

Billy and Howard is copyright © Slicer 2004.

Chapter 1

"Thou hast the same hair, the same eyes, the same voice and manner, the same form and stature, the same face and countenance that I bear. Fared we forth naked, there is none could say which was you, and which the Prince of Wales."

-Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*

Ten days before my birthday, I was contacted by Daddy for about the five thousandth time. I expected the usual: "Here, you're going to have to learn this, too" sort of thing, another round of "This social policy does A, which leads to B, and in contact with C, D, and E, X is likely to happen." Not that that's not interesting- but once you get the hang of it, it's just a matter of educated guesses. And it's never an exact science, which is annoying- but part of the job I'm going to take. The way he tells it and from what I've seen, there are lots and lots of annoying things about the job. Backstabbing, assorted petty power games, and people desperately trying to kill you all fit into that category.

The perks, of course, do not.

"Howard- you're getting something. A number of things, actually.", he said, with the usual wide smile that I'm certain he reserves for only me. I can have basically whatever I want- thus, it's the surprises that I care about.

"Another Sarah?", I asked, smiling. Sarah's great. She does everything for me, especially when I fall asleep on the couch or I'm hungry or something. He did to her just what he did to the dogs, no problem. Besides, I need more practice with direct power anyway- another regular human or bioengineered human would help.

"Close enough.", he said with a wink. "It's a boy this time. Your age, too. His name is Billy; I think you'll like him. He'll help you with making this place self-sufficient. Oh, and if you're worried about the workers, well, don't. They'll be here in a few weeks or so." Before I could reply, the screen shut off again, leaving me surprised and a little bit bewildered. I wondered what Billy looks like. I hoped he isn't some lower-than-plebian idiot, like all those Mexican workers Daddy was telling me he'd get me to make this place "self-sufficient", a thing he casually mentioned as a requirement- I have no idea why.

Of course, no one would come to my birthday party. Such is the annoyance of near-total sequestration. It's been a rule for decades- no getting near the Inheritor until he's old enough to know who's trying what manipulative tactic. I knew I'd get the total power soon... but he never said exactly when, and he did say it would be a surprise when it happened.

When I heard that Daddy was going to give me him for my birthday, I told Sarah not to say anything to him until I did- the implants auto-designate for the first voice with a face seen and heard. And then I found myself impatiently counting hours and such- things that I, as a rule, never do. Sure, Sarah's nice and all, she's a great cook, she's a trained medic, and she's the mistress of covert operations with over two hundred kills under her 20-inch belt- but when it comes to flat out **talking** to her- personal information, trying to figure out what she'll think or what her reactions will be if X or Y happens (just for the hell of it)- I can't. I can command her, I can extract information from her- but when it comes to the emotional aspects, she either doesn't, can't, or won't respond. It matters in certain aspects- I'd like to leave her on her own if I'm going to send her off to do something, and although she's heavily trained, I need to know what she'll end up doing under fire. Even with the powers of total command on my side, understanding what makes people tick is still a difficult thing to do. Billy, however, would be an entirely different story. I knew it'd be nice having someone else.

That's why I woke up so late on my birthday. The first thing I did when I got out of bed was stare at the calendar/wall clock for about ten seconds. "April 27, 1998! Fucking finally!" I then flipped off the bed, and went down to accept whatever presents were there. A disk that said "WorldTrace 6.0" on it (almost certainly already installed- the physical medium is a formality). A strange device that seemed to be a distance metal detector. A set of shoes that, when put on, forcibly added a powered spring to your step- I put them in my closet of Stuff I'll Never Use But Don't Really Want To Throw Away. (Yes, I really do have a large closet named that, and yes, it is crowded. Sheeple are not the only ones with that kind of 'do I chuck it or don't I' concern.)

Before long I realized Billy wasn't there. The hell? Did they have problems acquiring him or is he elsewhere? Hmm.. they wouldn't do the strange/silly thing (this time, anyway..) and put him in packaging.. but where is he? I got pissed off- I had never been denied anything before, period, and acquisition should have been easy... Daddy never directly lied to me before either. I heard someone breathing super hard from behind me, I started to spin around, and then I saw someone was looking at me from up on the railing. He had white (but cut! Damn those normals.) hair and eyes just like me, was wearing thin grey pajamas, and his mouth was open in an expression of shock and disbelief. For a moment I was shocked as well.. was this Billy? Who else could it be?! "Billy?", I asked, and as I said his name he started shaking and crying a bit. I think he was really scared. He started to mumble parts of questions like "how did.." and "who are...", his muscles tense and shaking. Finally, at the end of all his blubbering and stuttering, he was finally able to get out a real sentence out.

"You- you're me!!" Close, anyway. Don't tell me they made two Dominators- no, they couldn't, and he's a servant. This is odd. Very odd. Not much odder than other things going on in the organization- but odd nonetheless. 'Your age' my ass. But having to deal with the unexpected is part of the regimen. I am certain Daddy is laughing his ass off right now- he's always had a thing for good pranks. And this is well beyond 'a good prank'- how did they do **this** one?!

And I too started to laugh. Daddy didn't tell him about this, making things even more interesting. "No," I said, "I'm not you. I'm the Grand Inheritor, but you can call me Howard. Down there's Sarah." She waved and greeted him with her usual smile, and Billy's muscles tensed up and he looked like he was going to panic. "Come on, Billy, sit down, I have some stuff to tell you." I motioned downwards, and we came down the stairs to the big, comfy, plush couch in the middle of the living room. Considering that it's going to be the seat of tele-power, it better be comfortable.

When we finally got down there, and he sat down like I told him to, he started to gasp and shake again. I think the implants did this to him, but if he's anything like Sarah, I figured it would wear off. I think Sarah understood too. She came up right next to him and said in her sweet, high voice, "Don't worry. You'll get used to it. It's not that bad, really, and he **is** nice."

The reaction was semi-predictable. "Used to WHAT?!", he screamed, in my voice. He then jumped up and started to run around the room pinching himself. I didn't understand him at first- what the hell is he doing? And then I heard him telling himself to wake up.

"Billy," I said, "you're not dreaming. Now sit down and calm down and stay seated down and calmed down until I tell you you can get up."

He did, of course, but his eyes were unblinking and wide open, and his breathing was still a bit quick. He started to stutter and mumble again. "w- where -- what the fuck did they- w- why do I always hafta do exactly.. how the hell..", I heard him sputter out. Then he grabbed my arm really tight and looked at me with wide open eyes.

At that point, I remembered Daddy's instructions. "You won't hurt me, nor will you do anything to my possessions or leave the island without my permission.", I said, just as I did with Sarah. As soon as I said it, his grip loosened a bit but his stuttering became a lot faster. Eventually, he caught himself and blurted out the question I was half-waiting for.

"How the **fucking damn shitty hell** do you make me do things?!"

In reply, I touched the part of his forehead where the implants were. He started clawing at his head and stuff saying in a very low voice, "no.. nonono.. that's impossible..has to be.."

"Forget it.", I said. "They're below the skull. Besides, I told you not to hurt my possessions; **that includes you.**"

I think he was going to have a heart attack right there on the couch, even though he was doing what he could to calm down like I told him. Then he did something totally unexpected, he sat on the couch and just froze solid. The only muscles that weren't stiff were his heart, which was still pumping rapidly, and his diaphragm, which was still struggling to move at all. He untensed himself in 5 seconds or so, but he was still looking at me with unblinking eyes. Tears were draining out of them.

I pondered telling him not to cry, but then I realized that it wouldn't work. Sarah, who was still sitting next to him, squeezed his hand and looked him in the eye. He was still scared, and he looked like someone who just dodged a 100 mph car or fell out of an airplane with an extra-small parachute or something. I suppose I could look like that if I really tried...

"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.", comforted Sarah, her face a mixture of motherly kindness and childish 'please stop crying, it's okay' playfulness- things you usually don't see from someone with her occupation. She then looked at me and said "why didn't he tell him?! It would have at least helped." I shrugged. I didn't know Daddy's mind all that well. Even when you have as much training and education as I do, the exact motives of any Illuminatus are usually incomprehensible (often to the Illuminatus with the motives, but that's another story).

At this point, Billy's mind regained more control of his muscles and my command took effect. His facial muscles were no longer tensed around his eyes, and his death grin loosened up. Part of his mind, I soon realized, was still in panic. I was finally able to relax myself (too bad I can't command myself to do things, it would make my life a **lot** easier) and the three of us just sat there for a minute or so.

Finally, I was able to say "Billy, I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I'll try to answer them all." I was going to, too- I think that's the reason he panicked, because he didn't understand where he was and what today is. Also, Daddy always told me how servants should be encouraged to avoid misunderstanding. He did relax a bit just then, and turned to look at me.

His first question was fairly obvious. "Why have you brought me here?", he rasped, obviously trying to sound like Rambo just captured by the Viet Cong. I chuckled. At least he has an imagination, or maybe he really believes I'm going to hurt him. That's going to make this even more fun. I have never had the opportunity to really take a normal and send him into total panic with displays of sheer power. Of course, since Billy is my (genetic? Yes, certainly.) duplicate, it's not going to be the same.

"Because it's my tenth birthday. No one told you anything?", I asked.

He shook his head no. I think he still thought he was dreaming, because he kept saying "when I wake up.." and stuff like that. He was still really scared. I wish Daddy would have told him everything like he did Sarah. I guess this is part of my learning and all that, although Daddy never told me what to do with servants who thought they were dreaming.

"Finish your sentence, at least.", I said to him, trying to be as calm as possible. That's one thing Daddy never told me and I had to figure out for myself; emotions are contagious.

He looked me in the eye, tried to control his breathing, and said firmly and loudly, in my voice again, "When I wake up, it will be my tenth birthday, I will be at the orphanage, and you won't exist.", with complete conviction. Denial is a powerful force, but it's not going to last him that long.

I cackled slightly. "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.", I replied, the adrenalin being replaced by ordinary exhilaration.

"I remember people in dark suits carrying me out of my bed, I remember them sticking something into my head, and then I woke up here, wherever here is.", he breathed out. I wasn't surprised. The Illuminati usually do things like that. Not sure how they'll do it- either he's dead or just disappeared, one of the two.

"You're on my island, about 100 miles off the coast of Oregon." At this, Billy put his hand on his head and groaned. "It's really big, about a hundred acres or so.", I finished. He was still a bit frightened and all, but he was getting quiet. I guess he was trying to ponder how he got here- it's easy. Carrying Billy to his recently-opened room was certainly easy for my unseen servants.

He was finally calm. "All right... Howard? Why am I here for **your** tenth birthday?", he asked, looking me in the eye. Daddy told me that that is usually a symbol of challenge and equality, but I didn't care. He was implanted for me anyway.

"You're here because Daddy sent you here. 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. I'm going to play with you a lot too, it'll be fun.", I said, in a slightly more evil voice to further panic him- the irony is that it really would be fun. He looked like he was going to say something, but then decided not to.

I, of course, have the 'burden' of omniscience. "What were you going to say, Billy?", I asked him, and he got another one of those shocked expressions- obviously, the result of the implants taking effect.

"Why.. did you bring me here.. for **my** tenth birthday?", he asked with some puzzlement. I really hadn't thought of that. Considering we look and talk the same, I'm not surprised we have the same birthday too. Yup. DNA's the same, probably the same birthday- same everything, probably. Except I'm the Dominator, and he's not.

"Well, if we're clones, we do have the same birthday.", I said. "Besides, I didn't bring you here. Daddy did. Daddy runs the Illuminati." I never thought I'd ever **say** that to anyone! "He can do anything he wants, even give me friends like you.", I said, watching Billy slam the panic button. I think I said that right. You can always find more agents and you can always buy more generic friends, but there are people who are unique and impossible to replace.

"Oh, that's the cake. I think it's done.", said Sarah, who got up, put on some oven mitts, and pulled the whole cake out. It was huge and dripping with icing. It gets bigger every year. I wonder how I'd eat the whole thing this time. I had to eat my last one in 3 days for my ninth birthday. This time it was almost twice as big, and Sarah could barely carry it out. It took her days to make it, too. "Is it ready now?", I asked, and came into the kitchen where the aroma was the most pungent.

Sarah smiled and said, "Yes, Howard.", intentionally sounding like she's hiding something. I couldn't tell her to prevent me from getting hurt- angry and/or semi-deranged servants could use that command to their advantage- but I could find out what she planned.

"Sarah, tell me what you're thinking.", I said very quickly. The implants, fortunately for some and

unfortunately for others, don't control thoughts, only actions.

She turned from the cake, looked at me, and said in a clear voice, "It's very ready for you, all **four hundred degrees** of it, you little numb fuck! Eat and burn!" Billy broke out into bawling laughter from the couch. We do have torture implements in the house- Daddy showed them to me when I was seven, as a formality and for possible occasional use- of course, with implants, they are superfluous. And of course blaming servants for wanting to cause harm to their masters is a waste of time and a foolish gesture. After I told Billy not to laugh at me ever again (save myself some annoyance later), I reminded myself not to ask her thoughts too often.

I also don't think I've been served hot food before by a real human being- the one curse that the Inheritor bears is isolation. Sarah brought the cake into the dining room, and it had a large 'Happy Birthday Howard!' banner on the ceiling- obviously the crowning point for some trainee's lesson. The Inheritor's island is a long-standing training ground for covert ops agents, and stuff like midnight redecoration in utter silence (they wouldn't dare be heard) is good practice. A lot of stuff appears in my house and I don't know when- although I can usually guess how- it happened; they're quite a bit like Santa Claus, only they wear black, they are slim instead of obese, and they are also very, very good at removing things. Sarah took off the mitts, and brought a single ten-pack of candles conveniently placed on the table, and a lighter (which may or may not contain experimental fuels).

"What are you doing?", I asked. I don't know too many normal rituals, but familiarizing myself with them may help my thinking in their terms a bit. Which I find hard as hell to do, and hopefully won't have to do very much of.

She arranged the candles on the cake in a circular pattern and lit them all. "Normals blow them all out and make a secret wish. If you blow them all out in one blow, you're supposed to get the wish."

"I don't think it works for the normals." She laughed a bit.

"No. Didn't work for me either.", she replied, pouring three glasses of fruit punch (which were just conveniently **there** in the proper places) and giving me a look that said, 'You're not just going to leave him in there, are you?' I wouldn't do that.

"Billy, you can get up now. C'mon in here and sit down, you can have some cake too.", I called to him. I'd get sick trying to eat that giant cake, even with Sarah's help, even in three days. I do remember asking Sarah to bake a very big one. That's something else Daddy told me about the implants- be careful what you wish for, because you **will** get it if the servants can do it. Billy came in and sat, still a bit uncertain of where he was and what he was doing, but obviously hungry.

I took a deep breath and blew all the candles out easily and made the wish that the organization's been making for centuries. I think Billy was wishing for something; it was, of course, his tenth birthday. I didn't ask, it was most likely to be one of Sarah's insults, probably worse, probably something along the lines of 'may a meteor come down and turn the Inheritor into hot, bloody slag', because Billy was newer. Also, Sarah doesn't have his freedom illusion that will probably cause him some grief before he gets over it. Daddy says normal-born servants go for a year or so before, eventually, they accepted it internally and simply started following their master. A year is a really long time for me. Probably when you get older, the years start to come together like those geriatrics on TV say, although there is no objective measurement and it's definitely different for each person. The weirdness is greater here since I'm going to live forever. How fast would the years come together when I'm 10,000? Truly pondering eternity is no more easy to Illuminati than it is to normals, and certainly not for me, because I could live that long.

Billy was still only half-here, still a little confused, as if they hurt his head before he came here. Of course, they'd never do anything like that. They're way too good. They specialize in stuff the Gestapo wouldn't touch. They make ghosts look as obvious as a dancing clown, they make a shark

look like it has bells on its fins. I've seen videos of them before, by someone able enough to keep a camera trained on them. They're **professional** incarnate. Still, it's hard to wake someone up and drag them off in the middle of the night without them remembering it, even if you use drugs. I'm glad these covert ops people are loyal. If one of them decided to fight us, he'd be able to do a lot of nasty shit. At least most of them are implanted after we figured out how to make them- of course, many of them have been replaced by personality-less Enforcers who can do such things much more efficiently. But sometimes a mind is required..

Sarah brought out the long steel knife and cut the cake into eighths, as rapidly as she slices throats. "How much?", she asked.

"Two. Give Billy two. He looks like he's starving. And eat one for yourself." Sarah's a girl, and Daddy warned me about how servant girls sometimes will starve themselves unconsciously (anorexia) because they start feeling suicidal and they just want to die- and Sarah has huge food requirements anyway. I hope Sarah or Billy never get truly disgruntled and do something I forget to prevent. Daddy said it was hard and expensive to get replacements for good servants, but that's bullshit- it's literally impossible. Billy's probably the only clone of the Inheritor (but **why** the hell would they.. never mind, I'll find out later), and Sarah was the best and most wanted assassin and assassin leader in the world before she got here, was created by the best genetic engineering there was 13 years ago, can handle most weapons with ease, and is a very good cook- that last part becomes very, very important when you've eaten pre-made food your whole life.

We ate in silence and with gusto, a semi-resigned Billy looking into his food- and then up at me. "Howard?"

"Yeah, Billy?"

"How long am I going to be here, anyway?", he asked, his fear slowly but surely turning to dull resentment. Oh well. It had to happen. He will fear me and curse me until he finally understands that there is no way out.

"Well, forever. Until you die." 70-80 years would be about the max- but he's my identical twin. So he'll live forever right alongside me. Good. I can appreciate some company. Of course, I read plenty of fiction involving immortals (Irony, but what the hell) and the main problem that afflicts them is that they outlive everyone they know who isn't similarly endowed.

"Figured.", he mumbled, as he continued to eat Sarah's delicious cake. Even though he still didn't like me, I think the cake helped some. He'll get used to it and eventually start anticipating me- that's really the best kind of control, where they'll do what they think you want instead of you having to tell them- if, of course, that's possible. It might not be.. if he's my exact clone in thinking, his thoughts are pretty much uncontrollable.

Chapter 2

Right after I finished my last bite of cake, I heard the familiar buzzer that signified Daddy's coming on the screen. It'll probably be another one of his 'Illuminated Lessons' he keeps talking about. Some of them are really good, some I just don't understand for a while. Daddy made a quick motion with his fingers which signified I was about to hear something that he'd never repeat to anyone. I sent Billy and Sarah upstairs. After they were up, Daddy smiled his warm, fatherly smile and said "Howard, do you know what today is?", he asked.

"It's my birthday!", I answered, still glad I got what I wanted again. I'm being hyper and a touch childlike, I know, but I get this way when I get lots of cool stuff. Besides, an Illuminatus behaves however the fuck he wants, unless he's trying to manipulate someone. I know one guy who bites his nails far too much, I know a girl who runs her fingers through her hair constantly, and there's a first level who has a habit of rocking forwards and backwards in his chair. (He claims it's natural, but it

almost looks like it's meant to hypnotize..)

"Yes. It is. And it's your tenth birthday. Guess what I'm giving you today." The way he said it left no doubt in my mind what it was.

Adrenalin pushed through me like a freight train on steroids. "Your power is transferred to me and I start becoming the Dominator of Earth!" Actually, that's a misnomer- I'm the Inheritor of the solar system, effectively. Earth is just what the tradition required when people didn't know you could walk on the other planets.

I felt really happy, in the purest kind of way. The world was being passed down to someone who would know how to run it- and that someone was me! Even an Illuminatus can be overwhelmed by potential luxury, if it's luxurious enough. God takes a back seat to this. I wouldn't start really using my power until later though; everything will basically run smoothly until I see reason to change it. That's what this training is all about, to get me to become better at what I'll be doing. It's a great job, and someone's gotta do it.

"Yes. As the 193rd Dominator, I begin the transfer of power to the 194th. You will have full control over all the world- **everything will depend on you.**" He spoke the words with foreboding in his voice, but I didn't care. I was **made** to be ready for it, after all. "Your complete rule will come in the period of five short weeks, Howard- I remind you to use this island for all it's worth. You need to learn Illuminated thinking for yourself before you can use it on the world. I presume you are using your new gifts to their fullest?"

"Yeah! I've got to prepare Billy though. He's.. well.. why didn't **you** tell him- or me?"

"Because I wanted you to understand something, Howard. Nature, outdated that it is, still has the 'freedom' instinct among its progeny, even with engineered, we can't take it out. If we try to breed or engineer it out, it produces apathy, stupidity, and laziness, and Northberg hasn't managed to understand the exact relationship yet." They will, eventually. As the Illuminati, we make a point of understanding everything. Information isn't power; information creates power, in much the same way as weapons. "And, Inheritor, it is your job to make sure that instinct is kept in check. For the implanted ones, it is very easy- the farm workers you'll need will not be so simple."

"Unimplanted? Then how will I control them?"

"You'll get all the Enforcers you need." Enforcers being the hominid automatons Illuminati use for operations and various menial tasks. No personality, no publicity, no parents, no psychology, no problem.

"Yeah, but obvious threat value aside, Enforcers won't be much help on their minds.." I prefer more manipulation than simple 'I have more power than you, so get to work.' when dealing with situations like that. Complex computer simulations have helped in that regard.

I saw him put his hand up in the direction of the stairs- he knew what his gesture would look like to me even though on his side he was pointing at nothing. "What do you think he's for, anyway?" Of course. It's a dirty job, and some servant has to do it. Let him do whatever gruntwork.

"Now, if you have anything you want to know about this- **anything**- just ask me. I'm now here for you, not vice versa." That scared me a bit.. me being here for him sometime in the past? I didn't press the issue, even for someone who's supposed to know everything, there are things I really just don't want to know. "Yeah, how many workers?", I asked.

"About a hundred, give or take. We still don't really know- it's different for each Inheritor." The trees on the edges of the island are not more than thirty years old. They go down for clearcutting and then the self-sufficiency stuff is put up. When we don't need it anymore, they get replanted for the next

one of us to use- we've been doing this for the last eight hundred years or so when we discovered the island from a Korean boat. And these workers would be part of the plan, either kept as future pawns after the training is done or simply exterminated. I don't like killing people, it's a waste of resources, time, and ya gotta clean it up. Even when there's so many of them, I can always find uses for them. I did it for Daddy a bunch of times.

"Anything else?", he asked.

"Yeah. Why **did** you give India the nuke anyway?", I replied. Having a Dominator actually personally approve a world-control decision is big news. And like all big news, it was in the Real News- the worldwide newspaper with the smallest subscription. Today's edition is around here somewhere.

"Well, like I said, I want to see this planet unified. Making India think they're on the same ground as the First World makes them much more complacent. And besides, we had to even out the power balance some. Nuclear deterrence is a good way to make people think things are at least somewhat evened on their own, with mutually assured destruction and all of that." He grinned.

"Actually, considering how mentally unbalanced the fake governmental heads are, I'm surprised even our controls stop the people from thinking that we're all gonna die in nuclear fire. But people will believe if they want to, and if they see any situation as having a 'good ending' to it, they'll endure Hell to get there. Remember this lesson well, Howard... I think it will aid you sooner than you expect. Also, don't forget to read Billy the initiation out of the book."

He winked out of the screen unexpectedly like usual. It's annoying until you get used to it.

I grabbed the book, on a second thought picked up the guide, and ran up the thickly carpeted stairs into Billy's room.

As I opened the door, seeing Billy and Sarah together, I thought, maybe they were... no, they couldn't do anything I wouldn't have wanted them to. Besides, Billy's at my point in getting to puberty anyway.

I opened the book and read out of the first page all the stuff to make sure he won't do anything harmful. He was still scared out of his wits, and the implants can't do anything about that.

I still don't get why he's so scared. I mean, yeah, he woke up in a place unfamiliar to him and he hasn't been told in advance jack shit, but he should have figured out by now that I'm not going to do anything really bad to him. And it's not like he's new to control or anything- most of his life has been controlled by the agents of the agents of the agents of the agents of our agents through the school system anyway, and he probably already knows that. Then I remembered what Daddy told me a few months after my eighth birthday about the freedom illusion and how they all must think they're free or they'll start rebelling. It's a good thing Daddy can mass-manufacture the implants now, but he (wait.. now it's I) seriously has to work on that freedom illusion bit. It'll take at least weeks for it to wear off from Billy, unlike Sarah who started as basically one of us anyway. Maybe I'll step up the "need control for freedom" bullshit laid down by Daddy for the rest of the world, until it reaches a state of complete black-is-white belief like Daddy got close to but couldn't quite do. All it is is redefinition, re-evaluation, and a gradual change of philosophy- both in our camp and the normals' minds. I know I'm better than him at doing that world-controller politics stuff though. Each generation is supposed to be better than the last in our organization, and I'm specifically made for the task.

"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.", I told him, and all of it was true. I haven't had any real company my age since... since Daddy brought me to talk to that normal when I was six, and he was retarded or just plain stupid. And as for showing Billy around, I'd be showing him stuff I didn't even know myself- the guide was given to me today. I suppose all the doors that didn't exist (but I could tell where they

were anyway simply by placement) before in the house will be wide open now. Probably a whole lot of flat-out kickass (the term is versatile enough to encompass all of it) stuff I never even saw before- what was in the presents is likely only the tip of the iceberg. Of course, my immaterial power is greater than my material power, but the problem with immaterial power is that you can't hold it in your hands and use it physically.

I thought about it, decided to bring Sarah along too, and we went down the stairs to check the place out.

Chapter 3

I opened up the guide. At first I saw the familiar stuff- living room, dining room, pool, movie theater, information room, all that stuff in floor plan format. I turned past all the familiar rooms and found a section giving me all the details to the fifth floor down.

There's only one problem. **This house has no fifth floor.** There's no stairs leading down from the fourth floor, which is directly connected to an undersea cave. There is an elevator that I rarely use, but it only has the 1 to 4 floor buttons on it.. or does it now? They used similar instant-remodeling techniques when I was eight, and I'll never get over it- the viewscreen was changed in basic structure literally overnight.. but I don't think they even need to do it themselves for things like this. It was always here, they just had to press a button and open it up. The elevator, I decided, was definitely inviting me down.

Billy was looking at me completely perplexed. "You need a guide to your own house?", he said with some amusement behind his voice. I nodded. Since he couldn't laugh at me anymore, he just sighed and shook his head. Sarah, too, seemed a little confused.

They followed me into the elevator where, sure enough, there was a button marked 5. I pressed it, and I felt the low gravity of downward acceleration (around .9 g's, give or take a little) for five full seconds after we passed the fourth floor, then waited ten seconds before feeling the elevator push back up on me, and finally come to a stop. I did some physics in my head and realized that we were way, way, way down here, maybe 90 meters down, probably more. Nice and deep, so it will never be found- some of the items the guide said were on this floor were NOT to be seen by the masses in a really long time- or ever. In other words, this is Asskicking Stuff Central, one customer served. I love having power.

When the doors opened, Billy drew in his breath and Sarah went "Wooaah!". I, too, reacted to the vast sight of goodies, information, and assorted recreational shit galore. "It's a fucking underground mall....", continued Sarah. Basically, she was right. I walked from the elevator out onto the walkway, and looked down onto the sixth floor and out onto the floor where I was. It does look like a mall, filled with assorted tools, weapons, and games, but everything in it's free (the last Illuminatus to really need personal money died in 1850). Also, there's a few things you simply don't find in most malls, like the Disinformation Room, a full-scale library filled with The Secrets and more mundane information, and some Illuminated shit that would wreak serious havoc if given to the masses.

Billy had his mouth open real wide and looked like he was about to piss his pants. I'm not sure what it was- looking at this subterranean mall with all this kickass stuff in it, or just believing that it all belongs to one person. I think it's the latter- the public **does** know that most of the wealth is held in the hands of a few, and they do know that things like this are possible with enough cash, but very few have seen anything like this, Billy not being an exception. And he probably already figured I'd have a lot of kickass shit anyway.

I looked at the guide again to see what wasn't being shown at first glance. Underground pool, geothermal power plant (Of course, I thought- every island is at least somewhat volcanic.), Island Defense System (hope I don't need to use that any time soon...), and the Unreleased Technology room, which holds all the stuff we're not giving the masses until the future, when we're more ready

for them to handle it. All of this stuff, of course, is going to be used by the next Inheritor, and the one after that, and I'm going to have to put even **more** stuff down here for their use. That's the only true obligation of the Dominator- to make sure the line continues in power as it always has. And it can't continue unless I keep order with the toughest bunch in the world, and so I'm obligated to make sure Illuminati don't start killing each other. By killing them, if need be.

Today, however, is my birthday, the day when most American boys and girls try to forget all obligations, and their school permitting, enjoy themselves. There is a video arcade down here- even though I've got all the games I ever wanted, I've never been to an actual arcade. That's mostly because Illuminati can't afford to get killed, and the Grand Inheritor is definitely sheltered. It's great in some ways, sucks big dick in others. Oh well. Now that I'm 10 and gaining power, I won't have to worry so much about that shelter shit. I do what I want now. I decided to check the place out, why the hell not? Besides, Billy's here, and I gotta see if he's as quick as I am for myself.

We walked twenty meters or so to the entrance into the place. It, of course, is designed to be as "real" as possible- just like the regular people have. separating an Illuminatus's environs completely from exterior reality has proved a fatal mistake in the past, and the effect is obvious: to get the player's mind off things, to surround and discombobulate with loud noises and flashing screens, and possibly to jar thinking a bit and get a mind out of whatever temporary rut it fell into- shock therapy for the senses. The sensory overload is complete- this place even smells funny. I wandered the aisles, looking for something familiar. Ahh, there we go- Mortal Kombat, a purveyor of hate, a reinforcement of violent-gratification philosophy, a subject of meaningless debate, a parent's worst nightmare (If they only knew!), a worthwhile entertainment for the masses, and a good way for bored young Illuminati with nothing better to do to spend their time. Pretty old, and sure I've got the sequels, but so what?

Of course I rule the console version completely- vastly superior genetics make sure of that. And of course it gets boring when you utterly stomp upon the corpse of 'SUPER HARD MODE' of damn near every game made. At least Billy's here, and maybe he can at least hit my guy- this is the first time I've actually played a second person at this too. Billy was staring at the panel just below the controls on it. Now what could he be.. ah, that's right, the coin slot. I don't need any coins, so why have slots for them? I needed only to touch the controls to familiarize myself with them.

"Billy," I said in my cockiest voice, "play your hardest. Win." He looked at me briefly, a bit surprised by the command. He of course would try like nothing else in the world mattered- that's one of the things about the implants. Maybe he'll even give me a challenge. I slammed the 1 and 2 player start buttons. He immediately chose Sub-Zero, for the most "even" fight possible I did too. I quickly launched into a series of hard-to-stop combos.

He was dodging and blocking them all. The computer, even in Very Hard mode, can't do that. I went after him a bit more aggressively... and then my guy fell down to the ground, blood spurting out of his face. I don't believe it. He actually hit me. I got a little frustrated just then, and.. a series of cheesy combos from him turned my guy into lunch meat. I stood there in shock. No one, but no one, beats the Grand Inheritor in anything, especially if he utterly and totally kicks a lot of ass in it. Billy, too, looked a little surprised at his luck, and really scared again for some reason.

The next round was disgraceful. I got a touch frustrated and aggressive and walked into several roundhouse kicks and a few ice balls, and the next thing I knew his color of Sub-Zero was ripping the spine out of mine, the head dangling from the top and little drops of blood plopping from it. I had lost. To normal people, that's no big deal- to me, who hasn't lost at this ever, period, it was a disaster. Looks like my question about identical speed and reflexes is answered. I swore and kicked the machine. That's one thing about being in my position- you sure as hell aren't used to losing. I guess it's the implants- when you tell the servants to do something, they are going to do it. Oh well. I don't believe in omens. Getting your ass kicked by your clone: bad juju. But I learned one important thing- he is like me, if he has any advantage in any setting anywhere, he's going to press it. Good. That'll come in handy if I ever have to delegate something large to him sometime in the

future.

Right next to the arcade was something labeled by the guide as Weapons Center. We went in, and inside, on layers of thick metal racks, it looked as if at least one of every type of modern hand-held weapon known to man (and some unknown!) were in here, including what seemed to be mini-nukes and something that looked like a laser weapon labeled Micro-2025. I recognized some of the more mundane stuff, the AK-47s and the bazookas, more easily- I watch as many good movies as any normal. To hold as much as it did it was absolutely enormous, spanning both floors and a very large volume, almost as large as the central part of the underground area. It was amazing, even to me- if I ever wanted to blow something up, this would be a great place to get the stuff to do it with. Considering the obvious danger in having something like this down here, I'm not sure why they put it in. I could hear Billy breathing hard again. I looked back at him and his mouth was wide open, like he was going to swallow a cow. "Jesus fucking christ..." he whispered. Sarah had her eyes wide open and wasn't breathing much at all, looking at the implements with their vast destructive potential, considering how to use them, imagining her fingers in the trigger slots. They were powerful indeed- the racks looked like Saddam Hussein's dream basement. And one of the things Daddy told me when I was much, much younger was that Illuminati never keep a gun anything other than fully loaded. I realized that one of these days, I'm going to have to learn how to use these things- all Illuminati are supposed to be able to learn even the trivial- and people will fear me much more when I have a powerful weapon in my hand. It's a bitch, of course, but you get used to it. But not today. Today, I relax and play with Billy.

I walked out of there, and showed them the other stuff. The pool was, to my understanding, like the ones the masses have- only mine is made from 100% pure water, with nothing else in it whatsoever- just a 15x15x10 meter volume of H₂O. The future technology room, of course, is only a small sample. The stuff in there was obviously merely the final product- it takes labor, resources, and time to make anything, and when you're making futuristic stuff in the utmost secrecy, it adds another small problem. But in the end, all that cool stuff gets to me anyway- I am, after all, the Grand Inheritor. Diagrams for a car to come out in 2025 (collision detection and reaction systems? Somebody should lower the government's emphasis on safe driving a bit before this came out- wouldn't want it to appear as heavy-handed as it really is...), laid out on the front table, were one of the first things that caught my eye. Another book was laid out on the table. "Personal solar-based power system- 2035", it read, giving details of people wearing solar panels on their person. This was accompanied by diagrams for houses and (ordinary, gas-burning) cars having similar features, slanted for release dates in the next ten and fifteen years. I thought of the potential problems this might cause, the first concern being the color- all solar panels are black, and in normal land, black clothing is usually associated with darkness, Satan, evil, heavy metal, etc. To make this technology as widely used as we'd like and prevent reactions, I'd need to pull some strings to dissolve that association. Of course, we'd get a big kick out of that- in Illuminated organization, only servants wear black. Yeesh. My first day as a true Illuminatus, and I'm already thinking about this stuff like Daddy said I'd have to. Sure, I've solved problems before, but they were laid out for me in advance, and Daddy's biggest problem with them was me knowing I had a problem to begin with- instead of just figuring out that I did. Well, now the problems are going to come to me. Let them.

Billy was gawking over something else, and I went over to look. "Control Devices", the cover read. He had opened it up, and it contained details for subliminal message devices (along with semi-explicit instructions on their use), implanted homing beacons, chemical balance checkers and a whole lot of other shit, some of which even I didn't understand the purpose of until I read carefully. Sarah was looking around the room with a blank expression on her face. She's seen similar, and used such items before. And all of the stuff in here is just the paper copies, the hard stuff of the information more easily available by computer.

Billy suddenly turned around and pointed at me, his right first finger vibrating slightly with the rest of his hand. "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?!", he shouted in an accusatory voice. It appears he was already somewhat Illuminated before he got here, although he wasn't sure who was

controlling what, and he definitely didn't understand what the purpose was. It happens with the smarter people- they are able to grasp some parts of the way things really are, and many have ideas that a group is behind it, some of them even knowing us by name. And this Inheritor clone has recognized two of the major child mind control programs in his country of origin, with a dim understanding as to what they are. Since he's one of us now, he'll eventually get to learn just what's going on with them.

"Not quite.", I told him. "I'm just starting to get complete control today. All of that crap you talked about was, yeah, produced by the Illuminati and fed to the masses to keep them satiated and complacent. I wasn't the one doing it." He looked shocked but not for long- he's had more real surprises today than he's probably had in his entire life, and he looked to be getting used to it.

We went into the library, in which every old book (again on giant metallic shelves) was completely laminated- but the books' information, and so many other things, were on the enormous mainframe (more like a hard drive cluster with a terminal on it) at the center of the room. Billy's expression and thought processes changed from total fear to sheer wonder; he obviously has some idea of how much a modern computer of that size can hold. Finally. Scared people are almost impossible to impart with information- they instinctively reject it. And even with implants, it's not possible to tell someone not to be scared and expect them to listen- especially when, in this case, their entire previous life, belief sets, and general assumptions were turned upside down.

I took Billy and Sarah back up the long elevator, to the couch; it was time to tell Billy a little more than the basics, preferably without blowing his rationale or panicking his emotions.

Billy might have been filled with wonder, but he was still confused as fuck. Good. Now he can actually **listen** to what he's going to have to know; the gritty details, the ugly parts, the stuff he doesn't want to hear. I can empathize with him; it comes with the job. No Illuminatus has gotten anywhere not understanding his people. I sat down and told him to sit down next to me again. When he did, he looked into my eyes and he was breathing somewhat deeply, not shallow and quick anymore.

One big problem with being an Illuminatus is you really, totally, absolutely need to watch what you say, especially with implanted servants- one slip and you're dead meat. Hash browns. Kaput. The seeming idyllicism of Illuminated life can be turned into flame-cored anarchy in a fraction of a second, such are the wonders of technology. Even if you're not giving direct commands, giving anyone the wrong idea about what you want can produce nasty results. Although I've never actually made that mistake, it still looms as the top threat to my health and safety.

"Billy," I asked him, "where do you think you are?" Best to start with a question. Besides, I'm not sure if he still thinks he's dreaming. And I'm damn glad he has to tell me the truth.

He thought on the subject, unsure how to answer. Finally he said what he did know; he was in a big mansion on an island somewhere. Specific enough- planetary position means very, very little to Illuminati of the twentieth century. He didn't say anything at all after that. His brain was obviously burning with signals, wondering what to do. Sarah watched us silently- I didn't want to have to **tell** her to remain silent, because that would pump up Billy's already overexerted mental blocks, fear, and total denial of his environment in general when he figured I was going to try to affect his cerebral center once more. Even after years of development, fucking implants **still** can't do that without causing insanity. Sarah's smart, though. She knows what I'm doing, sometimes what I'm thinking.

Now, how do I put this in terms of maximum tolerability without resorting to double-talk? Oh, fuck it- he's as smart as I am, and he'll translate it back to what it really means anyway. "Billy, you realize you're going to be my servant, if you didn't understand it the first time."

"Yeah, oh shit." was all he said, in a completely neutral tone, devoid of thought or emotion.

I felt powerful right about then. I don't mean my usual state of confidence and nobility- I mean sheer, utter, unadulterated power. Which is, after all, what I have. For all practical purposes, I am God. Anyone attempting to oppose me is eliminated. I tried to do my job and put this in some perspective, prevent total egomania (and thus a nasty, hard fall which Daddy's given me examples of), but when I did that, I got even higher on authority, more drunk with power. It's like having a genie who gives infinite wishes- not like I have too much to wish for. Immortality? Check. Total world domination? Check. The ability, both personal and with my forces, to kick anyone's ass I want to get kicked? Check. It's the thrill of knowing that literally billions of people would gladly have all their limbs cut off if they could only bask in this power, give the commands, feel the pleasure. They'd do the job themselves, with a hacksaw in their teeth, if they could recognize it for what it is and were sure they'd get it. I grinned at the prospect of sending out mail-order Illumination at the cost of a few measly body parts- something I wouldn't actually **do**, of course, but an entertaining idea nonetheless.

Of course, power doesn't really exist anyway. Usually, it's just mental manipulation, mind games of a sort. Pavlovian control mechanisms almost always work. Give the people a god and they'll fear Him; an idol and they'll worship it; a king, a pope, a president, and they will revere him and call him sacred. Of course, it all starts in the home. Skilled manipulators can and do start patriarchal chains of control, which each successive generation trying to reach the "level" their parents had, or higher. (They try this through servility and bowing down to some godhead or another. Ironic, isn't it? Dance you puppets.)

But this isn't the usual. Science has conquered the functions of the brain, once mysterious, now understood. Technology has finally found a way to exploit it all, in our interests of course. The entire concept of self-determination has been effectively scrapped. The only problem is implementing it on the general population without causing alarm- this nasty little item usually proves to be a real bitch for most Illuminated maneuvers. Of course, implanted servants are available to everyone who knows the real secrets, who, despite huge amounts of bullshit published on us, are very few. (Surprise, surprise.) Enter Billy. I had almost emerged from my powertrip back into the real world when my well-developed sense of objectivity spoke up. I hate that particular voice- "normal" ten year olds aren't supposed to have it (then again, normal ten year olds can't speak with an echo effect)- but it's saved my ass from fucking up several times.

'Hey, Howie!', it said in a grating voice reminiscent of 1920's detective stories, which I think is definitely appropriate- nasty, cutting, and to the point. 'Smooth move, buddy! You get him here, his brain is hamburger, then **you** throw on the super-shock insanity treatment! No fucking wonder he's near-catatonic!!' He was, too. He was looking at me with a combination of fear and wonder that put even me at some unease. 'Look, How. I don't know what the hell you were thinking, doing all that shit before you did this- I mean, it is your birthday and all, but he's reallllly fucked up. At least you cracked his brain open for a bit.' I don't hate this voice because of its tone or inflection, I hate it because it's usually right. I'd been a fool. This isn't the first time I've gotten ahead of myself (in more ways than one, ooohh mighty Inheritor), and most certainly not the last. I was expecting him to be more like Sarah, shocked and somewhat worried at first, but then quickly adjusting to his new life. Sarah's a born servant, very literally. I'd totally forgotten about what his DNA entailed. It's precisely the same as that used to create the controller of the world. I was in the presence of something I've never had- a genetic and intellectual equal. The thought chilled my blood about twenty degrees and flung me right off my powertrip mood. My anxiety and brain electricity turned to cold, calculated Illuminated plotting.

It had taken me about five seconds to think all that. Billy was still looking up at me, confused, his mind blank, open, and receptive from the insta-stress he's been given, the super fast change in lifestyle, and the fantastic wonders which I casually showed him. 'Start with the POSITIVES, Howard!', said the voice of objectivity. First impressions don't mean everything all the time, but they do mean a hell of a lot, on the personal or societal level. Not like it's absolutely **fatal** or reduces their efficiency, but having servants who hate your guts and would gladly rip them out makes the razor

edge of 'the wrong words' ten times thinner. And when you don't grow old, dying young is a sick joke.

I spent a second meditating on the subject before all sorts of happy things filled my mind. Mentioning parents... he'll flip, he still thinks they were his... immortality... he wouldn't believe it... being close to the Grand Inheritor- definitely happy and nice, but he'll freak... aha!

"Billy," I told him smiling, "you'll never have to go to school again, **ever!**"

"YAYYYYYYYYYYYY!!", he shouted with glee, grinning like a village idiot. Apparently I found the right button. He then started to mumble to himself, bend over a bit, and shake his head somewhat. Clearing his thoughts, probably. He's almost certainly going to be doing a lot of that.

"Billy, you must realize I didn't bring you here to hurt you.", I told him in the most reassuring voice I could muster. Of course, I didn't bring him here caring about any pain or pleasure on his part, just his usefulness- I'm not willing to sacrifice something as high-priced and rare as an implanted servant, but if he really needs to bite it for some reason, he's gone. Of course, I left that tacit. His freedom illusion will be broken soon enough, but his security should seem to him (and is) pretty much stable.

He just looked at me blankly like that topped the list of the most blatant lies in the world. Like a true Illuminatus should, I was seeing this from every point of view at once, and I got the idea. He'd been brought up in America, a place where false freedom is the national religion and pretending to be free of external obligations is the order of the day. Any attack so face-forward and obvious would most certainly lay waste to his sensibilities and worldview cohesion, which it did. "Turning his world upside-down" was a poor understatement. It would have been less hard on him had he been less intelligent- but he's as smart as I am and almost certainly able to consider all of the ramifications of his implantation at once. Ack. To put it in layman's terms, he better get used to it or he's mindfucked (he's already mindfucked... I just gotta make sure the whole damn thing doesn't go to pot). And I'll need that mind of his. Even America's military admits that stupid people are useless nowadays.

Just then, the central viewscreen buzzed for the second time today. What does Daddy want now? Oh well, it's my tenth birthday- it's probably something good.

Chapter 4

The person onscreen who used to always be "Daddy" to me didn't say otherwise, so I let Billy and Sarah stay. Both of them made a point of listening intently- Sarah from training, Billy most likely from simple curiosity or just the general desire to know just what the fuck is going on around here.

"Howard, get dressed in your newest clothing. You'll appear before every last member of the top five levels at midnight at the usual place (Our main headquarters, about 30 miles out of Munich, Germany, GMT + 1, Illuminati don't use Daylight Savings), so you better look your best.", he said with rapidity.

I did some quickie math, looked at the wall clock which said 9:40 (local time is -8:00 GMT), and figured at cruising speed in my jet... we have to leave in about 20 minutes if we want to appear right on time. No, less, we've got to get out of the plane and all that.

"WHAT?! If I leave NOW I'll get there! Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?", I yelled at him. That damn asshole! I do like to be notified of things in advance.

"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. 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, which is why every servant there will either be yours or mine." He clicked off his end of the screen before I could reply. Oh holy crap, I know what this is.. Shit!! When he said I was going to **start** to get power, I didn't know he meant all of it **right now!** Why so **soon**, I almost asked to myself, but then realized it: I was getting what I wished for, I just didn't wish for it like this.

Gah! It's my first day with any real power at all and I get to walk into a place that could be my tomb? And in front of every last member of the top five levels... that's over six thousand people.

Remembering the customs I've seen at every Illuminated function in the past (Viewed, of course, from my heavily shielded 'Inheritor's Box' carved into the middle of the room with all sorts of surveillance equipment surrounding me so I could see everything from every angle.. not this time!), I told Sarah and Billy to go up to their rooms and put on clothing that covered every non-head part of their bodies in black, preferably something with a lot of pockets and weapon-carriers, then get back down here. Although Sarah is already widely feared for her abilities, and Billy will quickly be respected as well (and being the Inheritor's personal agents, it's assumed that what they speak is my will), all servants always wear black to signify non-Illumination and normalcy. Although we reject most customs most normals would consider appropriate, we have our own particulars. For example, Illuminati can (and do!) swear at each other, call each other assholes, morons, fags, and goatfuckers- even put each other's parenting into question- but belittling and patronizing them is not wise. Even if you're far above them in the hierarchy, you're very likely to find a knife or a bullet in your back if you do that shit. We (okay, more like 'they', I very seldom get offended) have our own peculiar sense of pride.

I looked at the incredibly odd suit before me on the floor. It said, simply, 'The Suit', but below that there was some fine print: 'Primary Formal Garment of the One Inheritor for his Double-hand Year's Presentment'- and laughed my ass off. Whatever bubbleheaded moron wrote this forgot I have six fingers on each hand. Anyone that stupid doesn't belong here, or someone's just cracking a bad joke.. probably the latter. The actual designer proved to be smarter and the built-in gloves did indeed have six fingers. Hell, the whole damn thing was probably designed to fit perfectly around me anyway. And it actually was one-piece, a body condom. I chuckled at that thought and took off my full-motion clothing and put the thing on, actually slipping into it from the back. It was made of some velvety substance probably not often (or at all) found in any normal fabric anywhere. Everything except my head was in absolute white material, and I'm albino with a full head of stark white hair- the effect was meant to be frightening, and to some degree succeeded. I closed the sides in the front magnetically (Zippers? Outdated.) and clenched my fists, feeling the soft fabric against my skin.

Instantly, four glistening metal blades popped out of my hands- sort of like Wolverine in that X-men comic a lot of the masses read, only from the base of the hand, not the forearm. Holy crap. Who the hell put that in there? I opened my fist and the blades retracted. Next time, I'll have to push against my palms with my fingers if I just want a fist- but when I did that, tiny blades came out of my fingers. If I had a god I worshipped, I would have uttered its name right there. I pushed again and they popped back.

Is it just me or is this thing designed with violence in mind? When I read "formal garment", I always think something bulky, uncomfortable, and annoying if you suddenly had to do battle in it. This was the opposite of all three. The bottoms of my feet were covered in rubber traction over the velvet, with metal at the toe. A long, front-attached cape, that seemed to be designed for the sole purpose of reaching into and pulling something out, came down to my knees, and I felt inside and found ropelike things that popped magnetically if you pulled them straight out. Weapon carriers, designed to conceal and carry just about any kind of gun. Truly marvelous, although you couldn't get through a metal detector with them.

Now why in all the levels of Dante's Inferno would the Grand Inheritor, going to his presentment before six thousand Illuminati, shown for the absolute first time before the extremely powerful

people he is going to (try to keep in some semblance of) control, accepted and glorified by the very fabric of our high society, need to come packing devices designed to kill people? Sure, the blades are nice for effect, but guns? There? On an Inheritor that has no allegiances, grudges, or sides? (None of that **yet**, I reminded myself. To keep or increase my own power, I'd need to do some of that political hokey-pokey... groan, it would need to be me dancing to their tune a couple of times.) Before a group of people that knew what he was all about, what he did, and why he was necessary? And no one else to fill the position without serious civil war? With every servant there either being mine or the Dominator's? Something's seriously wrong with this, and I don't like it.

But business is business and it would probably be literal suicide not to come to this one.

I went back down to the fifth floor to get some weapons, in case anyone really does start going after me. Let's see... something small for Billy or Sarah to pull out for quickie shots, normal automatic pistols'll do that, take one for myself.. ah, and I'll take this blaster here, this one that reads "Micro-2025". I didn't know what it did, but I had a feeling it was very powerful indeed. Of course, I'd look it up in the jet. Judging from its size, shape, and considerable (11 kg? More?) heft, I figured it was power-packed to start someone's day on the dead foot (probably more than merely 'dead'- I'll have to watch what I point it at, the target's likely to just be obliterated completely). Heh, heh, heh. I put it in the middle of my cape so I'd at least have balance.

I went back up the elevator and slid down the stairs to find my newly endarkened servants waiting for me. Billy looked like something out of some film-noir spy movie, and fairly menacing. Good. Sarah looked... damn, she's attractive in a black bodysuit, her curves showing up in her usual covert-ops gear, tight with no wrinkles.. I've only seen her wear that once before, when that one dumbass decided to blow the lid on an operation and distribute the information via his dozens of minions. She led the clean-up crew. Fortunately, we control the media, and the general public still doesn't know anything about that.

I handed the guns to Sarah and Billy and told them to put em in an easy-to-reach place for the best quickdraws possible. If the combatants have good aim and fast reflexes, milliseconds count.

I walked to the door and pressed a small button near it. A large section of empty land near the side of the house flipped over and there my jet was, a plane not going to be available to normals for thirty years at least, a plane with the clearance codes for every nation on earth. Not like anyone would want to try to shoot it down anyway- it's **armed**.

When I opened the door, a barking, slobbering animal rushed at me fast. I petted its thick white fur, scratching it behind the ears. It ran back and forth between me and Billy, tracking mud on the carpet. Fido couldn't tell the difference between us, obviously. "Fido, we're going away for a while, and I want you here when we get back.", I said to my favorite dog. He woofed as if he understood. Maybe he did- he's engineered the same way as I am, and he's way, way smarter than the average mutt. The good thing is, dogs are loyal creatures, and there is nothing on Earth more loyal than an implanted dog. I told Billy and Sarah to follow me inside the plane.

A door opened to my touch and we climbed in, Billy sitting to my right, still silent. He was probably trying to think of something to say, just to know something, and had no idea where to start. He'll figure it out in a minute if he's really like me.

This jet can go about 10,000 miles an hour in the stratosphere, but that blows its fuel all to hell and makes us more traceable to radar and such, so I keep it down to 1200 for the long flights. Sure, I might be the master, but I'm a secret one who wants as little incidents as possible- don't want people to know we fly around all the time in stuff sizably more powerful than what they'll ever see. "Sarah, fly us to headquarters, cruising speed.", I said in my usual secret-master voice I've been trying to develop better, and she moved up to the cockpit and started pressing buttons and flipping switches, and laid in a course to the headquarters' air field. Even though I'm the Inheritor to total power, sometimes I think I sound too much like a normal. Sure I can walk the walk, but in this

business, talking the talk is more important. Daddy told me that the ratio of threat of force versus actual use of it for Dominators was on the order of 1000:1. Even other Illuminati will back down to it, although you can bet they don't like to do that. Trying to stop the most powerful and arrogant people on the planet from slaughtering each other and starting another Era of Strife is not easy no matter how many resources you have, and sounding like you can do it always helps... even if you are ten years old. Being a child ruler, I realized, would be something of a bitch unless I always displayed some mega-ass amount of power to everyone. Who wants to listen to some kid, especially when he tells you why you can't lay waste to your neighbor and take his vast resources and power? Damn Illuminated assholes. A brief vision of someone shining a flashlight into someone else's rectum came to me and I smiled.

"Umm, Howard? Don't we need a runway?", inquired Billy as Sarah powered up the engines. I let the jet's Vertical Take-Off and Landing capabilities answer me. The jet flew 200 feet in the air, above the rainforest of the island, then Sarah blasted the main jets and we were pressed to the seats by the mondo acceleration, hearing the loud blast through the thick soundproofing. I moved the Micro around in my cape so it wouldn't leave an imprint in my back. In less than a minute we were going faster than the earth's rotation, and the steady thoooooooooom of the jet's engines vibrated the seat very slightly, and the slight whoosh of the jet's pressure fans could be heard. She put it into the stratosphere and came back, taking the seat to my left.

At this point, I'm fairly sure your average normal would have started worrying. I had a speech to craft, a very unschooled servant to teach in the ways of Illuminated life, and I had to appear before a group of six thousand people that couldn't be distracted or threatened or fed bullshit to. Oh yeah, and I'd also have to worry about getting assassinated, don't forget that. I don't get worried, however, and I tried to approach this logically. Besides, five hours is a long damn time. Actually, very long for the crafting of a speech. But Daddy said it better be long and good... ugh. Even though he didn't tell me outright, I know this could literally be a matter of life and death. Most Illuminati live for their plans, and if mine contradicted theirs, they might go after me. Or just one might. And it only takes one, even though he'd be automatically sacrificing his life, he'd ensure his plan better by killing me. We really are a bunch of lunatics, held together by the tenuous threads of common interest and the presumably stronger bond of the Dominator to keep everything from falling to pieces. Ugh. Anyone want some responsibility? I've got tons. Come over here with your wheelbarrows and pile it up, I can't deal with this much.

Oh yes I can, I reminded myself. I can deal with it. I'm trained to deal with it. I'm the Inheritor, soon to be the Dominator, ready to pull the strings of the string-pullers.

Then I realized I didn't really even **have** a master plan. I take problems as they come, doing whatever whenever, solving the little things given to Inheritors to train them in manipulation. Tactics I have. Strategy I have not, because I didn't yet develop one. Would I really need one, and what could I put in it on such short notice? Hmm... what could I possibly, realistically, have for a strategy to put in the speech, anyway? I posed that question to Billy and Sarah- even though they're servants, more heads can't hurt on this one.

"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 after a couple of seconds of deliberation. I chuckled at that. So did Billy.

"The Lord of Guidance Counselors?!\"", asked Billy. I laughed hard. Damn, that's hilarious, get some super genetic-engineered rich kid dressed up, call him the Inheritor, and let him deal with the infantile whining of the Most High Masters. He started to laugh and stopped himself. D'oh, I'd been a fool with that command. Listening to Billy not-laugh would be more annoying than just hearing what sounded like myself laugh.

"Billy, you know when I told you not to laugh at me? Cancel that.", I said. His face exploded in laughter, and he bent over a bit. Then I thought for an instant why he didn't answer that speech

question, oh yeah, because he doesn't have the answer. The implants affect only well-understood actions, not thinking.

"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."

"Hey, Howard, you know all that tech shit for control you got in the basement?", asked Billy. He actually had an idea? Damn! I didn't think he even had his wits about him, and I figured he wouldn't regain them for a while.

"Yeah?", I answered.

"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?"

Which was not a bad idea at all. But there was a small thing with that, and I searched what I know of normal society's daily life (which is not a small amount, really) to answer him in terms he could understand. "Billy, that's great, but this isn't some school report you can just bullshit your way through with generalizations and half-truths. These guys want specifics, and they probably want at least some damn good idea on what my plan does to theirs. And that's for each one of them." He groaned.

"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.", I added.

"That includes that Herbert bastard and those two prissy whores who look like pigs, doesn't it?", said Sarah. "Howard, you can't possibly address anything exactly as **they**'d want them." She had a point. I've seen them in action, and she's worked for them... it's always more, more, more with them. They're great manipulators, they command lots of power, and they're real assholes to everyone. They consider their plans the topmost above others', no matter who it is that's getting in their way. Fortunately for everyone, they're getting old. If anyone was going to try stupid shit to kill me, it was them. Greed is the top deadly sin in the Illuminated department, and those three first-level dickheads exemplify it. Even among the smartest people in the world, the carnal desires control the thinking.

I rolled my eyes. Where was I going to start?! Hell, I didn't even KNOW the jobs of most of those guys! How the fuck was I supposed to know their motives?!

The screen in the jet came to life, and that forsaken Dominator was on it.

"Damn it Dominator, just why didn't you tell me about this line of bullshit earlier?!", I screamed at him. "I don't have TIME to make some giant speech- I don't even know what these guys want!"

He muttered to himself as if he wasn't the one who decided when to tell me. Maybe he wasn't. "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?" I shook my head. He groaned loudly. "Those stupid.. absolute... **idiots!** I told them, but nooooo, they have to do 'test the Inheritor's ability'. Look. You want me to drag out all the shit on them? I know you don't know it.", he uttered in one of the angriest voices I've heard him use.

I nodded. "Yeah, that'll help. Also, what the hell am I supposed to say? How my plan relates to their plans or what?", I said.

"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," Whew! "but do be prepared to answer their questions about that sort of thing." Damn! "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 the hell you're doing."

"What the hell are they smoking?", I asked.

"No idea.", he grated. "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." He blinked out and a list of names filled my screen, organized by rank and alphabetical order. World-bending secret plans were one click away.

"They recorded that.", said Sarah in her 'Covert operations? Kid stuff.' voice.

"Yeah, no shit.", I said. I took a couple of seconds to ponder the enormity of the job at hand. **Ugh.** "I do **not** want to do this right now!!", I yelled. Sarah smirked. Every time I feel pain, she's that much happier. Born servant or no, she hates my guts, and there's absolutely no point in trying to Pavlov an Illuminatus of any level. Of course, she'd really, finally, actually get used to it sometime relatively soon in our 2000+ years together, before the not-yet-perfected immortality of her engineered DNA burns some vital organ out. Fortunately for me, they managed to smooth out that little problem before I came along.

"Then why not tell us to do it? We're your servants, remember?", grated Billy in a tone that reminded me of disgruntled postal workers. Yes, he's somewhat disgruntled, yes, he's carrying an automatic weapon, and yes, he'd probably love to blow my head off. If the implants could be resisted, his head would have exploded by now. But I have bigger problems to worry about.

"Billy, do you have any idea how much I'd like to have someone else do this?" He shook his head and muttered no. "I'm the only one who can.", I said in my secret-master voice again, trying to get the high notes out. For all my power, all my abilities, I can't make my voice crack. Sigh. There are worse things to have to worry about, though. Like effectively being caught with your pants down in the middle of an important meeting, and possibly getting shot for it. Or worse yet, being put into the hall of rejected Dominators- Daddy only gave that place a passing mention, but it's terrifying, especially because there are no computer records on it.

Ugh. Double ugh. Lots and lots of ugh, with some ugh on top. I couldn't ask the Dominator to make my master plan for me, or even for help- if I did, I'd be the laughingstock of eternity. (Meet the 193rd Dominator, the one who was so stupid he had to ask his predecessor for his plan!) So, to make the plan, I'd need to ask myself the most important question before a free Illuminatus does anything: What do I really want?

Nothing, I realized. I want **nothing**. I have everything. If the world stayed completely stable for the rest of eternity, it would be bliss. Well, I do want something. I want to be back home, eating spicy food and asking Billy about the fine points of normal American life, a thing which is as far removed from me as a cactus from the Marianas Trench. I really want to tell all those dipshits to go fuck themselves and solve their own damn problems for a change. But I didn't want just that. Sure, I could say some complicated stuff I'd never follow up on, bullshit an entire loop-full of totally bogus ideas, but after that, I'd have assholes breathing down my neck waiting to stick a knife in it. So, I want to be away from this shit permanently. I want this crap to cease forever. I want what Daddy probably wanted- for all these greedy numbfucks to stop wasting time trying to grab from each other and cooperate in grabbing from the world. Of course, they're all using the same decision-making techniques I am, and they won't let my will get in their way unless I point a gun to their heads. Subtlety be damned.

Okay. Where do I start? Well, the first thing to do is offer something they want. That works on every group of people, mostly because every group- especially Illuminati- want something and are ready

to listen to one who offers it. Yes. That would do nicely. Save the authority crap for later- go right in and say "Ladies and gentlemen, I am going to give you all a..."- but what to finish it with? I realized I had said that out loud.

"Kick in the teeth?", suggested the ever-helpful Sarah. The thought of giving them all a face full of broken enamel and gushing blood lightened my thoughts and I grinned. Billy laughed.

"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.'", I said with a good deal of sarcasm dripping from my secret-master voice. Sarah was giving a look that showed just how satisfying that would be. Billy was giddy. Yeah, that's it. I'd get the assorted servants to put em in line and drag em up one at a time. The first would be slammed to his knees, and I'd punt his face like a football player. My strength and the steel toe of this white outfit would rip out the roots of some teeth, and snap others in half, caking the rest in gore. He would start screaming, then be hustled off (to his dentist, probably) so I could give a good kick to the next one. All in all, the overused mouths of those fat power-savengers would be losing them a sizable amount of red stuff. Oh, the glory. Unfortunately, I'd have to deal with a lot of maimed, power-wielding, very pissed off lunatics carrying weapons with serious homicidal potential.

Not that I don't already...

"No, no... something that they'd want.", I said.

"A dick up their asses?", snapped Sarah. Billy was almost on the floor, he was laughing so hard. So was I. And she's probably right- Illuminati are remarkably free in their sexuality. Of course, whether or not they'd want to be cornholed by me is open to question.

"No, Sarah... something that doesn't involve pain or suffering or loss to them.", I said between gasps for air after laughing so hard.

"Hmm... suppose flat out-and-out payola wouldn't work.. 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."

"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.", I said, my voice having some chagrin from the simple fact that I don't really know what the hell to say.

"Howard.. the best way to do this is just to look at their plans, and make your plan in line with theirs, with some smacks of originality. I've seen this before from obsequious toads, and it usually works. If you're really in **that** much danger, which I kind of doubt, don't offend anyone and don't step on any toes.", said Sarah in a clinical tone. Billy, choking on his previous laughter, managed an evil smirk. They both knew I didn't like the idea one bit. The things I might end up doing 'in line' with the other Illuminated plans may be detrimental to me or my power base. And the very idea of an Inheritor acting like an obsequious toad... grr! Pisses me off to no end, even though she could be right.

"Well, let's take a look at these plans of theirs.", I said, and clicked the access last file button on the jet's computer. Twenty names appeared. I steadily went through all of them, looking at some points of interest. A few had to do with state subjugation and banana republics, a few others had some political shit, but most of them dealt with one thing in particular, which is really our main business anyway- mind control. Mind control through subliminals. Mind control through pills. Mind control through schools. Mind control through brainwashing. Mind control through religion. Mind control, and more mind control, several plans for it on every one of the top Illuminati named. Enough mind control to fill several seasons of 'Pinky and the Brain' and 'Nowhere Man' combined. (I watch many of the conspiracy shows given to the normals, for the giggle factor if nothing else.) It occurred to me that whatever I'm talking about better have something to do with mind control. Then I realized something else.

The only people walking around with implanted servants are the Illuminati who developed them, some more high levels, the Dominator, and me. And the Dominator and I have more Enforcers than anyone, probably as many as all of them combined. This is new stuff. The implants were developed a bit more than a decade ago by a relatively small group of neurosurgeons and engineers, and the secret's been under very, very close wraps this whole time. Of course, we do have a way to mass-produce them. And they are naught but little precise hunks of metal and energy. I didn't like that thought- little hunks of metal and energy being able to totally circumvent the decision-making processes in the brain. Not a happy thought for Illuminati, and that brought up another issue- what if they thought I was going to implant **them**? That would be far more glorious than kicking them in the teeth, but also far more suicidal. Nah... I'd kill that idea before it even entered their minds.

I imagine if I really wanted to I could offer them all free Enforcers. It would not be hard, and it would not be expensive. Just hand out one or two, to all, for free, and tell them that is just a taste. Considering their uses, they'd all jump at the chance. Such a proposal would also have the bonus effect of laying waste to all the Illuminati who don't really have enough intelligence to be in there in the first place, as they fuck up and their own servants gleefully turn them all into hot slag. Nasty fate. Heh, heh, heh. (Billy and Sarah both noticed me chuckling in my well-developed Conspiratorial Laughter™. One of the top things about having servants with minds is there's always someone there to listen to you.) Of course, that could be my fate, but I'm smarter than that. Just remember to see things from the servant's point of view and you'll be all right.

Then again, despite its merits, if I did that then I might be seen as a weak fool who hands out free things as peace offerings in the good old "please don't hurt me!" diplomacy fashion. Which would spell my ruin. A brooding feeling I've had since that accursed Dominator told me I might get killed came to my attention. It took me a moment to realize the feeling I had was known as anxiety, and I marveled at it a little while, testing its warm, shaky grip. Not pleasant at all. I drove my thoughts back to the matter at hand.

Giving's probably the best solution anyway. Start with a piece of bait, and reel the big fish in. Make them cooperate if they want the rewards. Make them increase your power to increase their own, and turn it into a sort of contest- who can kiss the Dominator's ass the fastest to get the latest high-tech gadget? Implanted servants decrease hassle unbelievably in the realms of manipulation, command, and that old Pavlovian relic, discipline. And with an implanted servant who's your clone... hey, who says you can't be in two places at once?

Hell, I could tell them I'm going to unleash a plan to implant **every** servant, direct or indirect, of theirs. While, of course, asking for small returns from each one of them. Little things add up, and when you multiply a fairly small gift of estate by six thousand, it becomes quite a gift indeed.

And why not do that? Hell, I don't have to look weak. I could look like a benefactor, judiciously handing his supporters their rewards. And the other Illuminati have no problem with me being the mighty dispute-settling Emperor of Earth- internal strife is not a happy thing- just as long as I didn't get in their or their plans' way. Admittedly, implanting servants would render pointless some mind-control plans in production, but no one would admit to being outdated before his plan was even started.

While I'm at it... why not implant the whole world?! Ooh yeah. Being immortal, I'm eventually going to become the secrecy-ending Dominator who finally gives us what we've always wanted- total control, no restrictions, nothing in our way. Everything we want for the rest of our lives, hands down, no more beating around the bush, no more bullshit, no more resource-wasting public manipulation. We're pretty close to that, exerting plenty of influence over the sheeple of the world. None of them know what's going on, and ensuring that is part of the job. Implants mean that they can know everything and not do anything about it. Of course, I'd have to keep a close watch on who's giving the commands to which segments of them, why, and exactly what words they use. Translations, naturally, can pose a problem. Sigh. More work for the smart ones... or, very intelligent implanted

servants with very, very explicit instructions.

Of course, there's risks. There's always risks. Go too fast, normals start noticing things. Even if we weren't uncovered (which, of course, we won't be), if the masses figured out their 'elected' leaders were under the control of a powerful, secret organization, it would be a setback. (We never speak of ourselves being fucked all to hell. We just call it a setback.) The risk of this is pretty low but shit happens.

I thought of an introduction and some assorted other things. I knew I was going to have to tell them exactly who I was and what I was for, and I should probably save the 'I'm going to give you all Enforcers' bit until the middle of the speech when they start getting bored. It'll add to the shock.

Then I'd probably need to go through a lot of ritual before they just pronounced me Dominator and started bowing down to me, a false gesture because they're willing to blow my head off. Or is that why Inheritors get killed there? Because killing the Inheritor holds less weight than offing the Dominator? Yeah, the death for offing the Dominator is an hour longer or something.

I thought of exactly what to say to each one... couldn't just go right up and tell the Triumvirate of Assholes what they were, had to act all benevolent and powerful and controlling and all that other symbolic crap. I've honestly never cared. I judge people by what they can **do**, not what titles they hold.

There's no point in memorizing anything word-for-word or even writing it down. I'll just make details up as I go along, according to the mood of the six thousand secret masters in front of me, some of whom are probably ready to blow my head off. I know what I'm going to talk about- writing it word-for-word is pointless and if I continue with a particular point they don't like, that's bad juju to the twenty-third power. I realized I was doing the mad procrastinator's way out, but what the hell would be the point of torturing myself twice?

Besides, I've got another possible cause of fatality- two of them, in fact- right here on the plane with me.

Chapter 5

So I decided to kick back and relax. It should come to me steadily, portions and ideas dripping into my mind the way a big decision should be made. Why the hell did I think this would be hard? Sure, most decisions are made in a few days- but that's a few days of blending it in with other work, not straight. Forget the mad procrastinator's way- in this situation, it probably is mad. Very mad, actually. I hate doing long, boring, drawn-out shit, but in this situation I better just do my fucking best- which is usually way up there. Like Daddy said, there are some things that an Inheritor, or any Illuminatus for that matter, simply has to do. I hate this whole bit, I wish those assholes would just fucking know their place, but they don't. They're greedy to the nth power, and I'm their leader so long as they accept me, and so to some degree I have to appease them.

But, for the moment, I was way too curious about Billy and I had a feeling he had some things he wanted to know too. Information is a commodity like anything else- the nice thing about information is when you give it to someone else you don't lose it for yourself. It is copiable, translatable, and malleable. He was vibrating with fear so I asked him, "What are you afraid that I'm going to do to you, Billy?" That was what I wanted to know. He was never free in the first place, and every bit of evidence I have suggests he knew that. I'm not all that familiar with the individual psychology of normals, but Billy isn't a normal anyway.

He seemed to falter a bit, fumbling for the answer in his shaking brain. I hope that wears off soon. He's giving me the chills with that and if I told him to stop, the vibrations would just get smaller and quicker. "Anything... you want." That utterly baffled me. To him it probably made absolute sense, but to me it didn't make a grain's worth of sense- he knew I'd have no reason to-

Oh. Duh. My thoughts kicked back to around my ninth birthday and Daddy was on the viewscreen again, telling me about all the fine points of normalcy and control, and the reason for the freedom illusion was finally explained. Why we let the Americans (and most other countries) believe they're free is simple- it improves stability. A people will not attempt to liberate themselves if they think they already have it. Add a complicated, unintelligible bureaucracy, a system of fake politicians, and as long as we pretend America is listening to the normals, they'll fight and die for whatever we want- such things usually being the control and assimilation of less industrialized nations. So, many parts of American culture are totally against the direct mind control they're so afraid of in cults and their own fringe groups. The very idea is associated with hate and fear over there. Ironical, isn't it? Great for us most of the time, but trying to get good servants from such a place is not easy.

Ergo, he probably believed he was in the literal, Christian Hell.

"Exactly. That's what I plan to do.", I said. "Billy, I can't afford information disparity between us. If you don't know something vitally important, ask it." When I realized that lacked something, I finished, "One question at a time."

"Just what... the hell.. have you done to me?!", he spat out.

I didn't know the exact list, but it's big. "Sarah, what did they do, anyway?" Sarah didn't mastermind this particular acquisition but she's done them a few times.

"Let's see... First, they used a temporary 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 contagions left. Then they vaccinated him for every disease known to man- in his case, including AIDS. Then they did some detoxification, definitely, then.. 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." Billy grimaced.

"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." His eyes bugged out of his head. He believed everything I was saying without question- not because he's a good servant, I realized, but because he'd believe anything at this point. "So if it's not fatal, it'll heal up."

"So why didn't you tell me about this earlier? Like- years?"

I sighed. "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, 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."

He took a second to ponder the brutally obvious. "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**?", he said between tears and clenched teeth. Okay, that is getting annoying. I've seen and made people cry horribly before (all comes with the job), but hearing and watching myself do it is an annoyance all its own. It makes me wonder just how far I am from that.

I could have easily told him to stop, but I knew that would bring about no good. One of the first things about using implants is they don't affect the subconscious mind at all. Whatever he can't do consciously, I can't tell him to do. He'd freeze up again. And I could undo that with commands, certainly, but I knew from all my training as an Inheritor what that would do. The part of his brain that determines actions would be in a minefield, unable to step in any direction. I may as well feed it to Fido and make another Enforcer out of him. Gah! This is the second time I've been frustrated today.

"Until you or I get waxed, exactly. And I don't plan on that happening any time soon.", I said, acting confident (yes, acting- watching your clone cry is not a happy thing, and it's really starting to get to me). That's an important point- our lives are not infinite, they're indefinite. You can't point at us and say 'I can guarantee that person is going to be a corpse in two hundred years.' as you could a normal. The same with the age-related diseases. And as for all that crap about non-regenerating cells in the brain and muscle, we keep a constant supply of immature cells in our bodies and regrow everything.

He did not react with screaming as I expected; he did not cry more. He put his arms and head over his knees, wiping his face off. He did not sob at all. His muscle structure seemed to break apart as his tenseness dissolved. I realized then that something had broken somewhere inside him- not his mind, but a shield, the shield of normalcy which so many dumbfuck sheeple hide behind. He was totally uprooted. I had no idea it would happen so quickly, but here he is. Whether his freedom illusion is smashed or not is open to question, but his internal mental structure no longer operates on American moral philosophy, and a new self could develop- hopefully an Illuminated self, one more conniving, opportunistic, and reflexive, one that can handle the challenges that would come up in the course of his life. Even Sarah has changed a bit, from a simple assassin into someone who can think about the reactions of her actions, and anticipate- because it's part of her job now, she is basically my military advisor, knowing details I don't about operational activity. "Finally.", I thought out loud.

Sarah knew what I was talking about. "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?" I read Billy's face carefully as she said "accept it". Anyone with an active freedom illusion would have gritted his teeth or at least flinched at the words. He did neither.

"Well, the impossible just happened.", I said with a slight grin. She muttered something about Lucky Little Fuckers A and B.

"What?", asked Billy.

I told him everything I know, in summary, about the freedom illusion. He did not seem surprised in the least. I doubted a nuke strike on his ass could surprise him, after what we did to him.

"So it's all a lie, isn't it, Master...", he said, with unshocked sadness. "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 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." He nodded.

"Yes.. Howard. Speaking of 1984.. why did you use Orwellian as a swear word back in the arcade?"

"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 across America." Billy had his mouth slightly open. I doubt he's used to talking to intelligent people, and hearing the obvious discussed like that.

"Holy fuck..", he said without closing his mouth.

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

"So no one knows where I am?"

"Unless you count us, nope. No normal currently knows anything about you." I opened another window on the terminal and looked his project up, and read the official line. "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!" I grinned and chuckled. He rolled his eyes.

"What about her?"

"Sarah, tell him."

"Billy...", she began, "I'm not a normal. I don't have any identification. No social security number, no parents, nothing. 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 operation 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." Sarah shook her head slowly. Billy winced. She really did have no idea what the fuck was really going on, then again, no one ever told her. That's why it's called a conspiracy.

"Billy, you have no idea how nice it is to have an assassin around the house.", I said, grinning. His mouth cracked open and he just chuckled, shaking his head.

"I could have really used one.", he cracked. "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."

"Yeah, I can see it now.. 'Assholes found dead in their beds! Local community dances for joy! More at 11!'", he joked. I cracked up. Illuminated power used on the local level is the highest order of overkill. It's like killing a fly with a nuclear weapon.

"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. Now for this speech... ergh!"

I opened up a word processing program, brought out every text I ever read on the subject of control, looked up the power, interests, and ability of the top-ranking Illuminati, and did quite a bit of muttering. Let's see ... Gates would probably want this sort of monopoly but then we have the West faction over there opposing it (and only they know why, there seems to be no correlation). "Better let Gates take care of that himself.", I muttered. Let's see.. saleable drugs, ritalin and all that, guys fooling around with who controls what in that department, I'll leave all that alone.. fuck, we've got

some asshole detecting miniscule amounts of our drugs, we better off him and his whole paranoid foundation- fire would work well, we could do that without secrecy violations.. shit, this one guy's a MAJOR thorn in the side of about fifty of us, he uses secrecy too, dunno why he's still alive.. why the hell did the Dominator leave all these fucking project-space timeshare programs unsolved, I can't leave that open, they'd crucify me.. With some small help from Sarah I had a lot of it done within forty minutes, most of it not even involving the speech- I'd solve their inter-personal problems, send them my decisions, and not have to announce them to the rest of the group. If I pull this off right I'll make zero enemies in there. I got a pounding headache from all the annoying work, my pulse doing the Monkey on my brain. Or maybe it's just the fact that this is the first time I've had to do this sort of thing in earnest.

"Hold up.. Billy? Read this shit over, and tell me if there's anything particularly crazy or esoteric."

He read it over, chuckled a few times, and pointed out that it was all crazy and esoteric. I asked him for the worst parts. "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 shit 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."

"You're fuckin crazy."

"By whose standards? The normals'?" He shrugged and said yeah. I got to work on the how-to parts... who could do what. I realized I was probably doing way more than I should, but what did they care? They'd love me even more, because this plan helps all of them. Besides, I'll be the Dominator. And boiled down to its simplest form, the Dominator dominates. And at least, if they fucking work together, I won't have all that shit the previous one had to do. Naturally, Murphy's Law is going to tear that apart, but even Dominators have hope...

Chapter 6

After twenty more minutes of general haranguing over details, refinement, and purification of the speech, it was finally done, sitting there on the onboard computer in full black and white. Yay. It's done. Now I have a semi-cramped plane, a new servant, and four hours to kill.

I looked to my right to find Billy zenned out. He could have been out terraforming Mars from the look on his face, facing straight ahead, body not moving, not even any leg twitches. He wasn't here. He blinked, he breathed, his heart beat, but that was about it. If I had told him to do an Enforcer impersonation, this would be it.

"Billy, wake up.", I said.

"I am awake.", he replied in a perfect monotone of a robot kid's voice. He continued to look straight ahead. Something primordial and sulfuric was boiling deep inside of him. I could almost smell it. It did not take me long to realize he would have gleefully ripped my throat out in a single, savage stroke, had he not been implanted. His previous moral system was probably in tatters, but he had formed a new one while I was making the-

'Stop right the fuck there.', my inner, been-there-done-that, mobster voice said, ringing in my head with its grating 1920's downtown voice. 'He's not a normal, you asshole. He's your **clone**. You have to stop asking yourself what a normal would do and start asking yourself what **you** would do.'

I really, really, really did not want to think about that. But I know this much- I wouldn't like it. And I definitely would respond worse than strangely. If I wasn't who I am, some researcher would have a field day doing nature-vs-nurture on us as separated twins. Gah! What the hell were they thinking? He isn't a servant, he's a time bomb with implants! Note to self: Do not give him any loopholes at all, or I'll regret it. Other note to self: Giving him no loopholes may reduce his efficiency a bit. Even the U.S. Navy readily admits that total control leads to more problems.

"Billy, are you still sane?", I asked. Which was extremely important. An insane person may not respond to implants effectively. This doesn't go so far as 'they don't affect anyone crazy' but it does go as far as 'they don't affect anyone who doesn't know what they're doing'. This is important. As long as the conscious mind remains in the driver's seat, no worries. If he loses it in the worst way, it could be serious trouble. But I don't think that'll happen. I have so many genetic brain protections it isn't even funny. Of course, that goes for everything. It's why I eat so much- and why I'm immortal.

"Yes, Howard.", he replied in the monotone again. If it wasn't for the overboiling rage oozing out of his body like slime from a slug, I would have taken him to have gone totally mechanical. Which is what he probably considered himself by now. A machine. Not the result of any moral system, probably not the actions of anyone in some warped sci-fi movie, just his own conclusions. And those conclusions held some logic. Implant a human and he does whatever he understands you say- just like a computer. Only a computer doesn't hate you like you were the Archenemy (™) and usually doesn't want to kill you. I felt like Dr. Frankenstein. Fuck. Even on the best of days, things can go wrong. Then again, things can always go wrong.

My thoughts flipped back to when I was 7, and I was being taught the finer points of how to think reasonably. I realized a while ago how much conditioning they chucked at me on that- and Daddy always chucked the words 'get what you want' at me. Always. You don't think for its own sake. You always think for the end purpose, to **get what you want**. How to think without mistakes, logic errors, or fuckups. How to think creatively. And the words 'get what you want' are extremely effective, even though I knew their manipulative purpose. But even though it was manipulating me, I didn't mind- because I really would get what I want, and with wealth and power, the value of what I can get is massive and great- such as servants, advanced technology, and greater control over the world.

Generally, everything one usually learns on their own, I was taught. And one of the most surprising things was 'If the most sensible choices don't work, use the least sensible for a change.' It operates on the same basic principles as whacking your TV when the picture goes fuzzy. Sure, it isn't supposed to be good, but it works, dammit. And I don't have the patience to fool around with what doesn't work, unless it's fun or interesting to fool around with it. Which is why I love Billy so much. He's random as hell. Owning other human beings enables you to go through at least most of their brains, directly editable or not, and see what you can find. It's fun. I already did it with Sarah's, but Sarah led a fairly boring lifestyle- unless you count the assassinations, the maiming, and all the various facets of using force that Illuminati do to stay in power. It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it, and she's the best there is. And she never went quite as worried, crazy, or emotional as Billy is. But Billy operates, just like all other seemingly chaotic systems, on a very complex order. There's a method to his madness.

Although we don't have quite the regenerative powers of Wile E. Coyote or Bugs Bunny, a set dose of lunacy always helps. (I never understood that. How can you have a limited amount of a thing that intrinsically has no limits and, when finding them, does everything it can to break them? There is still no such thing as lunacy in a can, although there are loony pills.) The sane thing to do would probably be just to treat him as if he wasn't doing it at all (implants + pre-existing minds = emotional reaction, this is known fact), but hey, I have 4 hours to kill. An amazingly nonsensical (and downright stupid) thing to do would be to tell him to chill out and stop the damn machine bit before he really starts to piss me off- but then I'd have him questioning his every move, especially since there are plenty of situations where you want your servants to act like machines.

A totally insane and off-the-wall thing to do would be to ask Billy how he was doing. That's too mean, even for me. Even though his mind has finally accepted it, he still feels the initial hate of getting controlled, especially under what to him are unusual circumstances. It would send his mind back down to Hell and profit me nothing. And I didn't want to watch the servile, short-haired version of myself cry again. It's eerie as hell- you're doing it, but you're not doing it, you're watching you doing it. Hmm.. oh, duh, there's lots of ways to get a point across without having to give commands. "Billy, have you really lost something up there or are you only pretending to act like a machine?", I asked.

"Pretending.", he said.

"Why?" Curiosity compelled me, and curiosity is one of the few things I'm susceptible to.

"Because if I allow my soul to resurface, I'll go insane." Again, that rage boiled just below the surface. He had a very deep desire to rip my throat out.

I giggled, grinned, and put my right arm around him. "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."

He sighed. "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.", he said in a substantially more normal voice. I chuckled at the thought of a screaming girl being chucked down a very deep hole by Enforcers.

"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."

"They're basically lobotomized, Billy. Born without souls.", Sarah said to make it blunt and obvious.

"Sounds like my old gym teacher...", Billy muttered absently. The idea of an Enforcer teaching gym class caused me to crack up. Even though I've never been inside a school, I know what it is and how it works, and picturing a seven foot tall Enforcer with muscles up and down his body teaching some elementary-schoolers the right way to use their muscles... well, it technically can be done. But I wouldn't recommend it.

I clicked the recliner button and a footrest swung up. I slumped.. but I needed to lay down. I swung around, putting my head in Sarah's lap and my feet in Billy's, taking the Micro out of my cape and chucking it on the floor. Bored, I reached up, called up the screen, and punched up elementary information on it.

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. (Units cannot be expressed in monetary terms, for they transcend money and refer to a combination of time, manpower, and physical resources. We would use them as currency if we didn't decide to avoid doing that.)

(some history stuff which I skipped)

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, non-alkaline (acceptable pH range is 5.5 - 9) hydrogen sources usable

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

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

Additional Notes: Microwave energy is a form of light and is subject to the same laws of physics, most notably that of reflection. The potential of danger to the operator is enormous and unavoidable.

Holy shit. Five hundred **mega calories per second** of pure microwave heat? No wonder this thing burns up quick. The fusion explained the weight- the 'pilot light' (I have no idea how they actually do that) housing was certainly lined with thick lead, to stop gamma radiation leakage. The mass is no problem for me, but added weight always sucks. Also, it was filled with water which I'd have to carry around. Oh well. The price one must pay for hand-held total destruction. Billy read the screen, realized what it was, and his eyes bulged out of his head again. He looked down at the Micro as if it were death incarnate- it is. More powerful than several bazookas, probably even more powerful than the rest of the plane put together, and that's right, kiddies- it runs on **water**. And I don't even recognize my own damn power anymore, I juggle so much of it, and finally I'd get the opportunity to actually throw it around. Yay! Fucking finally. Having cool stuff is one thing. **Doing** things, especially creative, fun, possibly productive things with cool stuff is quite another.

I yawned. "Billy, what was it like going to school, anyway?", I asked. Always wanted to know that. Sure, I know what it's supposed to be- but what are the (inevitably twisted in some way) results?

"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?"

"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." I pretty much quoted word-for-word from Daddy, with a couple of minor semantic differences.

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

"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's belly chuckled below me, inadvertently massaging my head along with the steady, very muffled h-m-m-m-m of the jet engines only a few feet away. "Only in emergencies.", I said. "Like I

said, we need to let em believe they're free. So far, anyway."

"Yeah..", he muttered, "so far."

And again, I felt that sort of glee. I was happy again. I'd killed a five-hour project in an hour, and it was finally done, all that crap about who controls what and who should get what power and how many kicks in the teeth should be delivered at what strength to whom. "Bureaucracy is kept to a minimum here.", the old guy I used to call Daddy said, a LOT.. but that was utter bullshit. It's kept to a minimum when they fucking feel like it. I suppose the same was true of the school system and their local administration. Fuck, do I hate feeling like a normal- doing annoying bullshit is supposed to be their province, not mine. Then again, every Illuminatus has to do annoying bullshit as part of the game sooner or later. Oh well. Writing it is done. Speaking it will probably be worse, but that's in the future and thinking about it will bring me nothing but that annoying fear-like thing normals call anxiety and I refer to as the mind mosquito. I snuggled on Sarah's soft belly and closed my eyes. Ahh... much better. This is the life, although there are annoying parts to it. Oh well. At least I've got Billy now. I felt the higher-order thinking in my brain retreat until it would be needed again, my head decompressed somewhat, and I could let myself go a while.

Chapter 7

My muscles and my mind de-tensed. I put my intellectualism away for a while, kicked back, and relaxed, determined to spend this last remaining time as Inheritor happily. "So how did you deal with people two-fifths your IQ, Billy?", I asked, grinning.

"I avoided most of them.. two fifths? It felt like less!", he exclaimed. He was beginning to understand the implications of the truth-telling command I gave him. Most people- even Illuminati, even Daddy- don't realize how much lying and exaggeration they do when they talk. What Billy says to me has to be literally true, and he had to search for the right words. "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, 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." He forced back tears to say the last part. **"I got what I wished for!!"**, he exploded in sorrow.

"Yup. And now you're the genie.", Sarah said with a smirk.

"I saw that movie.", muttered Billy.

"What?", I asked.

"Aladdin.", they answered in unison. 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." Sarah's talking tickled the back of my head and I rubbed it against her belly.

"Complete with restrictions.", I figured out.

"Yup. Saw it while tracking my fifteenth kill."

Billy looked startled for some reason. "What the hell would someone the Illuminati are trying to kill be doing watching a Disney movie?!", he asked with surprise. The same thing as one singing opera, playing soccer, watching television, or writing sick Internet stories. I didn't tell him, though- it would be better if he learned that on his own, along with everything else that goes along with it.

"He was a family man. Eight year old boy, six year old girl."

A day ago, Billy's trained moral belief system would have left him shocked. Here, his lack of surprise for anything and what he saw as unusual circumstances just caused him to ask "Why?" in a neutral tone.

"They never told me for any of em."

"So how'd you do it?", he asked with morbid curiosity. I felt an odd feeling creep over me, and I realized it was because I simply wasn't used to two people having a conversation next to me, especially when one of them has my voice.

"Poke to the heart.", she said evenly. Billy looked puzzled, so Sarah continued, "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, the impact goes down to the heart, and presto! Instant corpse."

"So what about the healthy people?"

"If you can think of it, we've probably done it.", Sarah said in the feminine version of the Grim Reaper's voice.

"Ugh.."

I was listening with less and less enthusiasm, and I realized I was drifting off to sleep, even though I had gotten up less than two hours ago. Oh well. I need a lot of it, and I get it when I can. I've been woken up by Daddy's buzzer more than once. Idle daydreams danced through my head and I closed my eyes. There's a billion things that could happen there... everything from them being happy-assed to attempted assassination. (It's always attempted. I try not to visualize myself getting killed. That's bad juju.)

"This is nothing like what I expected.", muttered Billy, his voice coming from far away.

Sarah chuckled once more, massaging the back of my head again. "Oh, you're going to have to get used to that. In addition to running the world, we also specialize in fucked up shit.", I said with a sleepy grin.

"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**.", informed Sarah brusquely.

"I feel like I'm in a book.. with a schizophrenic as the author.", he said resignedly.

"Welcome to your own private piece of Hell, Billy. Just feel lucky Satan over here doesn't believe in torment.", she said. I chuckled. I drifted off into the half-sleep of bored people everywhere who are lying down. Billy hung his head and nothing was said for the rest of the trip. I didn't sleep, but I came close, my mind adrift with what-ifs and plans. What if they say "no, we won't accept him" or something similar.. no way they're doing that, not now! What if some asshole interrupts me... then he's target practice, nuff said, I don't put up with shit.. what if they don't like my plan? Then I guess I'll have to change it.. What if all hell breaks loose.. I'm armed... what if my servants freak out.. they've already done that, and I have to remember to cover all bases with commands..

My laying-down position got to me and I realized that I was losing awareness.

"Billy... it's not going to be.. what you think it's going to be."

"I believe you, Howard.", I heard him say before I went farther into sleep, and may have dozed off a couple of times before I finally did sleep.

And I dreamed.

