enraged as he was. "Do you realize what I can make you do?", he asked, completely pissed off. Oh, yes, Howard, I do indeed. I can think of five things just off the top of my head. I have an imagination too.

I smiled, reached over, and gently patted him on his wet, hairy head, the same as he had done to me a year ago. "Yes, Howard, but you won't do any of it. I know you better than that." His anger dwindled to nothing, and a slight smile replaced it instead.

"Billy.. that was amazing. I didn't have any idea you had something like that in store. I didn't even consider that." If he had even considered it, it wouldn't have worked.

"You really should have, Howard.", Sarah said, rubbing it in a bit. "He can use deceit so he can unimplant himself? Seriously, what kind of tortured-ass logic is that? And you know damn well that if I had a hand in it you simply would have never seen it coming." On that she was exactly right. Knowing Howard for what he is, if I was going to kill him, I would never give him even the beginnings of a chance. His room's walls are metal, and I'm not up for self-damage, so I'd use a grenade launcher and cleave him to bits with shrapnel instead of an extra-wide Micro. Or maybe one of the sprayguns filled with acid, yes.

"Sarah, Paul.. did he command you or not?", he asked them.

"Commanded, but not against my will.", Paul answered, grinning. Just like me, there's some things that he doesn't need to be commanded to do.

Sarah agreed. "What he said. And there were a lot of commands- a lot more than what you saw, for a lot of contingencies. **All** the weapons were faked." That had been an annoying pain in the ass, carrying those guns around in the middle of the night.

"I had to. It had to be harmless. The Enforcers are replacing them right now." I'd prepared them, too; Howard gets doused, joke's over, put everything back to normal. "And I had to be sure to stand between you and Sarah, in case you freaked and went after her. Now I have a question for **you**, Howard." And I really, really wanted to know the answer.

"This isn't something you have to worry about me forgiving you for.", he answered. Huh? Oh, that was the question he'd asked me last year.

"No.. that's not it. If by some amazing miracle I really did become unimplanted and lived to tell about it, would you really give me anything I want?"

"Yes." Although I had no way of objectively knowing it, I was absolutely certain that he was telling the truth, and something changed for me. "I'm going to dry off now." He didn't command us to do anything.

When Howard left, Paul looked utterly relieved, as if he'd been barely missed by a truck. "You're right, Billy, he didn't do anything.", he said, as I pulled the camera out of the tree and walked to the one on the lawn. "I thought for sure.."

"Of course he didn't. There's no reason to be scared of him, Paul, and no reason to worry about pissing him off. You already can't do almost anything he doesn't want you to. And since he invited me to do this, he's kicking himself for walking right into a trap he started to set up. Besides, even if he did, that would have been completely worth it anyway. Have you ever **seen** him like that?"

"No. Never. Billy, you completely just.. made him your **fool**."

"I know. I'm not going to rub it in too much, though."

"Because he **will** get pissed.", Paul replied.

The words came out of my mouth naturally, and I had no intention of taking them back. "No, because he's my friend." Paul and Sarah looked a bit shocked, and I smiled a bit, as if to say that no, I haven't gone insane. We walked back into the mansion and I saw Howard rushing out of his room, as if he'd forgotten something important.

"Billy, where was the data going from those?", he asked.

"Wireless, straight to the computer. Once I figured out how, it was the easiest thing to do."

"Just locally, right?" Oh, yes. It would really be embarrassing if other people found out about this, wouldn't it? Howard has a reputation to protect.

"Yeah."

"Good. You can keep it for our records, but I forbid any of you to share it with anyone else." I didn't plan to. "Or even tell anyone about it." I wasn't going to. Howie, this is for me, Sarah, and Paul. This is to remind us that for all your power and intelligence, you can still be made a fool of.

Of course, so can I. "Howard, are you going to play one on me next year?", I asked.

"**No.** This ends here.", he said, decisively. "You remember what we did after I played that joke on you?"

"You let me try to get you back in fighting games."

"Yes. My turn." Paul sat between us as we tried to kick each other's asses for a while, a futile but entertaining task. I thought he was bored early, but instead he led me back down to the arcade, where we tried to do it some more on the stand-up machines. Paul continued to watch us, curiously and unobtrusively, as we played game after game on various machines, consistently trying to get the upper hand on each other and consistently failing.

"Paul..?", Howard asked.

"I'm not annoying you, am I?", Paul asked in return, willing to go away if Howard wanted it.

"Not in the least. I'm just wondering why.", Howard replied.

"Because Billy said you were his friend.", Paul said, and for a split second I was spooked at his saying it, as if he's given something away. Howard slowly turned to look at me, smiling a bit.

"Billy, were you lying or sarcastic when you said that?"

"No." The moment I said it, he threw his arms around me, silently, and looked into my eyes, and I saw my eyes reflecting off his and in that moment I saw the universe as it will be. Master or servant, it doesn't matter anymore. I'll go to the future with you, Howard.

"C'mon. Let's play.", he said, smiling. There was a four-player racing game in the back, and just looking at it I could tell that it was Illuminati-modified. Paul sat to our left, and Sarah was already in the chair to our right (How'd she get there? She's Sarah, that's how), smiling, her complete silence of note for once because I knew she must have heard and seen everything.

The game was incredible, the cars being made for people with twitch reflexes. Perfect traction with no rubber left behind at three hundred miles an hour, tearing around the levels at maximum speed (I don't know about Sarah and Paul, but neither my nor Howard's gas pedals left the floor, and we never touched the brake) without a care in the world, the seats tilting back and vibrating as we zoomed past everything in our way, to a simultaneous finish with an incredible time. And then we did it again (after Paul finally finished), for every track in the game. There was something I wanted to say, but I let it wait. Something unique was happening, and I didn't want to break it.

We hadn't had breakfast; Howard commanded Sarah to cook it and she did, with noticeably more enthusiasm than usual. She knew something important was going on, and she wanted to make it as pleasant as possible.

We snacked for ten minutes, and I thought. Howard had told me about a year and a half ago that just because he completely controlled me didn't mean we couldn't be friends. I had told him I loved him, which I do- he is my twin brother after all- but I still would have killed him on general principle, given the chance. Now I felt that I was on his side- once and for all, no matter what- even if I wasn't being commanded to be.

Sarah finished and we munched on.. I don't even think normals have a word for exactly what we ate. With an incredible supply of ingredients and long experience, Sarah made something very unique indeed, and we ate lots and lots of bite-sized pieces of it. Sweet.. tangy.. cheesy.. and with a faint trace of pepper. Carefully created food, for carefully created people. Paul ate his fill as well, and if he were forty years older he would almost certainly have eschewed it for the risk of heart disease. "This stuff's delicious, Sarah.", Howard said, and she smiled. He has the most refined taste buds in the world.

Then we rushed into the moving ocean on Illuminated jetskis and once more lost our minds in insane speed, gleefully rushing headlong into tall breakers, with no fear of capsizing or getting slammed by the wind-swept water, Paul following us engineered as if he were one himself. These jetskis were probably fusion-powered, and I felt like we could have gone all the way to Hawaii at eighty miles per hour, through driving water and any storm, if not for secrecy. As we blasted through and over the rising waves, a dolphin flew in the air above our heads, and splashed down and disappeared. It might or might not have been engineered, but it certainly knew who we were. Laughing, we continued going around the island, until we got bored after a few hours and went back inside.

We still had lots more time- for hours we played games, ran around the island with Fido (who tried to climb trees with us and failed), had every manner of fun possible. This is going to be better in two hundred years when the whole solar system becomes Howie's playground, but it's great now.

Nobody buzzed for Howard that day. I didn't set that up in advance, either, and when I told him that, he was glad. If everyone knows what they're doing, he's not needed.

Eventually the day ran out of light and we ran out of energy. Tired and smiling, Howard sat up from the couch where we played a game that never even reached the normals. "I'm going to bed.", he said.

I finally was going to say what I had on my mind. "One thing first, Howie.", I said.

"Hm?"

"Unless you actually command me to, if you say the wrong words, I'm not going to kill you." The words hung in the air like fog.

"...You can't delude me.", he replied, disbelieving.

"I'm not trying to. It's true. I'd rip these things out of my head instantly given the chance," I said, pressing the bottom palms of my hands and bringing out the precise nails I'd use to do it with, "but I don't want to kill you anymore."

"If Billy doesn't want to, I won't either.", Sarah said, to my surprise.

"You know I won't.", Paul said.

Howard just smiled for a few seconds. "I still can't take them out, anyway. You'd almost certainly die, and I won't let you die." Of course not. We mean too much to him for that. He turned around and walked up the stairs to his room, and we went to bed as well. It was a very active day- I fell asleep almost immediately after hitting the bed.

That night, for the first time, I was able to fight back against the nightmare. I fought hard, with everything I had, but it didn't work- I lost, with the usual screaming result. The implants were still in my head, after all. Our lives continued as they have so far- we had fun, Howard and I dealt with whining idiots (c'mon guys- if I can reconcile my problems with **Howard**, you can learn to avoid hurting each other's operations), and things went as usual for almost the next month, with me fighting and losing against the nightmare monsters every night.

Chapter 58

BZZZZERT!

'How many morons today?', I wondered as the buzzer woke me up once more. 'Or maybe it's someone going to talk to Howard about the birthday party he'll have tomorrow.'. I put on my clothes and walked downstairs; it was an Enforcer instead, and Howard was at the screen already.