Chapter 8

It was one of those rare lucid dreams- I realized I was dreaming, but felt no compulsion to wake up. I love these things. For a moment, I can live in true fantasy; the laws of physics stop working in an environment I experience. The jet's steady hum had crossed over, and I heard it. I saw nothing at all, literally- not even blackness. Just nothing. And then a white-clad figure stepped out of nowhere, and in two instants I realized it could have been no one but myself.

"My childhood is over.", my apparition spoke, its face in a slight frown. "I'll play the same games, do all the same things, climb the same trees, still do whatever I want. But I'll have to do things just because they need doing. And some of those things really won't be worth doing." I realized the contradiction immediately. "Power's just there. And that's why I'm here, because I don't even want power. I just use it. They're greedy, I just don't care as long as I get what I want." I've never consciously spoke or thought these things before- just taken them for granted. Why was this guy saying the obvious?

"But since they want it, I'm going to have to **fight** for it. And I'm just going to have to keep fighting and fighting and fighting and **fighting and fighting and fighting and fighting and fighting!!!**", my other-self spoke, a scary chaos growing in the dream with every repetition, but it wasn't fighting. It was running. It was running from something... something **wrong**. I woke up with a terrible wrongness in the back of my mind, as if something bad had happened, something more than fatal. It was definite, but small, and it passed away quickly.

Fighting what? Who? Destruction is a natural part of world leadership. People will disobey, people will get too greedy, people will do things that I can't allow them to do without retribution. And so I will strike back. As for 'fighting and fighting and fighting', well, that's getting carried away... and what was that? Just a bad dream, not even a nightmare, not by any standard. I tried to get it back, to ask myself questions, but it would not come back, and I would not fall asleep. Fuck! I hate it when that happens. There goes that dream. Oh well, I have reality to worry about, and the cliché holds water- truth really **is** stranger than fiction. Much stranger.

And worry I did. Even a few hours is forever when you have something hanging over your head and a metabolism like mine, and being ten years old- even for me- still reduces patience. It's a fact I realized years ago, that my own youth was the cause of some of my blunders and some of my hastiness. I don't fret over things like that- I **deal** with them, in a way that normals don't. Another cliché is true- realizing your own youth is a way to maturity. Which is not a definite concept. As of right now, I am officially mature, because I'm going off to what effectively says 'I am grown up enough' - grown up enough to control the world. Or maybe not. Perhaps Daddy and the rest want me in as a child- want me in because I won't be too domineering (the line between 'domineer' and 'dominate' is fine, but important) or destructive or headstrong, because they know that I'm smart enough to listen to them when in power and actually get some mutualism into the place. Mutualism- the act of suspending one's greed in return for the friendship of another- is vital to an organization like ours. It means that the use of force may be lessened. It means that plans may be made more efficiently, it means that a sense of community and belonging may be formed, and it means that the high-strung emotions of this place may be relaxed a bit to make way for greater ease in our labor. And, needless to say, between the greed, the selfishness, and the backstabbing, there isn't much room for mutualism. We survive anyway.. but a Dominator who will remember the will of his organization will definitely strike a blow for advancement and against petty feuds.

Fucking hell. I think too fucking fast! This isn't spending any time... the rest of the two hours drudged by. I constructed what-if scenarios in my head and played them out a dozen different ways. Billy

and I talked for a while, and I once caused him to utter "Fuuuuuuck..." when I also showed him a device of my own invention, a cross between a hang-glider and a helicopter- mine plus the reality checks of several mechanical engineers. Fortunately for my health, I can admit that my inventiveness sometimes exceeds my knowledge of engineering or applied physics- yet another facet of controlling my own ego. Some shit doesn't work that you think would work- other shit works that you've long considered impossible.

Sarah was much more used to waiting than the two of us and she fell into what was basically a trance, a trance caused by all the hours-long transportation times of going from one kill to another, doing the soldier's duty: to wait. I played video games with no interest, I tried to sleep, I ate, I went to the bathroom via a special slot in the seat. When Billy found out they were there, he wasted no time in relieving himself of a massive, foul-smelling load of waste (Just what have those normals been feeding him?!), causing me to vocally remind myself of the air-exchange machinery, causing him to comment that I'm even quicker with the fart jokes than the wit adepts at his school.

Eventually, some nutrient bars later, we got within fifteen minutes. I forced myself to relax, to compact my worry back into itself, to implode all my fear and my what-ifs, and I readied myself for what was to come. A wrong word and they could all be against me; a wrong sentence and several bullets could be heading my way. Just.. relax, Howard. Relax.. fear and the mind mosquito will only make it more likely that you'll fuck up.

I made the most obvious preparation. "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.", they simultaneously said.

I closed my eyes and took a single deep breath. Air in... fear out. I opened my eyes and realized I was good to go, fear-free, for hours. Within another ten minutes, the destination was reached, and Sarah landed the plane- not like the autopilot couldn't have done it itself. She's so used to doing things manually.. then again, that sort of figures. We hopped out of the plane and began a sequence of trams, elevators, and very quick security clearances. The entire inside of the installation was unpainted, made with the same steel my mansion is. Wary Enforcer guards, automatic defenses (don't tease the sentrygun, kids), and the general sense of sheer power all gave the same impression: this place is **secure**, and he who tries to get around or through it won't even have a corpse left to bury.

After going down a few hallways and finally to a backstage room next to the auditorium, I looked at a wall clock and found I was there fifteen minutes early- before looking at a figure already present in the room. It was Daddy. There was no emotional reaction; it's not like I even have a real father, and it's not like I wasn't raised by machines. If he had asked if I had the speech done, I would have said no, just to see his reaction. He wasn't quite that patronizing. "Howard,", he said, in a voice no different than that I had heard on the speakers so many times, "you already know." And then he walked out the stage door, off to declare his resignation. I watched, unseen, from the side. My silent incantation had worked- I felt no worry or fear, and the mind mosquito fell into the bug zapper and died.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati!", he exclaimed, in a booming voice, standing in front of the furniture that I'd sit in during my speech. Without a microphone, it would have echoed across the auditorium. With, it resounded from the walls, with no feedback. There was massive, dignified applause. "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.", he said in an obviously rehearsed tone. The room went dead quiet. "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" (he was neglecting the chair behind him) "is one of the masses, who humbly requests that you kind sirs and ladies accept the presence of his chosen replacement, Inheritor Howard." More applause. I suppose now would be about the time a normal would feel the effect known as 'stage fright'. Instead, I was feeling a curious lack of fear- a brave, driving force of pure courage and will. I will face them, and I will tell them, and I will not back down.

I stepped onto the stage, took a look at my surroundings, and applause welcomed me as Daddy was ceremonially led away by two Enforcer guards, off to enjoy his retirement. Needless to say, he'd be watching the recording of my speech several times after he got home. I slowly blinked once in an instant of meditation, readying my mind to make sure he'd have something worth watching.

Chapter 9

I was wrong- the unaided booming voice of the previous Dominator would not have carried across the auditorium. Not to say that his voice wasn't booming, it was simply that the auditorium was absolutely plain **huge**. With six thousand faces staring at me, each one with its own particular power behind it, I had no choice but to accept how large the auditorium and its number of inhabitants was. And I had no choice but to stare back at the mass of faces, and I had no choice but to take my position and allow my servants to take their places, Billy to my right and Sarah to my left, and I had no logical choice but to introduce myself.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati!!!", I shouted in an echoed, booming voice no normal could have replicated, only slightly high in pitch because of my age. I got twice the applause of my predecessor. This place is soundproofed, I'm sure- but without it, everyone in the whole installation could have heard it. There were no idle hands or bored half-clappers. Every single eye in the room was focused on my face, twelve thousand invisible lasers piercing my flesh. Every single hand was active in creating clapping noise, a cacophony that sounded more like a waterfall than anything else. Then it stopped with the quickness of a faucet turning off, and every ear was bent on hearing my voice, every mind intent on my exact words and their exact meaning or, if I chose to speak with allusions and/or make references, meanings. I did not feel anything out of the ordinary. After all, I was **born** for this.

I took a deep breath, folded the pole of the speaker's podium, chucked it away over my shoulder (clang, clatter) just to demonstrate how good I am, and began.

"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," Murmuring. "a product of Northberg." More murmuring from the far back. What the fuck are these people murmuring about? Isn't all this common knowledge? "And I have been created with one task in life: to serve as the Dominator of the Illuminati." Serve is the correct word, in this case- normal politicians may speak of themselves as 'public servants', but I am the masters' servant, the one who gets all the combined dignity and indignity of being the judge, jury, and executioner for the powers that be.

Now how did all that go? Oh, yeah. Every other Dominator has said their speeches with either plenty of preparation, stage notes, or both. I have nothing except my exceptional memory, which can handle this litany of oaths and promises. It makes for excellent theater, not using cue cards or other references- especially on such short notice. "As Dominator, I promise to uphold the power of the Illuminati, to uphold secrecy until the Day of Exposition, to be a fair judge," There's a joke for ya. "to refrain from excessive alcohol," There's another joke for ya, but it's been in there for the last two hundred years and it's not going anywhere. "to avoid recruitment of the unworthy, to defend my fellow Illuminatus, to dispense justice as I see fit," That really is exactly how it goes. I laughed for minutes the first time I heard it, then learned that it was changed in 1850 from 'to dispense justice in a regular manner'. "and to choose an- no, ladies and gentlemen, I just told you why I will not be choosing an heir." I hate to deviate like that, but immortals do not choose heirs to anything. Even if I do croak, these people will just fight amongst themselves for the position anyway, as the Inheritor will not have been introduced. I have no intentions of retiring.

"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." The reaction was some laughter and some half-joking cries of "Damn!" and "Shucks!" (in their native languages, of course) with accompanying fingersnaps. Only the three directly in the front row- the Bastard and the Bitches- were not amused.

"Right now, there's one friendly reminder I want to make." They all started listening closely. "**WE are the ELITE!**", I boomed. Cheering answered that- what else would? Pure emotionalism and ego-feeding, yes, but it's an instant approval generator.

"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." Loud cheering and applause. "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." Their good-humored laughter, cheering, and clapping caused me to relax a bit.

"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." Some clapping.

"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 tried to emphasize the generality of it. "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!**" Again, clapping and cheering- although most of them knew that that last phrase was for dramatic effect. Of course I can say that the end of secrecy will happen in my lifetime.. if I croak, I don't have to worry about being wrong.

"I know there's been some hubbub about technological priorities. I've been over them and I don't intend to change them." That settled the issue right there. Period.

"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- not surprising, that's where the lower levels are.

"So what you're saying is that every level 5 deserves Enforcers?", someone from the third level asked me in a neutral tone.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Many cheers from the back. "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." Even more cheering from the back. "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." More cheering and clapping. I love it the same way normal politicians do; it gives me a chance to collect my thoughts while basking in the general approval.

"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!", I boldly exclaimed, settling an annoying question once and for all.

The reaction was predictable: general cheering, lots of applause.. but through the applause I could hear one man saying, in a sort of loud muttering, "yes.. and we all know what you plan to do.." He stood up and, drawing a gun from his belt and aiming it at me, screamed "**Sic sempi**-" ('Thus always', I instantly realized: the beginning of 'sic sempi tyrannis', 'thus always to tyrants'.) as loud as he could. His words were punctuated by a bullet: Sarah's, blasting the gun in his hand, but causing it to go off at its intended target. Fifty milliseconds later, the bullet was where my head had been; I had simply leaned to the left very quickly. At about the same time, Billy had put a bullet in the idiot's forehead. There was some more cheering, some more laughter, and some more clapping. Sarah, though, was silently, almost imperceptibly cursing herself; I'll talk to her about her mistake later. I decided to continue my speech where I had left off, resting my head against the bullet hole in the chair.

"There's also been 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." Some shocked looks. No clapping. I'm not going to bullshit anyone about this one. Getting out of the Earth's gravity well requires tremendous resources, and creating space or celestial body-based facilities requires even more- technology will eventually solve it, but it's just a matter of time.

"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.", I said, and a large- but not quite large enough- round of applause followed that. There better not be something I'm missing... what are these people waiting for?

A 45-year-old man- Judas Rockefeller, one of the native-born Illuminati, a first level- stood up, hopped up the stage to me, and said "And you'll get the power when you'll pass the tests." What the fuck? Tests... on **me**? The **hell**? I would probably have laughed if it wasn't for the fact that everyone else in the audience was expertly, inaudibly stifling smiles and similar reactions, as they looked at my expression.

"You were all informed of this, weren't you.", I asked them. Everyone- absolutely **everyone** in the

audience- said the affirmative in his or her native language, including Latin. I laughed, smiled for the crowd, and went along with the first level showing me whatever he intended, the applause of the audience rising to the level I had anticipated earlier. My servants followed reluctantly, and I marveled at the Illuminati ability to keep secrets, as the applause of the audience disappeared behind the soundproof, closing door.

As we followed the white-clad, smiling man down the hall, Sarah gave me a look- a look that said quite plainly, 'Don't trust these people!' I smiled back at her- a way of saying, 'I'm not you, Sarah. They're not going to do **that** to **me**.' She just rolled her eyes and looked away.

A few unused stairs here, an unused door there.. and I was in the strangest place that I've ever been. I noticed Billy recoiling at it, and I probably did the same thing. It was a long row of holding cells from different time periods, all nearly the same size. The oldest looked to be from the late 1700s, the newest a modern holding chamber made from Illuminati-quality plexiglass. All of the old ones held decomposed, barely-recognizable human corpses, the next-to-newest (from the fifties?) held a grotesque, foul-smelling excuse for a man (who I did not want to look at, at all- I'll find out about him from a distance, thanks), and the newest.. was empty.

"Lemme guess. This is what happens to me if I fail, right?", I said, gesturing to the modern cell from which no one- not even me- could escape. Judas nodded.

"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 considered torturing him on the spot and then discarded the idea. I'd get in a fight with the entire complex if I did that- and although I might even **win**, these people are still my power base.

"I know why you did it this way.. you were worried about me killing people after I heard them." He only nodded and grinned. I sighed, shrugged, and started to walk off.

Behind me, a decrepit voice said, "Howard.. you're immortal... hahahahahAHAHAHA...", and then promptly began hacking and coughing from trying to laugh that loud. 'Can it!!', I almost screamed at him. 'Don't you think I know what that means?!' Instead, I didn't turn around. I didn't want to look at him. He was effectively dead.

The rail system took the three of us to my waiting jet. I was in a partial state of shock, but I really should have thought of this in advance. Screw the consequences. They might as well be death. I've got a problem to find out about and solve.

"Nothing is ever easy.", Billy observed as we re-entered the plane, Sarah at the controls once more. "Not even for you."

"Nope.", I replied. "Not even for me. I had no fucking idea. Is this confusing you?" The jet's VTOL took us up and the thrusters took us up and away.

"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?" I nodded. His use of the word 'parliament' was unexpected, but I've heard them referred to as that a few times. "Nah. Murphy's Law affects all of us."

"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." A few clicks later and the rules for the first test was on my screen, as Sarah climbed out of the pilot's seat to take a look.

I groaned. Billy shook his head and put it in his lap. Sarah muttered "Oh, that's just stupid.." to herself.

1. The first test will last for 28 days, starting at midnight PST.
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 contents, to your island.
5. You have twelve Enforcers and one hundred unimplanted normal servants at your command during those 28 days. (I never thought I'd see 'unimplanted' and 'at your command' in the same sentence.)
5. A particular variety of potato will be available for food. Only the unimplanted servants may farm it. (So I can't speed things up with Enforcers. Damn.) 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. (In other words, no Enforcer or peasant meat.)
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, but they want to make sure I'm running instead of just moving along slowly. Energy consumption.)
8. You must complete a given mental exercise each day.

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

"Sarah...", I 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.." Kill me. Exhaust the Inheritor for a full month and then...

"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 realized immediately that he didn't mean for me to keep it up for more than a month, that he misinformed me.. but I'll deal with that thought later. I have current problems- this is going to be bad. I'll survive it.. that's not the issue.

"And you have to solve one of those problems every day, that and the running.. shit.", Billy said.

"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." Billy started laughing to himself at that, and I can see why he'd find it funny. We talk about being the super organization with all-high knowledge and all-high manipulation, and our decisions come out with just as much bullshit as any other organization's.

"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."

"Wait a minute.", Billy said, shaking his 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."

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

"I know! I'm sorry, Howard."

"You were telling me before how you were too good, and that's how you got into this mess. 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." Billy started chuckling to himself. "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 blushed slightly at the compliment.

"And as for those potatoes..", I said, scrolling down the rules, reading the details: these things require lots of maintenance and lots of effort to farm.. and they grow quickly.. and they're obviously designed just for this. Then I looked up how the peasants would be waiting.. hmm, cages are appropriate.. and then proceeded to craft a plan to get them working.. muttering to myself all the while. Assholes. This whole damn test business only seems necessary, but is actually dangerous for damn near everyone. Because if I don't get in... who will?

After I finished that business, I took a look at who the attempted assassin was. Thirty-two-year-old Nathaniel Lee, no apparent threat risk.. but a steady stream of declining holdings and probably some growing anger. Typical normal thinking, nothing I haven't seen before. His fortunes plummet in a spiral and he believes the Dominator's behind it, so he tries to take revenge by killing me. Unfortunately, he obviously didn't read the relevant material on me, or he would have known he could have never actually done it, at least not like that.

Chapter 10

The jet landed with a soft thump in its usual clearing. The peasants were nearby, in four large cages, under intense lighting from tall spotlights near some huts and a large mound of fertilizer. Gah. It's not that cages aren't proper for this, but I had visualized something a bit less obvious and a bit more American-looking. And the eight Enforcers I have- which will equate to six at a time- stood around, simply watching the peasants, looking for one of them to make an impossible escape from the giant cages. "This is an American experiment.", I told them, my echo calling them to attention immediately. "This is a simple test. If you do work for five weeks, we will let you go." Lying is yet another of my strong suits. "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." I still don't remember where I got that one. It was either the Viet Cong or the Japanese Empire of the early forties.

"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 before. "Do you understand?" A few weak "Si"s were the reply. I motioned to Billy and he told them what they were to do in detail. His tongue was not used to Latin and Latin-based languages and so he articulated every word carefully, making sure he didn't foul up. I looked at the peasants intently. They weren't just scared, they were absolutely terrified. Good.

"That is where you will live.", I pointed, motioning to the huts. "You will begin work at daybreak tomorrow. Do not be afraid- if you comply, you will have nothing to fear." They won't have time. "Enforcers, put them in groups of ten and ensure they know which group they're in." I told them nothing else. As a rule, trying to make decisions without enough information, for any group of people, is a fear-inducing experience. I've only told these peasants what they need to know. Their fear should paralyze them into obedience.

I walked back to the mansion casually, my servants following closely behind. Billy looked around at

the nearly-invisible lighting that illuminated the interior with a pale glow.

Slowly walking back up the stairs, I paused at the door to my room, leaning on it. "Billy, as of right now, how confused are you?" Hopefully the time spent in the jet fixed that.

"Not confused. Lots of stuff I don't know, but that's different.." Confusion can be solved by thinking; ignorance can only be solved by information. "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 said, taking off her clothes before opening the door to her room. Apparently she wanted to show herself to Billy. I, of course, made her take her clothes off the first day I met her. Normals would find her tall and muscular. I find her beautiful.

"I'm gonna have some fucked-up dreams tonight..", Billy said. I'm sure I've heard funnier things before in my life, but I couldn't think of any. Sarah and I laughed our asses off as he stood there wondering why. I wish I could have given him a reason why it was just plain hilarious.

I didn't go to sleep right away- my head was boiling- but the darkness took me quicker than I expected and I fell into dreamland.

And then I heard the screaming.

Chapter 11

"AAAAAAAAAYAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!", the scream echoed, bouncing off the walls. Wait, not all that echo is from the walls, that's the echo effect. But I'm not screaming. Then what the hell...

Oh. Of course. It's Billy.

I got up and looked outside- blackness. I'm sure I've been sleeping for a few hours- I didn't think Billy would do something so silly as intentionally piss me off by waiting and then screaming. I walked into his room about the same time Sarah did, and he just sat there, simply looking at us. Sarah looked back at him with a murderous scowl.

"Uhh.. what time is it?", he asked, apparently embarrassed.

"Oh-dark-thirty.", Sarah replied with anger. Apparently Sarah dislikes losing sleep. Considering her previous line of work, where sleep is a treasured resource, I can't say I blame her.

"Billy, never do that again.", I commanded him. Usually I get specific with the commands, but he knew exactly what I meant.

"Do the rules for these things go something like 'if I can't control it, than neither can the implants'?"

"Yes.", I answered. What he was saying began to register.

"Then that's not going to help.", he replied, and I could tell from his voice that he genuinely wished that command would work on him. I muttered some Latin profanity, rolling my eyes. Damn. I know a few servants have uncommandable impulses, but **Billy?!** Psychologically it doesn't mean much, though. This could be a one-time involuntary scream out of fear, which would make sense given the circumstances and the likely potency of his nightmare. When he said he was going to have fucked-up dreams tonight, he wasn't kidding. Sarah chuckled with her usual morbid humor.

"They all scream.", she said. "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..", I pointed out. I could gag him or physically silence him in other ways, none of which I really want to do.

"What the hell should I say? I didn't mean to, and I didn't like doing that." And since he cannot lie to me, I'll simply overlook this as a small price to pay for having him. He flopped back down on the bed with a thump, closed his eyes, and appeared to return directly to dreamland. Sarah looked first at him and then at me. I just shook my head and motioned for us to return to bed. She shrugged and we did just that.

Sarah woke me up that morning. Usually, of course, I sleep in, but this is a different situation entirely. I put the suit on, took the elevator all the way down, grabbed something I figured Billy would find useful, and went to see if he was up. He was still zonked. I told him to get up and he popped up with a start, surprised.

"Get dressed and make them work.", I commanded him. "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, do it with this." I laid the large, giant-barreled weapon down on his bed.

As he was getting dressed, he looked at the device and recoiled somewhat. "What do you kill with that?!"

I only grinned at him. "Jets.. tanks.. battleships.. it's an atomic shotgun." The Atomic Shotgun was developed a bit before the Micro. It uses a small amount of fission power to propel a rather large projectile at many times the speed of sound. It puts holes in literally anything, going through a dozen yards of our strongest metals- which laugh at the highest caliber of normal bullets and are only slightly dented by normal armor-piercing bullets- before slowing to a stop. It's heavy and large, but we're engineered and we can deal with that.

The only thing I **don't** like about it is its incredible loudness, but that makes it useful for scaring peasants.

"Ehh?! You managed to..?!", Billy asked, amazed.

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

He was finally finished dressing, and he made a "Kaboom!" sound and gesture. I nodded at him and he walked past me and down the stairs to fulfill my command. I considered watching him, but he's going to have to learn to deal with this shit on his own and so I went to the screen to fulfill the intelligence requirement.

Ugh. There is no way I'd bother to describe the problems here. Just grinding, difficult logic, mathematical (the calculator-won't-help kind), and spatial problems that would make genius-level normals grit their teeth in frustration. I'm glad I learned how to solve the logic problems with the grid system a couple of years ago. Although Illuminated knowledge was required for many of them, there were no Illuminated people-manipulation problems; they can only give me ones with definite answers. Twenty tough but fairly small problems, enough to make a normal's brain bleed. It's a good thing I'm not doing this test alone. I'd love to have Billy help me with these but I doubt his mind is quite at the level of mine. He'll catch up, certainly, but that's probably going to have to wait until this bullshit is over.

I heard an earth-shattering **BOOM** on problem number 3. That was Billy, experiencing the full force of that weapon's loudness. It's a good thing we regenerate, otherwise that thing would lead to

permanently damaged eardrums. I doubt any of those peasants had heard anything like that before.

Billy walked back in on problem number 4, a slight smile of success on his face. I chuckled. "Not bad. That'll work- for maybe a few hours. You will have to manage them in the long run. But fear should keep them going for a while." Fear is going to be the primary source of work from them. Keeping them scared will keep them going. I usually don't like fear from those who work for me- it lessens efficiency- but this is an entirely different group of people acting on entirely different rules.

"So what's that?", he asked, motioning to the screen.

"Oh, just an ordinary IQ test..", I said, shrugging. "Ordinary for us, anyway. I'm just not allowed to make any mistakes."

"How many questions?"

"Twenty quick ones." Quick for me, at least.

"Are you going to want help?" Well, of course I **WANT** it, but..

"Not from you. Not yet, anyway. A lot of these questions talk about things you know nothing about." His face marked a total lack of surprise.

"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?" Watching Billy understand the Illuminati is an invigorating thing.

I looked at him, and nodded with a grimace. "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**..."

He shrugged. "You're going to get them all right and all done on time." His voice showed nothing but complete confidence.

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't get sent here just to watch you get tossed into a cage on the first day." I slowly made my way to a full laugh. That **would** be ironic, wouldn't it?

"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." Where truth can be found, that is. I felt a twinge of hunger and decided to satiate it. "Make me some pancakes." Wait.. "Oh, crap. Cancel that. Shit." I had devoted too many brain cells to the logic problems at hand.

"Potatoes in the morning, potatoes in the evening, potatoes at suppertime..", Billy sung with just a touch of mockery.

"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 fruit." He silently went to do it, and I returned my attention to the problems.

This is annoying. Is it really necessary for me to know how many moves it takes to do a shifting-block puzzle in? Must I know how long an Enforcer can keep walking assuming a certain rate of physical decay? They even made me take off the exact time it takes for an Enforcer to piss! Groan.

I slogged through the problems at a fairly rapid pace, considering them more like torture than a test. Damn it, if you want to fucking test me, put me in the damn position for a month and then try to get me out. I'd **love** to see that. Then again, except for annoying me with this endurance bullshit, they apparently don't want to get into my physical abilities at all. Or maybe they will. This is only the first test, after all.

My thoughts turned to failure and I decided to take a minute to consider it. What the hell would they do if I did? Who the hell else do they have available? Daddy talked to me about tests before but he spoke as if they were all in the past. Apparently he wasn't allowed to warn me. And if I fail, they either have a contingency plan, which is an unpleasant thought- or they **don't** have a contingency plan, which is an even more unpleasant thought. They better. Illuminati have a tendency to **find** a contingency plan where there isn't one, but when it comes to Dominator succession, that quickly turns into the chaos of civil war. Failure minute up. Time to focus on success. Although I developed a small headache, I got to problem twenty much more quickly than I had expected (which probably meant they'll make it harder in coming days, oh joy), and I had Sarah come down to check my answers, which she did with her practiced professionalism.

Billy arrived as she finished doing it. I clicked the button to send the answers in 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 smiled at him. Now he understands. "Ah. I get it." He pushed the bowl forward and I took it and started eating grapes. But I can't relax yet. Groan. It's a good thing only the top levels of the Illuminati developed this test. If it was made by fifth levels, I could afford to kill them for the sheer annoyance of this.

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

"It's **only** four weeks of it, Howard.", Billy said, some mild taunting in his voice.

"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.", I replied, getting up and putting the bowl on the end table. Billy and Sarah walked out to deal with the peasants while I went to the start of the run, annoyed at the people who will surely take this run through places that don't approximate flat land at all.

I just started running when I got to the white line; I knew that an Enforcer would start timing me the moment I crossed it. This isn't hard, just annoying, and I was dodging tree limbs and vaulting up rocks within the first quarter kilometer. I turned my body on autopilot and let my mind roam.

So now it begins. Ten years of training, education, and entertainment turn into five weeks of testing and an eternity of Domination, ass kicking (my servants already killed somebody, so I know I'll have a lot of that cut out for me), and entertainment. The power is a curse as well as a blessing. I won't control the world, I reminded myself- I'll just control the people who control the world. It saves me an enormous logistical hassle, but gives me lots of personal hassles. Fortunately, I have fear on my side (where would the Illuminati be without it?), as well as personal abilities and servants. Which leads me to a simple question..

What the **hell** is with them for creating and implanting Billy? Not that I don't appreciate having him, but...

It was the first time I've metaphorically sat down and asked myself this question rationally. What the hell? I find it difficult to believe that it was decided upon. They've had trouble dealing with Dominators in the past, I'm engineered so I'll be far, far worse- and yet they create him? They must know I'll use him as a second, so.. why?

My thoughts turned to present reality so I could jump on a few well-placed rocks in the river right in front of the waterfall, which I did without breaking a stride. The mist was somewhat refreshing but I couldn't afford to stop and take a drink. I continued past a few fruit trees, scared away a snorting pig, and regained my train of thought.

I've always tried to retain a sense of detachment from both myself and the Levels. It lets me laugh at myself and them from time to time, and it reminds me that grandeur is foolish unless practiced by the truly grand. Most important of all, it helps me fulfill the Illuminated requirement for making objective decisions, and it's why I can say that objectively it doesn't make a damn bit of sense. Maybe Daddy thought it would be for the best. Maybe it was considered necessary for a reason I can't fathom (this happens all too frequently- Illuminati doing things that other Illuminati can't fathom. It creates massive, massive headaches for Dominators.). I don't think asking would give me the answer I'm looking for, and decision-making details are seldom published in the database.

And, of course, this is just the **beginning** of the insanity. What else they'll do is anyone's guess.

The run took me over parts of the rocky, gravelly mountain, through the forest (where my dogs happily chased me for a few minutes before returning to their natural home), and finally past the peasants, which were watched by Enforcers only. Sarah had probably decided to let them actually do the work of watching them, which was a good choice. I crossed the starting line to finish the run, then immediately went back inside. I could have done the run again right afterwards, but my legs hurt. My regeneration would heal the ache in a few minutes, of course. Did I mention how much I **love** being engineered?

And my (and therefore his own) engineering is exactly what Billy was looking up as I opened the door, to my complete lack of surprise. "I was wondering when your curiosity would get the better of you." My presence startled him and he closed the computer window in reflex before turning around to look at me.

"Are you kidding? As soon as Sarah told me about this, I had to start looking." His initial panic and frantic question-asking had turned into an actual search for real answers, answers I need him to know anyway.

"Good. Sarah and the Enforcers can deal with the peasants, you'll have lots of extra time." As I said that, I realized that this test really would be easy and that the Illuminati who made it up really weren't considering that I'd have help. "I'm not going to be silly and try to command you to learn," It's a real shame I can't. It wouldn't work. He'd end up trying to digest too much information at one time and forget too much of it. "but just remember that you're going to eventually have to know **everything** I know.. I'll help you with the Latin later." He reacted at that last part. Latin is considered difficult by normals, naturally, but it shouldn't be that hard for Billy, even though he is past the formative years of language learning. He went back to studying; a bit later I did the run again. The fruit was not going to satiate all three of us all day, and Sarah later fetched the potatoes.

"Hungry? Need I ask?"

"It would be just like them to make the things really bitter...", I observed, simply taking one and biting into it- I couldn't afford the nutrient loss cooking would cause. Ack. "Not bitter. Tasteless and a bit salty." The salt was probably from all the times tall ocean waves hit that particular field, although the frequent rain washes most of that sort of thing away. I thought of running in the rain, and being watched closely, and then got an idea that I should have had earlier. "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." Gack. Ugh. That means **anyone** can tell us apart- and anyone can locate Sarah. I'll have to turn that shit off when this test is over. "If you want, I'll gladly spy on the spies and see what they're using."

"Get ready and do it." She walked up the stairs to get the proper equipment. "So, Billy- what have you found out so far today?"

"A little bit of everything and a lot of mind control." No surprises here.

I 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 can't command him to learn. I **can** command him to follow his natural impulses to find things out. He immediately stood up and started walking upstairs. "Where are you going?"

"To follow Sarah. I want to know how you spy on Illuminati spies." Ah. I nodded some more and smiled. Good. Although he'd gleefully rip me a new one if given the chance, one of the things we agree on is that he needs to know just what the hell the Illuminati really is and does.

Well, of course he does, I reminded myself. He's just been thrust into a new world, one several steps above his daily feast of lies and manufactured bullshit. Having absolute truth at his fingertips must have been a rush. Three decades ago, my predecessor was limited predominantly to a telephone and, later, a highly primitive terminal. Today I could drown myself in information if I wanted to; the terabit connection I have to the world's reality is many times faster than I can think. Naturally, I don't **care** about the details. Even when I don't have anything to do, trying to amass too much information in my limited-size brain cuts in on my fun-having time. And the only information Billy cares about right now is the information that can tell him roughly what the hell is going on here. (He'll never know **exactly** what the hell is going on here. Even I can't know that.)

Billy and Sarah walked out, Sarah wearing a foliage-colored ghillie suit that made her look like a panther on two legs. Oh, she's going to be sniper-crawling again. I idly checked out random, completely truthful crap for about ten minutes- it always takes her a while, as well as everyone else who does it- before going out to do the run. I noticed Billy squatting down in the tall grass and realized he was waiting for Sarah. I walked up to him and asked if he was bored.

"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." He sighed and for some reason I could imagine him saying 'But don't I have all the time in the world now?'.
I did the run again, not thinking so much this time. I'm glad so much of it is through the shady forest and not in the sun. I don't mind jumping over the rocks at all.

When I got back I saw an Enforcer finish applying force to a badly hurt peasant, the homiform causing lots of bruising and pain but careful not to damage actual muscles. Oh, fuck. Well, first I have to finish the run- I ran past the whole scene, with crying women and scared, angry men, to the finish line, and then walked back. Yes, you peasants, my running is more important than your lives.

"What happened?", I asked the Enforcer casually, ignoring the reactions around me of shock and horror. A few angry peasants turned to me with fists clenched and horrified looks on their faces. Yeah, right, guys. Try it, I dare ya.

"He tried to escape.", the Enforcer answered me, simply.

"Don't you understand that you're outmatched?", I asked the peasants rhetorically as the Enforcer

translated. "You're not the only ones being tested here.", I truthfully said. "All you have to do is continue with this for the next five weeks and we'll let you go, full and maybe a bit richer for your trouble.", I lied. "By the way, in case you forgot, this is an island. There's nowhere to run." A couple of gasps at that. Stupid normals. "Now get back to work." I thought I'd have to exert more force, but they slowly, reluctantly did what I told them. I walked back inside, annoyed.

"Idiot peasants. One of them thought he could escape.", I complained to my two servants.

"What happened?", Billy asked.

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

"They're not scanning.", Sarah said. "Well, now to order a fake head of hair for you.", she turned to Billy and said. Woah! Crap, how could I have missed that? But there was a flaw..

"Don't, Sarah.", I 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.." She started smiling at 'commanding'. "That really is the exact wording, isn't it?" Exact wording means **everything** here. "That **does** make things interesting. All right, you can do it if you want." I also knew- but didn't say- that the Enforcers would have no way of knowing whether they were commanded or not.

"That reminds me- Billy, I forbid you to ever get your hair cut or otherwise have your body looking different from mine.", I told him, and he was unsurprised.

"Wait, wait.", Billy said to Sarah. "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? They'd need to prove it.", she replied. They are required to err on the side of caution every time. "It's easy to claim that it scares the peasants more or something like that."

"You two are so damn confident.", Billy said, and Sarah and I laughed at him.

There's only one way to explain this. "Billy, welcome to the Illuminati." Sarah ordered the carefully-crafted wig.

Well.. not much else I can do, now. Better to just do the next run, relax, and save precious caloric energy. I walked up to my room and laid in bed, just thinking for a bit. Well, Howard, you'll be the Dominator soon, and the Illuminati will be yours. Gah. Saying 'The Illuminati will be mine!' is like saying 'This complicated maze of sewage pipes and tangled problems will be mine!' I won't know what it's like until I actually **do** it, but controlling world controllers is going to get annoying. Oh well. I won't mind. There's so much I've yet to learn, so much to experience, and as the ultimate authority on the planet, I will very literally be able to do it all.

After the run, some rest, another meal, and some more words with Billy, I just rested and screwed around until I fell asleep.

And was woken up by another loud, nightmarish scream.

Chapter 12

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!! NOOOOO!! AAAHHHHH!!!"

Oh, **fuck**. Not **again**.

Highly annoyed at this second invasion of sleep, I got out of bed, gritting my teeth. Gah, but I've already given him a command not to do that! What the hell could I tell him? Maybe something else, something to make sure he just doesn't..

I opened the door to his room and he immediately shrunk back from me, terrified. He was crying and shivering, as if beaten or whipped, and my annoyance immediately faded away into sympathy. Holy crap, why's he so scared of me now? Does he really think I'm going to.. no, wait. He thinks I already **did**. He was squeezing his eyes tightly shut; I walked around to the other side of the bed and gently placed my hand on the top of his head. He opened his eyes, still afraid.

I found the right words instantly, and asked them gently. "Billy, what was I just doing?"

"Howard, you were just..", he started, and then differentiated between his nightmares and reality, his fear-gripped body loosening up. "Wait.. no. You were just sleeping. So was I.. I screamed again, didn't I.. oh man, I didn't mean to do that..", he sputtered out, apologetically.

I almost asked him what he dreamed I had been doing, but realized I didn't want to hear any of it, apologies for something that **can't** be his fault or the details of whatever horrified him so much. "Billy, shush. You can talk again when the sun comes up." I immediately knew what to do about this and how to get it. "If you keep screaming at night, I'm just going to get this room soundproofed. Just relax for now." On impulse, I squatted down next to him and held him a bit. I hated this. I didn't want him scared. I wanted him active, armed, and kicking ass. There are so many things I've done by myself that I can do with him, so many things I've never been able to do before that he'll be so useful for, both in these tests and when I become Dominator. Seeing him in a quivering ball is like finding your gun stuffed with clay, only it's much worse because he's my beloved, engineered friend.

I could have climbed in with him, but didn't- I took my arm off him and quietly walked out, closing the door behind me. The worst fucking part, I realized as I went back to my bed, was that there was nothing to be done about it. Look for the reason why? I already know the reason, it's some sort of side effect of the implants, and even if I could afford to remove them he'd be killed. Drugs? On an engineered? His nervous system would freak out even worse, except for the one chemical.. what if he got it every night? That's no solution; prohibiting him from dreaming will almost certainly be even worse in the long run. I felt as impotent as a medieval king against forces I couldn't control, and that frustrated me immensely. I'm the Inheritor of massive power, I'll have several facilities full of advanced science, and I know damn well that nothing they can do can solve this little problem of my priceless servant screaming himself to tears from horrors I might not even be able to comprehend awake.

I fell asleep.

The next day was the same as the one before. Damn, it's already getting repetitive. Do these mental exercises of ultimate annoyance, eat these shitty potatoes. For a whole fucking month. This sucks. The runs, fortunately, were being done by Billy this time. As I worked on an extremely complicated (just for the sake of it, really, it wasn't even that hard on an intellectual level, just really large and with a lot of variables) problem completely requiring Illuminated knowledge, he came back from the first one with a small smirk on his face.

"Howard, you know what?", he asked me on the way in. "We didn't have to do that whole wig business after all." Oh?

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't it have been simpler and easier just to cut **your** hair?" Hell fucking no.

"Blasphemer.", I replied, smirking, and went back to my problem.

Later, it started to rain. Lucky him; he gets to run in it. I don't mind being outside in rain, especially when running around. The peasants did mind (why? You're not going to get hit by lightning with my mansion around, and it beats the constant sun) but between the Enforcers, Billy, and Sarah, I knew they'd be swiftly encouraged to get back to work. The test designers wanted to make those damn normals my problem, but I was determined to make them someone else's.

It's one thing to be able to tell an Enforcer 'Do it' and it being done. It's quite another to tell an actual implanted person to do something, especially one I care about. Billy was spending most of his time looking up stuff anyway, still commanded to do it. Although I did have Billy for companionship several times and wanted to play with him more, I had to leave him alone most of the time so he could learn- he needs to be caught up, and he knows it. I did have Sarah, though. I knew all the details of sex, and I knew I hadn't reached anything approximating puberty yet, but that didn't stop me from realizing how beautiful she is. She was nice to hold onto and talk to, although her conversation is almost always dry and direct; on Billy, she simply said "He's you with no Illumination and implants." She's skillful and intelligent, but.. 'Enforcer-like' probably isn't the right word, but it'll do. It's to be expected. She's a trained agent, the best assassin in the world, and I would never want her to act like anything else. It doesn't stop me from loving her, though.

Eventually, night rolled around, and I had to get some sleep. Please, Billy. Don't scream. Don't even have a nightmare. Such things would be pointless to say, obviously, but I thought them anyway.

Yeah, like Murphy would pass by that easily.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!", I was awakened by, and before I was even awake I knew what happened.

"**Fuck.**", I said, as the screaming continued to go on. Holy shit, he's still doing it? I walked into his room and it was even louder as I opened the door. "Billy, stop screaming!", I told him, but he couldn't hear me. He looked at me curiously as he yelled, as if his brain didn't know what was coming out of his mouth. Let's try this again. "**BILLY! STOP SCREAMING!**", I shouted in my tone of ultimate authority, and he closed his mouth with a snap and hummed for a split second, finally stopping the air over his vocal cords.

"Dammit.. is that **ever** going to stop?", I asked, annoyed. "You sounded like you were dying in here!"

"Probably not.", he replied. At least he wasn't terrified again.

"Ok, that's it, soundproofing comes tomorrow evening, or you're sleeping on the other end of the island.", I said in a low voice. "And Billy.. just what was the nightmare this time?" I had to know. It probably wasn't me.

"Well, I was hearing this horrible laugh from some kiddie show, and then I saw this monster reaching out to hug me.. it was Barney the Dinosaur." Holy crap! I restrained myself from laughing until he was finished. "I shot five atomic shotgun rounds into him, but it didn't stop him any. Then it reached out and hugged me and I had to hug it back, and I was actually made to act like I was a little kid who liked it.."

I laughed and laughed, bending over and laughing some more. As psychological defense mechanisms go, this has got to be one of the funniest. "Billy... monsters, demons, sadists, unnamed horror, snakes, even me, I can understand easily." Well, especially me. "But BARNEY?! That fat happy piece of Illuminated kiddie-control inspiration is giving YOU nightmares?! If.. haha.. if

I grew coke on this island, I'd figure you snorted some." I was joking, obviously. It wouldn't affect him anywhere near the way it does normals. I decided to try a new command. "Now don't try- but don't try **not**- to get back to sleep." Let him just lay down and get some rest. I did the same, falling back on my bed and losing consciousness almost instantly.

I woke up as usual, went downstairs as usual, and did similar shit, different day. I didn't dare keep exercising or playing even when bored- I needed to save the energy. Frustrating as hell for someone like me.

Later that day, I taught Billy some basic Latin (if he wasn't engineered, this would be a Sisyphean task) when the agents and Enforcers were working on his room. I don't think about them very often, but I really do appreciate their near-complete silence when ripping metal off walls.

The peasants just don't belong on my island, in so many ways. That self-sufficiency crap Daddy was spouting was just that, crap. This place won't be self-sufficient in a month, or ever, for that matter. I thought it was some kind of tradition, a show of power, to know that a Dominator is perfectly capable of running his own home without outside interference. He couldn't tell me about the tests directly, but apparently he was allowed to tell me that there would be some local agriculture, but he didn't tell me it would be like this. And as for the trees not being more than thirty years old, I'm certain that it's either a total fabrication, or simple misinformation- not false, simply misleading. The trees were probably cut down back then for another reason. And it was a planned lie, a lie that they sat down and thought and talked about, a lie I was sure never to catch, hopefully the final lie- no one lies to a Dominator without risking death. But they could conspire against me if it meant that I would have what they considered to be a fair chance at the first test.

And this first test, although I was starting to get used to it over the next few days, was a product of utter insanity. They could have engineered these plants much, much better. They purposefully created them to be high-workload, with specific instructions on growing, quite intolerant of variation (fortunately, the rain here didn't seem to hurt them any), all for one specific test for one specific person. I could not let the peasants rest for minutes when they had to be working at a specified time- thankfully, Billy and Sarah know the exact regimen. I remember a certain phrase from some sequel of The Man-Kzin Wars: 'Young Heroes are kept on an insufficient diet, to increase their aggressiveness.' Well, if they want me aggressive or just plain angry, they've got it. I can only guess as to what kind of fortitude the second test will require, but if it requires violence, my current bloodthirst will be more than enough.

One of the puzzles I did wasn't on the computer at all; it was physical. Complicated as hell, large, and made out of everything, and I defeated it in fifteen minutes (it actually **required** me to put a fist-blade into a certain part of it to pop something else) whereas a normal might have taken hours, even days, time I obviously don't have. When I'm not busy, I wait, I brood, play a couple of games, and worry. I wanted to play with Billy more, but I knew I had to let him learn. And I have to save my energy anyway. Oh well. If I don't let any of us get killed, I'll have forever to play with him in. Just thinking about that made me smile in spite of the various problems and their accompanying frustration. I'll have Billy and Sarah as my friends **forever**.

Chapter 13

It was two weeks into it, about 10 PM. The peasants, long since beaten down and debased, were allowed to sleep now. I had completed the daily intellectual problem, had done all the calorie-killing physical exercise, and I, too, should be sleeping, recharging my underloaded batteries- but I'm not. Hanging upside down from a large tree, fifteen meters above the ground on a thick branch, in near-absolute darkness, hearing nothing but the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, definitely does wonders for your mind. And the suit definitely helps against chafing of skin by tree bark.

I once more thanked my luck that whoever designed this little test completely forgot the presence of a rainforest with fruit-bearing trees- which were running out. The island becomes very, very small

when you start drawing resources from it. And the farmland was getting smaller and smaller- the planting had ended three days ago. Now it was time to harvest the rest of it, rationing the last of the food (my stomach rumbled at the word) then finally I can become the fucking Dominator and prove myself to these fuckers once and for all.

Or maybe not. I still had two more fucking tests. Ugh, fucking ugh, and more ugh. Damn it. Which one of those assholes designed this fucking test anyway? Probably the Bastard... but from all the assorted untruths Daddy's told me for a while, I imagine the "self-sufficiency" bullshit was part of the design specification. Probably along the lines of 'Here, do what you want with the tests, but include this.'

I heard a very, very slight snapping of branches below me- not the sound of a pig, but the sound of a person moving. Sigh. One of my covert ops guys had something down here to do, but even with my powerful hearing, I'm fifteen fucking meters up. Get with the program, you asshole, there is such a thing as stealth! "Okay, which one of you is it?", I called down into the darkness.

"It's me, Billy.", my young voice called from below.

"Billy.. what the fuck are you doing out here?"

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

"Get up here." I heard the faint creaking of branches and rustling of leaves as the black-clad Billy steadily made his way up by touch and moonlight, climbing up to sit on the branch where I hung. The addition of weight didn't make the branch yield a bit.

"Howard, are you upside down?"

"Yeah. And so are you, right next to me.", I commanded when making space for him. He flipped over with our usual deftness, swinging slightly on his knees. He let out a huge yawn, and through the darkness I saw him let his arms hang down, his lengthening hair blowing in the light breeze. If he was wearing normals' clothing, his navel would definitely be exposed.

He sighed. "This starvation fucking **sucks.**", he muttered as his head gradually filled with the same amount of blood mine contained.

"Yeah, really. 'Hey Howard, you're going to be Dominator now! Oh, wait, you've got all this pointless shit to do first!'", I said in a sarcastically nasal tone. "Right. Like four weeks of having to whip spics to get food is going to make the tiniest fucking bit of difference. 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?"

"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."

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

"Yeah, I know. Didn't expect to find **you** out here though.", he said as it began to drizzle. The constant clouds blocked out the moon and it became totally black. The generic feeling of mystery and semi-excitement caused by darkness and rain filled me, and I was tempted to sleep out here with him- but I know I couldn't. Not with him and his nightmares. Being woken up by your own voice screaming in terror is simply not pleasant, and unless I want to gag him (I still can't imagine actually

doing that), he has to sleep in the soundproof room. Besides, my legs might cramp up. And I'd wake up drenched.

"Well, here I am.", I said, and said something else I've been meaning to talk to him about. "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.", Billy answered. Wow, he's lost compassion for them fast, assuming he had much to begin with.

"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." That was accurate. "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." He has a point. "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." As much as I hate considering looking at things from a vastly inferior perspective, it's necessary. The Illuminati are supposed to see both sides of everything, after all.

"Damn, you didn't tell me any of that earlier.", I 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**." I chortled and grinned at that.

"Billy, that made sense. I've been thinking of them in my terms and I don't know why." Why is a dog unable to do algebra? Because it's a dog! Why are ordinary normals unable to make plans and ideas for themselves? Why else?

"Howard, just how genetically different do two things need to be before we start saying they're different species?", he asked, as the rain started to soak my knees.

"It varies. You mean that they might not even be.." Our genetics operations only use species identifications as monikers, as the entire classification system is meant for evolution, not bioengineering.

"These guys aren't. Can't be. Not even smart normals, not really." He's of the opinion that we should be considered *H. Superior* instead of *H. Sapiens engineerus*.

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

"Nope. I can't wait until these spics die.", he said, annoyed.

"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**."

"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." Just for the hell of it, really. I've never butchered normals before, and the organization causes it all the time.

"Enjoy.", he said, and then I heard a very faint snorting near the base of the tree. Dinner is served. I usually don't have the time or energy to hunt the food I want- but here, the food has come to me.

"Ssh!", I blurted at Billy. "Pig. Stay where you are." I could almost hear him drool. I left him up there and slowly made my way down the tree, feeling my way down. About five meters from the ground, there was a sharp white flash of lightning, and I could glimpse some pink flesh among the branches- then the thunder came, with nearly the force of the boom that the jet causes to people on the ground. **Fuck.** The pig sprinted from nowhere, crashing through underbrush at the sound of the thunder. I monkeyed my way down as fast as I possibly could. Even though I couldn't see much of anything, I could still hear the pig squealing like crazy about forty meters away- a normal would have said fuckit and just went home. But I'm not a normal. And I'm hungry as hell.

I held my arms out in front of me to push off trees, and ran through the forest after it. Fortunately for me, this is a true rainforest, and there is little underbrush. I followed the squealing after it, as I wasn't being silent at all and it heard me coming. I almost ran into a tree but grab-pushed it and kept going. I heard the steady panicked snuffling sounds before I realized the oinking was indeed getting closer, and could be heard louder through the steadily increasing rain. Then I heard a small crash- did it trip?, and a tumbling sound. Then I realized that the oinking sound was close- two meters, one- then I lost all caution and jumped down after it. A wet gloved hand tightly gripped tender pigflesh.

Yes. Meat.

I squeezed, stepped on the body, and pushed the leg upwards. A snap and a squeal of pain greeted my ears. Then, out of sheer bloodlust, I grabbed the broken leg, and walk-spun the twenty-kilo pig around and around until it finally met a tree. Thwok. Again. Thwok. The squealing grew to a thin whine. I swung again, and at that moment lightning illuminated the sky again, and I could clearly see the pig's head being bloodily smashed apart, skull in fragments, part of the brain left as a gory reminder to the rest of the pigs (not that the pigs would really care), by the unyielding wood. Snap-splat. Meat. Lord of the Flies, meet your match.

Now, to drag this carcass back home and eat it. Which way is home, anyway? Fuck. I'm going to be the everfucking Dominator and I can't even find my way back home on a small island. If there was anyone to be embarrassed around, I would be. But there wasn't, so I was just generally pissed at myself.

Duhhh. Billy was still up in the tree, which is not far from the mansion. I called to him, and his reply was farther away than I figured. I told him to come inside, and I walked through the forest and back inside, grinning, bloody pig in hand, from the cold rain into the steady warmth of ultra-modern heating techniques. Ahh. Better.

"That is what I call a meal.", I said right before I chucked the mangled carcass in the freezer, and flung the door shut.

"Don't tell me you're going to eat that whole thing yourself.", muttered Billy. Of course not. He needs the same amount of food I do, and he was waiting to rip the flesh off that pig raw. For that matter, so was I- I didn't want to go to bed without taking a few bites. This is the nice thing about having an accelerated immune system. I don't worry about whatever diseases normals get from eating fresh, raw meat. And this is the island of the Inheritor; there are no chemical pollutants here. I reopened the door, reached in, grabbed the pig's broken leg, and ripped it off completely, gnawing off the thick, stringy flesh as well as the fatty skin, savoring the thick, rich blood.

"Take some.", I told Billy. He jumped half-in the freezer, dug his teeth into the jugular of the thing, and drank the blood. Then he gnawed into the throat and windpipe, using all the force in his bite-muscles, chewing whatever teeth can chew. He looked like a vampire. Gore dribbled down his cheeks, and he kept ripping and tearing at the thick neck like a wild tiger. Holy shit. I couldn't possibly have underfed him that much. Nah, I didn't- he's just being smart, and eating whatever he can eat as quickly as he can possibly eat it, before I tell him to stop.

I finished my section of leg, brought out the butcher knife, cut into the stomach, ripped out the intestines, and squeezed them of their semi-digested contents before putting the raw chittlings in my mouth. Mmm, mmm, good. I took a few more bites, closed the freezer, told him not to eat any more pig until I said so, chucked the white suit in the wash (not to save some servant some time, but because it was going to stink), went to the bathroom and washed the gore out of my face and hair, then lay in bed naked and mostly relaxed.

How did that pig fall down, anyway? I didn't feel anything down there to trip on. I didn't feel any outganging root or branch there. There might have been a hole I didn't notice- pigs' hooves are smaller than my feet. I fell asleep on the question knowing I could never be sure of the answer, and dreamt about blood, gore, and squealing pigs who sort of sounded like Billy. Which was slightly disturbing, considering his voice is the same as mine..

Chapter 14

The problem of the day was irritating to the point where I moved around in various positions, one of them a bad, muscle-crunching one and I didn't even know it until I started to feel an ache. "Sarah, come here and give me a backrub.", I called up.

Instead of obedience I got a question in response: "Which one of you is it?" Shit! I really should have thought of this earlier!

Annoyed with myself more than anything else, I walked upstairs, opened her door, and said, "It's me, Howard.". The command kicked in and she started on the backrub, silently, and it created a good feeling to contrast with my irritation. Unless I start having to announce myself every time I give a command, there's only one way to solve this one. I opened the door to Billy's room- he was studying something. "Billy! Get out here, now!", I commanded, and he rushed from the computer to me in less than a second. "There is one thing I need to do.", I told him. He was a bit scared, thinking that I was angry at him. "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. Sarah- obey him the same way you do me!" Billy was startled, but not surprised. He could have seen this coming, too. "They'll probably obey you anyway, but I'm going to go tell the Enforcers the same thing.", I said, and Sarah took that as the cue to finish the backrub.

After I told the Enforcers (which I, indeed, didn't need to do), I went back to the brain-breaking problem at hand.

Eventually my attention wavered and I started thinking about other things. Just daydreaming, wishing that I had more time to play with Billy back when I wasn't being tested. Ugh. This annoying excuse for a test is almost over, too. Sigh. In minutes, my random thinking came up with a truly evil- and funny- idea, one that would be a real riot if I actually went through with it. I started giggling insanely. Billy was about to do a run, and came to see what was the matter, and I turned around and grinned at him.

"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.." I started laughing harder. He couldn't know if I did do it... but no, the time of setup and preparations needed (not to mention keeping a straight face, and when I have a hard

time doing that, you know it's funny to me) outweighed the hilarity, a lot of work for a few minutes of joke. I couldn't be bothered with doing it.

"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?"

"All right, Billy, you can relax. I'm not going to go through with it. 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."

"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.."

"It gets really scary really fast. Billy, of course I'm toying with you. 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." I chuckled.

"Starvation and anxiety mean brainstorms to me, which means I think about the unwanted, the unlikely, and sometimes the impossible." When stressed, I don't just react on a physical level, I **think**. It's definitely something that works in favor of my survival. I can't imagine how normals' brains would start shutting down at the time they need them the most!

"I wish **that** explained all those crazy nightmares."

"Do I keep showing up in them?"

"Not every one. But some.. feature of you is there. You've got your own brand of fear in my mind." That's okay, Billy. A lot of other people are going to be afraid of me, too.

"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."

"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. 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." My honesty very slightly shocked him back a bit; his reaction was so slight as to be subliminal to a normal. But I noticed the obvious, that he wasn't expecting Mr. Evil Dictator Clone (some random part of my mind laughed maniacally

at that) to tell him the unequivocal truth right off the bat.

"Thu.. thanks, Howard. I really appreciate it.", Billy said, genuinely thankful that his young master decided not to inflict needless torment upon his already-abused mind.

"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 can't finish it." The proper words would probably be something like.. oh, 'completely change around your mannerisms, outlook on life, and become a nasty sadist with a personal interest in causing me torment' with some unnamable atrocities mixed in for spice. Although I do have a nasty streak, I've always known to keep it away from my possessions. There is a difference between toying and some of the shit I've seen a few of my nastier Illuminated brethren do. Why any Illuminatus would spend hours doing.. whatever the **hell** that was, I really don't understand, for it really does have no purpose.

"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." Oh, don't worry about that, Billy. When this fucking test nonsense is over I'll be giving you plenty of attention.

"Speaking of hours.. do this one.", I commanded him, gesturing to the screen and letting him have the keyboard to face the problem I've been looking at.

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.

Other than some stupid non-answer like 'with a mirror' or 'force them to tell me what the fuck it is', I can't answer it. What evidence do I have for my decision?! Billy was of a similar mindset; "This is **impossible!**", he blurted out, shortly after reading it.

"They wouldn't give it to me if it was. It has a solution, and I don't know what the fuck it is.", I told him. If he can outsmart me, he's welcome to it.

"Ohhh..kay.. All right, deductive reasoning. If mine is black... dammit.." He was visibly wracking his brain for answers, just as I had. Good fucking luck! "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.." He wasn't vocalizing everything he was thinking, but I think he was starting to get it. "...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." This was in about a minute!

"You figured it out already?" Apparently his brain went in a totally different direction. What the hell did he see that I didn't?

"I think so.." Typing it out for him was much slower than figuring it out, and he went back to correct mistakes and had to do a lot of copying and pasting, but he 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 said, amazed. He clicked Send and the human on the other end swiftly approved it. I didn't know whether to feel embarrassment at my servant figuring out something I've been slamming my head on, or pride that I have somebody like that at my disposal. Pride, I decided. The problem was solved by something of mine, and I personally won't overlook solutions like that one again. "You're right. That **was** right up my alley.", I said, putting my arm around him and giving him a brief hug.. "I really should have had that." I patted his growing hair- he hadn't put on the wig- and laid back.

"I'm surprised.. it doesn't bother you that much that I figured it out and you didn't?"

"Not in the least. You can outsmart me all you like. Actually.. Billy, if you ever see me making a bad decision, I **command** you to let me know." I really should have said that earlier. He smiled at me, put on the wig, and went to do the first run of the day.

We continued for a few more days, Billy and Sarah intimidating and occasionally using force on the peasants when they didn't move their asses, having little time to think about anything else but learning and the tests, which we did with determination, as we tried to eat something resembling a balanced diet, the potatoes simply about to run out. Damn, this is annoying, and I'm counting seconds even as I try to preserve them. But I know, when this is over, that'll be that and nothing like this will ever happen again.

Chapter 15

With the potatoes completely used up, the final day of the first test was at hand. No more ripping inadequate crops out of the ground to feed the Enforcers, Billy, Sarah, and myself, all of whose calorie requirements are fucking ridiculous. I still can't believe they did that. When they said 'Test' I thought they meant an evil version of multiple choice, or separating some warring factions, or fixing some major world problem or something. Not a small-scale farming operation with the most belligerent people on Earth. At about 11:00, I used the I-didn't-do-it trick to order the biggest food shipment ever, and at precisely midnight a low-flying plane would come down, parachute several boxes, the servants would put all that shit away where Sarah can grab it, fix it up, and then finally I can **eat!**

Billy was right next to me, staring at the clock, watching the minutes tick by, salivating. 11:31.. 11:32.. I realized I fell victim to the same thing, waiting for the chopper to come, waiting for some damn meat (a few pigs just aren't enough!) and some sugary, rich, tasty calorie-rich food. Come on. The passage of time is outside my control, but I'd love to make an exception just this once. 11:33.

"Bah. Forget it, Howard. Looking only makes it seem slower.", Billy said.

"You sound like you've done this before."

"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. Damn it, I need some food!" His body shook slightly and I realized he was making an effort to stop his body from consuming itself, something that would inevitably happen. Fuck malnutrition. If you starve someone with our regenerative abilities, he'll literally eat himself from the inside out, the various parts of his body fighting for each other's nutrients, until he simply dissolves into a pool of red glop. I heard breathing from behind me, wondered who the hell could it be, turned around, and it was Sarah. Okay, this is getting crazy. When I can actually hear Sarah breathing, I know it's time to do something. But it's not time. 11:35. I had been feeding myself slightly more than them, so I could take it a little longer. But it crept up on me, the hunger growing. I need something to eat, preferably something very meaty. Now.

For fifteen minutes we sat and stood like that, Billy holding himself in one place trying to burn as few

calories as possible, the implants obviously in effect. He would have tried to kill and eat every Homo Sapiens on the island. Hey, there's an idea.. the peasants have to die somehow, they had been told they would get out a week later than they actually would **get out**, and it would take time for the Enforcers to take the foodstuffs out of the boxes. The difference would probably be only a couple of minutes, and I couldn't wait those couple minutes. Besides, they're live meat, with a beating heart and fresh, hot, rich, juicy blood. My muscles tensed at the thought.

"Now.. do you know.. what **desire** is, Howard?", Billy said in an acid tone, his body shaking, his mind and the implants on full tilt pulling every electrochemical string in his body trying to stop it from consuming itself.

"I think I'm beginning to learn.", I said sarcastically, looking at the clock- 11:51- and starting to feel the same thing, the process probably psychologically accelerated by watching Billy shake. For once in my life, I did not de-psych myself out. I didn't have the energy.

Time. Time. Time. 11:59 finally came around, and I went outside, walking on the wet ground in bare feet, walking over to the peasants' huts in the dark, Billy and Sarah following me uncertainly. I saw the food drop- midnight to within .01 second, I wouldn't need to wait at all, but it didn't matter. I knew what I wanted. I called for the Enforcers to put the packaged food in its proper place, eat whatever would satisfy their nutrient requirements, and by the light coming out of the house, the fading helicopter, and the moon, I opened the door to one of the huts. Billy followed me into this one, and I could hear Sarah ripping open the door to another. It was time to eat. I felt my nearly-unique brand of power fill me, probably the last of it. It drained the last energy I had, but I didn't care. I'd get more, right now.

Five of the six Mexicans inside woke up startled at our noisy entrance. "Que la chingala?", one fifteen-year-old said, the last thing he ever would say. Billy grabbed his arm and actually ripped it off his body, yanking away the holding bits of muscle and connective tissue. He ate it right there, grabbing the wrist and the elbow, cramming the skinny flesh into his mouth, barely taking time to chew. One of the peasants tried to run past me to some point outside, and I swung an insane, power-filled backhand into his head with all the force of my hunger and my strength. The thirteen-year-old's neck snapped. I grabbed the throat and drank the blood, rivulets of it running down my face. Damn. We really haven't been feeding the peasants enough. His blood was not nearly as rich as a pig's.

A woman started to screech at ridiculously high pitch, and in blind, vampiric rage I shut her up by putting her nose into her brain with the palm of my hand, feeling the brittle, malnutrition-weakened bone crush and hearing the corresponding snap. I flipped the body I was currently holding over and ate the skinny thighs, lamenting over the peasants' lack of food as much as my own. This meat simply doesn't have enough protein. Billy continued feasting on the body of the one he killed, its right arm laying on the floor, reduced to bone and a few pieces of skin. One older teenager thought he could be a hero and tackle Billy to the ground. Billy broke the idiot's right arm, grabbing the wrist and pushing it backwards to the shoulder, without thinking about it, and continued to feast. The would-be savior fell to the ground in agony, his heroism as dead as the bodies. Screams of suffering could both be heard from this hut and Sarah's, where I could also hear the sounds of snapping, crunching, and pain. They filled my heart with a sort of warm, fuzzy joy. The sixth peasant in this hut had finally woken up, her eight-year-old body shaking with absolute terror.

"Diablos blancos..", uttered a woman with too many wrinkles and too few brains on the top bunk, her eyes as big as saucers. You're right, bitch. White devils we are. White, evil, vampiric, hungry devils. I threw the unfinished body I held to the floor, and feasted on the other one I killed, with the flattened nose. I could actually feel myself digesting the underfed meat. My rage subsided, and I took a split second to focus on the sheer irony of an Illuminatus- the one a week and day from being the Dominator, no less- killing assorted nameless sheeple for meat.

I heard Fido bark and said in a nice doggy-master voice, "Go ahead, Fido! Eat, boy, eat!" He's

probably as hungry as I am, being forced to hunt and scrounge for his food. Fido rushed into the hut between me and Billy, lunged at the terrified little girl, and tore out her throat in one stroke, causing red droplets of blood to fly every which way in a wide spray, hitting everyone in the room. He promptly began chowing down on the gristly windpipe, then various stomach muscles and vital organs. The three other dogs followed him in and also chewed whatever flesh they could.

"Por favor... por favor..", the woman on the top bunk pleaded. I answered her pleas by chucking her to the floor and kicking her rapidly in the ribs until she died of internal injuries. There you go, you stupid bitch. That's for not farming fast enough. I ate more of the body I held. Mmm, mmm, good. The problem with humans, especially the underfed ones, is that they're too stringy. Too many tendons, too much gristle. I started to smell copper and realized that was the odor of lots of fresh blood.

I heard movement and shouts from the other huts, the very faint sound of rubbing sticks, and someone's makeshift torch light up over the sounds of tearing flesh. Additional light came through the door; I turned around and saw a man with wide eyes stare at the various corpses strewn around the room. "Dios mio...", he said, before he fainted. His torch fell on him, and his ragged clothing and his body started burning. He woke up in a few seconds, and screamed as his body was consumed by the flames. Idiot.

I believe I was actually starting to get full, despite my body's rapid digestion. I had eaten quite a bit of muscle, fat, and blood, and that wholesome nutrition would do me good. Usually, blood is the second most nutritious substance in the universe (The first is mother's milk or its engineered equivalent.), but when it comes from something as underfed as peasants living near the most ravenous people alive, it loses its quality. And again, I'm so damn glad I never have to worry about disease. These people are filthy, both inside and out.

I took a few more bites of calf muscle and realized I was full, to the point of overflowing. I chucked the rest of the mangled corpse to the floor, saw the burning body outside the door, easily kicked down a grass-and-sticks wall, and walked out, satisfied and happy, enjoying the cool night air and the normals' agonized screaming. Billy ate for another fifteen seconds, then followed me out. Panic had gripped the rest of the makeshift village. Cries of "Diablos!!" and "Los jefes han matando Alicia!" filled the air, their screams making me feel all the more satisfied. Sarah had finished, and pieces of humans could be seen all over the place outside the hut she ravaged. In amusement I watched three of the stronger, more aggressive guys try to assault her with torches - one got his neck snapped like a twig almost immediately. #2 got his skull literally peeled open as Sarah grabbed his eye sockets and yanked upwards with her engineered power and adrenalized might. The skull-joints simply tore off, leaving the man's head a bloody mess, and I could faintly see the gray matter of his brain under the gore, scooped out by his own skull. The third was killed more mercifully, when Sarah smashed his jaw back then up with two quick blows of right and left hands, putting his lower teeth inside his brain. He did not bleed so much; he simply fell down, dead as a doornail before he hit the ground.

Then all hell broke loose as the peasants flew in a constant stream towards the trees. A woman carrying her baby tripped and dropped it, and it landed squarely on its skull. She picked it up, crying insanely, and fled towards the forest. Dumbfucks. This is an island. Where the hell are they going to run? The flames both from the burning body and people's dropped torches proceeded to set the rest of the dry village on fire.

The Enforcers calmly, meticulously continued to unload the boxes of food. I could hear a loud whup-whup-whup as another black helicopter came to rest, and its blades quickly shut off, leaving a silence only broken by the sounds of burning buildings and screams. I ran up to it, expecting what was to come. The Bastard, Herbert Gladstone, stepped out of it and addressed me in a solemn, formal tone, obviously rehearsed precisely. His formal tone was only momentarily broken by the sight of the soon-to-be Dominator with blood running down his face and chest.

"Mighty Inheritor, 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." Wait a minute, hotshot. **That** wasn't the test for endurance? A month of malnutrition for the person who can handle it the least?! Then what the hell is? "Being of sound mind and able body, do you accept or reject this next challenge?"

"I accept, you stupid bastard.", I said, grinning. If I can take a month of that shit, I can take anything. Bring it. I'm the fucking engineered Inheritor. And you only have eight more days to fuck me over in, asshole. What the hell do you plan to do? Fido came running to my right side and I petted him gently, blood matting his thick fur. Ugh. I need a bath.

He ceremoniously dropped a single paper, lead-bound, on the ground at my feet. "You have twelve hours to prepare yourself before leaving. The details are here." He then stepped back inside the helicopter, its powerful air almost blew me down, and he was high in the sky, then gone into the night. I noticed Billy and Sarah had taken their usual positions behind my sides.

"I can't believe I just did that.", said Billy in a dreamy tone. "The fucking food was right here, and yet we.. you.. just fucking slaughtered them anyway."

"They were going to die anyway. Besides, we all know why the fresh meat went first." To a normal it would not have been obvious; to us it was clear as day. The hunger we get is not for regular food. When we get hungry, it's always for the same thing-- raw, fresh, bloody meat. The wilder, the better. And I got serious insight about my strength- I didn't know I could break necks with a single blow. I didn't think I had the raw power. And I definitely didn't think Billy could rip someone's arm off like that. He didn't even have good leverage.

The Enforcers were finished putting the food away- I would definitely bring it out again for another feast today. One of them ran up to me and addressed me at exactly the same space as every time- precisely three fourths of a meter. "Howard, the peasants may be killed now." No shit, Sherlock. "Do you wish Enforcer aid in that matter?"

"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.", I gestured to my favorite dog and servants. Fido barked. I picked up the book, trudged inside dragging mud and blood onto the carpet, dropped the book on the table with a whap, and slowly made my way up the stairs into the elevator, as I heard the faint, pleasant sound of assault rifles and agonized screaming outside. Shit, I'm tired. Once they followed me in, I pressed the fifth floor button, and almost collapsed with sleep on the way down. Some old prohibition about sleep and water I gleaned from common sense and some unnamed TV show hit me, so when I finally made my way to the pool, I said "Water - fifty-five." The freon tubes could be heard activating deep below the surface and at the sides.

"Fifty-five?!", exclaimed Billy. He started shivering in advance. "If you're worried about us sleeping in here, you really don't have to at **sixty**-fucking-five!"

"This is a lot easier for you than it is for me. Jump in." They did, all three of them, immediately, splashing me with cold. Billy drew in a loud gasp. Sarah shrieked, the first time she's done that in more than a month. Fido got out as soon as he got in, shaking madly. I touched a toe to the water - cold as hell - so I just muttered "the hell with it" and jumped in myself.

HOLY FUCK THAT'S COLD!! Icy tendons of blistering freeze greeted my body with sharp, shiver-producing bursts of cold and pain. "Yaaa!! Water! Seventy! No- Water, eighty!" All sleepiness was annihilated in a fraction of a second. What they say is true- cold showers really do wake you up quick, and normals really do get some important knowledge earlier. Damn. What the hell was I thinking? The high-powered heating got the water temperature up to at least a semi-agreeable level, with undercurrents exchanging the heat rapidly. Billy and Sarah were both giggling madly. "What the fuck's so damn funny?", I yelled at them.

"You.", Billy said, taking the KISS (Keep it simple, stupid) principle to an extreme.

"That and everything that happened in the last thirty seconds.", expounded Sarah. Both of them were still grinning like village idiots. An hour ago, I probably would have got pissed, but a feast of raw meat had made us all more agreeable- even Fido, who had remembered my earlier "take a bath" command and was swimming around. Fresh blood and mud are simple to wash off of bare skin and light fur, and the water purifiers quickly removed it when it dissolved.

"Thus ends the first test.", said Sarah in a semi-happy, semi-expectant voice.

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

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, then the next test can't be **that** bad, can it?"

"There are a lot of bad things you can do to someone in a week, Billy." He should know that by now.

"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." Heh, heh, heh.

The bath was refreshing. I sent Billy back up to get the paper, and bring it back - he did, with a pained look on his face.

"Howard- you better take a look at this. I think I jinxed it." His face and his tone were grim.

I climbed out of the pool and said, "All right, gimme." He chuckled it to me, and I read the description and the rules - and screamed.

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.
5. Illuminated secrecy must be kept.
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.

The designated point and time being noon and in the middle of undeveloped Brazil.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAA!! Holy shit!! Sarah, how the fuck are we supposed to do **this**?" I grabbed the paper tightly with wet hands and it didn't get damp.

She climbed out, sighing, and grabbed the paper. "Hooooo... very carefully? Well, where's Point X?"

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

"Billy," Sarah said with a sigh, "you did jinx it."

"Sarah, is this even remotely possible?", I asked, hoping that her field knowledge could tell me something about the challenge ahead.

"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..." She read Rule 4 more carefully. "Oh dammit. I usually don't miss those either."

"Oh come on, Sarah, they wouldn't leave **us** behind now would they?", Billy said in his usual cynical voice.

"Considering their inclination for making tests hard, I figured they'd make him do it alone.", she replied. That brought up something I've been wondering about her.

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

"About thirty big ones and constant little ones, like a total thousand or something. It was a weekly schedule. They changed it a few times though."

"Tell me how the one you most remember went.", I commanded. She rolled her eyes a bit, drifting back into her memory 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. 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, then he started trying to kick me... then my training kicked in." Billy winced noticeably.

"Ouch! What happened to him?", I asked morbidly.

"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."

"Did you have the metal fingernails then?", Billy 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." I giggled slightly.

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

"With flying colors.", Sarah replied.

"So what were they testing for?", he asked.

"The ability to kill. The ways came later." He nodded as if understanding something. Oh, yes. He was probably wondering why she didn't use her training methods to do an assassin kill. I figured she was just torturing him.

"I thought you did that naturally.", Billy replied. For that matter, so did I.

"Well, I do, but they needed to check."

"They always do.", Billy said with a slight sigh. It was then that Fido got out of the pool, and shook as dogs always do, his engineered muscles flinging water everywhere.

"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. Okay, how to spend them?", I asked.

"I'm still fucking hungry.", Billy said. For that matter.. so am I. Shit. How fast did we digest them? Eat to the point of overflowing and then eat some more.. my metabolism screams for more.

"Let's eat." We went upstairs and we ate. Fucking absolutely devoured is more like it. Ate and ate and ate, pastries, veal, cheese, milk, vegetables, bagels, feeling the power go back into our bodies with each bite, throwing everything that needed to be cooked into a microwave and nuking it instead. Damn. I had no idea it would get like this- the nutrition is absorbed so quickly that we're left demanding more in a few minutes.

And finally, we were satiated once more, as the high nutritional content ensured that we wouldn't get hungry quite so quickly again. I plopped down on the couch and Billy plopped next to me.

"Damn, all this food and we munched on the peasants."

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

"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."

"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 came very close to laughing her ass off. As it was, she was snickering repeatedly. I doubted commanding her could make her completely stop; she finds death entertaining and mockery of death, or treating it as more than another set of fools to the meatgrinder, hilarious.

"Basically, except for wars."

"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." This is all brutally obvious to me, brutally obvious to Sarah, and should be brutally obvious to him, but his ten-year childhood indoctrination of the Judeo-Christian Bullshit™ still affects him a little- of course, he's a quick learner and is rapidly getting over it.

"So why do you tell everyone that it's not?"

"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."

"So you and your Illuminated friends really don't give a fuck."

"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?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I get it. They're like ants, right?"

"You got the idea. Let's get some sleep." The digestive demands were taking their toll in fatigue. We went to bed and I was asleep seconds after hitting the mattress.

I woke up in the middle of the night with a pressure in my bowels. Ugh! I went to the bathroom, grimaced, and expelled a black, putrid mass of pestilence and rot, the inevitable result of the digestion of what we ate. Thus cleansed, I went back to bed and had no problem getting back to sleep.

Chapter 16

Sarah and Billy inventoried everything we thought we'd need for the trip. A fifty-meter grappling hook, three machetes, an assortment of antivenins (you know something's an emergency item when you hope it never gets used), water canteens, everything-proof, camouflaged clothing, an absolutely topographical map, a guide to rainforest food, three compasses, and a copy of The Rules. Billy re-read the rules, hoping that they'd magically change into something easier. They didn't.

And, not surprisingly, my mind was roiling with possibilities. And so I did what I seldom do- I sat on the floor, folded my hands, realized that there wasn't even a hum of a jet to distract me, and just thought for three minutes straight. I thought about why they did this, who decided what would be on the tests. I thought about possibilities, about what we'd do if we got seen, about what would happen if we got slowed down. I didn't come to any conclusions- I simply didn't have enough information, and this was starting to look more and more like an insoluble trap, one that I wouldn't get out of even if I did make the 200 miles. I got up.

"Got everything?", I asked Billy and Sarah pointlessly.

"Yeah.", Billy answered.

"Let's go." We grimly walked out of the house and entered the plane, letting an Enforcer do the piloting. There was no talking for a while- I was still trying to think, daydreaming about all the assorted shit they could throw at us. These are, after all, the Illuminati. Never expect any test they give to you to be simple, even if the previous one was. They are unpredictable and cruel, and they wouldn't survive any other way. But I'm not really sure if they know what they're doing- the first test was tough, yes, but it wasn't.. it just didn't seem to be much of a test in my opinion, just a month of torture. It made me wonder if they knew what they were doing- I pushed the thought from my mind. I **can't** wonder that, because I can't afford to treat them as if they don't. But something told me that dealing with them will be a whole lot easier when engineereds are at the helm.

Assuming they know what they're doing- which I have to- they wouldn't give me this kind of test without a chance. "I do have a chance, you know.", I said aloud, and I was shocked at how impotent my voice sounded.

"No fire, no food, no help. Howard, are you sure there's not someone else they'd want to be Dominator?", Billy said, creating new fear in my mind, even though he's asked that question before.

""When you asked me that three weeks ago I figured no. Now I'm not even sure if they want one at all. Damnit... damnit, **DAMMIT!!!!**", I shouted, with more fear in my voice than I would have liked.

"It's possible.", muttered Sarah. "All we have to do is just keep going and forget where we are." She's right- we have to forget, lest we slow down too much looking for traps and such.

"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?", I asked.

"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.." Or some happy Illuminatus going ahead of us and filling our path with some super-hungry ones.

"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."

"Maybe I should have brought Fido..", I replied.

"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, damnit all, sum præcipito, the Hall is just waiting for me.."

"What does præcipito mean?", Billy asked, not having gotten around to that word 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." At any other time, I probably would have laughed at the prospect of myself talking like this. But now, everything seems as if I don't have very much hope, particularly since I have no idea what lies in store.

"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?" Ah, good old self-interest. I am in familiar territory once more.

"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." A brief spark of rage emerged- **give up**, how dare he suggest that I could possibly- and then died down into hard resolution.

"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." I think I'm getting the hint, too. The answer is, as the megacorp's commercials say, to just do it.

A couple of hours later and I was thinking that there wasn't that much of a bright side to be found- but I didn't care. I'm not going to die to this mess. It can't be completely unfair- and even if it is, they're dealing with someone who specializes in unfairness. I'm probably going to have to deal with lots worse shit than this eventually- I'm not going to fall **now**. But speaking of falling, it's about time I fell...

The thump of the plane's landing woke me up.

Chapter 17

The entire first level was waiting for me. It's not usual to see all of them in one place, especially without the other levels, but they apparently decided that secrecy had room for them and only them.

The Bastard stepped forward from the group to me, and I stepped forward to him. "Inheritor Howard, do you accept the challenge of the Second Test?", he asked formally.

"Yes." Sarcasm came to mind, but unfortunately, this wasn't the right place for it. I'll use plenty of it later..

"Then let it be so. Inheritor, your second test begins in.." The Bastard rolled up his white sleeve and checked his watch. "thirty minutes and nineteen seconds. Do you have any questions?"

Well, there's always the little matter of.. "Yes. Where the **fuck** is Point X?" If I hadn't asked, he would have never told. This guy's not called the Bastard for nothing.

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

"How big is it?" I'm not going to nitpick the idea of a 'point' having area.

"Point X is a circle one meter in diameter."

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

"Yes." Whew. It would not be unlike the Illuminati to just draw a chalk circle in the middle of nowhere and call that Point X.

"Very well then.", I replied. Being the Inheritor of the Illuminati means that I have real-time satellite maps of everywhere, and I re-entered the plane to check the place out. I looked for guiding landmarks before I checked the place itself out. 320 km away, 173 degrees, 11 minutes, looking for obvious spots.. ah, here we go. It looked like a green hill, but I knew it wasn't.

Damn. That was too easy. "So, if anyone has any suggestions as for what we do for thirty minutes...", I said.

"We look at the direct route's satellite maps, check valleys, rivers, everything.", Sarah suggested. Good idea.

"All right then." For about twenty minutes, Sarah did the work of checking things out- most of our route was heavily forested, a few roads, a few human settlements, and a shitload of water. We'll need to get a boat. Shit, that's what I should have done- called down a super lightweight canoe that can hold three, be divided into three pieces, and be folded up. Why the **hell** didn't I think of that before, when I still had time? Why didn't Sarah? Bah, I know why. She's just too stressed out, just like Billy, just like me. Whether we make it or don't- and it hurts my mind to seriously consider the prospect of not making it- this is going to be hell. It's not like I don't have endurance, it's not like I don't have determination, but this isn't flat land and we'll need to keep secrecy, yet manage to go thirty miles a day. On dry land, that will be relatively easy- in water, we might be able to go faster,

but secrecy will be an absolute fucking nightmare.

Wait. Nightmares.

"Oh shit. I just realized something.", I said aloud.

"What?", Sarah responded instantly.

"Billy screams at night." The meaning of Billy and Sarah's expressions were clear: Oh, shit.

"Oh, the fuck.", Sarah muttered. I could tell she was angry at herself. But that's not right; **I** am the Illuminatus here. It's **my** job to **know**. How the fucking **HELL** could I have forgotten- how the fucking **HELL** could I have not been prepared?

"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.", I said, through gritted, frustrated teeth.

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

"Uh huh." Right. I doubt he can. Hopefully, if he sleeps face-downwards and in the sleeping bag, it'll be muffled.

"Sarah, what are our odds on surviving this?", I said, pleasantly.

"Hmm.. if everything goes right, if we manage to do everything perfectly, a hundred percent. This test was designed to be passed, not failed.", she replied. Naturally, Murphy's Law precludes perfection, but she has a point. She can't know when we'll screw up in the future, but if I do it myself or allow them to do it, that'll become the meaning of odds. Oh hell. Of course she's right. I'm the Inheritor, soon to be the Dominator. There are no odds to my operations, no percentage of survival or success as there are for Enforcer or normal teams. The tactical, strategical, and logistical rules all get thrown out the window when dealing with me. I do what I want; I do what I can. The First Level of the Illuminati contains my inherited power base, my main creator, and my inherited adversaries. Collectively, they would not create a test that I cannot defeat. Therefore it is up to **me** to do it right, everything else be damned.

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

"If you scream, it'll be one in a thousand or something similar even if we don't sleep near populated areas.", Sarah said with bite in her voice.

"I must not scream. I must not scream.", Billy repeated to himself, panicky. He just might not. If his subconscious is behind the screaming, self-preservation might kick in and he just might shut the fuck up- or at least scream a little less loud.

"Inheritor! Bring your servants and come to me.", the Bastard said in an incredibly obnoxious commanding voice, and I was highly tempted to put him out of my misery right then. He was standing exactly where he was before- did he not move that whole time?- the same officious, stalwart countenance on his ugly face. Use your power to acquire a **clue**, asshole. "Enforcers, check their backpacks for violations of the rules.", he said. Yes, he definitely needs to buy a clue. Sarah held out her backpack, looking at it carefully, and Billy and I both got the hint immediately- we looked carefully and made sure the Bastard's Enforcers didn't take anything out that they didn't put back in. They finished in less than thirty seconds.

"Very well, Inheritor Howard. First Level Gates has something to say to you." The Bastard moved away and the geeky-looking man stooped close to me. He's probably the only First Level who

exposes himself to the normal world- why, I have no idea. "Don't get your ass kicked.", he said to me in a quiet voice. Um, I think I'll take that advice. "If you don't get in there...", he said, motioning his head in the direction of Herbert. I can only imagine exactly what will happen, but I know it's going to involve assholes and a power grab.

And then the waiting began- five minutes of it. I went over the directions in my head, thinking, when Billy shouted something urgent.

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

Gah! Oh shit! "Yaaaaaak!!" We headed for the bushes immediately, running like fuck away from the destination (couldn't be closer than the starting point when it started..), getting out of view as fast as our engineered legs would take us. The Illuminati laughed- **fuck them**, they're not going to be laughing at me in a week- as we zipped into the trees and the brush and hid, covering ourselves in dirt and mud, the camouflage gear making us invisible to normal eyes. Yuck. I'm going to have to get used to this.

"That was close.", I muttered. Being a bullet dodger means that I'm rather used to 'close', though.

"Yeah, really.", Billy replied in a low, quiet voice, a voice we'd all be speaking in for this test. "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." I commanded because I knew how, but I didn't feel comfortable here, not in the least. I felt incredibly inexperienced- why wouldn't I be, who the hell'd train the Dominator in this shit?- and incredibly unsure, a rare thing for me. Fortunately, I have Sarah as well as Billy, making things easier as usual. The adrenaline I was feeling didn't last.

Traveling through the forest was easy, reminiscent of the engineered paradise I live at. There was very little underbrush and few things to get in our way. And, although we were wearing full gear anyway, there was no heavy sunlight. It was shady, humanity-free, and relaxing. Or it would have been if I was allowed to relax. Trying to focus, I kept going through the dirt, hacking away twice at some light undergrowth instead of walking around it. And then my legs started to hurt.

I'm not used to pain. Not in the least, not really. I wasn't used to hunger until the last test, either, but this is different. Just a constant dull annoyance that said, in its persistent monotone, 'Hey, Howard, you might want to stop walking now. Just a thought. Hey, stop walking.', on and on, ad infinitum. Why the fuck did they have to include **this** in their test? Long distances are for flying, not walking- my jet could do this whole thing in a few minutes! It's a shame the laws of physics are so limiting with regards to genetic engineering. I'd love to, say, sprint at half the speed of sound, instead of about a twentieth of it, and be able to keep sprinting for an hour or so. That would be nice.

Instead, I'm here doing this, wishing I was somewhere else. There are things to see here- a tree covered in ants, birds in the upper canopy, a very carefully camouflaged snake. I would love to have pretended I wanted to be out here, but that fantasy vanished as soon as it formed. I'm slated to become the Dominator of the world- I should not be doing things I don't want to do! I realized what a normal would say about me: I'm a spoiled rich boy not used to hardships. I would then swiftly crush said normal's throat and break his spine. How you can 'spoil' a normal by giving them exactly what they want makes little sense to me, anyway.

And I'm damn glad they let me use Illuminated gear out here. Having to wear normal clothing, leaving my skin vulnerable to insects and irritants, would make this even less tolerable. As it was, the feet of the soles, their soles looking like normal hikers' footprints, went squish in the mud, a constant plod, in a tropical version of Napoleon's retreat from Russia. (No, the Illuminati didn't control **that** goatfucker, although we did influence members of his court and could have killed him if

we wanted.)

We're being spied on, that I'm sure of, but no normals were looking at us.. or were visible at all, for that matter. Here's an idea for cleaning the slums of idiots- just take them out here. Having no future where they are, some of them might even want to come, and the ones with self-preservation instincts will live. Put it on camera and it'll be an excellent lesson in human behavior.

I wanted to talk, to break the constant plod and relative silence, but that would just take more energy. Billy and Sarah, I'm sure, have some choice words of their own for this nonsense, probably wishing I would have left them at home. Forget it, you two- if I have to endure it, I'm sure as hell bringing you. Misery loves company, after all, and there was more than enough misery to go around. We were walking considerably faster than two miles an hour, probably more than twice that, over rocks and logs and through squishy mud, and my legs really started to bug me after about 45 minutes. "Howard, I think it's time to rest.", Billy said after an hour or so.

"My entire lower body agrees with you.", I agreed. A mosquito was desperately trying to get through my face shield and I smashed it and wiped the guts off. "But we're going to have to get used to more than that.", I said, although I sat down anyway. Billy laid down on his stomach, not caring about the dirt. As we sat I started to worry about secrecy and being found, the worst possible thing that was likely to happen.

"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?", Billy asked. Shit, if we're not..

Sarah's answer was confident. "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."

"Think anyone saw us?", I asked, paranoid, and realized how stupid it was to ask that after I did.

"Not out here. Even the bravest tourists aren't going out this far and I don't see any natives.", Sarah answered. I keep subconsciously thinking of normals as wanting to spy, as knowing what's going on and wanting to find out. The truth, of course, is pretty close to the opposite.

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

"That was about.. oh, three, three and a half miles an hour.", Sarah said. Damn, I'd thought we were going faster. "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.", I said, shrugging. "Let's keep going." Somebody had to say it. I got up, Billy pulled himself off his stomach, and we did. Five minutes after we started walking, it started to rain. A drizzle at first, then harder and harder until we were in a torrent. That's why they call it a rainforest.

"At least the rain will keep us cool...", I muttered. The mud became slushier from it, though, and we fought to make good time. I am never, ever doing this again, and almost certainly won't have to. But in a way, that's the wrong attitude. I'm going to own this planet- why is it such a problem if I have to walk across large sections of it? I'm the Inheritor, and this is part of my inheritance. The Levels had set down rules that I have to follow during it, but that's just to make sure it's not too easy. As my gaming experience and physical abilities show, I have absolutely no problem with accelerated difficulty. Bring it right the fuck on. I heard Billy giggling at something and didn't ask what it was. He has his own thoughts to keep him going, too. We took a drink from a fresh puddle a bit after that, and a bit after that, urinated in thick yellow streams.

It continued to rain for a couple of hours. We clambered over and walked around large obstacles, using our machetes when needed, the blades easily passing through everything we used them on. It was actually somewhat difficult to see each other, our forms obfuscated by the pouring rain and darkness- and we're close to each other. So much for having to worry about normals seeing us. Sarah probably feels at home in the shadows like this. A few times, we heard rustling and crouched down to avoid being seen- but we didn't see any humans, and if we can't see normals here, they definitely can't see us. Probably an animal. Frustration, annoyance, monotony, fear, boredom.. yeah, I think I'm getting rather sick of this, I realized, sighing. A few times we were on hills and got a great view, or at least it would have been if not for the constant death march. Wasn't there some book about people being forced to walk until they died? Yes, that's right, they couldn't stop at all or the Enforcers (wait, it didn't actually say Enforcers, it couldn't have..) killed them. But they were on even pavement and not in a land of sticky mud and obstacles. I sighed some more. I can't wait until this goes from 'something I'm doing now' to 'a long-past memory'.