"A normal is approaching the island from the southeast, sending out uncoded messages on normal-band radio requesting permission to land." Two words: Permission denied. "Approaching normal has been identified as The Anarch." ...What the hell?! How would he know where Howard is? Howie's gonna blow this guy to-

"Do not terminate him.", Howard commanded the Enforcer instead, to my and Sarah's complete surprise. "Let him land." And Howard commanded us to get ready and follow him out the door and around to the southeast side of the island to meet the Anarch, with words, firearms, or probably both.

Maybe Howard just wants to find out what's **wrong** with the guy, probably just before the Anarch gets Dominated. There has to be something wrong with this normal for him to do this. Since he was able to gain access to information on Howard's location, he surely could have gotten access to information on Howard's servants, Howard's defenses, and Howard's physical abilities. Maybe he's doing a last-ditch suicide attack. Maybe he's got a balloon for an ego and thinks he can just take Howie out like he did the others. Maybe he's not thinking at all, and has simply decided that he must try to kill Howard, no matter the risk to his person. That would be about right; this guy seems to be amazingly willing to die, almost Enforcer-like in his devotion to his cause. Admirable in one sense, mind-bogglingly **stupid** in another. The last hope for humanity's freedom (Ha! But at least he thinks he is.) should **not** go and get his head blown off by the ass-kicking boy with the big gun..

Of course, had Howard simply wanted to kill him himself, he would have already been dead. One solid, narrow-beam shot from the Micro and it's goodbye, Mr. Anarch. There would not be any blood until his head left the beam.. it would just fry a hole straight through his entire cerebrum and cerebellum, and he'd just fall down dead before he could even grasp the fact that he was being attacked. Or, I could bring out the atomic shotgun and turn him to nothing but gibs. Or the local Enforcers could open up on him with an undodgable stream of death. Or any other death or combination of deaths. He's really walked into the lion's den this time..

I saw his facial expression, without details since Howard was currently using the power binoculars he had brought. This Anarch was stalwart. Tough. Had this been a movie, someone like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone could have been used- only they'd need to grow mustaches. It added to his freakishness and his fearsomeness. The guy, after all, **is** a one-man army.

But he's not fighting an army, he's fighting people who can kill him at the drop of a hat, and that's what gets me the most.

"I guess sheeple are dumb till the end.", muttered Sarah. "Or maybe he thinks he can do something." Like.. what? Boat full of explosives? C4 concealed all over his body? Is this a real suicide mission or does he really think he's Rambo? Pride goeth before the meatgrinder...

"I don't get how he can be this stupid, especially now. He's been uncaught by the **world controllers**- and now he just decides to come over here?! That boat might be loaded with explosives, maybe even a nuke, Howie. Maybe he just plans to take himself out and us too.", I said, puzzled by almost everything about this. Why? What the hell's going on here?

"Well.. that's a risk I'm going to take. I have to ask him why, and I **have** to ask him how he knows...", Howard said determinedly, matching my curiosity. Is it sane? Probably not. This goes against caution- the cautious thing to do would be to keep Howard out of sight until the Anarch was completely devoid of weapons and such. Even if we hit him with the Micro, he might have booby-traps laced to his body.. if his toes stop curling, for instance, a lot of bullets could shoot from concealed, miniature guns on his chest. Hard to do.. but not impossible.. and in the three installations that he attacked, he could have found something that would do the job. But, we all know, if we don't let him see us, then he would probably get in a fight with the local Enforcers and we'd have to kill him.

We walked down to the beach, the sound of splashing waves mixing with the noise of the approaching speedboat. "Stop the boat or you die!", Howard called out, and the speedboat's motor quickly ceased. "Now swim to shore." He immediately obeyed, simply stepping out of the boat and swimming at a rapid pace to the shore.

"Master Howard!", he shouted, in a way that made me think of long-lost parents. "Master Howard.. I thought you were.."

...WHAT the FUCK?! Okay, this is not making sense. This guy's supposed to be the bane of the Illuminati, what the hell is this shit?!

Howard was equally surprised. "Okay, first off, how the **fuck** did you know who I am?!", he exploded, holding the Micro with one hand, trained on the Anarch's head. If this is a trick, Howard's got the reflexes to make it not work..

"I don't know how I know... I just had to find you, Master Howard. I know who you are... I thought you were dead as you were not where I was placed.." PLACED?! That means that this guy's an Enforcer- but he's sentient! But I should know by now to expect the weirdness..

"Who the hell are you?", Howard asked him evenly.

"I am a prototype sentient Enforcer, placement date May 25, 1997. My master is Inheritor Howard." So he is... he doesn't seem to be faking it, either.

"Dominator, now.", Howard replied. "But you are an Enforcer. No one outside would know that.. Unless he got some really sensitive information, which is almost impossible. Either belief- that he's really a sentient Enforcer or he's faking it- is near the edge of the realm of possibility.

"Why did you attack governmental and Illuminated institutions?" Good question, Howie. That's what I'd like to know.

"Because they were attempting to perform the forbidden act of governing me. Only you can do that." I almost laughed out loud. Sarah just shook her head. Of all the insanities in the world.. but he's an Enforcer, he can't piece things out properly like a human can, he wouldn't know.. and he'd see the structure of government from the outside, and attack it, rallying a few normals to suit his purposes.

"How old are you?", Howard asked, no longer quite so wary.

"Three years, six months."

"They managed to do the training in less than eight months on a sentient?!" Exactly what I was thinking. Enforcer education is simply mind-pounding information. Since they do not feel or think, they can absorb it all without any problems. But this guy's a sentient.. but how sentient is he (or is that it? Which pronoun is used for sentient Enforcers?), really?

"That is true, Master Howard."

"All right.. if you really are an Enforcer... pick up the first pebble you see.", Howard commanded him. He reached down and picked up one the size of his pinky finger.

"Now eat it." Gulp. The Enforcer popped it down like a pill, and Paul gasped in surprise.

"Now puke it back up." The Enforcer simply bent over and vomited, the pebble coming along with the contents of his stomach. There's no way a normal could do it like that. He didn't even flinch or exert effort- Enforcers can do things like that with their bodies.

"That settles it..", I said.

"So how did this happen?", I asked. "Where were you placed?"

"Your recording told me that when I woke up, I would be at you, and you would be the only person I would obey from then on. I was then drugged with sleep gas and sent to you." Obviously a fake-voice recording, then, certainly the same thing they use for the rest of the Enforcers on the island. "I woke up in the back of a crashed delivery truck at the bottom of a cliff. I was.. confused. Both people in the front of the truck were dead. I was unhurt due to the restraints. I sought you out but the communication equipment was broken. I heard people coming and secrecy demanded that I leave." And then he'd obtain normal clothing and begin his one-man war in the same sort of secrecy we use. Absolutely amazing.

"Our operatives or normals?", I asked, thinking that he could have run away if he wasn't sure.

"Almost certainly normals." So much for that. Someone didn't monitor a shipment properly. And Howard's expression told it to me plainly: heads are going to fucking **roll**...

"We just have to **assume that** was cleaned up..", Sarah said, shaking her head. Well, no one found out about us and lived to tell everyone about it, anyway. Three years is a long time- secrecy threats would have been noticed by now.

"Speaking of normals.. who knew about you?"

"No one, Howard. They all assumed I was superhuman in some ways. Some believed I was a government project. No one had knowledge." Like a politician, he'd tell them anything to misdirect them.

"Good. All right. Come on in. We've got business to discuss with someone." Howard turned around and didn't worry about being attacked from behind. I followed him.

"There is a thing I must bring to your attention, Howard.", the Anarch brought up, and I knew that this was going to be very, very interesting if nothing else.

"What?", Howard answered.

"You are implanted."

I was about to laugh- that's one of the most surprising jokes I've heard.

What the fuck am I thinking, Enforcers don't tell jokes... but Howard can't possibly be...

"**WHAT?!**", Howard turned around and shouted, bringing his fist-blades an inch or two from the Anarch's face. My voice stuck in my throat, and Sarah muttered "No way... no way." "**YOU'RE LYING!!**", my twin shouted, and I recognized the voice quite well.

"I cannot lie to you. I suppose you must do something in response. What is your course of action?"

"Better question. How did you find that out?", Howard asked. That would be logical- he gets misinformation specifically meant to delude him. Why would they do that? Well, shit, this is the Illuminati- there could be any number of reasons..

"I read it from fifth level Brutus Mando's computer, shortly before circumstances forced me to leave. That is also how I found out your location."

"What else did you find out about Brutus Mando?"

"I found out what he does to be an Illuminatus. I found out where he was from. I found out the full extent of his place in this organization."

"Did you find anything about the group responsible for this?", Howard said, pointing at his forehead.

"No." That's odd. But I suppose one piece of information- assuming it's true- is better than nothing. Then again, if that piece of information happens to be true, we're **all** fucked... but finding a way is easy.

"Oh, we can find the truth of this **real** fast.", I said. "They're not magnetic but we can get something.." A revelation of the obvious hit me. "wait, don't.."

"Wait, don't' is right, Billy.", Sarah said. "You know that if they are capable of that, they are capable of finding out about call-downs. Howard, do you have anything?" Howard, for what is probably the first time in his life, was too confused and terrified to speak clearly.

"I don't.. I don't know.", he said. "Check.. check the closet.. lots of shit in there. Check the basement too, if you don't find something.. By the way.. for the next 72 hours, all of you are forbidden to say anything about turnabout being fair play."