Okay, fuck this, my lungs and heart are just hurting too much, and I need food. "All right, let's stop again.", I said, and sat down in the mud, not caring about the water. My servants sat very close to me, and I was glad. Although I knew it wasn't, companionship just felt vital out here. "Shit, I bet I could scream as loud as possible and no one would hear me.", I angrily, loudly muttered.

"Don't.", Sarah immediately replied. "Murphy's Law."

"I know, I know." I wasn't actually going to do it. "I'm starting to get hungry, too."

"Yeah, so am I.", Billy said.

"Shit..", Sarah muttered. "Yeah, me too, but it's almost impossible to see anything out here!" The concealment of darkness and rain works both ways.

"At least we've got plenty to drink...", I said flippantly. "Anyway, this rain isn't going to end any time soon."

"So what are you saying we should do? Look for food in this?", Sarah asked, as if it was a bad decision. Well, in a way it was, but it's something we have to do.

"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." I was in luck- Sarah spotted something that moment.

"How about that.", she said, pointing in the trees. I wasn't sure what she pointed at... wait, that's a monkey! Hey, it's not like we haven't eaten primates before.

"Got Rocks?", I asked. I thought Sarah would give me one, but instead she answered by picking one up and tossing it at the monkey full force. Her aim was perfect, and the beast crashed to the ground. We instantly ran to it and popped our face shields, ripping it to pieces and taking big bites out of it, like predators at a kill. The problem was that it wasn't very big, and there were three of us- and if I'm to have them at the end of this, my servants need to eat as much as I do.

"Damn..", Billy said. "Wasn't expecting it to be **that** easy."

"Neither was I..." But opportunism is an illuminated trait. "hey.. Sarah, check up the tree the monkey was in for fruit." She jumped from branch to branch like the ninja she is, climbing with her usual agility, going almost out of sight as she made it all the way up. There was a crash of branches- she jumped to another tree! I wondered why she did that until I saw her climbing down with mangoes in her arms. We gobbled them in less than a minute.

Nice. Very nice. And very **lucky**. For a moment this all felt nice, relaxing, refreshing. I savored the

feeling while it lasted, feeling myself digest. Phew. It took effort to make myself continue, but I had to- I'm the one in charge, after all.

We kept going. There was a river, but it had a log for a bridge which we easily crossed. Later, there was a small cliff, which we slid down harmlessly. Sarah paid constant attention to her navigational instruments, and looked around, matching the places we were at to how they looked from the air. Billy complained about his legs, but we had to keep going anyway. Besides, he knows as well as I do that mine feel the exact same way: a constant, aggravating agony. The pouring rain finally eased up.

We heard a scurrying to our left- shit, what was that?- and then there was nothing. Of course. It was a fucking **scurrying**. "We're getting paranoid...", I muttered, getting closer to my servants. "That was a small animal." Let it be known that you damn Levels have got your Dominator so paranoid that he's wincing at rodents. Damn, this is embarrassing. But I suppose that's part of the point- to remind themselves that, even with thorough genetic engineering, the Dominator's still fairly close to human, and can suffer as humans do. Good, assholes. So can **you**.

I didn't want to think about the consequences of not being paranoid enough, though. I didn't want to think about walking, either. Frankly I didn't want to think at all, just to go into a trance, let my servants do the decision-making (I'm no better than they are at it out here..) and wake up at the beginning of the third test, whatever the fuck **that** is. But that wasn't an option. Not just because three minds are still better than two, but because I couldn't turn off my brain, after all.

I heard Billy pick up the pace from a bit behind me. He has the right idea. I did the same, and Sarah followed suit. If they had given me a test that was beyond my abilities, I would definitely want to mope about it. But it's not. This is well within my power to achieve, and as many legitimate complaints as I have about it, it still needs to be done.

We continued for hours. Although we eventually lost our determined strides, returning to the slow death-march plod, we were covering ground and making good time. Good- if for whatever reason we have to slow down, we'll have a buffer against it. The rain started up a few times, and thunder cracked overhead. A couple more times, we reacted to something as if it were human, but it turned out to be an animal- the second time, Sarah whacked its face with a thrown rock, and chased the small ungulate. She managed to get in a machete hit, it stumbled, and then it was ours. I had no idea what species it was, and I didn't care. It was a **yummy** species, let's put it that way. We ripped the dirty skin off before we chowed down on the stringy meat, before continuing on. The sun started to set in a half hour. That's that- there's no way in hell we can get anywhere with insufficient light and tired bodies.

"Ugh.. after this shit I'm not going outside for at least a week.", I said, as we sat down closely again. "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." If I'm lucky, that is.

"Howard, you mind if I join you on that one?", Billy replied. Why would he even need to ask..?

"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.", he said. Easily? Not replaceable at all! The jet, if destroyed, could be built again, if a meteor hit the mansion I'd just command its reconstruction. To lose Billy and Sarah? I mean, sure, I could have the DNA formed into new organisms, but it wouldn't be anywhere near the same, even in a century..

"Yup. I refuse to lose anything permanent because of these damn tests.", I said, smiling. "We're done for the day. It's getting dark and I'm tired as shit." I looked around for a good spot to park the sleeping bag.

"Yeah.. yeah, I guess we can afford it.", Sarah said. "First light we gotta move though. We might lose time on the rivers. And I'd hate to think of what the third test is."

"We'll find out soon enough, or we'll die.", I said. Suicide would be better than that prison.

"Not die, Howard.", Sarah replied, her eyebrow raised.

"Yes, die, Sarah. They come and I'll whack my own head off, might tell you two to, too.", I said with grim determination.

"Bull shit.", she replied evenly. "There is no way. You'd die fighting but you would not cut off your own head." She was.. right. Die fighting it is, then, if it comes to that.

"Howard, you wouldn't.", Billy said. "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." There's no sense in worrying about crap like the consequences of failure. On a mission, focus on success. "Let's get some sleep." I found an elevated spot of ground that the rain wouldn't accumulate in, and Sarah unfurled the sleeping bag and put it there. We climbed in, still wearing the suits, with me in the middle, laying on my stomach. My hand brushed up against Sarah as she climbed in- hey, that felt pretty good. I ran my right hand up and down her body, feeling her muscles and her breasts, then moving my hand down to gently touch the region between her legs.

Even through this suit's gloves and the fabric of her suit, it felt wonderful. "Remind me to take your clothes off too, Sarah.", I said, thinking of what I could do with her.

"Howard, are you actually ready yet?", she asked. Hmm.. no, no I'm not. And I'm not in any rush. When I really want to have sex with her, I'll know it.

"Not yet. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy myself.. heh heh.", I said, my imagination still going.

"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.", I replied. She has an interest in my success, and I'm curious as to just what it is.

"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." Billy cracked up laughing at that. "And you will be woken up early tomorrow." I don't like anyone saying 'You will' to me, but unfortunately, she's right- I have to be. She turned her back to me, and I ran my hand along her thigh as she did.

"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." It wasn't just because I was touching Sarah, either.

"Yeah, so do I.. hey wait, which kind of 'good' are you talking about?", he asked. What other kind could I possibly mean? Oh, there is that other definition, too.

"The pleasurable kind. To me, not other people.", I replied.

"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.." Out here? In this mess, running the risk of getting bitten or stung by some insect or, worse, snake? Our only other protection is the sleeping bag, so hell no. These are designed to be worn for long periods,

anyway.

"It could be worse, we could be wearing normal clothes.", I said.

"Boy Scouts from Hell, here we come..", he said, and I snickered. World Domination Merit Badge, anyone? "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.", I reassured him.

"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 put my arms around them before immediately falling asleep.

Chapter 18

Sarah gently touched my shoulder to wake me up. 'Billy didn't scream. Whew.', was my very first conscious thought of the morning. My second one was the intense discomfort I felt upon waking up way too early. I didn't want to get up. I wanted to lay here. Despite the uneven ground beneath the bag, the general humidity, and the heat of laying next to two people (well, one now), here was an excellent place to be. Unfortunately, it wasn't a reasonable option. "Ow... Six more nights of that? This is going to suck...", I muttered, getting out of the bag slowly and listening for any humans that might have heard us. Nope. Nothing. Not even very many animals. Some birds called in the distance, and a snake hissed nearby, but other than that, nothing was active.

"Well, we survive another day.", Billy muttered, just as tired as I was. "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." She looked at her compass, thinking, and we packed up and continued on.

I just wanted to call it off, really. I wanted to say, 'Okay guys, we give up, game's over, I'm not playing anymore.' But the First Level wasn't fooling around, and this was no game. Even so, I'm the Master here- I can always say 'Okay guys, break time.' (even though we've just started) or 'I think we need more sleep.. wake us up in a half hour, Sarah.' This is what makes things worse on me than Billy and Sarah. They **have** to continue. I have to, in a sense, as well, although it isn't real control. It's control by force of threat, influencing my decisions in a way I don't want them influenced.

And I royally **hate** that being done to me.

Making things worse was the pain and boredom. To a normal, this would be 'exercise', an activity that increases the body's future ability to do work by enlarging muscles and expanding arteries. To engineered, it's 'pointless nonsense', because we simply regenerate. And that was happening now, with my body struggling to repair the damage slowly being done to it. Not really that important, and decidedly non-fatal even over a long period of time, but a pain nonetheless. And I probably really shouldn't be bored. In my years of being the Inheritor, I've never had an experience quite like this, and I'm still with my best friends, after all.

The ground was soft, muddy, and in a state of perpetual decay. There was barely enough light to see by, and we slogged through the mud almost blindly, with Sarah constantly checking her compass, using the faint light of what dawn sun could be seen through the seemingly infinite mass

of trees. Splurt, squish, splat.. the mud tried to stick to our feet without providing traction to walk on, and if it wasn't for these suits we'd be wasting even more energy on it. The constant, tired walk was becoming a nuisance to my ears, with the squishing of mud, only broken up by a patch of higher ground or a fallen tree to climb over. As the sun slowly, almost invisibly rose, the obstacles became easier to see, but the sheer repetitiveness became worse and worse.

There were puddles everywhere, and we didn't avoid them. Why waste energy? We simply walked over rocks and tree roots, following Sarah's compass. There wasn't anything else. There were lots of animals audible, yes, and plenty of multicolored beauty, but this wasn't my island where I could appreciate it at leisure.

It never... fucking... stopped. Hours and hours of walking through wet mud, pure Enforcer-grade drudgery at its worst. We kept a fairly brisk pace- we had to. I ignored the growing pain in my legs and chest, dreaming of the day when this will all become a faint memory and the normals involved in this excuse for a test will be dead, either because of old age or because of me just getting sick of their shit. The worst part, the thing that kept me from falling into total boredom-induced monotony as Billy has, was my anger and frustration. How dare they do this? If I survive, I can kill them! One at a time, or maybe all at once. A single swipe with the Micro, with them all sitting in a row, would rip them all to pieces almost simultaneously.

"..this **SUCKS!!!!**", Billy shouted suddenly, and if it wasn't for secrecy he'd have screamed it at the top of his lungs.

"No shit, Billy. This sucks big. Too big. I'm going to rape the guy who thought this one up.", I said, clenching my fist to reveal the blades. Open ass, insert sharp objects, remove soul from body. "Let's rest for a few minutes...", I said, exhausted, and sat down on the muddy earth, then leaned back slowly on my elbows and finally my back. It was nice.

"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..", Billy said. He'd also sat down, but didn't lay back, because he knew we'd have to get up soon. He's right. Procrastination is a gravity well. It's easy to get sucked in. I don't have to get up for a few more minutes, what's that going to affect? Same with the next few minutes.. and the next. Sarah would have an idea of when to say when, but that would cut things even closer to the last minute..

"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.", I said, annoyed. "Fucking.. let's go.", I muttered, got up, and Sarah continued to lead us with her compass.

Another half hour or so and I started to feel hungry. "Sarah, we need food.", I told her.

"Let's see...", she said, looking at all the trees surrounding us. "Leaves look about right.." Could it really be that easy? Shit, my island has a similar food density, if that's the case. We followed her to a tree with wide leaves.. and bananas! She found a good position and easily used her grappling hook to snag them and yank them off the branch, catching them as they fell. They were yellowish-brown but were probably good to eat anyway. She snapped two from the bunch and handed one to each of us. I ripped the top off mine and dug in.

I got a mouthful of bad taste and hard objects for my trouble. I spat them out immediately, utterly disgusted. "Gah!", I exclaimed, spitting some more, trying to get the awful taste out of my mouth. "Fuck that shit!"

"What's wrong with it?", Billy asked.

"Look for yourself!", I shouted, showing him and Sarah the inside. Unlike bred or engineered

bananas, these wild ones are full of seeds. I suppose they're technically edible, but.. ugh! "It tastes like shit, too.", I told them. Billy dropped his, and Sarah made an expression that she didn't have a clue they'd be like that. Well.. now we know, the hard way, and she didn't research for taste, just poison. I tossed the banana I had to the ground and stomped on it, annoyed, and Sarah tossed the bunch. "Sarah, there's more than this out here, isn't there?", I asked. If there's not, it's time for hunting.

"Definitely. I saw some Brazil nuts ten minutes ago, probably should have said something. Let's keep going." In about five minutes, she spotted something- a large tree with giant coconuts, many of which had already fallen to the ground. Coconuts out here, and from a tree like that? I've never heard of that before. Some giant, tailless rat had seen us, and skittered into the bushes at our approach. If these aren't good, that animal's on the menu.

Sarah examined one of the fallen coconuts, pulled her machete, and slashed the top off- it's not a coconut at all! Instead of the white milk and nutmeat of what I was expecting, it was full of Brazil nuts. Cracking them open individually was easy with our blades and strength, and we feasted. I was worried about them tasting bad like the bananas did, but they were delicious. We ate a total of four of the large mega-seeds before we were full.

Sarah then took the shells and attacked them, smashing them to pieces with her feet, hands, and the tree trunk, stomping on them, until they were completely destroyed. What the heck? Did she have some aggressive energy to work out? "The cuts were too clean.", she explained, as she tossed their shards randomly around the tree. Oh, yes. Secrecy. Normal hikers, which is what our trail pretended to be from, would never be able to slice those open in one stroke.

I realized I was thirsty, but Billy asked it first: "Sarah, what water should we drink?" These puddles don't look very good.

"Water that hasn't had time to stagnate." Moving water, in other words. It was easy to find a clear one, spurting off a rock like a perpetual water fountain.

The trudge went on. There's nothing mystical, adventurous, or even entertaining about walking over long distances. Although the scenery is beautiful, it's just a lot of land- land that might have someone with binoculars on it, someone that we couldn't spot, possibly an innocent bird-watcher finding things a bit more rare than he expected. The suits are designed for camouflage, of course, but our faces are visible through the clear plastic. In about three hours we noticed a village, seeing them long before they could see us, and simply walked well around it.

Fifteen minutes after that, our hunger started to kick in, and Billy and I solved it by leaping onto a sloth from two trees at once. Its claws were no match for our strength, and we tore it from the tree, breaking its forelimbs on our legs. Sarah tore its back legs apart with her fingernails, and it screamed its death throes as we ripped off the fur and chowed down on the raw, stringy meat and organs. It was unique, if nothing else. I've had lots of different animals' flesh on my plate before, but never a sloth.

Half an hour after that, a river was in our path, with no logs to walk across this time. About nine meters across, it was dirty to the point of blackness. We reached a simultaneous consensus: "Shit."

"How deep?", Billy and I asked at the same time. Sarah looked down into the muddy blackness and shook her head. One meter, six meters, who's to know?

"Well.. these are long enough, we can grapple and swim it.. but that's going to be a pain.", Sarah said with a sigh. Grapple-swim.. ah, yes, hook onto something on the other side, and let the water push us around in an arc.. but trying to get up those muddy embankments, about two-thirds of a meter high, will be difficult and annoying. It was easy to visualize us slipping down multiple times.

"Shit. We can eat predators and we're having problems with a fucking river.", Billy said, sighing as well.

"Predatory animals don't have that many watts' worth of push.", I reminded him. "Oh, we could hang on, all right.. but that's going to be a pain. Isn't there an easier way?"

"One word for you, Howard.", Billy said.

"What?"

"Tarzan." I looked up and saw the thickness of the branches and their distance from each other.

"Good choice.", I said, as we climbed across the branches, the thinner ones breaking as we moved. There weren't any vines to swing on, though, and even if there were, I would never have dared to do it with my weight.

Survival was the easy part; we found edible animals and plants readily and without trouble, although the food here caused our bowels to expel their contents more messily than usual.. and there's no sprays or anything to wipe with here, either. The hard part was the continuing. There was some tangled underbrush in a few places and we simply sliced through it. The ground was muddy, and I felt the energy loss at every step. And then it had to happen- we reached another river, a real river, one without any friendly trees to climb over. We looked at each other- now what?

"Grapple-swim this one, find a way to cross a bigger one when we get to it.", Sarah said, and we did. She used her grappling hook to grab a tree, pulled on it to make sure it was secure, and we jumped into the water holding onto it, letting it push us as we simply held on. We climbed up the embankment, mud getting all over the suits- fortunately the dirt can't make it through.

"Sarah, how're we doing?", I asked.

Sarah retrieved the grappling hook from the tree and re-coiled the rope. "If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll be there on time. But.." I don't like hearing 'But' from Sarah. Sarah's butt is nice, but 'But' from Sarah is a bad thing.

"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, reading 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.", I said.

"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.", she replied.

"A jet boat. A fucking jet boat. Out here?", I asked.

"Not impossible. Missionaries are out here..", she replied. Missionaries? Out of how much land? Out of how many people?!

"So instead of avoiding civilization, we need to find it, without it finding us.", Billy said. "Nothing like challenge." Challenge? Fuck this, I wouldn't play **games** with this kind of 'challenge', why the fuck do they have me doing this in real life?

"This is more than challenge.", I told them, shaking my head. "This is luck." The worst kind of 'challenge' there is.

"You think I don't know that? But there is no other solution.", Sarah said. I hate it when there's no other solutions, too. "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.", I said in Latin. "We just keep going for now. Next village we find, we look for a boat." And we continued through the same shit. Which is what it felt like, that we were walking not through muddy, leafy forest floor, but **shit**, as if we were in someone's idea of eternal torment, but only enough to agonize our legs. The only refreshing action was when we used a long, stiff branch to pole-vault across a river. A bit after that, Sarah found a wounded bird with a broken wing- she did which came naturally, namely taking a big bite out of it. She then threw the corpse in the river, where it was swiftly set upon by a school of piranhas. She then, to our surprise, pulled out the splashing mass and we ate the piranhas one by one, being careful not to get cut by their razor-sharp jaws.

Unfortunately, there was no village, and no boat. **Can** I swim more than a kilometer wearing this suit and with this pack on my back? Probably, but this is a hell of a way to find out. Realizing the lack of any civilization any time soon, and seeing the forest grow wetter and wetter, Billy groaned audibly.

"Relax. Maybe you didn't take a careful enough look at the map, but I did. This is going to end soon.", Sarah said, and I sighed with relief. "You didn't know either?" We're going exactly as we looked at the pictures, no detours? But this area shouldn't be this wet..

"No, I figured you were taking us around something, or upstream of something before we hit a river."

She 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." Billy and I sighed simultaneously. Gah. Same kind of trees, but not same kind of ground. "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' is not a phrase I'd ever expected to hear from Sarah.

Tree-swimming was an experience all its own. We went from tree to tree, walking on roots when possible, moving through the variable-depth water when it wasn't. Sometimes we could wade somewhat, walk on the bottom with our heads above water or most of our bodies, other times it was swimming all the way. Once in a while we'd do long jumps to keep out of the water and onto the tree roots, which were like miniature islands in a game where the idea was to swim as little as possible. If it wasn't for the Damoclean sword of imprisonment hanging over my head, I might actually have had fun with it.

Sarah looked startled at one point, then reached down with her speed and pulled out a large fish. Strangely enough, this fish's chest moved in and out, as if it was breathing the air. Wait.. it was! Must be a lungfish. I haven't had one of those on my plate, either.

"Arapaima gigas.", Sarah informed us. "Hangs out in warm water, breathes air, rather rare find." And it was, indeed, gigas. It must have been as large as Sarah herself, as it violently struggled to get out of her powerful grip. Sarah wedged a part of the fish under her face shield, flipping it open, and taking a large bite. "It's a local delicacy when it's cooked right, but it's still good raw.", she said, walking over to some roots and sitting on them, holding the fish in her lap as it continued to try desperately to flop away. Unfortunately for it, it was beset by three hungry engineereds (just an hour after we ate the piranhas, too) and it didn't last very long at all. When we were as full as we

could possibly be, we threw it back into the water. After a meal like that, I wanted nothing more than to rest, laying contentedly on the couch, maybe with Sarah massaging my painful legs and Billy brushing out my sweat-soaked hair, a slight, blissful smile on my face as I faded gradually to sleep.

Nope. We're still in shitsville. "Billy, Sarah, you know the old adage about not swimming right after you eat?", I asked them. Billy nodded.

"The one we broke after we ate those peasants?", Sarah asked.

"Yes, we're disfollowing it again." And we continued. It got rainy again, swiftly turning into a downpour. I knew we weren't going at three kilometers an hour, maybe more like two. There's no way in hell I can keep a steady pace of any real speed in this, no one can. Sarah was right- there was indeed a hill, and actually being able to walk instead of wade was a welcome change. Unfortunately, it didn't last nearly as long as I'd hoped, sloping downwards into the same kind of crap we just left.

"This is bullshit.", I declared.

"Yes, it is. I wonder if-", Billy started.

"Be quiet.", Sarah interrupted, turning around. Um, Sarah, don't piss me off now.. but she wasn't trying to, she was listening for something. Yes, I hear it, a steady low rumbling of an engine.. and, unless that's a very unique kind of aircraft, the only thing that sounds like that is a boat! "This way, quickly." We followed her in a direction at a right angle to the one in which we've been going, moving much faster than we were before. "And above all, just stay the hell out of sight." You don't need to say that, Sarah.. but out here, in this shit, I won't get mad for that.

We reached the edge of the trees and met a river, and Sarah looked left at the boat making the noise.. a two-story luxury yacht. What an aggravating concept. Normals, who almost certainly aren't worth it, are enjoying luxury out here, while I, the fucking Inheritor, am forced to undergo a test in the middle of it. Sarah thought out loud, letting me know at least some of what was going on in her head. "Hmm.. all right. No, we can't.. 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." She's actually telling me what to do.. normally I would never be this irritated, but after all the crap I've had to deal with today.. okay, fuck that. There's only one question I have to ask.

"Your plan is the best way to ensure my success?", I asked her. Right now, that's all I care about.

"The best that I can see.", she replied. Then that settled it, right there. She wouldn't be the best assassin in the world if she didn't know what she was talking about.

"All right, the seven-meter command is gone.", I told them. "C'mon, Billy. We're going to follow her plan." We moved away from Sarah and the boat, eighty meters or so from her, waiting until the yacht got to our general direction. She climbed aboard, snagging the ladder as it passed by, and skittering up the ladder like a squirrel.. going all the way to the top, why would she.. ah, yes, the radio antenna on top of it had to go before anything else could happen. And then the ladder came to us and it was our turn to start destroying things.

Killing sheeple is refreshing, invigorating, and fun. Even though we used nothing but our bare hands and did it bloodlessly, it was still unbelievably easy. We broke the necks of four pool players like nothing, then went out to the deck and heard two fat guys talking about manipulating the tort system (what country, I didn't catch) for money. Guess what, guys, your money can't save you from my Illuminated power. I crushed one's skull and Billy sent his hand into the rib cage of the other one, rupturing his heart but not his skin. We went around that yacht like the SWAT team from Hell, kicking in locked doors and killing people inside. There were some crew members, their look of

surprise on seeing such efficient killers the last emotion they'd ever have. Consider it an early retirement. One guy actually had a rifle- what would he hunt out here, anyway?- but we didn't let him live long enough to try to use it. I killed a young girl by twisting her head backwards. It only took us a few minutes to kill all the sheeple on board, but we spent a few more minutes making sure we didn't leave anyone alive. Nope.. nope, nobody's hiding here. The only people still breathing on this ship are me, Billy, and Sarah.

"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? I can't.. ah, same old trick, I can't light the fire but they can. "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." Humans are like that. "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." Wait... don't we need this boat for transportation? Like.. now?

"What, we're going to burn it now?", I asked, not understanding, as Billy started moving bodies around.

Sarah stopped, turned around, and explained it. "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." Ah, yes, those small ones outside the yacht. Both Billy and I smiled and nodded. Much better from a secrecy standpoint than this huge thing. "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." I didn't stop her again by questioning exactly why. The body-moving was tiresome, but mercifully short- Sarah had already taken many away to be burned, and the others were easy to place. Nope, the hard hands of an engineer didn't kill that guy, the bed did. Hey, it's rational, especially when the boat blew up when somehow the gasoline ignited. Those guys? Oh, they were tossed overboard by the blast, but all you'll find is a fish-chewed skeleton, because they sunk when they fell in. For the bodies to take in the lifeboat, I grabbed the girl I'd broken the neck of, and Billy dragged the 200-pound lardass he'd imploded the chest of. We went back to where we met before, hearing Sarah bump a few things around down there, then running out of the engine room like there was a bomb down there. Oh wait, there **was**. "Let's get the fuck out of here!" No problems with that- we jumped into the lifeboat, Sarah pulled the cord to start the outboard motor, and we immediately burst out of there at full speed. "Fortunately for us the sides of the boat are pretty high. Just stay down." So as not to be seen. She then did something strange- she flipped up her face shield and forced her whole head through it. Ah, so if anyone sees her, they'll think 'girl' and not 'odd-looking camouflaged suit-wearer'. She piloted the boat, but I was determined to have her plan followed through properly, and so did not poke my head up to look outside the boat, even after the loud **BOOM** came from the yacht. All right, Sarah, it's embarrassing to say so I won't, but you completely outwitted us there. I would never have thought to do any of that, and I know Billy wouldn't have either. And with this plan, we get to lay down, even if it's near sheeple corpses.. and laying down we can... zzz.

"All right.. we're going to hide ourselves.. here.", I heard as my next conscious sensation. She carefully put the boat under a tree's roots, which looked like large fingers grabbing the boat, ready to squeeze it- as they did, holding it in place. No time to get scared by stupid shit now. She turned off the engine and put her head back through the face-shield, back to the way it was meant to be worn. She then got out of the boat and started breaking branches, setting them carefully over the engine, apparently trying to hide it from view from above. "The bag will protect us against infrared detection, but not this thing.", she explained. Yes, they will have infrared out there, looking for survivors that don't exist. But since we're not ditching it..

"You intend to get more use out of it, then.", I 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." Crunch, crunch, crunch. Yes, it's been sitting out a few hours, but the meat wasn't that bad. Now I see why Billy brought the fat guy. When we were full we tore them open 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." Yes, that sounds like a very good idea indeed. After taking a few drinks of river water, we did just that, enjoying the slow, rocking motions of the boat.

We heard the splish-splashing of piranhas chewing on meat before we fell asleep. The piranhas have the same attitude I do...

Chapter 19

I was woken up from pleasant sleep by the sound of an engine.. the propeller, of the boat. But it's still very dark outside. This is Sarah, though, and she's obviously got someplace in mind. Even though my bladder was starting to annoy me, I stayed down and out of sight.

"Sarah.. we killed everyone on that boat. In almost every major accident, at least someone survives. Won't that raise questions of its own?", Billy asked.

"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 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." My servants are turning people into charred, broken skeletons, and I'm not even the Dominator yet. "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."

"But you didn't know that before you went in there." Billy pointed out.

"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." It would have been impossible to conceal that, with this somewhat loud engine anyway. Sarah took her hands off the wheel, leaned over very close to me, and said in a faint 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." I was utterly, totally relieved to hear that- and she was right. What are normals going to figure out in less than a week, assuming they ever do? "And get back to sleep." We did.

"All right, guys, this is where we stop.", Sarah's voice awoke us. My bladder was ready to burst.

"Is there no one around?", I asked.

"It's clear." I stood up and started to take a piss, and Billy did the same, releasing a lot of pressure and turning the water yellow. "Just so you two know," Sarah said jocularly, "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." Sounds painful, but unlikely, and if she's being sarcastic or completely joking, it's not showing up..

"You.. can't delude me, Sarah.", I reminded her.

"I'm not. It actually happens." Both Billy and I started watching our piss. "In more pleasant news, we're across the Amazon and we're making wonderful time." Yay and double yay. "That's no reason to slow down, though." We got out of the boat, ready to go- Sarah picked up the sleeping

bag, and then started to drag the boat onto land. Why...? "Guys, we're not downstream of where the yacht was. We have to destroy this thing." The hour it took us to chop the boat into pieces and bury them individually was worth the fact that Sarah had got us closer with it while I was able to sleep.

Of course, that also meant that Sarah herself didn't get much sleep, and it showed, despite her fervent efforts to ignore it. It's all right, Sarah- hold out until the end of this and I'll give you as much sleep as you could ever possibly want. I don't think you'll be killing people for me that much. Similarly, Billy's doing a good job repressing screams, and he'll probably scream as much as his subconscious tells him to when he's back home.

Nothing interesting happened for the rest of the second test until we got to point X, nothing at all. We walked around normal bases, plodding through pretty much the same shit the whole time, eating the same natural foods, going at about the same pace, although I think it was getting to us and we were slowing down slightly. Sarah wasn't worried- she said that we'd get there on time..

..and, eventually, we did.

From a distance, the location of Point X looked like a massive Incan temple constructed more than a thousand years ago, with overgrown stone, strange animal symbols, the works. I severely doubted it. It would be no problem for the Levels to use something like this for the final part of the test, particularly if it was already a base to begin with.

"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. As I should have expected, there's no door.", I said. It's just like them to do something like this. The stairs ended onto what was effectively a block face, covered in stones bearing pictograms. A puzzle, probably. Probably considerably worse than any of the ones in the first test. Something more to figure out, just in case I'm not already exhausted and running out of time. "And I had to leave all my entrance-makers at home." For everything the Micro can't fix, the atomic shotgun can.

Sarah thought for a minute, and looked up the face of the temple and back down, then back up again. It would also be just like them to put a fake puzzle here and put the target circle on the very top. "I know what you're thinking, Sarah.", I said.

So did Billy. "He never gave us a height measurement."

"Well, it's easy to climb, so I doubt it's up there..", she said, shrugging.

"Climb it and check anyway.", I commanded her. "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." Ugh. He's potentially right, but I don't think they'd do **that** without any clues here; I looked at the symbols and immediately discovered what they represented.

"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." It was obvious. "And I think that's you." The same picture with shorter hair. Are these symbols pictures of some ritual to perform to get in?

"And I think they're mocking us.", Billy said. Judging from the corners of the wall, if there's any ritual to be performed, it's a homoerotic one. Okay.. what the hell is this thing trying to say, really? Even they wouldn't drag me this far just to say "Go fuck yourself and your servant." at the end.

"Yes. They are most definitely mocking us. I really doubt that's what we have to do to get in. 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?" He was, as usual, right. Sarah was climbing down, shaking her head- nope, no circle up there.

"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." The pyramid containing the eye. "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.", Billy said. There were lots of assorted symbols to choose from- some Illuminated, some with either no meaning or a meaning I don't know. "I'm not really supposed to be here, I guess." It's all right, Billy- according to six billion normals, **I'm** not supposed to exist either. "Wait." He pushed on a pyramid with no eye, as well as the short-haired picture.

"Fuck.", I said. "That's obviously not it." Great. My last several hours before the squads come and I'm spending them touching symbols on a wall in Nowhere, Brazil. Yay for the Inheritor of the Illuminati.

"Wait. I'm being a dumbass. How long is my hair now?", he asked rhetorically, reaching around Sarah to touch my face symbol.

"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." Apparently it did- the long-haired symbol moved inwards and the wall simply fell over. There was a curved, probably spiraling passage at a right angle to our left; all three of us looked on as it lit up with torches.

"Well, it's a good thing we didn't bother looking around the rest of the pyramid. Okay, Sarah, how many traps?" I didn't need to ask, but I figured I would just to make it clear.

"**LOTS**.", Sarah said. "And just look at how that hall curves around. Come on guys, you know what that means."

Actually, I wasn't sure what it meant.. "Rolling rock fun.", said Billy. Groan... yeah, that's exactly what I need right now after a tiring day of walking, to have to dodge traps while running from a several-ton ball of death, while Levels watch my struggle to survive as a spectator sport. Fuck you, guys! Wait until I have the fucking power, I replace you assclowns with engineereders, and I laugh while watching your normal backs get broken by the sheer kinetic energy of a thousand kilograms of rolling stone!

"Well, it's not impossible and we don't have anywhere else to go. Fuck it, I'll take point.", I said. I'll take point because the traps are probably dodgeable and the rock isn't. Of course if I actually do lose either of my servants to this kind of insanity, there's going to be hell to pay where the only currency is pain.

"Wait a minute, Howard. Depending on how big that rock is, how fast it moves..", Billy said, making pushing motions. Of course.

"Stick together until it triggers, then. 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. 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. It wasn't as big as I figured- but it was probably more than a thousand kilos and it must have been going about 35 kilometers an hour.

I screamed and ran- at it. The slaps of my servants' hands hit the rock shortly after mine, and we had to force the rock both against its movement and against its downward rotation. It hurt like hell, my muscles were burning.. we moved back, it was simply too large.. don't want to back into any traps.. then eventually our force proved the greater and we started moving forward. From there it was child's play to roll the rock out the entrance we had made with the wall's collapse. Billy flipped it two middle fingers as it bounded down the stairs we had come up, and Sarah was simply laughing hard. If I thought Billy could be affected by traditional Pavlovian reinforcement, I'd find a way to reward him for that one.

"Fucking excellent, Billy. That probably pissed them off a good deal and made this a whole lot easier.", I said.

"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." I **swaggered** down the hall. A few arrow-traps sprung; I caught every one and tossed the thin metal shafts aside. I stepped, felt movement, and moved my foot out of the way of a spike trap. For the hell of it I triggered it again only to kick it, bending it out of shape so the spike couldn't go back in. I knew they had cameras so they could watch my desperation; instead they watched my triumph. Eat it, assholes; I'm laughing at you and I'm not even the Dominator yet.

Chapter 20

The room was dimly lit by the same wall-glow- and on the ground was a perfectly ordinary circle with a modest X in the middle of it. Gleeefully I jumped in, laughing a booming echo-laugh at whoever was listening. The echo was compounded by the room.

There was a loud THUMP as the way we came in was blocked off. Well, if they've got another trap, it's for another test.. and, considering how little time is remaining in the five weeks, this has to be quick.

"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.", the Bastard's disembodied voice proclaimed through a loudspeaker. Umm, since when were strength and speed Illuminated requirements? I get the feeling that these tests were made in constant consultation with the guys that made me, they're testing their product as if I'm some beta or something... but still, what the hell is this guy trying to pull by putting me through such high-risk situations? And why am I getting this feeling of impending doom... no! No way am I going to lose it all now. "Being of sound mind and able body, do you accept or reject this next challenge?"

"I ACCEPT, YOU ORWELLIAN MOTHERFUCKER!!!", I screamed at the walls, echoed echoes bouncing off them, creating a cascade of noise. **"I FUCKING ACCEPT!!! BRING IT RIGHT THE FUCK ON!!!"** Had I been doing anything but a steady week of adventure, and had that last bit been any less dangerous than it was, that would have been too melodramatic even for me.

The dim lights turned off and I was momentarily blinded by a lot of spotlights hitting me in the face. I jumped back reflexively and heard the sounds of someone or something trying to be stealthy.

"Inheritor- there is only one rule now.", the bastard said in a hateful tone, as if he wanted and expected me to up and croak on the spot. "Survive."

"You don't think they'll send Enforcers after us, Howard?", Billy muttered in a grating, semi-fearful voice. Oh shit. So that's what I hear...

"Billy... fight."

This is not a martial arts movie. The Enforcers did not come one by one, to be disposed of neatly in order. They came all at once. They didn't have guns- but they had enormous swords, one in each hand. And all I had was this machete. I drew it quickly with my left hand, then steeled myself for the onslaught. They were at me in a second, in what appeared to be a totally imbalanced fight- seven foot tall Enforcers against a 5'1" ten year old. But this is me, and I don't die easily. They were coming at me in a group of three- I numbered them from left to right.

I jumped to the left of 2's double slash from top right to bottom left, and 1 was moving like hell to skewer me in its own double attack- I cut off its head with my first stroke, not feeling the blade cut the vertebrae, moving towards it to avoid the swords, and almost embracing the headless corpse, before jumping back from it. 3 got within millimeters of running me through- I flipped to my left, hit the ground, swapped the machete from left to right, and in the next motion intended to cleave it from the lower left of its abdomen to the upper right of its chest. It managed to partially jump back- I lunged forward a bit and created a huge bloody streak. 2 was coming again and I punched at it with the fist-blades. It moved out of the way fast enough and almost chopped off my arm, before I completely freaked out, ducked down, rushed forward, and just grabbed at its face with my bare left hand, not knowing what I was going to do to it when I got there. When my hand was midway to its face, in a hundredth of a second I realized what to do and straightened my left finger out, poking its eye straight through and slamming my entire first finger **through** the bone and into its brain. I felt metal and realized that for the first time I was actually touching a mind control implant. I pushed the finger out, pushed the dead thing away, and faced 3- which was inches away from cleaving me apart. There's no way I can dodge this... in reflex, I parried the blade with my own and a resounding CLANG filled the room, above the scuffling sounds of Billy and Sarah's fights. I went totally berserk again, went low again, and started trying to slice apart its legs. It managed to barely parry the first with its other sword, but I was too fast and I cut out a piece of its lower right side with my left hand's blades. It did not react, but instead tried to strike me with the other sword. I clenched my fist and cleaved through its upper right arm, going through most of the bone and disabling it permanently. Then its left arm was dead by the machete, with gore arcing out in a great splatter of red. For a brief instant I was reminded of Monty Python and half-expected the Enforcer to try to kick me to death. It didn't have time. My sword had already cut it from the nape to the chops, within a third of a second after I had hacked off its left arm with it.

I turned to my right just in time to see Sarah break the spine of another one with a solid left-leg kick to the back, then cleave off its head in an expert stroke, slicing through the jugular and the larynx. Blood flew out in a huge spray, splattering everyone with its crimson warmth, as its head hit the ground and rolled a bit. All three of us looked around for more enemies- and found none.

That was it. All the Enforcers were dead as rocks.

The third test was over.

I had emerged victorious.

The spotlights turned off and the dim lights returned, as we put our machetes back into their scabbards with a *schink*. A shower of pure water rained down from above for twenty seconds, soaking us all but washing away most of the blood. Then, a fan of hot, dry air came from the wall and we got closer to it, enjoying the sensation. I squatted down in front of it, resting my body and my mind. Ahh... finally. I took off the helmet and let my hair hang down. Nope, no bugs here, no toxic vapors or annoying plant spores either. I am safe once more.

The floor began to move upwards as it took the three of us to a larger room, filled with cheering and clapping Illuminati. Some guys were putting their notepads away, finished with observing my reactions to the adversities. Some were muttering to themselves. Most were just joyous. One woman handed me a cup of hot chocolate, which I drank with gusto and a grin. The combined pleasure of warmth from behind and warmth from inside almost caused me to fall asleep on the spot.

"Mighty Inheritor, you have passed the three tests. You are now the Dominator of the Illuminati.", the Bastard said. Personally, I don't think he said it quite right:

I am the **DOMINATOR** of the **ILLUMINATI**!!

"May your reign be long and glorious.", he continued, obviously not meaning it and going through the motions. He was ready to scream, and no one cared. I half-heartedly considered tearing out his throat and realized that I didn't really feel like getting up to do it. That was it, then. No formalities (yeah, like I'd need any more annoyances after **that** shit), no random crap, just dominance.

"So what's your first act going to be?", a twenty-five year old man asked with a slight grin.

"My first act? That's going to be to get something to **eat**." There was a general laugh, and the party continued for two hours- with assorted politics, but nothing major. The lemonade was more sour than anything anyone said, and after all that, I wasn't going to start throwing invectives at anyone for making it too hard; it obviously wasn't, since I survived. People talked details and generalities of things I didn't bother to listen to- they avoided the important things- until the party ran out of people wanting to stay there and we all eventually flew home. They are going to be busy, as they modify and rethink their plans for the definite existence of the new Dominator. I am not going to be even remotely close to busy... and if there's someone dumb enough to call me up for something inane as soon as I get home, woe betide the poor fool.

Chapter 21

Waiting for us on the jet was something I wanted but hadn't remembered- a change of clothes. Water passes through these pretty freely, but some components of sweat stick around. Heh, cool, looks like someone gave Billy a black suit in the same style as this one.

"Ahhhhhh...", I said, leaning against the jet's cushioned back, enjoying the flight home- and just about everything else around me, for that matter. Everything seemed brighter, happier, and more cheerful. My body was full of the nutrients it needs, and I had long since regenerated all the small micro-tears and aches that plague an active body, leaving me with nothing but purity. I felt like I was living in the middle of a particularly hard video game's ending- nothing but pleasure and a jubilant, screaming, utter joy until the programming eventually ran out. "I don't think I've ever been this relieved in my whole life."

"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.", Billy said, a slight grin overcoming his face. His words knocked me off my perch. That would be ugly. Hey, it's time to relax.. no wait, no it's not, it's time to do your job! Hey, we've got all this shit piled up for five weeks, we need you, Dominator! That would just plain suck. I can't wait until Billy's trained for this.. lessen the fucking workload a bit.

"Billy, since that is actually possible, I declare you a very efficient killjoy."

"Thank you, Howard."

"They're not gonna do that.", said Sarah. "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.."

"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," (That would make him **OLD**.) "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 in other words, they have a healthy dose of fear." Emotions work on Illuminati, and no one wants to admit that.

"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."

"That makes sense. Good, I'll have some peace for once in my life.."

"You know, you're the second to last person I'd expect to hear that from.", Billy said, in a voice that suggested he was nearly as relieved as I am.

"Then who's the last?" He replied by pointing at Sarah and clicking his 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 replied, a slight smirk on her face.

"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.", I pointed out. She nodded rapidly.

"Great. So I've got this big all-expenses-paid summer vacation, and look where I'm spending it.", Billy said, half-amused. "A couple of months of straight summer camp in the **best** possible place and the **worst** possible company." Billy's rendition of the situation caused me to giggle and Sarah to chuckle evilly to herself in a faint imitation of my traditional dark laugh. "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." If I did that, I'd be known as a could-be-gone Dominator, and that is the first step down a nasty hill with a cliff at the end. So saith history. "I would go on a regular vacation somewhere, but I think I've had my fill of the tropics." He started laughing a bit, and then leaned back in my position and rested. I idled away the time until we finally got home, to meet a freshly upkept house with a rapidly barking Fido. Paradise is mine again. The sky is mostly white clouds with hints of blue sky, the forest is green as ever, and the steady sound of ocean waves greet my ears. And the annoying sounds of peasants are nowhere to be heard. I smiled as I realized what I wasn't noticing. The waterfall on the other side of the island. The stealth trainers and their hideout. The native fauna. I took it all in at once. Much... fucking.. better.

"Now,", I said, after touching the ground with my feet, "after five weeks of that crap.. where was I?" Fido, Magma, Negro, and Speckle rushed up to us, barked quite a bit, and both Billy and I petted the dogs' thick fur.

"Remember to take my clothes off, Howard.", Sarah said, casually. What?! Why the hell did she- ah, yes, I almost never make mistakes like that. That actually was a command a week ago, the 'when we get home' being logically implied. In a way, it was tempting, but I just grinned at her instead.

"I'm not sure what you were going to do next.", Billy said as we walked back inside the place I've missed. Magma, Negro, and Speckle didn't follow us in as did Fido. I've never commanded the dogs to do anything except tricks- and they're basically feral creatures. The non-engineered ones were all pulled in off the street, and Fido's more at home in nature than anywhere else.

"Don't look at me.", Sarah said. "No idea." I briefly considered asking them what they wanted to do and discarded it into the bad-humor pile.

"Oh, yes, that's right.. you had just been delivered here.", I said, looking at Billy. "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." I sat down on the couch, the vast majority of my weight on my ass and back, sinking a couple of inches into it. "But you've already seen quite a bit and you've already learned a good deal of Latin." Fido jumped up onto my lap and I petted him as he licked my face.

"I've also looked up the super technology, means of concealment, the engineering of the Dominator, the important stuff.", Billy replied. Of course, I can imagine exactly what the look on his face was as he looked it up. He sat down to my right and shook his head a bit. "Had to make myself believe it.." Billy gently grabbed Fido's neck and Fido nuzzled his arm and hand.

"And it'll only get worse.", Sarah said with a smile.

"Sarah, hot chocolate, tall cup. Two of them." As she left, I idly turned on the screen. I'm not going outside today, not after that mess last week. Let's see.. oh yes, one of the few games that's playable on the native operating system instead of an emulator. A simple side-scrolling fighter, which is constantly upgraded just because the bored programmers can- it began as a basic test of the ACNOS (Advanced, Comprehensive, New Operating System- but some real joker took the first five words of every Dominator's opening speech to make the acronym.) capabilities, but has grown into something else, something with the occasional political statement in it. I turned it on and three controllers popped out at us, I caught the middle one out of the air- Billy was surprised but caught his as well. I pressed Start..

..and proceeded to laugh my ass off. "WHAT THE FUCK?!", Billy shouted. Fido wasn't startled, but walked from Billy out the door. "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." I looked more closely at what I had laughed at. Yup, it's accurate- someone had put all three of us in there, along with new levels resembling the rainforest and faux temple. Our game characters were clad in the usual symbolism, however, and as I looked at the level-select index I saw screenshots of us running 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 came back with our rapidly-heated hot chocolate and went back to pour herself a cup, as I looked through the menus. No difficulty setting (as if I'd play on anything less than max), controls fairly intuitive, no weak normal things like multiple lives or health bars. "Not surprised they did that. Too bad this thing isn't realistic by any stretch.", she said, sitting down to my left and picking up the controller there. "They probably made it fun, but there might be a message in there." We selected our characters and jumped through the level's pitfalls easily- our reflexes are godly and our characters were equivalent to our real selves. After defeating the ten Enforcers at the end, Sarah just yawned, leaned back, and laughed to herself. "Which came first, I wonder.. which came first."

"Since we didn't run from the rock, they probably finished this first.. and that **really** suggests that **someone** is having a laugh.", I said, grinning. "That's something you might not have figured out and I never told you.", I said, turning to Billy.

"What, the jokers fooling around with shit like this?"

"Yeah, they're jokers, Billy.", Sarah said. "These guys think they.. oh, screw think, they **can** play around with anything they want, making it funny or strange or however they want. Surprised they didn't personally congratulate him at the end of the game."

"Strangest tribute to success I've ever seen.", I said, sipping the chocolate. Sarah downed hers in a gulp, stood up, took a couple of steps, and chucked the empty cup into the sink.

"Nothing can break around here.. keep forgetting how nuts this all is.", Billy said, drinking the last of his chocolate. I finished mine and Sarah chucked both cups in the same way.

I allowed Sarah to quietly disappear as usual, and played various assorted games with Billy, commanding him to play his hardest. Saying that beating Billy in games is difficult is a tautology; it's like an ongoing Mirror Match, and it pleases me to know that the implants obviously haven't hurt his abilities any, as he's an exact match for me when I get serious. At our level, which game it is really doesn't matter. We stalemate constantly, with wins and losses being largely decided by the slight advantage of Player 1 over Player 2 or vice versa.

On the other hand, cooperatively, there's just simply no challenge. Again, the game doesn't matter. Arcade-style Ninja Turtles, Super Mario Brothers 3 (hacked; we're both on the screen at once), Lynx Ninja Gaiden- all of it gets beat in record time. Game-addicted normals would probably kill each other just to see a video of this. Even with the enemies doubled and everything sped up by Illuminated programmers (I know the code-happy master of software development and his Enforcers did dozens of these in a day), we crush them like bugs, swiftly turning the fun from the challenge of beating a hard enemy to that of stomping upon anyone who gets in the way. Logically, having him would double my power. It doesn't; it triples it or more, and the more I play with him the more I'm certain that this carries over into the real world. I doubt Daddy- or anyone else- knew this would happen.

Meaning, of course, that attempts to overpower me physically with Enforcers or vehicular weapons (undodgeable traps, like a gigantic squishing ceiling that lands in half a second, would still kill me... note to self, don't walk into traps) that would normally have an almost certain chance of success are now far more likely to fail. That third test was biased indeed- in our favor. I can smell the ass kicking from here...

And then I remembered what I had wanted at the beginning of the second test. Damn, we are sweaty, aren't we? I commanded my servants to come with me for a long, hot bath, the powerful cleansers and pure, hot water getting rid of the polar and nonpolar grime covering our bodies. It's hard to hide being dirty as an albino. When we were clean, I took them upstairs, and had Sarah massage my legs and Billy brush my hair as I laid down on the couch, my face resting on the softness. It was heaven, and it was lulling me to sleep, but I didn't want to get up. "Stop, carry me to bed.", I commanded them, and they effortlessly picked me up, Sarah tucked me in, and I fell asleep with a smile on my face. Domination at last, and my first day I get to do nothing but have fun. It felt like the happiest day of my life.

Chapter 22

I woke up smiling. So nice to sleep in my own bed again. I'm probably going to be bothered by somebody about something today- five weeks of not having an active Dominator builds up a lot of crap- but until they do, I'm going to do what I usually do and enjoy myself, this time secure in the fact that I have the most power on Earth and don't have to be taught anything more, having beaten the killer final exam. It's good to be Dominator. I put on the white suit and was about to go down to the beach when I heard sobbing from outside.

I realized instantly the reason why, even before I walked out the door to talk to him. Billy's avoided screaming at night for the entirety of the second test, and it must have accumulated all into one terrifying burst. As I stepped out and looked at him I knew I was right. He looked horrible, haggard, a thing I didn't think was possible. "Billy.. are you actually.. hurt?", I asked. Over the past five weeks, he's done so much for me, the question answering, the rolling-rock trick, the amazing combat boost, things that an ordinary servant could never come up with or do, things that I couldn't command him to. Having him damaged- especially his brain- by this would be beyond awful.

"No.." His voice was an agonized croak. "it's not killing any of my brain cells, it's not hurting anything except my vocal cords, and they'll regenerate." He sounded confident- I control his actions but it's still his brain, and he's been taking good care of it- and I was very relieved. "But it was horrible, Howie..", he continued, and I let him put his arms around me. Howie.. he had called me Howie. I've been taught the importance of subtleties and I immediately saw it here. A minor use of a diminutive form of a name. From someone I didn't really know it would be a slight, a sign that I was just a kid and too young for the position, a word to be answered by threats or death. From Billy, who knows that I can make him do anything without any consequences to me at all, it meant that he felt so familiar with me that he knew he could hug me and call me that and I wouldn't do anything bad to him in response. In other words, it meant that he trusts me. By all rights that shouldn't mean anything at all- he's an implanted servant- but it did.

I put my arms around him in response and smiled. "Billy, I can't do anything about the nightmares.. you know why." He did. I let go and so did he. "I'm just going to watch the ocean for a bit. C'mon." I led him to the long, sandy beach, found a good spot, and simply sat down in the sand. He followed me, slowly, and we looked over the seemingly endless ocean.

Everything I see is mine, even if I just see it as flyover space or a buffer between me and the normals. I'm the Dominator of a water planet. Statistically, the land is the aberration. This constant fffssshhhh of waves- it's just background noise to me, has been for years- is the sound the planet makes, despite who makes war against what when. The thing with the ocean is that it's all basically the same, from the surface anyway. We don't concern ourselves with it most of the time, why would we? We're still land-dwelling creatures. The bottom of the ocean might as well be deep space to us for its hospitability. The thing is, I mused, Northberg might have something to say about that. Underwater engineered.. I don't know what they'd be like. But they'd see more, find more (who knows how many needed minerals are down there?), do more beneath the waves than we land-based creatures ever could in our metal shells we use to vacation there. I smiled. After we end secrecy and before we conquer Mars and Venus, we should finish conquering Earth.

It was almost hypnotic in its semi-repetitive movements. Waves would splash against the beach and retreat, only to be replaced by more waves. Seashells and driftwood littered the edge- it was low tide- and once in a while a seagull would fly overhead. Things I don't usually pay attention to, but were relaxing anyway.

"It is nice out here, isn't it..", Billy said.

"It has its own peace.", I replied. I saw motion to my left and looked at several moving, grey objects bobbing up and down, barely visible. "Hey.. dolphins."

"They probably love it here.", he said. "Nothing can disturb them." Because for anything to disturb them, it'd have to disturb this island's well-protected secrecy. It took a while, but we watched them pass the island.

I realized I was hungry after they were out of sight, and I didn't want to move. "Billy-", I began, turning to him, but then noticed something out of the corner of my eye, and we both turned to look at it. Somebody very stealthy, and from the slim, barely-visible footprints in the sand we both knew who, had left a covered bowl of sugary snacks and bottled drinks just behind us. Smiling, we munched and stayed by the beach for an indeterminate amount of time. It drizzled a bit, but it didn't

matter. After that rainforest business it was as nothing.

Relaxation finally turned into boredom and I got up. "Well, that's enough time looking over the sea. Now we're going to go under it.", I told Billy, beckoning him to follow. It's become second nature to take him with me, I realized. With Sarah it wouldn't be anywhere near the same. I smiled slightly as we walked into the house. There's no reason for me to be alone for any length of time anymore.

The elevator took us to level 4, where the submarine was parked. The hatch on my small sub came open with a pop- why lock something that's not supposed to be seen by normals?- and we climbed in. This was really meant for one person, but I knew it could hold me and both of my sentient servants okay, although there's just one seat. Which reminds me.. why am I piloting it? Because he doesn't know how. Well, I'll change that. I reversed the sub going downwards, causing the pressure lock above us to slam shut, turning it around as the sea doors opened. I took the sub out to a place in which we couldn't crash into anything nearby. "Okay, Billy.", I said, getting out of the seat. "Sit down."

"Let me guess.", he said, getting into my position and examining the controls. "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." This thing's armed. "Left one is missiles, right one is an electrical harpoon. There's autotracking, so don't worry about your aim." I tried to think of a normal vehicle in comparison to this, as there are similarities and differences. "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.", I said, hanging on to the seat as I expected Billy to be surprised by the touchy controls- he was, and the sub lurched to the left. "You can turn it all the way upside down, you won't lose your seat." He did just that; the automatic belt snapped around his waist as I simply ran along the walls of the sub as it turned. What else should I tell him? All of this is so well-known to me that it doesn't come to mind easily. Ah, yes. "Absolutely everything is jet-impeller driven and computer controlled. None of the stuff normals think about when talking about submarines," And we have three hours.. oh wait. "and the two of us have one and a half hours of oxygen."

"It's like playing a video game.", Billy said.

"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." He laughed in response. Let the people who make the things make computers for the details, and let us do the job of piloting and killing. It works so much better that way.

I told him where the lights button was, he pressed it and the area around the sub was brightly lit. I told him the reason for this, too- the light volume is actually very low, just specially amplified. This glass isn't actually glass, but a computerized image displayer in real-time. An incredible invention for secrecy. I had him keep going, as I watched with interest the ocean floor and various fish species. A few times I had to tell him to turn back because of secrecy, and he impressed me by parking the sub in reverse without getting anywhere near the walls.

Having him control the sub also reminded me- I wanted him to be able to pilot the jet, too. It had a lot more features- VTOLing being one of them- but it was easy and he got a hang of it quickly, the controls on all Illuminated craft being fundamentally the same. The thing was the secrecy rules- how high you can fly in what places, things like that. Above the island and nearby, though, he was doing twisting barrel rolls and fast loops almost immediately. Excellent. Having him be able to do this may come in handy someday. And that's the really cool thing about having implanted servants, especially immortal ones. They never grow outdated, as physical objects will. They learn and grow and develop, practicing new skills and using old abilities to help them discover new talents. The Billy I'll teach and play with tomorrow will be just as much, if not more, fun and useful than the Billy

I'm teaching and playing with today.

Eventually, he landed it vertically, I commanded Sarah to cook another meal, and we'd just finished eating when-

BZZZZZERT!

My second day as Dominator and I'm already starting to hate that sound. But it's rather appropriate. I wouldn't have a catchy jingle or a pleasant hum take its place- no, the loud, obnoxious buzzer is exactly the proper tone for most of the people who are going to call me.

And speaking of loud and obnoxious, it's the Bastard's son. What the hell does he want?

"Master Howard! Congratulations on your succession to Dominator." No thanks to your father. "I would like to individually salute you personally and discuss matters of the future." And if you fuck with me, you won't have one. "May I arrive at midnight tonight?", he asked, deciding to be blunt out of fear of wasting my time.

"You may arrive.", I said evenly and in an end-of-conversation tone. If he's going to be obsequious I might as well have fun with him.

The screen clicked off and I threw my arms around the couch and around the shoulders of my servants. I reviewed my decision not to judge the son by the sins of the father. He's not engineered- a huge shame- but he sounded pleasant enough, and he apparently wants to make nice-nice with me. That's not a problem. I'll make nice-nice with him too, and I'm the engineered manipulator here. Maybe I'll convince him to commit parricide.

"So he's coming over here? I thought no one was supposed to be on your island except you and your stuff.", Billy said.

"Not usually. But since only him and his servant are coming, he's basically at my mercy." That's the other reason I have no problem with him coming. "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.", I replied, annoyed at the people who just want to congratulate me, make a show of respecting me, and then say 'well Master, I kinda need your help here..'.
.

"Sounds like taking a field trip to Chernobyl.", Sarah said, grinning and chuckling. Yes, it is, and if he fucks with me I'll give him a **very** high dose of radiation indeed.

"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.", I commanded, my left hand idly groping at Sarah's left breast, her slight exhalation of air showing that she had no idea how to answer my command or my groping.

"Get on Quake or Quake 2 and snipe with a 15 ping- Reach out and crush someone!", Billy suggested.

"That gets boring after the two hundredth gib.", I said.

"Mortal Kombat.", Billy replied.

"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?" I don't want to do what the normals do, of course, I want to do an

accelerated, engineered version of what they 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." Ugh. I most certainly wouldn't want to do an accelerated version of any of that, except the biking, which would require a requisition of materials which I don't want to deal with right now. I'd rather just eat something at the moment.

"Or eating.", Billy added, and I realized how closely our bodies were synchronized. After that starvation shit I've come to enjoy having good food to eat, which for normals would be very bad indeed. Fat-loaded, calorie-filled meat, chocolate, and (ironically enough) potato chips. I ate with gusto, the food quickly flowing through my mouth and into my stomach with rapid, precise chewing. Billy was just looking at me for some strange reason and I asked him what the fuck he was staring at.

"You eating. You're a fucking Viking at a feast." Bwa ha! Only I don't drink mead. "I thought it was just for that one time after that starvation shit ended, but you do it all the time." And he's learning to do it, too. I started laughing and then choking. Billy waited eagerly for me to die, but I cleared my airway rather quickly.

I just smiled at him. "Now I remember why I keep you around."

The time was spent as I've spent it before, only this time I've got Dominator power and servants. I called down three super jetskis and, two hours later (after some incredibly nasty TV), raced along the ocean's surface at eighty miles an hour. The rain grew hard and I came in for several rounds of ridiculously hard computer games. Then I made the mistake of having both my servants next to me near the couch when we drifted off to sleep. The unmuffled "**GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!**" sprung me up with a start.

"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!", I commanded him angrily. Sarah giggled. I looked at the clock and muttered. 11:30. We ate and shat before Damien showed up- an Enforcer informed me that a helicopter was giving off authorized Level Two signals and I idly wondered how he got to that level. Oh wait. I already know. Good ol' nepotism. "Let it land.", I commanded the Enforcer. And if Damien's going to try to flatter me into doing things for him and piss me off, I'm going to send him back up into the air- without a helicopter...

The helicopter landed right on top of the jet's spot. Groan. Oh well. The mechanism that flips the jet can take the weight, Damien and an eleven-year-old servant stepped out, walking to the mansion, an interesting peculiarity in the servant's walk.

Chapter 23

Something's **wrong** here, I immediately noticed.

Damn it! What the hell is it? Damien's not here to kill me- that helicopter isn't filled with explosives (it'd have to have a nuke in it to blow me up from there anyway- this place is nigh-invincible).. why the hell am I getting the feeling that something is just plain wrong with this picture?

Maybe I'm just being a fool, that's why. Maybe I should have laughed at Damien and shut the connection off like I had planned. Maybe what's wrong here is me, getting prepared to deal with an idiot's son, knowing that I'm wasting my time and some of my credibility even bothering to talk to this clown.

No. It's not that. Because Billy notices something's wrong too- and he notices it more acutely than I do. Shit! I doubt he knows what it is either... is it the servant? Yes.. something is definitely wrong

with the servant, and that's what Billy's looking at. But something's wrong with the Illuminatus too. It's not his face, which is coated in some kind of lotion (I'm guessing it has something to do with the marks on his face). His expressions, his mannerisms.. I don't know. Even observing him carefully, I can't tell what it is. Maybe it's something Billy's seen in the normal world that I haven't. At any rate, if he has something planned, I have the utmost confidence that I'm simply too fast for him. I looked at him, judging whether or not he was carrying anything that might actually be a threat to me. No.. he's armed, yes, but from the positioning of the gun I can tell that he's clueless about it; it can't be quickly drawn.

I was obviously watching him and he watched me as well. Good. Take a good look! I don't mind that at all. I'm rather used to being looked at...

I let him say the first thing. "Where should I sit?" Silly question- there's not anywhere else here but the couch. I don't usually entertain guests, after all. His voice was scared- probably more scared than it should be, but then again I'm just terrifying like that.

"Anywhere.", I replied, and he sat on the left side- I simply flipped over the couch to sit on the right. He came here to be impressed, and I won't deny him even the little things in that.

"Business or pleasure first, Howard?" Pleasure? You're kidding, right? You're here as a diplomatic gesture, Mr. Gladstone, and I only conduct pleasure of any sort with my friends. What's more, there was an undercurrent in the word 'pleasure' that I didn't like at all.

"Business."

"Privacy?" For a split instant I had no idea what he meant. Privacy from who?! Oh... yes. I wouldn't consider it, but I'm going to be courteous about this, even if it's just another piece of utter pointlessness.

"Yeah. Sarah, Billy," and I motioned with my thumb upstairs. They understood and left.

"Paul, follow him." He left immediately, giving me no clue as to what was wrong with him.

"Start with the most important piece of business first.", I told Damien.

"The first would be for me to give you a personal congratulations on your passing of the tests. Dominator, believe me, there were all kinds of plans to have another Dominator if you failed. And yes, the rumor is true, my father had me as one of them." You earn no points for confirming common knowledge, Mr. Gladstone; tell me something I don't know and maybe I'll consider you a bigger help. "I'm glad you won, Dominator. I'm very glad none of that had to happen." He's being honest. If he was made Dominator, he'd probably be dead by now... "And I really loved that rolling rock solution." I didn't spoil it by telling him it was Billy's idea.

"The second is the retrovirus." I looked at him. I've been in favor of a retrovirus to improve already-existing Illuminati since long before my tenth birthday, and I've made no secret of it. It's a high priority for Northberg, but it's a tough job. "Dominator, there are people who don't want it deployed, that say if we make and distribute it, it'll tear us apart." I'm sure there are people that say that, and I'm equally sure they're close to Damien and his father. "They can go to hell. Dominator, you probably wonder why I'm not partially engineered. You know I could have been, and I'm sad about it. Master, I want it." I'm the Dominator, so it's all right for Levels to call me Master- but from his tongue it sounds very weird indeed. There is definitely something wrong with his mind. "The strength, the intelligence, the regeneration.. the immortality. I want it, and I'm so glad you're supporting distributing it freely instead of keeping it to yourself." He's being honest, but I can tell from the way he says it that he's got a terrible misconception. He thinks that if I give it out, I'm weakening myself against the other Illuminati, reducing my power as Dominator, instead of beefing up the organization that I command, really increasing it.

He's also sucking up, I realized. He did his homework, he researched me through and through, and now he's just doing his damndest to get on my good side. And, although it isn't working, he's good at it.

Well **of course** he's good at it, I realized as he continued to talk (it didn't really matter what he was saying), understanding everything about the Bastard and his son in a flash. He knows how to borrow, to manipulate normals, to take power. He knows how to make it sound like he wants to fulfill my goals when all he wants to fulfill are his own. And he and his family obviously know how to keep power, the fine art of position-keeping that has been perfected in the last two hundred years. I've known this sort of thing before- I guess a flash of insight is just a realization based on things already known.. such as the fact that they **don't know how** to use their power to benefit the cause- or **me**. Damien is probably very serious about wanting a retrovirus, mental problems or not. He probably would love nothing more than to join the ranks of the engineered. But I know that, at least for now, he can't really help me. He can tag along and that's about it. And since he does have mental problems of **some** kind- although I'm not exactly sure what they are- I can't have him interfering in my plans. If I just told him to get the fuck out, he'd likely cause me a good bit of trouble, so...

No. I can't just up and kill him. I can't let my bloodlust get the better of me. Not in this stage of the game. Maybe after I've marshaled some forces, maybe after I've established my position a little more. Not now.

So I let his sycophancy draw to a close, I told him that I couldn't help him right now due to other Illuminati not wanting me to play any favorites yet, and I told him that I'd be thinking about him in the future- which, of course, I will.

"All right, it's over, get down here.", I told my servants, and Damien called for his servant, Paul, in a voice that reaffirmed my suspicions of his mental imbalance. Damien and Paul walked out the door.

"Howard, can I ask Damien a question? It's important.", Billy said, casually.

"Yeah, go ahead." Billy rushed out the door as if the question was the one thing in his life.

A few seconds later I heard a **POW** and realized it was a high caliber weapon. Oh fucking shit. I rushed out the door and saw Billy holding Paul's arms tightly, and from the motions I realized the servant was trying to kill himself- and on account of a command. But why would..

Then I noticed the prone form of Damien Gladstone on the ground, a crimson flow pouring out of his head onto the rain-soaked grass. There's no healing this guy, I realized. Shit! I had just finished making my decision not to kill him immediately, and guess what happens!

"What the **fuck**?! Enforcers! Hold the dark-haired one and prevent him from hurting himself." Enforcers were at the servant immediately and held his arms tightly. Billy let go and turned to face me as I rushed towards the scene.

"Billy.. what the fuck did you ask him?", I shouted at him.

"If he let his servants do the one thing they wanted most.", he replied with a note of triumph.

"And he said yes?!" You've got to be fucking kidding me!

"Yup." His note of triumph was larger.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He was a fucking second level- how the hell did he get fooled by that?! "But Billy- **why** did you ask him that?!"

"Because I knew Paul, Howard.. from before.", Billy replied. Gah! No wonder! **That's** what Billy was looking at!! "He was my best friend, and Damien made him cut off his own dick." Well, that's the explanation for what's wrong with the servant, and probably a fairly good explanation for what's wrong.. err, what **was** wrong with the master as well.

"Awwrgh.", I muttered, sighing. But, still.. "I told you not to kill Illuminati!"

"I didn't kill him. I handed him the dynamite and the detonator. He pushed the button." This is exactly what the guide to implants warns about. A servant with a don't-kill-your-master command- which is all servants- can hook his master up to Jack Kevorkian's Suicide Machine as long as he's sure that the master, not the machine, decides the killing. This is also why it's a bad idea to implant people with poor senses of logic- they're likely, oddly enough, to make ways around it that don't make any damn sense. Unfortunately, it's also bad to implant people with good senses of logic (a necessary evil, however), because they'll figure ways around it that make perfect sense.

"Actually, the dynamite was already there. But.." Sigh. Argh. Damn it! "This is why only **intelligent** people are supposed to have access to the implants." Billy was mildly amused at that. "Now what do I do with him?" Billy obviously wasn't thinking about that little problem and said nothing.

Sarah spoke up from behind me. "You always said you needed someone to do more personal spy shit." Yes, I did, before Billy came to the island.

"Yeah.. yeah, some other stuff too." He's a normal and he might be useful just for that. "All right. Enforcers, take him to the Northberg Medical Facility. Use the chopper, but refuel first." A little Enforcer-latin, a little refueling, and the chopper was high in the sky, the black paint blending with the rain-filled black sky. "Sarah, call up Northberg and tell 'em he's coming."

I looked at Billy and thought. Well, if he's friends with that boy, then there's no question as to why he did it. And there's nothing effective I can do about it now that it's done. I wanted Damien dead as well- just not quite like that. But the fact that Billy is using manipulative techniques is a good thing in and of itself- it means he can become my second self very soon. It's just the ends that bug me. "Billy, at least now you understand the basics of manipulation.", I told him.

"But I didn't manipulate. I just took advantage of his stupidity."

"Exactly." That hit him like a gentle slap, the immediate understanding evident on his face. He followed me back inside.

On the screen was the Night Operator of Northberg, and he was absolutely livid. Which is highly unsurprising, considering his relationship to the Bastard and his son. "And I want to know why he is sending here a servant that he does not own! Where is Damien Gladstone?", he shouted to Sarah before I came into his field of vision. Damn it, Billy, now I'm going to have to deal with this guy, and he's well beyond pissed. "Dominator! Explain this!"

Wait a minute. What did he just call me? The Dominator. Oh, that's right, I'm the **DOMINATOR**. Why the hell should I be scared of **him**?! "First off, you diaper-chafed piece of shit, you do not use that tone of voice with me.", I told him, the authority in my voice a strangling hand. "If you continue, I will torture you to death and find a better man to replace you with. Second, it was a suicide." It's a suicide for two reasons: because it can be defined logically as suicide when you consider that implanted servants are supposed to be an extension of the self, and because I say it's a fucking 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," I remembered that one just in time- I almost forgot normals **could** scar. "and his implants will be reset in my presence when I arrive. Am I being clear, Night Operator?" He didn't like that, of course, but he knows that I really can and will torture him to death. He wasn't about to spearhead a revolution against me, I knew, not even for his deceased cousin.

"Where is his body?" He tried desperately to hold his temper. Here's some advice: don't lose your temper, or I'll lose **mine**.

"On my front lawn, feeding the grass."

"What?! We could save him if the damage is less than complete!" His temper restored most of its previous fury.

"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?" His temper returned to its previous explosive state.

"You will pay for this!", he screamed, and I decided to get flippant the same way Billy does.

"Do you take American Express? And I distinctly told you not to use that tone of voice with me." The Night Operator, a bright purple, slammed his end of the viewscreen off. "Circumcised a bit low, wasn't he?", I observed. I don't give a damn what Damien's relationship to the guy was. If the Night Operator cared about him that much, why the hell didn't he have him at least rudimentarily engineered? Don't you have any faith in your own technology, Operator? Didn't you realize that you could have prevented this by both giving him better intelligence and better reflexes? Or did you simply not care, you fuckwit, and only started caring when Damien became old enough to...

Play his power games? Is that what's going on? The Night Operator helped create me and I'm the best there is. If he is playing power games and using his cousin to do it, why the hell did he send someone like that against someone like me? Doesn't he have any clue how strong and smart I really am?

How the hell can genetic normals be so fucking **stupid**?

"Yup.", Billy said.

"With a chainsaw.", Sarah muttered, and Billy started smiling and chuckling in vengeful glee. Of course he's happy. He both got the chance to see an Illuminatus eat it from his servant and he rescued his friend from a life with a sadist, all in one simple question and one single stroke of death. Now Damien is dog food and Billy and his friend are going to be reunited.. just not in the way that he'd originally hoped. This is going to be interesting if nothing else.

But I'm too tired to worry about that crap now and I started heading for bed, the buzzer loudly interrupting me with its BZZZERT! The insanely, almost inhumanly angry form of the Bastard showed up on my screen and I smiled at him a bit.

"You... you.. Howard.. grrr... killed my **son**.." Oh, really? I killed him? Why didn't you think of his possible death before you decided not to engineer him, you shit? Why didn't you tell him that I can't be dealt with and manipulated and flattered like some pinhead normal politician or some fifth-level second-rater? What the hell were you doing breeding in the first place, anyway? I could almost hear the gene pool thanking Billy and Paul for their efforts.

"Having trouble forming sentences, happy boy?", I said, smirking at him, daring him to come and get me, a task I knew the other Illuminati would gladly let him do alone. I'd love for him to do that. I'd just slaughter him like the bloated bitch he is.

His crude, animal intelligence told him to leave. "You little bastard.. how could you.. I'll talk to you LATER!!", he shouted, before he clicked off. He should feel lucky I haven't yet clicked **him** off with a .50 caliber Universal Off Switch. And, as I thought about the last guy: why didn't you partially engineer him, if you wanted him to live so badly? This is the same general question I'd love to ask normal anti-bioengineering activists at gunpoint: why do you consign **your own fucking**

grandchildren to disease, inferiority, and slow death?

"Fiddlefucks. There is one more thing I have to do, though." I entered into public records, in simple, direct language, a statement of exactly what happened.

"You're telling the exact truth..", Billy marveled.

"The Operator could get the truth by resetting Paul's implants to himself before he resets them to me." He hadn't thought of that. "Anyway, it's time to sleep. We'll go pick up Paul in the morning. I haven't been to Northberg in a while anyway." I'll be sure to check out the latest everything when I'm there. I turned off all incoming communications to preserve my sanity and headed upstairs to get some sleep. Billy was still grinning, probably with the realization that we have a common enemy in Illuminated idiots.

The next day, I got up early, my mind waking me up with various worries, as various possible political implications of what Billy did (and my rather impolitic responses, although I don't regret them one bit) occurred to me.. I put on the suit, wanting to feel armed. Then I walked down to the viewscreen and read assorted, Enforcer-transcribed conversations between the full range of Illuminati, skipping over pleasantries and gobbledygook, looking for conversations like this.

Theodore Roosevelt: 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.

For a split second, out of nowhere, I visualized myself taking off the suit, just because I didn't want the fist-blades to give Jean Chirac an early death as I beat her head into the floor with repeated face-crushing punches. Then I made my rage pass- I didn't want to let it into this. Not now, at any rate.

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.

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.

That was my most recent; I've read about twenty before Billy talked from behind me. "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?" That might be what some of them really want, the ones who aren't just saying so to join with the group in a condemnation of me. Punishment might be the symbolism they're looking for. And they're not going to get it. Sorry, assholes- you **know** what Billy is the moment you look at him (which means you **might** want to consider donating a **few** of your sparse brain cells to thinking about what he'd like to do to you), I do not have to answer at **all** the fact of Damien's suicide (which means that you should feel lucky I am even bothering to care), and, furthermore, you are not going to affect any of my quite personal decisions with your pathetic, useless whining.

I motioned and Billy vaulted over the couch to sit at my right. "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," I found it amazing how naturally I factored in Paul as part of my forces. "the Enforcers'll get everything else, and we're going to have ourselves an ass kicking." I don't care what they're threatening. They want to try it, let them. They want to start a Dominator-ousting on something that is my business, they're welcome to it. And when my servants, Enforcers, Illuminated allies, and I are finished urinating on their corpses, I'm going to rebuild the Levels with people that aren't stupid. "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 say they want **Paul** tortured." I could almost read his thoughts: 'Didn't I kill the **last** guy who did that?' "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 asked.

I don't **want** a civil war. More than that, I don't want to be seen as the one **provoking** a civil war- I'll lose allies. I have to put my foot down- to settle anything like this in the future- but I can't do it in a way that would make them consider opposing me. I need ideas. "Billy.. if you really were me, what would you do?"

"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." Ideas are like that. Even good ones. "Why the hell did he say yes?!" Sarah chuckled and sat down next to me.

"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." They don't want to piss me off. Unfortunately for me, that also works in reverse. "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." It'll be attrition, and it will probably work on me. That's a problem. What I have to do is this: I must be direct without insulting everyone; I must answer the legitimate concerns without knuckling under, maintaining my image of benevolent strength. In other words, I have to be truly diplomatic for the first time in my Illuminated career.

"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.", I said, watching my words. I considered commanding them to do it, but decided against it. If the Levels bitch at me when my servants do it again, I'm just going to say 'Didn't I already answer this shit? And who the hell could fall for it after knowing how Damien met his end?'

"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."

"For an organization that prides itself on intelligence, you sure must have a lot of idiots.", Billy said. Sarah and I just busted a gut. I might be the Dominator, but he's **Captain Obvious**! He started chuckling, realizing the 'Duh!' value of what he had just said.

"Don't tell me you just figured that out!", I exclaimed, still laughing. Sarah was shaking her head.

"I had the feeling earlier.. how did they get in here, then?" The back door, I almost answered. The vents, the pipes, the windows. They sneak in like roaches, and I'm the fucking Orkin Man.

"They were smart when they did. Power corruption, Billy. They **have** the minds- they just don't **use** them. 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." I need to populate the Illuminati with bioengineered. The ones that aren't will either get a retrovirus, get terminal geriatric diseases, or get creamed.

"Got it."

We flew to Northberg that evening. Even if Paul wasn't healed yet, there was something I needed to do.

Chapter 24

I hadn't been to Northberg in a while, but I knew it like the back of my hand, easily finding Paul's room with a simple designation. Before I moved to my island, I grew up here; even if I can't remember most of what I was doing that young, I do remember how to get around in this place. Yup, they haven't made many modifications since I was last here, either. Paul's hospital door was guarded by an Enforcer, which took one look at me and walked inside.

"Billy, Sarah, no one is to come inside this door until I exit it. Not you, not anyone.", I said to them, making sure that I would not be interrupted. This is going to require the voice of a skilled manipulator, to make sure Paul doesn't lose precious sanity. Besides, I need the practice. I threaten too often and actually manipulate too seldom. As I entered, I noticed the Enforcer using a device to cut open his head in two places- ah yes, implant resetting. I watched carefully and made sure the Enforcer actually did it- it did, then expertly sealed Paul's head closed again, leaving without a word.

I then waited five minutes, until the powerful sedative they gave him wore off with the help of an even more powerful antidote. To put it bluntly, he was in a sad state. Hospital restraints held his arms and legs down in place. There were small marks on his head where they went to reset his implants. Various bandages covered his body, as assorted scarred wounds were being re-healed with fewer and less obvious permanent markings. Tubes went to his crotch, slowly feeding the apparatus regrowing his penis and balls, wires from that went to the monitors showing his progress. He was listless as the effect wore off- it took thirty seconds for the antidote to work enough for him to look up at me and mutter, "Billy?"

"No, Paul. I'm Howard.", I said, doubting that the implants would work on the first person he thought he saw. Nah.. he needs some recognition and surety of who it is for there to be the impression the implants use.

"Howard.. ahh...", he mumbled to himself, quickly regaining consciousness.

"First things first, Paul. Whatever Damien said no longer applies."

"Oh.. ugh.. you're my master now, aren't you.."

"Yes, Paul. I am." He sighed slowly.

"Oh man.. hey, what the fuck?!", he said, as his growing consciousness caused him to look up at the device regenerating his sexual organs.

"Paul, fortunately for you, I don't believe in non-intact servants."

"Is that thing doing what I think it's doing?"

"Well, that totally depends on what you think it's doing."

"It's regrowing my fucking.."

"Yep. It's regrowing your fucking. And don't fuck with it, you'd hurt yourself.", I said, undoing the soft, but obviously uncomfortable, hospital restraints. "You can't break Illuminated secrecy, you can't harm any of my property or me, you can't try to avoid my commands, you can't leave my island without my permission, and you can't try to delude me."

"Agh.. god. That was about the first thing he said. Howard.. if you **can** answer me this.. since I got **RIPPED** outta my house, I have been bitchwhipped, hogtied, maimed, and made to cut off my own dick.. just tell me **why**!"

"To fulfill the sadistic desires of a second level Illuminatus."

"So you people really are a bunch of torturers..."

"Hardly. We the Illuminati don't concern ourselves with hogtying, maiming, cutting off dicks, or any amount of bitchwhipping. However, certain members do enjoy such activities. By the way, Paul, if you remember, the one who used to do all that to you is now deceased." Might as well just tell him, in case he's forgotten any or didn't see it clearly (it happens, even when it's obvious as Damien's execution). He'll find out all on his own that we do as we damn well please, just because we feel like it.

"Yeah.. blew his fucking brains out after Billy said.. hey, where is Billy? Can.. can I talk to him?"

"Sure, Paul. He's right here." As I opened the door I noticed Billy and Sarah were dealing with a semi-irate Illuminatus who obviously thought some amount of logic or convincing could undermine my explicit commands.

"Howard! I need to talk to you, in private.", the blond haired young man said, his eyes beaming with hope. Just by looking at and listening to him, I could tell that dealing with him would sicken me to the core, and I don't have time to fuck with him right now anyway. "Is now a good time?"

I glared at him and began to curl my lip in a sneer.

"Well.. uhh.. I see. I'll.. I'll come back later." He hurried off, trying to imitate my speed in a walking stride.

"Billy, come in. Sarah, keep guarding the door." She stood right in front of it as I closed it, her folded arms visible through the shadowed glass.

"Billy!! That is you, right?", Paul exclaimed, his face slowly transforming from its semi-permanent mask of pain into something resembling a smile.

"Yeah, Paul, it's me.", said Billy, looking at his friend and shaking his head slowly, obviously struck by Paul's heavily bandaged body.

"Oh, Billy..", Paul said, holding his arms out to him. Billy reached down and they hugged, Paul crying a bit. "Billy.. tell me this isn't real.. tell me we're going home!", he said, in a voice that was almost begging, a plea to be rescued where no rescue was possible. Note to self: Manufacture of that emotion in anyone could be highly useful.

"Paul... this is real. But we are going home, as soon as you're healed up." Paul's eyes moved a bit as he realized where home now is.

"He really fucked me up, didn't he.."

"Nothing a couple gallons of Neosporin won't cure." Billy's instantaneous wit knows only one bound. Second note to self: I should probably have him do that in the presence of inflated-head egotists. A master doing that is acceptable. A servant doing that- interrupting a master's speaking, to boot- really flings guys off their high horses..

"Aww.. heh heh.." he chuckled, breaking off the hug. "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."

"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." The healing agents coursing through his body would definitely deplete his stamina, using his body's energy to repair its wounds. "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." A very subjective usage of the term, but accurate. Man. How the hell could Damien fuck up his own servant like that? Scars up and down his body, gashes, damaged organs.. Damien must have been even more messed up in the head than Paul was in body- not technically insane (not by our standards, at any rate), but close. But now he's a corpse and people are going to blame me. Technically, it is my fault. Even more technically, it's not my fault. Stupidity and a minor mistake combined can produce deadly results. All I have to do is basically demonstrate that I made the minor mistake and Damien was bone-crunchingly stupid.

The grating voice that held its own residence in my head (but hasn't really talked much in more than a month- maybe because I've had actual people to talk to?) started to growl at me. 'Yanno, Howard, these servants of yours are taking up too much of your time and resources.'

'Fuck you.', I spat back at it, growling with mental triple echo. 'That's because they're **mine**. And Damien was a little bitch anyway. Besides, Paul's a real normal, and I need more company around. And also, he's the only thing I'm getting out of Damien. I'm not going to take a share of the resources from people I happen to kill.'

'Yeah.. but you are the fucking Dominator now, keep watching your back.'

Paul laid back to sleep, his immediate discomfort of bandaged, unsightly, rapidly-healing sores mitigated by both the enervating healing agents and his own personal relief. Actual relief. Billy, Sarah, and Paul all have the unanimous belief that they are in a bad situation- but going from 'worse' to 'bad' is still an improvement. And I'm used to leaving a trail of suffering in my wake, too. The idea of improving someone's condition by moving around a positively nightmarish form of control amused me.

Now to deal with that idiot... but as we quietly left the room, someone more important, the Night Operator, was standing in front of me, much too close. I moved as if to rush him (**THAT** would have been quick) and he instinctively took a step back. "What do you want?", I growled at him, and he stepped back even more.

"My.. cousin's son is dead, and I've spent hours working on your servant's **dick**. You.. you'll pay, Howard, you'll pay.. your servants and your 'Daddy' will pay too." I could have- probably should have- killed him right there in a flurry of blades, but I didn't. I let him stew, let him walk off. I could tell he'd never try to make good on those threats, especially the one about attacking the retired Dominator- in addition to warranting instant death from **EVERYONE** in the organization, it would serve him no purpose whatsoever. Besides, he doesn't have the balls. He knows every technical detail of what I can do to him. Sarah made a sound of mild disgust, and Billy just shook his head.

I had something left to say, though. "Operator." He turned around quickly, visibly pissed. "You will have my servant returned to my home when he is fully healed.", I told him. His anger almost led him to say or do something stupid and get himself eviscerated, but instead he simply turned around and continued on his way. He'll obey me.

"That guy needs a replacement.", Sarah observed, her arms folded.

"Really. C'mon, kill him.", Billy suggested. "Just one hit."

"Not yet. Naaaaut yet.", I said. "He's just pissed. I'll give him some time to get over it and get the hint." Sarah and Billy both gave me looks that told me I was making a mistake. Bah. I can always kill him later.

The idiot that I had dealt with earlier came up to us as we started walking out. "H-How-Howard.. there was something I wanted to talk to you about.", he said in a self-debasing voice. (He doesn't need to do it himself.) Patience Meter: 90%

"Spit it out."

"Well, I think it's kindofa touchy issue.." Patience Meter: 50%, and dropping quickly...

"Get. To. The. Point."

"Well, it's about you and your servants and I think there's something going on.." Patience Meter: 20%

"What the **FUCK** do you **think** is going on?!", I shouted at him, wondering if he had the ability to think.

"Well, it has to deal with Damien.." Patience Meter: 0%

"Oh! You want to talk to me about Damien!", I said, in an incredibly sarcastic and patronizing voice. "**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." I left him standing there with his mouth open. He should feel lucky. My Patience Meter ran out, after all. I was about to cleave him into gibs. I could almost **hear** Sarah grinning at him as we got in the tram to the jet.

On our way back I noticed Billy was happy, a bit giddy, even. Why shouldn't he be? For him and his friend, this was the best possible resolution to this. He'd managed to slay the asshole who hurt his friend and rescue him from torment, I'd given him exactly what he wanted without any hesitation, and he got to see his friend being healed as if Damien had simply never done anything. My happiness can subtly rub off on him; this is the first time his has rubbed off on me. Hey, it's not like I'm not getting anything out of this. Billy obviously saw **something** in the boy- I'll ask when he's not thinking about it. I wasn't going to make any resource recommendations at all for Damien's stuff, obviously; all I'd done was take the servant for myself.

The moment we got home, Billy looked around for something, his eyes going to various rooms. "Wait a minute. I don't see any rooms added.. did those guys you have even know he was coming?" I simply smirked at him. He's sometimes endearing when he's ignorant. He opened the door to his room and noticed the two computers etched into the wall as well as the Paul-fitted clothing on the hangers. Even if it means I'm perpetually spied on by my own agents (how else would they know?) I love having mundane details worried about for me. Billy was amazed at their speed and efficiency, as everything looked as if it's always been this way. I chuckled, watching him look around his room

for signs of construction that no longer existed.

"Billy, I stopped doubting their abilities when I was seven. Can you imagine if all my problems were solved this way?", I asked him, and he nodded. Sarah can make annoying people go away, but I have to command her. Nobody can read my thoughts, and although that would be so useful for commanding servants, I wouldn't accept what they'd have to do to monitor them. "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." And now that I'm talking about something else, I hit him with the surprise question. "You two really care about each other, don't you?"

"Yeah.. yeah, we do. Howard, I know you have no respect for almost all normals. Paul falls outside the almost all." Note to self: Put Paul in for consideration to add to DNA database. "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." Thinking of Paul as one of the founding Illuminati made me smile. This is a perennial problem for us. There are always the ones who are almost invited, the ones who are dropped from consideration for one small reason or another, and the ones who are simply overlooked. I don't know how honest Billy's being with himself (how honest he is with himself is how honest he is with me) about Paul, but it's obvious the boy's a few cuts over the average normal. "You seem to care about him a lot, too. Why?", Billy asked.

"Because I trust your taste in friends. 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. Illuminati 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."

"You're not the first Dominator to say something like that.", Billy said, and I smiled. I wasn't, not even close.

"You're beginning to understand how Dominators keep loyalty.", I told him. It's a matter of who stands for what. I symbolize the Illuminati as a whole; thus, anyone who works and fights for me is working and fighting for the Illuminati as a whole.

The intercom buzzed. Damn. I got out of bed immediately, walking down to the viewscreen and turning it on, expecting an asshole Illuminatus to deal with, someone stupid enough to disturb my sleep. "A helicopter is giving off coded signals from Northberg Medical Facility.", an Enforcer said on it instead.

"Let it land.", I told it, smiling, and turned off the screen. "Paul's here.", I called over the intercom, and Billy reacted immediately, rushing downstairs to meet his friend. In a few minutes, Paul walked across the lawn in view of the big window, looking at us and thinking as he opened the door.

"Paul, who do you think I am?", I asked him. He didn't understand at first, but got it- Billy and I were naked.

"You're Howard.", he said.

"Good, you're able to tell us apart. There might be a time when you won't be. Obey him as you do me." Paul was startled, but he understood why. This might make things a little weird between Billy and Paul, but it's necessary. "I'm surprised you were back so soon. I'm going back to bed." As I closed the door to my room I heard Paul following Billy up the stairs, and I realized that I was going to have to get used to actually hearing his footsteps. For a moment I pondered using the intercom to listen in on Billy and Paul, but then Sarah would hear, too. Hmm.. nah. I just went to sleep instead, and dreamed of Paul, Sarah, Billy, and dogs.

Chapter 25

The next day, despite my new acquisition, I got bored again. No calls, no news, no plans to be carried out, no fights to break up, and apparently no more shit about Damien's death to deal with, at least not for the moment. So I brought Billy and sat on the cliff, looking out to the forest the sea, seeing for miles in the clear weather, although there were some grey clouds some distance out. I've been up here before, of course, but not recently, and never with him.

"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?", he said with some sarcasm.

"Billy, do the words 'damaged goods' mean anything to you?"

He chuckled for some reason and said "Yup. But Oedipal complexes? I imagine if the guy pissed me off, I would have killed him.. but to marry the wench? Uuugh!" The thought of Billy and a 300 pound, 5'1" sphere-shaped whore (although I know that's definitely not what the agent looked like) in holy matrimony split my sides.

I shrugged. "Part of normal psychology.", I said smiling.

"Oh, it applies to me, too.. just not with the parents." He was referring to something.. what? I was about to ask him when I grasped the unbelievably obvious. He meant me and Sarah. Duh.

"Ha. So what were their parents like?" Billy's parents would not be an accurate indication of the norm. They were agents, trained to pretend and to downplay Billy's special abilities to the rest of the world, and to act in a specified manner to specified conditions. Not like normal parents, who bring babies into the world with no thought of consequences or exactly how they will raise their children, except to go on the ideas and morals of **their** parents. They muddle through that like everything else.

"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." Well, of course not. They're not supposed to. The real raising is done in the schools and the TV where it belongs.

"Ick. How'd you deal with all those normals anyway?" That would be horrifying to me, dealing with a lot of unpredictable fools at once. I'd just break out the guns and tell them to get the hell away from me. That's the only solution I could think of. Just thinking about having all those profane normals up my ass at once, several shouting near me, all expecting me to worship the popular gods we as Illuminati have set up for them, truly disgusts me. The horror. I know I've asked Billy this before, but this time he's a good deal closer to reality.

"I ignored most of them, threatened some of them, kicked the shit out of seven of them, and made friends with .. four of them. Believe me, Howard, dealing with normals is a hell of a lot easier than

dealing with you." Normals are manipulable.

"So you want to go back?"

He exploded with a rage and a fury I've never quite seen him use. "Yeah. What the fuck did you think, Howard?", he screamed. "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?"

"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. You're living proof of our existence.", I said as who I am, the Dominator, preserving the secrecy and the power of the Enlightened Ones. "So I can't send you back. And even if I could, I don't think I'd want to."

His rage turned to sorrow. "Why not?", he said half-sobbing.

"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."

"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."

"Bullshit."

"Fuck you. Not literally, I don't want to see that."

I heard a crunching of shoes on small rocks. "Hello, Howard. Hello, Billy.", Paul's tired voice called from behind us. "Overseeing your kingdom, young master?"

"Yes.. Paul, there's a dissident frog in Korea I need you to capture.", I said with mirth. Billy turned to look at me, and his face asked what the fuck I was doing.

Paul swiveled and walked back down the mountain. "Do you mind being more specific?", he called back.

"North Korea." The idea of Paul searching every mud-filled pond in all of communist North Korea for frogs got me laughing. "I'm just kidding! Get back here."

"Howard, that was **not** funny.", Billy said as Paul sat between us, elbows on knees, his feet on the rock. "Paul, why the fuck did you come up here?", he asked as if that was a stupid thing to do. From Paul's point of view, it almost certainly was.

"I got bored and felt a little masochistic."

"A little masochistic? More like suicidal!", Billy replied. A breeze picked up and cooled me a bit. I looked up and saw thick, gray clouds coming in from the west.

"No, suicidal is when you ask for something to do.", Paul said in a semi-humorous voice. Now the

punchline... three seconds passed. "**Not** unless you tell me.", he said with certainty.

"Argh! Am I that predictable?" He guessed my thoughts. Damn. I'm glad I got him.

"Not really.", Billy said at the same time as Paul said, "Pretty much."

"All right, Paul- what am I going to do next?" Let's test this.

"You're going to tell us to get inside before we get hit by lightning." Good prediction. The gray clouds were coming in fast. Although I'm not sure what a good, solid ten thousand volts would do to my physiology, it probably wouldn't be beneficial.

"You guessed it. Get inside before you get hit by lightning." And we hiked back down the mountain, sliding a few times on the small volcanic rocks, jogging through the brushless forest, and getting inside before the rain hit. And it hit hard. Even with the soundproof glass I could almost feel the wind buffeting against the house.

Sarah came down the steps, making as little sound as usual. "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.", she said, knowing that I'd really fucking hate to hear it. But it must be said.

"I didn't know that assfuck **had** a dad.", Paul said with venom. Funny he'd use the word 'assfuck'.. no, I'm not going to go there.

"Actually, if he didn't, he'd probably be much smarter. And still alive. But noooo...", I spat out with a maximum of disappointment for my fallen comrade. Fuck that. These servants are more my fellows than that asshole was. Even Paul wouldn't fall for the trick Billy used.

I didn't really feel like talking to that Herbert asshole again. And I didn't have to.

"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." He grinned as he did it. I put on his dark clothing and looked like the servant. I wonder how many more times I'll do this to avoid dealing with annoying people. Paul giggled slightly. "No giving it away, everyone.", I said. Paul made an effort and smashed down his smirk.

Billy came down and punched the viewscreen on, and turned it to the channel of the person who sent the last message. A mean-looking old man, about fifty-ish, came on and immediately started screaming. Damn, these people are anal. I hope to hell I don't end up like the rest of my fellow controllers. "You killed my son, you little bastard!!" Funny you should use that term, Bastard..

"Bullshit! He killed himself. He let his fucking servant shoot him in the head.", Billy screamed back with my personal blend of authority and anger.

"After your servant told him to do it, him thinking it was you!" If you only knew, asshole. I could feel everyone in the room- including Sarah- making a conscious effort not to laugh hysterically at the irony. I had to bite my tongue.

"Look, I am not responsible for anyone's stupidity. I let him ask the question..", Billy replied, gesturing towards me, "..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.", Billy said, sneering. "**Now, I am going to** ask you a question," he continued loudly to drown out the idiot's replies, "and I want you to answer it! Do you doubt what I have told you about the facts of the incident is the truth?" Well played, Billy. Complete truth and absolute authority aren't the usual combination, but they can work wonders when used right.

"No. I do not doubt the facts you have told me. I doubt your reaction to them. I have seen no justice." Okay- now he's **really** starting to tick me off. There is no justice, asshole. He of all people should know that. He's a fucking first level himself. He has no business pretending to place normal concepts in the hands of the controllers.

"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." Something's wrong with this.

And Billy, of course, realized it. "And who will be at this meeting?"

"You and your servant, myself, and several other Illuminati who have an interest in this matter."

I exploded laughing. So did Billy. "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.", Billy said in a strongly flippant voice with some fury behind it.

"You listen to ME!!", he started to scream.

"NO. YOU LISTEN TO ME.", Billy said in a massively authoritarian and dominating voice I never knew either of us had, a voice far beyond any normal ten-year-old, using the echo effect in a way even I have never used before the third test, a voice that made the old man on the screen recoil as if his own father was disciplining him heavily. Billy clenched his fists tight and the suit's blades came out of the fists silently. "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." That would be the midnight, Bavarian local time, of three nights in the future. Is that the decision I would have made? I don't know. It's a good one. "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 could feel the hate in the man's eyes. I could see how he was begging that someone, anyone, would administer parental punishment to someone who has no parents. But he didn't dare say anything about it, because of how many hits it takes for any of us to kill him in: only one.

"Yes, Dominator.", the old man said in a far more subdued voice. He winked out.

"Uuugh... my throat hurts.", Billy complained in his usual voice after bellowing like a Norseman. Paul was cheering for him, pumping his fist and going "Yes! Yes! That was glorious!"

I started to take off the dark clothing, throwing it into a random corner of the room. "Billy, that was good. Excellent, in fact. And yes, take it off.", I said gesturing at his clothes.

"Howard, are they always like that?", he asked as he popped the magnets open.

"Sure as hell seems like it, doesn't it?", I asked, smiling.

"Yup.", he replied. There's his answer.

"That was a good call, that meeting thing. If it'll finish this, anyway.", I said. Paul was still cheering, although in a quieter voice, and laughing a bit. Sarah had a simple grin plastered on her face. My thoughts went back to what Daddy said a week or so before I got Sarah. He said the servants would hate me for probably a year or so after they were acquired. I have only one word for you, Daddy. Bullshit. They hate the situation. They hate being who they are. They don't hate me, it's just that I'm in the way of their rage. Sarah in particular has a score to settle with that asshole.

We killed the next two days doing things normals only dream about.

Chapter 26

I set the alarm early for me- it's still a five hour flight to a place nine hours ahead of us- and woke up a few minutes before it went off. A single thought was on my mind, one I've known but haven't considered- I'd let Billy make a decision as to what I'll be doing. I mean, it wouldn't look very good if I called the Bastard up after Billy had finished with him and said 'Cancel that, here's what we'll be doing.' What if Billy had made a bad decision instead of a good one? 'You're going to have to deal with that.', I said to myself. I had been explicit with the command, to prevent bad shit from happening to me, and he had accurately obeyed. If he's going to be serving as my duplicate, and have the decision-making power that comes with it, I have to accept that he might make misjudgments or mistakes. Did I still dare? Yes. Yes, I did. Smiling, I put on the suit and walked downstairs, to find Sarah and Paul playing a game on the big screen.

"Hey, Howard.", Paul said as I walked downstairs. "Time to go?"

"It is.", I replied.

"I'll get Billy." Sarah saved the game and he went upstairs past me as I thought of exactly how to do this. I'll need to respond, not act on my own, not this time. Depending on what is said, I might need to kill the Bastard, and if I kill him I should kill his bitches at the same time. Between firsts it might start a serious resource fight that I might need to control, but if they've gotta go, they've gotta go. How should I... ah, yes, yes. Three engineered, three idiots. I need a trigger phrase.. and I know just what to use, too. Sarah smiled and nodded when she saw the telltale grin on my face. She knows what it means.

Following Paul, Billy came out of his room with an angry look on his face. To my surprise, he vaulted over the railing, flipping forward as he landed from the twelve-foot drop so as not to get hurt- he didn't, of course. He's wearing the black suit with its cushioned soles, it's plush carpet, he's Billy, and he knows he's not allowed to hurt himself. Paul looked at the feat, realized he couldn't duplicate it, and took the stairs instead. Even after doing something exhilarating like that, he still looked pissed.

"Billy, you look like you're ready to kill something. Is it all at me?"

"No.. not just you, Howard. It's them I want." He's in luck, and not just tonight- killing Illuminati is something I'll be doing as Dominator. "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." On that, he is perfectly accurate.

"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." I don't want anyone pointing- or **aiming**- at him. "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.", Sarah said, annoyed at them. She has her own reasons not to like them.

"Of course. The fat whores he has for chorus girls.", Billy said, even more annoyed.

"Bingo." My saying that made him happier.

"Hee hee.. Howie, that's a good trigger phrase.. 'I'm resigning - wait, no I'm not, THEY are!'" Good, he was paying attention when I gave that speech; he remembered what the statement meant.

"Heh heh heh. Let's go."

Ah yes, four humans can just fit in the jet.. hmm. "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."

"Oh, no..", Billy said, realizing what was about to happen.

"Not again!", Sarah griped, as she got in the pilot's seat. She blasted the plane forward at cruising speed, and Paul grunted from the acceleration.

"Sarah, get back here.", I commanded her after she turned on the autopilot. She did, and I laid back with my head on her legs, my feet on Billy, and Paul in between. It felt wonderful. Warm, soft, and moving- there's nothing manufactured that can beat this for comfort. I have got to do this more often.

"Does he always do this?", Paul muttered. He was, by far, the softest of the three.

"Sometimes.", Billy replied in a dark tone.

"Hehehe... Feel lucky. I could be Sandra." I'm physically dense, yes, but I'm not that heavy, not yet anyway. One of the Bastard's wenches would be far, far worse- how the hell do genetic normals get like that, anyway?

"Well, then we wouldn't be going anywhere.", said Sarah, and I looked up at her smile. Apparently she's trying to imitate mine.

"Why not?", I asked, waiting for the punchline.

"The plane wouldn't get off the ground!" It was pretty funny- we all laughed at it, and their laughter was a nice massage on my head, back, and feet. This is one of the coolest parts of having servants like these, being able to use them for comfort and joke with them at the same time. And, of course, there's also the killing part of it, and all of us engineered were ready to do some slaughtering. Fragging alone is fun, but for the real entertainment, bring your friends.

"Could she even fit in here?", Paul cracked. Technically, probably, but there sure as hell couldn't be three of her.

"Well, now that depends, Paul. I imagine if we used an industrial press.." That brought gales of laughter. Despite being made of 70% hard-to-compress water, normal humans are squishy creatures, to my experience anyway. Shit, if we squeeze her hard enough, we might be able to turn her into oil, and refine it into jet fuel. Get out of my face and into my gas tank, bitch!

"She'd just pop back up!", Paul shouted, and my whole body moved with laughter. Paul was obviously thinking in cartoon physics; I visualized being the Dominator of a planet with them. Wow, how **would** that work? It would make my job much, much tougher- cartoon characters are practically impossible to kill...

"Okay, okay, no more fat jokes for the next 3 hours. I don't want to hear much more of that.", I said. Silliness has limits. "But seriously, she wouldn't fit in here. At least not leaving room for anyone else." They could visualize it.

Billy came up with something interesting. "Howard, speaking of fitting.. this thing could hold what? A six foot four guy? And if we're going to be seven foot two.." I hadn't considered that. This jet is pretty small; although it has illuminated comfort utilities in it (and not just the black-clad humans), it was

designed more as a speed-built fighter jet than a luxury liner. Paul looked between me and Billy, amazed that we'd grow so large. It would make the bullet dodging a bit harder, wouldn't it? I doubt that. The strength and endurance boost will more than make up for it, even if I need to replace the jet.

"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." I'll need to decide who to give it to in advance. In terms of units my super jet is worth more than some countries. "And yes, Paul, 2.2 meters, about seven foot two. Don't worry, you won't look **too** much like a midget.", I said smiling, patting him on the chest. I took a breath and thought for a bit. I should probably do some more research on the political climate, but damn, I didn't feel like getting up. Fortunately, I have ways of getting things done that I don't want to do. I commanded Billy to search the first and second levels' logged communications thoroughly and then tell me of anything that I'll find important (and fortunately, he knows enough for me to not have to elaborate on that) involving Paul, Damien, or some idiot like the Bastard getting his revenge. Billy swapped places with Paul under me and started to search. I'm just glad the information is logged as Enforcer-transcribed text, which is searchable for key words and the like, instead of just voice recordings, that aren't. Besides, Billy can read many times faster than these people can talk.

He did, indeed, search thoroughly; it took him a half hour total, and I'm sure he was learning a good deal reading all the various conversations between sheeple-deluding world controllers. "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." In public, at least. "There are eight things you should probably take a look at though."

I should take a look at? And get up? I think not. "Say when the conversations happened, who they are, then read them aloud so I understand them.", I commanded him.

He let out a sigh before starting. "June 4, 1998, 0017 hours. Night Operator: 'Herbert, I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but I have horrible news.'" Wasn't too horrible to me or Paul, assclown!

"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." I nodded, having figured that.

"'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'm sorry, what? You goatfuckers, I'm your **Dominator**- I reserve the right to be as arrogant as I like!

"'I'll call him up right now. Are you sure Damien's .. dead?'" Billy did a decent Gladstone impression, mimicking the Bastard's sorrow and anger.

"'Very much so, sir. The Dominator confirmed a powerful head shot with fatal brain injury.'" I giggled insanely at that. Here I am, preparing to **cause** a powerful head shot with fatal brain injury!

"'Damn it, I'll call him up **right now**. Gladstone out.' End of transmission."

"Okay, Billy, stop.", I said, sighing. "I wish I would have remembered those two were cousins before this whole mess began." Yes, it's insane. His cousin's son wasn't engineered at all, and he's the

Night Operator of **Northberg**. "Can't track everyone, I guess. Oh well. Paul, read the next one."

"June 11, 1998, 2315 hours.", Paul 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!""

""**What?!** How?!" Paul just recited; he didn't portray the startled terror.

""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." As if I ever did!

""Is the damage recoverable?" Yes, we can replace Damien with someone smarter and not related to assholes.

""No way. Howard says his brain is in little pieces. Something bad happened out there, Dave.""

""Oh, god. Look, that kid is becoming a serious threat here. Herbert said he shoulda been stopped earlier but.." Shoulda? As in actually should have been stopped if..

"Stop, Paul." I got the feeling that it wasn't a 'should' meaning 'In retrospect, we should have killed Blair before he adopted the moniker 'Orwell'.' It was more like 'When I pulled the trigger, the gun should have fired.' As in, they were actively plotting against me, probably something having to do with the tests. "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?" This kind of nonsense is really starting to piss me off. I am the **Dominator**, remember? You don't like me, you think I'm not competent because of my young age? I don't like you either, and I think you're incompetent because of your abject stupidity and intra-Illuminati manipulation bullshit. Let's see whose opinion prevails. Hint: I'm engineered, you're not.

""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." The Micro? What a joke. That attitude is all wrong, focusing on the wrong things and coming to the wrong conclusion. The Micro is a heat-producing tool. I am the superweapon, and I have two more superweapons who serve me.

""All right, Tim. Thanks for callin' me up. Night.' End of transmission."

I sighed. What a couple of nitwits. It's amazing how easily these people who are supposed to be Illuminati can get worked up. None of them actually cared about Damien, except maybe his relatives. I'm starting to get the feeling that this is something I've been warned about, that they just band together in a gaggle of ignorance and mutual backrubbing at the expense of the larger organization, a sort of politics that we try to avoid here. "Were the rest of 'em like this?"

"Yeah.", Billy said. "All the same theme. They don't know what to do, so I don't think they're going to do anything. 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." That came as very good news.

"Just the way I like them." Surprised and confused people are easier to direct, and I'm going to direct them to my line of thinking tonight. "And yet again we see the nature of humanity exposing itself once more."

"How do you mean?", Billy asked. I would have been disappointed if he didn't.

"Remember when I told you they all wanted whatever tortures, and how some wanted me dead or you dead?" He 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.." Actually, it pisses me off more when they go even a little bit behind my back, which is why I'm so annoyed now. Who knows who really wants me to die? Who will tell me if they get a non-logged message from another Illuminatus vilifying me? Some of their loyalties are to things other than me and the organization, and I intend to change that.

"Because they're doing their piece of manipulation." was the answer to his question, though.

"..now I'm really confused.", he replied.

"It's always hard to understand.", Sarah said, shaking her head. One of the reasons that it's so hard to understand is that it's normal crap, trying to use techniques on someone who they won't work on.

"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." That, I barely understand. If they don't betray me or fall into stupidity, why would their lives be at risk? "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."

I did not anticipate Billy's reply. "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.", he Occam's Razored me. I didn't want to believe that, but it probably had some truth in it, and that made things much worse. C'mon guys- aren't you supposed to be professionals? Telling people what you want, to get what you want? Bioengineering. Every last one of them needs a good, healthy dose of bioengineering.

"Or a combination of both.", I said. "It worries me that you might be right for the majority of them." I didn't have any idea this was an actual problem- I need Illuminati who can **think**.

"One thing I want to know.. why do you call them The Bastards, anyway?", Billy asked. Sarah sighed, as if there was a whole lot to say.

"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 manipulation to steal from and try to control other Illuminati." Billy should be aware of this difference. I expect manipulators to try to manipulate each other. It's all in how they **use** it; leveraging is accepted, lying and wheedling is not. "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. He tries to be a fucking demagogue to us.", I explained, trying to remember exactly why I hated him. There was other shit, too, but it was a jumble of half-thoughts and muddled memories. I don't do much research on the people who disgust me. I should probably change that habit..

"Demagogue...", Billy muttered, wondering if he's seen him before in normal land.

"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."

"Heh. Yeah. I think just about everyone who knows about him hates his guts **almost** to the point of killing him outright.", Sarah said angrily. "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. And yes, Billy, it was the important and treasured stuff. No one found out it had ever left, except guys who we replaced."

"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.", I said. A first shouldn't either, really.

"I know! He had a fixation on me or something. I think he **wanted** me," Heh, that's interesting. Most people want Sarah to stay far, far away from them. "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." 'Damien wouldn't have lasted three days as Sarah's master.', my own voice said in my head, and although I wasn't sure just what miscommand would have done it, I knew I was right.

Landing and going inside the concealed facility, we took the same path we had when I introduced myself.

Chapter 27

We took our usual positions, with Paul right behind me (again, whatever servant it was, he thought up the preparations very well). The lights, low as ever, came on, showing the first and second levels. I'm glad I didn't invite anyone else- only a few of them would have **cared**. And the Bastard, of course, was in his usual spot right in front of me. Why the hell would he sit there, anyway? Just because it's in the middle? Shit, what an idiot. He could, of course, have something in mind- like calling me out, which isn't going to work. And the specter of him threatening me is less than a joke. I brought the guns because I don't feel like getting out of my chair to obliterate the idiots when I choose to do so, and also because I don't want to freak everyone out by just going up and ripping him to shreds. These guys might be egotistical and think they're unfazable, but they're not engineered. They have lots of long-distance cold hatred, but they'll start reacting emotionally if I just tear an Illuminatus apart piece by piece with my bare hands. Hypocritical? Of course. A bit childish? Oh hell yes. But then again, who said the controllers of the world had to be consistent? And other than me, who's going to make them?

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati, this gathering is now in open session.", I declared. "Before we begin discussion, I would speak the known facts. If anyone is in dispute with these facts, let yourself be heard. 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." This was just a formality, of course. All of these guys did their homework. As I read the next part, I found myself fighting down a smile- it's absolutely hilarious on paper because of its sheer ridiculousness and irony- an Illuminatus, hopefully one of the smartest people in the world, getting **creamed** by an incredibly thoughtless, stupid, Darwin Award-winning decision!

"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."

The responses were somewhat predictable. One of the younger first levels fought down a smile, a twelve-year-old (Is he engineered? No idea, I'll check later.) of the second had to choke himself to stop his involuntary chuckling, and an 18-23 year old simply couldn't take it. "**WHAT?!** He did **what?!** You mean to tell us that he believed...", he exploded, going from coherent speech into uncontrollable laughter. He finally managed to make himself quit. "I'm sorry, Master Howard. But that's just too funny.", he apologized, his face red and his muscles aching from laughter.

"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." I looked at Herbert out of the corner of my eye as I said that. He was getting visibly pissed. Good.

"Do you have anything to **say**, Mr. Gladstone?", I said, antagonizing him and upping the stakes. The way this is going, I'm definitely going to end up killing him, and that's just the way I want it. There shouldn't be any question about it in the minds of anyone here- I don't want him around anymore. Just looking at his face makes me want to get rid of him.

"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**?"

"No. I personally don't plan to do a thing to him." The Bastard's reaction was predictable as ever. Doesn't he know that predictability gets you killed around here?

"**And why not?!**", Herbert shouted, his face getting red again. Damn, he's even uglier when he's mad.

"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." Let's remain left-brained for now. I'll save my emotions for later.. no, I won't even need to use them, I'll let him dig his own grave, and the rest of the Illuminati will understand perfectly well when I blow his head off his body. Let's have at least some justification. Although the top two levels certainly understand what I'm doing, the lower levels don't know this guy so well, and so need a course in just how bad he is when they watch the video.

"But he **killed him!**" No, **really**?

"What's your point? He just got the opportunity to do it, that's all." Apparently this guy does not understand the effects of implants very well.

"And your other servant--"

"Said a thing which **I** should have said.", I interrupted.

He finally let it all out like a temper tantrum. "You are horrible, contemptible, disgusting, uncouth, destructive, out of your league, and wholly inappropriate for your position!" I was ready to take a laughter break right then and there, but I'm not going to destroy this guy's rhythm- I'm going to let it beat to his grave. Let's go down the list.. yes, people sometimes think so, people often think so, oh fuck yes, of course (it's part of the job), absolutely not, and what the fuck did you just say that last one for? Sigh. I don't mind being underestimated- really, I don't. But this guy is forgetting who he's supposed to be, just like his son did. Score one for nature..

"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!" I was even closer to a laughter break. Just about everyone in the room knows what Damien was. A self-important fool who forgot he could die.

"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?" 'Smart and stupid, respectively!!', I almost exploded. This guy's got more melodrama than anyone I've ever seen on any television station anywhere in the world. Of course, I don't watch any anymore.. maybe William Shatner gets more into it than this guy, but I doubt it. "We cannot allow this to continue!" Yes we can. "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!" Can't you get back on topic? I appreciate the personal attacks as much as I appreciate being underestimated, but this is getting ridiculous. I found myself slowly but surely cracking a smile.

Preoccupied as they were with the Bastard's tirade, no one, except maybe Sarah, noticed me silently extending and retracting the fist-blades of my left hand.

"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!" If he would have said it in just a slightly more joking tone, I would have laughed insanely. Idiot! We're all egotists here, you blind moron! What the fuck is wrong with you, you Orwellian shithead, if you can't abuse it, **it's not power!!** A fool and his intestines are soon parted... I slightly, subliminally, shook my head slowly. Guy's got a serious problem and no one's noticed.. or maybe they did, but removing him didn't fit in their plans exactly.

Well, it sure as hell fits in mine. Responsibility 1 for the Dominator is to remove threats. Stupid people, especially in the highest levels, jeopardize the organization and are thus a threat.

"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?" Okay, that's **it**. I'll take the personal abuse just fine- it comes with the territory- but this guy has absolutely zero business going after my servants. They'd do better sitting in that chair than you do, bucko. Any slim hope he may have had is gone. The only thing that will keep his heart beating is his mouth- I refuse to kill him until after he's done talking.

"And now what do we have? A poorly-qualified boy dancing on our graves simply because of genetic engineering." Ding! Ding! Ding! Congratulations, you've won the Grand Prize and a free ticket to Hell! "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**?" Don't worry. Someone with more power than he deserves is going to get removed. (The Bitches might as well be his servants for all they do.. they exist to support him, basically. Why he didn't find thinner girls is beyond me. To each his own, but it sure says something about this guy's sense of aesthetics.)

"You've been talking way too long.", a second-level (one of the media moguls, I think) said flatly. The Bastard whirled around and glared at him, face red as ever. Of course, this is all being caught on tape, so I'll be able to watch it for future entertainment value.

"Let him speak. He has that right. Besides, he has to run out of hot air sooner or later.", I replied, receiving some murmured agreement.

"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," Exaggeration won't help you either. Then again, nothing will. "we have a Dominator who doesn't give two shits whether we live or die!" Oh, you're wrong on that one, fat boy. He turned around to his left, trying to face all the other Illuminati at once, his pudgy body moving around like a rubber egg. "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?" No, which is why they don't act stupid. "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**." Hello? Where have you **BEEN**?! I knew Northberg was good but I had no idea they could do recto-cranial inversion...

"Damn it, doesn't anyone understand? If this is the way of things to come, we're all going to be gone!" Erm.. you're not engineered and there's no retrovirus coming any time soon. You're going to be gone anyway. Why the fuss? "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!" Because everyone else is perfectly contented with the way things are.

"We're with you, Herbert.", the Bitches said, in a voice so saccharine, I wanted to tear them apart limb from fatty limb instead of the quick one-shot death.

"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.", he concluded, looking me in the eye. This is almost too perfect. Since this next move is going to be replayed again and again by everyone in the organization, I better make it good.

I took a slight, easy breath and said, "Is that your honest opinion, Mr. Gladstone?"

"Yes, of course it is!", he spat out, as a snake spitting venom.

"Oh. Oh well.", I sadly sighed, shaking my head just a bit. "I guess I really have no choice, then. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Illuminati,", I stood up and said, my outstretched left arm and hand passing from right to left, "I have a statement to make." There was a partially unanimous gasp during the last part of my saying that. Others knew what I had in mind.

Five hundred milliseconds passed.

Three hands zipped into pockets, three gun-hands whipped out, three people died with holes in their foreheads, and three gun-hands came back to their pockets and became three hands again. The bodies of Herbert, Wilma, and Sandra slumped backwards, dead as rocks. The instinctive recoil-in-horror reactions from the other Illuminati were predictable, before they faded into smiles and grins.

"That is my statement."

I wasn't expecting quite as much cheering as what came next. Suffice it to say that they were happy- absolutely fucking elated is more like it. A couple looked ready to dig a hole for the three of them, fill it up, break out the dancing shoes, and do the boogie-woogie on their collective grave. "Well, now **that** wasn't too surprising, was it?", said a smiling Gates over the heavy applause. The only one who appeared to be upset was the Head Night Operator. He stood up, and the applause died down.

"I don't believe this!", he shouted, his face a livid purple. "This upstart Dominator 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!" You, maybe. 'Us all', no one believes.

"Would you like to know **why** they are clapping, Head Night Operator?", I said with a grin. Of course, it is impossible for me to know precisely why they were clapping, as I can't get inside their heads. A few of these clappers were the same people who had told me via electronic communication that what I had done to Damien was shameful. I, of course, know the real message they're trying to send: 'We like who you're getting rid of, but we don't like the idea that people are being gotten rid of. It makes us worry.'

"God damn you... **Yes! Tell me!**"

I'm good at making long, firm speeches impromptu. Damien is simply out of the picture- now I have to focus on the three I just waxed. "Because no one liked those three. 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!", I stated in my strongest voice. "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." Friendly reminders of the obvious are always helpful. "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- no normal can know about what happened here- but if they begin a descent due to our mistakes, **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**." 'And I play it meaner than anyone, which is why people react to me the way they do.', I didn't add. "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. Trying to usurp power is always a mistake here." Total obviousness is usually left to normal politicians, but it had to be said. I should have put most of this out on the table when I gave my first speech. It would have probably put a damper on the Bastard's antics (good old Big Brother fear, but I say it to make most of them think, and only the assholes fear), and Damien would have never come to the island in the first place. But I did warn these people about the dangers of implanted servants in a few sentences, back then. I probably should have said more...

The Night Operator looked like he was going to die of a stroke in that instant, but unfortunately he didn't. He did, however, manage to get out two words. "You... little..", he muttered, before his throat choked up. I looked at his tense body and realize that he would have rushed me, if the results weren't predictable, bloody, and painful for him. I almost feel sorry for his whole family. Damien was an idiot because his Illuminated father basically chose him to be- he was young enough, he could have been improved. The Bastard himself could surely have been a much stronger controller, had he the inclination. And the Operator could have influenced them both in the right direction, but didn't.

And the biggest irony of all is that he had a hand in creating me, and helped put into me that which he didn't have any of himself.

"That's it! I know I can't kill you- but I'm not going to let you kill me!", he screamed, and I instantly realized what he was going to do. He pulled out a semi-automatic pistol, put it to his right temple, and played a fixed game of Russian Roulette with it. I'm glad the walls around here aren't strong enough to bounce bullets (by design)- we could have a real ricochet going on around here. I found myself giggling. Although the rest of the Illuminati reacted at first, they didn't really care much for that guy either. There are far more skilled administrators that the Day Operator can appoint. And the fact that I'm killing the annoying people left and right is probably making my fellow masters even happier than they appear.

A middle-aged second level stood up and began staring at me, not with anger, but concentration and some forced firmness. "This is **crazy!** 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, trying to make sure every word flowed in the same powerful tone. He's good. I wonder if he ever did voice-overs?

"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." After saying that, I knew I didn't have to contact anybody. The recordings would be immediately forwarded to my people, and my people would do my will. The Levels, however, are going to have to do some power-grabbing, but after what I've said, I can be fairly sure they'll be civil about it.

"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." Okay, I'm stretching. Freely, yes.. without fear, not exactly. However little they want to admit it, violent death does things to the normal mind.

The young man, 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 said with a small hint of drama, sitting down and inviting murmurs of approval. I realized that I've heard his name before and it instantly came to memory.

"Thank you, Mr. Beckett. Anyone else?"

An old woman stood up, with her kind, warm, world-dominating smile. I know her. She's Rebecca Adams, the 57-year-old mistress of dictators worldwide, her mother pulled out of Nazi Germany and betrothed to an especially gifted and loyal servant. Rebecca's seeming ability to mind-read, natural knack for figuring out complicated systems, and an amazing, equally natural lack of compassion for her fellow human beings, helped her into the enlightened ranks and eventually to the second level. She's had a few, heavily monitored chats with me, the Illuminated version of the wise old woman talking to the quickly-growing leader-to-be. "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." I trust her mind-reading on that last one- it coincides with logic.

"Thank you, Mrs. Adams. Is there anyone else?" A couple people thought about it, but chose not to. "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?"

You could cut the silence with a meat cleaver.

I adjourned the meeting and a few minutes later, I was walking into my jet.

Chapter 28

"You gave them what they wanted, Howard.", Sarah said, the moment we entered the jet.

"You think they really wanted to croak?", I replied, amazed.

She rolled her eyes and looked at me as if to say 'Well, duh!', 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, powering up the plane's engines and pointing it out the door.

"Never heard that term before.", I 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 replied, as she flew the jet out of the hangar and into the sky with the usual thoom of acceleration. Illuminated extermination has to be pre-emptive. I simply can't afford to let them live if they oppose me. The suicide, then, is advertising it in public.

"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.", I replied. It's possible- but unlikely- that they could have been consciously preparing for their own deaths.

"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." For a normal, that would probably be the obvious idea, that I wouldn't dare to attack first level Illuminati in a gathering like that. Such an approach in this case would be utterly idiotic- especially since Herber knew enough to craft a speech about how dangerous I am, and provoked me in the process. He literally walked into it with eyes open. "But watch it, some of those other guys might have faking the cheerfulness and might be gunning for you now." That's always a possibility. They sure as hell wouldn't have said anything after I butchered those idiots. But I can't believe that intelligent Illuminati would want to try to depose me over the termination of people who nobody really wanted around.

Of course, even smart people have stupidity bursts. "Hmm... maybe I'll look up examples of their crap, have some ready if someone thinks twice.", I said.

"Howard... wait, something strange about all this. Those guys.. aren't really Illuminati." There's hard sense in there, and I want to find it.

"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's words were like a drink of fresh water when all I've been drinking is muddy, silty river water. I've always assumed that Illuminati plan and pontificate over their decisions, manipulate and calculate, and then make decisions based on what they've really thought about doing, making contingency plans for eventualities all the time. With regard to normal-world operations, they do, they have to. What if they don't- or more importantly, don't know how- for intra-Illuminati politics..?

"Billy, these are the first rational things I've really heard in three straight days. Details."

"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?" If Herbert had been acting on anything but plain greed, 'Advanced recursive encompassization' would have been the answer. Get the normals fighting each other- doesn't matter over what- and control both sides. Unfortunately, although I'm certain he pretended, The Bastard was not a serious practitioner of it. His operations themselves were flawlessly executed. His strategy- the Illuminated political reasons for conducting his operations- was badly flawed. His ego got in the way of his thinking, and that's what killed him.

My mind had constructed the full explanation, and so I gave it to him. "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?" I wasn't sure why Sarah chuckled when Billy 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." It's so nice to be understood.

"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.", Billy said, and I instantly picked up his meaning.

"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." I have that conclusion not only from recorded evidence but from irrefutable logic. If too few of the Illuminati had a real interest in the organization's ultimate goal and almost everyone was mired in petty feuds and the like, the Illuminati would have disintegrated shortly after its inception, and I would be nothing more than a wisp of imagination for normals to scare each other with over the Internet. "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.", Billy understood.

"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." Will it really be like that? With genetic engineering, it's inevitable.. will secrecy end first? How exactly am I going to do this? I'll think about this some other time.

"There is one more thing I'm trying to understand..", Billy said.

"What?", I asked. I hope it's as intelligent as the last one.

"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 Billy briefly and just shook his head. He didn't get it any more than Billy did.

"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...", I explained.

"They realized that the danger didn't extend to them and they could breathe easier.", Billy replied, oversimplifying it.

"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," Billy smiled at my use of 'stupidity' instead of 'intelligence'. Few have intelligence, many have stupidity. "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.", Billy stated with professorial judgment. Paul, Sarah, and I all nodded.

"And now you see why I've adopted my philosophy.", I 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." Hell, I don't even bother to memorize their names for the most part

"Hence the inevitable use or direct threat of physical force.", Billy replied.

"Ehhhhhh-xactly.", I said. It's like trying to navigate an ever-changing maze. You can't really **think** your way out, no matter how smart you are- there's always some other little thing that you didn't know about that can fuck you up. So I pull out my super-strength entrance maker and just blow through the walls. Unintellectual, yes, but extremely effective.

There was a few more things I wanted to do- I checked out the twelve-year-old second level. Alfred Williams. Partially engineered, runs politically-affiliated organizations, long-distance sniper and expert at ping-pong. I checked out some other random details about conversations afterwards.. most of them had begun their communications right after I finished speaking. It was all affirmative, approving. They didn't want to be there and most of them were glad- even gleeful- that I exterminated Gladstone and his whores where they sat. Of course they could just be pretending.. forget it. This is exactly what I told Billy I take the direct approach for.

I eventually started drifting off, and fell asleep in my seat.

Chapter 29

'What am I going to do today?', I asked as I woke up. That's the thing. For important, world-changing stuff that can be done in a day, I don't really decide. Masters are supposed to be active, not reactive, but the top spot, for day-to-day operations, is the most reactive of all. I'm sure I could do something if I wanted, but when nothing's noticeably broke, there's not much fixing to do. I went to the computer and decided to play some games.

About fifteen minutes into it, I heard Billy close the door behind him. "Howard... I'm not even sure if I should show this to you or not... but I guess you should probably see it.", he asked.

"Is it urgent?", I asked. I was in the middle of a particularly entertaining game of Starcraft. The foe, a high-powered ladder player, was using map hack, and I wasn't; then again, I have certain advantages that he doesn't, too.

"No." Billy squatted by my side and diligently waited until I had finally strangled the opponent of resources, causing the fool to try tricks with disconnection hacks, causing me to remove him from the Internet like a hot cleaning spray on a clingy piece of shit. I closed the windows I had open and looked at Billy.

"Now what is it you're not sure you should show me?" Commanded, Billy wasted no time in reaching up to the controls and using the Search function to display the videotaped records of Damien Gladstone. 'Paul Smith, Servant - Part 1' was the first record; the records were all roughly around four hours of video, and went up to Part 12. After seeing Paul's battered body on a Northberg Medical bed, I had some idea of what they contained.

"Is this going to be unpleasant to watch?"

"It was for me, I only could take a few minutes 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.", I said, playing Part 1. If Billy could only take a few minutes of the first part, this is going to be a very brief foray into curiosity indeed.

"One thing.", Billy said as the title screen came up- 'The Beauty of the Servant, Paul Smith - Produced by Damien Gladstone'. Oh yeah, this is gonna be ugly. "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 replied. The video started with accompanying audio. Paul was in a leather costume with exposed buttocks and high heels, bent over on his knees, obviously being commanded to hold his arms hand-to-elbow behind him (no physical restraint was present). Damien walked onscreen, with a smile on his face and a whip in his hand. "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, in the voice of a normal-TV nature show host. "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. Yet he cannot scream. This, of course, is due to no gag, but instead is due to the power of mind control implants. Observe carefully." Damien spun around and struck Paul's exposed buttocks three times with the whip, causing him to jerk forward slightly. "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." Damien then nodded to the audience, produced what must have been a foot-long dildo with steel spikes protruding from it, and jammed it up Paul's anus in one single, forcible push, causing blood to drip out as if from a leak.

It was then that I felt a strange taste, disgusting but somehow familiar, in my mouth and almost forced it out, before I realized what it was and clenched my teeth (which felt a bit odd) and lips to avoid spewing vomit everywhere, swallowing my digestive juices down my throat with a single gross gulp. I've only puked twice before in my life, both in reaction to things I thought were edible but my body couldn't take. I closed the video file and the search results in a fraction of a second.

Now, make no mistake- I've seen sadism before, in all its forms. Males and females, adults and a few children (on both sides of the control), many varieties of torture, even a couple of masochists. Before today it was just one of those unexplained oddities that I've never really thought about, like how hummingbirds fly or how caves form and grow stalactites. The difference is that I could look the scientific stuff up. Here, a textbook explanation wouldn't satisfy my burning question:

What is the point of this? Even if Paul were some low-IQ sheep without much reasoning ability, why would anyone even treat an animal like this? Killing animals (including *H. Sapiens*) because they need to die and eating them because you're hungry is rational; torture can be necessary for information or to set a terrifying example. But how depraved do you have to be before hurting your completely obedient servants seems like a good idea?

In short, why the hell would anyone do something like this to someone he **controls**?

"Billy," I said deliberately, "I command you to explain, in a way that maximizes my understanding and minimizes my confusion, the reason why Damien has done this."

He began hesitantly, unsure. I doubt he was the right person to ask. I doubt the right person to ask would be anyone I'd really want to talk to. "Because.. because he wants to assert dominance, to feel powerful. Maybe he's got something to prove."

Billy's valiant, genuine attempts to make sense of it did nothing for my overall understanding. "Assert dominance? **Feel** powerful?" In the Illuminati?! "**Prove?! That must be the most screwed up normal psychology ever. He's an implanted servant, what the hell was there to prove?**"

I could see Billy looking at a number of answers and giving me the most satisfactory. "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." I knew that already. "If you want to know why **that's** the case," And it was. "I don't know."

"What a fucking waste." This statement contains considerably more damnation for the Illuminati than it does for normals, particularly when applied to people. "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, and otherwise pretend I never saw this.", I said. "Now that you've shown me something that made me almost puke and given me my ugh of the month," I was going to say 'Ruined my day', but I think I'll have this out of my mind with a few hours of good games. "make Sarah cook my usual plate of good food, if she hasn't already." He turned immediately and started out the door. "And yours, while she's at it." He left.

In ten minutes, the food was done. Sarah had wrapped beef in a donut-like dough, and as I took the first morsel and popped it into my mouth, I felt some of my back teeth hurt, like the gum had said 'Okay, enough of this'. Oh.. oh, yes. Sarah noticed that both me and Billy were in pain and looked down at her cooking as if she'd made some terrible mistake. I held my hand up, saying 'Nope, it's not you.', as I reached into my back teeth with my other hand, pushing and pulling. Top left.. loose, out. Top right, annoying, there we go. Bottom right's moving around, and with a good grip I yanked it out. I finished bottom left with another sharp jerk. It hurt, of course, but there was no way I was going to try to eat with constant pain like that. I held out my four extracted teeth with my right hand and Billy held his out with his left. Chuckling, we put them into a pile. I explored the holes with my tongue and felt the bicuspid already poking through. Sarah nodded, as if she should have realized we're just losing baby teeth.

Paul uncertainly reached out, took the teeth in his left hand, and shook them as if they were dice. "Shotgun.", he offered, and we laughed. That would be a hell of a weapon, wouldn't it? Death by flying teeth. We went back to eating, which felt odd.

That reminded me of what I thought earlier about Billy as a living, growing being that I control and can teach. Damien hadn't done any of that with Paul in the least. He hurt his body with his torture devices (strange- I'm pissed at the now-dead Damien for hurting my servant, but Paul wouldn't be my servant if Damien wasn't dead), but he probably didn't train him, either.. and that's a problem I can fix.

"Paul," I asked, "did Damien in any way teach you how to use that gun you carried?"

"No, not really.", Paul answered.

"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 believed that it was a realistic limit of Paul's abilities, for the time being anyway. Sometimes I just think there's something extra in him, something that Billy saw.. maybe when he grows older, it'll come out. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking. "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." He was a bit shocked, but recovered. If there's anyone who can train him, it's Sarah.

"Yes.. yes, Howard. But.. considering what you are and who else you have.. why would you bother?", Paul said.

"Because I want you at your peak.", I said simply. "And it just might mean something someday." Paul played on one of the light-gun games in the basement arcade before the stuff got here, and I played various games involving firearms with Billy.

It didn't take long for Sarah to set it up, a target on a motor, which she walked the Enforcers through assembling, and of course the pistols themselves, good-quality Illuminated weapons, the best model for a beginner but enough to blow someone's head open. Sometimes I find myself amazed by how much Sarah really knows. Billy found a tree to watch from; I decided to just stay inside and watch through the glass.

Almost as soon as it began, the viewscreen buzzed, and I was interrupted by... him?! A guy I do vaguely recognize, but on principle shouldn't. The leader of the trainees and squads I have on my

island, who has them doing things in secret for me here before they go on to other things. In **secret**, meaning that this guy shouldn't be on my screen at all. "This is about your dogs, Howard.", he said. Well, that's a good excuse. "Magma and Fido have had a litter of six healthy half-engineered, but it took an enormous toll on her." Shit, this dog was running out happily to me just last week! "She's okay, but we've had to give special nutrients to her pups as well as special treatment for her. Howard, I don't think you want this to happen again, so.." He was probably going to say something like spaying, which I will not abide.

"Let's not mince words, hm?", I said. "You roam the island far more than I or any of my implanted servants do and you're far more numerous; if signs were present earlier you should have noticed them. Don't disrespect my dogs, especially the engineered one, he's more dangerous than any of your men and you know it. In case you haven't noticed, they have their own miniature society, which is why I leave them alone. And the day might come when I have considerable uses for Fido." I spoke gently, explaining everything, but the thoroughly loyal agent was wincing as if I'd actually hurt him. "You're not going to mutilate any of them. The adults are implanted, after all. I have a much better way of handling this. Take care of them all, and make sure they're not harmed. I'm certain I'll be able to find six people in a few years who will give them good homes and thank me for it." I clicked the screen off and walked through the back door of the mansion to the dogs' den. Paul... no sense in me watching, not really. Sarah'll train him. The agents, of course, had left by the time I arrived. Crawling into the den of an engineered dog is highly dangerous, of course, but I'm welcome, and Fido barked happily, but quizzically, at my approach: 'So glad to see you, but what a surprise!' A feeder had been set up for the half-engineered to drink from, and they nursed from it, oblivious to everything else. Magma was laying down, weary but fundamentally okay.

"Fido," I said to the engineered dog, and motioning to Magma's vagina, "never have sex with her again.", I said. He understood 'never', understood what I was motioning at, and gave a whine. "You're stronger than she is. Much stronger.", I told him. "She was hurt having your puppies." He barked at that. I have no idea how much he actually understands of English, and don't want to test him. "You're a good boy, Fido. You're a really good boy.", I said, petting the dog's thick fur. Obliging, he rolled over on his back and I tickled his stomach. After some minutes of this- he's soft and warm- I crawled out of the den and returned to the mansion. Fido is a somewhat useful pet to me, and would make a wonderful guard dog beyond all others, but in a way this is simply where he belongs, as leader of his own pack. At least for now. When I want him, as with my other implanted servants, I'll have him.

I watched Paul attack the target with aim that I could only classify as 'wildly inaccurate'. The thing is, obviously, compared to what I'm used to, he's no good at it. The key word is 'compare'. Dolphins laugh at human swimmers, people in fast cars laugh at people on horseback (hmm, bioengineered horses, there's an idea...), we laugh at normals' fighting abilities. He was, in fact, learning quickly, aiming at a moving target. This would be a lot harder if these were normal weapons, too. I couldn't see the targets from this angle, but I didn't have to- the look on his face was enough to know whether he'd hit well or not. Watching him move is like watching an elephant dance. He has no natural grace at all; his movements are as smooth as sandpaper. I really hope Northberg will be able to do something for normals, not just surgery and fixes, but really **something** one day, perhaps the retrovirus, perhaps something else. Not just Paul- the Illuminati is full of people who should be like us engineered, but aren't. Cybernetics, maybe? With fusion power, energy requirements are no longer an issue. In fact, with the Illuminati's command of biomedical knowledge, neural interfaces, and robotics, we could probably build one hell of a cyborg if our efforts were focused in that direction. But we've gone the bioengineering route instead, and I'm thankful for it. Even with accurate tactile simulation, fine motor control, and all the abilities I enjoy today (only I couldn't regenerate, I'd have to be rebuilt..), it would just suck on an æsthetic level if I was mechanical.

Paul tried mightily to fight, running back and forth as if he was actually in combat, for a good number of minutes, and I opened the window a bit to hear his words. After some more bad shots, Sarah said, "The line still applies, Paul." The line.. ah yes, she means the line from the barrel's path.

"Yeah, I know. It's just that..", he said, running back and forth, "I'm **sick, sick, sick** of being considered some monkey of a lesser being compared to the assholes around here!", he shouted, firing three shots. He'd done a very good job, an excellent one- both him and Sarah were smiling widely. I heard Billy cheering as well.

"How tired are you?", Sarah asked him.

"Very."

"All right, Paul- you've got most of the offensive part down pat. I don't-"

"Hold up- **offensive** part?!", he replied, surprised. "Sarah, I can't dodge bullets like **any** of you can."

"You don't have to **dodge**, just make yourself harder to hit.", she replied. "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 looked at Paul and at me, and I could read it off her face- what am I doing? It's easy, Sarah- I'm making him tougher to kill, and I'm training him to be better. Yes, he'll probably never be on the level of even some of our normal agents, but that's not the point. He has something in him, something faint, something that I intend to bring out or that may come out on its own. He has something that sets him apart from most normals, a greater potential somewhere- even if it is inconsequential in the long run, I want him at least close to maxed out ability-wise. Besides, if he ever does get improved, he'll have the training to help him there, as well.

"Fatigue's going to affect you too much. We can finish this tomorrow.", she told him. I know of no real-life situations where he'd actually be fighting for that long, either.

Billy followed them in and asked various questions about Illuminated weapons operation that I thought were silly, but made sense from a normal standpoint, things involving reloading and getting the bullet to the chamber; the chk-chk of a shotgun is indeed quite menacing, but it's done automatically in our weapons.

I woke up early the next morning, but Sarah and Paul were already outside, and I opened the window a crack to listen again. He was.. shooting at her, yes. I should have expected that. She makes the perfect moving target- he can't possibly hope to hit her, no matter how he might try. And he was, indeed, trying, forcing her to continuously dodge, trying his damndest to land a hit. "Okay, stop.", Sarah said, and he was relieved. "Howard- he's good.", she told me.

"Good enough?", I asked.

"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." And from the way she was dodging, I'd have to agree.

There was one last lesson I wanted to give, though. My command could possibly kill him, so I made sure of the angle and the verbiage before I gave it: "All right. Paul, try to shoot me with the next bullet in that gun." Blam- TING! The bullet, bouncing off the window's surface, angled as light off a mirror would have, passing a meter to the left of his head, and the pop of sound had him holding his right ear.

"You now know about ricochets.", I told him, grinning. In the Illuminati, the potential exists for bullets to bounce off **any** hard material. "You also now know that this glass laughs at those bullets. Any more training that you might want is up to you, that command's over." To my complete lack of surprise, he didn't want to do any more training.

Sarah made breakfast, and I remembered the targets Paul was shooting at- there were plenty more,

and I used some of my underground weapons on them with Billy. Wow, I can't believe I've never fired some of these before. Some are pretty basic, and some kick a lot of ass. The day went by as usual without any weapons being used on any living targets.

Chapter 30

I sat down at the main living room screen, casually browsing through Illuminated records for the umpteenth time, doing small audits on everyone's stuff, making sure resources weren't vanishing into thin air. Self-supporting... sponsored, he checks out.. hmm, a little-affiliated one, if he wants to do that he can go right ahead, he doesn't have to accept our support if he doesn't want it. He checks out, just a small private guy. I don't mind them, especially since what he's doing- public television, with a free forum for anyone who wants to show up and blab their points. That's a good thing, especially since he's broadcasting on channels few people watch anyway, making the assorted fringe groups with little or no Illuminated influence feel like they are being heard by the gullible masses. Freedom of speech is great when no one listens.

I went through the list in alphabetical order. I would have a servant do this, but they don't yet have the eye for what I'm looking for. He checks.. and he checks... he probably checks, but I gotta be sure. I sent out an unidentified high-level request for the specific sales information of Timothy Heilker's merchandise, which is equipment for mental hospitals. Most of the larger mental hospital organizations are run by Illuminati anyway, but there's a few smaller ones that aren't.

She checks.. him? Hmm, these expenses seem to add up, but they don't seem to make a lot of sense, what the hell would a 'youth camp' need with hospital restraints? (Bought, coincidentally, from Timothy Heilker.) Oh. Now I get it. I've heard about these places before, when the old Dominator was teaching me about self-contained control facilities. James Baker is running a 'boys' ranch', one of those little places out in the woods (in this case, the desert), where parents send unruly children who they feel need more 'supervision' than they can give. It's great- usually the cops and other local authorities would send kids to those sorts of places, but then it's state business, and people get worried when the state interferes- so records are kept, severely limiting our abilities (at least for the next decade or two- we're slowly shifting from normal record-keepers to servants and Enforcers in many areas, and of course we hack computerized records all the time.) to use them as we'd like, which is to cull the true threats and possible servants from the mix of delinquents. We can still do it, of course, it's just harder and requires more resources.

But, when a parent sends his kid there, it's far, far different. The state is only minimally involved. The parent expects harsh discipline, usually the harsher, the better. Their own conscience and morals prevent them from doing something that they hire someone else to do- much like a hit man. Only in this case, it's multi-layered child control, attempting to use force to turn them from rebellious youth into good, God-fearing, obedient citizens. Of course, given the natural human streak of rebellion, this is sometimes impossible (of course, when it works, the camps always let everyone know about it!) - so instead they just get turned into petty criminals, graffiti-sprayers and lawn-defacers. Slightly annoying, but harmless.

This guy seems to be in order.. hey, wait. The figures add up all right, but they're unreal. He owns not one, but a string of these camps, but even so, that income is up there. I checked one out- ironically named 'The Help Center', located in western Nevada, there's 189 'enrolled'. Yet, that place reports income of \$2,534,400/yr. I opened up Calculator and checked it. No... way. Wait, maybe it's my judgment that's at fault. I took a look at it to make sure that all their income was from clients - ah, no, it's not, they get donations from private citizens. Like they need the cash. I looked into this guy a bit more, got a bit suspicious, and -- hey, wait a fucking minute. This guy has all his ten staff members as Enforcers (he is a fourth level), yet he ordered five sets of extra implants, with no clue as to their use. What gives? If he's doing what I think he's doing, he's putting us all at risk.

"Oh, shit!", said that usual high voice from behind me. Once again, Sarah was looking over my shoulder, seeing what I'm doing. Not that I mind- I've come to the realization that the stealthier she

is, the better. She doesn't bug me when she comes in and she doesn't let herself be known until it's necessary.

"Yup. Looks like this guy's doing something very, very bad over there."

"You gonna raid him?"

"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."

Billy came down the stairs curiously, wondering what the fuss was about. "What's going on?"

"Billy- read this." He did, and didn't seem too surprised.

"So he's hoarding them, or..?"

"He runs a youth camp." Billy took about a twentieth of a second to make the connection.

"Howard, you really don't think he's using them on those kids do ya?" There was some irony in that- most of 'those kids' are years older than we are.

"Looks like it." Which is another problem. It only **looks like it**. Who's to prove he's not storing them in little sealed plastic bags in his desk somewhere, waiting for the chance to legitimately acquire servants?

"Well, I remember you distinctly saying you planned to implant everyone." That would have been funny if I was in the mood for humor.

"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."

"A young Enforcer?", suggested Sarah.

"No, no, if the guy came around he could tell. But.. oooh. Hey." I grinned, and checked the age range for that camp. "Oh, Paaaaaul!", I shouted into the intercom. Billy looked at me with his mouth stark open, unable to speak for lack of words. Sarah shrugged as to say 'Didn't I say he was useful for spy shit?'

"What?", he said in an 'I'm here, and I bet you're going to use me now' voice. I could hear assorted sounds of gunfire and splats in the background, he's playing 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." It takes about 60 hours for agents to set up a normal family lifestyle, with a house, used car, and all the trappings- but I like to give them more time for more thoroughness.

"What for?"

"You, my dear Paul, are going spying."

"Oh fucker, can't you make Sarah do it?" The rest of us shared a chuckle.

"Not in this place."

"This wouldn't happen to be one of those boys' ranch places would it?" From the way he said it, I could tell what the term meant to him. It meant pain, control, and rigorous 'discipline', things the Illuminati have phased out. It meant a palace of horrors, where you can't do anything and only things are done to you. It's probably an extremely bad fear for normal children who know about it, and it probably brings back bad memories for him.

"How the **fuck** did you know?!", I shouted. Paul's getting damn good at this. I took an instant to ponder the existence of actual telepathy- nah, it's totally unproven. But this is getting ridiculous.

"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," I said, playing on (and with!) his emotions, "you'll be back to your regular hell in no time!" Something about what I said made Billy hold his forehead, bend over a bit, and get giddy.

"Yes, I guess it does need some variety.", Paul muttered. I turned the intercom off.

"Howard, can't you send someone else?!", said Billy, semi-annoyed once he figured out exactly what Paul would go through.

"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. 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?", Billy said.

"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." **Very** brief. Paul looked at me and walked down the stairs. "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.", I answered. Not a bad bet, really.

"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. What if they take him somewhere else?", Billy asked.

"It works like this, Billy.", Sarah said, as if instructing. "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." I don't mind her use of the royal 'we'. She is, after all, the highest assassin of the Illuminati.

"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?" Yup. "But how do you plan to keep track of him, though?"

"Hmm... subdermal implants?", I figured.

"Subdermal?", said Paul in a panicky voice.

"Under the skin, Paul.", Sarah said. Paul gasped, shuddered, and made an 'ugh' face. "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...", I said.

"Full body cavity search? You mean they're going to..", Paul said, mildly afraid.

"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.", I pointed out.

"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 up to Billy's room. I let him go. I can't say that I blame him for that- no one wants to listen to their pain being discussed, especially not Paul after what Damien did to him.

"You're not going to..", Billy said, obviously going to finish with 'keep Paul here to listen' or somesuch.

"No. I'm not.", I said, shaking my head. "I don't need to and he doesn't need it." He doesn't have to be in on our discussion of Baker, either.

"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.", I said.

"What if he tries it on Paul?" I forgot to consider that.. there's no way I can be slipping, is there?

"Then he'll **really** be surprised, won't he? 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 replied.

"Yeah, he'll check to see who he is, and when he finds out, he's just going to head for the fucking hills." Discretion is the better part of stupidity. "Of course, I'm going to have guys making sure James doesn't go very far."

"Let's hope this works and that Paul doesn't go any crazier than he already is.", Billy said.

"He won't. That's why I can do this with complete confidence, because I know he has the resilience for this."

"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?", Billy asked.

"How could I forget? The implants already transmit, Billy." **Aaack!** That's what I forgot to do! I never turned off their implant transmissions! I was going to do that back at the beginning of the first test! "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.", I said, annoyed with myself. "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." Billy, I'm sure, would love to find some way of doing this that spares his friend some misery, but I'm not going to let him jeopardize things by asking around. They left shortly.

"So.. how long am I going to be there?", Paul asked when they were gone.

"About three weeks tops if you can't find anything. If you can immediately, it's a **very** short stay." Paul looked downcast and started to go back upstairs. "Come here for a bit.", I told him, and he did, stopping about a foot from me. I reached out and hugged him with my right arm (damn, he's soft- I don't have any females this soft, and I had a temptation to get one), gently mussing his hair with my left. "Paul, it's just a spy mission. Your nightmare's over."

"But Billy's aren't.", he replied.

"Yeah, I wish there was a way to do something about that. I can't afford to fuck with the implants or his brain, and neither can he, really." Paul understood. "Okay.", I said, letting go of him. "You can go back up if you want." He did.

When Billy came back from Northberg, he asked the same question about how long Paul'd be there and got the same answer.

The next two days were spent as we usually do, but I could feel the worry in Billy, as much as he tried to hide it. It's so much different when it's him or Sarah, isn't it? They're engineered. Sarah would have no problem staying for days in a strange place of possible mild horrors. Normals are so frail...

Paul didn't seem that worried- perhaps he was hiding it well or just not feeling it anymore- when it was finally time for him to get ready. Sarah taught him various specifics of spying and twenty different code phrases. And then she brought out the small pieces of fake skin. "All right, disguise time.", Sarah said, applying the strips of fake skin to his face. "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." Paul did, indeed, look substantially different with the disguise on.

With a quick "Goodbye, Paul." from me and Billy (and I could tell he hated saying it), he was gone.

Billy was nervous practically the whole time Paul was gone, making no secret of it. It's okay. I was starting to get a bit nervous myself, even though Paul reported daily with messages of 'finding nothing'. Why, though? Why get nervous over something like that? Fuck it, I might as well face it- I care about him. Not as much as I do an engineered, but yes, he's special, with all the qualities that make a good friend and servant. He's still going to finish this, though, and I'm still going to use him again the next time it's wise to do so. I hold pragmatism in high esteem. In the middle of that time period, I showed Billy and Sarah the puppies- they were growing up well, but at drastically different rates; that's what happens when you randomly mix engineered and normal DNA.

"So, Paul, how's it all coming along, okay in there?", Sarah had the agent playing Paul's aunt ask, about 88 hours after I'd sent him.

"Yeah.. yeah I think life here is pretty good, they still feed me, everything's A-OK." That means 'I'm really starting to get suspicious but I don't have any hard evidence.' "So, yeah..." Something sharply cut his words off.

"Sorry, Mrs. Abrams. That's all the time we're allowed to give, other people need to use the phone.", a male Enforcer said. He's using the basic voices for public Enforcers? Although normals won't

recognize it, that's arrogant in a potentially secrecy-damaging way. "Rest assured that your son is perfectly healthy and is receiving the best care we can give." I'm sure he is.. "Have a nice day."

No.. I don't think today is going to be a nice day at all..

"Do you smell it, Howie?", Billy asked me. I knew immediately what he meant. Does it smell? Sniff, sniff..

"Yeah..", I began. I started sniffing harder. Of course it smells. It smells **foul**, like Cthulu's microwaved shit mixed with rotten oysters, something I don't want to touch. It smells **wrong**. But at the same time, it smells like.. **rage**. "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!!**" Someone is going to die. A lot of people are going to die. All shall perish; none shall survive. First I'll rip their arms off, then I'll eat their bodies bite by bite. I can't remember the last time I felt this kind of purified hatred.

"Us, Howie?!", Billy asked.

"Yeah.. **us**." Of course. I want it done **right**, after all. I went upstairs and got the Micro, although I doubted I'd be able to use it. I hate secrecy. If it wasn't for that, I'd just walk in there and exterminate, using all five hundred megajoules to start my own personal holocaust. I'd laser off Baker's legs just to give him time to scream, then I'd crush his skull with my hands- and I'd have every kid in there chanting my name by the time I walked out. Where the hell's that retrovirus when I need it?

"I'm ready. I suppose we're raiding that asshole the quick way?", Sarah said, as I walked out of my room.

"Oh yeah.", I said, my face twisted in a grimace. I threw the large sliding window open, and walked out.

"So are you going to tell him he's being hasty?", I heard Billy say to Sarah, and he obviously didn't care if I heard him.

"He already knows **that**.. and that's **not** going to stop him. I just wish I could go berserk with as much precision as he does." Which is what I'm doing. Going precisely berserk. But no one, and I mean **no one**, does this to my servant, my organization, and **me**!!

The jet blasted off like a rocket, and although I didn't send us into space, I stayed high in the stratosphere, immune to radar and normals. There's an illuminated airfield not more than 15 miles from that concentration camp of his, concealed inside a military base. I asked Sarah what she thought she should bring to the forefront and she ordered assorted ammo gear, weaponry items, a highly-trained Enforcer replacement for one of Baker's trusted assistants (who wasn't at work today- I said a few words and he'd never be at work again), and a corpse in a plastic bag with its head blown off. She worked out the minutia- and, of course, we also knew that Paul's mysterious disappearance didn't have to be worried about. Baker had certainly already arranged that end of it- it's just where he's disappearing **to** that's at issue.

The disguise/mannerisms replacement would be there, ready to lurk in the shadows and step into the limelight, in a half hour; ten minutes to disguise and mold face, ten minutes to learn mannerisms, ten minutes to memorize names and faces of the boys in the ranch- and it is hellishly easy for us to get that info! It'd take maybe all of fifteen minutes for it to get to us from the installation it came from. It's only the ass kicking I have to worry about, and of course I don't exactly have to **worry**... but what if- no, he's not that stupid. James knows what killing Paul would do to him, he has to.. he better. That torture chamber is still in perfect working order, no matter how little I use it.

Forty long minutes later (BURN that fuel), I had sunk the jet to the bottom of the base, got the goods, and was being shuttled to another spot- the inside of a normal-looking car, which we exited in a half

hour. The replacement Enforcer for Baker's assistant tried to triangulate the signal, but the concrete fucked that up, and all we could tell was that he was on the top floor instead of the basement where everyone assumes this kind of thing goes on. Sarah had selected a side to climb- we flipped over the fence and grappling-hooked our way up all five stories. The guards' movements were watched by the Enforcers, the few on the ground and the one with us, constantly communicating and giving us information on where they were and what they were using. No night goggles, merely flashlights and the ambient light around doors. The windows were barred but that's about it- it's a 'boys' ranch' with only teenagers in it, non-Enforcer guards on patrol, no one's breaking out- and who the hell would ever want to break in? No corner sentries, no spotlights, just silence, crickets, (*SMACK!*) mosquitoes, and us.

We walked along the ceiling with silence, tracking the signal. It was close... close... shit. Paul is less than ten feet away from me, and I'm in the middle of the building. I'm standing directly on top of him. The obvious problem with normal installations is the stealth factor. If we came through the front door, moshing along, we'd have to do a gigantic cover-up afterwards. Sneaking in is not all that easy, as random people tend to be walking the halls at this hour. Sarah thought up ideas and then discarded them. Billy absently scratched his chin. The Enforcer just stood there, looking around for anyone. Well, hell, there's got to be some good way to get in there...

Fuck, is it hot and humid. And there's no rain in sight. As I adjusted the fabric in response (it's good, but it's not made for this), Billy brightened up.

"Heat lightning.", he said, with a slight grin. I immediately got the idea. Setting the Micro for non-visible wavelengths only and setting the power to a little less than half, I raised the weapon into the air, turned on wide-beam, and shot diagonally downward, away from Paul. If anyone else got baked, oh well.

The entire affected ceiling burned and melted with a sharp crack of microwave-induced thunder. They might think it sounded a bit strange, or maybe like an explosion (which will be the normal explanation), but no one is going to question God's miracles. I put the Micro away and brought out the silenced normal weapons. Sure, the locals would have to hear shooting, but not from many people at once.

We leaped down into the hot hole it had left, blasting bullets everywhere. James was about two feet from Paul, with a horrified look on his face as Sarah sent him to Hell. No point wasting words on him. Paul was heavily anesthetized, and was obviously undergoing implant surgery. Seeing them already there must have really freaked James out.. I shot two idiots in the room without thinking about it (Ugh. Shell casings are weird. Except for this kind of thing, I'm sticking to Illuminated weapons, which don't use them.) and I noticed Billy doing the same. Normal, Enforcer, it doesn't matter, they all have to die. Either from being involved in it, attacking me, or simply being witnesses. Illuminated operations leave no witnesses.

The normals were dead; there were four Enforcers left in the room, pulling their guns and trying to aim at targets they'd never hit. I shot two, Billy shot two, and Sarah didn't get any kills that day except Baker. Blood, corpses, and pieces of internal organs lined the wall and floor of the makeshift surgical room, with Enforcer blood all over the various surgical implements used for opening up Paul's skull, the familiar copper smell of blood mixing in with the ambient antiseptic, the fluorescent lights causing the room's metal objects, the surgical instruments, and the brass shell casings to gleam in the same way. This scene would be a real treat for a normal investigation, if one was ever going to be done.

"Fuck.", Sarah muttered under her breath. "I hate getting guys that you two already did." Two of her non-kills were fools that we shot first.

What happened next was a blur- the trained Enforcer (who also didn't get any kills) took his position, left the 'gunman's' corpse on the floor, gave the plastic bag to Sarah, and Billy re-attached his skull

pieces (easier than it sounds- implant surgery tools make it easy) then took a bandage and wrapped it around his head, Billy and I carried his semi-conscious form out the hole in the ceiling, and we got the fuck out of there before anyone came in the room. Getting out of there was easier than getting in, since all the guards had ran inside- Sarah attached the hook, we scurried down, she pressed a button to release the grapple, Billy vaulted over the fence and Sarah and I threw Paul over it into his arms, and we ran out of there and called it a victory. Sarah called in some pseudo-FBI agents to 'investigate', a medical team took care of Paul's started surgery (and the transmitter) within ten minutes, the transportation conga line took us back to the jet, and I knew that there was nothing left to worry about. As for the other implanted children.. I called up a random first-level Illuminatus in the jet and told his secretary that this one was all his to decide, and he would get James's unused resources. I'm not going to fuck with this any longer.

A bit later, Paul, in the middle seat, turned his head and body left and looked at me. The medical team had also injected a semi-powerful anti-anæsthetic into his veins, and Paul had obviously waited until he was fully awake before talking to me.

"Howard?", he said, in a slightly determined, lucid voice.

"Yes?"

"Don't you **ever** do anything like that to me, ever again." His voice was purposefully restrained- he wanted to scream that at me.

"Which was it, the place or the implantation?"

"The place."

"You've seen worse.", I casually reminded him. For some reason, that phrase made him absolutely livid, and he pulled his left arm across his right side and swung at my face with all the force his backhand could muster- he knew he'd never actually hurt me with normal blows. I was tempted to just take it, but I raised up my right arm and caught his wrist instead.

"**DAMN YOU HOWARD!**", he screamed at me, his face red as a strawberry and his eyes wet with tears. I let go of his wrist as he yelled at me some more. Might as well let him. I hate being screamed at by agitated Illuminati, but I don't really mind being screamed at by Paul. "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!**" I decided that my ready wisecrack wouldn't be funny to anyone but myself. "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." Apparently my logic was in error- they were much more aggressive than I thought. They're taking servants from those places, and I have always felt that mentally traumatized servants are damaged goods and far more dangerous than the regular variety, because insanity and implants simply don't mix. Apparently they don't agree, although I wasn't about to ask Paul any details. "I just had to keep telling myself that I was on a mission."

I just smiled at him. He might have to get used to this.

He just lowered and shook his head, and no one said anything else during our fairly leisurely trip, first to Northberg to get Paul's implant transmitters turned off, then home.

The next day, I examined the Real News and found nothing important I didn't already know. "Dominator raids James Baker!", the headline screamed, and the editor had wisely gone through the trouble of finding out **why** I did it. There were, indeed, five implanted children- and now that random first level, Akira Mitsuhamas, has got them now. What he does with them is his business.

Billy, in his room, was enjoying reading some online normal news. "A job well done.", he muttered aloud.

"I know. I love doing that on short notice.", I told him. It's great being the Dominator. I do the meatgrinding and everyone else does the cleanup.

"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..", he said.

"No, that was your second lesson. You were subjected to your first lesson.", I reminded him.

"Yeah, I think that was my second lesson too..", said Paul, patting the strip of plastic keeping his head intact. "and I sure learned a lot from it."

"Like what?", I said, grinning a bit.

"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 chuckled and Billy grinned. "Oh, yeah, and to maybe think up better ways so **you** won't tell me to do that shit anymore!" I only smiled at him. If you can out-think me, Paul, you're welcome to do it.

"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.." Like a contagious virus, one that he's hoping he'll never have to experience again. He wasn't just worried about it- he was terrified.

"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?" I expected at least a somewhat witty answer to that question.

I got one. "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." Billy and I laughed.

"Then it was a success.", I 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." Assuming that the idiots are terrified into not pulling any more stupid shit. "So, Paul- what do you want to do, as of this moment?" There was no purpose for that question. I was simply curious.

"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."

"So I suppose you'll be good at Quake right about now."

"Not good in your terms, just bloodthirsty."

"That'll do." Gibs ahoy.

Chapter 31

Just another day, some silliness in the news. Damn these people... my thought process barely got started when I heard Paul making strange noises.

"Ugh...", he said, coughing loudly from Billy's room. "Howard.. I do not feel well today.. *cough**"

"Why not? What's wrong? Some after-effect I didn't know about?"

"Nah... I think one of those assholes gave me the *cough* flu. Is there any aspirin or cough medicine in here?" Sickness. A thing I almost completely forgot existed.

"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."

"You mind lending me some?"

"Well, Paul, that would be the ideal solution.", I 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."

"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.", I heard Billy say. "That should help bust it... cough medicine and aspirin don't really **cure** anything." Paul went to go fry his germs.

"Actually, Billy, there are things at Northberg that can help... but for most of them, the cure's worse than the disease." He left his room to talk to me.

"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."

"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.", Billy said, walking out of his room and looking down off the railing.

"Yes, we do have **things**. But Billy, I have seen way too many of my brethren rely too much on **things**. 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. 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." Most of what I just said came from Daddy a few years back.

"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 don't think that was hard to figure out. It's this.", I said, whacking a certain part of the Real News. "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!" I was lecturing and ranting, but that's my prerogative.

"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" Sarah wasn't nearby to correct me on that. "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." The buzzer cut me off and I accepted the communication.

Fourth level Deborah Puff was on the screen, chubby and thirty-something. I didn't recognize her. "Dominicator!", she yelled shrilly. "I absolutely.. need that you get this woman, Claire Sanders, out of my Malaysian operations!" That 'need' there was a 'demand', she just changed her words so as not to piss me off.

The screen faintly hissed, and I checked to see who it was- yup! Claire Sanders. I grinned a bit and set the screen to three-way calling mode, displaying Claire's older, much skinnier form next to Deborah's. This'll be much easier this way. Once the two of them could see each other, they immediately started bickering at each other in screeching, yammering tones.

"Both of you shut up.", I quietly said.. They didn't want to, but they knew what would happen if they didn't, and I clenched my left fist and displayed the blades to remind them. I went into one of the forms of speech I use, a calm, all-controlling voice of high-born power. "One of my servants has become ill and I am not in a very good mood. 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." They knew I wasn't bluffing. Now to end this quickly, as I'm really not in the mood for this. "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," Name-dropping won't help you here. "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 so badly wanted to interrupt, but knew that I'd dislike that.

Her turn came. "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." Similarly, Deborah wanted to shriek when it was Claire's turn, but did not out of fear.

"Oh, I see what's going on. 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." Genetic normals can be so much of a pain in the ass. "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, chastened.

"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 shouted, and I simply looked at her in unspoken threat. "No, Howard."

"Listen to me carefully. Your goals are not in direct opposition." They both shook their heads in agreement. "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." Ask James Baker what happens when I do that. "I do believe you both understand?" They did indeed. "Good." Click. My servants were sitting at my sides, and I turned to each of them, 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." I then looked up details of Claire and Deborah's control operations in Malaysia.

A few minutes later, I heard Paul say through the intercom, "Ugh... god damn this hurts.." What the hell? Is something going on with the water? I rushed to the elevator and waited for it to come up. Strangely enough, Billy didn't follow me as I rode it back down and rushed to the pool.

Paul was just outside the pool, and he looked to be in intense pain. There was sweat mixed in with the pool water, I could smell- I felt the heat from the pool's water- and yet Paul was shivering as if cold. Holy shit, he's badly fucked up. "Howard... Billy..?", he asked.

"Howard.", I answered. I was about to ask him if he could walk, but to hell with that. Something is obviously very wrong with him. I picked him up; his weight was negligible. "Not sure what the hell happened but I'll get you to Northberg asap."

"No, it's okay.. I'll be all right.", he said, to my relief. "Just.. take me to bed.. okay? And smack Billy for me.." That's what had done it! I surmised that the hot water probably gave him Hell's fever and expanded his blood vessels, causing pressure and pain. What the hell? Billy didn't- couldn't have- hurt him like this intentionally. Did he really tell him to do that so self-assuredly without genuinely **knowing**?!

As I rode back up the elevator with Paul in my arms I realized why Billy hadn't come. He realized what he had done and didn't want to face it.

I came out at the second floor, and carried Paul to bed- Billy walked up the stairs after me and I could tell by his face that he was quite upset over it.

"Billy, hold very still.", I commanded him. He watched my right hand as I smacked him- not a battle hit, just a smack- on the left cheek. Let it be known that the Dominator's servants have caused him to do things he didn't want to do; I didn't want to do that in the least, and felt as if I had breached some line I had set down for myself when I did. "You can move again."

"Howard- you've never-", Billy 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!", he exclaimed, apologetically.

"I know that. You're not a normal, Billy. Unless you study it, you don't know their biology." That was the other half of the problem. He hadn't just hurt Paul; he had acted in ignorant arrogance. That's not really something I can command him not to do- not without having him second-guess himself- and yet it has a potential of getting me killed if he acts arrogantly in other areas. I probably shouldn't be this hard on him for this sort of simple mistake, but it's simple things like this that can turn an otherwise good plan into what I've heard called a Charlie Foxtrot.

"I did study it, and even I didn't know that one.", Sarah said.

"Neither did I.", I said. **"But I didn't tell him to do that."** Billy understood. I didn't like to see him upset, and I was fairly certain that watching Paul suffer- as he went into his room, downcast, to do- would hurt him considerably more than my strike. He closed the door and I turned to Sarah.

"Sarah, have I ever done anything like that?", I asked her.

"Oh yes. It didn't have quite that kind of effect, but don't you remember when I was brought here? I barely knew what the fuck was going on and you didn't have a clue."

"I remember." Wow, what an embarrassing series of memories. And that only happened a few months ago, too. Although I was taught how the implants worked, I really did have no clue. Before I put things together, I almost thought I'd have to command her to go to the bathroom. Fortunately, all my errors were on the side of caution. I just smiled at her and gave her a hug.

Paul was up and drinking copious amounts of grapefruit juice in a few hours. Billy ordered several large wads of fluid-absorbing cloth for him- I had no idea why he'd need so much until I saw him coughing great gobs of phlegm into them over the next week (down the incinerator with that crap!), even when most of his other symptoms were gone. It's amazing how much goop a sick normal can cough out and still remain basically okay. I did need to make more threats over that week, but fortunately we didn't need to go on any raids.

Chapter 32

It's my tree. Not like the rest of them aren't, but this one in particular is specifically allocated to my personal use. This is my outdoor place of serenity, ever since that whole first-test business and the butchered pig. Unless it's urgent enough to cause weapon fire, I told my Enforcers that I would not be disturbed here. There are only three people who can come up here with me, and even they better watch it.

My mind floated, as I hung upside down, eyeing the clouds beneath me. Were gravity to reverse itself, I would fall.. and fall... and fall straight up. The above ocean, the final frontier. I would just

keep going. It's an awe-inspiring thought, even if you and the blood in your head constantly remind yourself where down is. The blood in my head, incidentally, felt like it was just going to slosh around in my skull and dribble out my eyeballs. Slow dreaminess engulfed me and, after a few minutes with leaves near my face and hearing nothing but rolling surf, I lapsed into half-sleep, thinking random thoughts.

'Who am I?' was the first question my brain asked me.. and 'why the hell am I asking that?' was the second. Why did that, of all things, come up first? Sum id quod sum, et id totum est quod sum. I'm the fucking Dominator, that's who I am. I'm the poster boy for the future. I'm immortal. I deal with my problems in systematic ways and I take incredibly little shit from anyone for any length of time. I am very literally the alpha and the omega. People come to me for help and sometimes I do that. I am the closest thing to God that physics, biology, and the power of Illuminated technology a decade ago would allow. And with every passing day, both my power base and my physical form get steadily stronger. To list everything I am would take hours..

A distant splashing sound interrupted my train of thought. I turned my head, looking for the disturbance, I'm not that close to the ocean, what the hell could it be.. then I saw it come out of the water, majestic and sleek, white markings on a black body. Orcinus orca, a killer whale. It came down again with another loud splash. Some others joined it, and they gradually continued to swim away from the island. Strange creatures. For some odd reason, successfully implanting cetaceans is impossible, and although many hypotheses involving the echolocation melon have been thrown around, no one really knows why. It just doesn't work.

'So who are they?', my brain asked gently, and I was tempted to ignore the question entirely... but what did that mean? Did it mean the whales, or something else? Which 'they'? Some parts of my brain tugged at various other parts and I got the impression that I meant my servants. They are servants, and every modern Illuminatus needs them. No Dominator has worked without help of some sort, and even I can't be in two places at the same time. Even with implants, however, the real goal of having servants- as extensions of the self- has not been fulfilled, and probably cannot be truly fulfilled. But we can get damn close. Even though the part of their brains I so frequently bypass wants to kill me when it gets pissed off or depressed (which is often), I still love them all.. and they've saved my ass enough. But I don't have three servants, or fifty Enforcer servants, I have nearly six billion servants. Not all of them are doing my will, but one day they will all be. I don't have any equals now, and I won't have any equals then- no matter what happens. But manipulation only goes so far... if I'm to take greater control over this planet and then jump to others, and get rid of all the useless and self-destructive behaviors of the world's people, then I just need more control, that's all there is to it. More control over them not as the masses, but as servants proper. The eternal dream of the Illuminati happens to be my personal one.

As if on cue, I heard a slight rustling of branches below me. There wasn't any question in my mind who it was and I didn't have to look. In seconds, Billy was by my side on the branch, in the same position, his shoulder inches from mine.

"Howard..", he began, slowly, "I was wondering... what will you do when you have what you want?" He couldn't have picked a better time to ask.

"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."

"Yeah, some idiot would push the little red button sooner or later.", he replied. "You mind if I just stay here?"

"Stay, Billy. I like you here." I then put my arm around him, he put his arm gently around me, and we just hung there, silently and upside down, for something longer than fifteen minutes and shorter than an hour. I don't know if I was technically sleeping, or what. Time doesn't usually run away from me like that, either.

"Howie.. what happens if your plan.. doesn't work?", he then asked, in a wondering voice.

"Billy, there is no such thing as failure to an 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."

"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. 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.", I finished with a slight smirk, holding him a bit tighter.

"Yeah.. and those goals... will... will.."

"Will what, Billy?"

"Will remove hope, Howard. When you finally succeed.. there will be no more hope." For absolutely no conscious reason I started laughing, not loudly, but in the traditional style of megalomaniacs everywhere, using my echo effect.

"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."

"Heh, heh, heh. Oh, it'll be sweeeeet... just have to wait a couple hundred years."

"Yeah.. but you'll be the only one who can.."

"Make his own decisions. Oh, I know. 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."

"Is that what you're doing to me?"

"Of course! What - you think I wouldn't?", I said with a grin, stating the obvious. Billy started either crying, laughing, or both; I couldn't tell which. I studied him for a few more seconds and it became quite clear that it was a variation of both, laughing but crying without using tears. "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."

"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." I started chuckling. "But, as you've probably guessed, I don't find that funny anymore."

"That's okay. I wasn't really joking."

"I should have figured that.", he said quietly, half-closing his eyes. "Oh, Howie...", he began, but it appeared that either the languages he knew did not have words for the emotion in his head, or he simply did not know how to put words to it. "I love you.." was as close as he could come, holding his arm around me as tight as the implants would let him. And then I understood why he was like that- because he had suffered one of the worst fates in the world; he was enslaved to his own twin. Had we been normals with deep mental rifts and egos that needed petty appeasing, it would have been several times worse than living hell, as I would have certainly tortured and/or needled him straight to death. Fortunately for him, I don't particularly give a fuck about any of that crap because **I know who I am**, and I don't need anyone- servant, fellow master, or sheeple- to tell me anything about that.

"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."

"After hearing that, I don't think I'm going to take anyone else's confidence seriously again..." I burst out laughing and we just hung there for a while longer. True to my nature, I went into outside-observer mode and tried to ponder this whole thing from a normal point of view. What are we? Two kids hanging from a tree branch in the middle of nowhere. That brings to mind another thought- were either of us ever really children? Is that even a possible quality to ascribe to an engineered Inheritor/Dominator mostly raised by machines? No parents; few friends; cold, calculated string-pulling; and inhuman, utterly superior physical abilities almost from Day One. He might have been, though. Perhaps the idea of being implanted- or even the pure shock- has taken it away from him and now he's a good deal like me. Of course, none of this is 'good' or 'bad'- sum id quod sum, and everyone in a ten mile radius has advanced (even Paul, mostly) beyond those concepts anyway. And being God hasn't seemed to decrease my pleasure any.

I don't remember coming down from the tree, but I did at some point, as I was lying in bed several hours after that.

Chapter 33

After detangling a hideous, profane, emotion-filled, ugly fuckup directly affecting two third levels, three fourths, and involving several others (Ugh, I hate women's emotions- glad Sarah doesn't have many), I went, sat down at the computer, and did the traditional decision-making method (You are probably familiar with it as "eenie meenie miney mo".) to decide how to create pixelated death. Duke 3D Atomic it is. I logged onto Mplayer, got a 4 player going, and started the slaughter on Crater.map.

Footsteps came from behind me and quietly entered the room. "Hey, Paul.", I said as I calmly killed an idiot with two shotgun blasts. His blue-panted sprite fell on its knees with blood running from its mouth, then fell down dead. A kill was added to the little tally after my name.

"Hey, how'd you know it was me?"

"You're the only one around here who has footsteps."

"Oh."

"So why'd you come in here, anyway?"

"I.. I dunno. I guess it was to beg for my freedom.. but just looking at you I know there's no way."

"Begging? I need the ego boost. Start begging and keep begging.", I said with a grin. Some newbie got on the wrong end of my RPG and he became little teensy kibbles.

"Oh mighty master Howard, I beseech you, please release this poor servant.. I know I'm only a normal and I don't think I can possibly be of any compare to your greatness. I know I'm just a burden and I know I'll only get in the way, so this miserable little footstool I am so humbly asks for release.. I'll do anything." He started fumbling for more toadiness and ran out.

"All right, you can stop now. And you'll already do anything."

"Yeah, I know. But you could let me go if you wanted, couldn't you?"

"Actually, probably not. For one thing, you're dead. If anyone you knew sees you walking around, that'll lead to a lot of crap we could definitely live without. And even if we got your face rearranged," I said with an evil emphasis on rearranging faces, "there'd still be other shit to deal with. Your DNA, for example. And then there's that little matter of going from dickless to fully intact, and yes, that

operation leaves evidence.", I said as Duke's version of the Micro started expanding assorted fools. One of them called me an autoaimer and left. The other two were also asking how I'm so damn lucky. It's not luck, you idiots, I just kick ass. Having the god of computers is just icing on the cake.

"But.. who would find out?"

"Anyone with spare time, good luck, and your DNA sample."

"You're clinically paranoid, you know that?" I started giggling, both from Paul's comment and from the fact I stepped on two shrunken morons one after the other.

"I know I'm paranoid. I'm really starting to lose it, Paul. I already think there's a secret organization controlling the world, and sooner or later I'll start raving about subliminal messages, secret islands, and mind control implants. And I've got all these crazy delusions about being immortal and super strong and being in some great position somewhere." I blew someone to pieces with an RPG, he respawned right in front of me, I killed him again, he respawned again, and I grinned widely as I gibbed him again. He left.

"Thank you for reminding me where I am.", he said dryly.

"You're welcome."

Paul flopped down on the bed, stomach upwards. "Of all the people in the world I could possibly be enslaved to, it ends up being Billy's clone." The remaining one was getting the shit kicked out of him - a shotgun war yielded one hit on me and three on him, causing him to die and swear again. I headed over to where I knew the armor and atomic health were. Stupid games- in the real world, you can see where and when someone is shooting, and the bullets aren't instant. Oh well. "Still can't believe that jerkoff Damien was that stupid."

"Never underestimate the stupidity of normals.. or, for that matter, Illuminati.", I reminded him. Which is brutally true. People are stupid. Not just sheeple, not just the masses. Perhaps the only exceptions were the ones on this island- even Paul, of normal birth, seems fortunately devoid of idiocy.

"Are you pissed about that?"

"Pissed.. no, not pissed. Disappointed. That shithead got what was coming to him. And no, I will not make that mistake." I would have said 'don't even think about it', but that was in the list of phrases not to say to servants, which I dub the Bad Juju list. The opponent was hiding from me, but I knew where he was. The top of the tower is not a good place. Let's try pipebomb-elevator games, shall we?

Paul snapped his fingers in the 'Damn!' gesture, and said, "At least you're nothing like him."

"Of course I'm not. I've seen the videos."

"You're sure you're never going to do anything like that are you?" His voice had a great deal of sympathy-seeking in it, and had I felt like it I would have toyed with his mind. Nah.. not now, anyway. I was getting a bit tired, and I've had enough of servants freaking out. Even when you tell 'em, it just doesn't really go away. The opponent idiotically named "SCORP123" was not killed by my pipebombs, but died to my shotgun instead after he got stupid and jumped out the window. He proceeded to call me things I'd thought about Damien, but with a more limited range of thought and bad spelling. He then left after I sent him to Hell as he stood still and typed.

"No. Why did you think I would?"

"It's because you ... you're in control, Howard. Master of everything, definitely master of everything here.. I kind of expected you to be a sadist."

"Oh, that whole freedom illusion thing still applies to you?" His puzzled look answered that question. "How long has it been since you were implanted, exactly?"

"Two weeks. I count the days."

"And you still don't understand how things work around here?"

"Not really. He didn't even let me go outside until the flight here."

"What? That fiddleshit! More than a week with an implanted and he didn't even..." I sighed in exasperation. "Idiot. Idiot! Paul, do you know exactly how he got into the second level?"

"His dad is first level."

"Yeah, but damn nepotists.." Again, Paul looked at me quizzically. Groan.. once more the public schools have failed to teach adequately. "Nepotism is when you put friends or family in top positions simply because you like them. And that doesn't belong here. Paul, the Illuminati is a non-religious, non-ethnic, mostly disunited group. The only thing we have in common is we like power. And to get more power, we generally follow the same procedures, which includes using every resource to its fullest to get more resources and more power. Personal things are usually chucked to the side, unless you either have a lot of power and don't need any more- or are just stupid, like that fuckstick Herbert and his diddleshit offspring whom you mercifully euthanized." I joined another game.

"So in other words... it's not about hurting people, you just don't give a fuck."

"You have the idea."

"Oh, **man**. Billy said he felt totally real again a half hour after he woke up here the first time. I still don't feel real. And I'm .. we're not talking like an eleven-year-old and a ten-year-old. At least not where I come from. What the hell..." The map was a bit larger than Crater and I aimed for the weapons, not the fools, first.

"You've been around people who use words of more than one syllable too long, I'm afraid."

"Fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck.", he muttered absently, like a chant.

"Yes, Paul, I assure you there's plenty of fucking going on around here. I fuck people over for a living, they want to fuck me up, I usually tell them to go fuck themselves, I've got a fuckload of power and technology, and according to Billy this is all fucked to hell." I had a good arsenal, and about three idiots had shot at me. It was a five-player game, and one or more of them was lagging severely. I found a safe spot, alt-tabbed, opened up Ping Pal, found his IP and domain name.. an AOLer! I reached out with Error Buddy (What? You think those holes in Windows are accidents?), crushed his system stack like a baby under a steamroller, and while he was bluescreened and couldn't see anything going on with his computer, closed his Duke from afar. The other players cheered.

"I agree with him."

"That makes two out of three. Sarah's used to it."

"Yeah, I know, the bored assassin. I just wanna know how you.. you three do all that.."

"All the ridiculous gymnastics, unbelievable feats of strength, superior intelligence, and assorted abilities you find to be superhuman. It's called genetic engineering, Paul. We can't let normals know this sort of thing exists for a long, long time. There would be chaos. Everyone would want a super designer baby with all the latest features. People are basically objects already, and massive freedom-illusion schisms would erupt if they knew the truth." Some twit shot an RPG down a corridor and I managed to pump on the 'roids and dodge most of the explosion damage. I then shotgunned him to death.

"Hey.. hey wait a second, if you guys control everything, then what about all those TV shows like The X Files and .. uh .. Gargoyles and alllll that other shit that has Illuminati on them?"

I erupted in laughter. "Paul, those are an important part of it. I don't think you understand the basic thing here. We have to control **both** sides of everything. The Republicans and the Democrats, organized crime and the FBI, the big scary government and the mass media that makes people worried about conspiracies. Of course, we make most of those conspiracies ridiculous by introducing magic, religion, or aliens into them, therefore no one really believes any of that conspiracy crap." Some fool popped out from another corridor and I decorated the wall with his blood using a rocket.