"Didn't cross my mind.", I replied. I was too worried about his masters (that doesn't even feel right to think..) showing up.

Howard started losing it as we reached the mansion. Not his usual temperamental fury- just the reverse. Fear beyond fear. A rogue thought hit me- 'now you know what it feels like, shithead'- but I realized that I'd have long after 72 hours to joke about this. Assuming that we're alive to joke about

it, and assuming that we're in a position to crack jokes... Howard started doing research on something- probably Brutus Mando- as we searched his closet full of high tech goodies. I was able to identify most of it, but I still haven't learned- even after two years- what most of this shit is. Sarah was able to identify it, however.

I heard what sounded like a wounded tiger and I knew that was Howard's version of sobs. He's going to take whoever did this apart if he possibly can. That much, I am sure of. "**FUCKING DAMN SHITTY HELL!!**", he screamed, and I knew exactly where I had heard that before.

"Your command has prohibited me from making an observation plus wisecrack, Howard.", I said casually. The Anarch shook his head and started going downstairs.

"I believe this will do the job.", Sarah said, picking up a device that looked more like a weapon than anything else. The Anarch stopped and returned to look at it.

"What's that?", Howard asked.

"Sonar mapper. Goes from a few hundred meters to a few millimeters. This thing'll do it. First, let's try it on him.", she said, motioning to me. She lifted it up- it was rather bulky- and focused in on my skull. "This might be annoying.", she said, and it was- as she moved it from one side of my head to the other, I heard an extremely high pitched sound and grimaced.

"Definite. No question. The metal shows right up."

"Now.. try it on me." Moment of truth time. I can't wait to hear his expression of relief once he realizes this is all bullshit. But, as he stopped grimacing from the sound and Sarah looked at him in a way that I will never forget, I realized that it was not all bullshit after all.

"Howard.. you realize that no one's ever survived removal."

"I.. don't.. care.", Howard said, shaking angrily. "Take them out of m-"

"Waiiit, Howard.", I immediately interrupted him. "Dumb decision, remember? I gotta warn ya.. Of all the commands he's given me, that has to be the most sensible.

"Although you know why we can't stage organized testing procedures, we can at least find **something**.", Sarah said with a bit of a sigh. She appeared to be slightly scared- but her training is kicking in and she avoids feeling fear. "Murphy's everfucking law."

"No.. Sarah. Murphy's law is.. 'what can go wrong, will go wrong'. This is 'What shouldn't ever possibly go wrong is going wrong along with a whole lot of other things that must be going very, very wrong.'" Wow! I remember sounding **just** like that!

"I suppose, then, you should prepare to die.. because I know you're not going to sit on your hands now. It's all or nothing with you. Always has been." There was something final about the way she said "has been", and Howard noticed it and sneered.

"All right.. now to see just how the implants kill..", Howard said, reaching for the keyboard. "They're not going to monitor this.. at least not right now, because anyone could be looking that up.." I was about to say 'But the server is secure!', before I realized the fact that if **he's** not secure, **nothing** is.

"Don't bother, Howard.", I told him.

"Why not?"

"I already memorized it." And have had nightmares of dying from it.

"So, then.."

"Overload of the nervous system. All of it. Massive electrical flux, with the activity centered in the implants' area. Your brain goes into convulsions. Either the brain kills itself directly, or it tells your heart and lungs to move very, very quickly, burning them out. That might be mitigated by your engineered status.. but the Enforcers.."

"Didn't survive even with their improved bodies. I know."

"So then.. what's the solution?"

"A power drain.", Paul suggested. "Take some of the electricity out of your head. Use drugs or something to slow the convulsions down, or maybe if you let the electricity out of your head somehow.."

"Wouldn't work.", the Anarch told him. "He may survive with that plan. However, the parts of his brain that were attached to that may, depending on his brain's chemicals, and depending on how fast and how much, be destroyed. He'd regenerate it, but.." We all knew the 'but'- the fact that Howard would have to re-learn far too much. "And I would not use chemical inhibitors on him." Drugs and bioengineered metabolisms simply do not mix. Our version of an allergic reaction to any kind of depressant drug is redoubled rage- you'd have to kill us with the stuff for it to work. I've had a sip of cold medicine containing sleep aid before- it made me wide awake instead, and my agent parents threw it away shortly afterwards. I can't believe that this is the first time I realized what had happened then..

"A little at a time, then.", Paul suggested. "I've seen the videos of guys dying. It takes them a few seconds.." Not possible. It would take a medical facility to remove them 'a little at a time'. Paul's expression showed that he realized that, and he shut up.

"You guys realize that we're not going to get this done anyway, if Murphy's Law holds out.", Sarah said.

"Why not, Sarah?", Howard asked immediately in a commanding voice.

"Because they've already had this discussion. They're capable of putting two and two together, guys. You did not keep the fact that you let the Anarch on your island a secret, Howard. They probably already know that by now, although I doubt they've been listening to our conversation- if they did, we wouldn't be here talking about it. But they've already gone over this. They know what you'll have to order. They know that the Anarch attacked one of their men and gleaned important information. They're probably considering right now whether to strike or not."

"Fuck.....", Howard said, the word becoming a sigh. "So.."

"I have an idea.", the Anarch said. Good thing about sentient Enforcers, that.

"Spill it.", I told him.

"They probably have a catalog of devices needed for such an endeavor as your master plans to do. If they are monitoring- which we must assume- then their catalog probably only has such devices as were created when your master was implanted, which would probably be at birth. If they have not updated.."

"Forget it.", Sarah said. "One, they probably do update any automatic system, and two, **I ASSURE YOU** that they're monitoring your communications **LIVE** right now. They wouldn't even have to crack **your** system- just the places where things are ordered from. Because I'd be using the

encryption keys for those places, which these people would know."

"Okay.. so we can't order anything.. guess we'll just have to do it bare, then..", Howard said, ready to die.

"No, we won't.", Paul said. I'm impressed- he's the one giving ideas for once.

"Eh?", Howard asked.

"You see, Howard, you're forgetting your own manipulation teachings. You forget how cowardly people are. The people on you are probably very afraid to do whatever they have in store. After all, if you've got your ears plugged and your eyes closed in the basement," I totally forgot about that whole idea a long time ago. "they still have to fight Billy and Sarah. If you give them a reason to question your motives.."

I got it quickly. "You're going to say you're unimplanting the **Anarch**, aren't you?"

"Bingo! We have a winner.", Paul said, grinning.

Sarah just sighed. "I can't even think of the comparative risks. There's no way to compare the unknown with the unknown. So if we're going to use something, what?"

"Yes, I admit it, I did my homework here, too.", I said. "We don't know how the fluctuations will work with you, but if we have some device balancing them out over a period of time... let's see.. damn, I don't remember it all." I decided to look things up- we could fit that in with our 'unimplanting the Anarch' lie.

"Any device balancing out the impulses from the brain would have to react to the previously unknown data.", the Anarch said, his neutral tone unwavering in the slightest. "Furthermore, as it says here, the impulses are random inside the afflicted's head, centering on the implants but occurring at all points. Attaching anything to the front of his brain would do little, and we would separate very many neurons if we inserted any probing devices." This thing wouldn't do that, however- it would sit on the surface, as little as that would accomplish. "It is also unable to predict the fluctuations very well. And this is.. the only such device." Howard rolled his eyes and shook his head. And that's really the only one in existence, built as a prototype because there was no demand for more.. but it can have multiple connections..

"It's this or nothing.. by the way, aren't these transmitting?", Howard asked, gesturing to his forehead and the hated implants.

"No.", Sarah said. "Almost certainly not.", the Anarch said at the same time. "They would destroy their secrecy.", he continued.

"So how many connections are you going to order?", I asked him.

"How many do you expect me to order?", he asked me calmly. "Four? Five?"

He knew the answer to that.

Chapter 59

"Well?", I asked him, wanting to get this over with- one thing's for certain about him, his decisions are seldom influenced by sitting on them with no new information.

He thought about it actively, and I could see the expression on his face move around. Damn, he's not just toying, he really is thinking about it. Shit. This has got to be the last thing I'd expect... I don't

want to kill him, really. He's been kind... and it's not like it's really his fault. Maybe that line of thought will change when I finally **can** do it, sour grapes and all that, but there's no way of knowing.. even for me. After the initial shock for both of us wears off (assuming we survive the implant withdrawal), it'll be just like now.. only I can tell him to fuck off and die when he tells me to do something.

I could almost feel the scales in his head (and see Sarah, strangely enough, dressed as the Justice holding them) turning this way and that- having us unimplanted holds certain combat- and 'I've got friends'-related advantages, and huge 'Oh shit, they're not my servants anymore' disadvantages. And he's not going to let the emotions get in the way, except as a place on the scale, a value to be counted in.

And as he came to his conclusion, it seemed to dawn on him that there was an inevitable decision, and he knew what it was.

"Oh, hell yes."

"**YES!**", I screamed in pure joy. The Anarch obediently called down the materials, as the four of us shared a group hug that galvanized me in a way I've never felt before. Finally. Fucking finally. Thank you so much, Howard.

"I have a suggestion, Howard.", the Anarch said evenly as he took note of the usage procedures.

"What?", he replied from our embrace.

"Include me in the unimplantation. I.. cannot explain why properly." Howard looked startled for a moment and then considered it.

"All right. There is one other I'd like to bring. Fido." That didn't occur to me. "And guys.. especially you, Paul.."

"What- you think I'll croak? So what if I do?", Paul replied off-handedly.

"Dammit, this isn't one of our usual fights.", I told him, as we slowly broke off our hug. "No one's survived this. No one. Even with the precautions.. fuck, I wish we could **test** this!" But I guess I only get one wish granted in years.. a chance. And chance it is.. luck and our will to live.. hopefully the latter will outweigh the former.

Howard just smiled a bit. "Pfft. You're telling me. For me.. there isn't a choice, it's either this or the painfully inevitable. But if you guys.." He smiled wider, anticipating our reactions.

Of course we gave them to him, and they were nearly simultaneous. "Like hell!", I exploded. "Fuck you!", Sarah spat out. "Kiss my ass!", Paul shouted.

He nodded, still smiling very wide. "...That's what I thought." His sense of humor never ceases to amaze me. Then again, I'll be in a position to play the jokes in not too long.. given that I survive, of course.

"So, this is it, Howard. No more commands, no more doing what I don't tell my body to do. It's going to be all gone, like a bad dream.", I said, and a horrible thought entered my mind. I imagined, for a brief moment, that he wouldn't let us use the other connections after all, say 'Just kidding!' and unimplant himself, smiling. Or, worse yet, this isn't even the Anarch, and this is just Howard with an extremely well-thought-out joke, making us think that we'd finally be free when we wouldn't.

Neither of those were true, of course. "Yes, Billy. No more commands. All of them are gone, right now." He means.. "You heard me. I don't know if set commands can affect implant withdrawal or not. All three of you can do whatever you want." I heard a subconscious scream in my mind, as if a

demon had a holy sword plunged into it, and I felt simple, unrestrained happiness. I felt Sarah looking at me, as if to say 'Well, are you going to take your revenge when he finally takes them out?' There seemed to be no revenge to take, and even if there was, I wouldn't want it.

"Thank you... Master.", I said to him, smiling as I've never smiled before. It was one of the first commands he ever gave me, never to call him that.

"Yes, Howard.. thank you. Thank you so much. You're the best friend anyone could ever want, both of you are." Paul said, a large smile on his face. Aww, thanks. "I guess I'll just deal with the pain. He didn't order any anaesthesia for me.."

"It's not safe.", the Anarch told him. "Although the symptoms are similar, this is not a traditional epileptic attack. Further brain modification is not recommended."

"It's going to hurt like crazy, but we all need to be conscious for this. There's the knockout gas for us, too, but we're not getting any of that either.", I said. We have to be awake for this.

"There exists a sedative for bioengineered humans?", the Anarch asked, as if one should never have been developed.

"Huh? You didn't know? I wasn't brought here kicking and screaming.", I told him. "I know it's a complicated chemical, any good filter will catch it, and it doesn't do jack to normals."

"Why would such an item exist?", the Anarch asked. "Your bleeding is too rapidly regenerated for that to be effective. Similarly, any anaesthetic will impede your regeneration. Other than the circumstance of engineered servants, there appears to be no use for such a chemical.", he said, clinically.

"The.. previous Dominator told me it was in case of incredible pain.", Howard said, uncertainly, as if he was thinking of it being developed for use against him. "They didn't give any of it to me with that arm, though." Which was unrelenting agony, the only logical time to use something like that for medical purposes. "Shit, that is weird. It's almost impossible to use as a weapon, though." But easy to hide in, say, wall vents.. He didn't want to think about it, and I realized, morbidly, that they didn't need to use it- he's already got implants in his head...

"So we're going through this with nothing but what amounts to a crude dampener.", Sarah said. "Nothing to stop the pain. Good. For once in my life, I can't wait." Coming from her, that was an amazing thing to say. Unfortunately, we did wait, we had to. Howard was visibly nervous, eager to get those cursed things out of his head, and find whoever put them in and kill them. I understand, Howie. Completely. I didn't want to say anything, because it might possibly change his mind- a silly concept, I know. Like the Operator's choice more than twelve years ago, it was an easy decision, without much hesitation at all, and he's not going to change his mind about it. He's giving us a chance to end the nightmare or die trying. He wants us.. well, not free, nobody is, we still have secrecy after all.. but unimplanted. Maybe it's really for his own benefit, because he thinks we might get taken over somehow (a distinct possibility). Maybe I'll never ask him why. Frankly, I don't care. I changed clothes from black to my copy of his white suit. Implanted but uncommanded, looking exactly as he does.. now, once and for all, I'm really his twin.

The unimplantation device came from heaven like a gift from Santa Claus, and in moments Sarah had brought it back. We laid in a circle on Howard's bed, heads near each other, eagerly waiting. For a moment I imagined saying, 'Wait, Howard- whoever controls you obviously needs you, and almost certainly won't do anything to hurt you. Nobody has ever survived implant withdrawal, no matter what. Let's stay the fuck alive.' Then I laughed at myself inside, because there is no chance in hell I'd ever say anything like that. It's time to end the nightmares.

"Enough connections for everyone...", Sarah said. "All right. I'll do it, guys. Everyone at once.

Anarch, can you do yourself?", she asked.

"Yes." Here we go.

"Then do me and then you after I do them.", she said, and went for Paul first, placing the connectors expertly on his cranium and activating them. The implant remover blades sliced open two neat circles on his skull, and flipped them open like a door. Paul held very still, and didn't react to the pain. Then it grabbed the implants, both simultaneously, and they went with an audible pop. Paul's face went blank, and the connector snapped onto his head. Sarah then immediately rushed to me and Howard, and placed the connectors on us, and I held very still as the guided blade cut into my head, knowing that it was carefully designed not to damage its subject's brain. It didn't hurt nearly as much as I expected; the blade was consistently thin. I felt it popping up my skull as it had Paul's, and it popped out the implants, and there was nothing but--

Chapter 60

THUD

..

thud thud

no..

NO!!! I WILL NOT DIE TO THIS

NO! Absolutely fucking NOT, DAMN IT!! **I AM THE DOMINATOR!** I DO NOT DIE TO

no..

Ow.

Where the hell am I? I surveyed the area, and found .. no. Can't be. My island... no, this isn't real. Reality does not shift and turn in real life. There, the water and the land stay where they are, and the trees don't blur together like a strange version of an oil painting.

Then a thud next to us. Us?! US? What the hell?

It's Billy, I said and knew. It's Billy, and I'm here to help fight whatever it is that's been killing the experiments this happened to, Howie. My identical, naked figure appeared in a flash of lightning (damn mind, always going for the dramatic) about three feet away from Howard to my left. Wait.. that didn't make sense at all.. then we realized it. This is telepathy at its purest. Our consciousnesses aren't separate anymore, at least not for now.

And I'm here, too, Howard. Sarah. She flashed into existence to our left with a dark wave coming from behind her.

Paul. Paul.. Paul is here too, behind our dual forms, impossibly holding us both tightly from behind, anchoring himself, preventing the thuds from getting to him and taking him away from us.. so that's what it's doing. The tubing isn't just acting as a capacitor, it's connecting our minds. We probably really could make computers based on this.. an unexpected side effect, but maybe a good one. Maybe the one that can save our lives.

Good thing none of us will regenerate this out. The Anarch's form appeared, again stark naked, in

front of me with a vacuum sound and an audible pop.

What is that??? THUD THUD THUD THUD

I can hear it, but what the hell is it? I heard it when I arrived.. an elephant? What the.. As we - I - thought of a large animal, immediately a huge whale, baleen wide open in an obscene way, came roaring out of the land-water, facing us, coming to eat.. then I- my form - backhanded it somehow, an enormous blade slicing it in two. Great gobs of blood flowed everywhere.

That wasn't it. The thudding is something else. But these... these are dream monsters...

"NO!!!!!!", Sarah screamed, and I knew what was coming to get me, I knew the fear all along. Enforcers, and they're coming to put them in and they're coming in groups of five and they've got the soundproof thing and they're going to give me over to him and they are me and they're going to .. no, NOT THAT, NOT AGAIN!! I grew that back, thanks to Howie!

Am I younger again.. no, I'm bigger than that! These guys are ten feet tall!!

The melee lasted fifteen seconds. Super Enforcers with red eyes lunged out of the darkness, and the five of us summoned our power and cut them down like grass. There are no physical rules here. They just died, their heads exploding with a thought. Nothing can hurt us .. no.. except..
thud

thud

NO! What the hell is that and why does it keep interrupting?! Even our worst fears.. we know this isn't real and we know we're connected, so it's got to be something else.. then I saw the gateway to it.

The metal house, twisted and bent, grinning like an open mouth with its hungry jaws, come in Billy, you'll never come out, you'll be the servant forever and you'll never, ever get to say goodbye, because you're immortal and everything you've never wanted to happen to you will just come back again because of the control, you'll never have anything yours again... not even

your soul

So that's what it wants. Well, come on fucker. I've got a soul for ya, the sole of my steel-toed boot right in your face.

But it wasn't going to come on. I had to come to it.

.. no.. here's an incarnation, a fear for ya, the .. no.. the hell? What the hell is that hissing, and where did the thuds go?

Damn it Anarch, ya didn't bring Fido! The other dogs sure, leave em or give em away, they'll be dead in five years or so, the pups were never implanted, but Fido... the Anarch winked out of existence. My god, he has guts, why the hell did he do it, he didn't have to. It'll kill him if he's alone!!! But he was already gone.