"Damn..", was all Paul could say.

"It gets technical in spots, but world domination is easier than you'd think. It's not like it's anything new."

"Yeah.. but.." His un-Illuminated mind (I hate thinking of him as a 'nescient') would not let him finish, as he couldn't find the right way to say it.

"Yeah, but we're doing it in secret. It adds a few more things but still, not that hard." Wounds were traded, but no one got any kills for a short while- then I heard RPG fire and one normal killed another.

"Land of the free and the home of the brave is the land of the bees and the home of the slaves.", he said, as if he memorized it a while back. I started laughing again. Assorted repetitive voice taunts were being thrown out by one of the dipshits.

"Who told you that?"

"Billy, about a year ago. It's almost like he knew."

"He had some idea. If he actually **knew**, I probably would have had him as soon as he could be caught." Argh, I hate skinny-ass corridors. No room to dodge and two normals shot at me with RPGs at once, killing me for the first time today. This map is now on my shit list. Of course, I'll still win the frag war by about 50:1.

"Trust no one." He was trying to express his thoughts in the basic terms given him by the media- he'd learn sooner or later that that's utterly ineffective.

"Correction. Trust no one that you don't control. And even them you have to watch out for."

"You have to watch out for us?"

"Oh, hell yes. I'm not going to shit you on this one, Paul. If I misspeak the wrong damn thing to any of you, especially Billy, I could end up with a bullet in my head, just like Damien." Sounds of fighting came from a little ways away and I came to clean up. A normal killed another, then used a voice taunt- 'You're an inspiration for birth control!'

"That sounds hard. Even for you."

"It's not hard, you just can't get careless. Paul, if I put you in charge of any implanted, which I probably will, I want you to remember that." I'm starting to love the pistol. Peashooter? Bah. I emptied about half a clip into one fleeing idiot and he died.

"Yeah, I gotcha." Paul sat up on the bed and watched my skill decimate assorted normals for a good fifteen minutes. Then I made another game on Warfortr.map, and played for a minute. A guy moving around on 'roids in front of me was very hard to hit, and I thought nothing of it - both of us retreated for more ammo, and I gibbed some fool on the way. So did the other guy. We dueled for a bit, retreating a lot when we did damage. He was shooting very, very well and I idly wondered if he had an autoaimer- but I didn't want to open the program to check. The other two fools were pretty much astounded after another couple of minutes and basically left us alone to fight some more, which we did for a good two minutes. We killed each other three times, with the instantaneous weapons. That joker actually had two more kills than I did!

"Damn.", said Paul. "He's as good as you."

"No one is as good as me, except maybe Billy.. hey, wait a second." I found a nice hiding spot and alt-tabbed, checking the IPs I was connected to - **WHAT THE FUCK?** It only shows three foreign hosts, one of which is Mplayer itself... I clicked the game again, and yup, they were all there. That miserable..

"Billy! Get your ass in here, **now!**", I shouted into the intercom.

He appeared in moments. "Yes, Howard?", he asked innocently.

"Just what were you trying to pull?"

"Me? Why, nothing. I wasn't doing a thing.", he said in a far too sugared voice.

"Then who was?"

"Her.", he said in a loud voice, pointing at Sarah's bedroom, and I heard loud girlish laughter coming out of there when he did. Paul quietly burbled. Billy only stood and grinned.

"Sarah, turn that thing off and get in here." Oops. She did and I noticed the game's movement come to a halt. IPX no-timeout piece of shit. I made a mental note to go bust some heads over at 3drealms. She walked into the room as silent as ever, grinning slightly.

"Sarah, why did you do that?", I asked with some malice.

"Oh, just for the hell of it, really." I let them do things just for the hell of it. They're lucky I'm so lenient.. "Also, I was really bored and didn't want little Paul to think you were good or something.", she joked.

"Hey!", shouted Paul at being called little.

"You bitch.", I said. She shrugged, as if her bitchdom were a universally accepted fact. I thought of the right words... don't go in.. no.. don't fuck up.. noooo.. ah. There we go. Wait. I can't give a no-interference-without-my-knowledge command, that might prevent them from saving my life.. damn this. There's only so much you can do with direct commands, for absolutely total protection, they'd need to voluntarily be interested in saving my life instead of killing me. The usual way to cure this little problem would be the usual carrot-and-stick pavloving, but Billy and Sarah are immune to that- hey, what about Paul?

'No.', my inner, grating voice said, returning once more. 'You know exactly what will happen if you

do that. He's done a damn good job repressing memories of Damien. You'll knock his efficiency down to squat if you do that. You might as well just kill him and get another Enforcer instead for the same thing. Besides, he's not as smart as Billy and Sarah. You have less to worry about with him.' Then I found the other little problem with the implants - for Illuminati near my power, bodies and physical power were easy to come by through the Enforcers, but it was their minds- their intelligence- I needed as help. And guess what the implants happen to control? Oh well. True 'mind control' implants would probably wreck to shit what they were designed to control anyway.

What to do now? I need a challenge. "All right, since everyone in here seems hell-bent on kicking my ass," Subtle, unspoken agreement from all three of them. "Billy, Sarah, get back to your computers and let's play local." They went. "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."

The game was, indeed, a challenge. The three of us walked off with about 30 frags each in the end from Warfortr.map, shotgun war at its finest. Paul actually got ten kills, more than I expected- of course, he usually fired shots while we the engineereds were kicking each other's asses. Then he got expanded and exploded by the Weapon O' Sizzle. Ah, death and destruction. Glorious, and takes pain and annoyance off the mind. Even I need to escape from reality for long periods of time- even for me, usual reality is dull and boring, and only punctuated by small bouts of real-world killing. Then again, with the three of them here, it's much less boring than it used to be, even when dealing with the sort of ugly, detailed shit we dealt with later that day. A job that would have taken me about an hour or so took me about 25 minutes with Billy's help.

Chapter 34

Just another day- I woke up, threw on some white pants, and walked downstairs for breakfast. I looked out the window- sun, sun, sun. Okay, unless I absolutely need to do something myself, I'm sure as hell not going outside today. Billy came down shortly after me and we ate the breakfast that Sarah had already cooked.

When I was done eating, I grabbed the Real News from the end table, found an interesting-looking article ("Anarch' raids Stuart Robertson!"), and read things that I didn't want to. Some asshole normal calling himself the Anarch had found an Illuminatus- **found** a fucking **Illuminatus!!**- and raided him.

"Hooo...", I sighed, and Billy looked over my shoulder as I continued reading.

The Illuminatus had escaped with his life, but not much else. The self-destruct was hit on his Illuminated communications- he'll get it rebuilt, of course, but it's definitely going to be a major pain in the ass for him. A lot of his normal followers were dead or left wounded (whereupon we got what information we could- which wasn't much- and killed them), but he got away. A few Enforcers were fragged as well. How the hell'd those normals (and they were, the wounded ones confirmed it) manage to do that?

"So what are you going to do about this guy?", Billy asked.

"You're being silly. He's not **my** problem." I deal with Illuminati. We have a whole department that's equipped to deal with shit like him.

The rest of the day was spent as usual, with Billy at my side. It stayed sunny all day, so we didn't go out in it. Instead, I played some games, including single-player RPGs. When I handed the controller to Billy, I watched myself play, literally- he did the exact same things I would have. Fido came in and

we petted his furry back with our bare feet. After a few different games- the time absolutely flew and it was lunch and dinnertime before we knew it- we went down for a swim.

The buzzer rang when we were in the pool. I got out and considered having Billy pose as me, but decided against it, put on my own pants; Billy got dressed in his black shirt and pants and followed me up.

This is new; the two opposing Illuminati were on the same screen this time. Kudos to them for deciding to settle their problem in a civil manner. Unfortunately, the problem wasn't anywhere near as nice as the people. One guy's a military controller, another guy has a multinational defense corporation, and their power is overlapping in many ways. I've never had to say this before, but I went ahead and did it- "This is complicated, damn complicated. I'll have to call you back." I worked with Billy for a resolution to this thing. This guy owns this, therefore that, but the other guy owns that.. smarter people always have more complicated problems. Fortunately we were able to get a satisfying resolution, and they were both happy with it. I let Billy go do other things and laid down a bit on the couch.

Half-asleep, I dreamed conscious dreams, thinking of random things that I've been told in the past. One of those was the Law of Fives, the idea that you can't reliably 'bounce' an Illuminated multi-manipulation idea through more than five channels. For example, if I purposefully created a children's show that exposed them to pedophiles, expecting some horrible incident to happen (or more to happen, and thus getting better statistics), using that incident/statistics as leverage on the population to accept without question new, more socialist laws, then used those laws to help us control people more effectively without using secrecy, and then managed to continue building up those laws, oh, it can be done, and it has been done.

But when you multiply too many percentages, and you try to add more things to those five (using them as precedents for greater state control over children, for example), then things start to break down. This is occasionally referred to as the one-hand rule, and I really like that one- can I do one more than everyone else? Heh, heh.. The reason it is a law is because people always start to forget what drove them in the first place. The sheeple don't always understand the relationships we want them to, in this case, greater state control because of dangers 'to the children!'; their minds start holding other relationships and they start comparing the latest laws to Hitler. (Some Illuminati say that the Nazis are the reason they can't control so much today- I say that if it wasn't for the Nazis, they'd just be making other allusions, like Stalinism. 'Horrible' total control always has some symbol. If they knew who I was, that symbol'd probably be me.) Assorted angry people begin joining anti-socialist groups- usually, the ones we totally encompass, but too many of them have ideas of their own and start to either take people from the group to use in their own anti-Illuminated purposes, or just to act alone. Usually, of course, everything goes A-ok, the manipulation takes hold, and we laugh at the fools. But reliability is the question here. A normal wouldn't buy a product that only worked maybe 80% of the time. We don't like to use manipulation techniques with unpredictable results. The Anarch does that, which is why he's the Anarch.

To get around the multiplication problems, we act simply. We always keep the images fresh in the minds of the masses, deluding them with loud words and pictures. But people really can only be pushed so far, and the farther manipulation goes, the more stringy and less reliable it becomes. This is why we've been changing society to help us with greater manipulation, to keep them talking and prevent them from acting. And we, even the more mortal among us, can wait. We've been waiting. We can continue to wait for opportunities to come to us, which is why the Law of Fives doesn't apply anymore, because of technology and because we're so goddamn cautious. We're handling humanity like it is: a giant jar of nitroglycerin. Millennia of violent, turmoil-laden human history can not be overrode by willpower alone.

And now here come the implants, ready to lay this whole thing to rest and make all this talk of manipulation obsolete- and with that thought, I rested, losing consciousness entirely.

Chapter 35

I was sitting in my usual place, on the ridge overlooking the grass and the house. I would have climbed the tree or the mountain, but I really didn't feel like doing that. For that matter, I really didn't feel like doing much of anything.

A black-clad figure walked up to me from the distance, not hurrying, just plodding along in a gait I wasn't familiar with. Is that how all normals walk when they don't really give a fuck who sees them? It appeared so- he wasn't limping or moving strangely due to a replaced dick. Paul slowly made his way up the hundred yards to where I sat lazily, staring at him and through him.

For a fleeting instant I had a vision of Paul just up and singing something like 'Somewhere Out There'. I pushed the thought out of my head. If he did that, I'd shut him up completely for weeks. Instead, he slowly sat down next to me, and said, "Howard, I'm not really sure why I'm doing this, but I have to thank you for something." Now **this** is a new one. I get six straight weeks of constant beratement and snide, semi-witty insults from Billy and Sarah (always witty enough, I realized, to get me not to tell them to shut the fuck up, a thing I intend to do in the near future) and here he comes thanking me for who knows what?

"What?", I asked, smiling out of the right corner of my mouth.

"For.. for taking me in. And.. for saving my life.. and giving me back my dick."

"Well, I had it on pretty good authority that you were worth something. I figured I'd try you out.", I said with my patented smile. He didn't reply, and just sat down, seemingly trying to relax for two minutes. He was about to do something... ah. Asking a question. "Ask it.", I said evenly.

"Why was I taken? And .. how did you know I had a question?"

"Because you talked to the wrong people about Billy, and because it was decorated all over your face."

"The wrong people? No one even asked me anything!"

"Exactly. If some guys interrogated you, they'd certainly be from us. No worries there. But when you start blabbing to the general populace about this friend you had and his special abilities- that is when things get hairy. Too hairy, this time, and the secrets were just too high-level."

"Why didn't anyone just.. like.. threaten me?"

"You must be kidding. That would make it obvious something was up, and you might have told even more people. We had to remove you. If it wasn't for Damien needing a new servant, you would have been killed." And if we did do that and Billy found out, he probably would have gone apeshit.

"How many people have you killed like that?"

"Plenty. Enough to staff Microsoft and all its subsidiaries and bought-out companies, at least." I was being nice. That number is much higher than most people think. I didn't really want to panic Paul or send him on a shortcut to insanity when he learned the real body count of direct Illuminated attack. Indirect is even worse- Holocaust, anyone? Hitler was one of us, of course, but he got nasty, and severed his connection to us. We considered axing him, but then some other guys realized what a nice world war could do for the industrialized world, a few guys were put in the right places, and whammo! The sheeple kill each other left and right in what normals know as World War 2. Countries are unified, and the stage is set for the Cold War. Oh well. I wasn't there.

"**You've..** killed.." Duh- miscommunication.

"Not me, you dope! The Illuminati. You really think I axed that many sheeple in ten short years? That would be funny, but it would be a great big sign saying 'Hey, right here, there's something we're not telling you going on!' Pfft."

"Oh. Then .. how do you stop people from finding out.. especially since you own all this stuff?"

"There are two ways to explain this. The long way takes years. The short way can be expressed in three simple words. **People are stupid**, Paul. If you can remember that, you will quickly understand, hopefully before you get too old to be useful with that knowledge."

"So you're basically just driving people like cattle."

"You're quicker than I thought."

"Where to?"

I grinned. "Well, we didn't know, at first.. we just developed technology, and increased the population and our power. But now.." I tapped his head three times.

"What.. my brain?"

"Nope." I tapped his head three more times.

He caught on. "Oh... **NO!!** Howard! You're going to.."

"Uh huh."

"Everyone?!"

"Sooner or later. If we need the normals, that is."

"Howard, I have never wanted to kill you more."

"And I have never cared less." I chuckled. I was probably screwing around with things I shouldn't be telling him about, but so what? I realized I'm something of a sadist- Damien may have liked his servants to scream in bodily pain, I grin watching them squirm in impotent rage.

"No one.. even pretending to be free. And no one to stop you."

"Perfect, isn't it?" I could get used to this. Now I know why Billy had him as a friend. His reactions are funny as hell, he still has some remains of his freedom illusion, and he's probably the only person of normal birth (I don't think I consider him a normal anymore) on the planet who can understand me the first time around.

"Howard.. are you the Antichrist?"

"No, Billy is. I'm just the guy in the back yanking his strings." Of course, it's always the guy in the back, unseen, who is getting the best end of things. This applies everywhere- normal relationships, politics (local, national, and world), even many Illuminated fourth levels are getting manipulated by fifths- and then there's the completely unconfirmed rumors about a few yet-to-be-named fourth levels having some dirt on some seconds. Again the law is proven- power doesn't really exist, and those who can manipulate the best are the ones really in control, at least until recent technological advances changed all that... drugs, bugging devices, modern communication, subliminal messages, specialized environment-affecting techniques (the least of which are known by the FBI), and mind control implants. But simple manipulation is still the main focus and our strong suit. Again,

I found myself thanking all the gods worshipped in the entirety of human history for those advances. Simply manipulating these three servants, even Paul, is somewhere between 'not possible' and 'no way'.

"By the way..", I continued, "you don't believe any of that Christianity shit, do ya?"

"I didn't even use to take it seriously before .. before Damien. But now, I.. I dunno anymore. Anything seems possible."

"In other words, your reality was fairly much shattered, and now you see nowhere to turn for the security you used to have."

"Yeah..", he said, pondering my words, "**yeah**, that's **exactly** it! How did you figure that out?"

"Billy got the same. And having years of education in that department helps."

He nodded, and fell silent for a few seconds, then slowly opened his mouth to speak. "You know what's ironic?"

"Spill it."

"In a lot of movies and books and shit, the bad guy or Antichrist is often named Damien or something that sounds like it.", he said evenly. I exploded in laughter. Too, too funny. Does that mean the fatass who kept giving me a hard time was really Satan? And does that make me Jesus for popping him off like an overripe zit?

"Way to go, Paul! You killed the Master of All Evil with a single gunshot wound! Now if only I knew where to find Cthulu so you could pop him off with a BB gun."

"Howard.. you do not act anything like any kind of world dominator I've ever heard of. Or even a kid. You and Billy, man.. you're the fuckin same."

"Score one for nature."

"Uh?"

"Nature versus nurture."

"Ahh. Hey.. one more thing.. why servitude.. why not death? I know you didn't make that decision personally, but I just want to know.."

"Simple, Paul. You are useful. We need more servants for our steadily increasing power. Killing you would be seen as a waste."

"How the hell can I be useful when you've got Enforcers and engineered people, and I'm just normal?"

"You answered your own question, Paul. You're just normal. You've given me more information than you know."

"About what?"

"First, the obvious. You've shown me how a small sector of the population will behave when exposed to the same circumstances you have, and you're giving me information based on a mostly normal perspective. I believe we'll start with people like you, Paul."

"Start wha- oh. That. But... why?"

"Because we feel like it."

"But.. why?"

"The trail of 'why's can go on forever, Paul. Be more specific."

"What's driving you?"

"Ego. Just good old-fashioned ego. We're doing it **because we can**. We want to do it, we can do it, we do it. We want to do it, we can't do it, we develop the technology, then we do it. Although the various processes we use are complicated and myriad, the end result is very, very simple. We get what we want."

"Then.. what am I still here for, why haven't you killed me already, or let that last command of Damien's do it? I can't possibly be worth that much just for being a normal source of information.."

"You are. But there's more reasons. I need more warm bodies around and yet another mind to make sure I don't severely fuck up." Paul's brain made simple connections and his eyes glowed with understanding.

"You're not the average mastermind, Howard. You're not cruel, you're not evil, you just sit back and fucking kill and control people by the fucking ton! Ming the fucking Merciless doesn't hold a candle to you..."

"Well, hell no. I have more personal power, I actually know what I'm doing, I have **far** more troops, and the last bunch of guys who pissed me off got... well, you saw what happened to them. So far, just about everyone I've come into extended contact with has compared me to some fictional evil overlord or other, but I'm more of a badass and I've read something the dead overlords haven't."

"What's that?"

"The 231 rules of Evil Overlords. The guy who wrote them's preaching absolute gospel and doesn't know it. A lot of those only apply to total fantasy, but they're all really good advice. **My** Legions of Terror know how to search for people, **my** Legions of Terror actually have marksmanship, **I** actually listen to the advice of my advisors, and shooting is not too good for **my** enemies."

"At least you're not diabolic or maniacal.. god, this is just so fucked up."

"And Billy has told me that too. Look at the bigger picture, Paul. I'm sure you can comprehend it. This isn't any different than any other bid for power anywhere. We're simply upgrading. If this were a previous time, I would control you through threat of force, physical and mental dependency, and good old Pavloving. Now, there's advanced technology. Later, there will probably be something even better than this. But it's the same thing you've seen before and you'll see anywhere."

"I guess since you're telling me all this, I'm going to be here a while.."

"Of course, Paul. For the rest of your life. When you lose your usefulness due to the diseases of old age, I will terminate you. But, by that time, advanced technology can be used to prolong your life- and if you do succumb to the more popular diseases, you will probably ask for me to kill you. But every normal has to face that sometime, unless something else gets them first."

"And I suppose if I wasn't doing this, I'd be in training to become a wage slave for you anyway, only I'd be lower on the totem pole."

"Exactly."

"Well, that's what Billy said... '95% of the time, this sure beats school.'"

"And logically, the other 5%.."

"Sucks a good deal of shit."

"Well, now, Paul, I'm going to save you some pain, save me some trouble, and inform you exactly of your position. Your pleasure and pain mean nothing to me. I do try to keep you relatively happy because it improves your thinking. Angry people fuck up more. Besides, having pissed off people as the people you talk to most of the time does wear on the nerves. Especially Billy, he **is** my mirror image."

"Were you born this selfish or... no wait. You weren't born this selfish, Billy isn't. They made you this way."

"Actually, it's a bit of both. You're right, Billy was never quite as selfish as me. But he's a quick learner. Exposure to his world-controlling clone is influencing him. And for the better- for the both of us."

"You expect us to put ourselves first when we're your servants?"

"Well, you have to put me first, Paul. I already commanded you to do that when I gave you commands in reverse order. But not worrying about anyone else will save you some grief, because over the course of the next few decades, you're going to watch me and my organization fuck over legions of people."

"And I know why you're being honest.."

"Paul, believe me when I tell you that I will never lie to you.", I said, grinning a bit.

He chose to stay seated next to me, silently, and I didn't command him otherwise. We stayed like that for an eternity in the space of a few seconds. Or minutes. I will never know how long, mostly because I had drifted off into space again, my brain operating randomly, electricity beginning and ceasing in random spurts, testing the connections, my regenerative system of immature cells quickly regrowing any cells that had died, prolonging my life another day in exchange for a day's worth of living, the DNA being constantly checked for imperfections, the cells conjugating, auto-detecting, and suiciding if they sensed something was wrong with themselves, and the white cells detecting and destroying the renegade ones, then the good cells detecting the lack of nearby cells, splitting and regrowing what died, preventing permanent cell loss, or cancer, or the slow-death-by-cell-damage called 'aging'. I love that. It's amazing what scientists, computers, and people in general (Stupid as they are!) can do when they have adequate reserves, enough brain mass, a damn good motive, and plenty of support. And for those of us who haven't been engineered, there's still the prospect of a retrovirus to make normals engineered, an incredibly difficult project that's taking them years and may yield nothing, despite how much I want it for Paul. Oh well. Even if the retrovirus proves a failure, he's at the brink of the technological immortality curve- when technology finds ways to prolong a life quicker than the life ages. He could live to be a hundred and fifty or so with today's technology- tomorrow's could make him immortal some other way, or just prolong his life another hundred years, in which a hundred years' worth of futuristic geriatrics would be researched. And he's in Illuminated hands now, and our technology is the best in the world. I grinned. Ahh. Power. What good are a thousand men with guns if you can obliterate them in seconds with something better? It's the same with the rest of technology, which is why Illuminati fund it so hard. Or at least I was taught, when I was seven.

"Howard..", Paul began unsteadily, "why do you always have us around, instead of all those

Illuminated people?" I laughed for a bit.

"Don't you get it? You guys are the only people I can talk to who I can trust. They want to stab me in the back, Paul! I can't talk to them without watching **every single word** to see if I'm giving something away! And talking to Enforcers.. well, it's kind of like having a friendly conversation with a brick wall."

"I've done that.", said Paul with a slight grin.

"What- had a friendly conversation with a brick wall?", I said at the same time as he said "Having a friendly" and then he started nodding.

"Brick walls are great, actually.", I pointed out. "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."

"Join the fucking club.", Paul muttered with venom.

"I'm already in the fucking club, remember?"

"Yeah, the Shitluminati." I cracked up. Paul's voice turned from funny to deadly serious in a tenth of a second. He looked me directly in the eye and did not blink, enunciating each word with conscious use of his lips and tongue to form a grim, dark (he wasn't trying either) tone. "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." Well, now, this is an unexpected development. I began to think about similar situations in the future, as the pool of non-Enforcer implanteds gradually increased.

"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?"

He gave the answer I should have predicted, but missed completely. "Because", he said, pointing a slightly shaking forefinger at me and talking in an even grimmer tone, "it means that **we can't hate you**. Or at least we have more trouble with it. But you **can**, Howard. You can." On this he is exactly right. I can. I just won't. The difference is enormous, but he understands it. "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." For the first time in my life, I had nothing to reply with. I heard breathing from behind me and spun half-around; Sarah and Billy were standing about three meters behind me.

"How much did you two hear?", I shouted.

"Umm..", started Sarah.

"From 'don't you get it' to 'do to stop it'.", Billy said.

"Yeah.", nodded Sarah.

"Fuck. Do both of you agree with what he said?"

"Pretty much.", said Sarah, nodding some more and a grim smirk on her face, at the same time Billy

said "Yeah." in a neutral tone.

"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. Why didn't you say something about this before?"

Once again, I really should have predicted the answer. "You never asked.", said Billy and Sarah simultaneously.

"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.", said Billy with some hate.

"Dammit.", I muttered. "Do all of you still want to kill me.. even after the tests?"

"Uh huh.", nodded Billy. "Oh, yeah.", said Sarah. "I .. I dunno.", said Paul, shaking his head. "Howard- it's really not your fault, is it?"

"He's the one who's going to implant **everyone**, if you **remember**, Paul!", exploded Billy. I almost saw the lingual side of his teeth as he shouted.

"Yeah", he said, turning at me, "but weren't you like.. taught to be like this?" I started chuckling.

"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. So why do you two", I said gesturing at Billy and Sarah, "want to kill me?"

"General principle.", said Billy, at the same time Sarah said "Because I fucking hate all of you."

"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."

Sigh. It's irrational, but he knows it's irrational, and he doesn't seem to care anymore. Is this how I'm really going to croak? One saying of 'Shoot your main target' or 'Eliminate all hostiles as you see fit', and **blam**-splat, there's one less Illuminatus in the world. And all because of animalistic desires, revenge, and a rogue sense of self-preservation. "Yes, and we have a word for it here too- bullshit. Sarah, you've worked for us for years. You want to kill every Illuminatus there is?"

Sarah spoke in a hate-loaded tone filled with vengeance. "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." She started reading my mind again, not that it wasn't fairly obvious what I was thinking. "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. 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." I figured that was the most likely path of insanity for servants gone bananas- the implants wouldn't be affected, in fact more bases would be covered. The only loss would be that of a mind. "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." With absolutely no prompting, Paul started applauding like mad. I joined in. So, surprisingly and with a smirk of dark humor, did Billy.

"Encore! Encore!" shouted Paul.

"Hey- **can** you repeat that?", I asked with a grin.

"Not perfectly.", she said with a scowl. I didn't think she'd remember it.

"Is there anything else any of you wanna say to me about this?", I 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.", said Billy, his visage in a sneer, his hands clenched in the eternal strangler's gesture. I severely doubt he means that permanently- he's just pissed to the point of his anger clouding his thoughts.

"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?", Billy replied immediately and with evil. Paul started giggling to himself in spite of the grave and sadistic things exchanged.

"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?"

"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 considered a couple then just decided to forget it.

"Nope."

"Howard.. in another universe, it could all be different.", Billy said with some regret in his voice.

"In another universe, it could always be different. But, if I do terminally slip up, just remember- what happens when I die?"

"We move to a new level of Hell.", Billy said with slightly less anger.

"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?" He didn't answer. He didn't know how.

"Howard, you're a manipulative bastard.", Sarah said.

"Hello! **Job description!**", Paul shouted at her. She rolled her eyes, sighed, and nodded.

"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."

"And you'll miss me if something bad does happen, won't you?" I could almost hear Sarah broadcasting at me, 'That was cheap!' Hmm. It shouldn't be even possible to really manipulate him, regardless of commands. Or maybe he wants to be manipulated- wants to because he hates the torment of free thought with no free action. Wants to because he can't stand the thought of doing what he believes he must do, kill me when he has the chance lest he be subjected to another couple centuries of this. What would I be doing in this situation.. well, the answer to that is pretty

obvious, I'm looking at it!

"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."

"That makes various kinds of sense. I should probably ask now- are you the only one doing this, using your.. servants like this?", Billy asked.

"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. 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?", he asked warily. Paul watched the conversation intently, trying to learn something. Sarah was just barely there as usual.

"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- or better yet, an emotional add-on with universal compatibility." An idea that has been bandied about, but never seriously attempted to implement.

"Emotional- will you-"

"No. Wouldn't work, wouldn't work, and I'm not even gonna try.", I said, pointing at Billy, Sarah, and Paul respectively. "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 with mock offendedness.

"Of course I do."

"Good, you're right." He changed his voice as he had done earlier, from semi-jovial to dark. "But seriously, Howard. Even if it turns out I'm not so screwed up, **please** do not use that shit." I identified the source of fear immediately and without any trouble. He is terrified of losing himself. He sees his body as no longer his own (which is not inaccurate) and he doesn't want to lose any part of his mind. And he's got the imagination to picture a very ugly worst-case scenario of what I could do with something like that.

I decided to have some fun with him. "Why not? Wouldn't you like to walk around happy all the time?"

"**Seriously**, man!!", Paul shouted, in a tone that indicated he believed I was already being very serious.

"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**."

Paul's facial flesh was pulled back around his bones, contorting his visage into a mutant grimace. "Howard.. please, man, I like you enough already, don't use that crap, you don't know.. what.." His

terror was inhibiting his powers of speech.

Sarah, as I could have predicted, spoiled it early. "He's fucking with you, Paul."

"You're sure?" Both Billy and Sarah nodded at him.

"You're an **ASSHOLE**, Howard!"

"Since you can't read my mind, I'm not going to command you to not tell me things I already know."

We all ran out of things to say, the sun started to break through the clouds, and I went in, laid on the couch, and randomly daydreamed for hours.

Chapter 36

This kicks ass. To put it into traditional, sophisticated, Illuminated language, I would say that the situation is advantageous, pleasurable, and amusing to boot- but it can be argued that none of those terms have quite the expressive meaning of the normal world's 'This kicks ass.'

I'm on a plane- not my own- to the Bavarian headquarters. This jet-helicopter hybrid is smoother and more efficient than my jet, to be sure. Although it doesn't have quite the raw maximum speed or the armament, the VTOL is much smoother with a helicopter, and when it's at its cruising speed of 3200 kph, the entire helicopter apparatus retracts- a very nice design, if I do say so myself. Sarah is leaning on my shoulder, fast asleep. Billy and Paul are taking the jet to Michael Stevenson's dwelling, who has asked- foolishly- that I physically attend a meeting with him as a representative of his sub-group, the Sons of Control. Do I decline? No. Do I go? Nope. Do I stand him up? Nope again! Instead, I send my jet with Billy in it, and now neither Michael nor the people at the party know just which one is me- so I am, effectively, in two places at once.

And of course, there's no real reason for having the party- Illuminati need about as much justification for having parties as normal college fraternities need for drunken fuckfests. In fact, it's exactly like a frat party, only much improved in all areas: the sex, the booze (for those who drink it), the drugs (Northberg has concocted some truly nasty shit- nasty for only about 12 hours, of course.), the topics, the social rules, and there's also a solid, Illuminated reason to have such a party- it gives a good opportunity to bring out the time-honored skills of, very literally, cloak and dagger. Usually, of course, no one gets impaled. Usually.

Did I mention that I **love** this job?

Granted, there's a lot of bullshit at these things. Plenty of it, as a matter of fact. Sub-conspiracies form (always a no-no) and random drunken arguments burst out between the controllers of the world. But all in all, that's a good thing- it means that they're not sitting at their consoles with a clenched fist for one hand and world-controlling power in the other. Shouting matches and the occasional round of fisticuffs (The engineereders don't get into those kinds of fights unless they're actively intending to kill or humiliate someone) do no damage on a global scale. Illuminati get pissed off at each other just like normals, and power and anger don't mix. Needless to say, the key phrase to these kinds of events is 'Don't take it personally.' Of course, that philosophy lends itself to practical jokes- which are relatively harmless and provide amusement. Of course, I doubt anyone's crazy enough to try those on me. I just might take it personally, after all.

The usual transportation regimen followed- the auditorium, I noticed, must have had its normal slope mechanically lowered and its seats removed (or, more likely, mechanically lowered into slots in the floor) to become a party hall.

It was the sort of thing you'd expect from world controllers. Extravagance without limit; displays of power with absolutely no restraint. Golden chandeliers, fur carpeting, soft music from speakers

everywhere in the room, shadow-corners for the invisible conversations that naturally must happen, and party drinks. I noticed that the cups used to serve them looked funny- they were presumably ceramic but they didn't seem that way. On impulse, I used my full strength to try to crush it while drinking its juice contents- it would not yield an inch. You could probably take a shotgun to it and not do more than knock it across the room.. they're as indestructible as everything in my house. And the juice itself was from something I've never tasted before. Engineered fruit, probably.

The thing with being the Dominator at one of these things is that everyone tries to get close to you without getting close to you. They want to be right there so if you just start talking to someone, they'll be the target- but they're not dumb enough to start crowding you. And, more importantly, they don't want to appear that they're even trying any of that- while, of course, regarding your superior presence. My enhanced senses picked up exactly in what ways they were moving, and most of them knew it- but then again, going through the motions is part of the game. A game which none of the engineered played- because they were all off in their own corner of the room, a corner I intended to disappear to, which was easily accomplished. No one came up to me and addressed me about some concern or other as I vanished to the other side of the room. Sarah, of course, could be anywhere.

It should be noted that Illuminati have a long-standing tradition of same-age socializing. Unless there's necessary deals to be done, the old stay with the old, the young stay with the young, and people of middle age stay with their own kind. Part of this stems from the longer-standing beliefs on children- although they might realize the basic truths on which humanity operates, making them Illuminati, their immaturity might lead them to be more easily exploited by adults. The solution is to keep them semi-segregated, and manipulation based on maturity-related issues has always been frowned upon here. Especially since children have a bad habit of growing up and taking revenge.

Now, all of this is well and good, until you realize that just about every young Illuminatus I can think of is partially engineered, making them far smarter than their normal-bred counterparts and making them a sub-conspiracy of sorts. Naturally, the politics get convoluted at times, but the general message is that the engineered youth are going to be around a hell of a lot longer than their normal-bred elders, and so they better damn well get used to it.

The group, which had been talking in a circle as befits conspirators, instantly widened and made a spot at my approach.

"So where's Billy?", a seven-year-old boy asked, looking me in the eye with a wide grin.

"For all you know, I could be Billy." The reactions were predictable- a few 'Oh, shit's, a few 'That figures', and even a 'Two places at once!'

The conversation went on and I listened much, talked little. A couple of them mentioned the advantages of applying implants to their existing servants- one of the females mentioned how they never look at her 'like that' again. The partially-engineered, 12-year-old Boris calmly described just what the Russian mafia organizations are like- autocratic government in spirit with a few key, necessary differences. Another boy, younger than I am, mentioned using the Islamic militants to further polarize a growing area surrounding the Middle East, in order to make things easier for someone else higher up. The conversation was informal and easy. Another key thing about the engineered youth is that none of them have any fear.

A butleresque, tall servant with a mostly-bald head quietly came up to me. For some reason I got the feeling it had to do with Billy- wasn't sure why. "Your servant has called, Master Howard. He requests your contact immediately. He says it's totally, absolutely fucking urgent." There were some chuckles from the rest of the group. Yup, that's Billy all right. He better not be fucking up... I went to a small back room with a viewscreen in it.

"Howard- if it wasn't you, you would not believe this.", he said, a very serious look on his face. Paul

was next to him, breathing a bit hard as if he had recently undergone stress.

"What?"

"Mike tried to kill me. And he knew it was me, Howard. He knew even before I came in that it was me. He tried to use a robot that looks and sounds like you to get me to kill myself."

"Holy fuck!", I exploded. Murphy's Law... "You're right, I almost don't believe this. Is Mike..?"

"Dead. He wouldn't tell me the truth so I blew a hole in his head."

"That's a relief. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Got lucky."

"You almost... oh damn. Billy, I'm comin there, now. Search the place, and don't leave unless it gets dangerous."

"All right, Howard. Watch it. I think someone's **really** out to get you." Which is more than the usual, job-description 'people are out to get me'. I announced my untimely departure, slipped out the exit, and did not seem to be missed by anyone other than the engineereds.

"Holy shit.", I said to Sarah, after the jet-helicopter was in the air and blasting at almost full throttle to the dwelling of Mike Stevenson. "Holy shit, holy shit." I opened channels and directed Enforcer squads to arrive at the same time I did.

"Well, now we know how far **that** goes, don't we?", she said in a half-flippant voice.

"How the hell did he **know**?!", I shouted, not expecting a reply. "How. The. **Hell**!!!"

"50-50?", suggested Sarah. "The events weren't a secret. He probably guessed you in advance. He figured you'd send the servant to him and go to the party yourself, and he was right. And he or his group probably had that robot for a while."

"Sarah.. I hate thinking that.. but you're probably right. The outcome was good.. he's dead.. but that was **just too fucking close**."

"Howard, now you know what your real job is."

"And that would be..?"

"Survive." I gave her a strange look. Surviving is just another duty... "Howard, you don't do anything unless something's going wrong. Things that go wrong in this organization tend to be dangerous, often fatal. With technological advents and increasing powermongering, the number of things going wrong grows and the peril becomes more and more life-threatening. Under the old Dominator, people knew what to expect- since you're fully engineered, everything's shaken up and out of fear, they'll react- with violence. That's just my guess.. it could be that his group could have been plotting against your position for years. But at any rate, it's all getting more dangerous- survival becomes more and more of a concern." She would make a good Illuminatus- she seems to understand a good deal, things that I've been neglecting to tell myself. Since I am engineered, I figured they'd know my power and step back, unwilling to get in any kind of confrontation- but no, they have to be egotistical and foolhardy and commit suicide the long way. But I refuse to live in mortal terror just because I want to visit a stranger or go somewhere unfamiliar.

We arrived at Mike's mansion, the Enforcers I called in front of it. He had a double life, but his exceptionally large mansion (complete with pool, tennis courts, multiple cars, and other trappings of

hedonism) isn't accessible at all to normals- guards all over the place. Guards still standing at their posts, jealously guarding the property of a deceased man. I laughed at that as I walked in to find a nervous Paul, a shrugging Billy, and a very dead Mike in a large center room with a dais. On top of that was an extra-large throne, a plastic bubble enclosing it. Hmm. I guess that was Mike's escape plan, have tunnels under the mansion and a quick getaway. But it obviously didn't work- Billy had caught him and blown his brains all over the wall, and Mike's kneecap took a bullet as well. Also laying around were the bodies of six Enforcers, each with a bullet in the head. Billy and Paul's expressions told me that they hadn't found any evidence why.

"I didn't think there would be anything. Fuck."

And on the ground was.. fuck, that's one realistic robot. Was, anyway, since its metallic skull was smeared all over the ground. The investigation crews will search it thoroughly, check the parts for identifying characteristics- and if Mike did his connections properly, find nothing whatsoever. Damn. Of all the things that could happen.. Mike here had to try to kill Billy. Why Billy, though? What sense does that make? Unless he's actively trying to piss me off.. and that would be the way to go about doing that. "Damn it..", I muttered to no one in particular. "**Damn it!!** I want to know **why**!! What is **wrong** with these people?!" I was probably red 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. He probably predicted my moves. It's a good thing you caught it."

"I didn't. Paul did. It was in mid-sentence when Paul blew its head off." Holy shit.

"You mean that if you didn't bring... then.."

"Bingo." My red anger turned to black fury. I'm going to kill these people, if there's any more of them. I shall walk up to them and rip their bones from their bodies, leaving a mound of shapeless, torn carcasses and a river of blood behind me. Billy bothered with a gun for that asshole. I will not. I will tear them apart in unheard-of ways, ranging from (literal) recto-cranial inversion to crucifixion with their own ribs. Or maybe I'll just forget the creativity, and just smash them to pulp the old-fashioned way. Don't these assholes know that I am absolutely the last fucking person on planet Earth to fuck with?

"Okay, it's official.", I said to them, striding up to Mike's screen and calling up the editor of the Real News. "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." That statement would certainly be placed next to the available Real News evidence- which probably isn't going to be much. I had the Enforcers search the place anyway. There. That's the official shit. That's all I can do, for now. I'm particularly interested in hearing from the Sons of Control, although I know what their statements will be- they didn't know a damn thing. And who knows? They might not have. Illuminati often spend a good deal of their time striving to be unpredictable and unknowable, and if someone's going to try something like this against me, that amount of time grows. And now to prevent this trick from happening again...

"Billy, I...", I began, and then realized something. What the hell could I tell him? He's obviously not stupid enough to fall for the same trick twice, and if the next one is super-realistic, there is no defense. You can't tell an implanted to ignore certain commands from you in the future. Latest has priority, not earliest. I'm just going to have to watch it when I tell him to do things like this. Damn it! Two months into this business and I'm already seeing shit like this!

"Forget it. He's dead, and we're wise to the tactic. Can we just go home and pretend none of this happened?", Billy suggested. His voice was music to my ears.

"Except for whatever I'll have to say regarding it, yes. Let's get out of here; I don't like looking at that.", I said, gesturing to the dead robot and the dead Illuminatus. Sarah had already gotten into the cockpit, waiting for us to get in and fly off to a relatively safe place. Without hesitation, we were gone, and the reassuring THOOOOOM of high-powered jet engines gently massaged my back once more.

"Ya know, Howard.. I think I made a major mistake back there.", Billy said, after we were well into the sky.

"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." Even with our kind of medical technology, there are ways of hiding things like neurotoxins near the brain. Fool around with the body and it stops living.

"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- as I heard his voice, a cold realization came to me. I might not be hearing any laughter now if that assfuck had gotten his wish, his profane desire. I wanted to resurrect him, just to kill him again for that. I've got to keep my mind off the subject- every time it gets on it, I find myself in 100% throat-rip mode. It's like being millimeters away from taking a head shot- sure, it was close, but it didn't actually kill or even hurt. I really have to put my mind off this until I get some hard data- so I popped up Recent Documents, looking for something entertaining I've seen recently- and found an interesting piece of literature. The Prince and the Pauper. Of all the things they could be reading.. I noticed Paul biting his tongue. "I remember reading this a couple years ago.. and I remember wondering why Edward never used Tom for a duplicate.", I said. (As a matter of fact, my Illuminated mind picked up on it as soon as I realized the plot.) The ensuing laughter was expected. "I know, that was just the most fucking **ironic** thing I have ever said, especially **now**."

Then I turned my head to the right, to look at Billy, and I told him the unequivocal truth I should have said as soon as I heard about what happened. "Billy.. 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**- that I am going to lose any of you to that line of **BULL SHIT!!**" I noticed my right hand was almost ripping a portion out of the seat cover and I relaxed it.

Paul lightly grasped my left arm. "Thank you, Howard.", he said with sincerity. "A lot."

"No problem, Paul."

The jet blasted to the south much faster than sound.

Chapter 37

"Howard!!", the man yelled at the screen, apparently a bit panicked and needing help. Donald Simpson. Never heard of him. Wait.. he was the one who laughed at Damien's death, wasn't he? Yup, he was. I remember that.

"Good thing you're close. We need you here, right now. Here's the coordinates.", he said, and they displayed on the screen; this place is in the middle of Canada. I'm close indeed. I don't appreciate his commanding tone, but he does appear to be in genuine need of Dominator help.

"What's this all about?", I asked him.

"A second level's base just got overrun. And the circumstances... are pretty **weird**. I'll explain on the way." If it's a trap, I don't actually have to **land** there.

"Ah hell, it should be interesting. This better be worth my time, though." The man nodded, as if to say that it definitely was, then turned off his end of the screen. "Billy! Sarah! Paul! Get ready to fight. We have somewhere to go." They got ready and I used the elevator to go downstairs and get the Micro. I came back up, they were ready, and we were blasting off into the air in seconds. The screen came on with Donald again.

"All right... where do I start... oh shit, how about with this?!", Donald said, and pointed the camera at the blown-open metal entrance of Brenk's base. An Enforcer came out, but it wasn't acting like an Enforcer- I could tell that just by its walking, which was stiff and awkward.

"I'm a little teapot, short and stout. Here is my handle, here is my spout.", it said, in a mockery of a little kid's voice, with strange arm motions accompanying the words, as Donald's Enforcers pointed their rifles at it. I looked on in fascinated horror. It was bleeding from its ears; obviously something was done to its brain. Holy shit- what the hell could do something like that to an Enforcer? "When I get all steamed up, then I shout- tip me over, and pour me out!", it finished, then pulled its gun. It blew its own brains out just as the other Enforcers filled it with bullets. That was.. **beyond** fucked up...

"JESUS!!", Paul screamed.

"What the **FUCK** was that??", I asked Donald, hoping for a good answer and knowing I wouldn't get one.

"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." So.. someone (something?) smart is doing this.

"Okay, what the hell started all this?", I asked.

"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." You should have come to me earlier, Donald, but since this is so odd and unique I'll forgive your mistake.

"Who else is there with you?" Donald answered me by panning out the camera, which revealed three more Illuminati in a tent, apparently discussing 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 replied.

"All right. I've got some other calls to make. Thanks, Howard.", he replied, happy that I'm assisting him (as if I'd do anything else in a situation like this!), before turning his screen off.

"Okay, is there **anything** at all any of you can tell me about that?", I asked my servants. **They** better have answers, because **I** sure as hell don't!

"Howard, how many horror movies have you watched?", Billy asked, obviously in the service of an explanation.

"Not many." The plots usually get too laughable. "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." His explanation, fortunately enough, made sense.

"So whoever or whatever's down there is trying to scare us.", I said.

"Well, I think it's starting to work.", he replied.

"Yeah.. it is. It's bugging me to hell. I'm tempted to give the order to just turn the place into rubble." I could always say the hell with it and blow it up, and in this case it would be a rational, very sensible thing to do.

"Yeah. If I were you, I'd blow the place straight to hell. There's something nasty down there, Howie.", Paul said, a bit scared.

"No shit.", I replied. "I want to know what the hell can do that to Enforcers. They got... re-controlled somehow. You saw the ear-bleeding.."

"I did.", Billy said, trying to visualize what could have done that. "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..."

"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. 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.", Sarah said, thoughtfully and slowly.

"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.", I said, unable to even begin to understand the motive. Illuminati do weird things, this is certain. But something like this? The planning of an expert and the results of a madman...

I pulled up all the information I could on Brenk. He could have done it- he'd be the ideal person to, actually. Kept to himself for the most part, provided things on command; if he's dead, he'll be annoying to replace, as he's a very good scientist and we need guys like him. Electrical engineering, very good at robotics (and good at solving the famous 'walking problem' of machines.. hmm, he

could have built that robot that almost killed Billy..), a master of mechanics of every sort, and knows a bit of mind control technology. The images coming out of his base, from the short amount of time cameras could be brought in, were completely insane. Robots reacting to things that didn't exist, banging their heads on walls, and some guard robots that seemed to have retained their sanity, carrying huge weapons that caused Sarah to mutter to herself and sigh, knowing that she'd have a hard time conducting any operation against things like that.

We went at about mach 6, making the trip short indeed. Before we landed, another video was relayed, this time of the two heavily armored Enforcers. Their armor didn't save them. Bleeding from their ears, their armored helmets broken, they walked out like puppets, waving their left arms jerkily back and forth in the air, as well as their heads, vapid smiles on their faces. This very disconcerting sight was removed by a pair of ordinary Enforcers with rocket-propelled grenades.

"Well, **fuck**.", I said. I wanted to turn the plane around and deal with more mundane things, like angry Illuminati or assassination plots. Unfortunately, my Illuminati need me for the truly weird shit as well. Sarah went into the pilot's seat and slowed us down rapidly, and we VTOLed to a flat landing on a grassy field.

"Howard, am I going to be in any way possibly useful for this?", Paul asked as we landed.

"Probably not.", I answered him truthfully.

"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." Paul's worried about dying, and if a lot of those things pour out of there, it's a possibility. Even if I got him a suit of heavy armor, he couldn't survive against the kind of force in play here.

"All right. You can stay here for now." That got another line of thought rolling: I should probably have Sarah teach him how to pilot the jet, as well. Although all it's got is fusion lasers- not suitable for keeping secrecy if the beam bounces and cuts holes in clouds- I might want him for air support in the future, even if he'll never have the kind of aim we do.

Billy, Sarah, and I jumped out of the jet, and I shook hands with an aging man who'd obviously dyed his hair brown. He looked like a politician, although I didn't recognize his face from normal broadcasts. "Pleased to meet you, Dominator.", he said, in a politician's voice. "Mr. Simpson and his other colleagues have decided that they could set up a command post in view of, ah, Brenk's facility. 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?", I asked. This place back here was a military supply station in miniature, with medical equipment and a small arsenal of weapons, Enforcers, and explosive devices, with more being helicoptered in constantly. A good place for controllers to stay secure while being relatively close to the action.

"Um.. yes.", he said, nodding and smiling a bit. "It's not that Donald's, ah..", he said, trying to be diplomatic.

"No, he's just more confident than you are. 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.", he said, pointing. An Enforcer handed Billy and Sarah communicators, and we walked through the light forest and spotted Brenk's base before we came upon the tent.

"Dominator!", Donald greeted me from it, smiling. "You came at a good time. In about... three minutes, maybe you can tell us if you've seen anything like this before." I walked into the tent. A few

servants were there as well, as well as Mr. Mao- I remember his name, not much else- and a middle-aged Illuminatus I didn't recognize. I sat down on a portable chair and looked out, waiting.

He did, indeed, have it down to clockwork, as the robot walked out of the destroyed entrance almost exactly three minutes later. It was disturbing just to look at. Eight feet tall from orange feet to orange pointy head and with the face of a nightmare clown, it looked completely doll-like, its graceless legs moving it out the door. Enforcers put holes in it with armor-piercing bullets and it exploded, destroying the entrance further- what left there was of it to destroy. No, gentlemen, I have not seen anything like this before. And don't want to again, for that matter.

"Shit! Why would anyone **build** something like that?", I asked, and received absolutely no answers. "All right- what kind of strike team would we need to go down there and control the place?" Something to defeat the shit that happens to the Enforcers, then something to neutralize the robots... and probably a lot more other things.

Donald looked as if I had asked a question that didn't really have an answer. "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."

"So what are you suggesting?" If he has any better ideas...

"Nothing." ...he doesn't. "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." The atomic shotgun might be a good idea for this...

"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.", I said, thinking. Maybe if we blasted another entrance.. "Show me the schematics."

The schematics were unpleasant to consider raiding. Ugh. About eight thousand square meters a floor, seven floors, not counting the enormous manufacturing bays. The place is probably brimming with all kinds of threats and potential threats. Dig down to the manufacturing bay and raid from there? Strap bombs to Enforcers, wait until they've reached that controlling machine, and blow them up? Nothing I could think of would keep the place intact, most of it stands a good chance of killing Brenk in the process, and a lot of it would spend a lot of resources. Whatever we do, it'll be a pain in the ass.

"Hey, wait a second.", Billy said. From the tone of his voice I could tell that he had a strategy.

"What?", I asked immediately. Let's hear it.

"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." Yes.. yes. Billy's absolutely right. Unless Brenk was personally working on something when this happened- in which case he's probably already dead and the point's moot- he'd be down in his living space.

"Holy crap, you're right. Donald- can we efficiently nuke that place floor by floor?", I asked.

"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.." I'm pretty sure we're going to lose a lot of that anyway.

"The database is on the bottom. Even if Brenk has something we don't know about, the research must be in there.", the middle-aged Illuminatus said.

"Then let's do it." I love being the Dominator; I say 'do it' and it gets done. Donald, Mr. Mao, Sarah, and a few more servants immediately got to work on what missiles should be launched where. Technical stuff, and I haven't the experience to contribute to the details. I found a tree to climb and leaned back in its branches, dozing; Billy joined me.

It was decided that helicopters would carefully drop the explosives; Brenk's base had no anti-air defense. It took an hour for the correct explosives to be shipped in, but I didn't mind. It beat the alternative of trying to do a raid with just me and my servants. Boom... boom.. boom. It looked more like demolitions than an operation. Dirt and metal flew into the air with every blast. The air vent was carefully avoided and stuck out of the wreckage like a flag.

As the last floors were blown to bits, we all heard a loud, electronic scream. What the fuck?! It was as if someone had programmed something to scream in agony on dying. Yeah, this is nuts. Either Brenk went batshit insane or someone incredibly twisted got hold of his facility. But to reprogram everything to build things like that... I can't wait until we get some answers out of this.

That was it- it was toast. I got out of the tree and led Billy and Sarah, with a squad of Enforcers, up to the destroyed pit of molten metal and smoke. The excavation machines had already been brought in, and they reached down into the pit, carrying away huge, irregular gobs of wreckage. This is going to take a while, I thought, and then I heard a rumbling and saw a metal spike pushing its way out of the destruction, rising sixteen meters in the air. Panels opened up on its sides... oh, shit.

We ran as fast as we could. Microwave lasers, randomly turning off and on, swung around like gigantic swords. There was gunfire, but not much- the spire laid waste to the Enforcers immediately, firing randomly into the ground, and we jumped and ducked several of its long, wild slashes. I looked right as I ran and noticed that Donald and a few of his people were huddled together, covering their heads, making their survival a matter of dumb luck. Trees were cut in half with loud explosions and we jumped over them, trying to put as much distance between us and this thing as possible. I've never had a plan backfire on me like this before. The place was **rumble**- who the hell would have thought-

Then I heard a moving beam explode the ground behind me and knew- just **knew**- that it was going for my chest. I dodged it, and for a minute I thought I had avoided it entirely. Then I looked to my right and saw what I should never have seen.

My entire right arm was neatly sliced off. Blood spurted out through huge burn marks. I looked down and to the right- the appendage was mangled and would probably never be re-attachable; the beam had curved right and torn the entire top part apart. Billy and Sarah were both screaming loudly. I didn't feel a thing. "Sarah!! Give me your communicator, now!!", I screamed at her. Confused, she obeyed, throwing the device into my remaining hand, as she took off her shirt to make a body tourniquet, while all three of us got closer to the ground. The beams were quickly tapering off as missile launchers blew the spire apart. Billy was using his communicator to call for medical help.

I pressed the Ops Leader button and screamed into it, "**Blow that thing to BITS!!**"

"But Howard, Peter might-", Donald replied, obviously battle-confused.

"**I don't give a fuck!!! Bomb the place, that's a fucking direct order!!**" The pain was starting to come. My missing limb's stump screamed at me loudly at its loss. Sarah's shirt was beginning to be soaked with blood. I will... survive, I thought to myself. I will survive. I must survive. All I have to do is stop the bleeding... and I'll be A-OK... pain came at me in greater waves and I screamed loudly with full echo. The bombing could be heard in greater volume- Donald was obeying me.

"Dammit Howard.. you all right?", Donald's voice called to me, and I heard the lightning crack of a laser near him as he talked. "I'm seeing a request for a medical unit at your location..", he continued, trying to avoid panic.

"Yeah... I'm fucking fine.. come see for yourself.. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!", I screamed, through my second set of vocal cords because the first ones had tightened up.

Time blurred into itself as the medics came with alacrity, took one look at me, and injected me with a nutrient blood substitute, as I laid on the ground, writhing with pure pain. It **hurts**.. anything.. anything to make this end... I could think of nothing else. I felt myself being moved by experienced hands, as the medical team ensured that I wouldn't suffer from blood loss. They know who I am- and they know that's all they really have to do. I stopped caring what was around me. All I needed to do was just survive long enough to turn this faucet of overwhelming agony **OFF**...

About fifteen minutes later, the unreality of intense pain did end. I was being flown to Northberg in my own jet, by my own servants, after being carried to the plane (Fortunately it didn't take any beams, that thing is truly expensive to replace) by Enforcers. None of them said anything, but I could see the looks on their faces- worry mixed with some relief.

"Holy fuck...", muttered Paul, as he saw me lower my hand from the wound and take off the plastic, taped bandage with it as the hurt began to completely dissipate, as my body accepted the loss and began the process of undoing it. The bleeding had stopped a couple of minutes ago, and the wound was losing its edge and smoothing over. "Your arm... Howard.. we're going to have to do everything for you now.."

"Quite a few things... and it'll be one of the most annoying one and a half weeks of your lives.", I replied.

"That slow?", asked Sarah.

"One and a half weeks is by itself.. depends on what Northberg can do about it.", I said, grabbing three candy-coated nutrient bars from the back and eating them right up, and then drinking about half the water supply afterwards. Fuck, am I hungry... no surprise, considering what I lost, and what was slowly but surely growing back. A painful reminder of my own essential mortality. If I didn't feel that coming... I would have been cleaved... been in **half**, and my regenerative power can't take care of **that**. I'm lucky to still be on this planet. What the hell was wrong with me for coming there in the first place...

"Damn, Howard.. for once in my life, I'm glad I'm not you.", Billy said, wincing at looking at my removed arm.

"Relax.. nothing permanently lost.. not even my pride. But that **hurt**.." I started to feel giddy and realized it was the endorphin rush.

Paul started looking somewhat nervous quickly, as he realized something. "Howard.. you're not going to use Billy as.. well, uh.. spare parts, are you?"

I thought about it for a brief instant and decided against it. "No." Both of them sighed in relief. Not like it really affects me, and not like I won't just get it back anyway. Other than the obvious annoyances, the only thing it really affects me in is my Quake 2 strafing, and I can just call him in for that. Which I played half-heartedly (to me, anyway. The locals were, as usual, awed and pissed.) on some low-ping normal server while we went over there, as he did the movement. This is getting annoying fast. I can already see it now. I'll be waving my ever-growing stump at people as I use hand gestures, find it hard to eat with one hand, getting dressed will be a bitch... and every day will be spent waiting for it to finally get back to being part of my body so I can use it again, responding to 'How's the arm?' by showing my mutilated part... ugh. Damn it. But I'm not going to chop off Billy's

just because I can.

As the landing pad was cleared and the gates to Northberg opened before me, all I could think was 'Ah, fuck, wonder if they can pound it down to six days, or three if I sit in there..'. Imagine my relief with the Day Operator called on the screen with a smile on his face, telling me the good news- the limb was in a growth tank now. Damn! I was expecting it to be a piece of dead flesh, self-digested because of its own blood loss. I underestimated myself and the medical teams.

"How long, then?", I asked, grinning.

"With you? Six hours at most. That was lucky. Any closer and you could have lost some of your lung."

"It was going for my whole body.."

"Well, if it hit where it was going for, we wouldn't be here talking about it. We need to prep you." I left my servants in the plane, walked to the Northberg tram, and selected the medical ward. The tram passed the educational facility where I grew up and I looked in that direction, spurred into remembering fragments of my very early life.

The experiences of the children here now are very different from what they were for me. I didn't have any playmates, not even servants, nothing like the kind of friends these children have. I asked.. I know I asked for some at some point, I had to have. I think I must have been four when I was told I could never have any.. I don't remember what my reaction was, but knowing me now, I probably used the Latin version of 'bullshit' more than once. (Now, as Dominator, I can say that that whole shelter-the-Inheritor business is a fucking idiotic joke, the epitome of bullshit, but it doesn't really matter now, since I'm the last one..) I was moved to the island to live alone sometime when I was six. My imagination, my education, and my electronic entertainment stopped me from being bored.. but before Sarah, I very literally didn't have anyone to play with.

Of course, these kids aren't quite as superior as I am- not yet, I don't think- because they're only partially engineered, the modified sons and daughters of ordinary normal-born Illuminati. It keeps genetic diversity up and allows for a wide range of natural talents, since all their (highly improved) brains are slightly different. The critical stuff- the muscle density, the regeneration, the disease-proofing- is all the same, a fact I know not only from research but from logic. Regeneration has to be effectively perfect or you're asking for trouble.

I suppose I could visit while I'm here, but I'll do it some other time, hopefully on a day when I have both arms and lots of time to use them. The tram stopped, and I walked out and an Enforcer told me which room to go to (I know this place very, very well). The Operator was there waiting. "Are you ready, Howard?", he asked, as he beckoned me onto the soft bed. I laid down on it, enjoying its comfort- I might be here a while.

"As I'll ever be."

He attached a fluid-filled device to my arm, which did what I figured it had to- it re-opened the wound, destroying the 'second-reason' (necessary to stop bleeding) skin, making me scream in pain again (anaesthesia impedes regeneration). The fluid mixed with my blood, its chemicals further encouraging my cells to divide to my body's natural form. Likewise, my missing arm was surely in a similar tank somewhere, steadily drinking the substance and using it to reform itself. If kept in enough fluid for enough time, the arm would eventually grow into another clone. Despite the pain, I eventually fell asleep.

Four hours later, I was woken and informed that the lengths matched. The top parts, anyway. The beam's slash had been diagonal on the arm- while a corner could be attached to my body, only time and fluid would attach the rest. The connection process didn't feel like anything. The Operator

himself took notes on the healing- from the look on his face, it was exactly within design specifications. So they **do** make the plastic on these things clear so people can watch. It grew from the entire arm hacked off... to a deep cut.. to a smaller laceration.. to a small flesh wound.. to nothing in fifteen minutes. I felt a jolt deep inside and realized that was the nerves reasserting their relationship. The muscles, too, were completing their re-attachment. I flexed my hand and moved my fingers, reminding the nerves and muscles where they were and what they were supposed to be doing. Back in business.

Then he had asked me to test it, and I had lifted his fat ass into the air with it (he'd be even more obese if not for his own facility), gently playing throw-and-catch with him by the neck. He had laughed- most people would have felt fear, but the Day Operator knows no fear. I'm certain that every minute he watched me, he took notes. I idly wondered just how much of me is in the partially-engineered. He smiled as I put him down, my arm quickly losing all feeling and becoming just another part of my body.

"I read the public records.", he said, nodding slowly. "I'm surprised you just didn't nuke the place at first."

"So am I. I didn't foresee anything like that. They find his body?"

"Yes. Pieces of it. He was torn apart long before any of us got there."

"Any info on what caused it?"

"None. All kinds of info on manufacturing and the layers, what kind of shift in production created all those weird robots, what happened to the Enforcers.. but not the least fucking piece of evidence as to what ultimately caused it, and that's the second most important thing I'm worried about."

"I can guess the first. It's about me going and getting myself killed, isn't it."

He nodded. "Yeah. I think it's a subspecie of your hunger, Howard. Your own aggression can spell your doom if you go in too far, even if you know what you're doing. Dammit- I can't tell you what to do, you know that. But you laugh at death like it's something that just doesn't happen to you. You don't sit back and delegate, you rush forward and delegate, like a fucking king rushing into battle. If that is what kills you, we're going to have to make the next one.. less powerful, and God knows I don't want to do that." I almost laughed out loud at the Operator referring to God. Bad habits die hard.

"Because the power breeds the hunger and the aggression, right."

"Basically. I'm just glad that cell divided.. if it didn't, you might not be here now."

Wait a **fucking** second.. "That cell- you mean you didn't make two, or induce division, that it just **happened?**"

"Yes, Howard, it just happened. We didn't mean for there to be two of you. We were considering killing one, but I was full of myself, and didn't want to destroy any final engineered product. I came up with the idea for what to do with Billy in about three seconds. Looking back, I'm surprised it worked." His gaze faltered a bit, as if he were looking back into the past.

"**That**, Operator, was the very definition of a shocking revelation." Of all the shit in the world.. that was dumb luck? A one-in-a-trillion chance? Crap.. that's beyond amazing. Dumb luck! For something as important as that?! For everything that I've used and am going to use Billy for, he wouldn't be here if not for the luck of the draw. Yes, I suppose I'll tell him too.. he'll probably almost crap himself.

"Your mentor never knew. I didn't consider it that important that it was a mistake. Yes, I admit, it was an illusion to keep up our perfect image."

"I don't blame you for that. I **do** blame you for not deciding on twins earlier."

"So far, we are only human. And me worst of all. Since it's time to tell secrets, I'll tell you a couple that I've nuked out of the records." It couldn't be that important then. Probably something personal-history related. Higher-level Illuminati have the privilege of nuking (destroying completely and utterly, retroactively obliterating out of existence) their personal histories of things that happened before their Illumination, assuming they were taken from the normal world- which I'm getting a feeling he was. "Howard, I'm not a native-born Illuminatus. I was taken from normalcy." Yup. "I went through eight straight years of public school before someone caught my intelligence and I disappeared, went straight to the Missing Persons list. That's why I prefer being called Operator- I hate personalities." Of course. Because of our influence, personality is twisted out of its natural form in the normal world, and even with most Illuminati, childhood experiences still stick. "And for all my experience, I sometimes get the idea I'm not up to snuff. So if you think I'm saying that you're not perfect, which is undefined anyway, take a look around you." He's trying to manipulate me subtly with long-used methods, probably knowing that I'd detect it anyway. I can forgive him- he's doing it in my interest, which also happens to be his; he's trying to keep his greatest creation alive.

"Relax, Operator. If I was that suicidal, I'd be dead already. And if you weren't up to snuff, you'd be replaced.", I said with a smile.

Someone had the foresight to have a new suit brought here- my size to the tenth of a millimeter- and I kept the old, mutilated one as a reminder of my own mortality.

When I did finally return to the jet, Paul's eyes bugged out of his head, almost literally, as I sat between him and Billy with two arms intact. "Holy fuck.. already?"

"Yup."

"No way. That's insane."

"No, insane would be a fourth of that time. That would also be nice.", I replied with a grin, as Sarah chuckled and started flying us back home.

"Fucking.. you don't feel anything if I do this?" He was good at determining the spot where the two parts met, as he reached across my body and poked the area with the tips of his middle and ring fingers.

"I feel you poking me." Billy started giggling. Paul slowly withdrew his hand.

"Damn, Howard.. other than the arm, that operation was amazing. All that annoyance you saved.", Billy said.

"Yeah, no kidding."

"It could have been worse, you could have ran us down there like some RPG's dungeon run or something.", he noted.

"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.."

"Our cell division happened by chance." He immediately began laughing.

"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." He stopped laughing and took about a second to ponder my words.

"Okay, I laughed already. No joke?"

"No joke."

From mirth to rage in one second, the albinism adding to the look of pure fury. I'll have to remember that.. it's how others see me all too often. "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." Billy just sighed.

"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**.."

"Somewhere between 'low' and 'nil'.", Paul offered.

"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.." He got lost in deep thought, shaking his head slightly. I'll give it to him for this one- this place is just as fucked up as he's always been saying it is.

Chapter 38

"Guys, get your butts up here.", I called to my servants. Sarah arrived first, and I told her what I've been planning to do for the last couple of days.

"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.", Sarah said, mildly surprised at my plan.

"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.." I gave my servants the exact same explanation I gave to myself, as they sat next to me on the couch to see exactly where it was we were going.

"I get it, Howard. But what about someone seeing you?", Sarah said offhand. Apparently she didn't realize I planned this already.

"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.", Sarah said, examining the location.

"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." Billy and Paul started chuckling. Bah. Let them mock.

We left in ten minutes, the jet blasting to the Illuminated airport nearest to the destination. We sat in bored silence and I idly wondered what the place would really be like. It takes hundreds of normal designers to make a place like that, and it's designed for lots of entertainment for lots and lots of normals, which makes having the entire place to myself an excellent-sounding prospect. The flight took about two hours, and as we got out to meet the approaching white limousine, Billy and Paul looked around, perplexed. Perhaps that's because we're in the middle of a large military base with absolutely no one around except a few guard Enforcers.

"And no normal is watching us at all.", Billy finally said.

"And no normal can.", I replied, grinning.

"You guys are.."

"More ingrained into the system than you thought.", I informed him, as the limo's two back doors opened to reveal a comfortable interior. "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."

Sarah looked around the interior of the limo and nodded. "This is one of the newer models. It's got the face-changers in it. We're not going to look like ourselves through these windows." Paul's face betrayed his disbelief. Usually, Illuminated windows are tinted, with a polarized mirror- the sun or other lights always glare off the window so that normals can't see inside, but the glare is gone for the occupants. This is a new trick, one that I haven't heard of, but new tricks that I haven't heard of are part of the business.

The better part of an hour passed before we arrived, the gate automatically opening with a creak of metal. There was a lot of pavement, with markings everywhere for normals to park their cars- thousands of them, from the looks of it. But there were no normals, of course, and this would be a great place to play an extra-large game of roller hockey, the giant lightposts serving as obstacles. The limo parked next to several booths- must be for tickets to enter, I figured- and we got out and walked past them, between the guard Enforcers who had opened the gates, in the direction of the larger roller coasters.

I had ordered every self-sustaining automated system in the amusement park to be on, and I heard its strange, unique sounds and smelled a very weird foodlike smell even before we stepped through the garish front door. What greeted my eyes was even more obscenely demented than what greeted my ears. There is absolutely no way to describe it without individually mentioning every item. A large, rotating object with plastic horses and sleighs was to the right, lights flashing. On top of it was an enormous mutant-clown face glowing with an internal lamp. To the left was something extremely fucked up- it must have been a six-year-old normal's idea of the set of an old Western. Unfortunately, there'd be no gunslingers popping out of the woodwork to execute unsuspecting sheeple (how's **that** for entertainment, kids?). Directly in front of us was a twelve foot tall, monstrously ugly fountain with blue water spewing from its top. Some distance from us were the entrances to the large, brightly-painted coasters. There was far too much other stuff which I didn't even bother to look at. **Everything** made noise, and the smell of whatever-the-hell was strong. Yes.. **hell** is the proper word for this. I have an arcade in which to overstimulate my brain in an effort to

reset it. This place didn't try to reset my brain- it tried to fry in an inferno of far, far too many strange stimuli, none of which made sense. I blinked my eyes a few times and shook my head slowly back and forth, trying to develop the defenses that normals must have on their senses to possibly visit places like this.

Another solution, one involving lots of destruction, took its turn upon my thoughts. "Uuugh.. if I had the time and the secrecy I'd redecorate this whole place..", I said. I had the feeling my servants agreed with me and would joyfully offer specific ideas. I would have loved a rocket launcher right then. A really big, ugly one with the most powerful explosives known to bioengineered man. I was carrying the Micro, naturally- I was very, very tempted to use it- but secrecy must be preserved. Even at the cost of sanity.

"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.", I said, trying to make some sense of my surroundings. 'Never seen this much insanity' is an understatement. It's not even close. The dose of pure madness I got from walking through that bright red door was much larger than all the smaller doses I've received previously, **combined**. And I control the Illuminati.

"This place is hell.", Sarah said, sighing and matching my thoughts. "Guys, I've been trained to react to every strange light, every strange movement, every strange smell- what the hell is that, anyway?"

"Artificial food.", Billy answered simply. Ah. Must be more 'artificial' than 'food', though.

"..and every strange noise. You think about that.. and you look around you." She **can** react to them all, of course- she's Sarah, she could shoot every light and sound device in range- but it's an incredibly taxing and unrewarding thing to do.

"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.", I told him. "But for an engineered- no, more like anyone with quick reaction time and a better sense of æsthetics.. this is just plain lunus."

"When secrecy ends, so does this place..", Sarah said, again matching my thoughts.

"That's exactly what I was thinking.", Billy replied before I did.

"Yes, and we could use the metal to build a far superior one in its place. Come on.", I replied, jogging to the large coasters and they followed behind, eager to get out of the middle of the insanity and into a less-stimulating branch of it. A series of waist-high railings blocked our path from us to the coaster, as televisions hanging from the thin ceiling played cartoons. I didn't know what the hell to make of it- was it some weird game before the ride? My brain responded with a visualization of a very long line of normals, the railing determining their path. Ah, that's what they're for, and I've found that my brain is still working right after all. But it was a game for me, and I hand-vaulted from railing to railing, only touching the ground when absolutely necessary, moving as fast as possible. Billy and Sarah joined in, with Paul just crouch-running under them.

I took a look at the coaster from its start point. Large, yes. Lots of weird turns that no sane hominid would make in any kind of aircraft, yes. Safe, almost certainly- bailing out at eighty miles per hour, although lots of fun to look at, is no fun to actually try yourself.

Paul arrived then and pointed out something I should have noticed. "So who's going to operate this thing?", he asked. Who else?

"Enforcer, here quickly.", I said, and one became available and present in fifteen seconds. "Do you know how to operate this equipment?", I asked it.

"No."

"Learn." I was expecting it to perform a complicated system of trial-and-error tests on the button-laden equipment- instead it used its logic and pulled out a paper-bound manual from a shelf in the operator's booth. It took it twenty seconds to flip through it and understand the machinery- when it told me it was finished, Billy got into the front seat and he moved over to the right to make room for me. Sarah and then Paul got in the seat behind us. "Send us around this coaster's course once.", I commanded the Enforcer, and I felt the powerful, ponderous acceleration of the machinery. The coaster, I noticed, doesn't have its own engine. The tracks power it, and the third rail's electricity was apparently enough to match a subway car. As it started up, a padded bar clacked into place for us to hold on to, and I idly tested how much slow force it takes to push it back. It must take a strong normal.. no, wait..

IT HAS NO GIVE AT ALL!!

THIS IS A FUCKING TRAP!

"**BILLY, HELP ME!!**", I shouted, as he was only looking at me, not knowing what to do- he helped push it on my command, and the steel screamed and gave way under our combined strength, the bar much more tilted from my side as I had obviously put far more adrenalin into my push than Billy had.

I was about to shout to the Enforcer- assuming the Enforcer would even obey me now- when I heard Billy shout into my ear, "Don't!"

If he knows something I don't, now's a really, really good time to tell me! "Explain!", I commanded him immediately.

"They always go there! They're always there for everybody! They're a safety feature, you sheltered moron!", he said, very quickly. What... the... hell? Paul was laughing at me and I realized my mistake. With every safety device I've seen, a swift jerk is assumed to be the result of a crash or hard braking and the safety device will not give. A slow pull or push always will. These, apparently, don't work like that.

"Shit..", I said, as I realized another safety issue. Negative G-forces and rapid deceleration would throw me from the seat if I didn't provide enough counter-force. That's what the restraint bar was supposed to be for.

"You're not going to chicken out just for that, are ya?", Sarah asked, grinning, as Paul continued laughing in a low voice. Crap. Should I or not?

"Not sure calling it would be wise." Doing the ride without the bar in its proper place could mean a trip through the air- I'm not sure just how much strength I'd need to keep my body in the seat- and calling the Enforcer to stop it may mean a dangerous climb down with possible secrecy violations. I wish I knew more about how this damn thing worked, and I really wish that a certain someone would tell me these things before shit like that happens. "You should have warned me about this..", I told Billy, looking him in the eye.

He looked at me with some exasperation. "Fuck if I know your logic..", he replied, as we reached the top of the slope.

I looked down. "Oh, shit.", we all said, as I pushed hard against the bar to keep from falling too far forward- but I didn't need to, as the car began a very, very rapid decline, faster than gravity, my hair

being pushed back by the wind. I don't know if this is what the normals get or if the Enforcer is operating it at maximum speed. The coaster fell straight down before it continued on its journey. I didn't have to hang on as desperately for dear life as I'd worried, but if this place is overdue for safety inspections we're all dead. Hopefully, the one human agent I used to commission this place didn't leave any large sections of track missing. But hey, what's a hundred kilometers an hour impact onto solid concrete between friends? I didn't look anywhere but straight ahead. A speeding track is less terrifying than watching the horizon move upwards. Then the corkscrew loops came, and it pushed my body down and to the left, pressing my left gun against my side, and Billy pushed to avoid being pressed into me.

"Billy, when this is over, I'm going to command you as to what telling me things really means..", I told him, annoyed but not serious. I saw what was coming up next. A nice, big, nose-downward loop that would just love to yank us out of our seats with plenty of negative G's.

"When **this** is over, you can command my **carcass**, you assmeister!", Billy shouted. Sarah and Paul laughed uproariously. My forehead filled with blood as I held myself to the seat with my knees under the chair and my hands on the bar.

The rest of the ride was far more tame than the first parts, although there was a bit more loopiness near the end, which came as a relief, the car stopping exactly where it had started from. Sarah and Paul's bar moved upwards with a clack- the one in front of us simply made a pathetic click.

"Billy.. Illuminated safety devices do not work like that.", I told him, as I stepped out and tried to ease my muscle aches.

"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." The term 'sheeple' needs to be modified a bit. That 'le' doesn't belong there.

"Ugh."

There were two more large coasters in the park and we did them both- they weren't as large nor as fast as the first. I mentally cooked up plans for a park built for engineereders, one where moving scythes would need to be shot in order for the rider to survive. Normals would be annihilated, but that would be one hell of a lot of fun for us.

Unfortunately, it appeared that the coasters were the only fun thing in the park. There was a water area, but there was no way in Hell I'd get wet in this kind of weather. Having my body heat bled like a Nigerian oil pipeline is not my idea of fun. We wandered around fairly aimlessly and I pondered just saying fuckit and going home.

"Why haven't you guys gotten on **that** one?", Paul said, pointing to a ride that said Gravitron, something that looked like a closed-off merry-go-round to me. I looked at him quizzically, and Billy looked at the ride, thinking. "Don't you remember, Billy? When you stood up?"

"Oh, that's like **that** one! But that one was up in the air. Yeah, I remember.", he replied.

"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 by the memory and eagerly walking towards the entrance of the ride. We followed him, interested.

"That's right! And if I remember right they almost kicked me out of the park. If they only knew, right?", Billy replied, laughing a bit.

"Okay. What the hell are you two talking about?", I asked them.

"G-forces, Howard. We're talking about G-forces.", Paul replied. Well, I guessed that much..

As Paul opened the door to a large, circular room with lights and speakers in the ceiling and what appeared to be mostly-vertical beds along the walls, I immediately realized how it applies gravity: it spins. Ah. Billy, being fantastically stronger than everyone else there, would be able to stand up in an environment where others would have trouble even sitting properly, even with his denser body. Of course, it would be extra fun to run against the spin, neutralizing the gravity.

I immediately called over an Enforcer and ordered it to figure out how fast it was designed to go. Fortunately, the manual was again right there and it was able to figure it out immediately. "Twelve meters per second recommended, fourteen meters per second maximum.", it said.

"How many Earth gravities is that?"

"Users should experience approximately three at recommended and four maximum."

"Oh, of course. The room's ten meters wide.", I said, leaning on one of the vertical beds.

"Huh?", Paul said, baffled, as he leaned on a bed.

"He knows his physics, Paul.", Billy said. "What's the equation?", he asked me, as he chose an angled bed exactly opposite mine.

" V^2/R .", I answered. "Enforcer, keep these safe." I casually tossed it all my weapons; so did Billy. Even a few extra pounds is extremely undesirable. "Turn this thing on maximum speed." As if I'd accept anything less. The machine started up- some of the lights and the speakers didn't turn on. Good, the Enforcer wasn't commanded to turn those on and didn't. I'm going to try this and I don't want to be annoyed. I decided to let it spin up first- would be too easy otherwise- and I watched a metal plate go over the exit (safety, I reminded myself- if there wasn't one, normals who got stupid would fly out the door) as we started moving counter-clockwise. I stopped leaning on the vertical bed and started laying on it, as sideways became down and I saw the Enforcer calmly sitting in the operator's seat on the wall. It wasn't feeling shit for force; velocity decreases linearly with distance from the center. The angled beds were on rollers, and moved backwards towards what would normally be the ceiling, and as I felt my own mass pin me to what was now the floor I grinned and realized how much power I'd need to pick up three of myself and stand.

"Is this what it's like to be normal?", Sarah asked, as it reached maximum spin and she sat up with effort. I moved my body so that I was leaning against a number of beds, with my head counter-clockwise of my legs.

"Worse in many ways, probably better in others, it doesn't.. correspond.", Paul replied. "But for you it's probably closer to it."

I sat up and got to a squatting position, mild pain in my legs and back. I tried to stand up, start running.. it was difficult, I opened up power.. and I stood up and started walking laboriously, my power screaming with what looked like a simple thing. I moved upwards along the beds and tried to move faster and faster, knowing that the more relative speed I accumulated, the less gravity would affect me. Billy was watching me and decided to follow my every move. Good choice. I usually know what I'm doing.

But I was getting dizzy, lightheaded, blind.. of course! All the fucking blood's rushing out of my head! I had to do it now or collapse. I forced my legs to move faster, faster, push against the real floor, start moving.. and the spin gradually went away as I actually started running on the real floor and the usual amount of blood returned to my brain. Billy continued to match what I did.

"That's not four G's where you guys are, is it?", Paul asked.

"We're not moving, so it's just Earth.", I answered. My running was about four meters per second, as I orbited the operator's section fairly leisurely.

"Heh, we beat this one. I wonder if we could do it at five?", Billy considered, smiling.

"We'd have to fuck with the machine, but do you really want to try?", I replied. I sure as hell didn't want to, but I wondered what would happen if he did. He'd probably pass out if he got up.

"No, actually. That wasn't nice to my head. Or the rest of me, for that matter."

"Enforcer, slow it to a stop and return our weapons.", I told it, and the spin gradually slowed. I probably could have just told it to turn it off- I doubt the thing would stop immediately (and likely kill or injure every normal inside) under any circumstances.

"Aww, but I liked feeling helplessly crucified with glue!", Paul said with more than enough sarcasm.

"You **did**? I'll have to keep that in mind.", I replied. Just maybe, if I get really bored..

The Enforcer handed back our guns and I considered what to do next. Hmm.. ah, an arcade. The full-sized arcade machines in the basement are, surprisingly enough, not updated. It'll be interesting to see whether the normals' games have gotten better or (more likely, given the usual behavior of normals) worse.

Worse, I decided, as I only had to briefly glance at many of the screens to tell that they were crap before finding something worthwhile. I'll start playing.. wait, it's asking for 'credits'.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Billy. "Damnit.. I bring everything useful and forget that these need money.", I muttered.

"Heh heh.. well, you could just..", he replied, leaving the last part an unspoken act of violence. Bah. It's not breaking it open that's the issue. Of course I can break it open. But I don't know where the internal wiring is and I'm likely to chop the whole thing to bits. But if I went for where the tokens are..

"That's exactly what I'm going to do." I was going to rip the locking mechanism out with a fist-blade, but I realized that I'd jam it shut and didn't do damage. Then I just punched through the door, but, surprisingly, the metal was too strong for me to cut through after I punched; puncturing is much easier than cutting. Fuck it, I decided. I pulled a gun.

"Howie, let a professional handle this.", Sarah said, picking up a paperclip. I'll just have to see this for myself. She bent the paperclip and used half of it as a tension bar and the other half as the lockpick, easily popping the lock. I knew she was good. I didn't know she was **that** good.

The game, unfortunately, was not worth the effort. "Worthless. To think real money was spent making it.", I said, disgusted. Too many unpreventable hits and far too much lameness. Normals might say they hate lameness, but they're not going to slay who they consider lamers.

And, as if on cue, I spotted four normal teenage lamers as I walked out of the arcade. So did an Enforcer, which simply said, "Get out of here. The park is closed." No shit. Apparently my human agent didn't order enough Enforcers to patrol all parts of the park at all times. But I don't fault him- who's dumb enough to break into an amusement park where people are apparently testing it?

"Dude.. if the park is closed then who are they?", one of the younger ones said, flaunting his stupidity the way his female peers do their breasts. The Enforcer didn't answer him. I decided to number him 1, his younger friend 2, and the two older boys 3 and 4.

"Enforcers, ignore them.", I ordered. I came here for entertainment, after all.

"Enforcers?!", 1 exploded. "Who the hell are you, the manager's faggot kids or something?" Fucking hell, normals are idiotic. Can't you see the way it talks, you fuck? Can't you tell that the thing near you is either a very professional-acting human or isn't human at all? Can't you tell that I'm so far above you on the evolutionary scale that my piss will be at terminal velocity before it reaches your thick head?

Apparently one of them was trying to climb the evolutionary gap. "Ryan, I think they're something a bit different than that. Let's just get out of here.", 3 said, edgy, paranoid, and ready to break and run.

"I wanna know what the hell's going on. Dude, who **are** you?", Ryan (hmm, nah, I think I'll just keep thinking of him as 1) said, his lack of fear due to stupidity and not real bravery.

"And what's with the fingers?", 2 joined in. You really want to know?! Fine! I'll show you!

I rushed them and grabbed 1 and 2's throats, lifting them up into the air easily. "Hey, let them go!", 4 shouted, but then his voice was choked off as he realized that I was indeed holding two of his friends up in the air by the throat. But I did let them go, tossing them to the ground and hitting 4 in the cheek with the back of my hand, making a sound like a ball player hitting a home run. 4 clutched his broken cheek in screaming agony. It's a good thing we're near the center of the park- I don't want secrecy damaged because of this assclown.

1 screamed- an incredibly **annoying** scream- and shouted, "Dude, what the hell are you?!", scrambling to his feet. Can't you figure it out? I could have just killed him, but I realized that there's a normal here who needs to be taught a lesson.

"Paul, get over here, I'm going to teach you how to kill today.", I said, and I heard his approach. 3, I noticed, was still standing there with his feet rooted to the ground, paralyzed with fear, watching with wide eyes. Ryan had no such fear and tried to punch me. I was half-tempted to let him hit and feel the density of my bones that way, but in annoyance I just grabbed his slow-moving hand and squeezed it. Everything from his wrist to his fingertips simply went squish, and he went from hero wannabe to screaming child, whimpering for his mommy, in half a second. 2 was on his hands and knees, trying to get up, and I gave him a sharp kick to the stomach, causing him to orally expel blood.

1 decided that his best chance of survival- as if he **had** any chance of survival!- was to get on his knees and inarticulately beg for my mercy. I actually do have mercy, but it's in such short supply that I can't be bothered wasting it on idiots like this one.

"Paul, punt his face like a football player.", I commanded him, stepping out of his way. It was actually a very nice hit for someone like him, the steel toe snapping 1's nose and sending him on his back, knocking his head against the concrete with a coconut-like sound. 3 took the moment to lose his paralysis, but retained all of his fear and he screamed as loud as he possibly could and ran as fast as I've seen any normal run.

"Enforcers, bring him back to me.", I said, pointing at him. His running speed did not even come close to the Enforcers' and he was brought back, an Enforcer on each arm, screaming like crazy. In a way it reminded me of the struggle from the suicide command Damien had on Paul.

"That one might have some use... he did figure out you were something more than you seem.", Billy said.

"Hmm.. I wonder... could we have uses for this one?", I said, looking at him.

"I don't think so, Howard.", Sarah replied, and of course she was right.

"Pity.", I said, shrugging and slamming his nose deep into his brain, flattening his face with a snap of bone. The Enforcers, realizing that they couldn't further carry out their 'bring him' command as he was no longer there, dropped his corpse with a thump. Paul gasped and I took the opportunity to teach him.

"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." He should know. "Now, you see the whimpering one on the ground there?", I said, gesturing to 2.

"Yes.."

"Kill him, without weapons.", I ordered him. A daunting task, but he can do it. And he tried hard, kicking hard and repeatedly with the steel toe, and I heard the telltale snap of skull. However, it wasn't a big enough break, and 2 continued moaning. Paul completely flipped out, grabbed 2's skull, and just bashed it into the concrete again and again until he was sure the victim was dead. "Good. Now let's see..." Who's next, and who to save for last? I'll let Sarah decide.

"Now, Sarah, show Paul how you do it." Sarah grabbed 4's head with both hands- he started to say something beginning with P- and she snapped his neck in a single move and dropped the body much as the Enforcers had dropped 3. I realized how angry I was about thirty seconds ago, and how much the fresh scent of blood and the agonized screaming of 1 relaxed me. I considered chowing down and decided against it. If these guys eat the same kind of junk that I smelled coming into the park, I don't want to consume the same chemicals after their partial decomposition. Their blood's probably loaded with drugs anyway.

"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." Paul ended 1's screams with a single, silenced shot in the center of the forehead. 1's lips pursed before he realized he was dead.

"Howard- did you have to do that?!", Paul shouted as loud as permissible. I was about to reprimand him for being an idiot but I realized that he meant the brutality and not the killing per se.

"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 took special care not to list the brutality as even relevant.

"I **know** they were supposed to be dead anyway.. but.. dammit, you just killed them like... like baby chickens or something!", he said, pushing the issue.

I sighed. "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.." Ugh. Okay.. I'm not in the mood for this and he should have already figured it out, but I told myself I'd teach him a lesson and I'm going to follow through on that.

"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." He'll have to, if he's going to be present when the **real** party begins and I declare the End of Secrecy.

"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.

Unfortunately, the question is what to do with the bodies after I've killed them. Fuck it. Not my problem. I called up the public-control Illuminatus responsible for this geographic area and ordered him to take care of it- they died in a tragic amusement park accident after trying to operate a ride. The Enforcers I'm using here would also obey him (or he could call up the agent I used and get him to make them obey), so I told him to just use those and reminded him to make sure the Enforcers cycled properly.

The limo had sat there the entire time, the Enforcer patiently waiting for our return. "Not nearly as good as you hoped, Howard?", Sarah asked as it drove away, the gates creaking open once more.

"Not nearly as good, but many times as weird. Absolutely freakish.", I answered.

"All a matter of perspective..", Paul said.

"No, Paul.", Billy 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.", he said, his tone remarkably like mine. And I put a new meaning to the term "tourist trap"...

"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. A tiny part of it can be siphoned from the controlling corporation.. but that's no reason not to level the place.", I said. "Let's see.. how many American dollars were spent on construction.." I checked with the mini-screen in the limo. 5.6 billion American dollars..

Sarah spoke casually, with an air of having seen it all too many times. "I've seen normal balance sheets before, Howard. 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. One of my kills did that." That's insane.. it's their business, their livelihood. Even as normals, you'd think that they'd not burn up their own money. I've seen the manufacturing costs of various things. Everywhere in the world, something is wasted, but.. like that?

"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?", Paul said, taking his turn to instruct instead of learn. Good! Let's see if he has any real knowledge or if he's just talking out his ass.

"Parts and labor.", Sarah immediately replied. "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, obviously thinking of everything he would say.

"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." I groaned. It turns out that I'm very well-versed in this topic after all. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"That last one- yes, logic would dictate that normals do the infighting shuffle as well.", I said.

"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." My surprise at hearing him tell me that was compounded by the fact that he might actually be right.

"Paul.. I'm not going to again." Once is quite enough for that sort of freakishness.

"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

January 15, 1999, boredom galore, sitting on the couch with Sarah on my left, Billy to my right, and Paul at the far right end, *Blade* playing on the screen for the third time, all non-urgent messages put off until later, veal in hand, Fido at my feet eating the gristlier parts, I relax, go out of focus with reality (and the movie) for a while, and ponder things.

Why the fuck do I feel so much like some superhero? Superheroes in general all have superhuman powers (Check!), access to powerful weapons and technologies (definitely Check!), run around with high risks of getting killed (big fat Check!), are always on call (Check, and that pisses me off still), get into and out of terrifying, near-death situations (Check!!), and command high degrees of respect. (Tehehe... I think that counts as a check too.) The only differences seem to be in the morals department; I don't have any and I don't really give a fuck how many sheeple croak unless it disrupts things. I suppose that makes me more of a supervillain, then. I'd power-laugh, but I reserve that for special occasions.