Speaking of alone..

No!!! Where are we? We weren't .. no, I'm not alone here, NO SEPARATION!! If we die, we do it as one, in the comfort of my brother's, my girlfriend's, and my best friend's arms!!

The snake, in the darkness.

No arms or legs, fucker, and you want to deal with ME? Paul- it was him initiating it, but we all felt it - summoned up some other kind of power, a power obvious, a power that I should be using more in this dream. The power of creativity, and of linking parts in the brain. The power of hacking reality, so to speak. The power of a level 99 character in the game of life.

Us, at level 99. Assuming you even know what an RPG is, you figure it out.

The snake came at us with jaws of death and a black hole for a throat. I just stopped it. It tried to go forward, and the force just came out of us like a blaster. The snake took a googol damage or so, the number somehow falling off its body, and it went nova. There wasn't any blood. It was just gone.

Then the scene returned to where we were. In front of the house, making no headway, running as fast as we can to stay where we are like a very stoned Alice somewhere in the far reaches of Wonderland. I avoided thinking about it because Howie will never finish this. Me? Yes, you. You got us into this mess. Now we're here to help you get everyone out. After this, your power is gone...

No, my power is still going to be supreme and you guys are going to be an aberration. I don't give up, remember?

thud

Then every last normal human being on the planet will have to deal with this.

So what? Fuck them. They're going to die off anyway.

Thud thud. Thud thud thud thud, thud! Thud thud. Thud thud thud thud thud

NO. I said no and I meant THUD

No more thuds asshole, where the fuck are you??

The house, grinning widely, razor-sharp teeth, being blown out by Paul's assault cannon. BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM. You got your thuds, well, here's my BLAMs. The house continued to grin with broken teeth and we walked between the giant lips, defying physics and logic, into my ordinary living room.

Only my ordinary living room doesn't have that.

I saw something slinking back into the darkness, what darkness, and there's nowhere for it to slink to

Twenty skeletons and three blobs of slime attacked.

I used all my years of martial-arts training to break its neck, doing what the Enforcers trained me for, to kill, I couldn't even snap its arm, or anything else, NO IT CAN'T HAVE THAT IT'S MADE OF BONE IT'S NOT GOING TO VIOLATE ME.. that is just sick..

Crushed like an ant. I stared at it and it just dissolved. In fact, if I so choose, everything in this room is nothing. Which one am I now? I can't even tell. Howard is usually the one doing this shit, but any of us could, even the one with the nice breasts who failed that last attack. The slime just disappeared into water with a 7 pH. The skeletons were gone. I struggled to hold my own form because I didn't have it... I was.. no, I'm me again and not some caricature.. no, I'm not going to turn into a..

stamp! cardboard cutout! piece of paper, that's it, just something to look at, you can't even move

unless someone picks you up and moves you around, can't even stretch your legs unless someone folds you!

NO!!!

BLAST!! Hyper.. power..BLAST!! Shoom! The effect was gone, but what the hell was initiating it? Something else is here. The implants are gone.. what is their remaining effect? What lingers..

Where do I go next? The torture chamber, still here ain't it, I'd never send any of them here no matter what they did! We are your friends, Howie.. even though.. well, we're not under any control anymore, now are we?

you're not under any control anymore, not even your own, child.

WHO THE HELL??

The dog!! THE DOG!! No! A giant, twenty foot dog, it would never fit in real life but here in the dream.. no.. if only..

The cue happened. Fido warped in, fantastically smaller against the enemy dog's towering bulk. He loyally ripped out the fiend's throat in one blazing stroke of teeth. It bled, died, and vanished.

that won't help here

hahah

chains, howard, chains, for you and for billy and for sarah and for paul and for fido and even for that fool who calls himself the anarch

chains

The torture chamber, and it looks even more medieval here than it does in the real world, sure it's great to say "I have a torture chamber in **my** house!" but you live with it as an item..

The chains clamped themselves around our wrists and ankles.. then heat was applied... to both us and it.. no... burn these things, MELT THEM DOWN... no they won't be sealed.. no damn it, I AM MORE POWERFUL!!

Boom. Gone. Brick exploded. The skeleton hanging from one of the chain sets was blown to pieces. The rack was gone into burning wood. The chains that attempted to hold us weren't here anymore.

GOT ANY MORE, MOTHER FUCKER?! I opened up the reservoir of power and it's even bigger here than it is in the real world. Come on you asshole, I've faced you seven hundred and twenty-nine times before, every night you come for me and every night I escape to my usual hell. Well now I'm prepared and now I've brought friends and now the implants are GONE!

The enemy attacked in my room.

Spirits with machineguns. Faceless nothings with giant hell-blasters that would make Rambo shit his pants.

Easy as pie, piece of cake. The bullets and the rockets and the blasts just bounced off. Fido ignored them entirely and just destroyed the things one by one with searing, blazing teeth.

I opened up on them with movement and force. They died. There were no details, just fuzzy illusions of vanishing phantasms. Then I realized that the room we're in is an amalgamation of all of ours.

Where the hell is the Anarch, anyway? Ah, fuck him. Maybe he already died because he couldn't take it. We can, though...

COME ON BEAST!! I'm through fucking with you! NO MORE! THIS ENDS HERE!

We teleported to the living room, or was it the bottom floor? The walls were fuzzy. We're waking up, I realized. It's getting more lucid by the minute.

you wanna wake up howie? fight me like all your enforcers did and fail.. you'll wake up dead

So now I know why the implants kill... This thing is either summoned up or created by their presence in the human brain, and when they're removed... Canine too, for that matter. Fido is sensing the same things we are.

The beast came in front of us from nothing, a giant multi-tentacled mass of putrid, stinking nausea, looking at us hatefully from one malformed, huge eye. If I could draw a symbol of evil, this would be it; a pure, unadulterated disgusting abomination from some black abyss, a blob with no sense to it, no organs, a thing that would be useless in terms of natural ability to survive unassisted. A thing not of this earth. So there is evil beyond that which is created by us to further our own goals. And it comes in microchip form. Why the hell didn't anyone tell me about this? Because no one survived to do so..

hahah of course not. no one can stop us.. well rip your people apart like a *image of some enormous fanged creature resembling a giant wolf* through *image of something much like sheep, but not quite* so you cant stop us

Don't think so, fucker? I'm going to blow you into Kibbles and Gibs. Excruciabis oculo a paupera contorta excusa corpore, et cotesta calpestabis sine clementia a neminem sopravvivere sic pasta sanguinia!

bring it on

BRING IT ON!!

All four of us humans flashed out katana-sized blades from our fists. Fido's face became longer, and his teeth grotesquely long and sharp. The beast grew even more tentacles, each one punctuated with a different implement of killing.

We began the dance of death.

Tentacles and weapon fire launched at us from all sides. I moved out of the way into nothing-space, ducking and flying through the air at the same time. The blades cut through tentacle after tentacle, trying for the eye.. but never reaching. It was a five on one, but the thing just kept getting new tentacles from somewhere... A Micro blast came just above my left shoulder. Of course! Simultaneously, all four of us brought out our power weapons, and Fido somehow generated machineguns from his flanks. I set the Micro to wide-beam and we blasted.. and blasted.. and nothing. Tentacles died and vanished, only to be replaced. We were continually dodging a heavy hail of blades, bullets, and blasts. I felt something in my mind being used up, slowly but surely.

that's your power howard ha ha ha

I doubled it, and ourselves, and I continued to pound with blades, blades, blades. Teeth, cannons, missiles, everything was pouring from our bodies, death as sweat. Tentacles blocked the eye, dying like crazy but not decreasing the mass of the thing. We redoubled again, attacking like crazy, flashing from point to point faster than light, blazing here and there and everywhere, not even sure

how many of us there are, just cutting up tentacle after tentacle, dodging a halberd here, a shotgun there, dodging because our lives really did depend on it, NO I WON'T LOSE THIS!!!

Here, there, everywhere, THUD

THUD
THUD
NO!!!

Not that cheesy-ass mental attack again, dumb fucker!! EAT THIS!! Imaginary, impossible weapons launched themselves at the thing, blasting and blasting this way and that, annihilating tentacles again and again and again. And yet it continued to fire weapons at us like ammo was not a problem.

We increased our power again. It's all or nothing time; no way we're going to win the endurance war with this thing. I felt everything split apart and reform.. how many people are we now? One? A thousand? And how many do we need to be to kill these tentacles to get to the body of this.. there's just.. no... NO!!! I WILL WIN DAMN IT!! Not going to die to some ugly-ass excuse for a monster straight out of some video game designer's garbage can...

Then it happened as it was bound to. In the real world, it is impossible for any two things to be in the same place at the same time. This isn't the real world. With the continued teleportation and vanishing, Billy and Howard occupied the exact same place at once, making the dream's usual molding of souls seem like a parlor trick.

Billy.. I.. I didn't.. know that this thing was.. your.. tormentor.

I know, Howard. It's not your fault. Let's end this. Together.

All right, then. Together.

In the real world, humans only have two arms. We opened up with more arms than the thing had tentacles, blasting through them again and again and again, and began to get into the flesh of the beast. It emitted a horrible scream composed somehow of thuds, but it wasn't important anymore. The beast's death was important. The various-colored ichor its sluglike body is pouring at us, that's important. The blades grew longer, to No-dachi size, and cleaved the beast's eye in half. It went white... and so did.. everything else.. that was one **seriously** fucked up nightmare..

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhHHHHHHH..

Chapter 61

Ugh.. ow.. head is pounding.. heart is pounding more.. what is that, two hundred beats a minute, three hundred, more? And what's that weird sound I hear.. sounds like firecrackers. I pressed the button and the cables disconnected with an unnerving pop (Hey, I reminded myself, this is super technology, if it wants to pop without hurting my brain, it can.) and the automatic bandage system put my bone and skin back where it belongs. Hey.. what the hell is that firecracker sound anyway.. oh, I recognize that, that's..

Shooting? Here? What the fuck... my first unimplanted moment in two years and all the joy of it has to be sucked out by yet another fight. But who the hell could possibly be fighting here... "Fuck a duck..", Sarah muttered groggily. "That can't be.."

"It is!!", the Anarch called back. "Go and get your weapons! I can hold these guys off a little while longer.." I heard Fido whine as Sarah disconnected the wires and put the bandage on his furry head.

"Who the fuck is shooting at you?! And how the fuck did you survive the implants?", I shouted. Great. Just.. great. Murphy's Law, I guess.

"Enforcers are shooting at me!! And I didn't, I just evaded it for a while. That thing will be back for me when I go to sleep. Now get em.. I can't kill em all!!" Howard was yelling for us to come on, I almost didn't- until I realized internally what had changed. Great.. I have to have problems like this now. And it turns out that the Enforcers weren't implanted for Howie after all. Just.. great. How the hell are we going to get out of this? We ducked past the railing- the Enforcers spotted us and just opened fire.

"WAIT!! We can't take the elevator!", Sarah screamed, as we ducked into the guest bathroom. The Anarch was forced to go partially in there with us, firing at the Enforcers, killing a couple, trying to drive them back. "I assure you, it's trapped!" Why does this figure.. we can try to take the Enforcers hand-to-hand now.. no. Not with that many, not with that many bullets. Either we get some ranged weapons or we try to fight one at a time with the rest shooting at us, and willing to blast through their comrade to do it. And I'm so fucking tired..

"Shit..", he muttered. "All right.. I don't think so. So I'll go. Here!" The Anarch flew down the elevator, throwing the gun and some ammo to Sarah, who attacked Enforcer after Enforcer, the specialized bullets (when'd he get those?) blasting through their armor. How many of these guys are there? She's killing them... but the rate is increasing and they're going to overwhelm her and take us right out.. these are damn good Enforcers too.. oh crap!

"Great! Just what I always wanted..", Paul screamed, panicked but not without his wits. "First we fight off that thing and now this? I feel like I'm in some bad RPG." I realized that he was **really going to die**, and then I realized that **we were really going to die**, and then I realized, on a personal level, that **I WAS REALLY GOING TO DIE** on account of overwhelming firepower.

I think I snapped just then. I started screaming my fucking head off, using complete echo. My only consolation was that Howard was doing the exact same thing. We're going to die.. like rats in a fucking trap. Fuck. A minute of freedom... for too high a price. Sarah continued fighting but she kept dodging back into the bathroom, again and again...

The Anarch returned much sooner than I expected, which was never. Not a trap? Take the luck as it comes.. the Anarch threw a double handful of weapons in our direction and Sarah unloaded a burst of cover fire, making one Enforcer dodge clear off the railing, and threw the gun back to our only Enforcer. I realized I was still screaming and I ceased, again at the same time Howard did.

"Maybe... just maybe.", I found myself saying.

Howard grabbed the Micro as soon as he saw it, I took the atomic shotgun and its attached case of ammo (heavy.. but I don't give a fuck), Sarah got some strange mini-missile launchers that attached to her arms and back, and Paul got the big gun. Really big gun. How the hell can he even lift that thing? Adrenaline, lots of it.. and it looks like it fires in a spread. With that thought, I thanked whatever Supernatural Entity In Charge Of Lucky Breaks there is that the Enforcers weren't using shotguns. We can dodge a few, maybe, but not repeated spread-shots from multiple foes..

And then we screamed again, this time not of fear. Not even of rage. Just.. power. Absolute power. Power I didn't know I had. Power that made me feel for a very brief moment like I could kill them all at once just by thinking about it. Power that might- just might- win this one.

Sarah rushed out the door, followed by Howard, followed by me. They saw him before me, they aimed at him first, he danced around bullets like a monkey on Jolt Cola. I didn't have to look at him to know that. I was just looking at my targets, and the bullets headed for me. This one? *BLAM!* Okay, next one? *BLAM!* Naturally, the noise was deafening, but I didn't really notice it. I did,

however, notice Howard's working knowledge of microwaves reflecting off metal; he wasn't going to let the narrow beam he was using come back to him at any strength. There were more enemies. There was one- *BLAM!* with a bloody gap between its shoulders and the top half of its skull flying into the nearest ceiling, bouncing off it and the wall, leaving red smears behind. There was one that got neatly cut in half, the wound only partially cauterized by the searing blast of the Micro as the top half continued firing for a bit. There went one, flying through the air, blast marks up and down its tattered body. There were several of them blown/shot/blasted to tiny gibs. And there was one that I killed, by putting a blast straight through its chest- you could see right through it as in a Tom & Jerry cartoon, just before it fell over dead. And, on top of it all, I managed to hear the Anarch singing Sad but True over our combined screaming.

More Enforcers came. More Enforcers **went**. I realized that I hadn't done much dodging myself- just a few, here and there, between the cannon-like BOOMS of the ridiculously overpowered shotgun. What a fucking mess, in every sense of the word. We have no idea who the fuck the wise guy is who took the Enforcers and commanded them to shoot us upon unimplantation, making it a strategical mess. We are so ridiculously outnumbered that it isn't funny (WHERE are these guys COMING FROM?!), making it a tactical mess. And there are Enforcer guts strewn up and down the smoldering, bullet-torn remains of the once-luxurious living room, making it a bloody mess. And we're still screaming, which just seems to add to the general mess. Good old-fashioned havoc, I thought to myself, as I subconsciously continued to take aim and fire at the dwindling supply of enemies. Eat this, assholes. Ten years acting like a normal, two years- **TWO WHOLE YEARS!!**- as his servant- and now you expect me to just keel over and die after those things were finally removed? My pure hatred and this atomic shotgun say otherwise to your substandard minions. And then when I'm through with **them**, I'm coming for **you**.

I heard an enormous blast on the roof and realized that someone obviously had thought of a Plan B. Shards of metal hung off the gaping hole, others were blasted partially inside the floor. It didn't break into tiny shrapnel- if it did, we'd be shredded meat. Howard used his Micro to cook the next incoming missile (and two more beside it), and I noticed the reflection again. We've got to get out of here. More missiles like that and this whole place is going down- as I thought that, more missiles did indeed come, but Paul managed to get them and was luckily out of the way of a small spatter of shrapnel, which Sarah leapt away from. Paul has gotten luckiest of all- but then again, no one's been aiming for him. The Enforcers could have probably been able to kill him.. but they were obviously ordered for us. Howard the target in all likelihood, me the corollary because they can't tell us apart.

I calmly noticed, looking to the left, that Fido had gotten a kill, his jaws caked with Enforcer blood. There weren't many left- Howard and Sarah jumped down from the railing, as I popped off another couple of good, deadly shots. He's got those (kick, rip, beat), she's got that one (**RIP** goes the skull).. so I decided to exact revenge in like fashion.

"I've always wanted to do this.", I growled. I vaulted over the railing, forced myself downwards for more speed, and rushed the last three of them- no, make that two, the shotgun's got that one (amazing what kind of kick this thing gives in mid-air)- and I pressed my palms against the wrists of the suit, summoning the seldom-used nails, and tearing out both their throats in extremely rapid succession (I have never seen an Enforcer **not** react before) before putting the nails back in their place, and finally ceasing to scream- again simultaneously with Howard. And then I looked around and **realized**.

This is unbelievable. Unbe-fucking-lievable. They had numbers galore. They had good, high-velocity weapons. They had reinforcements. They were the best Enforcers there are. They even had **missiles**, for fuck's sake. All logic dictated that we were definitely going to die, and all logic continues to dictate so, even though it's not going to happen- we tore through them like wet tissue paper, the only thing that stopped us from doing it faster was the logical restrictions of our weaponry...

What the fuck are we now?

Chapter 62

As we rushed outside, I heard a separate rattle of gunfire to the right and the left- from the grass and the forest. "I don't know who the **fuck's** commanding you, but you will **not** harm The Dominator!!", a man's voice screamed, as the tattered, bullet-destroyed body of an Enforcer was seen hurtling past the window, falling on the grass and drenching the soil with its blood. The remaining Enforcers - of which there were very few- died to the new arrivals, a hail of bullets turning them into nothing more than ground meat.

Who are these guys?

Then I remembered- Howie's Upgrade Squad, the ones that train on this island and practice advanced forms of Ninjutsu. We stepped out of the wreckage that once had been the metal mansion (the important stuff's A-OK though.. which will be a comfort if we can ever get back here when it's not a warzone. Then again, odds of us getting out of here are slim as it is.. getting back might be a fucking joke.) and greeted our would-be saviors. Black-clad all, they scanned the area for more threats and spread out some, military-style.

"Couldn't you guys get here **just a little bit QUICKER?!**", Howard screamed at them.