The action begins, and I chuckle as some poor sap gets his ass handed to him by the vampires to the tune of techno music. Mmm, blood showers. I chuckle louder as Blade walks in and starts randomly disintegrating vampires. Sarah is counting something, probably mistakes, under her breath. Yup, had Blade cut the fancy shit, he could have gotten lots more frags. But some of the fancy shit was funny, no matter how staged. Billy was simply grinning and licking his lips, his usual response to violence.

I'm like that hero, a bit. Only I can call down men and firepower to do my dirty work for me. The people- and the dog- in this room alone can destroy platoons of normal soldiers. And that's nearly unarmed. And we're not even grown up yet. In the future... will everyone be like this? I do not ponder that question idly... I can always wait until later to decide... but ultimately, the decisions of the future rest at least partially on my unblemished hands. It would destroy my uniqueness, surely. But to generate people... to make everyone, in Huxley's words, an Alpha Double Plus... evolve mankind at thousands of times his normal rate... the implications are staggering.

And an implanted society of such...

I think I will put pondering this question off until later. In fact, much later, when I get the resources and information I need to properly decide it. Let's leave the uninformed judgments to the normals, shall we? Besides, if all the fuckers have our speed, wits, and strength, then we wouldn't be able to destroy platoons of them, now would we? Of course, I won't need to..

The screen hissed, signifying a non-urgent communication. The movie ignored it.

Fido left mid-movie, going back to his den and the puppies therein.

When it finally ended in a large splash of blood and gibs, I checked out the caller. Someone answered immediately - wearing black, but with a white hood and white gloves. Strange. As he spoke, it was readily apparent that this, indeed, is an Illuminatus. The only ones of us who wear black are either servants - or Satanists, the LaVeyan kind. This guy was fairly obviously the latter.

"Dominator.. I have a request.", said the fourth level, fifty-year-old man named Dimitri Luxington.

"You and six thousand other people."

"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."

"And which dream is this, Beelzebub boy?" All three of my servants repressed chuckles. The joker was going to give me a correction on his religion then decided against it. I find needless aggravation to be great on whiners. If they mean it, and they need it, they'll keep going. If they're just here to beg, they usually go away. Usually. Of course, I have a special place at the end of my Micro for those that don't.

"The dream of created personalities in genetic constructs. Think of what we could do with that!" He made it sound as if it was an original idea. Can't he just use Enforcers? They don't have personalities, but the ones used to replace normals can act as if they do.

"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."

"We already did. Northberg has it on 'medium priority.' It'll take years." I'm surprised it's that high. Most of the qualities of personality-created constructs are equaled by implanted servants.

"And your poor, mortal body isn't going to stick around long enough to ever see them in action." He gasped a bit, fiddled with his robe, then finally decided I already knew and decided to speak the truth.

"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." He became a Satanist after 30? There's a rare bird for that group. "I'm going to die, really damn soon, widespread brain cancer. They're already using the drugs, but the disease will eventually conquer." His voice grew lower and softer with every word. "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!" He started sobbing and crying. No one in the room gave him any sympathy. His dramatic effect simply didn't work. Of course, some of his brain cells are dead already, otherwise he probably would have thought up something better.

"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."

"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." So not that many cells have died after all. "But please..."

"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. Now go follow your own Rule 2." I turned the screen off.

"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?"

"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."

"What does he have to lose?", pointed out Paul.

"Not a damn thing. But he should have considered that I can make his last years on earth a living hell."

"I thought he liked that, I mean, he is a Satanist.", he replied in a half-joking tone. The rest of us gave low chuckles.

"Not that kind of hell, Paul. Electricity straight to the pain center. Make him hurt like nothing else can." Paul would actually have been scared if he believed that it had a chance of being used on him.

"Bad fate. Glad Damien didn't have that shit..."

"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."

"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 almost screamed with his mouth stark open.

"He could have. 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."

"Howard... I don't get traumatized.", he said in a low voice. I chuckled darkly, knowing that if he could get really mentally fucked up, he would have probably already done it the moment he was implanted, and further with Damien's abuse. Odd circumstances do different things to different normals. Threats of death fuck up the mind, I've seen that fact demonstrated to me. The brain demands to live when physics demands it die. Chemistry gets altered when people sincerely

believe they are going to die. Trauma sets in and psychological damage is the result. Permanent maiming (or what looks like it) also has effects, but that depends even more on the normal's personal brain configuration. Some guys lose a foot and their willpower. Other guys lose most of both legs and run marathons on the remainder and some prosthetics.

A Satanist with firm beliefs in natural selection and human order starts whining like a petulant child when he realizes that time is running out- he is an Illuminatus, so societal reactions mean nothing compared to his personal want, which is commendable because it takes **balls** (or serious stupidity) to whine at a bloodthirsty young Dominator with way too much time and power on his hands. Paul hasn't been affected by any of that, and he doesn't seem too weird to me. Then again, I'm so used to weird that normal really has no relevance, except when dealing with the masses of human filth, aka the sheeple, aka the Great Unwashed. But Paul isn't any of those. Billy's taste in friends, and my choice to keep him, were good.

"I know, that's why I put your DNA into the database as prime candidacy. That reminds me, I never did ask- you got any siblings?"

"An older brother, off in college... Howard, you're **not** going to-"

"Probably not. The Illuminated demand isn't as high as you'd think." Mostly because the Illuminati I've come into contact with are too used to Enforcers, and true humans as servants would be an unwelcome change for quite a few.

"Howard, you wouldn't want to. His older brother's a stupid asshole."

"Yeah.. and that reminds me of something else, something I never understood.. Paul, tell me everything you know about sibling rivalry."

"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, 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."

"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 held out a fist and smacked his left forefinger against his right forefinger, going down his fingers simultaneous with saying every item on his list. "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!" It was my only reply. Damn... the masses really will squabble unto the end, as I've heard a 30-something Illuminated lady shout at the rest in a meeting a few years back. I thought she was exaggerating a bit. If they do this with their own families, no telling what they'd do with their own nations.

"No kidding."

"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 with some ire in her voice. She hates it when normals are too stupid. It makes her job too easy.

"They really are stupid like that, Sarah. And you know that.", he said, using his left forefinger again, pointing at Sarah. "And he knows that. And after listening to me say that combined with everything else he knows, he definitely knows that. And after I've thought about it, I know that.", he continued, pointing at Billy, me, and himself. "But they don't know that.", he finished, throwing his left thumb over his shoulder. I just sighed.

"It's because it's their whole world, Howard.", Billy said, and I turned to look at him. "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." Billy was telling me that because he thought it would be hard for me to comprehend. Which it is. "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." Billy's explanation was almost hypnotic in the imagery it evoked for me. No wonder so many techniques work that shouldn't. They never learned to see beyond their own noses. "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. 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 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?" I nodded. Holy shit. No wonder the normals are so screwed up. How could they possibly be otherwise? I mean, yes, they're normals, they don't have the abilities, travel, or access I do. But for their entire worlds to be closer to prison (it was the only analogy I had) than anything else..

"Billy, let's play something fast and aggressive enough to get my mind off this for now.", I commanded, and he eagerly found one I've never heard of with a Japanese name, the controllers shot out, he set it to the maximum speed, enemy density, and enemy durability, and we were quickly beset by a shitload of pixelated foes, with no helpful third dimension to dodge in. Sibling rivalry wouldn't even be a joke here- even with commands, as was proved in the amusement park, I can't make him use his adrenalized power, and it was those super reflexes we both needed in abundance to have a chance against this madness. Thirty minutes or so later, over a vast field of little-dot stars, we killed the incredibly well-armored final boss. Sarah and Paul, who I hadn't even noticed were watching, clapped.

"Billy, I have an observation to make."

"Yes?"

"That was **totally insane!**"

"I know. Want to play it again, Howie?"

"Okay!"

Chapter 40

I woke up as usual, ready to have fun and kick ass, ready to give orders and settle disputes.

Something's different, though. Something important. I need something, and for what has got to be the first time in my life I don't know what it is. Is it need of some commodity? Power, maybe? No.. something more primal. Human companionship? Something like that, but not quite. I got up, threw open the door (Clang!), and went to get some food. Maybe Sarah can cook it for me.. wait, Sarah..

I looked down at my crotch and instantly realized what I needed. It had to happen sometime. Sarah was already downstairs, making the usual food.

"Sarah... I need something." Something in my voice- not to mention my crotch- clued her in.

"Is this what I think it is?", she called back up.

"You know and I know that depends completely on what you're thinking.", I said, in an even more lascivious tone.

"Howard..", she said, coming up the stairs, "I don't think 'thinking' has anything to do with this." I just grinned at her. "Enforcer, finish the cooking.", she called down. "At least you're not an adult yet.", she muttered in my direction. I grinned some more. Size does matter.

We got in my room, and she immediately took off her blouse and threw it into the corner, revealing her body, and once again I studied her features. B-cup breasts backed up by rippling muscle. A slender, fatless waist with no navel. Hips, quite literally, of death. "I want total privacy until I say otherwise.", I called into the intercom.

"It's about time you got around to this. I was beginning to get worried.", Sarah said, lying on her back. "There is one thing I'd like to ask you for, though."

"What's that?"

"Can you at least pretend to be making love to me while we're doing it?"

"Heh, heh, heh... of course.", I said, lunging toward her and giving in to my animalistic desires. She took me in her arms, being careful not to cut me with her razor nails, and wrapping her legs around me. I took her in similar fashion, hugging her tightly, then began to thrust into her, while caressing her face with my tongue. The bed bucked and heaved along with us. She put her lips to mine and we french-kissed at the same time we fucked.

The pleasure was like nothing else I had experienced. Feeling her firm breasts under my chest, feeling her hands on my back, feeling her mouth in mine, and feeling my penis do what it's designed for, all caused me to open up with lust- and power.

I went faster, licking her teeth, rubbing the inside of her vagina with my painfully-hard dick, and feeling her up with my hands. She began to moan. I put both my hands on her moving butt as we continued to do it, feeling the muscles move in and out, in and out. She grabbed ever-tighter, her grip reinforced by her pleasure. She moaned and moaned- and then with a deft move, flipped us over, and suddenly I was on the bottom, her breasts hanging down towards me as she continued to thrust with me. Thirty seconds later, I performed the same maneuver, using my left hand and arm with power and speed, flipping her on her back again. It was another minute of pure heaven, until finally my still painfully-hard penis could no longer tolerate it and I came, around the same time she did. I screamed with absolute echo. Now I know why it's on the forefront of everyone's mind all the time. She moaned my name, several times, as her entire body began to ripple. We stayed going like that for another full minute and she came two more times, until I got off her and laid down on the bed to her right, gasping for breath.

"Why didn't anyone tell me it would be like that?", she sighed, as she breathed forcefully, her breasts heaving with every breath.

"Probably.. heh, heh... because you didn't know. And neither did I. We'll have to do that again soon.", I said, grinning, my bodily needs fulfilled. "Privacy over.", I called into the intercom, and walked out the door.

Billy was waiting for me, having known exactly what I was doing. "May I?", he asked.

"You may." There was no need for clarification. He closed the door behind him and I went downstairs to eat breakfast.

I severely doubted he'd have any reservations about having sex with her, and a loud "**YES!!!**" from upstairs several minutes later confirmed that. Billy walked down shortly afterwards, smiling, and went to eat.

"What if she gets pregnant?", he asked me, to my amusement. The answer was a complete 'Duh!', but he could be concerned about other things to go with it.

"Well, then she has a baby! Seriously, there's nothing to be worried about.", I told him.

"Don't be a dipshit, Paul.", we overheard Sarah say. "Even if I had become a first, I probably would have done that sooner or later anyway." Billy and I grinned at each other and continued to eat. She came down wearing her blouse, and ate almost as much as we did.

That was the only really new thing of the day- twice the buzzer rang, the first was the usual resource-conflict crap, but the second was some idiot who wanted to complain about some other guy- Billy took that one. At first I thought I missed his actual, logical complaint about the other guy, but when Billy said "Shut the fuck up.", I realized he didn't have one. Those are some pretty magic words. A lot of crap can be solved by people following those four little words. Billy then hilariously said that he'd flip a coin to see if he'd kill the asshole or not for wasting his time, and clicked off the screen. There was no such coin, of course, and Billy didn't actually intend to kill him, just teach him a lesson.

Of course, we had sex with Sarah every so often after that.

Chapter 41

Well, I realized as I woke up, today I go through with it. A bit less than a week ago, I had an incredible idea, something really manipulative, something I'll never forget doing- the conclusion, on camera, will see to that. I laughed to myself when I thought of it- did I really want to go through with this? By definition it won't accomplish anything productive, and it's requiring me to declare a day that I won't be interrupted. Ah, fuck that. I want to do it, and the results will be interesting if nothing else, so I will.

This is going to require something new of me: I've never had to **act** before in my life. Leaving subterfuge and misdirection to the Levels, I've been bullishly straightforward, unwilling to play any games of lies or deception. It's made me a feared, respected leader, because anyone who deals with me, friend or foe, knows that I will always make good on my promises and claims, not even deceiving them in the least about my goals. I don't think the day will ever come where I have to. Like playing a reputedly impossible game or performing a supposedly impossible stunt, I just wanted to see if I could do it.

The first thing I had to do was set up the players. I was early to rise, so I quietly called Paul out of Billy's room, and called Sarah as well, and gave them a series of instructions. They didn't like the commands given them- not a bit- but they knew what I was doing and why, and they couldn't give anything away.

"That's just plain.. **evil**, Howard. Not mean, or cruel, but just evil.", Paul said, and I smiled.

Sarah shook her head. "I will be very surprised if he falls for it. I know you're not going to stop if-"

"Yes, I will. If he actually thinks I'm joking or toying with him, even if he doesn't remember what day it is, I'll stop." I'm evil, not terribly unfair. "Now, go back to your rooms, and start pretending like I told you." They wouldn't have to pretend very much, at least not at the beginning. It's the end part that has all the detailed stuff.

After five minutes, I walked into Billy's room with a slight smile on my face, as if I was trying to hide something dire. "Hey, Billy. Let's have some fun today.", I said to him, cordially, and he woke up. "We can keep going until 5:00."

"What happens then?", he predictably asked.

"I'm not going to tell you.", I said. That phrase clued him in that something was definitely up.

About the having fun part, I wasn't kidding. Breakfast was bacon, sausage, eggs, and pancakes. We played everything we wanted to play electronically, then went to the sub and enjoyed the bottom of the ocean. It's a nice place, and the dolphins are always curious about just what the heck a metal object is doing moving on its own. We watched a translated Japanese animated movie, then it was time to eat again, and I had Sarah cook an Illuminated feast of things we eat just because we can, blending rare spices and foods from opposite ends of the world. The whole time, I was acting, setting up the stage for the illusion at the end. I made sure Billy was having fun, and more importantly, I let him know it. I kept looking at clocks as well, as if utterly worried about the time.

"Are you still not going to tell me what happens?", he asked at 4:30, as we continued to play. He was worried, damn worried, not having a clue what was to befall him. I love this, I absolutely love it. The question 'Can I do this?' has almost been answered. All I need to do is a little more and finish this up.

"I'm so sorry, Billy.", I said, shaking my head, tears growing in my eyes. It's so hard to do that! "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." The statement was designed to freak him out, but I wasn't done yet. "But only if you want to."

"What?", he asked. He understood, he was just shocked.

"Do you really want to play with me, Billy? You can answer that however you want. It's up to you." That question had two purposes; it was part of the act, but I really did want to know the answer.

He thought about it. "Yes. Yes, Howard, I'll go outside and play with you." I smiled and giggled, crying a bit more.

"Thank you. I'll always remember that you said that.", I told him, and that was true. "We'll go anywhere on the island you want." Billy led me to the stream, which, at the bottom of the waterfall, was wide and deep. Naked, we swam in the cool water, enjoying the constant pitter-patter of the steadily draining stream above our heads. There are fish in here, eating bugs walking on the water's surface. Plop! There goes another one. I shook my head, as if trying to pay attention to the scenery and not to think about the horror at 5:00.

Time passed quicker rather than slower and I knew when about twenty minutes were up. "It's time to go in.", I said, and we put our clothes back on and headed back. I could feel the worry and the fear dripping off him like the water from his hair. I forced my anticipation down- he's gonna go absolutely nuts when he finds out what it is.

"Paul, Sarah. Come here, please.", I said over the intercom. I wasn't looking at Billy, but I knew that he was freaking out- what the hell could possibly cause me to say 'please', especially to servants? Paul looked kind of nervous, which is fine. It's the source of the nervousness that Billy doesn't know about. Sarah acted as she always does. To her, pretending anything is easy. Commands time. "Paul, stand right there, facing the camera, and then don't try to move anything below your neck.", I told him, pointing to a spot on the floor in front of the camera the nearby Enforcer had set up. "Sarah, stand right there, same command I gave Paul.", I said, pointing to another spot. "Billy, stand right there, same command I gave Sarah." I hesitated, as per the script. "And.. Billy? I forbid you to look to your left."

Paul's cue happened just as Billy freaked. "What the hell is going to happen?!", Billy shouted, as Paul yelled, "Howard, what's going on?!"

Now it's my line again. "You know how I can't stand up to all of them at once? 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, on cue. This is stretching believability indeed. Even though I'll never act like a parent for it, the child is from two of the most biologically superior beings on Earth. There's no way in hell I'd let it die before it's even born.

"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."

I didn't expect Billy to take this silently, and he didn't. I was expecting him to be louder and more disbelieving, but he used steady, solid logic instead. "Bad decision, Howard. Very bad. You're losing your best assets, and you know it. 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." He was right, of course, on all counts, making my next act unbelievable indeed.

"I can't, Billy. Not this time. You think I haven't thought about this?" If he was going to say 'You would have never come to the conclusion to do this. This is fake. You're playing a joke on me.', now would be the time. He didn't. "Uuuggh... Shit, Billy. It's been fun. I wish I could have had you longer.", I said, giving him a hug. He was in silent disbelief- on some level he **knew** this couldn't be happening- but he never vocalized it.

"NO WAY man! No way! No fucking way!!", Paul shouted, as I turned on the camera. I'll give him one thing- he remembers his lines well.

"Paul, be quiet.", I commanded him, silencing him until the end of the joke. I walked in front of the camera, and faced it. "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.", Billy told me bluntly. If I was actually doing this (a thing I can barely consider), I would have silenced him then, but I wanted to give him the chance to call me out until the end of the joke. "You really just don't." In that, he is utterly correct. I'm doing this because it's fun!

"Do it to Paul.", I commanded the Enforcer, sniffing. Bang! The sound was very realistic, and Paul's crumpling to the floor was good enough.

"**NOOOOOOOO!!!!**", Billy screamed, desperately, his face a horrible mask of pain and despair. It was all I could do to keep from grinning instead of my sorrowful act. He's going to be so pissed in a few seconds.

"Enforcer... do it to Sarah." Although her falling down was completely uncontrolled, she was almost silent anyway.

I gave Billy just a bit of time. His brain was thinking desperately, just not in the right direction. He was looking for something to say, but I'd already 'killed' the other servants, and he knew I wouldn't start something like that I didn't finish. His next words were something I had never expected to say. "Howard.. I forgive you.." I've never cared about anyone's forgiveness or lack thereof before, but from him it was different, even if originating from a carefully orchestrated sham. I smiled at him, just a bit.

I pointed at him. "Do it to Billy." Bang. He didn't move at all, just stood there, wondering why he wasn't dead.

And now to drop the hammer. "Billy, what's today's date?"

Totally bewildered, he thought about it. The look on his face was priceless as he realized what had really just happened. "April first.", he concluded. "**You son of a bitch!!**" I laughed and laughed and laughed, bending over and holding my sides. Perfect! Flawless victory! For a moment I was amazed that I had actually managed to pull that off. The question 'can I act?' has been answered, and distinctly in my favor. "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." The camera, although rather large by our standards, was quite real. And it's still going. "You can move and look to the left again. Joke's over." That phrase ended the joke for Sarah and Paul; Sarah got up, and Paul just laid there, as if dead.

"Paul, get up.", I commanded him. "I know, you wanted to at least fool me a little bit back. Nothing doing." Paul sighed. "Howard.. I forgive you..", I imitated Billy, and laughed again. If he had only **known!**

"Shut the fuck up, you goddamned asshole!", Billy shouted, completely pissed off. "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.", I said. He wasn't enraged- I'd know immediately if he was- just in the ultimate state of aggravation.

"Fuck you dude, of course I'm pissed! How the fuck could you **DO** that to me?!" Have you forgotten who I am, Billy? It was easy! "You weren't just playing with me- you were fucking.. **PLAYING** with me!" I laughed at that. I think the right word would have been 'toying', as that kind of is what he is. His embarrassment and humiliation (wow, I didn't even know that was possible) were lightened off his face by a slight smile. "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." I grinned at him. Doing this was, indeed, worth it.

I turned the camera off, giggling. "Billy... I think even you are going to laugh at this someday.", I said, smiling, gently patting him on the head to show that I meant this in fun, not to hurt or humiliate him. He smiled in spite of himself.

"I can't believe you fell for that.", Sarah said to him. "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.", I told him, and that got him more- he knew I was telling the truth. "A couple of times I thought you were going to get it, especially near the end." He so easily could have. "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..", Billy began.

"Unwilling actors. Completely.", Paul said. I couldn't have done this without their cooperation, and that's one thing I'm always assured of.

"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.", I said. If I was actually asked by the Levels to do that, I'd pull the strongest weapons I own and engage in a three-engineered rampage against whoever suggested it, and continue to whoever supported it. I'd be furious if they asked me to destroy my jet or my home, and my servants are worth more to me than either of those things. "But now there is one thing I would like to know."

"Yes, Howard?"

"**Do** you actually forgive me?", I asked him.

"Now? Hell no." I was too unsurprised to be disappointed.

"That's what I thought." I phrased my next statement carefully. "Billy, you have permission next April Fool's Day to use deceit to attempt to play a harmless joke on me." I wanted to see what he'd do, if nothing else. Maybe I won't even remember it next year, and he'll have the element of surprise, as I definitely won't be expecting deceit from someone who's commanded not to delude me.

"Do you consider what you just did to be harmless?", he asked.

"Yes." It didn't hurt him, did it?

"Good." It sounded like he had a plan or intended to formulate one. I certainly hope so. I know he's more than capable of it. For the moment, I invited him to try to kick my ass in fighting games as revenge; naturally, the results were the same as usual.

Chapter 42

A few nights later, I laid in bed, awake, thinking. Damn, I've been bored. It's not like I haven't been looking for things to do, either. I've checked out relationships, plans, complicated shit, and it appears my practice of annihilating people who get in my way (Sarah just came back from killing another one) is paying off. They're being relatively kind to each other, usually not fighting like vultures, usually not wasting resources where resources should not be wasted: in internal disputes. Whether that was out of fear of me or because they're actually choosing to work together, I don't know. In return, I've been kind to them- the other day, I spent an hour or so in sheer pedagogy, teaching a newly-recruited fifth level the ins and outs of why and what. Unlike other people I've talked to, he hung onto my every word as if I was speaking the purpose of life and he had to memorize every little bit of it. (I was, and he almost did have to.) And, of course, the kinder we are to each other, the less extra space we leave the normals to squeeze in, and the less kind we are to them as we gradually squelch them into the ground whenever we feel like it.

But none of that happy crap alleviates my essential boredom. I need something to kill, or at least

something to think about. Video games get old fast, research gets tedious and stays that way, and the more places I think about vacationing to, the more I don't want to go anywhere. Sigh. This would be even worse if I were alone. A year ago, I could not envision life with servants; now I cannot envision life without. Looking back, I find myself asking myself, how the **hell** did I stay sane?! Technology, that's how. Technology and.. what else did I use? Mind games, got into the learning too far to care.. hmm.. no, I didn't do that..

Oh, **there** we go, **that's** what I did. I have an amazing capability for imagination. It's like running a program- I just put some variables in and run it loose. Being the techno-monger I am, I have plenty of sources to draw imagination from. I found myself having detailed, imaginary conversations with computer opponents at the age of seven. Sometimes I extended them to other areas, sometimes I made up people out of thin air. Fantasizing is especially effective when your mind is powerful enough to do two things at one time. I really should have asked Daddy for some humans- but then again, back then I didn't understand the concept. Having people in the same house as I am was a concept I didn't even really consider. I was the Master, sheeple were not fit to associate with me, I saw examples of that, and, of course, I still believe that. Illuminati, and their children, were also out of the question- no corruption of the Inheritor and all that. But I made a huge error in logic and thought that they were the only possibilities. Of course, Daddy did manipulate me- even as he was building my defense and offense to the entire subject in general- then he stepped out of the picture altogether, gave me what I wanted, and allowed my own momentum to keep me going. And now I have a replacement for all those imaginary friends.

These are much, much better. Billy and Paul do not disappear every time I stop thinking about them- Sarah might, but that's just an effect of her profession, and she always comes back on command. They can anticipate me, instead of always the reverse. They will think of things I won't. I am not psychokinetic (oh, would that I were..); imaginary friends do not get one hot chocolate or random snacks when one is in a particularly comfortable position and does not want to get up- using Enforcers for such things is a violation of all aesthetics and I don't like mechanical half-people hanging around me unless absolutely necessary anyway. And on the rare occasion that these do start begging for mercy, I know that this is the real deal instead of some twisted part of my mind having some fun again.

Shit, they really are like my imaginary friends- I can predict what they're going to say in advance. For most things, I know how they're going to react to the point of being able to predict their next move in fights. (And it definitely helps- we don't target the same guy simultaneously **at all** anymore.. not even Paul. Visible in electronic games, and I know it'll carry over to the real world.) I use them for what they're designed for- extensions of the self. And they can still act as independent agents- the efficiency of my setup in critical situations has caused some members of my organization to take notes, especially after watching the recorded raid on the power-greedy asshole implanting the normals in the ranch. So, from a purely objective standpoint, I'm using them well to accomplish my goals.

But as every Illuminatus knows, there is no objective standpoint. Everyone has their hand in it somehow. A variation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, this rule simply dictates that no one can watch something without somehow being interested in, and thus affecting, the results. And chaos theory- a similar unbreakable rule- dictates that everything affects everyone in some way, large or small. Which is why almost all Illuminati at least half-consciously recognize their place in the scheme of whatever they're trying to judge before they judge it- the ones who don't are either making a mistake or know they are very far from what they're judging. And I am hardly 'very far', quite the reverse. I realized a large disparity between the future and the past: I used to always command them to do things, now they often know what I want. The only time they complain is if it really does disgust or frighten them, or if they see something I don't. They act towards me almost exactly like I act towards them. And I've encouraged them.

It's probably the obvious. I've been with them too long, and I know that getting them upset won't help anything much, and at this point it won't feed my ego any. I'm a purist. Most Illuminati get off on,

purposefully live with, and enjoy the presence of crying, helpless people in a special Ming the Merciless way that the organization has been promoting. After all, if everyone thinks they're powerful already (which they are, but it's relative), business is good. The pseudo-Epicureans and the Satanists promote it, and most other people nod their heads and say 'Yes, this is a good way to live.' while going on with their business of world domination. It's utterly anathema to me; I'm not going to abuse them because I don't believe in it. With Sarah, half the fun is hearing her moan in ecstasy. And since the answer to the question 'Will my attitude cost me things I don't want to lose?' isn't 'No' or even 'Boool-sheeyit!' but 'Bwaaaahahaha!!', I can rest in peace without having to worry about resting in pieces.

Come to think of it, I think I could use Billy's company right now. Should I wake him up? Yes, hell, he probably hasn't even begun whatever nightmare he'll have this night. And even if he does wake up screaming next to me, oh well, I'll just flop back down same as him. So I pressed the intercom and told him to come to my room.

He screamed so loudly and with so much echo that he could have sent the whole house into resonance. Wow, I had really bad timing. "Billy.. dude, that wasn't a nightmare. He really did call you.", Paul said.

"Whaat?! I don't believe this shit...", he said, as the realization of the command carried him from there to here. Something else is going on here- he shouldn't be reacting like that.

"Howie..", he started as soon as he opened the door, "if I wasn't..", he continued, then gestured to his forehead and finished, "you would never believe this."

For a brief instant I pondered shrieking at him with 'Can't you even choke out the **word** 'implanted'?!' Nah. Instead I said, "Believe what?"

"Paul and I were talking about you doing something like this before I went to sleep."

"Paul, how long ago was that?", I called. He replied that he had fallen asleep as well and didn't know how long for. "What else were you talking about?"

"Imaginary friends, us, and you. I'm not sure how to explain."

"Oh **FUCK!**", I shouted instantly. "Okay, this telepathy shit has gone from interesting to strange to all-out weird." He half-consciously rolled his eyes, reminding me that to the normal world, this is already very much 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." He did, and he looked into my eyes, I looked into his, we both chuckled a bit and we fell asleep simultaneously, with me secure in the knowledge that there is someone else on this planet to help me with everything. About an hour after that, I heard a skritch-skritch-skitching at the door, and found Fido wanting to be let in. I let him in and fell asleep again, this time with my dog and Billy in my arms. To an outside observer we would have looked like a solid lump of white hair and flesh..

Chapter 43

So out of sheer curiosity I decided to put the screen on a popular American news channel, and within fifteen seconds was erupting in laughter. Sarah was sitting next to me, and getting some chuckles of her own. It was beyond funny. Two idiots had walked into their school, black trenchcoats (hmm, why'd they choose black?) and heavy weapons in hand, and started blasting away their classmates, killing "up to 25" before massacring themselves into oblivion. The media were reporting facts, the 'tragedy' angle and all, and the fact that this is getting to be a popular pastime for many American students. Maybe I should... nahhh, I'm just too distinctive-looking for

anything like that. "Hey, Billy. Check this.", I shouted up. He was at my side in a few seconds, looking at the screen with increasing bewilderment.

"What the fuck?!", he eventually blurted out. I cracked up. Paul, who moved to my far right, still wasn't saying anything, just looking at the screen and slowly shaking his head. Then another fat punchline came. The destroyed duo had a number of unexploded bombs inside!

Sarah got the joke in a way that the rest of us didn't at first. "Unexploded.. unexploded.. all that trouble and they can't even make bombs that- hehehehahahaha!!", she squealed, her bosom moving rapidly in and out with her laughter. Of course, her assassin background means that she's used to seeing perfection in destructive operations, and something like this with mistakes that egregious is more than merely ridiculous, it's 'ludicrous' on steroids to her, wholly insane from the bottom up. Which it is, as a matter of fact.

"Duuuummmmmmb fuckers!", I pronounced. "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." It really was a nice try, although they fucked up so completely the term "botched job" doesn't come close. I listened to some more details- they were ostracized, they were loners, all that crap. When it started whining about all the dead sheeple again, I just turned it off. But there was one last question..

"Okay, I'm confused. Why did they do it?", I asked.

"Revenge?", Paul suggested. Ha! Revenge my ass. It might have been what they were trying for... maybe. But if they were seriously going for revenge, why did they leave so many people alive? Sheeple are puzzling.. even to me, and I understand how they think- or, to be more precise, would like to pretend they do.

"Yeah, **that's** some revenge. I guess with normals, everything's weaker, even the body count." Which was the most pathetic of all.

"Mental illness and revenge. Also probably family history, and just bad luck. Someone's gotta do it. Can't think why they made bombs that don't even fucking explode.", Sarah said, still amused at the idea of unexploded bombs.

"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.", said Billy, as puzzled as I am.

"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 quickly reminded me.

"Yeah, but that's just the ordinary stuff. I mean something more.. cohesive. Something to further our plans a little more than usual." Single events have much more potential for exploitation than many people realize.

"You mean like gun control.", she said.

"Yeah!", I said and grinned. Gun control was a good place to start. I hate the idea of all those sheeple armed with weapons they can barely use anyway, and gun availability simply provides too much freedom illusion- the illusion that they can protect themselves with their own resources. "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. Nah. Interfering with their

music choices will destroy the freedom illusion in a way that we don't need to.

"They were Hitler freaks, right? Associate them with the far right, if you can do it.", Sarah said after considering.

Billy finally broke his silence with one of the most ironic things I could heard from him. "Hold up. Did they play any violent video games?"

"Violent.. strange as that is, that might be a good one, Billy, I think you're on to something.", I said, enticed by the idea. "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 can see it now; the great post-Littleton change, everyone's afraid to let their kids get near them, and partake of the 'violent' material (which often has large anti-government/society/Illuminati undertones). Granted, it won't work on everyone (nothing can) and it definitely won't work forever (nothing does), but it'll have an impact. Liberalism and fake freedom with less of the hassle, after all, they are fearing for their lives, right? Stupid sheeple. Lenin really did put it best when he said that one death is a tragedy and a million deaths is a statistic. And I've got a great way to do this without sparking backlash. Multi-cyclical is so fucking useful!

"Yeah, but **you** don't want to put them out of business do you?", Paul said, noticing my personal love for violence of all sorts.

"Oh, don't worry about that. They'll stay in business with the fake rebellious crowd and everyone who likes home violence. 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?", he replied.

"Close enough. Remember, it's not the stuff itself that's important- games, guns, television- but the underused minds of the sheeple consuming it."

I implemented my plan, telling some details to several Illuminated heads. There was a lot of nodding, a lot of grinning, and quite a bit of actual understanding. In less than ten minutes I had contacted everyone I'd need to, to take something really important to only a small area, and decorate the world with it.

"Ahhh... all right. That was easy enough. Let's go rock some normal Team Fortress server." An hour and a half of straight death- and Trenchcoat Mafia jokes- emanated from the super Internet connection.

A few hours later, as hunks of roast veal and yams were being consumed by all four of us, the screen buzzed. Had my plan worked? Did someone finally get the guts to question me? I answered it myself, and the guy on the other end was displayed as a fourth level media dude, working at MTV. Hunh. I didn't tell this guy to do anything, although I may have talked to his sponsor, or his sponsor's sponsor.

"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."

"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?" I really shouldn't be surprised. But I was semi-generalistic when I gave the orders, and I was expecting most of them to take time to make specific decisions. To engineer an entire fully-formed plan, with cooperation between everyone, would have failed to take advantage of the moment. Their plans will gel together anyway. Still, it usually takes hours to decide how best to carry out those kinds of orders, and a few more hours to precisely engineer the way to carry them out. Results shouldn't be appearing yet, or maybe this guy was watching for this kind of thing in advance?

"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?!", I said, snickering. "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 we're 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 will support all of them at once and point to the real reason (whatever that was), 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?" I 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." I turned the screen off.

"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 continued, trying to puzzle out what passes for logic in their culture. I understand their logic well, of course.

"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." It really is amazing. The corpse count is unbelievably low- if they played any first person shooter with any seriousness, they must have sucked at it- and yet I can make the religious groups tighten around themselves and the rest of the masses tighten around everything else, adding an extra helping of control to the fools, letting them make themselves and their children steadily more helpless, as they steadily include more outside control (of all sorts- pick your poison) into their lives. The only commonality will be that they'll all be praying to their overlords for help. Absolutely amazing. If it wasn't for my extensive teaching in this subject, I would never believe something like this would even work.

Later investigation revealed that only thirteen people other than the shooters were dead meat.

Chapter 44

I woke up very early by my standards, and for good reason; today's my birthday, April 27, 1999.

When secrecy ends and I'm the public leader of the world, I want everyone to celebrate this day. Not with parades and confetti (that shit gets in everything, I don't know how the sheeple can take it), but with everyone around the world saying "Hey, let's do something special. It's Howard's birthday today." And of course I will have my parties with the most powerful, effective people in the world.

But, for now, I'm having them with child Illuminati. Not sons of daughters of Illuminati, Illuminati who are children themselves, under the age of 17. A young Illuminatus's birthday party, with only other young Illuminati to participate. I won't be able to logically do this for many more years; I won't be a kid forever, and I will be an adult for as long as I can stay alive, so I might as well have this kind of fun now.

I pondered the requirements for Illuminated status- there are only a few real ones: a general understanding of how the world works, high intelligence, some deviousness, the ability to have true loyalty to something they really believe will be of benefit (to themselves, their causes, or whatever they want to benefit), and at least some limited ability to consciously self-program. Of course, many people have all these requirements and we don't invite them in; there's also a subconscious element. Many people believe they can be true Illuminati (or some equivalent)- only a few really **can**. Hell, it's pretty obvious even some of the so-called Illuminati aren't the ones who really **can**. But they were the best we could get, at the time- but it's obvious that power really does corrupt and they're sacrificing the larger 'us' for personal gain, the antithesis of what we should be doing as a conspiracy. Since these are children, most with no normal-world baggage, they should be considerably less apt to fall into doing that kind of crap.

I had Paul be the doorman, identifying people on their way in; I could use Enforcers but I wanted the sentient touch for this. Sarah, of course, was already baking the cake, an enormous one for engineered with enormous appetites. This time, I didn't want candles and their ashes on the cake- instead, I had her write in icing 'Happy 11th Birthday Dominator Howard' on it. The young Illuminati started trickling in, one by one, smiling with their mostly-bioengineered faces. Petey, Sara (decidedly not to be confused with Sarah, and pronounced a bit differently), Becky, then Jeremy was the first non-engineered to walk in. Then Akira and his servant, then Tony, Hadji (he's engineered, I can tell, but to different specifications than the others) and his two young girl servants, then Azrael coming in at about the same time as Bobby, another non-engineered. I tried my best to remember them all.

None of the kids carried presents- those were all delivered in advance (security reasons; I dodge bullets but I'm not bombproof), and a few of the presents were from others. The suit manufacturers didn't put my suit in my closet, they put it out here, just to remind me of their constant gift. I didn't mind; I simply took it upstairs and put it on. The rest of the presents were of the 'What do you get the boy who has everything?' variety; the answer is 'No one can possibly have everything, there isn't enough room. He can, of course, acquire almost anything, so the best thing to do is get him something cool that he'd never think of getting himself.' Naturally, a lot of it- like this super sonar device- is just going into my closet never to be used any time soon. Hey, maybe one day I'll find a use for it. More kids were coming in with more servants, Paul writing down names. Hey, speaking of servants..

I turned the intercom on. "Billy, wake up, wear all black, and go down to the dining room." C'mon, Billy, you can't sleep in- it's my birthday! And it's your birthday, too.

"I suppose they'll **all** be there?", he asked, as even more people came in.

"Probably.", I replied. I hoped, anyway. "Sarah made an extra-large cake. There's quite a few of them down here, not yet all though." Billy was walking down the stairs in a few seconds, watching the Illuminati walk in. I made my seating arrangements known- servants next to their masters, and don't try to position yourselves close to me. Everyone wants to get close to the Dominator.

"Looks like no one else is coming, Howard.", Paul said, and I nodded. I usually think things like this

in more violent situations, but let's get this party started. I gestured to Billy and then the seat at my right, and he took it. Then I did it with Paul and the seat to Billy's right, and he sat down as well, a bit nervous. Being able to command servants wordlessly is a gesture of power.

Sarah brought in the cake, and balanced it a bit on her pregnant belly, setting it down in the middle of the table. She hid her emotions well, but I could tell that she was quite annoyed watching the kids in front of her. Of course she's pissed; to her, she's in the right place, wearing the wrong color.

The door opened from behind me and a straggler walked in. Don't be the last to the party, not when everyone else already sat down. "I took a sub.", was his explanation as to why we didn't see him coming. He found a chair and sat in it; I noticed that some of the seats were still empty. Hmm... yes, it's not just the extras for servants, not everyone's here that I invited. Their loss.

"Is it four hundred degrees this time, Sarah?", I asked sarcastically. Some of the other kids snickered, although they were on the outside of that particular in-joke.

"No, probably about two hundred in the middle, though.", she replied evenly. It smelled wonderful. But before I began, there was one more thing I wanted to do first.

"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 said, while looking around the table and counting white clothes. "I only have two ears, there's 43 of you, and I don't want people crowding for whispering space."

"Are you really immortal?", a six-year-old asked. How can he not know? Shouldn't he be, himself? And if he's six years old, not engineered, and a true Illuminatus, he either got in in a way that he shouldn't have, or he's very talented indeed...

"Yes. Unless someone blows me into little pieces or something, I will live forever. Also I regenerate, and no, I don't give demonstrations.", I answered jovially. There was laughter at that.

"Howard, what **really** happened to Damien?", a twelve-year-old boy asked, smirking, as if the official records were bullshit and he knew it. Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction...

"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." They smiled and nodded agreement. "Any more questions?"

"Are you the anonymous asshole who keeps kicking my ass on our Quake 2 deathmatch server?", Akira asked, and a lot of kids laughed. He's engineered- just not as well as I am.

"As a matter of fact, yes I am." There were a few quiet 'ooh's. C'mon, who else would it be? Sometimes Billy plays as me, and sometimes it's both of us with the same name, wreaking havoc and confusion.

"**I hate you!**" I laughed and so did almost everyone else at the table.

"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." Akira groaned. Some of the other, younger kids grinned, as if they knew their abilities were closer to mine. "Any more questions?" Nope, none they'd ask publicly, anyway.

"Sarah, Billy, pass out the cake." In retrospect I probably should have been more precise with that command or defined it in advance (they could have embarrassed me rather easily), but they did a decent job; Sarah expertly cut it into many large chunks, her skill drawing the attention of a few of my guests, and Billy methodically placed a chunk on everyone's plate, starting with me and going

around the table, regardless of status or power, ending with himself. About two thirds of the cake remained, which made sense. If they want more, they'll take it. I started eating the moment it hit my plate and almost everyone else followed suit.

Some of them did get up to whisper stuff into my ears after they ate; I should have expected it. Will I make it easier to go up levels for engineered? Not directly, but the engineered should be smart enough to make it easy on themselves. What's it like owning my twin brother? Fun and rewarding in so many ways. No, I don't make my servants do **that**. Yes, even if you're not engineered, it's all right; I do support the retrovirus development after all. Only one kid directly asked me for more power, and I simply laughed at him; being intelligent, he took the hint quickly. Fido was under the table, and I motioned for Billy to pass him a piece; the dog ate it happily, being tickled by everyone's moving feet.

This- the party, the kids with their smiling faces, the atmosphere- was great, absolutely wonderful. I should have done this before, maybe when I became Dominator (for a split instant I visualized an alternate reality where Damien had brought Paul to that party, and Billy had done the same deadly manipulation **in front of everyone**, with the same result). I loved every moment of it, loved having these intelligent world masters celebrating my birthday and looking to me for support of all kinds, loved their devoted love of me and what I stand for. There aren't enough of them, not by a long shot. I can't wait for the End of Secrecy; this world needs billions less normals and hundreds of thousands more engineered. People I can play with and talk to, people who make their mark by helping to make everything better. People who want to follow me to the future. They ate and talked amongst themselves as they went for more cake.

Eventually one of the non-engineered got full (after pigging out as if she was engineered), and she left her table with her servant, and others started leaving as well, going off to talk to each other in the living room. My servants went as well; maybe they'll find other servants they can talk to. I was being pestered, but it was inevitable. My guests didn't want to ask questions when I said to, but each of them was hoping I'd talk to them in private, and the fact that I wouldn't do that put some of them off. Sorry, guys. One of the people who wasn't fazed was the non-engineered Jeremy, who looked at me and said, simply, "I want to be able to get a servant." I'd promised all the fifth levels Enforcers, but not sentient servants, and some don't have the access to get them.

"Why?", I asked him, looking at his twelve-year-old, roundish, healthy face, which was dotted with a few freckles. His blond hair was cut, but in a full style, as if he was trying to find a good balance between his normal look and the small white cape growing out of my head.

"Well... I have someone in mind. He's been a big help to me my whole life, before I came here, and since you gave us all Enforcers, I figured I could ask." I knew immediately why and what he wanted. I'll grant the request, but only if he understands, and only if he's willing to actually ask for it.

"What makes him so special, that he can be a servant for you?" He looked around, at everyone else who was watching the conversation, people who wanted their turn to talk to me and were holding their tongues to stop from interrupting. "You're going to answer me in public, and you're going to be honest; or you can end this conversation now, if you want." He wasn't going to do that.

"Well, he's smart, and he's cool, and he can be really efficient..." I looked at him, smiling a bit, beckoning for him to say the words I knew he had. "He's my friend." There we go.

"You want to put mind control implants in your friend's head, Jeremy?", I asked him, casually, and he recoiled only slightly. "Do you want your friend to have to do everything you say, no matter what, for the rest of his life? Do you want to pluck your friend out of the normal world like a feather from a duck and make him yours for decades to come, possibly even far more? Is that really what you want for your friend?" I was squeezing him verbally, slowly, and calmly. He was probably going to say something like 'Yeah, you're right, Howard.', even though I'd been neutrally asking questions, and abandon it, never to be mentioned again.

He did the opposite instead, after a few seconds of hesitation. "Yes. Yes, that is what I want.", he said boldly and a bit formally. "I want to acquire him as a servant."

"Well then, you've got him. Send me the information after the party's over and I'll have it done for you myself."

"...Ththank you Howard!", he said, stuttering a bit, and from his tone of voice alone I could tell that he had become immediately, completely loyal to me. The others were surprised by my handling of the situation.

I heard some voices getting louder in the living room, and two teenage boys walked up to me, who've obviously been arguing about something, and I got up to approach them. "Howard, do you like bets?", the older boy asked.

"Depends on the bet. What is your offer?", I replied.

"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." They're actually using units as currency. They're allowed to do it... but this is the first time I've seen it in a very long while. Obviously, they just wanted to bet something. But it's a pointless bet. I'll accept the challenge, definitely, but I severely doubt he's going to be able to beat me.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Ryan West."

"Ryan, I am going to kick your ass up and down the street.", I informed him. "Get up there, go in that room,", I said, pointing to Billy's room, "load up the game, and prepare to die." He obeyed as if he were implanted.

"Brood war or regular?", he asked on his way up.

"Brood war, latest version.", I replied, going up as well, and my servants followed me curiously.

"So how are we going to make sure no one cheats?", he 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.", I said, my voice getting loud so everyone could hear me. "Oh, and if anyone tells anyone about anything, or even gives any vague hints... well...", I said loudly, and clenched my left fist, sprouting the oh-so-familiar blades. Threats aren't always the best way to guarantee cheat-proofing, but they work wonders. I motioned my servants to come by my side and they watched me load up the IPX game. I could tell that some of the others had things to talk to me about, but they knew to wait until I was done.

I chose the 3-man map, Ice Mountain. I played Random and he chose Zerg right before the five-second timer ended; I ended up as a Terran. I have to assume he's good, as good as the Etarenicni/Kleptomaniac pair Billy and I fought a bit ago. (They just HAD to call us map hackers and run off, too. Pity...)

He tried to rush me, and then tried to dance his 6 lings around the bunker in the middle of my base. I popped a couple of marines out and he didn't manage to kill one SCV. Hmm.

Let's see.. how is this going to go? Well, he's either going to do one of two things- he's going to play like a complete coward, or he's going to rush me hard and fast. I would normally doubt the latter, but

he's already shown his desire to attack. Oh, yes- he can't actually be seriously afraid of me, or he wouldn't have made that bet in the first place. So I'm almost certainly going to be attacked. The only question is by what? Lurkers, most likely. I went Academy-Comsat with Marines and Medics, made an Eng Bay for turret help and upgrades, and he attacked with a partially upgraded Hydra and Zling force. I lost a few, he lost them all.

I then engaged in my usual plan, a plan directly derived from general, traditional Illuminated strategy. It's very simple. Control **everything**. I aimed to take the entire map, building lots and lots of Bunkers, taking two expansions in rapid succession and getting all available buildings. A bit later, he attempted an air-based attack; a few Irradiated Overlords and cloaked Wraiths later, his forces were no more. I comsatted his main a few times and continually prepared for the units he'd send next, building a Marine/Tank/Wraith force, scouting the map.

The people watching me remained deathly silent. I could hear the footfalls of two running back and forth between rooms, and I could just sense one of them struggling not to giggle and piss me off, emitting little bits of sound likely inaudible to the non-engineered around him. I don't know what he's giggling about, and he is making a real effort not to give something away. But it does mean that either he has a poor understanding of SC or the battle is more decisive than it looks.

Thirty seconds later I realized the answer. Ryan had simply forgotten to expand enough- he didn't take the spots I still had left open. One miserable minerals expand- his local one- and he's running out. No wonder his forces are dwindling. He's an Illuminatus, he should know the value of resources.. we fought a few semi-large battles and a few minutes later I began to Siege Tank his base into oblivion; he resigned as gracefully as is possible when your bet for twenty kilounits has gone nowhere. I don't see how Jimmy could have possibly lost anything. Ryan just underestimated me, Jimmy didn't.

Ryan entered the room with a grimace on his face. "Howard! You.." He looked at my face and I realized he was considering my possibly violent reaction to what he was going to say. "You mind if I swear at you?"

"You can for five seconds." I put my thumb in my palm and used my fingers to count down from five as he unloaded a lot of ill-conceived, hastily created profanity; when my fingers were all clenched, he immediately ceased. "Anyone else want to try me at this?"

There was a general shaking of heads and a few "uh-uh"s. The party continued as usual. I noticed Billy and Sarah answering (and not answering) a few questions. Almost everyone wanted to hang out near me, and it was with no small amount of joy that I realized they weren't just doing it to ask favors. I'm their Dominator, and they wanted my company and my friendship.

Someone discovered the controllers that shot out of my big viewscreen (as opposed to the controllers who appear on my big viewscreen that I shoot) and wanted to play me on it, and that rose into a larger crowd all wanting a piece of me in various fast-action games. I clobbered them easily, of course- it's amazing how used I am to playing with my engineered servants, and more than once I found myself asking 'How the hell'd he die to **that**?' when fighting these kids. A few of them, the engineered ones, proved to be more of a challenge, but only a couple of them were anywhere near my level- some of them had reflexes, some of them had advanced knowledge of the games, and some of them had experience, but none of them had all three.

One boy- Tony, I remember his name- came up to me, smiling, and said, "Howard, I really think I understand something now that I didn't before. I just wanted to thank you for it." He didn't detail what he meant, and although I was curious, I decided not to ask.

"Hey, Howard, mind if we look around your island?", about five Illuminati, with a couple of servants following them, asked after one of the games.

"Go ahead. You can even eat the fruit if you want. Just don't hurt anything or piss off my dogs."
They nodded and left.

"You ask him!" "No, **YOU** ask him!", I heard from another room, in quiet voices, a bit later. Neither of them actually asked me, whatever it was and whoever they were.

"Howard, my name's Carlie. I have something I want to give you.", a fourteen-year-old girl in a tight pink dress said after the next game, into my ear.

"Really? What?", I asked in a lecherous voice, grinning.

"This!", she exclaimed, thrusting her breasts into my chest and kissing me all over my face.

"Oh, you can do better than that.", I said, grinning wider. I simply took Carlie to the floor, kissed her large, barely-covered breasts, and lifted up her skirt. She wore no underwear. I took my dick out of the slit in the suit and had her in front of the viewscreen, with everyone watching. The inside of her was just as beautiful as the outside. She was softer than Sarah- **much** softer. And she reacted differently as well, moving forwards and backwards, her legs pushing in and out. It's **good** to be Dominator. As Sarah did, she enjoyed every bit of this.

"Holy shit!", a young boy exclaimed, as I continued to pump her again and again, gasping with the effort. I was being careful not to hurt her, of course; even a bit too much passion from me could mean bruises or sprains for her. It didn't **look** like I was carefully controlling myself, though, as I continued to thrust in and out. Carlie was actually technically lying, I mused- she didn't want to give me anything, she just wanted to get a womb full of Dominator sperm, which I eventually gave her in a single, large gush.

I stood up and helped her to her feet. "That was great.", she said, smiling.

"We'll have to do that again sometime, Carlie.", I said, grinning and putting my dick back. I knew we might not, but it was the right thing to say at the time.

She kissed me one last time. "I'll remember you.", she said, to a lot of cheering and clapping from everyone who watched. Oh, Carlie, I don't ever expect you to forget.

The party continued, all day long. Everyone had fun, nobody got hurt. Sarah, with Enforcer help, efficiently cooked lunch and dinner for everyone and their servants. It was, of course, an exhausting experience. Naturally, everyone wanted to stay late, to have private time with me- sorry, guys. I set a hard 8:00 leaving time, and when they left, I went to work on what I'd promised Jeremy- he'd sent me the information. One Joseph Freeman, not to be so free anymore. Normal kid, normal life, no special protections. Easy.

"You're running an acquisition?", Billy asked me curiously.

"Yup. This fifth can't do it himself so I'm letting him acquire a friend of his."

"Acquire a friend-", Billy sputtered out. "Does he know what he's doing?!"

"Oh, yes, Billy.", I assured him. "He does indeed know exactly what he's doing. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't make sure of that." Billy didn't talk any more about it. I got up from the viewscreen and started heading to bed.

"Howard.. if you could get it, I'd say that girl was trying to kill you with AIDS or something.", Sarah said, before retreating to her room. I chuckled- she probably wasn't trying to give me anything.. she was trying to **get** something, and I gave it to her.

"Wow... I can't believe it's been a full year.", Billy said, thinking back, and followed me into my room.

"I thought time was going slow for you and you were suffering.", I replied.

"Oh, I am, but I've stopped caring about that." I smiled and held him with my right arm. "The time effect went away after your first test. If you think about it... living with you has been rather quiet, considering." Say what?! After all we've done? After the weirdness and the fighting and all the little things in the Dominator's life? And that coming from him, who's only been with the Illuminati a year? That's surprising and funny!

"What the fuck could you be considering?!", I shouted.

"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.." Ah, yes. I guess the potential for even more mayhem is there, isn't it?

"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." Which is seldom.

"Or...", Billy began, grinning a bit. There is that, too.

"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." I envisioned it: "You'll piss off the Dominator if you do that! You don't want to piss off the Dominator!"

"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.." Oh, of course. If we killed actual people for every game construct we fraged, we'd have wiped out a small country.

"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." There's always a war going on somewhere, the hard part would be to get myself into it. "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." He understood. I might be the Dominator, but even I'm not so all-powerful that I can do anything in reality as many times as I want without repercussions.

"You're still a trans-manipulative bastard, Howie." Smiling, I held onto him a bit tighter.

"Thank you, Billy. Oh.. and Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Happy birthday." I said that out of pure caring, and it meant a lot to him.

"Happy birthday, Howie.", he replied, smiling.

"The nightmares-", Billy started, but I didn't care.

"You can stay." I smiled a bit and we got back on the bed and fell asleep on top of the covers.

Chapter 45

"**EEEEYAAARGHH!!!**" I really wish Billy could tell those nightmares of his 'Yes, I know what you're trying to tell me, okay?! Stop with the making me scream, it's annoying me and Howie!'

We woke up together again in the morning, and ate Sarah's usual breakfast. I checked the Real News, found nothing but our version of bureaucracy and things that have no relevance to me whatsoever, and swiftly got bored. Severely bored, as a matter of fact. First-person games were too easy, it was too sunny out to play there, and there was absolutely zilcho in the work department to be done. Yay, they're taking care of themselves. No complaints. Damn, I'm bored. I looked through my archive of really fucking old games, found Secret of Mana, and played. When their characters became active in the plot, I used Billy and Sarah as the other players. Paul ended up watching, and we were in the middle of anally raping some diddlefuck with two heads when the screen moved the game to the lower right corner and some hideous dipstick with glasses came on. Dave Wilson of the fifth level. A fifth has the gall to just call me up and interrupt whatever I'm doing? I paused the game to ask exactly what this fucker wanted.

"Master Howard.. umm.. can we have some privacy?", he said in an incredibly stereotypical nerd voice.

"No. Now **what** did you call for?" It's a rarity I have to ask something twice. He took a bit of time to look at us- Sarah wore dark purple, Billy and Paul black, and I white. It took him about three seconds to grasp the fact that yes, these were servants (c'mon, you didn't know about Billy, asshole?), yes, I wanted him to speak the fuck up, and, yes, if he didn't do it soon, I was going to kick his ass.

"Umm.. Master Howard... I believe I know the names of some people who want to kill you." Okay, correction: A fifth has the gall to call me up, interrupt whatever I'm doing, and tell me who he thinks is trying to kill me? Points for bravery, points for trying to save my ass, negative points for being annoying, and way too many negative points if this is what I think it is- just some asshole trying to guess right, impress me, and try to wring me of some power like an old rag.

I burst out laughing, and so did Billy. "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.." His voice is sandpaper to the ears.

"Give me the list, and get off my screen. Now."

The list was downloaded instantly, he said "Goodbye, Master Howard." in his whining voice, and he got off my screen. I maximized SoM again, and continued to rock on.

"You're not even gonna look at it?!", marveled Paul. I scoffed. I could read Paul's thoughts- he figured I had a serious ego problem and an immortality complex. Well, I do, and I am... mostly. We proceeded to beat the living shit out of the entire game in a few hours. (To hell with the AI. Three humans on that game and you kick ass. Three engineered's? 'Easy as crushing ants' doesn't quite cut it. Try something more like 'God Mode'.)

After the game, I, to much amusement, proceeded to look at the list. It listed about people of all levels, from William Gates to Jeremy Jorgenson. Hey.. wait. Jeremy was at my birthday party.. and he's the one I talked to, the one who wanted his friend. No way he wants to kill me. I called him up. It took him fifteen seconds to answer.

"Howard!", the twelve-year-old said in his pajamas. "What.. what are you here for?" His tone was more happy than scared, although it did carry a bit of worry. Unless Jeremy's the Lord of Hiding Emotions, that nerd was full of it.

"Jeremy.. you know a Dave Wilson?"

"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?" I groaned.

"Check this." I gave him the list, cheerfully entitled People Who Want To Kill You by that nerd. "From Dave, to me." Paul shifted his weight a bit on top of the couch as Jeremy's face got puzzled.

"What the hell is this shit? I don't even think a lot of these people really know you at all." I didn't reply to that, instead musing over what to do next. "Howard, you mind killin him? I .. I know this is a lot for a fifth to ask.. but.. he's a real pain in the ass." I didn't like watching him say that- it was slightly disturbing to watch a young Illuminatus beg for anything. He's almost certainly sincere, and Dave Wilson is.. yes. Dead.

"Ah, I'll do it anyway. He tried to feed the Dominator misinformation, Jeremy." Jeremy's face broke out in a grin.

"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..." I moved my finger across my neck and made the *KOUUICK* noise of Looney Tunes cartoons - the international symbol for execution.

"So in other words, you're going to make it clear to everyone that I'm the plaintiff here." We both could be, but I want you to do it, Jeremy. I want to see if you're willing to do what you ask me to.

"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?"

"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? From a fucking **cult**? Okay, this is crap, just **who** let that nerd in and just **what** is he doing here?! Of course, Jeremy was smarter than 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." What the.. fuck? What the hell does Dave think this is? It's amazing how divorced people can be from reality, even in the Illuminati...

"Oh, the **FUCK!**", I exploded. "Okay, he dies in 48 hours or less, guaranteed." Jeremy snickered. "By the way.. how's your friend coming?"

"He's almost here.. six more hours." There was something else on his lips.

"And let me guess, after I woke you up, you won't be able to go to sleep again tonight." It was 2 here, and 10 where he lives, in England. Not that physical distance means all that much.

"Yeah, you guessed it. Now I have two things to wait for."

"We're hitting him tomorrow night. I'll call you in twelve hours." His forces probably consisted of only a few bodyguards and maybe a normal hitman or two- we didn't need them. My Enforcers and myself would chew all Dave's defenses into tiny kibbles.

"All right, Howie. Thanks." His face moved after he said 'Howie' - he knew he had made a serious error but didn't want to call more attention to it, and was obviously hoping I'd overlook it. What he didn't know is that I don't mind it from people who I care about. Maybe It'll be a known differentiator in the future, people who call me that being those who I really know will help me.

"See ya, Jeremy." I clicked my end off.

"Uh.. Howard, was that such a good idea? Killing someone you hardly know based on a few things from someone you just met?" That's the nice thing about Paul. He keeps things in perspective.

"I really don't think Jeremy's lying to me, Paul. But, I'm going to check this guy- wait, no, you are." Paul needs experience with this kind of thing. "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." That information would be for the other Illuminati's benefit- not mine. Billy and Sarah were welcome to kill their time almost any way they wanted. I went to the elevator.

"Wait... what if Dave had some kind of evidence? Even if it was bad evidence, planted by someone else?", Billy said with some puzzlement in his voice.

"Well, it's either terminal stupidity or lying, Billy. 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..", Billy said, mostly to himself.

"Good. Haven't had something like this in a long time.", Sarah said. "Gotta brush up on my skills..." The elevator took me down and I mused to myself as I took the suit off and dangled my legs into the 80-degree pool. Dave Wilson. A man I haven't heard of until today. Six thousand people, and it's utterly pointless to keep track of them all. I imagine the normals have problems like this. Only with them, it's easy to dis-employ somebody; here, it's a much more tedious and bloody process. I jumped into the pool and idly treaded water.

Every time I see a normal Illuminatus, I think to myself, 'Why isn't he engineered?' The two Illuminati contacting me today were yet another instance of that. Jeremy Jorgenson has a gift; that's why they got him. A knack for problem solving. Engineering talent. With our training, he could be turned into an absolute genius, and that part of his DNA is probably going to be thrown into the next mix of engineereds. His existence is a boon to us.

But Dave? What talent does **he** have? What capabilities allow him to be considered the best of the best, the highest of the high? Why the hell is he here? You'd think he'd be a bullshit artist, with the normal-world record I'm sure he has, but either he's not up to his form today or he was never that good at bullshit. Or maybe, after careful research, he didn't figure out a way (There is none. I'm the **DOMINATOR**, you shithead- I don't **fall** for **bullshit**) and just decided to throw the information at me and run? Or maybe he.. bah. Infinite guessing there. I hopped out of the pool and laid down, my head on my arms and my legs in the water. Sigh. Forget about him for now. He's just another waste of carbon about to get recycled into the ecosystem.

I finished my swim, put the suit back on, and went back upstairs. "I'm done, Howard.", Paul said, as I walked out of the elevator.

"Did you help him?", I asked Billy and Sarah, who were sitting next to him.

Billy shrugged. "Yeah. You didn't say not to." I didn't, did I? Then again, there's a lot of things I don't want them to do and never have to tell them. Oh well. Paul almost certainly learned what I wanted him to. "We found ours separately and just told him where to search."

"So who actually found what?" Paul found five ugly actions of Dave's, Billy found twelve, and Sarah found only three. Billy's and Paul's were various- everything from Dave annoying other Illuminati to being a bit sloppy with secrecy- and Sarah's were resource problems. Wow, holy crap. This guy actually wasted Illuminated resources on pointless normal shit!

"It's a wonder this guy's still alive.", I said. Manipulators may thrive, but stupid pains in asses don't last long here, usually doing something major enough to get themselves instantly killed rather quickly.

"That's what I was thinking.", Billy 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."

"Because an otherwise smart person could have been tricked into sending you that list.", Billy said, and it was, indeed, ridiculous. Maybe I'm being too cautious after all. But this is the way I was taught to rule, lots of truth to go with lots of force. Even I could possibly be tricked by a careful setup, so I usually double check everything.

"That's the theory.", I said.

"That's total bullshit.", he replied decisively. Billy makes a wonderful arguing partner because he can't consciously delude me. "If you had a zero-tolerance idiot policy, that guy probably wouldn't have even tried this shit. 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." I'm sure of it. "Maybe you should start looking them up and killing them just for being stupid." Oh, how I would love to. But I can't. Even I'm not capable of standing against the furnace that would start. Billy's speaking from slight ignorance; he hasn't read the history of Dominators trying things just like what he suggested.

"I'll be taking that advice when the engineereds 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?" The question was rhetorical, but Billy shook his 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." He nodded with complete understanding.

"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. Now, unless Dave gave his out to someone willing to spoof his voice and likeness, which is pretty much a death sentence anyway,", I continued, making it pretty clear that anyone

who gave it out was a total dipshit, "that was him. And all the keys are stored here.", I finished, pointing downwards.

"So you could.." No matter what back-stabbing defamation or assassination plot he was about to say, the answer's the same.

"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. I heard Daddy almost got his ass kicked for that when he lived here. At any rate, bad idea."

I had Sarah set up the raid, which we had two days later.

Chapter 46

I'm not really sure just how the idiots get in the organization. My best theory is nepotism, but I have a hard time believing that- for one thing, Dave Wilson isn't influenced by anyone, at least not in any way that's in the records. All of his stuff belongs to him. Of course, he has ties to others of higher level, but that's just usual and they didn't look particularly suspicious- when an Illuminatus is found to be unsuitable, the person recruiting him is looked at, but not usually attacked. It's all too easy to make an honest mistake- an honest mistake that pisses the Dominator off. It's also too easy to say 'Hey, I didn't know he'd be like this!' when the asshole knew it all along.

Actually, I'm sort of glad for the idiots. Keeps us all in practice- because there's going to be a lot of idiot-slaying between now and the time we've finished the billions of them off some few hundred years from now. I'm just glad there haven't been more of them. A few might be fun to kill, but this is the home of the masters and we don't have time for too much of this shit.

So here I sit, about ten miles from Dave's compound, concealed in a van with one other Illuminatus and four other servants. It's good that Jeremy is in on this. Although he's not engineered, he knows what he's doing, and is probably going to end up higher in the organization than he is now. He's the second person I'd like to use the retrovirus on, the first being Paul. But he needs experience in Illuminated practices, and watching just how ass gets kicked around here is going to help his education immensely.

"This might seem like a really stupid time to bring this up, but I've never killed anyone before.", Joey, an eleven-year-old with dark hair and a slightly freckled face that looks kind of like Paul's, said from the back seat. Looks like Jeremy's servant needs to learn as well.. Billy and I started laughing.

"Don't worry. You'll get used to it.", Sarah said in a sarcastic tone that she usually reserves for me. "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 quickly replied. If he was, wouldn't it be a bit pointless to acquire him?

Paul spun around and looked the boy in the face. "Joey, look. 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." I cracked up laughing; so did Sarah and Billy. That's the one thing I love most about Paul. After dealing with so much obfuscation and general bullshit, it's nice to hear someone tell it like it is.

"Was that..?!", said Jeremy, startled.

"Everything he said was perfectly true, Jeremy. He didn't tell you enn-eeee lies.", I said, still smiling and chuckling.

"Howard- do you mind if I make a completely unbiased comment?", Jeremy said, obviously going to fire off some piece of witticism.

"Go ahead, that's the kind of comment you should make anyway.", I said, preparing to be amused again.

"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?" He doesn't understand. I need to think up the words..

"And let someone else have all the fun?!", Sarah cracked. My servants started giggling at the same time I did, almost certainly worrying the young Illuminatus.

I found the words. "Because we **can**, Jeremy.", I said, slowly and seriously. "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." Jeremy started nodding as I talked, and his face started lighting up with some understanding.

"I get it. I understand. You're not just crazy, you're absolutely fucking psychotic.", he said, with both wonder and accusation in his voice.

"Comes with the territory.", Billy said without looking at him.

"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 somewhat loudly, some fear showing on his face. "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 said sharply to him, somewhat annoyed. I'm not sure what's annoying her. Anticipation for her first real mission in a long while, most likely. Can't be PMS...

"You really do like killing people, don't you Sarah.", Joey said, the vocal lilt to signify a question noticeably absent from his voice.

"You didn't stop him from asking stupid questions?", I asked his master.

"There are no stupid questions.", Jeremy replied, setting me up for an easy one.

"Only stupid people.", I replied- along with every other sentient in the van, including Joey himself. Gah! All **six** of us? Too much 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.", I said, sounding intentionally formal, a rare thing for me.

"Not like last time.", Billy said, smirking.

"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.", I replied. I liked it when we were **doing** it, but looking back it was clear that I had been very hasty.

"How was that anyway... just you three taking on a whole base, about.", Jeremy asked, apparently visualizing it.

"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, his gleeful spite causing him to grin a bit.

"I never knew that was from you! I thought I caused that!", Sarah replied, and I could almost sense her mind revising the history of what happened that day. "Dammit. There goes the moral victory, anyway." Oh, yes. Speaking of moral victories..

"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?", I asked, intentionally grinning at him to signify that almost any way would be fine.

"Hmm. His servants run MLM scams, that kind of thing, so..." I haven't a damn clue what 'MLM' is. I guess I'll have to find out sometime. "Fire might be nice. Got a flamethrower?"

"How about a drip torch?", Paul suggested.

"What's that?", Jeremy asked. I didn't know either.

"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." Ah. A nice, slow, controlled burn. Like Chinese Water Torture, only faster and with more screaming. It appears Paul has genuinely lost the local morality after all. Sarah crooned a low 'ooooh' sound to signify her approval.

"Ooooh.", Jeremy said, grinning with delight. "That is **nasty**. Howard, can you..?"

"No problem.", I said, ordering the Enforcer in front of me to call for one. "It'll be there by the time we get in." The Enforcer put the car into forward motion and I felt a tiny twinge of anticipation. "All right, it's time." It only took a few minutes for it to drive us into ass-kicking position.

After the van parked and we walked a few hundred meters through light, natural forest and brush, we were welcomed by eight Enforcers. They immediately dispersed upon our arrival, one stopping to hand Jeremy the drip torch he requested. They'd circle the place, moving through the trees to cover all exits, turning Dave's building into his prison.

"This is a completely formal raid, and we're doing this with at least most of the usual procedures, by the book.", I said, for the camera. "His building will be surrounded, any forces he may have will be annihilated or captured, and Dave Wilson will die very, very soon." I turned to my servants. "The three of you 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."

"Joey, you too.", Jeremy said quickly.

It would take a few minutes for the Enforcers to circle the building. Sarah put her ghillie suit on in a few swift movements and headed towards it, moving with more than her usual stealth- she'd be creeping along when she saw the clearing. I idly thought about how it would go- this should be clean. Kill sentries, maraud in, waste everyone, walk out. I considered the chances of any of the normals getting shot- they're low. Enforcers always attack the most threatening targets first. I considered possible foul-ups, possible.. forget it, I told myself. This shouldn't be considered hard. But a few minutes can seem like hours when you're waiting to get into real violence...

I heard two sniper shots come from Sarah's position at the exact same time, and all five of us rushed towards her; she had thrown off the ghillie suit and was waiting for someone to blow away the normal electrical fence separating death from the target. A blaring klaxon sounded from Dave's base. Paul obliged her with the launcher, the fence shorted out (glad there's no normals around here, this is getting very noisy indeed, that klaxon could wake the dead and the explosion didn't help any), we pulled out our pistols, and I experienced the simple feeling of pure pleasure I always get from this.

We rushed through the hole in the fence, and onto the 200-meter stretch of open land that Dave was trying to use to snipe off anyone trying to sneak in. But we weren't sneaking in- we were running in at our full speed, and popping off guys with our usual accuracy. I got two with two shots- I heard four shots from Billy and Sarah, as the klaxon came to an abrupt halt. There were more of them, firing from various windows- but our Enforcers fired immediately after the defenders shot at us, killing them all. A pair of double doors marked the rear exit- Billy fired at their locks at the same time I did and we kicked them in simultaneously, breaking the hinges and swinging the doors wide, and revealing four humans coming from the hallway directly in front of us to run and shoot at us as we dodged the normal guns' bullets with relative ease. Are they normals or- no, I realized, my presupposition was right- Dave had recalled all his Enforcers to defend him. I immediately realized the irony of promising only two Enforcers to every fifth level. They are useful; they are powerful. But they can't save anyone from sentient, fully-engineered power.

I realized that the guns would only lengthen the fight, so I put them away and drew my blades, also noticing the two additional homiforms coming in from each side. Another hand-to-hand fight with Enforcers. Pity. Dave couldn't even bother to put in some auto-defenses or traps?

A year of development seems to have done something for them- but not much. They knew that their normal guns wouldn't do much at any range- so they rushed with them, and it was two-on-one for me. One at a time, I told myself. I flipped over the first one, grabbing its shoulders and throwing it, dodging a bullet from the second one. I'll kill that one now, then- It's trying to smash my head, I'll duck, it's punching at me and shooting with the same hand (trying to add another 300 FPS to normal guns? That's not going to help much), I'll get out of the whole thing's way, it's going to kick, I'll grab.. I could have crushed its testicles right then but Enforcers simply don't feel pain in the same way that normals do. So I cleaved it from the navel to the chops as I had done a year ago, my blades punching through both its kevlar and its underlying metal plate. Bah! They're wearing metal, and it's not our quality. The fool- he's using Enforcers but not Illuminated materials. Oh well. The other one was right on me and I waited until the last instant before punching it in the chin with my blades, the tips coming out of the top of its skull, its blood running down my arm. I let it fall to the floor with a thump as Billy pummeled his last one with a very rapid series of stabs to the chest. I looked back and saw one corpse with its throat slashed, and the other one had its head smashed open, as if she had just killed it in a flash without thinking about it.

"Was one of those a normal?", I asked. Billy picked up the last dead Enforcer, sliced off part of its sleeve, and took a couple of bites out of the tricep.

"Yeah, one was." She looked at her pregnancy and I wondered how close she is to delivery. It's a strain on her, obviously, but she's made it quite clear that she can handle it.

"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, and we went right up the stairs and into the room. No one there. Billy rushed forward to the large desk and looked out the window- at an armored vehicle speeding through a hail of Enforcer fire. As I realized what it was that he saw, I drew my gun and so did Sarah. We fired simultaneously, blasting through the glass, and shooting out the back of the left tire, which wasn't protected at the bottom against aim like ours. The driver- yeah, it's Dave- struggled for control and skidded the car to a stop, turning the vehicle on its side. And once more I realized his foolishness- he's hiding cars made out of our materials but he can't get his guards to wear the same in their armor. Bah.

And I want this jerk **NOW**, before he decides to do something like end it all. Fastest way down.. I cleaved away a section of the window in one swift stroke. "Sarah, grab Billy's arms and lower him down.", I said. I held onto Billy's legs as she dangled both of us out the window- I jumped down and rushed Dave at full speed as he climbed out of the driver's side door, grabbing and holding him by his neck.

"Oh no.. please, don't.."

I shook him back and forth a bit. "Pathetic till the end, I see."

"Look.. don't kill me.. please."

"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.", I said, then taking a second 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!!" I enjoy the fear, and I'm sure the people watching this will as well. And he was terrified. Why bother being terrified? I'm the Dominator. I cannot afford to show sympathy to idiots like you. Face it, Dave- you're going to **die**, and there's **nothing** you can do about it. My arm was getting tired, so I threw him up in the air with it and caught him with the other one.

"But you're lucky today. I'm not going to kill you." A small bit of relief came over Dave's face. I threw my thumb back at the approaching Jeremy. "He is." The relief went away.

"So you are giving this one to me.. all right.", Jeremy said, as he disengaged the drip torch from its place on the back of his armor. "You mind dropping him?" I opened my hand and Dave fell to the ground on his ass, then stepping aside so that my fellow Illuminatus could indulge his torturous desire.

And torture he did, starting with a few drops of drip-torch liquid flame on Dave's lower abdomen, as the man screamed in agony. Jeremy only grinned as he began his speech, making sure it was audible over Dave's vocal cords. "Do you know why I'm doing it this way, Dave? 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 wasn't going to laugh- not out loud, not now- but that's hilarious. Obviously, the recording will be closely tied in the database with the real reason for this, so Jeremy can say whatever he wants. It'll be just as funny to the people watching this.

The only one who didn't get the joke was Dave, who screamed his pain to the world as his genitals were incinerated. Jeremy simply started dripping randomly on him, hitting the grass a few times and burning it just the same, smiling all the while. "**Oh JESUS MAKE IT STOP!!!!**" Don't worry, Dave. It'll all be over soon enough.

"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?" This is getting funnier by the word.

Dave tried to choke out the word 'mercy' a few times, failing miserably.

"I **hate** spam." Jeremy punctuated that remark with two pistol shots to Dave's kneecaps, the bullets flying through the bone easily. I'm not sure how much of this is his real enjoyment for this sort of thing, and how much is just to show everyone watching that he's capable of it. Dave stopped feeling pain- a moment of shock?- and then redoubled his cries of agony.

"Aww, he's so cute like that...", said Jeremy, smiling. "Oh well. Bye, Dave." A final bullet to the forehead ended the spammer's screaming and his life, and the Enforcers ceased the recording. I considered taking a few bites out of the corpse and decided to forget it. He's probably loaded with normal-world chemicals. "That felt so right."

"Well, that's it, mission accomplished.", I said with a shrug. The cleanup is not our problem. I thought back on how little effort it had taken to do this. Sarah snipes, we rush, we dodge, we fight, the target dies. No serious threats. Nothing to really give us a hard time. No insidious traps, nothing particularly unexpected, even though he basically knew we were coming. Bah! What a waste of my time. I didn't even have to do this personally- Billy could have done all my fighting for me.

"Good timing.", Sarah said, as she sunk to the ground to lie on her back. "Now there's something I just have to do, **right now**... nngn...", she said, as she slipped off the lower part of her suit to display her expanded vagina, as she pushed the child out. I found my fist clenched in anticipation- and I'll use the blades if I have to, considering that she may need her hole opened wider than is possible without damage. Of course, I don't **want** to do that.. let's hope the engineers thought of that.

I realized that they had as I saw my child's head poke out into the world, followed by the arms, followed by...

...another pair of arms? Oh, great. The Operator and I are going to have a little talk...

..but the rest of him is perfectly okay, I noted, as Sarah expelled his bottom half and then the messy afterbirth. He began whimpering and crying, and Sarah held him to her chest, calmly slicing off the umbilical cord with one of her fingernails. This makes sense, in a way. The ultimate assassin, the third most physically dangerous person in the world, has her child shortly after a bout of killing. I took a closer look at the baby- his hair's an even blend of mine and hers. His top two hands have six fingers; his bottom two have five. He has four toes on each foot.

"First death, then life.", Jeremy said, breaking the silence and observing the baby intently. "But.. what's with the arms?" Heh, you think I know? You think this was **planned**? It would make for a great plan if it was, provided he has full use of all of his limbs.

"Northberg obviously never expected us to breed.", I said, sighing. "And that's where I'm sending him, for the education and nurture I had." There is no reason to do otherwise- even with a defect (or is it a blessing?), Northberg Educational is simply where engineereds are taught. "Let's hope he's not crippled by the arms. Because if we cut them off.."

"They'll grow right back, won't they.", Jeremy finished for me.

I nodded. "That part of the DNA's the same." I'll talk to the Operator after he's allowed to examine my four-armed son- there is absolutely nothing I can do at this point, so I pushed the thoughts out of my mind. "Let's go home. I'm almost never up this early."

"Howard... no one's going to try to kill me for this, are they?", Jeremy asked. Maybe by fools, but no

one with any sense in his head is going to fuck with someone that's killed someone in my presence, unless he has a serious death wish. But there's always the chance that some friend of Dave's might freak.. bah. There is always that chance. But I **like** Jeremy, and I'll make it clear that I'll do what I can to keep him safe.

"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 finally put on her pants with one hand, cradling our son with the other, and he stopped crying.

"Thanks, Howard. I think I'll do that. Your jet's not big enough, is it?"

"Nope." He'd have to use the helicopter he came in.

Sarah opened her shirt to suckle the newborn, and we walked back to the car that took us here, Jeremy and Joey following behind the four of us.

"Well, that answers a question I've had..", Sarah said casually.

"Which was...?", I 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." She has confidence that it's a blessing, then. Good.

"This is getting weirder by the minute..", I heard Joey say in a low voice, probably right up against Jeremy's ear where he thought we wouldn't hear him.

"It's called 'progress'..", Sarah replied. Paul laughed, and Billy and I grinned. Jeremy and Joey were surprised at her hearing- they didn't think the engineers improved that?

"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!" We went through the hole in the fence that Paul had originally blasted, laughing at that. You forget where you are, Jeremy. This is my planet, and this is our existence. Strange to you, but nothing particularly spectacular to us.

"Jeremy, you want the full explanation?", I asked him, turning my head to look at him while ducking the forest's branches.

"Even if it all goes over my head, I still want to hear it..", he replied. Good attitude. That's probably the mentality that got him in the organization in the first place.

"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. He doesn't know?

"You didn't tell him, Jeremy?", Sarah asked.

"Never actually researched that myself.", he said, as we got back into the vehicle, the Enforcer turning the engine on and putting it into reverse. "A from-birth educational institution, I suppose?"

"Right, first try. They put it right next to the genetics facility at Northberg." Which makes for a very short trip for the engineered youngsters.

"That makes sense..", they said with a simultaneity that I thought was reserved for me and Billy.

After we got back to the airfield, Sarah took the baby to Northberg in a propeller plane, I took the jet with Billy and Paul, and an Enforcer flew Jeremy and Joey in the young Illuminatus' helicopter.

Chapter 47

Although it's of Illuminated make and far faster than a comparable normal version, Jeremy's helicopter was nowhere near as fast as my jet at its usual 2000 kph cruising speed. I spent the time in the jet and on the ground dealing with Dave's death. Let's see.. these guys get control over that, that's their department, this guy gets this, these 'resources' are of no value, toss 'em.. I made my recommended distribution solutions purely pragmatically, with no favoritism. Jeremy got nothing; he couldn't use any of it for his current operations.

I cleared Jeremy in advance to land, and he and his servant jumped out of the helicopter after it touched down and walked up to my door.

It was the exact same scenario as a year ago- a young Illuminatus and his servant showing up in a helicopter for a personal visit to the Master of the world, the only real differences being that Jeremy's far less experienced, far lower level, and far better. I didn't realize it as the Inheritor, but in a year of being Dominator I've learned that the old adage is true- you really can learn a lot about somebody by judging the way he treats his servants. I don't let anyone know that, of course, then they'd just be visibly treating their servants differently to delude me.

Billy wordlessly beckoned Joey upstairs to his room, and he nodded and the servants went upstairs. I let them go- I'm going to be talking to Jeremy personally for a while, to see how smart he really is and how much I can teach him.

"Why did I like doing that?", Jeremy asked after Billy's soundproof door closed. "I could have done it much more simply."

"What, the killing?"

"Yeah."

"Jeremy, I have no clue. None. Of all the things I can do, reading your mind is not one of them. Maybe you have a natural carnal instinct. Maybe you really did hate the guy that much. Maybe you were unconsciously trying to impress me and/or the viewing audience. Maybe some of each, or maybe some other, more rare psychological thing. At any rate, you didn't torture him that much."

"That drip torch didn't count?!"

"Are you kidding? Jeremy, just about everyone gloats if they have the chance. It's just natural. The reason we don't see more gloating is because combat is fast and stealth is crucial, and it's been like that since the advent of the machinegun and the sniper rifle. Sure, you tortured him, but if you really wanted to torture him, you would have taken him alive."

"I dunno. That was just.. weird. The whole thing was just.. weird. Not like the operations I've read about at **all**. We didn't suffer any casualties at all, did we?"

"Not a one."

"Yeah, you just ran in there and kicked their asses. That's what I'm saying. You usually think about strategy, more snipers, getting the guy with a well-placed bullet from some hundred yards away... not with the Illuminatus running the thing just jumping in and cleaving everyone apart."

"Yes, and that's what's so scary about me, Jeremy. I don't fight like them. I'm the bogeyman. I don't do it like the others do it. I just go in and let my personal power take care of the rest. I didn't know about the upgraded Enforcers though- not sure how much longer I can do this. One of these days, they'll be better than me one on one."

"Not for a while, Howard. Did you read the news of like a week ago?"

"No. I don't read it very often."

"Well, the newest model of Enforcer- which is what that asshole Dave had- is supposed to be the top of the line for another year or so. Your upgrading is done automatically, isn't it?"

"By the same guys who do the first and second level's. They do their jobs well."

"You might want to test them out.. not like you already didn't fighting them, but their sensory organs are probably better than yours. For that matter, probably a lot of other things. Howard.. this is both pretty secret and personal, but I have to stop beating around the bush and ask you it."

"Wait. I can guess. It's about how I win the fights, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"Jeremy, there are certain things sentients can do that Enforcers just can't. It has to do with biofeedback and the brain circuitry. It's like animals, when they get mad, their fury takes hold, their strength rises. Also, I can predict what the opponent's going to do, and I know how Enforcers fight. And it's still the same as it'll ever be."

"Yes- but Enforcers can supply their own muscles with adrenalin anyway."

"Yes, but they can't go into overdrive as easily as I can. They can't go into psycho mode. They can't pull their hidden reserves out and start rocking because they have no hidden reserves. They might have self-preservation programming, but they have no direct sense of self-preservation, and they can't burn themselves up and grow themselves back like I can. Also, their spinal cord and body-sensory coordination isn't self-programmed for that like mine is, and any organics developer anywhere will have a hell of a time putting that into Enforcers, because they can't think about situations and adapt to them quickly and reprogram their actions in preparation. That's why I'm faster, because my movement comes from the spinal cord, not back and forth between the brain and the fists unless new stimuli comes in, and if it does, it's probably something easy to react to, like an incoming punch or bullet. With Enforcers, they'd just leave themselves open and punch lots of thin air if they tried that, and like I said, they can't think to do it. They have no motive, just orders."

"So you can consciously-"

"No. Not consciously. Subconsciously. Consciously, I'm thinking about other things, like the longer-term aspects, and what I'm going to do. My spinal cord prepares me for each move and variation, and then I do it when I get the chance. But like I said, one of these days they will make an Enforcer that's just plain old **faster**- completely- than I am."

"Fuck dude. That's a lot of shit to put in. I wonder why they can't program themselves though, if that's part of the secret?"

"It's part of the brain. People react to things out of instinct. People, even normals, can develop reactions that are next to instinctive with practice. Enforcers can't, because like I said, their brains and bodies just don't mesh well enough. They can do things like stick a pole down their throat without gagging and break their own arms without flinching, but that's just because their design can manipulate their cerebellum. They're not as good as some people think they are. They're just living robots, remember that."

"Howard, you realize you just gave away some biiiiig secrets."

"Nothing you can't find out if you look hard enough. The thing is knowing where to look. Of course, you need to deduce that Northberg gave whatever ability to me because they **could** give it to me."

"They are just like you, they do things just because they can."

"Which is the height of ego."

"Ha. I wonder if your son will want your position?"

"Needless to say, he can't have it. When he's old enough to understand social relations, I'll bring him up as an Illuminatus, but there's no way he'll take my spot. Where would I go? I don't think he'll be crazy enough to try to take it by force."

"Better hope he doesn't. And... at that facility, don't they learn Latin first? Why is that? I thought we were supposed to be running on English now?"

"Latin is a root language. From Latin comes many other languages. Teaching a child Latin first will allow him to learn other languages, like English, more quickly. Learning Spanish, French, German... all no problem for me because I learned Latin first. Which brings me to another thing I'd like you to understand, Jeremy."

"Uh? What's that?"

"Technology goes upwards and the pyramid strikes again. You need a base, a precedent, to develop from, if you want some security in your actions. You said that my running in and laying waste to Enforcers was something completely out of the ordinary. But it has good precedent. It was a medieval-style raid, the kind you never read about in legends because they're so underhanded and so fucking effective. Find the enemy camp- that building was far from a castle- and just rush in on horseback with a few men, with no large armies, no visible preparations for battle, and no warning. Get in, slay everyone you can, get out. The modern equivalent is termed 'commando-style'. What we just did was a slightly modified version of that, much simpler, much more direct, much less expected. Although people **will** start expecting me at some point."

"Howard... irrelevant question here.. how can you think up so much stuff to say to me so damn quick? And why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I can with my faster brain, and because I consider you one of my friends, Jeremy."

"Oh. Thanks, Howard. I appreciate that. But don't give me any more Illumination at the moment. I don't think I can remember it all, my head's starting to hurt." He's a normal, so I'll judge him as 'pretty smart'.

"Yeah, give yourself time then. Learning'll come to you."

"So what are you going to do? I don't know why, but I have this **urge** to play you in a game of volleyball."

"Jeremy, by offering any sort of physical challenge with me, you accept any and all consequences of what might happen to you during the course of the game."

"So yes or no? We can make teams more even.", he said with a slight grin, unafraid of the white bogeyman.

"So yes. After I get some sleep. You order whatever objects we'll need." I flopped down on the couch and my consciousness said adios.

"Hey, Howard.", Jeremy woke me up with some time later. "Hope you don't mind me waking you." I didn't. "The stuff's all here, and we've got almost all of it set up. Sarah and Paul had helped him and his servant with the poles and lines spraypainted into the grass outside.

I went upstairs and got dressed- not the suit, not for this game. "Hey, Billy. Get dressed, not a bladed suit, and come down. We're going to play some volleyball.", I called over the intercom from my room. We were down and ready to play in about two minutes.

"Why aren't you wearing your usual, anyway?", Sarah asked us. C'mon, the suit's got weapons.

"Because he doesn't want to tear open the ball if he ever punched it, remember?", Paul reminded her.

"Oh. Duh. Forgot about that."

"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." Sizzle. A mistake I've painfully made in the past and seldom repeated. My eyes burned like crazy, and my skin started peeling off and the skin under it was reddish and angry. Fortunately, it's cloudy today.

"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 wracked his brain for more. "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. I chuckled a bit. "You know how to play, I assume?" I took a second to figure out the logics of how it's played. Since balls arcing upward are easier to hit, a logical strategy would be to have a teammate hit it into the air, where someone jumping up can smash it directly into a random area of the opponent's court. Which is what all those scantily-clad women were doing on.. what was that, ESPN?

"Saw it a couple of times on TV."

"All right.. teams?"

"I can't play for shit, Jeremy, remember?", Jeremy's servant told him in a fairly blunt voice.

"Oh, yeah. I remember.", Jeremy replied. "All right.. we should probably use Enforcers."

"I can already tell this is a height-based game. But.. hmm. All right. Me, Paul, and Sarah against you, Billy, and an Enforcer.", I said.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

"Billy, Sarah, Paul, you already know. Enforcer! Did you hear the rules being spoken?"

"Yes, Howard.", the nearest Enforcer said while coming closer.

"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." The newer Enforcers can learn by example. Since it doesn't see the rest of its team doing things like walking over to the other side of the court or letting the ball hit their side, it won't, either.

It did and the game began. I served first, whacking it to the middle of their court and then darting forward to prepare for what I knew would happen- Billy would probably nuke it, and I'm not sure how well Sarah can return his slams. He did slam it, and I jumped up and backhanded it up in the air, Sarah pounded upon it, the Enforcer smashed it directly up and back, Billy hit it above me, Paul bounced it into the air (apparently the ball is made such that normals can return engineered's slams), I returned it to the back of the court, Jeremy hit it into the air, the Enforcer hit it to its left, and Paul failed his return. Whack. When Jeremy served it, I smashed it way up into the air with some power- **way** up. Too far up. The wind caught it, and everyone except the emotionless Enforcer and me was laughing hysterically. I swore, grumbled, and gave it to the Enforcer, which served it in much the same way Jeremy had.