"We didn't know what the hell was going on. We thought it was just you until we saw the missile.. are you hurt? There's blood on your foreheads..", one of the men said, his tall form and muscular structure, grey mustache, and authoritative voice giving him the appearance of command- he's probably the instructor. Blood and a quickly-dwindling wound is about all that's left of the next-to-brain cut. I didn't even feel mine anymore, instead I felt something deep within.. maybe that's where I've been getting all this power from? The implant removal itself? The cocktail of adrenalin and various brain chemicals would do it..

"I'm fine. I'll tell you later. Right now, this place is a fucking hot zone. We have to leave here **NOW.**", he replied.

"Yeah.", the operative replied. Another missile headed straight for us. I used the shotgun to put it out of the air before damage could be done. The shockwave was mildly painful to the ears. "Take the jet!"

"What about you?", I asked. We could use these guys.. but there's no room.

"We are ubiquitous. We are here when you leave; we will be here when you return." The man's voice had an unearthly confidence, as if all the force in the world would simply not affect him.

"Guys- if that jet's not trapped, I am ashamed to be considered an Illuminati assassin.", Sarah said. "There is just no way it can't be."

"We don't have much choice.", the Anarch said, going back into the smashed mansion, pressing the button (which was still intact), and flipping the jet over. (Hey, wait.. **when** did **he** learn about **that**?! I suppose he just happened to pick the info up from whoever..) We followed him from a safe distance. Hey, he makes good cannon fodder. Maybe Howard should have had one of the operatives do this, though.

"No way. Just.. no way.", Sarah said, shaking her head. A missile came from the sky again and she sneered and annihilated it with a single well-placed missile. A jet/propeller dropship came in from overhead, and Enforcers were going to drop out of it (using helicopters, no less)- and then Howard growled loudly, taking the Micro and cooking the whole business straight out of the air, blood and airplane parts falling from heaven in a grotesque rain as the gas tank was suddenly

heated to thousands of degrees Celsius. Yes, the Enforcers did indeed drop- in charred pieces. Some reflection could be seen to boil some water some five hundred yards out, the microwaves doing their job on the water and the fish. He had angled that shot well.

The Anarch climbed in and a faint, unfamiliar sss-**chunk** was heard from the inside of the plane.

"Run.", Howard said faintly.

"**RUN!!!**", I yelled. We all took off in opposite directions (safe distances can only get safer with more distance..), and we threw ourselves to the ground when the explosion nearly deafened me, the **BOOM** followed by the flying of shrapnel overhead, the bomb being big enough to turn it into nothing but little pieces. I'm not hurt.. and neither is anyone else, no lucky shrapnel hits, even the Anarch got out in time. Paul's really going to have a nervous breakdown... he's visibly shaking, panicky, and gaining an incredible tendency to look behind him. Now he knows what Illuminated war is all about.. and it's good that he's panicky, that means he's not clutching any bleeding wounds and whimpering in pain. A wound we'd heal fairly quickly could permanently cripple or even kill him.. damn. At least he's good at staying the fuck out of the way.

I know Howard has a submarine.. but I bet that's trapped, too. And why the hell could I actually hear that bomb? It should have exploded the moment the Anarch opened the door. This isn't some cheap-ass adventure movie, these are the controllers of the world we're fucking with. We really should be long dead. What the hell's going on?

"The boat.", Paul said. "We've gotta take the fucking **boat!!**"

"Yeah- let's move!", Howard shouted, taking off in that direction. A boat-load of Enforcers shot at us from offshore and the two of us decimated them, the charred bodies splashing into the water, the still-moving boat leaving them behind, the water slowly turning red. Fucking reinforcements from Hell..

We got to the Anarch's boat and no one said a word about its inferior speed or 'where the fuck do we go?' We'd have to deal with the first, and normal territory for the second. Let's hope these assfuckers aren't willing to break secrecy just for this... oh what the fuck am I saying "just for this" for, this is the Dominator we're talking about, and it'll be interesting to find out what's more important- the Dominator's death or the eternal secrecy.

The next ten minutes were predictable and hellacious. Howard placed the Micro in the water when he wasn't shooting, to chill it as he fired. Both of us were screaming vulgarity and murder at the attackers- mine in English, his in Latin. I was thinking 'Ammo.. ammo.. ammo..' the whole time, as were Paul and Sarah. Ammo. We can't run out. Otherwise, we'll die to the torpedoes and missiles and Enforcers and guns and all the different kinds of flying death getting in our faces- thank God they're not using submarines, and thank the same God they're too mechanical/stupid to shoot at the boat with bullets instead of the passengers. It was a battle to behold. Sarah's fingers were alternately clenched and un-clenched, the hand-mounted mini-missiles following her targeting exactly. Paul's assault cannon was similarly alternating as he chose his targets wisely. The Anarch did not attempt to pilot the boat and fire weapons at the same time. The whole thing was a manic dance, bullet-dodging intertwined with rampant slaying. "Stop shooting at me, you assholes!!", I heard Howard scream in Latin, and I probably would have laughed if I had the breath. I envisioned us running out of ammo and dying by getting overrun (even with the Micro in Howie's hands..) or someone getting a lucky hit and sinking us.. but the attack abruptly stopped instead. We were too far away from the island, and someone could possibly see us and report it back. The attacks stopped coming. Secrecy would not be broken. They're letting us go.. I imagine all normal craft are being steered away from here.

Now, I realized in a flash of insight, the hunt begins. They didn't stop, they just changed tactics. Think undercover FBI agents, only a fuckload more deadly.. and even if we changed our looks and

tried our level best to mingle with a crowd (and totally obliterate secrecy), it wouldn't last. They'd find a way. They **always** find a way.. none of us needed to say anything more. We knew what to do. We had to make ourselves one hundred percent **scarce**. Gone. A-la-byebye. Let's see how that stealth of yours really works, Sarah..

Eventually, the boat made it to an unknown shore- there were lots of risks landing on a normal, crowded beach... although the guys following us could have sealed off the place by now. We cruised the shoreline, looking for something fortunate, like a cave or a sewer pipe. They surely had us on some high-altitude tracking device (surprised they haven't nuked us with an orbital laser or somesuch..), and were certainly directing normal authorities out of our way, so that they may better go in for the kill. Only a matter of time if we can't get underground.. and then we found what we were looking for among the seaweed and the sand, a pipe. The grate was torn off by engineered muscle, the rusted steel yielding with incredible ease. It was too fucking small to walk in.. but just big enough to crawl through easily.

And crawl we did. With animal instinct, we hid in there, Paul entering last and looking behind him. He didn't seem to be scared anymore. He's probably well in shock.. or he's developed the inhuman coolness the rest of us naturally have. Fido didn't like the smell, but could trot along behind us.

I have no clue how long we were in there. We could have been crawling for minutes, hours, whatever. We just pounded the sides of the pipe as we went forth, glad in our hearts that nothing like sewer water was coming from the opposite direction. The Anarch eventually found a storm-drain, and popped it off like a can's plastic lid. We came out somewhere in an industrial district, a no-man's-land of flat brick buildings, parked cars, and too much sunlight, the storm-drain in a slightly watery depression that was probably the result of abandoned construction. Did anyone see us? Nope... but it's midday and there are people around here, certainly. Now what the fuck do we do..

"They're not here?", Sarah asked from behind us. "Well, we know it's not all of them.." If it was all of them, we'd have no hope. "Coast clear?", she asked before looking around. Clear so far.

I climbed out, Howard following me through the knee-deep muddy water. Ugh. Hate getting dirty in shit like this, no idea what it's polluted with. Sarah had her weapons at the ready, looking around, ready to destroy any threat to secrecy.

"Forget it, Sarah.", the Anarch said, pulling his muscular frame out of the pipe silently. "Any attack from your weapons would send people coming. We would not be able to kill them all without being easily discovered by a group of people far too large." We could anyway. Sheer luck could get us all killed..

"Yeah.. hate this!", she said, sneering. She wasn't alone. "Gonna get my claws into the bastard who tried that.." Fido climbed out, went into the mud begrudgingly, and rushed out shaking.

"You'll be lucky to have your claws after this is over.", Paul said, climbing out. For a brief instant I visualized someone hearing us, taking a look.

And, as per Murphy's Law, someone did.

"Who the.. hell are you?", the 40-something man asked from the top of the hill, some sort of hard rock/heavy metal (for some strange reason I thought I recognized the song) coming out of his headphones as he put them around his neck, looking at us like we were freaks.. which is sort of logical, considering what we are.

Sarah walked up to him. "You mean you've never seen two albinos, a guy on steroids, a normal-looking kid, a girl with bladed fingernails- all of them carrying weapons- and a white dog come out of a pipe before?"

"No.. is this some kind of joke?" Do you see any of us laughing?

"Yes." She threw him down the hill, conveniently snapping his neck on her leg- the Anarch grabbed the guy's Walkman and headphones as the guy rolled past to land face-down in the water. "And you're the punchline." She looked around. "No one else and there's some light forest here. Come on." We took the biggest risk to secrecy ever- we dashed a hundred yards to the strip of trees and underbrush blocking the industrial park from a freeway, Sarah shredding the scrub, all of us hunkering down out of sight from both the passing cars and anyone from the industries.

"This is all nuts..", Howard muttered. "They can't be the ones controlling the satellites, or we'd be fish food by now.."

"Quit underestimating yourself, Master. It's detrimental to long-term survival.", the Anarch said. I felt a flash of rage and didn't know why.

"He's got a point. It doesn't matter how many guys they can summon.", Sarah said, fingering her weapons. "They'd have a major crisis on their hands. The other ones are probably wise to something going on, your squads have already contacted them. Everybody's probably looking for us now.. but they don't know where that sewer led and maybe their satellites never saw it." How can they not know? This is the Illuminati! Unless other Illuminati are actively trying to hide that kind of information... which is logical, considering how some of them, probably most of them, must still be loyal to Howard.

"Hard to believe.. they've got to be fighting each other.. but then again, this whole thing..", I said, shaking my head.

"Is hard to believe. Since fucking Day One.", Paul finished. "We sure as hell can't stay here." Too open.

"Then let's go.. that way.", Sarah said, just picking a direction parallel to the freeway. We didn't get thirty feet before there was a helicopter overhead.

"For us?", I asked rhetorically.

"Murphy says yes..", Paul replied. At that time I thought I heard something. A series of.. thumps? What is that? Sounds like..

"Fuck, they're tracking us through the sewer.", Howard said. "Probably using scent detectors of some kind.. but they're not going to come out!", he said, looking through the trees at the place we had left. A circle of at least four people was looking down into the watery pit, one rushing to call for help- before getting a silenced bullet in the back of his head. Sarah just winced and squinted her eyes tightly; I'm sure that if she was a normal, she would have been crying. At the strangest things.. but there's a method to her madness. She knows what that symbolizes.

"Now we know..", she said, faintly. "There goes secrecy.", she said, as the other three died as well.

"Not entirely. It's just going to be a bigger cover-up than usual.", Howard said. "They want me.. they want us. Nothing else matters to them now. Let's just run." We ran- rushed- through a long stretch of semi-forest, and I heard the Enforcers get on our trail.

I looked around- and got a plan. "They're not that close. Anarch, you open that, you and Paul go in there. Fido, you too.", I said, gesturing to another sewer entrance- this time a manhole in a parking lot. "Follow me." We ran around back and forth between trees, the two of them getting the idea, running to mix up the scent and make it unclear where we all went. It's that or nothing.

But then they saw what we were doing- and shot at us with finger-snap bullets. Morons. There was a normal leader with them, too. As soon as he saw us, he saw the folly of attacking us with only four Enforcers (maybe he expected something else to happen? I frankly have no idea what's going on with the stupid operations, and I personally don't care at the moment), realized his hope was nil- and then he realized what he had to do. He bit down on a suicide tooth, killing himself as we quietly and efficiently disassembled the Enforcers, Howard and I wasting the ones to the sides, and tearing into the middle two just as Sarah dug in with her finger-blades. She took a whitish globe (illumination device? Yup, it's just a bigger flashlight, he saw his way through the dark, we didn't..) from the body of the normal who had died, and checking his pulse- yup, he's a goner. Forget hiding him. Let the secrecy squads do that, we've got bigger things to worry about.

"All right.", she said, lifting the sewer cover as easily as the Anarch had. "Time for some more Ninja Turtle shit."

"Not even going to ask how you've heard of them..", Paul said from below, as we crawled into the even-tighter sewer, the Anarch rapidly scraping his larger body against the walls. Sarah handed the light-globe to the Anarch- nope, it wasn't a bomb. He turned it on and we went back and forth, intentionally going back where we had been, doing our best to confuse anyone tracking us.

Chapter 63

Sarah pushed open a sewer cover, and we climbed into the dilapidated basement of an anonymous, basically unimportant building in the middle of normal land. The floor was made of cold bricks, shelves full of unused stuff were everywhere, and there was a loud, rusty boiler making grinding noises in the corner. Funny how it works out. The fate of the world will be decided down here.

"Are we going to rest here?", the Anarch (heh, we're still calling him that as he doesn't have any other name) asked, as Howard pulled Fido out of the open hole.

"Definitely.", Sarah replied.

"I have a nightmare to complete, from which I may not wake up.", the Anarch said, matter-of-factly as usual. "My survival is not critical to your survival. If required, I advise that you leave me here.", he concluded, laying down on the cold brick as if it were made of feathers.

"Yes, but you're still damn useful anyway.", Howard observed, as the Anarch put on the Walkman he'd taken, turned up the music, and went to sleep. Hey, if he thinks it'll help. His survival is, indeed, not critical to our survival, and he probably won't.

"We shouldn't leave at all.", Sarah said. "Right now the people trying to kill you have the initiative, the element of surprise. If my secrecy squads" She said that phrase without doubt or hesitation. "can get here and overpower the ones trying to kill us, we can get out. The problem will be determining who's who, and who's still loyal. We should definitely stay here a while, though, unless someone starts blowing shit up. If they had a big missile or a nuke they would have definitely used it by now."

"I'm inclined to agree with that.", Howard replied. "But.. **your** secrecy squads?"

"Aren't they, Howard?", she asked, smiling at him. "I don't know who's in charge of them now, but I severely doubt he's as qualified as I am. He's probably loyal- otherwise this is going to get ugly in a hurry- but you **know** I'm meant for it. And with this shit going on, if he's not already, this is a job for a first level."

"Is that all you want, Sarah?", Howard asked.

"It's what I was promised.", she replied.

For Howard, there was no choice to be made, nothing to consider. Sarah's request was logical, easy to grant, and ultimately beneficial to the Dominator. "We'll do the formalities when we can. And I think you'll look wonderful in white." They both smiled widely, and I realized it was my turn.

This was it. This could be the beginning or end of everything, right here. "Howard, you said I'd get anything I want if I was unimplanted, right?", I asked.

"Name it.", he replied, completely unafraid of me asking for something he wasn't willing to grant.

"I want you to take that metaphorical Dominator Throne of yours.. and I want you to make it wider.. and I want you to move over.", I said, the smile increasing on my face. Because I, too, was made to be the ruler of the world.

As with his decision for Sarah, there was no consideration, no hesitation. He almost certainly knew I was going to ask for this. "Dominator William.", he said, smiling at me, and Fido gave a loud, appreciative bark, as if he knew the full meaning of it. The words resonated strangely on my ears, but were like liquid gold, shining in the darkness lit only by Sarah's glowing sphere. Dominator William, heir to the whole world. Having Howard at my side didn't feel like a division of power at all. It felt like an augmentation.

Dominator William. "Wow. That **does** sound weird.", I said.

"Oh, you'll get used to the title."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean being called 'William'." He chuckled. Nobody has called me anything but 'Billy' for more than two years. "I've been called Dominator pretending to be you. And.. Howard.. I forgive you for everything. Using me like a toy or a pet whenever you wanted, making me your shadow following you around.. all of it. Because you're my brother, Howard. You're my twin. And in the end.. you decided to let us go."

"And if I hadn't.. **we'd be dead**. Billy.. if you never said that I was your friend.. if I thought I couldn't unimplant you because you wanted to kill me or I couldn't trust you.. I would have died to it. That thing, that implant monster, would have eaten me alive. The only reason we're still here is because I could unimplant you.. and because there are two of us."

"And there were never supposed to be two of us.", we simultaneously said. And that was the truth of it. None of this was supposed to be possible. Someone had the idea to implant the Dominator, planned out well in advance, probably long before we were born. If the cell hadn't divided, or the Operator had decided to kill one of the divisions right there instead of what he did do, Howard would either be still implanted or dead. But here we are instead, dealing with a group of people capable of infiltrating the most powerful organization in the world, who have unknown (certainly enormous) amounts of force, and who now desperately want to kill us before we kill them, because the impossible has happened.

Good. There's enough ass kicking to go around. Let's **rock**.

"Tomorrow's our birthday...", we said again, simultaneously, and smiled at it. We're going to be simultaneous a lot now.

"I wish we could bring the engineered kids here for it.", I said. "I think this would be a great place for a party. Nobody getting in our ear or asking for anything, because we'd all be too busy killing traitor assholes."

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?", he rhetorically asked, smiling. "Some of those kids aren't good enough at fighting, though."

That reminded me.. there was one more thing I wanted to take care of. "Paul..", I started.

"I'll do anything for you.", Paul said, with absolute, steadfast conviction.

"I'm not going to let you get killed.", I told him. "And when we get back, in the interests of showing fairness, I'm going to have to give you the test like everyone else. Of course, since you were there when we redesigned it, I don't think that'll be a problem.", I said, smiling at him, and the expression on his face was as if he'd won a thousand lotteries. (In a way, he had.) Welcome to your new place in the Illuminati, Paul.

The Anarch started gibbering and shivering, the external signs of implant withdrawal. Spittle flew from his lips (we actually had to dodge it) and his head repeatedly cracked against the floor. He sputtered a long burst of random, nonsensical Enforcer-latin, his skin stark red, his body twisting back and forth. Then the symptoms stopped abruptly, and he sat upright, fixing each of his eyes on our faces, and said in a calm, deliberate voice, "We're coming for you. Each and every last one of you. And we're going to **kill. You. All.**" He fell backwards, and his last breath sighed out of his throat. Well, fuck. He was an Enforcer, anyway. Not someone to be worried about.

"That could have been us..", Paul said, afraid.

Sarah nodded and thought. "Yes. It could have. All right, guys. Here's what I think will end up happening..", she started, but that was the end of my saga as life as a servant. It didn't matter what the force was that we'd fight later, the insane odds or the weapon imbalance, the secrecy we'd have to keep, the people we'd learn would betray us.

Because we were together.

And when we're together, nothing can stand in our way.