As the sun started to come out, most of the battle was kept in the front, with engineered's pounding the soft ball at each other's ground, higher-arc'd shots being popped up by the genetic normals. The Enforcer and Sarah were a decent match, the Enforcer having the height and Sarah having her usual speed and fury. In three more rounds, the score was 3-2 in their favor, and the two ordinary humans in the game were beginning to suffer mild oxygen debt. Billy served it, I whacked it close to the net, the Enforcer hit it into the air- then Billy came down like a raging demon, grinning like a madman, and was going to pound the ball into the grass like an axe blade into flesh, avoiding players and going for the largest open spot he could find. I was going to put that away, too. Whack-**crack!** A split second after he smashed it, I had punched it with full force, aiming for a similar plot of ground on his side. I was wondering why I didn't hear a bounce until I saw the results. We all laughed as I realized that I had smashed the ball in half, the two hollow, foam hemispheres connected only by a thin weave of volleyball exterior.

"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.", I said.

"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.", he said, handing it to Billy. The next few rounds demonstrated that he was right- repeated blows would not break it.

The next memorable moment was when Jeremy did the totally unexpected. He slammed it with folded hands, looking directly at me and grinning as Billy had done. What the fuck? How crazy is he? Oh well, I warned him, if this volleyball replaces his head, it's not my fault.. I punched it upwards, the force unfolding his hands as it bounced off them, and I instantly noticed huge red marks. He stepped back and the Enforcer came down, whacking it hard and to the side. Paul blocked it with his arm, it was going to the side, Sarah managed to kick it in the air, and I pummeled it down, directly going for Jeremy's head. He popped it up (that must have stung his palms a good deal), and Billy smacked it to the side, near the line, with an impossible-to-return blow.

"Damn, Jeremy, it's a good thing that thing's soft!", said Paul, rubbing his arm a bit.

"Oh, of course, I knew it would be like this.", he said, opening and closing his very red hands. "But I like it! You aren't pulling punches, are ya Howard?"

"Jeremy- am I known for pulling punches? It's just that I've never played this before." The Enforcer made a minor mistake next round and smacked it off the post instead of the part of the court it had aimed for. Sarah's quick reflexes managed to tie it up 10-10 a bit later. The next round was decent. Billy had whacked it into my hands, he whacked it back, I whacked it again, and as we got closer he knew he couldn't whack it into my hands again without being guilty of holding the ball- it would come to rest on his hand. So he let go and the ball rolled on the net a bit, and Sarah smacked it over into their court. Jeremy popped it up to the back, Paul slammed it into the back-middle of their court, the Enforcer smacked it to Sarah, who put it back to Jeremy- who failed his diving save, skidding into the grass. Except for the parts of his body and clothes made a shade greener, he didn't appear to be affected. Oh well. Grass stains are about as easy to get out of clothes and skin as blood, which washes out fairly quickly.

The game went to 17-15, our lead. I served the ball directly into the middle of the back court, near the line. Billy hit it high in the air and the Enforcer obligingly pounded it near the back corner. Sarah zipped there, hit it up, I bashed it, Jeremy managed to pop it up, Billy returned it, and Sarah hit it to the side of the Enforcer's head, who was moving and could not react fast enough.

Oddly enough, the next round ended in a similar scenario, with Sarah hitting the ball to the same place- the Enforcer, again, failed to react.

"That, gentlemen, is a **bug**.", she said, slightly sneering and pointing at the Enforcer.

"They better not have that problem in combat.", Jeremy said, shaking his head.

"Oh, it's that.." I thought back to when I was 9 and reading up on Enforcers. Rezoning of certain parts of the brain might take away personality, but some forms of learning are inhibited. They make the same mistake twice, like a bad AI. A problem they're working on.. but can't seem to quite fix. "Yeah, I remember hearing about that. That shouldn't work in combat.. but Murphy's Law dictates that it probably does." We continued the game and won it, 21-16, Paul and Jeremy exhausted, the Enforcer not showing any signs of fatigue (except for the task of removing a nutrient bar from its pocket and munching), and the rest of us slightly tired out.

"Well, Jeremy, I was thinking... how much of that was actually regulation?", I asked. He grinned.

"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." If we had been hitting harder balls, not only would he suffer more pain blocking my shots, the time between a bioengineered hit and the ball hitting the ground would be a lot quicker than his reactions. A smaller court means that he has less room he needs to move in, and the low net meant that he could actually get his arm over it.

"So that you'd actually get a chance to play without getting your ass too kicked." He smiled brightly, laughed, and nodded. "I'm not surprised. I would have done the same." We went inside with mildly aching muscles.

Waiting for me inside the house was a traditional annoyance. Another fool on the screen (Jack Butcher, don't recognize the name), whining at me for obliterating yet another fool who should never have been in the organization in the first place, or anywhere else on Earth for that matter. "How... **dare**... you.. you have disgraced your position... you... you've shot a messenger.." For a minute I envisioned him saying something like 'not soon enough!' and we would share a laugh, he would tell me how many people were made happy, and he'd get off the screen appreciatively. It didn't happen. "Howard, you can't just run us and control us by killing who you don't like!!" You know,

I'm not in the mood for this shit, especially with my eyes starting to itch.

"Why not? It's worked so far.", I said with some sarcasm and some anger. "Did you even bother to find out what happened, or are you just annoying me for the fun and the suicide?"

"You killed the man trying to save your life!!"

"Bullll...**shit!**", I said with a wide grin. Jeremy was in the camera's view; this asstard didn't recognize him, otherwise he would have known that I'd just been playing with someone who was on the list. "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??**" Something in my voice- I doubt it was only the words- shocked him to the core.

"I... I... he swore he'd... it wasn't supposed to.. oh **please** Howard, spare me!" No one gives awards for patheticity in the Illuminati. Maybe we should start with this guy, with the first prize of flying lead. But this really is pissing me off. I've been born into being the leader of an organization which seems to be, despite all the rampant engineering, on the decline. Too many idiots are getting in. It used to be that every fifth level Illuminatus could recite back to you exactly why some form of theology or idol worship is important for control, and that the freedom illusion is really the 'limited-freedom' illusion. Not anymore. With some of these guys, it looks like someone promoted them to honorary low-level Illuminati just to give them something and manipulate them better, at the cost of our organization. This will destroy us if I let it continue any more.

Needless to say, I am going to make this stop. Now.

"You will speak the **truth** or I will torture you to **death**."

"Howard... all right!! But I seek asylum for telling you what I will!" Yup, he deserves asylum, all right, just not **that** kind of asylum.

"Granted. Now speak!" Granted if I feel like it.

"His name is.. his name is McCaw. A-Andrew McCaw, he's a third level. Howard.. you weren't supposed to know. He started this when you started the tests. 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." Andrew McCaw is a member of the walking dead if this guy's telling the truth. "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."

"Say it."

"We've had a conspiracy inside the conspiracy." Old punishments for this crime were in the Inquisition-style torture ballpark. Now we just kill them. "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.." Probably, someone pointed out to him who Jeremy was offscreen. "those guys were getting in our way and rejecting our offers, making things harder." I 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? 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." Just thinking about this makes my head hurt. It makes no sense, none. He's trying to manipulate people he can't manipulate into doing things no sane Illuminatus would do. He's telling lies and playing politics in an environment where neither are welcome. Lies go only one way in the Illuminati: out. They don't flow between person to person. How hard is that to understand? Another slight buzzing sound signaled that another Illuminatus was on hold.

"Howard.. the idea.. was eventual rebellion."

"Then he's dead. And you may remain a fifth level. 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." I'll spare him. If he's just genuinely stupid, he'll fuck up again shortly and I'll execute him. If he's not stupid, he'll do what I tell him and he'll make a very strong effort to learn what's going on.

"Yes, Master Howard. Th..thank you." I received the next caller: Andrew McCough. I could faintly hear Paul humming the Military Corpses Song under his breath as Andrew tried to stammer out a sentence. Doo.. doo deeee... doo.. da deeee...

"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!" Just.. how stupid.. is this guy?

"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." I waited for him to tell me that yes, there really was a reason for him to manage to put bugs in Dave's home. He didn't. "I'm glad to meet you. It means that I can put an end to this annoying shit. Sarah!!" For a moment, I couldn't believe it was him, a third level Illuminatus making a very simple, foolish, and generally stupid mistake after making a much larger mistake. But it has to be him- with thousand-character encryption keys, it can't be anyone else. I'll have Sarah check the logs on his end after he's dead to make sure.

"Yes, Howard?", she asked with a slight grin.

"He is still alive.", I said calmly, pointing to the red, thirty-something face of Andrew McCough. "That is a bad situation. Rectify it." It was probably a bad operational decision to tell him I was going to kill him, but the intimidation value to potential future idiots is worth it.

"Yes, Howard." She didn't need my help, of course. She has access to everything I do, and no one is stupid enough to fuck with her, especially when she's under orders. It means that she will kill or disable anyone if they get in her way too long, regardless of literally everything else. She went upstairs to obtain the equipment she'd need for surety of death.

"NOOO!!! NOT HER!! NOT SARAH!! PLEASE, HOWARD, PLEASE.." It's nice to know that one of his final actions is to support me by showing that kind of abject fear. I turned the connection off and blocked calls from the walking corpse, and put the call in public logs. When the other Illuminati read the log- and I know they will shortly- they would probably take bets on how long it would take Sarah and whoever else she uses to kill him. Answer: not very long. Even if he tries to disguise himself, there's nothing like having DNA on file. I also removed the man's various accesses, as I don't want his last act to be a secrecy break. He still can break some, but not much, and I seriously doubt he'll think to do it.

"Howard, did anyone ever tell you you had a way of dealing with things that everyone envies?", Jeremy said from behind me with a kind of awe.

"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."

"Because I **don't** care, Jeremy. 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." I should do some prevention, shouldn't I? Definitely. "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." Sarah was coming down as I said that, wearing her usual assassin garb with normal clothing over it (jeans and a sweatshirt actually enhance her figure..) and carrying a compact pouch full of devices. She took the jet and I heard her take off to do her job: my dirty work. We all turned our heads to watch her close the door.

I spent the next few hours drafting ideas with everyone present, and developing an outline, while snacking on various treats. Regular testing would be seen as intrusive, the first few tests for true Illumination are supposed to do the job, but obviously, it's not working. And so, obviously, something needs to be changed.

The thing was that this was very well-covered ground. Lots of committees and designers had set up the tests, making sure of intelligence, manipulation ability, various roundabout questions, and some personalization. Therefore, the testing we developed was more of a hands-on approach, with everything being detailed in logs. We have agents, false-environment techniques, control of all kinds; let's use them. We already do some of this to a limited extent, but I want these guys put on the spot. Are they really Illuminati at heart, or are they just pretending to be? Similarly I intend to make it clear that anyone who just wants to make someone an Illuminatus better have a damn good, explainable reason for doing it, otherwise I have a damn good, explainable reason for killing both the inviter and invitee mercilessly.

The problem isn't just regular old stupidity, I realized, and it became easier to understand. It's stupidity and misled egotism. They believe that.. yes, my age is a factor again. They believe that I'm young and foolish and easily deludable, even when repeated kills confirm that I'm not. It's wishful thinking. They get in the Illuminati, the top of everything, and they lose their ever-growing heads. They try to find out who's easily manipulable, and try to get other people, like me, to push people out of their way either through violence or threats. The obvious leaps in logic, they try to bridge with blind faith. When blind faith fails them, all hell breaks loose, and people like Sarah are sent to eliminate them. But the idea that these people even got in- under the noses of people supposed to care who gets in- worries me. I suppose if they're all too busy with **real** sheeple manipulation, people can sneak in and do damage. And that's what I'm here for, to protect the Illuminati from threats. Idiot infestations definitely count as a threat. My face itched, and started disturbing my thinking; I idly scratched it, although the gloves covered my natural fingernails.

I was reminded of the O'Riley Rule. A 1930's Illuminatus, Mr. O'Riley had been one of our best, if I remember the history right. The farther you get from the center in any group of friends (or conspirators, or anything else), the farther away their goals become from the center's goals. The goals of a duke are close to the goals of a king, but the goals of a soldier or a lower-ranking commander of soldiers are not. He even applied this to egalitarian relationships. I'm not sure what he would have said about today's multi-societal ideas, but I'm starting to get the feeling that he was completely right. He wrote essays that the normal world never saw. And then there's always your pal and mine, Finagle (Murphy is usually quoted on this because the later-invented Murphy's laws were more detailed and specific)- can it go wrong? Then wrong it goes. And fuck, did it ever go wrong. But I didn't lose all that much and we didn't lose all that much either, and, like an antibody

response to a germ, the idiot infestation was the impetus for shielding.

Eventually, after much brainstorming and hammering of details, the detailed technical discussion got to a close, we got new testing rules to implement (I thought for a bit and decided to just send it as policy- no sense bothering to discuss it as **this is** what we're going to do), and we got to talking about Andrew again.

"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?", Billy asked me, scratching his face.

"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.." There were too many ways to finish that sentence and I chose none of them. My face was itching and I scratched it. It felt like there was too much skin there.

"I'm glad you're starting these tests. Imagine if people like that got world implant power..", Billy 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. I hope we just stop recruiting from the normal population. The kids who came over were..."

"Quick, brilliant, understanding, and had control over their own egos, right, Howie?"

"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. But no, they need to play politics and ignore real problems. Their resource portfolios were in tatters.." Just like my face. How much sunburn did I get?

"Yeah, I saw that. Someone should have got them on that too. Howard.. why?"

"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? 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-" His face was itching as much as mine. I pinched a corner of my cheek and peeled; so did he.

And peeled. And peeled. Skin came from below my chin to all the way up on my forehead, and I held a great deal of epithelial tissue in my hands. The itching promptly went away; I had completely regenerated it.

I let Jeremy take it from my hands, but I probably wouldn't have if I knew what he was going to do with it. He covered it over his face like a mask, pinning the sides to his cheeks. It was grotesque, but oddly amusing. "These guys don't know what they're doing!", he said, in a very poor rendition of my voice. Joey, Billy, and Paul started laughing.

Billy had a similar outline of skin and handed it to Joey's outstretched hand. "Now this shit? Yes. Make them all locally.", Joey said with the skin mask, doing a different but just as bad imitation of

Billy's voice. Both Jeremy and Joey started giggling.

"You guys- Jeremy, you- Damn!", I said, with slight indignation but laughing just the same.

Still laughing, Billy asked, "Okay, now that you've taken advantage of our dense skin, can we go back to being serious?", in a not-very-serious voice.

Noticing Jeremy and Joey quietly pocketing their new playthings, I continued from where we left off. "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.."

"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."

"The same reason it's not going to be a problem now." Blam. Chk-chk. Blam. Or, the ultra-modern equivalent, KA-POW and sizzle. Guns don't kill people, microwaves kill people.

"You know, thinking about it, I'm getting the impression that these guys are just put here for the three of us.", Billy 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." He has a point.

"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," I half-expected Jeremy to put the mask back on and say 'You're welcome.' "like this place needs any more intrigue.."

"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."

"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." Many times, the ranting of a high lord is taken as sage advice- which it often really is. But the listeners fail to recognize that it's still just ranting.

"You do that a lot."

"It could be worse. I could be doing it in Latin." I chuckled, he absolutely cracked up. "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."

"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?"

"That is my purpose in life, isn't it." Thinking about myself in **those** terms **definitely** knocked me off my high horse again. "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."

"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.'"

I nodded slightly. "Point taken. And I'm bored **now**." I sent Sarah because I was tired. "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.", Billy replied.

Jeremy and Joey, of course, were listening to this whole thing, certainly taking mental notes and comparing themselves to us. I don't mind- I should probably broadcast some of our meatier conversations (although NOT the skin mask part. Definitely not.) to the entire five levels anyway, to give them a glimpse of how the Dominator thinks. Giving insight to my weaknesses? Do I **have** weaknesses?!

I did the research and everyone watched intently. Everything Andrew said aroused suspicion and the way he said it was always conspiratorial. (Billy was right about people doing plotting for its own sake, of course- they get in and feel they're expected to play the part. But Andrew was hardly new.) He was sane, semi-intelligent, pretty much logical.. just given to bouts of stupidity and illogical calculations. He was one of the ambitious types, thought he was better than anyone else (Position's taken!), wanted to manipulate his way straight to the top- and now Sarah's going to put him straight to the bottom of a grave. As I understood his personality, I understood why; and as I understood why, I stopped doing the research and went to have some fun. There's so many games that work well in FFA, although Billy and I have a strong tendency to go after each other- we're the most powerful opponents in the game, after all. When we were done that we played a six-player beat-em-up featuring comic book characters.

After Sarah killed him (he tried so many things to stop her, too- she simply said she used a bigger gun, and I didn't bother asking further), I told her to get the logs from his computer- and there they were, with his name on them. Good. If it wasn't him, I'd have had to do some serious investigation. I told her to try to find out who else he'd invited, but he apparently shredded the documents (literally destroying a hard drive he'd kept on a separate computer- a smart thing from someone with such stupid ideas) before she showed up- she found nothing.

Jeremy slept on the couch that night, with Joey on the floor at his feet.

Chapter 48

I woke up the next morning with a simple question on my mind. I put on the suit and strode down to Jeremy and Joey.. or, rather, just Jeremy. Hey, it's not like his servant can get lost here.

"G'morning, Jeremy.", I said.

"Oh.. hey, morning, Howard.", he said, noting Joey's absence. "Ehh.. I bet he's upstairs again. Did you want me to do something?"

"Just a question. I haven't asked anyone this before. What standing orders do you keep on Joey?"

"Standing orders?"

"Don't kill you, don't hurt Illuminati, keep secrecy, that stuff."

"None." None? Did he say **none**? Okay, that was **not** what I expected! How many others in the Illuminati are like that?! Probably the same amount as Joey's standing orders..

"Wait a second, you mean you haven't told him not to kill you yet?!", I shouted, believing him but not wanting to. I was almost struck mute by the gravity of that. Even the dumbest Illuminatus, hell, even the dumbest **sheeple** would do that!

"Nope. And I don't plan to.", he said, as if he had some trick up his sleeve.

"Jeremy, have you gone insane.", I said, a statement not a question.

"Nope. Guess again!"

"Okay. Jeremy. Has he tried to kill you yet?"

"No, and it's not going to happen."

"You're living on the wild side." He grinned and made semi-condescending tsk-tsk-tsk noises that I wouldn't tolerate from almost anyone else.

"Maybe. But I don't have to worry about my commands because I so seldom give them and I always leave him room."

"The hell. Okay, no more footsie, what's your secret?"

"The secret is...", he said, pausing for dramatic effect, "there is no secret. It's really quite simple. Come on Howard, your brain is twice mine, you can figure this out, cantcha?", he said in the happy, evilly gleeful tone of voice I'm starting to love him for.

"It's because you're his friend, isn't it."

"Bingo. And he's a happy person, an optimist. And the ultimate bastard when it comes to wiretapping. Hell, I'm surprised he's not in here with us, he is that good." I have similar sentiments about Paul. With the right training, he really could be.

"Well, that isn't a criterion, but I'm starting to feel shortchanged with my own fucking clone!" Although I wouldn't trade Billy for anything, I wish his attitude was a lot more like Joey's. "Jeremy, this is why I like you so much. You don't have much at all by our standards but you make it a lot."

"Oh hell, you have everything and you make it into everything more, not to mention that whole immortality thing. You probably already know, but a lot of the engineered ones aren't, the older ones, anyway." Yes, that does make sense, doesn't it- they were created before everything in the regeneration and age-stopping was ironed out.

"Yes, but everything's part of my job." We laughed. "And depending on how many more miracles Northberg can pull out of its ass, that 'immortality thing' may start getting contagious."

"You're talking retrovirus."

"I'm talking retrovirus."

"That would just be sweet. I have no other words for that."

"You're just going to have to wait, like everyone else." The Operator is moving as fast on this as he practically can. I can't speed this up through any power of mine.

He nodded and sighed. "Yeah.. but that's the thing, I can't wait a century or two like you can. That's the thing about people talking to you, Howard... you're immortal, and they know it. They act as Illuminati, they see it from your angle. And they realize that you're going to forget about the conversation entirely in a few hundred years, regardless of **how** important it was."

"There is that. But there are some things no one can affect."

"Yeah, I wish a lot of things were different." A phrase rarely heard from newly-recruited Illuminati. Jeremy has placed himself into a minority by saying that.

"Like.."

"Like Joey. You know how you've been laying waste to all these stupid Illuminati? Well, how'd they get in there?" Having him ask the question I've always wondered made me smile. "Joey never even got looked at and he's infinitely better than a lot of guys in there now."

"I do what I can to get the best. They'll all be made locally pretty soon anyway." When I say 'made', I mean **made**, and he knows it.

"Yeah, so there's no point in changing it, and you can't just go back and say 'Okay, I **un**-recruit you.' And like religion. That has really fucked up... ugh. I've seen it in person, it makes people **useless**, even as sheep. It's nasty as shit."

"Religion is one of the things a lot of us get antsy around. You know why. Very unpredictable. And since the demographic of serious religion practitioners is more emotionally-oriented than logical.. we manipulate them all the time, but we still say that caution is advised."

"Which makes everything slow."

"Somewhat. Remember, Jeremy, this isn't a nation's federal government. Bureaucracy does not tie things up. Every problem that you have mentioned to me so far has already been debated and thrown around in every sort of forum imaginable, and I can't think of any particularly important topics that haven't."

"So, in other words, if I can think of it, it's already being worked on."

"Essentially."

"Now I understand how you can be bored!"

"Do you have anything else to do, help me get rid of some of it?", I said with a grin.

"I will cream you in *Soul Calibur*."

"Your ass is mine."

And so we played, and you could have fed his tactics to the nearest mouse, and his entrails to the nearest tiger. After my character got done pissing on the corpse of his (Yes, we do have several bored programmers among us whose seeming goal in life is to de-kiddieize video games.. it must be, because this shit takes **time** to make) for the fifth time, he turned to me and said, "Howard... I need to tell someone about something."

"That's a very bad need for an Illuminatus to have, Jeremy.", I replied.

"Yes, I know, which is why it's better to tell it to you, because in the end, you don't give a shit."

"Jeremy, even though I have too many people to deal with, I do have some modicum of care for the thoughts of my brethren. Besides, you've made me curious, and **no one** keeps me curious." That had just the right blend of threat, friendliness, and curiosity.

"All right. When I was eight years old, I was doing homework for those crappy public schools, and Joey was over. The thing is, he lived about a couple of miles away, and so he needed his parents to drive him. I know you can already smell the bad vibes. Remember, this is what normal life is like." I laughed and nodded.

He kept going. "All right, so his dad took him, and you could tell the guy was bored out of his shit. Just by looking at him, I knew that he had just lost a big argument with Joey's mom."

"Just by looking? Is there a normal trademark I don't know about?"

"There's signs. You can tell- the way he looked around, the impatience in his voice, he didn't wanna be there, but it was like someone was forcing him to be there. And who else but his wife?" I laughed regardless of my personal unfamiliarity with the humor.

"All right, keep going."

"Well, his dad had the day off, and we didn't. So his dad was basically wanting to get out of there in a hurry, but he didn't wanna go home and be chewed out, so he went to.. ah, I forget, McDonald's or something. Anyway, my mom, praise God, knew when to leave me right the fuck alone." I nodded. Ugh. That would just suck. Having your every move watched by someone in authority... we the Illuminati, of course, stopped doing that to our servants a long time ago. "So we were alone in my room, I was gonna finish my homework, I sat back down in the chair, and Joey looks over my shoulder and looks at my homework. So when he looks, he's got his hands on my shoulders, and he's basically giving me a massage. And I don't know what he touched, a pressure point or what, but.. but that just felt **good**." I realized the context of the message, realized how he was saying it, and internally congratulated Jeremy for not showing embarrassment, which is simply not supposed to exist in our organization. Maybe the reason he isn't acting like it is because he isn't feeling any; after all, he is talking to the Uber-Master, who understands everything.

"So he kept his hands just like that the whole time I was doing my homework.. public schools, simple, repetitive shit, done in fifteen minutes. And so I lay on the bed, hands behind my head, staring at the ceiling, thinking about what to do.. and so Joey leans over me and says 'Know what, bud? I would give my motherfucking **soul** for more time like this and a fuckload less time with my dipshit family.'" I grinned widely at the fact that Joey got exactly the deal he wished for. "Yeah, I

know, ironic isn't it. And so I joked that I'd give his soul too, there's some more irony for ya, he laid on the bed next to me and we shot the bull until five minutes later his dad comes up the steps, Joey jumps off the bed in **pure reflex** as soon as he hears it, his dad drags him home, and I swear to God" Obvious and Highly Unnecessary Wisecrack: 'I'm right here.' "that his dad said, before he left the house, 'you're not queer for him, are you?' That fucking.. hey, wait a second. I should probably just give that fat fuck a little accident right now!" He started to reach up to pull the keyboard back- I grabbed the back of his shirt near the neck area and calmly pulled him back down.

"You know the rules.", I reminded him. There's a personal reason for the guy to die, but no Illuminated one, and Jeremy's only a fifth.

"Yeah, you're right, I'm not allowed to kill him, but there's more I want to do, too. There's instant 'nasty accident', instant 'Kill and Replace', instant 'Feds watching the house' for the political dissidents, but there's no instant 'cause suffering and misery from no perceptible source' button."

I dredged back into memory and pulled out a small list I've seen a while back. "Illuminati are still being trained in doing that and they still need normal human targets to do it to."

"From no perceptible source?"

"Bingo."

He reached out, grabbed the keyboard, and within two minutes had added the asshole's name to the bottom of the 'Undirected Fear and Anxiety' sub-list. Checking the dates I could tell that this thing cycles pretty fast- this asshole will suffer in a month. "Wait.. I should probably tell Joey I'm doing this.", he said, and got up to do that. He cares for his servant so much.. I realized that if Paul's family ever became involved in an Illuminated operation, I'd tell him.

"Hey, Joey. You know that asshole dad of yours?", I heard Jeremy ask from upstairs.

"We were **just** talking about him!", Joey replied, and I started laughing and so did everyone upstairs. Coincidence happens.

"Well, guess what, I'm only a fifth so I can't kill him, 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 replied loudly. "Undirected fear and anxiety is exactly what that bastard deserves!" More laughter from me and everyone else again- I didn't think he had the meanness in him! We all played some games- that six-player beat-em-up was even better with a full house- and then we went around the island, Jeremy and Joey seeing everything there was to see here. I keep forgetting how nice it looks to people who don't live here. We went to a cave, open to ankle-deep water but with lots of dry spots, that I haven't seen since I was seven, and never went inside. It was small, but nice- when I want to go outside but it's too sunny (being in here during a storm would have its own kind of charm, too), I think I'm going to start hanging out here.

"I think I'm going to start relaxing here.", Sarah said, echoing my sentiments.

But shouldn't that be impossible? "And avoid my commands, Sarah?", I asked with a raised eyebrow. She simply pointed to something I'd overlooked- an intercom was built into the rock wall, looking like a part of the cave. Nice. We joked and played in there (note to normals: don't ever get in a splash fight with an engineered, you'll lose embarrassingly and you might not even get the engineered wet) for a good fifteen minutes, then left to do other things. Of course, Jeremy had to leave at some point, and did so in a few hours, waving and smiling with his servant as he got into his helicopter.

The next day was the usual- just a lot of time-killing, random research, and assorted sources of fun- I kept Billy next to me because I figured he'd need to hear this. At about noon, the call I've been expecting finally came with a buzz. I responded immediately and the Operator appeared.

"Howard, the report you wanted? It's here, in full." Finally. Instead of worrying, I get results. I pressed a few buttons and downloaded the offered report in milliseconds. "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." He shook his head slightly and closed his eyes a bit, pondering the event. "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."

"Why?" He shrugged a bit. "We screwed up, that's why. None of us had the foresight to predict that you two might be breeding." I'm not going to point out the total blindness inherent in that last sentence- not now, anyway.

"Technical explanation."

"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**. 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." Something wasn't quite right.. oh, that's it.

"Why did you have them in different places? I thought I was just an advanced version of her?"

"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."

"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." Since almost everyone throughout his life will be almost certainly be nicknaming him according to his abnormality, I figure a good dose of Latin can make it sound much better. The Operator's fingers moved in the traditional five-fingered secretarial typing, filling it in. Listening to the clicks, I could tell he hadn't misspelled. (That **would** be an embarrassment, wouldn't it?) "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.." Bah, even 'mutant' sounds better than that. "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." Visions of heavily-deformed babies danced in my head. "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. 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." I figured he'd say that, but I had to ask all the same.

"Then that's all." We both switched off at roughly 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 **am** technology.

"Oh, I **love** that.", Billy said, chuckling. "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."

"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."

"And we actually have opposition in Quake!", we both said simultaneously, then proceeded to actually have a battle on the local (my) server, kicking ass and ignoring names. They will surpass us, no question. One of them may try to take the Dominator's seat because of that, and I won't be able to fight them off like I can the normals, because they'll be better than me. That doesn't bug me for some reason, though. So far, engineered or partially-engineered children (even those with slight tinkering are still under the age of 15) have formed their own loose sub-clique. We are, after all, a real elite. I will be known as the First, the original fully-engineered Illuminatus- even though I may lose some power, I can't fight this. I am not remotely stupid enough to attempt to slow down the advancement of technology- there can be only one result at the end. Technology is a scramjet combined with a bulldozer- you can give it paths to go on, but it's eventually going to go whether anyone wants it to or not.

Besides, I really **am** technology. I have nothing to fear. The current crop, at least, isn't going to try to kill me. It's a sort of curse- in 30, 40, maybe 50 years, I'll be wholly outdated if Northberg continues. The New Elite will have taken over. 40, 50 years after that, a Newer Elite will rule, and the previous Elites will, of course, be living forever. The Elites won't kill the older ones- they would sentence

themselves to the same eventual fate by instituting such policies. In other words, in a hundred years, we must have direct, or at least greatly expanded, control. These Elites need to go **somewhere**.. and they will be digressing farther and farther from the current human form, millions of years of evolution packed into a century or so, ignoring the usual restrictions of mothers giving birth and energy requirements. And, of course, the normals will simply vanish.. making the poor deluded fools who want their children 'pure' nothing more than cannon fodder. Or maybe I'm overestimating the speed of progress. Although I know the partial engineered's have some elements superior to me, what I'm thinking of is the 3-year-old who was rumored to be my Version 2.0- last I heard, he had serious mental problems and I don't know what they did with him.

After the hard-fought game, I looked it up. They 'removed' him (that one makes even me blanch, but no one said the Illuminati were nice), now it's 'Project Restarted' and they're a year into the restart, having difficulties and making only slight headway. They could produce something slightly better than I am (with four arms, to boot) now- but they won't. They're saving up for a full-on assault on nature. They want even more bang for their G's, T's, A's, and C's. Since there is no call to create another fully-engineered with only slightly more power than I have, they want their code to be better compatible with normal human forms, so they can have their cake and eat it too- their biological children being given the superhuman power and intelligence we've all grown to love. And, of course, when they do finally create Version 2, they'll produce him- or several- just on principle and **find** a use for them... and I can't stop them because if I tried, they'd know exactly what I was doing, and kill me because they firmly believe in the desirability of greater technology. Obvious solution: Personally take charge of the children's education and cause them to at least regard me as an ally instead of the eventual target.. I thought about it and decided to take regular trips to Northberg Educational. Although I might still get deposed in the end, it's better than getting my ass handed to me by some Orwellian superhuman.. will that work? This is depressing. Yup, I **am** technology, and technology gets outdated.. this is even more depressing. Fuck it. No sense worrying about it. There are currently only two engineered's in the world who might want to do violence to me, and fortunately, they can't.

"Sucks, doesn't it?", Billy said from behind me. I had noticed his presence sometime in that last stream of thought, but hadn't really regarded it.

"Has to happen sometime, no two ways about it.", I replied.

"Don't let yourself get demoted, or there's no way back up." He's right. Once I start sliding, there's no end to the bottom. I'll almost certainly always be an Illuminatus, but what does that mean five hundred years from now when **everyone's** engineered better than I am and the Illuminati have full direct control? Better a figurehead than... oh damn, I better implant even them.. fuck, why the hell can't I think straight?

"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**.." He continues to be right, and I thought nothing more needed to be said on the subject- he walked away for a few seconds, then turned around and said, "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..." My thoughts were somewhat jumbled and I didn't finish the sentence.

"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." Holy shit. He's right again. The reason hierarchy exists is because people are stupid enough to be guided by outside forces. I instantly realized the futility of trying to keep everyone implanted- it's not going to work with an advanced humanity,

Murphy's Law dictates that (doesn't it?)- and I am certain Billy realizes this as well as I do (which isn't very well at all, shit... I'm getting confused a bit, need to think on this). With six billion- nah, we don't need that many, make it a hundred million and preserve the environment- people better-engineered than I am, technology is going to be much more powerful and the new humanity will explode into space, trans-light travel or no. First we take the Moon's resources, then Mars, then maybe Venus (**can** we turn all that CO2 into oxygen?) then some moons of other planets, then it's time to get out of this solar system and go exploring. Fuck the solar system; let's take the universe.

"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 ones might not have been actively considering it, but they know.. I think we all know if we look ahead far enough."

Who wants some paradise? Replace all the idiots with 500-IQ immortals and see just how fast the world improves.. of course, this is incredibly long-term thinking, but this is the road we're headed down, the only road in sight. Trying to keep the population stratified as in Brave New World would be pointless- technology will replace the lower classes. But then, what would that mean for me? I'd be ruler of... what?

Nothing more was said. Communication would only exacerbate the problem- so I did something else. I checked out the report's technical details- nothing except the arms was really of note. Lots of fucked up code.. but he has our engineered physical aspects and he's not disabled in any way that they can tell. From what I could tell, a small section of genetic code necessarily got overwritten by the arms- but they can't tell what should have been there, to them it's just garbage, and hasn't affected any of Quad's physical aspects, and although we can't know the mental aspects yet, it hasn't physiologically changed his brain any. I felt a good deal of relief. Quad and I will probably make wisecracks someday about the strangeness that got him his extra limbs- but as I noted before, it's out of my hands now and I'm not going to go around in circles about it.

As I went through the day, my brain was boiling- I figured it was my mind resolving its internal conflicts, my subconscious figuring out things, what to do, how to do it, and what the results would be. I got a slight headache, but thought I'd get over it.. eventually, I did.

But that night I couldn't sleep. Two voices were doing battle in my head. One was screaming about how I'll have to implant everyone if I want to keep power and stay alive.. the other said that that was certain, inevitable death, because things have an incredibly bad habit of going wrong, citing Murphy's Law and the sheer power of engineered people. Oh damn.. the biggest decision this world will ever see, and I'm having trouble making it. I hate being confused.. but confusion is often the result of decisions that need to be made. Fuck, what to do.. in theory, the implants are perfect. In theory, I could have everyone attached to me, and through telecommunications, give my orders.. and prevent my plans getting interfered with by ambitious middlemen. Instead of having both voices pester me, I turned them on each other and watched the debate.

Voice 1: No implants mean your replacement. Implants mean you stay where you are. There is no question about that.

Voice 2: Yes, but if you try that.. think about what could go wrong! Murphy's Law!

Voice 1: Like what? You don't try to implant all of the people immediately.

Voice 2: Well.. umm..

And that settled it. There is no way I can possibly stop the technological advancement of better engineered ones and retrovirals, but I am not going to lose this power willingly. Things can go wrong.. but until I see a plausible way for things to go wrong, I'm going to go through with the original plan and implant as many people as possible. Now it's just a matter of how I go about doing that- the fact that the Dominator doesn't control anything directly, I immediately noticed, is a safeguard against tyrant Dominators who want to try to use power battles as a way of control. They didn't foresee

someone with my kind of reaction time just blasting heads off. But now it's gone from a discussion of 'what to do' to a discussion of 'how do I do it', and discussions of 'how do I do it' are my natural territory.

It would have ended there, had a third voice not shown itself.

Voice 3: Even if you manage to avoid being deposed forever, even if you manage to implant everyone without anything going wrong, even if you live as the ruler you plan to be.. what does that mean, in the long run? What does it mean if you're going to control a society of engineered through implant slavery, and have your will be supreme over all? It means you'll make all the decisions, it means you'll be God. Now, tell me- is that kind of plan really worth it, forcibly suppressing the engineered Illuminati, constantly struggling to keep your position, and knowing that everyone else in the world- engineered of your caliber- are reduced to the level of servants? And let's say, in a hypothetical situation, you somehow do manage to implant all the future Elites. Then what? Do you really want to be everyone's master?

'Why wouldn't I?', I asked it, but for some reason I knew that there was an answer to that, some nagging sensation, something even I couldn't articulate very well. What price, power?

I immediately fell asleep.

The next day, I checked a lot of engineered's conversations and a lot of Northberg material. The engineered were also feeling antsy about getting outdated, and Northberg's reports basically said that I'm the best they'll have in a long, long time. Theoretically better combinations of DNA were often unviable, and often produced unexpected results. Get one thing wrong, screw something up elsewhere. Get everything 'right', and the body doesn't grow properly. Screw everything up and you might get a Quad. On a hunch, I looked things up, and found that I was right- they're going to start making four-armed Enforcers now. On another lark, I read a dissertation by the Operator and a few of his colleagues- genetics is like assembly code in some ways. It was confusing, full of references to other documents, and I found myself skipping large parts, but I got the gist of it. You can do anything you want with DNA.. given that you know precisely what you're doing.

And as for what to really do.. I'll burn that bridge when I get to it. We as an organization need more direct control before I can do much with the normals. And if I start trying to implant Northberg's current creations, my ass is grass- but I know that they'll stop, or drastically slow down, manufacturing engineered at some point, even if that point is long after the End of Secrecy. They'll have to. Immortality means that there is no natural die-off, and we're ridiculously hard to kill.

Chapter 50

I had an oddly complicated dream in which I'd imagined various inefficiencies in the Illuminati and figured out ways to cure them- then I woke up and thought of ways I could do the same thing in the real world. Hey, it's not often I take initiative in this kind of thing. I'm not in any way obligated to do it, but the Dominator's power is good for fixing inefficiencies as well as settling disputes and removing idiots. I put on some pants and went downstairs- it'll be easier and more comfortable on the big screen. Let me see- yes, let's take a look at current mind control projects, that's a good place to start. The information was readily accessible.

I had an Enforcer get me a physical notepad and a writing implement- it's not often I use pencil and paper, and I tend to make my shorthand up as I go along. For a couple of hours, I went through several clips the same way, evaluating various practices and procedures. A lot of it was familiar territory- pleasure and pain Pavloving, subtle manipulation of ideas, good old-fashioned obey-or-else threats that we don't use much inside the Illuminati anymore. Some of the items were new twists on old ideas, or people using new things with old-fashioned procedures. "Possible implant technology flaw" read the description of one item. What?! Like hell there is. I watched the guy in charge of the facilities (in this case, the water supply) command Enforcers to do a number of

various things. "Close the valve, then remove the old filter like this, then snap in the new filter in just the reverse way. Open the valve, and that task is done."

"There!", I exclaimed. He'd forgotten a 'then', and the Enforcers did the last statement first! C'mon, he should have seen this before putting it in the database for review. "No wonder! That fucker phrased it all wrong! I didn't think there were any technology flaws!", I exclaimed aloud, a bit relieved.

I tried another clip from another department entirely. About twenty servants sat at desks, marking and filing information in a rather mechanical way. They're not Enforcers, but they're not acting like implanted or unimplanted servants.. what, then? A rather long chemical name came on the screen that I faintly recognized, along with a dosage of 5 milligrams every half hour. Where have I seen- ah, yes. "Xenol again, these guys never give up.", I said aloud. I paused the screen, wrote Xenol and the dosage down, and unpaused. Xenol has showed up in Illuminated experiments twice before. The first one was rather dismal, with serious mistakes in the servants' work showing up everywhere. It was slightly modified for another try; the second time passed some initial testing, but a couple hours into it, the servants would lose it and start completely fucking up everything. This latest test has a different dosage with smaller increments, and I think the chemical itself is either the exact same or similar. Based on what I've read about its effects, I doubt it succeeded, and even if it did, it wouldn't be of much value to Illuminati. '2 minutes, 30 seconds later' appeared on the screen, and the servants were all shown working away as normals almost never do- then the camera fixed on one servant in particular with the word 'Mistake' on the top right. There were multiple cameras and I could look at the shot from all angles, both the servant's face (which yielded absolutely nothing) and his paperwork. It's the same kind of mistake as the previous two Xenol tests: obvious to anyone who's actually thinking about what he's doing. The servant had a box to put the information in, and he wrote down the information about three inches to the left of the box, right over some printed words.

"Nothing different... except it's in the wrong place. Real simple, too...", I said. A totally un-thinking mistake. Which is actually the point of Xenol- it turns off the brain's ability to think independently, and its subjects become robots dedicated to tasks. Of course, without the ability to think independently, the metacognition is destroyed, and if any brain cells die (an accelerated process with Xenol), the subjects can't catch themselves making a mistake because of that.. "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.", I concluded, writing things down on my notepad. The hell with this. Who needs servants like that anyway? Forget the Enforcers, regular old machines can do this shit. I sent a message to the directors of the program telling them to shut it down and gave them the benefit of my reasons before I finished the actual report.

"What is Xenol?", Billy asked, as he came down the stairs to watch me. I gave him a general overview.

"Why would you bother with that?", he asked.

"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.", I said, finishing with a chuckle. The name's a relic from the first version as it isn't quite so obvious anymore, but I can only imagine what they'd be like after, say, four or five hours on that stuff..

"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?"

It didn't take him long at all. "..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 what a colossal waste of time it would be.

"And now you've got the simple solution, scrap the human mind."

"Bingo." Billy sat down next to me as I continued writing my conclusions down, and he looked over at my notepad. That, too, is a waste of time. "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." The X's are quite clear, but I doubt he knows what the upside-down question mark ('Why would we even WANT to know?') and the square/circle combination ('Square peg, round hole') mean. I continued to number 19: "Pure Manipulation Procedure", I shorthanded after I paused it. Apparently this rather fat Illuminatus is going to manipulate this almost-equally fat normal into something.

"Pure? Is that what I think it is?", Billy asked.

"Yep. No implants, no drugs, and if it is truly **pure**, no threat or use of force." He looked amazed. I was amazed myself the first time I saw it. I quickly started doubting the target's sanity, believing that he had to be completely nuts. Once I was taught the exact particulars of why he believed what he did, I understood it completely: normals will believe what they want, so insanity is common.

"What?! No.. force?! Must be some serious sheep.." To me, they're almost all serious sheep, but the targets of Pure are almost always among the most ovine possible.

"Ohhhh, yeah. No question. It's amazing to watch in action, though." I unpaused it.

The room must have been professionally done to be part of the manipulation. Morning sun poured through the thin, yellow drapes. Almost everything was white or light in color. I don't know how normals stand rooms like that- there was nothing actually useful in it- but it suited the Illuminatus's purposes well.

The victim wore all black; perhaps the purpose of this is to make her a servant? She woke up and asked where she was. Hmm? Manipulation after unconscious transport? This will be interesting.

The Illuminatus wore a white gown, and looked her in the face, smiling as only Illuminati really know how to smile. "Barbara? Wake up." When she spoke, I realized how good her voice sounded; it was simply harmonic and didn't sound like it came from a human throat. Either she was born with that gift, she's a practiced professional, or she has subtle technological help. This is the Illuminati; I'm guessing all three.

"Ugh.. who are you?", the victim asked.

"You can call me Angela." She can call her that, but I doubt that's actually her name. I paused it and wrote down my observations.

"Billy, note the tone of voice. Pleased, expectant, and respectful.", I said.

"I recognize two of those from somewhere..", he replied. I grinned at him. "By the way, she's got a Christianity thing going."

"Uh?" I hadn't noticed.

"See that gown, Howard? See the way her hair's done? 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." I wrote down the Christianity part as well, and then unpaused it.

"Annnngela? What is this place?", the black-clad woman asked, a bit confused.

"This is my house, Barb.", the Illuminatus replied, the epitome of a positive attitude.

"Your house.. what am I doing here?" Maybe I don't understand normals, but unless it was someone I trusted at least somewhat, one of the last places I'd want to be is someone else's house after waking up if I didn't go to sleep there. (Billy, I remembered, was of the same opinion.)

"Well, because we selected you, Barb. We hand-picked you to help us with our important work."

"Yeah? Well, what if I don't want to help you?" I feel sorry for the Illuminatus here; there are so many good answers to that, and she can't use any of them. "And why did you bring me here, anyway?"

"Barbara, please don't refuse us.", 'Angela' replied, avoiding answering any of the actual questions. "It takes us time and money to get people as gifted as you. We saved your life, to give you a second chance." In case you weren't enslaved enough the first time! I paused it again to write down some more of what I noticed- the facial reactions of the servant-to-be, the potential problems for bad results with the questions, the sheer skill involved in using voice tone.

"Old school.", Billy said. "Flattery, authority, appeal to pity, the fucking works."

"Yup- it **works!**", I replied, unpausing it.

"To do what?", Barb asked in a tone that can only be described as bovine. What a stupid cow.

"To guard the world, Barb, guard it from Satan's followers." Oh, if she only knew.

"Ha! You were right!", I exclaimed.

"Satan's followers?", Barbara asked, not in a 'What the fuck are you talking about?!' tone, but rather a 'Please tell me more' tone. Yes, we need them to be like this for world control, but in a way this just disgusts me. I can't wait until we wipe people like this off the planet like an industrial cleanser sucking up scum.

"Yes, Barb. Satan. I know how horrible that sounds. Which is why we need people like you, to help us fight them." Needing people like her to fight anything is less than a joke.

"Well.. well, what will I be doing? And who do you work for?"

"Administrative stuff, at first. Even we have our bureaucracy." Heh, no shit. "And we are known simply as the Enlightened." Billy and I giggled. I'd intended to do this for serious purposes, but I'm being amused instead.

"So why me? Because of what happened to Russ and Don?", she asked. The video didn't have any subtext explaining who they were.

"Because of your abilities, Barb." Abilities?! I pride 'Angela's ability to say that with a straight face.

"We know you're willing to support Christ." Why humans would worship a supposedly supremely powerful being who managed to get nailed to a couple of pieces of wood is beyond me. "And yes, we never take people with familial obligations, it wouldn't be fair. I'm sorry for what happened. We pray for the souls of families lost." For a pure manipulation procedure, they were probably already dead when Angela chose Barb.

"And why am I wearing black?"

"Oh- that's just because you're a neophyte. It's just to show who's who." I paused it, laughed, laughed, and laughed some more; so did Billy.

"Neophyte my motherfuckin ass!", Billy shouted, amazed, as if he didn't believe his ears.

"Neophyte! Fuckin neophyte.. That is pathetic!"

"No. Shit!", I replied, laughing. "That really is bad." I wrote down my observations- that this whole thing was a bit laughable, but very effective in its own way- and unpaused it.

"You guys aren't a cult, are you?", Barb asked. Oh, far from it...

"No, Barbara- we are not a cult. We are in fact Methodist." Yes, and our methods are control, manipulation, and expert lying. "You are free to leave at any time," Funny enough, she probably is. This is pure, after all. We really could afford to let her go; Angela hasn't broken any secrecy. "and we respect your right to privacy." Like a hyena respects a gazelle. "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." Oh, we most certainly can...

"Okay, so tell me about these devil-worshippers." As we knew would happen, she bought it all.

"Well, we call them the Misguided, because that's what they really are.." The screen faded out. Pure manipulation it was indeed, and I grinned and giggled at it. The taking of the woman to Angela's house could loosely be construed as 'force', but not really. I guess there's probably not a logical, statistical analysis that can be done here, but I want to know anyway: how **stupid** do you have to be before this kind of thing will work?

"That was unrealistic.", I heard Sarah say from the second floor.

"Oh, yeah. It was an extreme example. But that was real- although they did have her planned out welllll in advance.", I said.

"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!", Billy exclaimed, trying to wrap his mind around it.

"You were the one who told me that they don't think at all.", I reminded him.

"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..", he thought aloud.

"Was cult-prone. That's why they could do it.", Sarah finished.

"Stupidity is entertaining, but stupid people are useless.", I declared, and decided that was enough for today. I turned my scribbled, shorthand notes into paragraphs of readable information. So much of what I've seen today was nice, and even useful, but just.. unnecessary. It's like trying to optimize internal combustion engines when you've got fusion power.

Chapter 51

I had wanted to personally examine new recruits; my wish, as usual, was granted. In five hours we were at the Bavarian headquarters, at midnight local time, in a small room near the larger auditorium I've done my speeches in. My servants took their positions, muted and rendered motionless, and I sat in what was meant to look somewhat like a throne. I have a part to play, after all.

"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."

"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, grey-haired man asked.

"You won't get used for them. Just me." There are Illuminati who work at the behest of other Illuminati- Jeremy's one of them- but the dynamic isn't master-servant at all.

"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," A lot of that comes from Sarah, but there wasn't an operational difference. "the guy you dial up when someone has seriously wronged you."

"So wait a minute.", another, younger 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." I read many of their conversations before I got 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." He nodded and smiled slightly. Being told the truth, I've found, tends to make anyone's (and I do mean **anyone's**!) acceptance of a situation a lot easier, especially if they know **why** things are done.

"All right, Dominator, so you're the guy to call whenever anyone starts blowing the lid on Plot A or Secret Plan B.", said a twenty-something woman with some understanding in her voice, grinning with some teeth showing, her round, medium-size breasts pushing out her sweater.

"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." Some startled gasps and some incredulous looks greeted that on its way out of my lips. "Yes, 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 bulky thirty-year-old with a mustache and the beginnings of a beard, realizing his mistake (like I'm supposed to know off the top of my head who 'her' is), but still wondering anyway.

"You can figure that out by yourself. Any recruitment information is accessible to you on the database and it **does** include such details."

"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." A general chuckle was their reply. I can exterminate idiots from the Illuminati, but attacking the egotism will end with a dead baby to go with the flushed bathwater.

"Did they create you in a factory?", another woman asked.

"You have good insight." I'd hardly refer to Northberg as a factory, except maybe for the Enforcers, but she's on the right track.

"I figured. They're not making any **more** of you, are they?" I could feel Billy repressing a chuckle.

"Not me in particular," Never before have I wondered what it would be like with two or three of Billy. It wouldn't be the same, that's for damn sure.. "but other engineereds, 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."

"Speaking of which.. Howard, how old are you?", was another question from the man with the mustache and beard.

"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..", I heard from the back.

"No, those are normal size." General laughter. "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?" Every hand in the room went up instantly, without hesitation. "Who here has completely subordinated all other loyalties to the Illuminati?" Again, every hand was up, and they all looked as if they meant it. Some people may see this sort of oath business as silly, but they don't have the observational powers I do. Sure, I can be fooled, but it's an efficient test anyway. Now for a real question. "Who here is at the behest of another Illuminatus whom you know by name?" Three hands were up; the ones with raised hands were surprised at the rest who weren't, and vice versa. From left to right I decided to point to them one by one, starting on the first one, a 35-year-old man with glasses. Hmm, still haven't had those eyes fixed? You'll love Northberg. "How do you know the person who introduced you to the Illuminati?"

"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."

"He set up all your resources? So, really, whose resources are they?"

He knew the right answer: "**Mine.**" If he answered anything else I might have killed him.

I went to the next Illuminatus, the 20-something woman who told me I was the guy to call. "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 said, dispelling it before it got started. "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." 'Mistress' is a perfectly acceptable term, of course, but it's rarely used to describe female Illuminati.

I smiled and went to the next person, a balding, slightly dark-skinned man of possibly sixty, who was nervous about being put on the spot. It's all right; I'm not going to kill you for stage fright. I was half-tempted to give him a different starting question, just to freak him out, but decided against it. "How do you know the person who introduced you to the Illuminati?"

"He's an old friend of mine." **That**, I wasn't expecting. I was silent, so he explained further. "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." We don't like people who change here at the Illuminati. It means they can become people other than what they were when they signed up. That's not enough to hold against him, though, especially since he's so old.

"So how many questions did he help you with?"

"What? None! He didn't tell me **jack**!" His denial was both vehement and, I'm pretty sure, sincere.

"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." I smiled at him. He's okay. He was visibly relieved at me doing that.

"Okay. Now I'm going to find out what everyone else is doing here." I started pointing around the room, demanding to know what each of them was doing with his or her resources here, an absolute necessity for everyone to have an answer to, even if it's technical, complicated, or just plain long. Then I asked them why they accepted the invitation to join the Illuminati, and got practically the full range of logical responses. When I was done that, I simply said "Good. You're all still alive, so you all pass." I'm not sure how many of them know how easily I can kill them, but I decided against giving a demonstration. I left, letting them talk among themselves- this is good, they should talk to each other a lot more than they talk to me.

Chapter 52

The downstairs buzzer clicked again, in the middle of my daydreaming, on October 14, 1999. Sarah took it, I shuffled down to answer it, and I prepared myself to answer some questions and yammer some more shit. So, it was a surprise when someone I actually care about- the Day Operator of Northberg- was on it. For shits and grins, I motioned for the naked Billy to take it instead, and stayed out of sight.

He turned the communications on and proceeded to impersonate me. "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.", he replied, having perfected my offhand, slightly threatening tone. Sarah looked at Billy with a somewhat coaxing face, as if to say 'Send me! I want some blood!'"

"Yes, but this is a plot you'll actually like."

"Spill it all."

"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 was a first level, until he died of a heart attack from cholesterol in June. I remember that factoid.. since I usually make a point of not getting involved unless it's necessary, I didn't know him particularly, and since the other Illuminati were able to divide his holdings just fine almost completely without my help, I didn't particularly care. "You didn't know this, of course, since I instructed him to never even get close to letting you on. Yes, I approached him."

"But you're the guy who was in charge of creating **me**!"

"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. 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."

"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?!** Oh, I think I know.." Interestingly enough, Billy figured it out just a bit before I did. The Operator was trying to demonstrate my power, using cannon fodder to cause fear in the useful ones.

"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." Which is exactly how I remember thinking of the additional testing, as protection from disease. I was wrong about his intentions. I doubt I was wrong about the fear, though.

"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 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 killed another one who apparently hated you all on his own, and I imagine you can now guess what really happened to Walter." Having a near-monopoly on autopsies **does** give one incredible power here, doesn't it.. actually, the cause of death was almost certainly a heart attack, it's just its cause that's at issue. Did he fail to take cholesterol-reducing pills often? Did something just.. get in the way of his blood supply? There's lots and lots of ways to jam those little arteries up...

"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." Coming from Billy, there was a careful double meaning woven into that sentence, and I avoided smiling at it.

"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. 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." I will gain an entirely new respect for him if he manages to solve that one before everyone's engineered.

"For a normal-born, you really like to target large problems with giant plans."

"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."

"As you command." He clicked off.

"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.", I said with a grin.

"Howard, aren't you feeling a little left out?", Sarah said. "I mean, everyone else has plans.." I just looked at her.

"Sarah, what the hell would he plan **for**?", Billy asked rhetorically. "He already has the long-term stuff down. 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. Paul had come out of his room and was idly leaning on the railing, listening to everything.

"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.", I said. "Don't **think** he'd lie about that. 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.", Billy said.

"That's all we can do, and that **bugs** me.", I said. "Oh fucking well. We'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

On principle, I did some research on the Day Operator, checking personal logs (which are stored on my server) first. Of course, all the 'personal' journal information of any Illuminatus is visible to those above him; this is why almost no one uses it. But some do, when they have something they want others to know. I scanned the entries; they were sparse and sporadic, but I found one of particular interest written about three months ago and read every word.

Northberg Day Operator (He really **does** hate his name.)

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. (As Billy and I read at the same speed, we both gasped at the same time.) 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.", I said faintly.

"I don't think he's bullshitting you, Howard.", Sarah said, shaking her head slightly. I checked to make sure that he was not, reading through pages and pages of the logs. Yes.. the Night Operator was trying to move things forward. Yes.. he was asking to skip some things.. and the Day Operator's efforts (either through pre-ordained rules or direct confrontation) prevented it. Billy was laughing to himself quietly, but growing louder as he read each word.

"What? What's so funny?", I asked him, knowing that he saw something that I didn't.

"Howard.. have you ever heard of the term 'devil's advocate'?" Now where did.. oh, yeah.

"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. 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.", I finished. "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.."

"..they probably **wouldn't** have done those tests at all!", he finished. We shared a loud, echoed laugh. "I don't believe this shit!", he exclaimed in delight. "Fool, fool, fool!" Sarah was just smiling and shaking her head gently. I love it! Some of my superiority is because of someone hating me. Some people promote, some people sabotage, and **both** end up working for my greater good even before I'm born. Absolutely excellent.

That was definitely the high point of the month.

Chapter 53

I really should come to Northberg's children more often- I've only done it twice before, bringing my servants neither time. Of course, if I did it too often, I'd be widely suspected of corrupting the children for my own purposes, too many other Illuminati would figure out my plan, and a tug-of-war of sorts would break out, and that's bad for everyone involved. I tell anyone asking that it's for personal reasons, and in part, it is: seeing very young, engineered children can't help but remind me of my own upbringing.

The jet landed in the usual place and the light-rail system took us to the 1987-built educational facility, the plastic bubble immune to the driving snow and the fast winds. The facility wasn't particularly large- perhaps the width and length of a normal school, but several floors underground. It only holds about two hundred children at one time; I opened up the mini-screen and found out that only 139 were in there right now, the oldest of them being 90 months- and he's spending more time in the educational facility because that's where he's going to work his whole life, as the director.

I took a moment to reflect on the practices. It used to be that the sons and daughters of Illuminati didn't always have a chance to follow in their parents' footsteps. Recruiting was always considered better than breeding, because it was held that the superior quality- the Illuminism- can be found easily in a society of millions of people, instead of the risk taken with breeding. With the advent of genetics technology, however, all of these children are partially engineered, so all of them- certainly every last one- are much better than anyone you'd get from recruiting. Thus, that's a thing to keep in mind: I'm talking to future Illuminati.

Another thing to keep in mind is that I have to make this experience memorable, as I attempted to do the previous two times, for absolutely every last one of the children. It's a very, very simple idea: make the kids associate memories of me with the emotions of love, trust, and pleasure. Now, for normal children, this is easy because they don't have the abundance of material things. You can get in through their wants, very simply. Hand them some forbidden fruit (candy, etc) and the love will be instant. With these children, it is much harder; you have to get in through their minds because they already have everything they want. Giving them something they have never thought of wanting is a poor decision because it would instantly clue everyone in to what I'm really trying to do- and if I find something physical that they can't get again, assuming such a thing exists, they'll eventually associate me with 'the super friend that doesn't show up enough'. Tantalization is bad.

Making this a lot easier is the fact that these children do not have adult figures in their lives.

As I did the previous two times, I started with the youngest first. With the 2 or 3-month-old infants, it's not possible to get them to remember a face very well as they do not yet have the concept of object permanence- they don't understand that an object sticks around after it disappears from their field of vision. We quietly stepped into the soundproof, soft-carpeted, four hundred square meter infants' room. There were several high-resolution screens on the ceiling, with a corresponding low-pitch voice. Along the far wall were several mechanically-controlled cribs silently holding the youngest of the young who could not yet crawl, and a separate room for the sleepers- a room that would be gone back and forth to quite quickly; infants' sleep cycles are erratic and rapid. Bottle nozzles lined the walls, near the floor. At the corners, four Enforcers stood silently next to diaper-changing tables, one's jackboots freshly cleaned- the result of puke or crap, probably. In the middle, among their numerous toys, several children in various brightly-colored bodysuits were crawling along and playing games which only they (and a handful of expert child psychologists) truly understood, speaking half-formed Latin; these children are taught the language even as their nervous systems begin to understand what external stimuli are. Some of the children just watched the three of us, inquisitive but unable to form the thoughts to ask questions that would mean anything. One eight-month-old girl sat up, looked at me, and said, "White hair. Long white hair." in Latin. Most of the children in the room were blond, including one of the two Asians.

I squatted down near her level, smiled, looked her in the eye, and replied, "Yup, that's me. Howard has long white hair.", using Latin as well, then picked her up to carry around for a bit. Her tiny right hand gently grasped the back of my neck.

And then I saw Quadrus, in the middle of them all, playing an odd game of wrestling with three other children. His light blue bodysuit covered him from his neck to all 22 of his hands' digits to his feet. He broke away from the others, used his lower set of hands to climb to his feet (it seemed to take quite a bit of his engineered power, which would be no surprise at his age), and just looked at me. "Hi, Quad-Braach!", the girl shouted, right next to my ear.

"Kay-ti.", Quad said, looking at her. "Hi, Ka-tie. Tih- tih- tibi nomen. Tibi nomen.", he continued, looking at me. Many of the other children had stopped their ongoing activity to look at the stranger in their midst.

"Howard."

"How-ad. Howad.", he said, uncertainly. He then looked at Billy, then back at me, then slowly back at Billy. It was all I could do to keep a straight face. I hadn't brought the servants before, thinking that they would distract attention- then, about a month or so ago, logic took hold of me and I realized that the visual effect of having more bodies in the room, coupled with the children's general understanding of color symbolism, would cause them to recognize that someone important had entered the room.

I sat down, and Katie jumped off my shoulder. "Quad.. you don't remember who I am, and you're probably not going to understand this. I'm your father.", I told him in Latin. Strangely enough, he started laughing- and so did some of the children and then every other child in the room, simply out of imitation, the wave of giggling rising and falling as the children got bored of it. What in the world could a six-month-old find funny...

He was frowning in the usual baby way, searching his brain for the words. "Duu..braki! Dubraucki!", he said, spitting out the words. Oh.. I get it. In order to show the children what a 'family' was, the educators probably showed the children pictures of families whose children were exactly like their parents, teaching them a Mendelian lesson as soon as possible, and prompting the conclusion that in order to be his father, I'd need to have the same number of arms that he does. But the understanding of full sentences at that age is Enforcer-speed teaching.. I looked up at the screen to see how they were doing it- yup. A constant stream of information: large, bright pictures, small words on the top right, a soothing, low-pitched voice from the side speakers which, if they crawled next to, would drown out screaming. Not that these kids had reason to scream very often- they did not fight, they did not interfere with each other very much, even at the age where they are just learning to interact with their (and it IS their..) world. Engineering. It's all engineering, genetic and educational. I don't remember anything from that age, so I'll just have to guess they've further perfected their technique far beyond what I experienced. "I'm not surprised you don't believe me.", I told Quad in Latin.

I gently talked to almost every child in the room. One of the children seemed to like being chucked into the air some- the other children simply continued to watch me, even during their diaper changes- Enforcers do that in about five seconds. I knew I did all I could when the children frowned and cried at my departure, but I had many more of them to visit today. I left as gently as I could, not saying that I'd be back. An hour is a long time to them; they'd probably think I was lying if I didn't come back in two.

The adjacent room was full of 1-2 year old children, who immediately looked at me from the get-go. "Howard!", a boy shrieked. "Dom-ee-nus!" another girl observed, as the rest of them followed suit. They didn't know who I was the last two times they saw me, and I never told them I'm the Dominator either of those times. It appears that they're being educated on who's who earlier and earlier. I'll have to check records for this, I noted as I looked about the room.

It was approximately the same size of the last one, the children engaging in much the same games with slightly more complicated toys, the screens exactly the same size but with different programming, the dispensers along the walls providing what I'd logically guess to be different-tasting, different-colored (you could see the stains on the carpet) substances, and probably the exact same nutritional value for all of them. I sampled some from the plastic bowl attached to the floor- it was sweet and incredibly high in protein, if nothing else.

"So you kids know who I am. I didn't think they were teaching that at your age.", I said in Latin. They

only smiled at me in reply. I went about introducing myself in the same way, and looked around- there were annexed bedrooms, other, much smaller rooms (probably for privacy), and a bathroom with a few very small toilets in it. As they grow older, they need more and more space- not just relative to their body size, but relative to the complexity at which they live.

It was strange, if nothing else. All of the children had an urge to touch me, to see if I was real. Yup, here I am, kids. I made a point of picking almost every last one of them up and looking into their eyes as I did so. Because they know who I am, the goal is simply to get them to treat me as a friend. I didn't stay all that long- but half an hour is an eternity to toddlers.

The next sub-part- for 3-4 year olds- was much, much larger, with multiple sub-rooms for each one. These children, I noted, are constantly active- unless, of course, they are asleep- which, judging from the number of children asleep in the large, soundproofed, individualized bedrooms, is not governed by night or day. They knew who I was, of course, and they all paid at least some attention to me, even the ones that were thoroughly engaged in play. They were busy in whatever it was that they were doing, but they slowly ceased and came up to me, sitting down near my feet. They didn't say anything. This didn't happen the last two times... why aren't they speaking?

"None of you are saying anything.", I said to them in Latin. They smiled a bit. "Is this somebody's practical joke?", I asked, still using Latin. They laughed some, almost in unison.

"No...", one said, in English. He looked to be one of the oldest, and he enunciated his English slowly and carefully. "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 shut off just then and I realize that someone- probably an Enforcer- was on the other end of it and had noticed that no one was watching.

"Ohhhhh.", said a three year old. "I dint know." But he didn't talk that whole time as well. There is an important distinction to be made here. It's not that he simply went along to go along, as ovine normals will. It's that he went along because he believed that the others knew what they were doing.

My brain processed tidbits of information. These kids- far below the age where normal children even begin to act in this way- are making decisions as a group, coming to agreements and actively seeking each other for things like this? I knew, of course, that they've got the brainpower; but I had no clue that they'd summon up the organization to do that. This line of thinking lends itself to two opposite conclusions, hinging on one critical piece of information. If they like me, which they seem to, I can have the smoothest Illuminati running- ever. If they learn not to like me, I'm kibbles and Howard bits. I realized that I was on-the-spot as much as- if not more than- my original speech.

I squatted down and motioned for my servants to do the same. "Well, what do you want me to say?"

In return, I got a chorus of "Why's he wearing black?" and a "Weird duplication!" in Latin, and, from the oldest, "What the fuck is going on with that twin stuff?"

I didn't want to bore them so I gave them the basics. A couple of them struggled to stop laughing. A few didn't struggle at all. Some of them just hung their heads and muttered about the insanity of it in Latin, and others did an excellent impression of a traditional "Mwa ha ha!". A pair of twins just looked at each other and for some odd reason I visualized both of them saying 'You wouldn't!' simultaneously. The remainder didn't react. I wonder if what I told them is going to cause any nightmares?

"You.. " a blonde girl started, before reverting to Latin. "You should let him go."

I cocked my right forefinger to my head and pretended to blow my brains out. "That's suicide. You'll eventually learn why.", I replied in Latin. She did not look convinced but said nothing. "Anything

else?"

"Can I have my own servant?", another girl asked, smiling widely.

"You'll have to ask the Director.", I said. She nodded rapidly. The answer would probably be yes. I thought for a moment on why none of these children didn't have one, and just took a guess- they don't see a need. And yet my simple presence, as this little girl saw me, created a need. Everything you do is advertising to a child; if they see someone with power doing a thing, they will gravitate towards the behavior. In this, there is no exception for the engineered; in fact, they simply get notions faster. Note to self: Remember this well. "Anything else?"

"Howard, when I become a dult.. adult, can I be first le-level?", a boy, one of the younger ones, asked, sitting up from a laying-down 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." As illustrated by the current Illuminati engineered population. He smiled, said okay, and laid back down. "Anything else?" A young girl ran off just then, as fast as she could, straight to her room's miniaturized bathroom. The rest of them looked at me, looking for questions.

"Howard..", a boy started. "I get a lot of nightmares. Can you help?" I took a few tenths of a second to choose a reply.

"Billy, you help him."

"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.", he said, pointing upwards. "Watch them and have fun. They can't hurt you." Obviously the boy never considered that before, and he sputtered out some gratitude and grinned to himself for the rest of the time I saw him.

There was nothing else. Some of the children asked to hug me before I left, again seeing if I was real; I obliged each and every one of them.

We continued on to the 5-6 year olds' room, which was bigger, more intricate.. and far more deserted. A total of seven kids were taking advantage of the main room's empty space by tossing a frisbee around. One of the kids slipped a bit and ended up throwing it to an Enforcer, which tossed it back exactly the way it had came.

"Where is everyone?", I asked. Every last one turned to look at me.

"Oh.. they're in the gym.", a spunky, short-haired, all pink-clad girl said, her loose clothing hiding her engineered form from the neck down. "We didn't know you were coming. Hey.. is that **the** Sarah?"

"Yeah, it's me.", Sarah replied.

"Oh.. I didn't know you..", she said, looking back at me and then at Billy, dismayed her heroine had ended up implanted. Don't worry, little girl, it's all right- she's still at the top of her profession, after all. "It's nice to meet you, Sarah. I've seen all your work."

"All of it?", Sarah asked. That's a good deal of assassinations. A girl that age would have to have a serious interest in the subject to watch all of Sarah's kills.

"Every one. You're good. You got screwed though.", the girl replied, frowning a bit. Some of the other children giggled a bit.

"Yeah, tell me about it.. Murphy's Law, kid..." Well, it went perfectly right for me. "but they've

probably already taught you not to trust anyone."

"I know.", she said, still frowning. "At least you're alive."

"So Dominator..", a blonde-haired boy said, sitting down, leaning on his white gloves with six holes for fingers and wrinkling his intricately-designed, red, long-sleeved shirt. His tan pants and white shoes showed his feet leaning apart. His two dark-haired, black-clad servants, who had also been playing, squatted down close to him. "You're not gonna.. acquire anyone else, are ya?" His paranoia shone through his nonchalance. And my interest is showing. I'm not sure why I'm looking so close at him, but I.. oh, yes. His DNA is probably much more derived from mine than the other children's are.

"Not planning to."

"Okay.. good."

The kid who was holding the frisbee finally chucked it, his target the girl who had spoken earlier. His was a hard throw- hers was an equally hard catch, her retractable cat-claws helping in her grab. She flipped it into the air for a while before passing it to another, light-blue-haired boy.

"What's it like? I mean.. being the Dominator and all.", that boy said, chucking the frisbee off to another girl.

"It's a pain in the ass.", I answered. All of them were laughing and the receiving girl almost missed her catch because of it. "Of course, power has its privileges, but I get lots of crap. Just ask Billy."

Billy took the cue. "Yes, kids.. he does get a lot of crap. Guys seeking power, morons wanting overthrow.. assorted random assholes who, happy days, 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 light-blue-haired boy said, as the frisbee made its way back to him.

"You know the answer to that.", I said, smiling. "Anything I should know from any of you? Any problems?" The replies were negative, with an implied hint of 'of course not'. I bid my goodbyes, they reciprocated, and we went to the gym, two stories underground.

I've never been there before. A huge swimming pool, a grass field, and a basketball court, all fenced off via glass walls, were the larger areas, the kids at the basketball court. The match appeared to be boys on the left vs. girls on the right, the nets at six feet tall, and the ball the right size for their small forms. They darted back and forth with my speed, stealing the ball often. A girl grabbed it from a younger boy and threw it perfectly into the hoop. "Hey, Howard!", a boy shouted, happily, as his teammate- a servant- took the ball and passed it to another. The rest of them joined in with greetings, although they did not divert their attention from the game. It's a shame I didn't have anyone to play with when I was their age a bit more than half a decade ago.

"Hello, all." Better to let them come to me than to intrude upon them- they're busy. "Anything any of you want to tell me? Anything at all."

"Yeah. I wish I was fully engineered.", a younger boy- probably the youngest there- said, prompting the laughter of his fellows. "It would make me better at this and I'd get the ball more often!" General laughter followed that, and the boy with the ball passed it to him- but the youngest boy had to ditch it to a teammate quickly as he was being surrounded by opposing girls. That boy shot and scored.

"You might be even better engineered than I am.", I told him. "'Fully' is meaning less and less." These children only bear a slight genetic resemblance to their parents, if they have any. The pressure to create more powerful children in lieu of the parents' DNA is incredible.

"I know that most of those girls are better than I am.", Sarah said into my ear. "Those throws, that coordination, at that age? I didn't have it." Paul walked around me, to get a better look, watching the new humanity in silence. 'Beauty', like so many other terms dealing with relative quality, is a slippery thing, in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, I can only say with certainty that I found the match beautiful- the carefully-created grace of their bodies, the dashing speed of the thrown ball, the in-tandem movements of offense and defense, the occasional outrage of a couple of boys as one of the older girls stripped the ball from them to pass it, the receiving girl making another shot. I only saw one miss- and the boy making that shot was covered fairly heavily.

"We're not gonna win this.. we're down by 6, one minute to go.", one of the oldest boys informed his team, looking at the wall clock, which counted down from :58, showing a score of 40-34. The girls scored again, the boys scored again, and it was over, and some boys shouted in frustration. One of the boys started making more practice shots, indicated his desire to play again, and did so with a smaller group. The others walked up to us and started asking children's questions- what's it like being the Dominator (I gave them the same answer I had the other, red-shirted boy, with the same results), what's it like trying to keep all those normal-born Illuminati together, what do I do for fun, stuff like that. They asked Sarah, Billy, and Paul questions as well, all sorts of stuff about doing things and killing people. Eventually they waved goodbye, smiling.

"Hey, Howard. The rest of us against you and your servants.", the boy who had invited the others to play a second time said when the others left. That would be ten young engineereds against three older engineereds and a normal.

I shrugged and nodded. "All right, you've got it."

"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." Allowing their small forms to grab it mid-throw or mid-dribble, eliminating some of the height advantage.

"Ralphie, I told you before.. five years of genetics doesn't DO all that!", the girl spoke. "They're lots bigger than us, and they **are** fully engineered."

I informed them of Paul's normal status. The reaction was instant. "Whaat?! He's a normal?!", Ralphie said, rushing forward. "Other than.. than the Operator and some of the biotechnicians, I've never even SEEN one before! What's your name?"

"Paul.", he informed the grinning boy.

"You wouldn't even.." Ralphie jumped up and slashed his fingers a millimeter from Paul's throat, and I noticed that he was purposefully moving relatively slow. They all laughed as Paul flinched a hundred milliseconds after Ralphie's stroke was finished.

"Fine. Ten on three, but we're still going to lose.", the girl said.

Another boy said "Ten minutes." to the Enforcer, the clock was set to 10:00, we walked over to the right side of the court, Ralphie took the ball, and the game began with all ten of them rushing us, the ball going back and forth, leaving Paul mostly confused. One of them dribbled, I reached down to grab it, and another boy stole it immediately and passed it to the girl who had spoken before. She tried to pass it to a teammate, but Sarah tipped it with her fingers, grabbed it after the first bounce, ran past the middle line, and threw it up in the air and flat-handed it into the net, just to show that she could. The Enforcer blew the whistle.

"Count it.", Ralphie said to the Enforcer, and a 3 appeared on the right team's display. "But don't double-hit it anymore!", he said to Sarah, who nodded, slightly embarrassed. Ah, yes. Rules

violation.

They passed it forward rapidly, throwing it back and forth. The girl who had spoken earlier chucked it too high to Ralphie, Sarah nabbed it, darted across the line, and casually chucked it in.

"We can't **WIN** this!", one of the other boys shouted. "They don't have to **go** far enough!"

"How about we go within the three-point line?", I suggested, eliciting a general affirmative response.

Another, light-blue-clad girl took it this time, and passed it immediately to another girl, who rushed up. I moved to place myself in front, reached out to grab the ball, and she chucked it right between my legs- there was no way even I could bring them together quick enough. Billy went for it, but couldn't- the boy who had taken it had already passed it to the most talkative girl, who tried to pass it- Paul, to everyone's surprise, managed to get a hand out, tipping the ball. It went directly to Ralphie, and Sarah couldn't get there quick enough to stop the immediate 2-point shot.

I received the ball and threw it full force at Billy- and a blue blur caught the ball mid-throw, the basketball impacting his young hands with a surprisingly loud crack. He tried to shoot and I grabbed it on the way up, launched it at Sarah, who immediately dribbled it forward to toss it at the backboard and right through the net.

The game continued in much the same vein until it ended in our favor, 30-20, with Paul only influencing the game a couple of times. Although they may be half our size, these kids are obviously very, very quick.

"That was good. You guys are good.", a blue-clad boy- the blue blur- said, smiling. "So why did you come here to play with us?" I could not afford to equivocate.

"I have to let you all know that I'm here, that I'm not just some face on the screen. This is your Dominator speaking, I'd like you to know who I am." Some laughter greeted that.

"Well, we know that, we even know about him and her.", he said, motioning to Billy and Sarah. "Or someone definitely would have asked!"

"They taught that to you?"

"Lots of stuff about you." I was taken aback, and everyone on the court noticed it.

"I probably should have checked that out.. I had no clue."

"Yeah. We know allllll of it.", Ralphie said, causing his fellows to laugh. Good. They're being trained properly. I could, of course, make my personal information private, but why would I want to do that? These kids are obviously learning the virtues of knowing who you're dealing with.

"I guess I don't have to talk about **me** much more, then." The kids laughed. "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!", a young boy blurted out. "And if I didn't know it was necessary, I'd ask them to turn it off!!" Everyone looked at him. "That crap gives me nightmares!"

"When I become Night Director, I'm not going to change it.", one of the older boys said.

"They've decided it?", one of the girls asked.

"Yeah. I'm a lot like the Assistant Day Director for this place. Hey, maybe you should go talk to him?" That's the 90-month-old I noted before.

"I think I'll do that. Remember, I'll always be here for you.", I said to them as I walked out of the gym.

There wasn't an assistant's room, so I walked into the Director's room and found.. who I was looking for. The boy was sitting at a desk, his adjustable chair jacked up so that he's sitting at my height. The desk- complete with small-sized keyboard and computer- was obviously meant to be simply a smaller version of what an adult would use. I should know, I've had such things before. The desk's identity plaque read 'Xavier A. Burgard' on the first line and 'Assistant Day Director' on the second.

"Hello, Howard.", he said. "Taking another tour, I see."

"Yeah. Hey, where's the Director?"

"You're looking at him. 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?"

"Basically. The place has changed over the years, more efficient.", I said. "Who gave the directive to tell them about me?"

"He did." He put his hands up in the traditional 'Not my issue' gesture. "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." He smiled a bit at that.

"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.", I agreed. "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." I wracked my brain for a better opposite of 'disability' but couldn't find one. "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."

He laughed a bit. "Thanks, Howard."

"I'll be back sometime. Goodbye, Xavier. You know that I'm always around."

"Bye, Howard." I took my leave of his office and the facility.

As the magnetic levitation took us out the same way we came in, Paul was scratching his head absently. "I don't get it.", he said finally. "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.." Paul searched his brain.

"You're not thinking about the fact that those kids aren't attacking each other, are you?", Billy offered.

"Yeah- yeah, that's **it!** No spankings or discipline or... there's nothing to stop them from.."

"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.", I replied.

"Oookay, Howard Dominus, what the **fuck**?!"

"You obviously need a psychology lesson.." And a retrovirus, but he already knows that. "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.." He snapped his fingers a bit. "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."

"Waaait. You said that the need for control didn't exist in engineered.. and yet you're.." The Dominator. Paul, although normal and relatively unschooled, is capable of logic. We got out of the tram and walked to the jet.

"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 only smiled. Billy had a neutral expression.

"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."

"You understand. Good."

"Just one more thing.. those **were** servants of those kids that I saw, right?", Paul asked, as Sarah started the jet's usual pre-flight sequence.

"Yes, they were." They're not wearing black for the fun of it.

"So.. do any of those kids want a big house with lots of servants or.."

I talked as the acceleration pushed us back into the seats. "None of them do, Paul. 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." Why wouldn't they? Frankly I'm surprised I didn't see more servants, and I'm sure the engineered-servant part of Northberg (a place I generally don't visit- no point) isn't running low. Probably there's some sort of special restriction, because young children, even extremely smart ones, are likely to use the wrong words

and get somebody hurt or killed with a slip of the tongue. As I can testify personally, engineered servants are far more dangerous than guns.

After a meal of nutrient bars and water (keeping up with those kids is enervating!), I rested my head on Billy's shoulder and smiled. That was great, being there with those kids. I felt a tugging on my mind, the urge to get the End of Secrecy done and over with, lead them boldly into the future. Patience, I told myself. Patience! The End of Secrecy can only happen once, after all, and it has to be done **right** (we are vastly outnumbered, after all!), otherwise we're going to have a lot of dead engineered- a thing I can't allow to happen. I am the Dominator; I have power, I have responsibility, and I'm going to use the former to fulfill the latter.

I had wonderful dreams that night.

Chapter 54

It's all lies.

All of it.

Even me...

Even me, even me, oh Billy... Sarah.. Paul.. what the hell am I doing they're just going to take me next and I'm dead, dead, dead dead, NO THAT ISN'T EVEN REMOTELY FUCKING POSSIBLE

I woke up sitting, turned on the lights, and muttered, "Shit on toast." Oh, damn. What a fucking nightmare. My head and heart are both pounding, too. I suppose this is one of the type Billy's used to, the nightmares he describes as 'pure emotion and only a few words.' Ow... what the hell triggered that, anyway? I haven't had a nightmare like that since I was eight. I looked out the window and saw darkness- and what the hell is that white shit? SNOW? Out here? It's technically possible... I looked out and yup, maybe about a quarter inch of white was covering the grass. The wind was blowing some, too. I haven't seen snow out here, ever. The temperate winds usually prevent that- guess there's a cold front coming on down from the Arctic and giving me some Northberg Joy. I know what its texture is, of course, but I've never been in actual snow for more than a minute at a time- no one leaves the Inheritor standing around.

I shook the last of the lingering nightmare off, rubbed my head, and groaned. I checked the clock calendar - 4:30 AM, December 22, 1999. Not only is this the first time I've had a bad nightmare, it's also one of the rare times I've woken up anything less than refreshed. I lumbered out of bed, walked without any of my usual grace down to the couch, and skimmed the latest edition of the Real News. Yadda... yadda... yadda. Two fifth-levels croaked on the same day, yesterday. Winter Solstice Party held by the Wiccan subgroup (why there are any Wiccans in the Illuminati is beyond even me). Latest experiments show some bugs still need to be worked out in the chemical balance checkers for 5% of the population. Possible upgrade to 'small' threat, that damn Anarch is still aiming for the Illuminati and trying to destroy our institutions, his target list was discovered and copied. He's a pretty good guesser, too. I swear that guy looks like an Enforcer. And his physical abilities are just like them too, only a bit better, and he seems to be able to summon up technological destructive power like a pro... he's not as advanced as us, but he has a sizable amount of intelligence and can strike quickly. But I could kill him. Hell, if my brethren can't do it, I'll kick his ass myself, with my own bare hands. Then I'll talk about how fucking easy it was. However, I'll probably never get the chance anyway. His ass is doomed. No one defies the Illuminati for long.

My servants were either asleep or elsewhere, probably asleep - it is early AM. I went down to the kitchen, opened the cabinet, grabbed a few nutrition bars, and lay down on the couch, eating them all in about thirty seconds. What did that nightmare mean, anyway? I had the distinct impression of getting.. what, killed, no.. it was something along the lines of ending up like my servants. What a fucking fate that would be. The Dominator made to serve someone else for the rest of his life - in my

case, indefinitely. I've, for the sake of Illuminism, tried to identify with my servants and see things from their point of view; I still can't do it, even after 20 months, the best I can come is a clinical understanding, no empathy. Perhaps I just got them now. If that's true, no wonder they're so pissed at me and semi-paranoid- it's more than just the obvious, it's a subconscious recoiling as well.

There was no way in hell I could go back to sleep again, so I turned on the living room computer and played the latest build of *Diablo 2* on an eighty-inch screen with surround sound. It got addictive fast, and I fell into a semi-awake stupor. I don't even remember blinking, only level after level, health potion after health potion, monster after monster, kill, kill, kill. There is a certain happiness to brainless slaughter. You don't have to worry, you don't have to actively think- in fact you can keep all thoughts of anything on the back burner- and your only immediate responsibility is the deaths by your weapon, in this case a pair of axes. Chop, chop, chop, upgrade weapons, hack, slice, maim. Program error (fucking slowass developers- Blizzard Entertainment could use an Enforcer or two), restart program, cleave, chop, cleave. Sarah once again appeared from behind me, massaged my shoulders uncommanded, and that is when I glanced at the clock- 7:30. I had killed more than three straight hours doing that.

"It's snowing out, you know.", she said in my left ear.

"Still?"

"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?"

"No.. had a nightmare, couldn't get back to sleep." When I said 'nightmare', the emotions returned in a flood, and this time I was able to identify them: lots of fear, mixed in with some rage, some acceptance, a touch of hate, and a sprinkle of envy. Ugh. What demented cook created that vile concoction? My own brain, of course, chemicals in one hand and stew-pot in the other.

"And I thought only I had the nightmares.", Billy muttered to my right, coming down the stairs.

"Usually, you do. So what was yours this time?"

He stood looking at me for a split second. "Okay.. you in a chariot, whip in hand." I started giggling a bit, and that giggling almost cost my Barbarian his life. Thank the producers for the leap skill. "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."

"Screwy enough." I heard a whistling noise from outside, and looked. The snow wasn't a blizzard, nowhere near it- but it was coming down rapidly and the grass was invisible. I wonder how much of the local wildlife it'll kill. Or have the pigs made their own preparations for this?

Turning skeletons, zombies, and wraiths into paste and bones was beginning to be a chore so I turned it off, and laid back. "Damn.. hey, maybe I'll go enjoy it while it's still here."

"You're going to go play in the snow? Even just saying that sounds weird.", said Billy, as Paul ambled his way down the stairs.

"The Dominator does as he will, and none may know his true motive.", said Sarah, quoting a long-held Illuminated phrase about Dominators engaging in *faux pas*, things below their station, or seemingly eccentric or out-of-character practices. Just hearing the phrase, of course, is a subtle cue to shut up, fuck off, mind your own goddamn business, and thank whatever god you believe in that he isn't coming after you. "Sometimes, not even him." Billy chuckled a bit. Sarah sees a regular need to deflate my ego- not to say I blame her or that that's a bad thing.

"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." Everything else was, and my own personal strange sense of aesthetics told me that he'd otherwise be a dark blotch on the perfection of it all.

"Isn't that thing too light?"

"Nope. It exchanges heat a lot slower in cold." Two minutes and a few bites to eat later, we went to enjoy nature. One of these days, maybe in a few hundred years, maybe in only fifty, I'll just press a few buttons and summon the snow whenever I want it. It would take a good deal of power (all meanings) to implement, but it almost certainly could be done. Weather on demand. And I'll live to see it happen.

The suit did its job very well. I felt a slight chill as my feet sunk into the frost, no more. I picked up a large handful and then squeezed it. It obeyed the shape of my hand, with five indentations arranged neatly on its surface. I then chucked it at the ocean and it skipped a few times before landing with a plop.

"We got a lot of this back in Illinois. Didn't think we could get it here.", Billy said, admiring the snow, the wind blowing it on his bare face. Winter wonderland my ass- I noticed the tips of the trees were frozen, and they would surely be permanently damaged. I didn't worry about it; that's the job of the nigh-invisible maintenance men.

"Didn't think we could get it here either. Strange- little bit of frozen water on the ground makes all the difference."

"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 barking and the sound of small, rapid feet coming closer. Fido and Magma were running at us, Fido with his supercanine, cheetah-like speed. He had long since learned to tell which one of us was which by clothes color, but with us both wearing white, he just picked one and dashed. It happened to be me. In that instant, I saw the traditional canine way of saying "I'm just fooling around" - the lips pulled back to hide the teeth. He slowed down quite a bit and came at me at a speed of over thirty miles an hour, obviously intending to knock me down and lick my face as he has so many times before. (I, of course, have been strongly tempted to tell him not to do that, but I won't. Canine affection is simply too ego-boosting and flat-out pleasant.) This time, however, I anticipated him and leaned back - he did knock me down, but I grabbed his forelegs and flipped over with him. We rolled completely over again and I was on top, smiling. He licked my face anyway, and I kissed him on his wet nose. Billy was scratching Magma behind the ears. I let Fido up and he started barking at me, and panting at the same time. He then ran out back into the frozen forest- to get some treasure, maybe.

"What's he going for?", asked Billy, with one of my dogs' heads in his hand, the dog affectionately rubbing the fur against the fabric of Billy's leg.

"Something valuable, maybe?", I guessed. And I was right - it was something valuable, to Fido anyway. Dogs have such simple pleasures and simple lives. Fido obediently and happily carried the half-eaten remnants of a frozen pig to me. The pig, a male, had obviously died of hypothermia. It had almost no winter coat, and its blue-tinted body was covered in ice crystals. "Natural selection

at work.", I noticed aloud.

"Mmm, what I always wanted, yummy fresh pignic. I haven't had pork this fresh since the tests."

"Actually, this isn't that fresh." There would have been more blood coming out of the wounds if it was. He took a closer look at the pig and nodded.

"Yeah, and the dogs ate most of the good parts." He was right- Fido probably took a fat chunk for his own engineered needs, and the year-old half-superior puppies probably had their fill as well. But Fido had respectfully and thoughtfully brought the meat to his master, whom his canine brain had thought may need food this winter. Of course, it is Fido who needs the food - his coat had grown out in reaction to the cold, his energy requirements are higher during the winter months, and all the dogs had eaten their share of the heated food the Enforcers leave out for them every day. Their instinct, however, is unabated and they feed their children, and their masters, meat. I petted his thick fur, snapped off a piece of frozen leg, and slowly munched. It was tasty- if you like frozen, raw meat.

"Is it good?", Billy said, chuckling slightly.

"Yeah, tough to eat though. It doesn't taste the same as it does fresh." Billy snapped off another leg and nibbled.

"I still can't believe this stuff tastes good to us."

"Why not? It's protein and fat, the two things we need most."

"It's.. well, it's raw, unadulterated, frozen pig! Look at it Howie, it's the other blue meat!" I started laughing, and so did he- abusing the old Pork slogan is fun. I laughed harder and lay back in the snow, munching fresh pig. Fido and Magma both watched us, wagging their tails. I lay back in the snow- it was comfortable, at least, the softness being compressed where the weighty areas of my body are.

"Take the pig back to your children, Fido. They need it more than I do.", I said, looking into his eyes. He nodded, barked, grabbed a remaining leg in his jaws, and dragged it back to his den. He does indeed understand some English - he knows what "children" and "pig" are, and he generally understands "back to". Magma barked and followed him back into the frozen forest. I took a couple more bites from the leg, and flung the rest into the ocean. Billy also flung his and decided to sit right next to me.

"I think that was your Christmas present, Howie.", he said, chuckling.

"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."

"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.", I said, being factual and serious. He had a slight 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."

"Oh geez! Did you get hurt?"

"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."

"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?"

"Nope.", I said, the snow still gently falling on my body. "It was someone with third level clearance, though. Daddy was pretty pissed when he told me what it was supposed to mean. I think he did an investigation, but the guy is an Illuminatus and he did cover his tracks."

"I didn't think they'd let you get shit without knowing 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.. 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."

"Yes, that's right, the calls of nature can not be denied for long.", he said. I gently reached up, grabbed the back of his neck, and dragged him down to lay back next to me. He laughed slightly. "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." Well, of course I'm being myself, who else would I be - oh, I know what he's saying, and why he's saying it. A small piece of normal psychology (and a piece he still has, after all this time? Interesting.) I read about on my own answered this one. It's a thing that gets itself into the minds of the masses and gets buried deep, too deep. It's the 'Someone is always watching my manners' reflex that is brought upon by the lack of privacy and the constant supervision of parents, peers, teachers. A thing I've had to study psychology to find out about- a thing that is kept as an unconscious assumption at a very early age. And since practically everybody in normal society follows the pattern, there are no counter-examples. Of course, this is

also kept as an assumption when creating new paradigms for the masses to follow, it's just called by other names and packed in as part of general normal psychology- not identified on its own as a mental element, just part of the general idea of 'groupthink'. It's hilarious, really- everyone is worried about being watched from outside, while inside, they are watched the most. And of course I've never had to worry about any of that because the only one who was watching me was Daddy, and he was only there to guide a young mind's learning and prevent it from making fatal mistakes.

"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."

"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!"

I laughed. "You did enjoy it. You just didn't notice you were. The remains of your freedom illusion were still in the way."

"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." He chuckled, put his hands behind his head, and just grinned at the falling snow.

So we ended up silently lying down next to each other in an inch and a half of fresh white, in which we were surely close to invisible. For no reason at all I slid my arm under him and just left it there. He reciprocated and for a few seconds we just looked into the sky. A snowflake fell on my nose and I brushed it off.

"So you do have some Christmas spirit.", he said, looking at me with a slight smirk. In reply, I scooped up a big handful of snow, chucked my right arm over my body in a simple arc, and plopped it directly into his face.

"Hey! You know I can't-", he yelled after the cold hit him.

"You can now, with the snow." He grinned, grabbed a fat handful, jumped up, squeezed it into a very tight ball, and chucked it at my head full force. I dodged a fifth of a second before the snowball hit the ground with a smack. I flipped up to my feet and we quickly got into our version of a snowball fight- tightly compressed balls of ice zinging back and forth, four total thrown a second, at 100 miles an hour. I suddenly realized that it would make no difference if a rock was put into one of these or

not. We were seven feet apart - there was no way we could even come close to hitting each other, after dodging bullets for a while, snowballs going at the speed of a normal fastball are easy. I turned up the power, he turned up the power, and the rate increased to six a second and the speed to about 150. Of course, it was still impossible. However, I haven't had a workout like this in a while.

Then Paul stepped out of the house in green warm winter gear, with his mouth all the way open. He looked like an egg-eating snake with double-hinged jaws about to devour its latest meal. "Holy shit!", he blurted, as if he hadn't seen us do things like this before. He looked like he was going to throw one, looked at his hands, looked at us, and just shook his head. We kept at it for another thirty seconds, circling to get fresh snow. The frozen ground was barren of snow where we had grabbed and chucked like crazy, and an asymmetrical ovoid was formed of footprints and handmarks, leaving a small, pristine white patch between us.

"All right, stop it.", I told Billy. "There wouldn't be any hits for hours and we both know it." I plopped down on the ground, tired after that much speed.

"Yeah.. but there's still one thing I wanna show you, Howie.", he said, squatting down and putting his arm around me.

"What's that?"

I could have seen it coming. I really should have seen it coming. Had I been an outside observer, I would have been able to pinpoint the exact moment it was coming with ridiculous ease, for it was an available, simple, and predictable option for him.

I didn't see it coming.

Splot! A loose handful of wet snow greeted me in the face. Paul started cracking up. Oh, the fucking irony. The machinegun iceballs miss and the single, loose, slowly-chucked handful of snow hits. Brrrr... that shit is COLD!

"Billy," I crooned in my most pleasant voice, "I hope your finely-tuned sense of revenge does not extend into other areas." And I hope his resourcefulness does. I'd like to see him demonstrate it in life-threatening situations; but then again, life-threatening situations are something to be avoided.

"You hope wrong, asshole.", he said in one of his least pleasant. He then grimaced, and I was faintly reminded of The Joker. "But that was fun." Paul was still laughing some, his face visible even through the blowing- oh dammit all, it stopped snowing, there's just a wind carrying around what's already there. It's just blowing already-fallen snow and it's still early morning. The grass will be dominant in hours- and that's if the sun doesn't come out.

"Hey, Howard, do you have a sled?", Paul smiled and asked, pointing to the steep incline of this island's mountain.

"Ahh.. no.. Call a couple down! They'll be here inside twenty minutes." Paul ran off back to the house. The sleds would be purchased from normal retail stores by missionless agents, taken to an airfield like the rest of the stuff I order, and flown in some form above the island where they will be deposited by parachute. Sort of like normal mail-ordering, only a fuckload quicker and easier.

"Wood or plastic?", he called back. Damn. I doubted I could have one made of a frictionless material before the snow melted. I began to vaguely wonder if there was a good place, cordoned off in some way as to make it inaccessible to normals, that was always sled ground. Of course there is- Illuminati like a lot of land around their northern bases and using them as vacation spots (particularly for those who live in hot climates and have to often leave air conditioned buildings) is not unknown.

"Big and plastic!", yelled Billy. He then turned to me. "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?" Why do I keep forgetting that **they** are the standard and **we** are the exception? Mostly because I avoid dealing with them. Mental note: even a very light metal, such as aluminum, would grow cumbersome to normals, especially after repeated trips. Besides, aluminum is too malleable and would get bent out of shape if it ever hit something.

"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."

Billy muttered something under his breath. "What are you thinking about?", I asked, smiling a bit. This will be good.

"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.."

He cringed. "AAAAAAACK! No! Howie!"

"Billy, stand up and hold still." As he did, his eyes were tightly shut and his back tense. I picked up a nice, fat handful of fresh, wet snow, put it into close contact with the back of his neck, he involuntarily hunched his shoulders a bit- then I dropped it. Onto the ground. "All right, you can move."

"Oh.. you didn't."

"Of course not. Why would I waste good snow?"

"Howard, that was a cheap shot.", said my personal female assassin and all-around sneak.

"Sarah, how the **hell** did you get behind me in snow?", I whirled around and said. She was wearing not white, but a white-grey camouflage pattern designed for stealth. As with the rest of her skin-tight clothing, this diverted blood into my important, but technically non-essential organ.

"Thin snow, special shoes, and your distracted senses.", she said with a smile. She had not left footprints - wait, she had, they were just not outlined as most footprints are, and they could not be recognized for what they were from a distance.

"And I didn't even know you were out here." I looked up at the clouds. A few particles of snow seemed to come down, then stop again. Flurries. And when they end, no more snow here. Maybe there's an Illuminated ski lodge somewhere - I never know things like that until I look them up.

"That made it easier. I suppose you're taking the steepest way down you can find?"

"Sarah, that's a cliff. But I have one in mind." The one I had in mind was a steep slope with gravel-very hard to climb up even in summer. In winter, it should be perfect sled ground.

"Cool, now what were you doing with these things?", she said, grinning and picking up a snowball. Billy shook his head emphatically.

"Sarah. No.", I said, not wanting any more freezing on my face.

"Then I suppose you're just out here for the freeze?", she said, the opposite of my thoughts.

"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 from can get it here anytime soon.. hey, I wonder how the Micro would work out here."

"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." She's right- the energy would just bounce off the ice particles every which way, heating the whole place up and giving me some radiation as well.

"Yeah, would be funny though. Anyway.." I took a large handful of snow and compressed it as tightly as possible, using power and forming a compact object of crushed ice, then picked out an overhanging twig branch in the forest, a frozen one maybe 25 meters away. Then I took careful aim, threw - and the branch snapped with the force. Footsteps came out of the house - must be Paul.

"Nice aim. Watch this.", said Billy, doing similar and aiming for a branch farther away, which no normal could hope to hit. It snapped into two pieces - the branch was indeed frozen over, and was brittle. Sarah did the same and got two in one hit.

I grinned, this was fun as hell, and good training to boot. Even at the speeds we throw at, gravity and wind are still a factor, and I don't want to hit a branch without watching it snap in half, so I selected the brittle ones. I picked up a huge handful, crushed, threw - and missed by inches. The rotating, uneven snowball had gone under. Billy and Sarah both noticed and laughed malevolently.

"ARGH!", I yelled, this time aiming better and blasting the twig dead-on. It did not snap fully, but held on by a small piece of bark, hanging dead from the branch it was attached to.

"And even more impossible shit.", muttered Paul.

"Paul, even though you are a normal, you can do shit like this, you've done it before."

"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 frozen pine needles sticking out of it?", I said, motioning to one about 15 meters away.

"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." Snow fell off his hand as the middle portion became something resembling solid ice. Even through his winter clothing, I could tell his muscles were straining. But the snowball was nowhere near what it should have been. "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!" The snowball moved inward very slightly. "The stuff you're hiding, Paul." I think that triggered it. The snowball became something not quite comparable to ours, but almost as hard as they come. In that instant, I realized something simple, something that I've been wondering - it's true, emotional pain, fear, and culture shock do make normals

stronger mentally, much as the slight muscle-tears build their muscles. Paul was almost consciously pumping adrenalin into his right forearm and hand. He, of course, understood after a year and a half exactly what we were talking about when we said 'power'. It's like liquid concentration. Unfortunately, it took all his concentration and all his force to do something which we do half-heartedly, and he knows it, too, and he has known it for as long as he's known Billy. Oh well. Not everyone can be a superman - or if we were all supermen, we the Illuminati would come up with someone even better. I love genetics.

"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."

"All right."

"Now, pull back, release your power, and just throw, Paul." It was impressive, almost Enforcer-grade ability. The snowball did not break the twig but bounced off with a loud smack and exploded into pieces. Had Paul been an adult and had a larger power reservoir, he would have surely killed it.

"Dammit Howard, I can do that.", he growled and said, then pulled back another tight snowball and just zinged it. The snowball surely had enough force to break the twig. Unfortunately, the twig didn't notice a bit as the snowball was a good three feet over it.

"FUCK!", he screamed, grabbing another handful, tightening his aim - then consciously summoning something, that **something** I recognized, burning like fire behind his eyes, the something he had not been able to access in his training. He broke the tip of the twig straight off; it and the white iceball kept going until they bounced off another tree and hit the ground. "Shit, I've never been able to do that before.", he said, looking at his light grey gloves and the hands within as though they had become a different, alien part of him. Billy applauded, and Sarah nodded, grinning. We all took aim and kept snapping twigs, Paul aiming for the closer and smaller ones and missing a lot of his shots. After about five minutes of that, we ran out of twigs, got bored anyway, and stopped. I laid down again, resting on the cushion that nature provided.

"Ahh... my arms hurt.", I said, looking up at the clouds once more. I had made a point of throwing with both arms equally- being ambidextrous is quite useful. The three of them murmured the same.

"Now I see why you come out here.", Sarah said, throwing another snowball up in the air, then smashing it into pieces with a backhand.

"Yeah, it's great stuff. And check it- here come the sleds.", I said, pointing up into the clouds, where a jet flew. A parachute dropped from the jet, its trajectory directly to the lawn near us.

"All right!", said Paul, his usual grin on his face every time he thinks of speed.

The sleds landed directly on top of my underground jet, glistening with new blue plastic. One was circular, and large enough for two of us - the other one was a normal sled-shape that, with slight difficulty, could have held us all.

"Billy, Sarah, bring em and follow me.", I said, going through the frozen forest and up the mountain to where the steep hill is.

We trudged up the side, the gravel, the snow, and some ice combining to make climbing difficult. All of us ended up almost crawling, Billy and Sarah pushing up the sleds as they plowed into the slippery mix, pummeling their way upwards with their feet and elbows. Finally, we looked down the slope we had just climbed up- about 50 meters downwards, 30 meters horizontally. When the angle tapered off, we would have a tree to avoid, but lots of room to stop, provided we didn't make any sudden turns.

"Shit. Howard, are you sure you want to do this?", said Sarah, looking down and considering the risk.

"Yup. I love playing it dangerous.", I said, grinning. In a jet or a car, you have raw speed but good control over that raw speed, and it doesn't seem as fast as you're really going. In a motorcycle or a sled, you can see the ground whiz by more easily, know how fast you're going, and that's the exhilarating part. I've only been on a sled a few times before, and I don't remember it too well.

"Hmm.. guinea pigs, guinea pigs.. 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." He jumped in and she pushed him, using her power in three solid steps. When she jumped in, the force of it sent Paul overbalancing, he reached forward too far, and the both of them spilled over into the snow, Paul rolling, Sarah doing a backflip and skidding partially down the hill on her well-formed ass, and the sled flipping over 360 degrees and sliding down the mountain, as it would normally, only with no riders on it. Billy and I simultaneously cackled madly.

"You little fucker! You could have killed us both!!", she yelled, screaming at Paul from the base of her lungs. I laughed even harder. Paul got into a sitting position from his point halfway down the mountain, muttering to himself. Neither one appeared to be hurt.

"Yeah, well it wasn't my fault you decided to push us like that!", Paul said, getting up and checking himself.

"Howard--", Sarah began.

"I distinctly said not to crash.", I reminded her. She snarled and made an half-bark, half-roar sound like an angry wild cat. "I think we can do it without, well... hehe, don't you Billy?" I aligned the sled for going straight down.

"Oh, yeah.", he said.

"Push and jump in.", I said, steeling myself for it. He did a similar three-step push, smacking the ground with the rubber soles and his power. There was a thump as he jumped in the back- and I realized we were going 60-70 kilometers per hour. Faster than I expected. We hit a rock and did a slight jump - the nearest tree wasn't anywhere near us - but if we don't stop soon, we will continue into the forest where there are plenty of trees to hit. And there was no way to stop it from here, so..

I jumped off the sled, slide-walking onto the snowy ground. Billy jumped off backwards, leaned back and crouched, grabbed the sled, and skidded on his ass and the soles until he came to a stop. We were still a good thirty meters from any arboreal threats.

Sarah carried the sled back up the hill, cursing Paul with a variety of vile profanity. From the sounds of it, Sarah wanted his dick to fall off (Again?) and his brains to ooze out his nose while he was fucking a dog with AIDS, all the while performing a variety of impossible and contortionist acts.

Their next attempt was more of a success, us watching as we came back up the hill. Paul screamed all the way down, before he eventually bailed out. Sarah kept going.. toward the tree! What the fuck is she thinking?? "Sarah!!", I called out, as she demonstrated her plan. She grabbed an overhanging branch, flipped the sled on its side, caught it between her legs, and elegantly flipped over, chucking the sled to the side and landing on her feet. The rest of us clapped. She took bows, grabbed the sled, and trudged back up the hill for more.

Billy finished bringing the sled back up the hill and we did it again. It's exhilarating going at that speed. No wonder skiing and snowboarding are such popular sports. We did it several more times, then I got on the long sled with Sarah, I pushed, and I held on to her breasts as we zinged down the

hill. Ah, I love this job.

As the ground grew wetter, the sleds grew faster. I laughed at Paul every time he jumped out, because he screamed every single time and bailed out like the sled was heading towards hot lava every time it was heading anywhere near a branch. "Damn.. this is cool.", he laughed and said after the fifth time he bailed, this time out of the long sled. I was alone on the circular one, spin-sliding at an absolutely suicidal rate, balancing myself so I wouldn't fall over, until I finally, internally realized that the tree wasn't going to lose the game of chicken and I bailed. The sled landed into the tree with a resonating thud, and snow dropped out of its branches.

We did that for a couple of hours, in various combinations, again and again, snow blazing by. We kept it up until the sun completely dominated the ground, the snow was flowing off the mountain in rivers, and it was definitely time to quit or suffer serious rock-burn when jumping out. Something would have lapped up the blood if we hit a good patch... eeyouch.

"I'm dizzy as shit.", mumbled Paul as he trudged through the brown forest, shaking off the after-effects. "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.", I said, dripping water from the tips of my fingers. "But can one of you please tell me why I just did all that?"

"Boredom?", Paul suggested. "You said at the time that you basically just felt like it."

"Fun?", Sarah suggested. "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.", said Billy. "But the point's the same, we don't really know." He stopped for a moment and pondered it from a different angle. "Even he doesn't really know why he does things. Now I am scared.."

"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.", Billy 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."

"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.'", I finished, quoting Daddy.

"Not to mention they get stabbed in the back a whole lot easier.", added Sarah. Billy laughed. It took me a second to realize that she wasn't just meaning anachronistic normals who are spaced-out and easy to kill, but herself who triple M'd (majorly miscalculated motives, the Illuminated way of saying 'seriously fucked up in people skills') so badly she ended up here.

We entered and the viewscreen was displaying "Non-immediate message"; Sarah clicked the usual button and I sat down to listen.

A partially balding, dutiful-looking man's face was displayed- he's one of the second levels, but I'm not sure of his name. He spoke in a formal and precise tone, showing only mild joy. "Master Howard, I have good news.", the recording said.

"There's a new one.", I muttered. Billy sat down next to me.

"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." Yeah, Eric and Dylan and the pissed off Texas atheist in America, and lots of truly random violence in the undeveloped countries. We prepare for most of it, but Murphy's Law sometimes kills people we don't want dead. "Howard, your ah.. 'advanced recursive encompassization' technique is absolutely excellent and we of the Second Level particularly commend you for it." The man nodded and the screen clicked off. Hmm. ARC's simple, and I think that certain things I did other than just the general suggestions helped more than that.. but oh well. This was probably a message meant to calm me down or try to manipulate me into accepting something a bit later- or, a variation of this was being sent to everyone. I checked it out and found it was the latter.

"Ha! I knew it would work.", I said proudly and mightily. "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.", she continued, taking off the snowsuit and revealing to us once more the body we've all experienced, "I imagine you're hungry." As soon as she said the word, my stomach agreed with her.

"You guessed it. Turkey with stuffing." While she proceeded to simultaneously bake and nuke the turkey, I checked out the guy's claim that the plan was indeed going perfectly. Murphy's Law dictated that things would unexpectedly go wrong, and they did, but sometimes luck dictated that they didn't. Or was my plan and its implementation really that good?

"Damn! You win, Paul.", Billy said. I asked what he meant.

"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.", I said, checking out things. Illuminati seldom report that 'there's nothing wrong' so I judged the success of the general plan by checking how many official problems were filed. They're down one fourth from last year and that was about one fifth from the previous. Damn! No one is opposing us, hate groups, factions of our larger organizations, not them, no one! "'Tis the everfucking season! Santa came early this year!", I exclaimed, laughing at the results.

"And once more I am reminded why you use the term 'sheeple'.", Billy said, sounding slightly exasperated at their idiocy. Why don't they realize, anyway? We can take away their speech and their weapons and their very children, and they do nothing to oppose us, hell, they'll even support us if we make it sound right! It's so **good** to be Dominator! I started laughing again, this time not the same; this was a gut-laugh, one that came from the bottom of my diaphragm, one that filled the room with powerful amusement, using my echo-cords. Billy joined in, doing a perfect imitation. Paul tried to imitate it, and partially succeeded. Sarah walked in and joined us, some power in her high voice. We continued for five seconds.

"Shit. If this keeps up, I'm going to start believing in Santa Claus.", I said.

"Yeah, and here comes the Easter Bunny. Howard, I have not felt this displaced from reality since I got here.", Billy said, still chuckling.

"Reality is malleable anyway.", I reminded him. "And I've got a pretty big hammer."

"Yeah, just watch where you're pointing it.", Paul said. I grinned at him.

The turkey was done shortly after, and we munched greedily, all thoughts of anything but the pleasures of right now in our heads, ready for tomorrow by focusing on today, enjoying life- yes, all four of us, actually enjoying the lives blind luck gave, the pleasure-chemicals zipping through our heads. After taking a nap and some more research and specific queries to make sure everything really **was** going according to plan, I blew the rest of the day on electronic entertainment, happy at the presence of- no, just the mere existence of- my good friend Paul, my girl Sarah, and my eternally obedient and lovable brother, Billy.

We both had great sex with Sarah that night.

Three days later, we did take a snowboarding trip, in the mountains of Siberia on an old, Illuminati-converted military base now used for human research. It was mind-blowingly cold (of course, none of us noticed or cared due to the fabrics used) and mind-blowingly fun- we created an avalanche with our explosive echoed voices and surfed down the moving snow, using the super jumping ability of the special snowboards to launch over obstacles. The ache afterwards made home all the more welcoming. There was so much else we did, as we always do. Fun of all sorts, serious problems with Illuminati (Billy and I solve those in the same general way- get facts, make threats, Dominate), things that normals can barely contemplate and will never see. This, ladies and gentlemen, is how your Master is meant to live.

Chapter 55

Another fucking nightmare. Same theme- me, Billyized. Shit, that's annoying.. although waking up and realizing you're still the Dominator mitigates the terror with a total sense of relief. Whew. Yup, I'm still me. There's a Twilight Zoner for ya- a body switch with no apparent changes, except for lots of cheering from one side and lots of screaming from the other. A terror I'll never have to worry about. A real nightmare- no basis in reality, I reminded myself, although I did find myself darting around random nooks and crannies with engineered speed.

Forget it, Howard. Let it go. If some secret agent were in here, I or they would be dead as steamrolled bugs already. Besides, no one's that stupid. You'd need a real Darwin Award contender- too bad secrecy demands that it not be put on the Darwin Awards website- to try to get close to the person of the Dominator.. between the Enforcers (Enforcers vs. Idiots: you can almost hear the screaming if you listen real hard), the agents-in-training and their teachers (I took a second to question their loyalty- no way in hell they'd betray me. It's something like Asimov's First Law of robotics- I've seen plenty of the training and it's clear who they follow, no matter who's commanding them at the moment, and no matter how personally dangerous they become.), the servants (Hmm.. it's close, but my money's on Paul shooting him in the head before Billy and/or Sarah tear him apart at the seams), and my own abilities (Crunch.), no one is getting in here. Not even that Anarch- who seems to be in hiding, since he hasn't been heard of for months- can break into this place. There are problems I have to live with- security is not one of them.

A part of the nightmare I didn't realize I remembered came flashing back out at me like a bulldozer from Hell- although I didn't get a complete image, it was enough to realize that I was being savaged by the only people physically capable of doing it.

Security from the outside is definite. Security from the inside is not. Wait, what the fuck am I thinking? They're servants, Howard, **they can't kill you!** Although I've demonstrated plenty of indiscretion and instant decision-making over my twenty-two-month rule, I stay away from the big blunders (No! That bit with the arm did **not** count! That was one in a million, now stop doubting yourself, dammit!), so if it eventually happens, my natural sure-tonguedness has ensured that it doesn't happen any time soon. Hmm, where are they, anyway? I opened their door to find Billy and Paul asleep, Paul's head resting on Billy's right arm as Billy had his legs over Paul's. If they heard me, they weren't showing signs. I closed it and opened Sarah's- she wasn't there. Not that that's unusual or anything. She could be literally anywhere on the island- of course, I could have

someone fetch her in two minutes if she wasn't near an intercom, but I'm not going to bother.

I put the usual on and went outside, shaking off the last effects of the nightmare. Not going to happen. Ugh. I found myself wandering aimlessly after a few minutes- I need to clear my head. Clouded sunlight and the forest produced a somewhat pleasant, calming effect. Hmm. Might as well see it all from the top. I clambered up the usual route to the top of the island's mountain, to a cliff that might as well have been designed for aesthetics.

And there Sarah was, clad in all black, sitting on the cliff's ledge, moving back and forth frustratedly. She'd move forward, as if to lunge off- then lean back- then stand up, move a bit- and then relax back. "Yes, I really do want to.", she said, without looking back. Had I known she was up here, I probably would have been more stealth-concerned. And here she is, trying to do what dozens of electronics engineers and a fuckload of secret, well-funded technology prevent her from doing.

She finally looked back. "Just tell me which one you are- the duplicate gag's old.", she said, as I walked up to her. She squatted down and threw a small rock over the 25-meter drop. I couldn't hear it land.

"And what good would that do?", I asked rhetorically, squatting down next to her and looking at the budding trees, spotting a pig shuffling through the forest below.

"It would destroy a rotting, repugnant joke that's been going around like a bad case of ebola."

"Yes, but if I did tell you, I might be lying just for the sheer hell of it, and you already know that."

"Got me there.", she shrugged and said. "Damn, you mind just letting me do it? What's one more kill between friends?"

"Sarah, neither of us want you to die.", I said quietly.

"But it's just one death, Howard!" I could tell that she doesn't know it's me- she's only just guessing. "Just one stinking little kill! You've listened to my advice before on who to get rid of- now why not me?"

"Because we'd miss you. Valuability issues aside."

"Yeah, just because you fucking feel like it, as usual. Billy," Ah, she's not guessing at all. She's alternating names for whatever reason. "if I really were your friend as well as just a sex partner, assassin, and all-purpose servant girl, you would have asked me why by now."

"Is it the obvious?"

"What else is there?"

"Then why ask?"

"For more specific stuff.. I was at least expecting you to ask my thoughts by now."

"Sarah, I have no desire to know what you're thinking right now. A good portion is very simple to figure out and the rest is probably just muddled anger and frustration."

"You're wrong- it's all anger and frustration. Come on! You can still fuck my corpse for a while after I'm dead.." A certain sense of desperation that I could simply not place came into her voice.

"I thought you had other people to kill first."

"I do. And you know what? They're either going to die on their own in a few decades or they're going to live forever, just out of reach, just like this cliff. I suppose you know who Tantalus is."

"Spending an eternity in Hades with food and water just out of reach, which is why we use the term 'tantalize' today. I'm surprised you've heard of him."

"Oh, don't worry, I get plenty of culture.. seeing as how I get to see everything and touch so fucking little."

"Sarah, just because you happen to be my finger of death instead of everybody's doesn't change who's ordering the killing. If not you, then someone else. You just happen to be really good at it.", I said, letting her know which one I am and trying to get her to reveal more. A wish to kill me? Logical. A wish to kill herself? Uncharacteristic as hell.

"Yes, and after all that bullet-slinging, I've still never done my own assassinations, or even my own assassination. It's all been for you or some other power-hungry warlord."

"Such is the nature of the business."

"Yeah, the same fucking business that created us and started this whole damn thing. What the fuck were they thinking? All their egotism was culminated, rolled into a ball, combined with genetics and made into you. And now here I am, still suffering from the effects of being trusting."

"You already know they planned every minute of that to exactly fit what you've always wanted. They do that."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that.. damnit, Howard, this whole thing just sucks. You can make me do anything you want, just say the word.."

"Sarah, none of us want you to die. You really are too valuable. Besides, if you plunged 75 meters, who'd cook the turkey?" She just sighed and chuckled. "I'm the Dominator, remember? I don't waste resources, especially ones I care about."

"Your definition of care.. remember almost a couple of years ago when Billy was saying he didn't want to know what your definition of 'friend' was? Well, we've eventually learned in detail. Howard, you're an evil bastard all on your own but that part comes with the territory. But when you've got other people trapped in your twisted clutches, things change, because you have a spark of kindness and of niceness and of all that other happy crap. And is it trying to get out, hell no, because your overwhelming sense of illuminated control has taken and assimilated **that**, too."

"As you said, part of the territory. I'll always control you, but that doesn't mean you've got to suffer. Besides, most of the people you want dead, I want dead. In fact, probably all of them except me."

"No, there's others."

"Name one."

"The head Day Operator at Northberg."

"Him? Well, yes, I have everything to thank for from him. Is that just vengeance or.."

"Just vengeance. No other reason. Same with the rest of the assholes. They enslave me, I smear their guts around."

"You're talking like there's such thing as justice."

"It's not justice, just revenge and hatred. I want them **dead**."

"If the retrovirus doesn't save them, you have only but to wait."

"Yeah, and watch them get replaced by a new squad of engineered even more villainous than you."

"Sarah, anything I could do or say to further your goals would be immensely detrimental to mine. Which is the bottom line, because I'm not only an evil bastard, I'm **the** evil bastard, and don't you forget it."

"How could I? I'm two and a half years, lighter hair, and a sex change away from doing what you're doing. And that's the real kicker. Even Paul could be just as mean and evil as you are, if only he had the power to go with it."

"So you're just pissed off that it's not you."

"Basically, and also at the way even engineered humanity works."

"Tough shit. Sum id quod sum and even I can't change the way humanity works. Not for a while, anyway."

"And even then, you're going to change it for your own purposes, because that's what's going to benefit you the most in the long run. Shit, I know all this. It's the way things have always worked. I'm just on the wrong fucking end of it." She stood up, picking up another pebble, and throwing it full force at about a twenty degree angle, the small stone quickly becoming a dot and then nothing.

"I will leave you alone, if you want.", I said, getting up and looking her in the eye.

"No.. I'm goin in. A decimeter from the cliff, four hectometers from the cliff, doesn't make a damn bit of difference. Cold out here anyway." I put my arm around her as we turned around and walked back. Other than Sarah's suicidal episode, it was a usual day.

Following my usual instincts, I killed things. Virtual, as usual- my Lightning-loving Sorceress and the Burning Dead simply dislike each other, and between my sense of tactics, my strategy, and my reaction time/ping (It is **my** Realm after all), the Dead have an extremely low chance of survival. And, of course, they didn't last any longer than I let them. I don't play with the big screen for this game anymore- too low resolution, and it still looks pixelated on the meager 35 inch I have in here.

It was indeed a usual day- the buzzer came when I was in what's usually termed 'the zone' - a semi-conscious state, the same one I use for real-world fighting. Fuck it. I'm not leaving this chair. It's.. Greg and Shane Jefferson, the fourth-level 13-year-old fraternal twins, partially engineered. They can afford to see my room. I saved the character and turned on the visual chat.

"So what do you want?"

"Just advice, maybe some help. You know the main news in America?", Shane said, her high voice reminiscent of Sarah's. Which shouldn't be surprising- it probably, partially, **is** Sarah's.

"I don't watch it, you should know that."

"You know who Elian Gonzales is?"

"Doesn't ring a bell. Give me a few minutes." I checked Illuminated records and found a whole lot of shit- looks like a few media guys are using the six-year-old boy as a public figure, to stir up yet another wave and set up some precedents for tactical and military use, and to steer popular thought

the way they want it, like always. Amazing. Screw fifteen dead kids- one living one will suffice just fine. It would have taken me about fifteen minutes to see exactly what was going on in detail, but I realized it had a lot to do with world politics. "All right, what is it?"

"We think the guys who are doing this are doing it poorly."

"Shit.. I never even heard of any of this until today. What's going on?"

"Agh, it's a mess.", Greg said, in a voice slightly like mine. Looking at their necks, it's obvious that they can echo as I can. "Thing is, we're starting to think they've got it backwards. The idea was to keep the boy away from his father long enough to make people want government intervention, and to make familial relations more important than world politics." More minor delusions of the sheeple- this whole thing seems to be a time-killer, to make them look at something else while more important things were going on, which they always are. "Thing is, there's a whole lot of protestors out there, begging to let the boy stay.. government's really being portrayed as the enemy here. The guys behind this are doing the usual shit to make the whole thing useless, you know how they do that.. but we were thinking that if this keeps up, the protests will be seen as working, government will be seen poorly.. personally I don't think anything will really be affected, but there's fourth and fifth level guys whining about how the local climate is going to fuck up their plans. it's just a mess and we don't think **anyone** knows what he's doing. Might be some infighting between guys controlling this." Never a good thing, that.

"Besides, we think we want the boy for ourselves.", Shane said.

"What possible use could you have for him?", I asked.

"Oh, come on Howard- same reason you got Billy.", Greg said, not quite accurately but I wasn't going to correct him. "Besides, this is a real mess, and I want to see what the kid's mind is like. A small experiment in psychology, and we rip this mess off the air and replace it with something else. Of course, this isn't our department, we don't have authorization.. that's why we're asking you."

"Give me a half hour and you'll have your answer." Click. After about twenty minutes of pure research (I didn't use Billy for this, I wanted to learn these things myself), I started thinking about it as a whole. This is intriguing, I will give them that. Stalin, of course, said it best: one a tragedy, one million a statistic. So, we tend to focus on the one, and not the one million. One is much, much easier to control, anyway- especially when the one happens to be a child too young to make decisions for himself or even understand what's going on. And it is, indeed, a mess. There really are arguments- not so much 'infighting' as heated debate between guys controlling this. When media and government Illuminati disagree, bad things happen. Out of respect for.. me, probably, they've decided to refrain from kicking each other's asses and simply started playing tug-o-war. Bad. Very bad, in the long run. This kid needs out of the public eye. It's not a 'disaster' by any means- but it's starting to get muddled and ugly, and government isn't doing what it should have, that being to chuck the kid into the hands of his father from the first and claim it as policy. And Greg and Shane want the kid.. I can't say I blame them. Yes, let's do this. The father is replaceable, just like anyone else, and any behavioral differences can be blamed on Loyal Castro (the name Fidel always gives me a chuckle). Take the kid to a military base, and then replace him- the behavior of a six-year-old is amazingly easy to replicate- and give the real one to Greg and Shane. No fuss, no muss, no annoyances. Rip him away from his relatives military-style, and just ship him far away from Miami, and let's put an end to this whole mess.

Greg and Shane don't have authorization, and I should really be doing this myself anyway.

A few clicks and five minutes later, the face of Janet Reno appeared on my screen.

"Dominator Howard! What is it, Master?"

"This Elian Gonzales.. really screwed up publicity, really screwed up everything. I have people who want the boy. We can do effective replacement on the father right now.. when can you bring him to a nearby institution?"

"That's the problem, Dominator. I've got orders from every which way. You're going to need to give me time, lots of it."

"How much?"

"A couple of weeks..."

"A COUPLE OF WEEKS?!" What the hell kind of orders can you possibly have?!"

"Do you really want to know?"

"No. I don't. Orders or no orders, I want the boy at a military institution within fifteen days. I'm being lenient, Miss Reno. I want that boy delivered unharmed and my people will do all replacements themselves. Your agents can take him out of there in.. how long does it physically take them?"

"Three minutes. But Dominator.. trust me here, you don't want to rush this."

"Fifteen days is hardly rushing it, Miss Reno. I want the boy, unharmed, as soon as possible and that's the maximum I will take. **MY** people can get him out of there in **thirty seconds**, and I can easily leave you with the cleanup. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Dominator. I'll inform the other masters."

"Good. Don't contact me about this- contact Greg and Shane Jefferson. Don't screw this up or you **will** end up on the wrong end of some implants."

"Yes, Dominator." Click. I then informed a happy Greg and Shane about my instructions, had Juan Miguel replaced, and then went back to playing Diablo 2.

Chapter 56

BZZZERT!

The man on the screen, Thomas Fuchi, instantly started talking. "Dominator! I'm going to make this quick. The Anarch has just killed Brutus Mando and is still at his residence, and some of his normals are actually killing our Enforcers! Can we count on your help?" You're damn right you can. This isn't something I wanted this perfectly good day to be interrupted by.

My reply was swift. "You have it. If you can't kill him, delay him long enough for my forces to get there. He's dead." I clicked the screen off. Fuck you, you irritating normal son of a bitch. You don't get to see my face. I have someone who can do these things for me. "Sarah!! It's time to go kill!", I shouted into the intercom.

"Who?"

"The Anarch!"

"You know where he is?", Sarah asked, eager for blood.

"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." In this situation, that command had to have priority over the kill-him command.

"On it." And she was swiftly gone, silently walking past me in her usual murderous ensemble of normal clothing over assassin gear. This is one thing I find irritating- people who oppose me who somehow live. I want people who oppose me to be **dead**. Fortunately, as the Dominator, I have lots of ways to get them to that state.

Highly annoyed, I laid back on the couch and wondered what would happen if secrecy somehow broke. Well.. it would be 'underground', for one thing. It would be decried as paranoid nonsense by anyone in the mainstream. Even if by some horrible catastrophe, a piece of secret information got out, it would eventually be contained, or at least diluted- when a piece of secret information and 99 pieces of similar-sounding bullshit get out, who's going to know what to believe? The sheeple sure as hell won't. And anyone displaying the true information to the world would be swiftly killed and probably replaced. I know all this, of course, it's just that I haven't needed to think about it for a while. What a pain in the ass it is; lots and lots of Illuminati do nothing but that, secrecy. The End of Secrecy will free all that intelligent manpower up, at first just to kill assholes like this Anarch, then to do scientific work that will actually help the next humanity. With that thought in mind, I relaxed, and a bit later, ate and played with Billy and, for a few hours, Paul. Then I had him research what he could find on the Anarch, which was practically next to nothing. No name, no identity. It was left unsaid- an Illuminatus probably has a hand in this somehow. There was nothing productive we could possibly do, so I played some more with him instead.

Sarah came on the viewscreen in a few more hours and told me something I never, ever thought I'd hear from her. Failure. She failed to kill him. Maybe I should count that as my failure, though. She's my servant, after all. But.. how could she? He's a fucking normal!! She didn't want to explain, instead just saying that she'd write a report about it. I didn't command her to tell me. Right then, I didn't want to know, and turned off the communication. I was frustrated with myself, for making snap, casual decisions that might get someone killed. She's **Sarah**!! How the fuck would I ever suspect that **she** couldn't do it?!

I read the report when it came. Bottom line, he had a lot of meat shields, and she killed them trying to get to him, but it was a rather unique situation- she couldn't do it. Because my last command was for secrecy, which was reasonable under the circumstances- nothing for anyone to get pissed off about- but a huge mistake just the same. What if I had commanded her to kill and ignore secrecy- he'd be dead, and not killing any more Illuminati, and we'd have to do a bigger cleanup for the possible life of an Illuminatus in the future. What if the next target's Jeremy, or an engineered, or someone else I really care about? What if my off-hand command about normals and secrecy had actually gotten someone killed that I really don't want dead? I have to command- it's my job as Master- but next time I'm going to be far more specific and command Sarah to use more her judgment. Next time I have someone else to kill, that is. This Anarch has personally pissed me off, and he's somehow managing to evade our searches..

Sarah, naturally, was livid at herself when she came home. "**I FAILED!! I fucking FAILED!!** That Orwellian motherfucker's still out there somewhere, doing who knows what, and I couldn't motherfucking **STOP HIM!!**" She had my sentiments, and I wasn't going to get mad at her.

"Sarah, shit happens. 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 emitted in a voice that was almost a shriek. She flat-handed the wall hard- neither, of course, was hurt by it.

"Sarah.. it probably ended up being impossible.", Billy tried to pacify her with.

"No- you guys don't get it! I could have **had** him! Damn!" No, you couldn't have. You were commanded, and you're an expert. If you could have had him, you **would** have. I didn't want to say that out loud and make her worse, though.

"One and three quarters of a year for serious mistakes.", I said, remembering the trigger-blasting way back when. "But until now, her targets have always ended up dead."

"So then.. why?", Billy 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." Sarah eats Enforcers.. if this guy's worse...

"One hell of an Enforcer.", Billy and I said simultaneously.

"Yeah.. well, if he shows his ugly mug anywhere around here again..", she said, irritated.

"If I get the chance, I'll kill him.", I 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..", Billy said. That's another question- how the hell does he do **that**?

"Yeah.. we should assume someone's behind this. Can't think why. There's better ways to go about this.", I said. Illuminati have escaped the Anarch before- and that was an irritating thing to think, that we should have to worry about escaping **anyone**. "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.", Billy said. I looked at him with a simple, direct message: 'No shit.'

"Yeah.. guess Murphy's at it again.", Sarah said with a yawn. "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." It would have been better, probably, but Sarah didn't seem to have an opinion on it. That's my decision, after all.. "I'm going to go sleep this off." I let her go.

Damn it! This is just so irritating! If I had bothered to go on one jet ride, I wouldn't have to be **worrying** about this **shit**! "If **we** would have went...", I started, upset.

"He'd be dead, yes.", Billy said, sympathetically. "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." His words were the exact opposite of a lot of Illuminated philosophy but perfectly in line with common sense. "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." Billy's words were true, and very good to hear.

I smiled at him, and it felt like a weight was removed from my shoulders. "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

April Fool's Day, I realized as I woke up. The day Billy gets to play a joke on me. I kind of wish I had forgotten about it; instead, I actually woke up early because of it. Damn. I'd play along with whatever he had in store, for a while at least. It's probably something good.

"Sarah, no!", I heard Billy's voice say outside my door, barely audible.

"Dammit, I don't know how you did it but if you mean to-", Sarah replied, even more inaudible. Interested, I walked up to the door.

"I mean to kill him, it's just that I don't want him getting you!", Billy replied, as I struggled to make out the very faint words. Say what? I was about to step out and ask what he meant but I didn't want to interrupt. Instead, I silently turned on the intercom. "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." **WHAT?!** "It's harmless, isn't it? I mean, not obeying him doesn't make me hurt him." Oh no. Oh fucking no. My little bit of permission was enough for Billy to do it all- I'm dead because of my idiotic ideas of fairness and friendship, I gave him an inch and he used it to take a mile. Fuck.. now I've either got to get the fuck out of here or kill him instead! "And it was like when I was taken, I didn't even wake up. Then I just did the same to you and Paul. I'm glad we didn't die from that, I just hope Paul gets through it okay." Holy fuck...

"But if it was supposed to be harmless, now-"

"**Now** we're unimplanted, so what difference does it make?" My heart sped up to an incredible rate as I heard Sarah laugh in reply. "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.." That was enough. As they were speaking in normal tones I could tell that they were in Billy's soundproof room, so I immediately jumped out of my room, naked, rushing for the elevator, only shooting a quick look back (Billy's door was still closed, whew) as the elevator took me down to the basement. Well, Billy... this is it. I made a bad decision, but so did you. The walls here might be made of metal, but the trained agents' rather more hidden elevator (Wait, what if I commanded them- no, they wouldn't help half a second against Billy and Sarah..) opens directly to the outside. And, if they managed to get to me before that, with the Micro's wide-beam I could hopefully fry all three of them at once, as well as whatever instant-death chemical they'd be spraying at me. Tears welled in my eyes as I was finally, irrevocably forced to kill my dearest friends for fear of them killing me. But were they ever, really? With the power of the implants I have declared them to be such, and in short order they had actually been that. On the surface, anyway; because I had commanded them not to delude me, none of them has ever been less than honest about their intentions to kill me.

I took the Micro in hand and felt its heft. Ammo- full. Not like this fight will last more than a short burst anyway- I set the beam to widest immediately, and made sure the power was still on full. I rushed to the service elevator at full speed, not letting my depression get to me. This is it, it had to happen. My dearest brother, an enemy of the highest sort, finally free and ready to disintegrate my dominating ass for what my Daddy and I had done to him.

The doors opened silently and I rode up it, ready to sprint the moment it opened. The jet's best- if I can rush inside, hit the button, then jump in the jet and blast out of here like a bat out of hell, I'll be safe. And I'll have to nuke Billy from orbit, possibly- assuming he doesn't escape in the sub the moment he realizes I'm gone...

But none of that was to happen, for as the elevator doors opened in the middle of the forest, Sarah in her ghillie suit, Billy wearing the white Dominator suit, and Paul wearing black (but with the distinctive scars of unimplantation on his forehead) were standing there to greet me, with backpack-loaded sprayers in their hands and angry, vengeance-filled grins on their faces. I fired- as I realized the trigger had actually depressed and I saw no spray coming at me, I knew that in a split

instant they'd all be dead and I would still be standing.

"April Fool!", the Micro shouted instead in Billy's voice, and my entire world shattered. I'd been had. He had let me overhear him, and the other weapons were probably okay.. outwitted twice, I was going to die. And yet he did not fire right away, choosing to speak instead.

"Any last words, Howard?", he said in an angry voice, and I knew that I just might have a chance of saving myself, if I chose my words just right...

"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." I saw him shake his head and knew it was over.

"Not good enough.", Billy said. "**GET HIM!**" Billy was right- there was no way to dodge. The clear wide spray hit me in my arms, my face, my legs. Covered in it, I stopped dodging, waiting until the poison or acid stopped my heart or burned through my skin.

"Howard," Billy asked as I waited to die, "what's today's date?"

Holy. Fucking. **SHIT!** My mouth dropped open and I let the fake Micro clatter to the ground as I realized, with a mixture of absolute outrage and total relief, just what had really happened. "That was a... the whole thing, just..", I began, as Billy, Sarah, and Paul started laughing their asses off. I really **have** been had. Billy's not unimplanted, none of them are- I saw Paul peeling the fake scars off his head as he laughed at my shocked expression and wet body. The spray had been pure dihydrogen monoxide- I'd been hit with what were essentially Illuminated versions of Super Soakers.

"Billy, I'm sorry, please don't kill me..", Billy said, mocking me. "Oh, the look on your **face!** I never thought I'd see it! That was **so** completely worth it.", he said, laughing again, as my outrage grew. "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.", he said, gesturing behind him to a tiny object in a tree.

"You still have to do everything I say, Billy?", I asked, some anger in my voice.

"Unfortunately, yes.", he said, still smiling.

I raised my finger in the air, about to point it at him. I was ready to give him a command he'd never forget, something along the lines of what the worst normal parents have done to their children, something to cause him pain, restrict him from everything until I let him do things one by one when I finally said that it was enough. "Do you realize what I can make you do?"

He smiled at me and patted me on the head gently, as I had done to him a year ago. "Yes, Howard, but you won't do any of it. I know you better than that." And he was right. I had invited him to try to trick me, and trick me he had, in an incredibly well thought-out way. If I had any doubts whatsoever about his ability to manipulate, they're gone now. My outrage faded away.

"Billy.. that was amazing. I didn't have any idea you had something like that in store. I didn't even consider that." Why the hell hadn't I? Argh! Hindsight is 20/20, yes, but I **really** should have caught that! But it's been something I've been fearing for so long that I didn't look past it. Damn. I really am the fucking April Fool this year.

"You really should have, Howard.", Sarah said, mirroring my thoughts. "He can use deceit so he can unimplant himself? Seriously, what kind of tortured-ass logic is that?", she rhetorically asked. "And you know damn well that if I had a hand in it you simply would have never seen it coming." Yup. That would have been Sarah's way of doing it, all right. And Billy would never have really told Sarah not to do it. She would have walked in, set the spray to extremely wide, and sprayed the fuck out of me as she opened the door. It's not an attack I worry about defending against.

"Sarah, Paul.. did he command you or not?"

Paul spoke first. "Commanded, but not against my will.", he said, grinning as I'm sure he had when Billy had told him the plan.

"What he said.", Sarah said, nodding. "And there were a lot of commands- a lot more than what you saw, for a lot of contingencies. **All** the weapons were faked." Which is Illuminism in action. Make a show of favoring one over others and control them all.

"I had to.", Billy said. "It had to be harmless. The Enforcers are replacing them right now." He hadn't needed to say 'Joke's over'- the cue was certainly them dousing me. "And I had to be sure to stand between you and Sarah, in case you freaked and went after her." Which would have been quite possible. "Now I have a question for **you**, Howard."

"This isn't something you have to worry about me forgiving you for.", I replied. It was the question I asked him a year ago.

"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." It was truthful, but more than that- in a fundamental way, it was the **right** answer. "I'm going to dry off now."

I walked back through the front door, relieved, embarrassed.. and **humiliated**, an emotion I barely recognized, and the humiliation brought back some anger. I barely ever lose, and I hadn't just lost, I had been utterly outwitted. I walked upstairs with a scowl, yanked a towel noisily from its place in the bathroom, and dried off, completely annoyed. There was nothing I was going to do about it, either- after being made a fool of, there were no good options (I **won't** be a poor sport about this..) but to quietly accept it. Fucking hell, if the other Illuminati got hold of this- **Oh shit!**

I rushed out of my room and looked down. Billy was walking back in casually, carrying a couple of small cameras.

"Billy, where was the data going from those?"

"Wireless, straight to the computer. Once I figured out how, it was the easiest thing to do."

"Just locally, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You can keep it for our records, but I forbid any of you to share it with anyone else." Billy nodded, as if he hadn't been planning to anyway. "Or even tell anyone about it." Again, he nodded, as if telling anyone was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Howard, are you going to play one on me next year?", Billy asked.

"No. This ends here." He smiled at me. "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.", I said. Sarah vanished into Sarah-space and Paul sat between us and just watched us play. The action was cathartic, but we fought to draws, as always. After a half hour, we went down to the arcade to stalemate some more, and Paul continued to watch us from a distance, seeing as much of the back of our bodies as the game.

After about another half hour, he was still there, just standing, obviously not trying to intrude but to quietly observe. After another three-round draw, I turned around, casually. "Paul..?"

"I'm not annoying you, am I?"

"Not in the least.", I replied. "I'm just wondering why."

"Because Billy said you were his friend." I turned, slowly, to look at Billy, who was smiling just a bit.

"Billy, were you lying or sarcastic when you said that?"

"No." There weren't any words. I simply hugged him, tightly, as he meant everything to me. I looked into his eyes and saw the reflection of my own, and between us I saw the fate of everything for an eternity to come. Come to the future with me, Billy.

"C'mon. Let's play.", I said, and we went to a four-player racing game in the back, and we sat in the middle seats, and Paul cheerfully followed us to our left. Sarah was already to our right, smiling ('How'd she get there without us knowing' no longer being a question), and I knew immediately that she must have witnessed everything.

It was Illuminati-quality. Immediately we shot to three hundred miles an hour, with perfect traction. With us being stationary they could never get the feeling of acceleration right, but the seats tilted, and we burned around the digital track like there was no tomorrow, flying around obstacles and each other. For Billy and me it was all gas, all the time, no brakes. We finished side-by-side with a time that no one could ever possibly beat. And we did that for every track in the game, Sarah coming in a few seconds after us and Paul coming in a while after that.

We hadn't had breakfast yet, so I commanded Sarah to make it, and as she did and we snacked on other stuff, I started thinking. For almost two years now I've dealt with the best, worst, and everyone

in between the Illuminati has to offer. People who create, with metal, organics, time, Enforcer labor, and extremely advanced science and technology. People who destroy, with guns, agents, and a mission to rid the world of the people we don't want in it. People who control, with manipulation, spying, and servants their main tools. People I praise and people I scorn. People I save and people I kill. Engineered and normals, masters and servants. People who work together to unify and people who let their petty egos divide. People who look at the future, who grow the seeds of a post-normal world. People who look at the past, sometimes because that's their specific job. Not a single one of those people- with the possible exception of the people who created us- has done anything as fundamentally important when Billy said that I was his friend.

Sarah finished cooking and the bite-sized pieces she served were amazing. In the whole time she's been here- about two years now- I've never tasted anything like this- sweet, tangy, cheesy, a bit peppery-hot. She has practically every ingredient possible to make it with- I knew immediately that no normal has ever eaten one of these. She had, of course, made plenty; three engineered and a normal have an enormous appetite. "This stuff's delicious, Sarah.", I told her, and she smiled.

Time for more fun; we went out on jetskis and broke through waves at a hundred and thirty kilometers an hour. It was windy, and a bit cloudy, but we didn't care- none of us was about to fall over, not even Paul, whose skill at this was almost engineered. Obviously, we couldn't go very far because of secrecy, but I felt like I could haul ass with them all the way to the Aleutian Islands, weather be damned. A grey figure tore through the waves to our side, flew its finned body over our heads, and landed with a loud splash on the other side. Engineered or not, that Tursiops Truncatus must have known who we were. We laughed- it seemed the right thing to do- and eventually got bored after a few hours and went back inside.

We weren't done, not even close. Games that the normals didn't even finish, we played them. Fido gleefully ran around with us on the island, although he couldn't climb trees. Although I wouldn't do it- I didn't like the last one- I was in the mood to take over another amusement park. Sarah cooked more of those goodies again, and we ate another batch as if we were starving. I can say, as an expert in the area, that even though I was made a fool of earlier, today was the most fun I've ever had, even though I've done things like this before.

Nobody called and I wondered if Billy set up today as uninteruptible as I had a year ago. I asked; nope, he didn't. Good. The less I'm needed, the happier I am.

Eventually it started getting late. "I'm going to bed.", I said.

"One thing first, Howie.", Billy said. From his tone I could tell that he's had it on his mind.

"Hm?"

"Unless you actually command me to, if you say the wrong words, I'm not going to kill you."

Maybe he misunderstood the earlier permission to play one joke.. "...You can't delude me.", I told him.

"I'm not trying to. It's true. I'd rip these things out of my head instantly given the chance," he said, pressing his fingers into his palms and bringing out the small, Sarah-like claws, "but I don't want to kill you anymore." My first feeling was that my overall risk had dropped several orders of magnitude.

"If Billy doesn't want to, I won't either.", Sarah said, to my surprise, dropping the risk further.

"You know I won't.", Paul said.

I looked at them and smiled. Enemy Illuminati, traps, assassination attempts, that sort of thing, don't worry me very much anymore. I can fight through that or avoid it. Billy and Sarah no longer wanting

to kill me- in approximately two short years- lessened my chances of death considerably. But I couldn't give them what they really wanted, couldn't afford to lose them. Even in the extreme unlikelihood that they did survive, they might leave me, and I can't let them do that. I value them far too much. They're simply too useful, in fun or in life-threatening situations. "I still can't take them out, anyway. You'd almost certainly die, and I won't let you die.", I told them. And then I went to bed, and got a very good night's sleep.

Almost the rest of the month continued as usual. Even my job gets mundane. Even with my twelfth birthday coming up, I feel like a parent, telling all the Illuminated, wrinkled, grey-haired people not to fight over spilled milk or tossed cookies. You may do this, you may not do that. Don't step on each other's toes or I'll step on your heads. I did realize that I (and Billy- he did it half the time, not needing any help from me) was dealing with the rarity- if the Illuminati was truly full of aggressive idiots I'd be solving problems for them constantly, like a normal tech support servant- but it was aggravating anyway.

Chapter 58

BZZZZERT!

I woke up, expecting to deal with an asshole or two arguing assholes at once, put on my white suit (yay, I get a new, very slightly larger one tomorrow), and went down to the viewscreen irritably, Billy and Sarah coming out to watch. I got an Enforcer instead.

"A normal is approaching the island from the southeast, sending out uncoded messages on normal-band radio requesting permission to land. Approaching normal has been identified as The Anarch." What?! He's surrendering, or what?! And how the hell does he know where my island is?!

"Do not terminate him.", I commanded the Enforcer, to Billy and Sarah's surprise. "Let him land." I was going to watch him come, of course commanding my strongest weapons to prepare themselves and come with me. We walked out, around the island, to the beach where his boat approached.

Of all the insane things he could do, he's coming here in a speedboat, nearly unarmed (in comparison to the locals), and very, very vulnerable. He isn't shooting at anything here. He isn't moving to attack, he's just coming... it's like he's putting himself at my fucking mercy! What the fuck?! Some dude starts directly attacking Illuminati for more than two years and then he comes in here, at my mercy.. and he still looks like an Enforcer, too. Sitting in the bushes with power binoculars, I could see his facial features from here- grim, and mission-like. Maybe he is planning to destroy us after all... not like I can't just nuke his ass first. The Enforcers, of course, would have already nuked his ass if I hadn't ordered them not to. My servants were at my side, similarly wondering what the hell he's thinking.

"I guess sheeple are dumb till the end.", muttered Sarah. "Or maybe he thinks he can do something."

"I don't get how he can be this stupid, especially now.", said Billy in a puzzled voice. "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."

"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...", I uttered determinedly. I had to know. I just had to. The figure came closer and steadily closer. I wasn't going to bother with Enforcers here. I was determined to handle this fucker myself. We went down to the beach and stood at the point he would land, heavy weapons at the ready. "Stop the boat or you die!", I called out in one of my most authoritarian voices, in case the boat was a bomb. The boat stopped as fast as it possibly could. "Now swim to shore." As soon as I said it, the Anarch

immediately jumped out of the boat and swam at a steady pace until he was climbing out of the water, standing in the waves.

Then even I could not have predicted what would happen next.

"Master Howard!", he shouted, in a voice that reminded me of a lost child finding its mother. "Master Howard.. I thought you were.."

"Okay, first off, how the **fuck** did you know who I am?!", I said in a semi-panicked voice, holding my Micro with a steady hand, the power setting at full blast. In a hundredth of a second, this guy's head could be severed from his body- and the classification of solid things, for that matter. He could have gotten the information from the Illuminatus being attacked.. but we severed those connections before he got in there.

"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's the term used by Enforcers, signifying the circumstances under which they are given to their masters... oh holy shit.

"Who the hell are you?", I asked him. A general question, but maybe he'll just spill it.

He did, immediately and obediently. "I am a prototype sentient Enforcer, placement date May 25, 1997. My master is Inheritor Howard."

"Dominator, now.", I told him. "But you are an Enforcer. No one outside would know that.." The gravity of what he was telling me reached my brain. He's the prototype sentient Enforcer Daddy told me about, I thought I was going to get him back when I was 9. He never came, the project was scrapped, Daddy never mentioned him again... but here he is, as the everfucking Anarch. How could I not have known? Why didn't anyone tell me about this? Someone's head is going to roll..

"Why did you attack governmental and Illuminated institutions?", I asked in one of my more demanding voices.

"Because they were attempting to perform the forbidden act of governing me. Only you can do that." Oh for fuck's sake. This whole 'anarch' deal was nothing more than an Enforcer command gone wrong. None but the master may govern an Enforcer, and in the case of a sentient Enforcer, anything he would perceive as a danger to his commands... all this is the result of some blunder, the details I'll have to find out. Figures that it would be something stupid like that. No glorious shootout, no defiant, suicidal explosion. This is where the resistance's mightiest warrior comes to his knees, willingly. I powertripped for a split second at the thought.

"How old are you?"

"Three years, six months."

"They managed to do the training in less than eight months on a sentient?!" It's possible, I've just never heard of it. I thought a sentient would go crazy being trained as an Enforcer. I haven't heard of the topic even being considered since this guy...

"That is true, Master Howard."

"All right.. if you really are an Enforcer... pick up the first pebble you see." He (it? With what pronoun do you refer to a sentient Enforcer?) did.

"Now eat it.", I said, thinking that if this was bullshit he would at least hesitate. Paul gasped. The misdirected agent gulped it down as he would a pill.

"Now puke it back up." Large quantities of vomit joined the pebble in its return to earth- Enforcers have biofeedback circuitry not matched by the most adept yogi. Yup. None other than an Enforcer could have done it that quickly.

"That settles it..", Billy 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." The hell? I never received any kind of delivery information.. maybe they had intended it to be a surprise, and then fucked up.. I've got to get to the bottom of this. "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." Oh, fuck. I know what's going on now. The person who didn't tell me about this is going to **die**.

"Our operatives or normals?", Billy asked.

"Almost certainly normals."

"We just have to **assume that** was cleaned up..", Sarah said, shaking her head. I hate assuming secrecy. But assumption is necessary in an organization this large, and secrecy threats created by the crash would have been noticed by now anyway.

"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." His sentience allows him to manipulate.. and his Enforcer training allows him to find things out. Best of both worlds, if he's on your side.

"Good. All right. Come on in. We've got business to discuss with someone." Walking back to the house, I turned my back to him without worry. Sarah will keep an eye on him if no one else.

"There is a thing I must bring to your attention, Howard."

"What?"

"You are implanted."

I am..

I am..

"**WHAT?!**", I turned around and shouted directly in the Anarch's face, my fist-blades centimeters from his cheek. I heard Billy stuttering and Sarah saying "No way... no way." The Anarch was not fazed... he has to be an Enforcer, but whose? He can't be lying.. can he? "**YOU'RE LYING!!**"

"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?", I asked. I noticed Paul almost paralyzed with shock, then shaking his head in disbelief.

"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?", I said, pointing to my head.

"No." The gravity of what he was telling me finally reached the inside of my brain. Oh.. no. No... that can't be right.. this has got to be crap.. but something tells me he's not bullshitting me here.

"Oh, we can find the truth of this **real** fast.", Billy said. "They're not magnetic but we can get something.. 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?" Do I.. I found my thoughts being clouded with an enormous fear and the shock of it all. Me? No way.. no fucking way. The day before my twelfth birthday, too...

"I don't.. I don't know.", I 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.", Billy replied.

I tried to compose myself.. and failed. By the time we got back to the house, I was shaking all over, almost catatonic, sitting down on the couch as my servants went to examine the closet for detection tools. Me? ME?! This has got to be bullshit... got to be.. I did research on Brutus Mando, found nothing pertaining to anything like this.. but of course I wouldn't.. Son of a bitch.. I have no idea how long I just sat there cradling my head. Tears were coming out of my eyes and I wiped them off angrily. Son.. of a.. **BITCH!! "FUCKING DAMN SHITTY HELL!!"**, I swore, screaming at the ceiling. Just where have I heard that before?

"Your command has prohibited me from making an observation plus wisecrack, Howard.", Billy said nonchalantly. Oh, yes. That's where.. they searched the closet some more, the Anarch going to the elevator. He knows this place.. maybe they did that when they made him, though.

"I believe this will do the job.", Sarah said evenly, using both hands to hold up a heavy, but precise tool that looked like an electronic mini-mortar gun. The Anarch stopped and went to inspect that device.

"What's that?", I 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, gesturing to Billy, using the device's telescopic lens to focus in on his head, her strength and dexterity allowing her precision with the bulky device. "This might be annoying.", she warned, as she ran it across his skull. He grimaced a bit but did not move.

"Definite. No question. The metal shows right up."

"Now.. try it on me.", I commanded her, also grimacing from the almost-unheard noise in my ears as a result of the ultrasonic scan. The way she looked at me told me everything. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I'm not dreaming; I can't be. This is.. demented, sick.. who the HELL would do this?!

"Howard.. you realize that no one's ever survived removal.", she said, and my hands were trembling very, very fast.

"I.. don't.. care.", I said, looking into her eyes as she put the thing down on the carpet. "Take them out of m-"

"Waiiit, Howard.", Billy loudly said, interrupting me. "Dumb decision, remember? I gotta warn ya..". He was.. right. It would be stupid just to try it.. but I can't give my knowledge away with some test.. shit, they might already know.. oh **DAMN!!**

"Although you know why we can't stage organized testing procedures, we can at least find **something**.", Sarah said, sighing a bit, only slightly spooked in comparison to me. "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.'"

"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." The way she said 'has been' suggested my non-survival, and I sneered at her at that but said nothing. She was, indeed, right that I wasn't going to live as a servant, especially since I have no idea who my master (fuck, those words feel like liquid shit in my head) is.

"All right.. now to see just how the implants kill..", I said, reaching for the keyboard. "They're not going to monitor this.. at least not right now, because anyone could be looking that up.." If my body is not secure, my server most assuredly isn't either.

"Don't bother, Howard.", Billy said.

"Why not?"

"I already memorized it." It should come as no surprise that he did. He probably did so early in his implantation.

"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.", suggested Paul, the first time I've heard him say anything in a while. "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 said to Paul. "He may survive with that plan. However, the parts of his brain that were attached to that may.. depending on his brain's chemicals, depending on how fast and how much.. he may lobotomize himself. He'd regenerate it, but.." But I'd forget everything and be an easier target for a very, very long time. "And I would not use chemical inhibitors on him." My biology tends to violently react in the presence of any such drug- at least that's what their tests on my prototype parts told them.

"A little at a time, then.", Paul suggested. "I've seen the videos of guys dying. It takes them a few seconds.." But 'a little at a time' would take a medical facility, and Paul's expression showed that he

realized that.

"You guys realize that we're not going to get this done anyway, if Murphy's Law holds out.", Sarah said.

"Why not, Sarah?", I asked immediately and with force.

"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.....", I trailed off. "So.."

"I", the Anarch began, "have an idea."

"Spill it.", Billy said.

"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.."

"No, we won't.", Paul said.

"Eh?", I 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," That would do it, wouldn't it? It was probably the first thing Paul thought of, to avoid being commanded. The three of them have been prohibited from avoiding my commands for so long I forgot it was an option. "they still have to fight Billy and Sarah. If you give them a reason to question your motives.."

Billy got it before I did. "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.", Billy 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." He sat next to me, drew the keyboard to himself, and looked things up.

"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." Which is what the device's description had on it: non-neuron-separating. It was an experimental implant-removal electrical modifier.. which did next to nothing because its connections (possibly many) would only stick to the surface. "It is also unable to predict the fluctuations very well. And this is.. the only such device." I rolled my eyes and shook my head. The only such device in existence.

"It's this or nothing.. by the way, aren't these transmitting?", I said, gesturing to the cursed things in my skull.

"No.", Sarah said. "Almost certainly not.", the Anarch said at the same time. "They would destroy their secrecy.", he continued. Ugh, I must not be thinking straight not to have caught that.

"So how many connections are you going to order?", Billy asked me.

THAT, I caught immediately.

"How many do you expect me to order?", I asked him coolly. "Four? Five?"

One second passed.

Chapter 59

"Well?", Billy asked me.

An objective observer could not have said anything about this, because both answers are completely subjective, so it's time to ditch that traditional Illuminated idea for now, and time to think- about myself, about the world around me, and about my own doom and potential doom.

If I don't, then something can possibly happen to their implants, or someone could already be controlling, say, Sarah- hell, even Billy- and commanded her or him never to clue me in about it. Someone obviously has serious power- more than me, as much as it galls me to admit it. There really is a trans-Illuminati. And a trans-Illuminatus would treat us as an Illuminatus does sheeple: like cannon fodder. But I've proved to them that I'm not fodder, and so they will do what they can to annihilate me, which should be considered to be just about anything. Including implant takeovers.. who says there's not a subroutine in there to project another controller image on their minds, given the right signal?

If I do, then they've got a chance of dying, too, although I figure Billy's outcome- life or death (or brain damage, which is an unsettling thought)- will be the same as mine. And even if we survive withdrawal, I run the risk of instant death, despite what they said. They believe what they said, but their love for me might quickly fly out the window as they comprehend it- they will get revenge. Fast revenge. I might not even know what hit me... I started contemplating my own death and then shook it off.

I added more variables into it by considering all the times the implants seemed completely superfluous as well as the few times the right command saved my ass.

But what do I **want** to do? I closed off logic for a bit and started listening to my right hemisphere, which was steadily sending me one signal.

There was no choice to be made.

"Oh, hell yes."

"**YES!**", Billy exploded, the first time I've seen him with that kind of joy. The Anarch began ordering the parts and looking over the procedures. Billy, Sarah, and Paul rushed forward and we shared an intense group hug.

"I have a suggestion, Howard.", the Anarch said.

"What?"

"Include me in the unimplantation. I.. cannot explain why properly." Fuck.. should I really trust.. I have to. He is an Enforcer, even though sentient. All evidence points to his belief that he was telling the truth about the reasons for his attacks. I **must** assume he knows what he's doing.

"All right. There is one other I'd like to bring. Fido. And guys.. especially you, Paul.."

"What- you think I'll croak? So what if I do?", Paul replied with total nonchalance.

"Dammit, this isn't one of our usual fights.", Billy said sharply, as we broke off our hug. "No one's survived this. No one. Even with the precautions.. fuck, I wish we could **test** this!" No shit, but we've already been over that.

I smiled. "Pfft. You're telling me. For me.. there isn't a choice, it's either this or the painfully inevitable. But if you guys.." I smiled wider. If I'm going to croak, I might as well have one last joke.

The reactions were as predictable as they were simultaneous. "Like hell!", Billy blurted out. "Fuck you!", Sarah sharply shouted. "Kiss my ass!", Paul yelled.

I nodded. "...That's what I thought."

"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.", Billy said, and I realized something I should do.

"Yes, Billy. No more commands. All of them are gone, right now." They looked at me as if I couldn't possibly mean it, that I was just kidding, and they'd be my obedient servants forever. "You heard me. I don't know if set commands can affect implant withdrawal or not." My next sentence was in the list of things you just don't say, no matter what reasons you have for saying it. Just by saying it, I completely defied years of advice and Illuminated common sense. This is, after all, what killed Damien and other masters. "All of you can do whatever you want." As I said it, I visualized chains falling from their bodies, clankety-clank, and for a moment I had no idea why I had them wearing them to begin with. There, it's done.

"Thank you... Master.", Billy said, smiling as if he couldn't ever be hurt by anything. It was one of the first commands I ever gave him, never to call me that.

"Yes, Howard.. thank you. Thank you so much. You're the best friend anyone could ever want, both of you are.", Paul said, smiling widely, and I appreciated it. "I guess I'll just deal with the pain. He didn't order any anaesthesia for me.."

"It's not safe.", the Anarch said, simply. "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.", Billy said. "There's the knockout gas for us, too, but we're not getting any of that either."

"There exists a sedative for bioengineered humans?", the Anarch asked, the instant after Billy finished speaking, as if he felt there shouldn't be one.

"Huh? You didn't know?", Billy asked. "I wasn't brought here kicking and screaming. 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 anæsthetic will impede your regeneration." Which is what the Operator told me when I had my arm blown off. "Other than the circumstance of engineered servants, there appears to be no use for such a chemical."

"The.. previous Dominator told me it was in case of incredible pain.", I said, a bit uncertainly. "They didn't give any of it to me with that arm, though. Shit, that is weird. It's almost impossible to use as a weapon, though." The Anarch simply nodded. But as a trap... okay, save this for later, I've got one Dominator-overthrowing device to worry about right now.

"So we're going through this with nothing but what amounts to a crude dampener.", Sarah said, smiling. "Nothing to stop the pain. Good. For once in my life, I can't wait." But we did wait. We waited a full hour, the nervousness only buffered by the relief of my soon to be ex-servants. Billy changed clothes, putting on the white suit, making himself truly identical to me. I didn't want to say much of anything; I was scared, and still shocked. They didn't want to say anything either, probably because they so perfectly liked the way things were going that they didn't want to do anything at all to disturb it.

Sometime during the wait, my dark, cynical voice, the one I haven't heard from in a while, came to me. 'Do you have any idea what you're doing, and what you just did?', it asked. 'Have you gone completely insane? They're your best assets. You can make them do anything. Why throw away something like that?' I didn't answer it. I didn't need to. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I was doing it because I wanted to.

The implant removers were helicoptered in on the lawn, and Sarah picked them up nonchalantly as if there was nothing to worry about, and then brought them back. We walked up to my room, and laid down on my bed, all of us in roughly a circle, our heads near each other. Here we go. Nobody's ever survived this before, and we're not well equipped to survive it now. I have no idea whatsoever what it'll feel like, nor even how to possibly hope to survive it, and I pondered the possibility that my adrenalized power might hasten my own death. I don't care. I'm ready. Let's see how powerful we **really** are.

"Enough connections for everyone...", Sarah said. "All right. I'll do it, guys. Everyone at once. Anarch, can you do yourself?"

"Yes."

"Then do me and then you after I do them." And with that, she started with Paul, putting the connector expertly on his head, activating it, and it cut through his skull like nothing, not damaging the brain beneath. She pressed something else on it and I heard a very sharp pop, and I saw the implants get drawn out of Paul's skull carefully by the automatic doctor. Paul's face immediately went blank, the connector snapped onto his head, and Sarah immediately darted over to Billy and I, putting the connectors on each of us with one hand. I forced myself to be still as the extremely sharp blade cut into my head carefully (it did hurt, but not much- it was a truly thin cut), and the automatic arms pulled off the parts of my skull, leaving me feeling strangely exposed. It popped out both implants at once, and my whole world became--

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. Excrucias 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..

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhHHHHHH..

Chapter 61

Ow. My head.. my chest.. my HEART! Oh shit! How fast is that thing going?! I felt it throbbing like a rabbit's, beat beat beat beat beat beat.. beat.. whew. Still alive.. then I took notice of where I was, sitting on the floor with long cables hanging out of my head. I pressed the buttons and they detached with a pop, disconnecting from the brain tissue with no damage, the automatic bandage system gracefully folding the detached skull and skin back in its rightful place. Then my auditory sense kicked in and I heard firecrackers.. no, that's..

Shooting?

But this is the real world! We beat that thing! The rest of my .. friends .. were sitting upright, their cables popping out of their heads, getting to their feet slowly, because we all still had the same migraine from hell. "Fuck a duck..", muttered Sarah, slowly waking up. "That can't be.."

"It is!!", called the Anarch back to us. "Go and get your weapons! I can hold these guys off a little while longer.." Fido was whining like crazy, as Sarah disconnected his brain from the apparatus.

"Who the fuck is shooting at you?!", yelled Billy, his face as red as the rest of ours, because of all the blood pressure and the fight. "And how the fuck did you survive the implants?"

"Enforcers are shooting at me!!" Enforcers?! Why.. oh **shit**!! "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!!" No! NO!! I should have figured- a key Illuminated rule is to **never** do anything without a contingency plan!

"FUCK!!!", I screamed. "I should have seen this coming. Come on!" I sped to the elevator, and as soon as my ex-faithful Enforcers saw me, they immediately started blasting- large dents into the wall above my rolling body. I've still got enough power for this... I must!

"WAIT!! We can't take the elevator!", screamed Sarah, partially hiding in the guest bathroom to avoid being seen and shot, a place we all ducked into. "I assure you, it's trapped!" The Anarch was near us, and he groaned loudly.

"Shit..", he muttered. "All right.. I don't think so. So I'll go. Here!", he shouted, chucking the automatic rifle he was using and its ammo to Sarah. The Enforcers were climbing the stairs... and

they were heavily armed and armored. Great! No way in **Hell** we can beat these fuckers, especially after that tiring dream sequence!

Sarah took the rifle and put them away, aiming for exposed skin (but then learning she didn't have to as the bullets tore through the armor), having to fire several times for each one because they dodge bullets almost as fast as we do. She anticipated them with lightning speed, killing them all.. but there were more. And they were probably getting reinforcements.

"Great! Just what I always wanted..", screamed Paul. "First we fight off that thing and now this? I feel like I'm in some bad RPG."

Then for absolutely no reason at all Billy and I simultaneously just started screaming our heads off using too much power in the diaphragm and both sets of vocal cords. I realized... slowly.. but surely.. I'm- we're- going insane... because we're going to die, no two ways about it.

Sarah was at a standoff, holding them back until the elevator came up, which proved her wrong about the possible trap, to my surprise. When killing someone like me, the Illuminati usually let nothing possible slip past, trapping everything and trying to minimize survival chances to a very small percentage. Maybe they figure I would have seen it sometime or a technician would have caught it. As soon as the doors opened, the Anarch jumped into the bathroom carrying a huge double handful of weapons, including the Micro, while Sarah laid down a huge burst of totally random cover fire, keeping the Enforcers away for a few more seconds. Good. We stopped screaming and started readying ourselves. I hope Paul doesn't try anything stupid.. I don't want him to die. He is only human, but after living with us for a while, he might think he can do things he can't... but regardless, I must survive. That's my primary job.

"Maybe, just maybe.", Billy was saying to himself. Which is exactly what I was thinking.

We reached for the weapons, readied them, and Billy and I resumed our screaming. Not a scream of fear, nor a scream of rage. A scream of power. Pure power. I'm not sure if it was the adrenaline or what, but for an instant, I felt like I could rip them all in half with a thought. Is it enough power for survival? Only one way to find out...

I looked at who had what weapons- I would unleash the Micro, Billy pulled out the super shotgun, Sarah got some Uzi-types, and Paul pulled out the biggest weapon he could find: an assault cannon that looked like something out of Batman. We rushed out the door in a single file line, Sarah first, me following.

I should have been prepared for the noise. The thundercrack of the Micro almost knocked me off my feet on its own, not that I wasn't off them already- flying back and forth, a bullet here, a bullet there, one aimed at my head- duck!- another at my chest- turn and dodge to the side, dodge the ricochet, get back to a better shooting position- and continually fire at guys. The couch exploded into flames. Three Enforcers were cut in half by the concentrated heat; I was using narrow-beam. Charred flesh and some steaming blood oozed out of both halves, the parts sliding off one another while the top halves kept shooting for a second or two. I know I don't have this many on the island. Where the **hell** did these guys come from?! And it feels like they're all firing at me..

Billy was taking careful, automatistic aim, getting one shot, one kill for every BOOM of the atomic shotgun. I took 1/20th of a second to see his face- calm and serene, as if firefights were a Tibetan monastery. It was like a cartoon- when he fired at an Enforcer, you could see right through it before it fell to the ground, dead as a rock, a beachball-size hole in its chest. They fired at him about the same amount as they fired at me. When he dodged, he moved right back to his original position as if nothing had happened.

Sarah was flipping over me, using every skill she had to avoid bullets (they weren't shooting at her very much, though) and plant attacks herself. Blam, blam, blam, in a frenzy of death. She

concentrated further, and got one aimed shot for every shot made by the mini-missiles (which fire pretty fucking fast), stopping only to reload.

Paul got a clear line of fire and just unloaded. WHUDDA WHUDDA WHUDDA of wide-spray buckshot, and he's obviously got enough rounds to keep firing for a full five minutes. He barely held the thing still, but he managed to, and the Enforcers who didn't get out of the way quick enough felt the pain of high-velocity pellets tearing out chunks of their flesh. Paul's adrenaline must be letting him even pick that thing up...

And the Anarch was also shooting with his assault rifle, but he was doing something else.. singing?!

"I'm your eyes.. when you must STEAL!!", he screamed, and he seemed to be moshing to invisible music while dealing his share of pain and destruction. Another few Enforcers jumped through the broken glass to the outside (wasn't that thing bulletproof?) and tried to kill us before we blew them to Hell.

Then **WHOOOOOOOM---** HOLY SHIT, something blew off some of the **roof**! Fortunately, there wasn't very much shrapnel- but another missile is coming this way! In reflex I turned the Micro up and blew it and two of its cousins out of the sky, the blast too far off to do us any damage (painfully loud, though)- and I noticed the reflection again, this time way into the sky. If I had hit it exactly dead-on.. well, we know how reflection works.

They're trying to nuke us. They're just using superior firepower to blow us to pieces because the Enforcers are failing. We've got to get out of here. More Enforcers fired, more Enforcers died in an orgy of gore. Remind me to recommend this scene to id Software, Valve, or Ion Storm if I get out of this.

I turned my head left to see an Enforcer take aim- who's it shooting at?!- and then see that Enforcer get knocked down by Fido, who tore its throat out in less than a second, growling like Cerberus on steroids, his jaws and face caked with blood. At that moment, I realized why none were attacking him; they were all going for me and Billy, since they had been ordered to and we were the biggest threats. Good. It means that Paul doesn't have to put himself up to our kind of acrobatics..

I had never stopped screaming, but I would have started by realizing what I did- I turned this thing up to full power when I first started shooting! The Micro is going to overheat and I know Sarah's running out of ammo! More missiles came and Paul got them all, quickly aiming the autocannon upwards to take them out- the effect was something like being right in front of a fireworks display. Sarah had to dodge a large bit of shrapnel, Paul ducked but nothing got him.. these calls are way too close for my taste, but it's a miracle we're alive at all...

We have to get out of this building, now. The Enforcers' numbers are dwindling, but the missiles will do the job.. and if the Micro blows, we're all toast.

I flipped all the way down over the railing, and then rushed them with my bare body. A solid kick imploded the skull of the first one. Then I summoned more power - and tore off the right arm of the second one, and beat it in the head with it. Another one was shooting at me with a hard-to-dodge diagonal firing pattern- then Sarah was just **there**, opening its skull with her bare hands, peeling the joints apart and scooping out some of the brain with the dislocated bone.

"I've always wanted to do this.", grated Billy in the voice of Satan. He jumped from the railing, pushing himself downward for more speed, blasting an Enforcer as he went down. The instant he hit the floor, he was running- and another two instants later, another two Enforcers no longer had throats, and I realized we were still screaming and we shut it off simultaneously. Fucking hell... they're not even a match for us anymore. This isn't even a fight, it's a massacre. Even with high-velocity guns and aiming ability vastly superior to the most trained normal, these guys die by the ton. And I thought we were going to die right off... we're not going to die, they are, because we

can dodge dozens of bullets a second and our aim is only hampered by the guns we're carrying- which, in this case, is next to no hampering at all.

What the fuck are we now?

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We rushed outside, and there was more shooting- from both the forest to the left and the field to the right. And the Enforcers were getting gunned down by it- I saw one being shot apart. "I don't know who the **fuck's** commanding you, but you will **not** harm The Dominator!!", someone called, as the body flew past the window due to the kinetic energy of all the bullets being pumped into it. What the hell? Who.. oh, yes. Them. I figured they'd turn against me along with the Enforcers. The normal operatives (or are they, now? I'll have to check if I survive this..) spread out in a defensive position after we stepped out of the mutilated metal shell that had been home.

"Couldn't you guys get here **just a little bit QUICKER?!**", I shouted 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..", the leader said, struggling to remain assertive in the crisis. He's not used to actually talking to me, after all. Hurt? No. Rather the opposite... in fact, that might explain the sheer feeling of insane power I've been having. Psychosomatic? Or did that implant removal really do something that no one could anticipate? I'll find out..

"I'm fine. I'll tell you later. Right now, this place is a fucking hot zone. We have to leave here **NOW**.", I said.

"Yeah.", the leader agreed, as Billy noticed another incoming missile and blasted it out of the sky, the missile's explosion being louder than the atomic shotgun. "Take the jet!" And fly the hell out of here many times faster than sound.

"What about you?", Billy asked.

He got the answer I was expecting. "We are ubiquitous. We are here when you leave; we will be here when you return." Billy recoiled slightly. Even if the odds are hopeless, that is the only attitude they as operatives can have. They are the caretakers. I'm going to make sure that all future Enforcers here (if I can ever come back..) are cleared through them, instead of whatever the hell's been going on.

"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, as he stepped back inside the wrecked shell and pressed the button for the jet. (Hey- **he** found out about **that**? Lots of places he could have, though..) We all knew to stay away from him as he went towards the jet.

A sss-**chunk**- the most ominous sound I've ever heard in my life (aside from us)- came from somewhere inside the plane.

"Run.", I said in a far too soft voice.

"**RUN!!!**", Billy screamed, as we all retreated to an even safer distance, throwing ourselves on the ground as the plane exploded. Damn it!! At least we're all okay.. but the sub's almost certainly trapped in the same way. How the hell are we going to get out of here? Damn it more!! This place is supposed to be fucking **secure**!!

Paul answered it for me. "The boat. We've gotta take the fucking **boat**!!" They could have installed

some kind of trap... but we have no choice but to take the risk.

"Yeah- let's move!" A boat full of Enforcers came into our line of vision. Billy and I reacted simultaneously and annihilated everything living on it, the bodies loudly splashing, the ocean beneath turning red with the carnage, the boat continuing as a ghost ship. Who's next?

We got into the boat silently, the Anarch turning it on to full speed towards the coastline of America. It would really, really suck if we ran out of fuel right now.. forget it. There's a million things that could happen, I reminded myself. Stay focused, dammit.. not even the rage of the Dominator can stand against the overwhelming force they're going to bring this way.

And they did. A good deal of rapid-reaction forces at once, about seventy hominids in Illuminati-quality boats against five hominids in a normal boat. I hope someone is recording this.. because even if this really is the Dominator's Last Stand, it's going to be something to watch. The first thing I noticed is that this must be an entirely Enforcer-directed operation- none of them got the clue to shoot at the boat and not the passengers, the only exception being the slow-enough-to-shoot torpedoes and missiles. So much for teaching them tactics. As we fired, Billy and I screaming profanity and hate in our first-learned languages, I found myself very glad that the Anarch had decided to bring a Micro up that elevator. I tried to keep it in the water, to both cool and refuel it (the filter could probably last a week straight in salt water, damn, has it been cleaned recently?! This is the worst way to find out..), as Billy, Sarah, and Paul were obviously concerned with ammunition troubles. The Anarch was piloting the boat, and I noticed that he was smart enough not to bother swerving. Shit. So many of them! A Micro shot here kills those, an atomic shotgun blast takes out that boat, the missiles've got that, and Paul's unloading the Ass Cannon there.. dodge, dodge, dodge.. "Stop shooting at me, you assholes!!", I screamed in Latin, as I fish-fried several at once. A bit later, they did. It's not because they ran out of cannon fodder.. it's because we're too far away from 'safe' waters, even though I'm sure they're trying to keep a field of secrecy around our location.

Great. Now we're going to be hunted. I wonder how they plan to do it? Get us in a building somewhere and blow it to pieces? Get control of satellite lasers? No.. they would have already done that if they were capable of it. But in normal territory, we're safer even if we break secrecy ourselves.. we've already got this enemy faction (whoever the fuck they are) after us, what'd be wrong with getting the rest of the organization up our butts as well? No, I decided. That would eventually end it.

After what was probably a couple of hours (time flies when you're running for your life), the boat reached a rocky shore and we cruised northwards, looking for somewhere to hide- it must be assumed that they have forces inland (and possibly coming in from above) ready to kill us, and I'm glad they didn't fire at us from the beach. We swiftly found a sewer drainage pipe hidden among the seaweed and the sand, tore off the rusted steel cover with our combined might, and we climbed in. Not big enough to walk in and disgusting as hell, but if I live through this we can crack jokes about it afterwards. 'No, you don't have a septic tank problem, ma'am, although you might be the target for a new experiment. Oh, it's just that you've got Illuminati in your sewer.'

We crawled for what could possibly have been hours, our hands and feet pounding the sides and bottom of the sewer as we crawled through it. I'm just glad there hasn't been any recent rain to send bad water our way. A storm drain was above us, and the Anarch simply popped it off and climbed out, and we followed- we were in the middle of a large indentation in the ground, with the pipe's opening above brackish, dirty water. Flat brick buildings everywhere- no, they've probably got normal alarms on them, and it would take too long for Sarah to find a way in. We simply can't take the time to look.

"They're not here?", Sarah asked from behind us, climbing out of the pipe. "Well, we know it's not all of them.." Shit, if it could possibly be anywhere close to 'all of them', I'm toast. "Coast clear?", she asked, before answering it herself by looking around.

We climbed out of the pipe, which was sticking out a couple of meters from the ground, and waded through the knee-deep, heavily tainted water. Damn, and I thought the normals practiced sewage treatment, too. Sarah had her weapons at the ready, looking for people to kill.

"Forget it, Sarah.", the Anarch said as he lifted himself out of the pipe. "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." If we used projectile weapons, that is... to avoid noise, we simply wouldn't.

"Yeah.. hate this!", she said, sneering. She wasn't alone. "Gonna get my claws into the bastard who tried that.." "Which bastard who had tried what?", I didn't ask. Focus on survival now, save the revenge for later..

"You'll be lucky to have your claws after this is over.", Paul said, a bit dismally. I heard something else- great, a normal.

The man looked to be about forty years old and had some kind of heavy metal pouring out of the headphones on his ears. "Who the.. hell are you?", he asked, pulling the still-going headphones off his head and onto his neck, looking at us as if we were from another planet. Which, to his ilk, we might as well be.

"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?", Sarah asked, casually, as she slowly walked up to him. His life won't even have time to flash before his eyes...

"No.. is this some kind of joke?", the normal replied, his last words. If it is a joke, it's not a very funny one.

"Yes.", Sarah said, and tossed him down the hill, snapping his neck on her leg like a flimsy branch. The Anarch, for whatever reason, took his headphones off the corpse as it rolled down to land face-down in the water. "And you're the punchline." She looked around, probably for normal surveillance cameras.. or more enemies. "No one else and there's some light forest here. Come on." We followed her into a wooded stretch alongside a highway, and my overflowing brain started thinking.

Why the hell are we still alive? There are only so many sewer paths- why didn't they, say, pour gallons of neurotoxin down them? What the hell is preventing them? The only logical answer is that the ones who did that.. the ones who controlled me, don't have enough power in the Illuminati to do those things. Or, right now, there's a battle going on somewhere, with those loyal to their Dominator fighting against the usurpers.. until I get back to an Illuminated safe spot, I can't know. But.. for something like this to happen, for me to be controlled, they'd practically have to.. "This is all nuts.. They can't be the ones controlling the satellites, or we'd be fish food by now..", I muttered.

"Quit underestimating yourself, Master. It's detrimental to long-term survival.", the Anarch said. I have no idea why he thought I was underestimating myself.

"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." What a SNAFU. If, say, Sarah or another of my assassins (she's not 'your assassin' at all anymore, I reminded myself) fucked up so badly as to not use the Illuminated resources at her disposal, it would be a loyalty-breaking lack of competence. There must be infighting going on- that's the only answer to this.

"Hard to believe.. they've got to be fighting each other.. but then again, this whole thing..", Billy said, shaking his head, mirroring my thoughts.

"Is hard to believe. Since fucking Day One.", Paul finished for him, putting this into his perspective. "We sure as hell can't stay here." That much, we can agree on.

"Then let's go.. that way.", Sarah said, pointing in a direction parallel to the highway. Any decision is as good as another when you have no way of knowing what to decide. We barely got started when we heard the telltale whup-whup-whup of a helicopter, and I wasn't sure whether it was illuminated or normal.

"For us?", Billy asked rhetorically. It would be some fantastic luck if it wasn't.

"Murphy says yes..", Paul said, and I heard a series of thumps below us- great. We're being followed there, too.

"Fuck, they're tracking us through the sewer. Probably using scent detectors of some kind.. but they're not going to come out!", I said, a bit glad. Four normals had discovered the corpse Sarah left, one rushing to call for help, almost certainly thinking it was an accident- secrecy was preserved. And, unless our enemies are going to break secrecy just to send an almost certainly ineffective...

The one going for help got a silenced bullet into the back of his head. Of course they are. They implanted the Dominator. Little things like secrecy aren't going to get in their way...

"Now we know..", Sarah said softly, wincing and squinting her eyes, obviously upset. "There goes secrecy."

"Not entirely. It's just going to be a bigger cover-up than usual.", I said. That's the way it is so far, but if they think that attacking us in front of live nationwide TV cameras with Enforcers will end in our deaths, they'll do it. "They want me.. they want us. Nothing else matters to them now. Let's just run." We ran like hell, our stride only slowed by making sure we were invisible to everyone. I was worried about Paul being able to keep up and considered having the Anarch carry him, but he was doing rather well. I heard the enemy enter the forest, vastly less concerned about being heard or seen than we were.

"They're not that close. Anarch, you open that, you and Paul go in there. Fido, you too.", Billy said, pointing to a sewer entrance that the Anarch opened easily, and started running through the forest. Huh? Why... ah. He's going to try to mix up the scent. We ran around the trees in different directions, crossing paths. Hopefully, they can't follow us fast enough to-

They could. Enforcers shot at us with silenced pistols. What a waste! What nitwit thought this up? We just got done dodging machinegun fire- how the hell do they hope to hit us with individual bullets that don't even exceed the speed of sound? There was a normal operations leader with them (I haven't the faintest clue why.. man, will I ever love to see the commands on all of this, assuming they were recorded at all), who realized the folly of his attack, and killed himself with a suicide tooth as Billy and I tore through his Enforcers like a knife through Jell-O, with Sarah getting a few strikes on the last two as we destroyed them. She took a spherical light-creating device from the body of the normal and examined it for traps or tracers, and checked his pulse- yup, he's dead. What a complete waste.

"All right.", she said, yanking the manhole off like it was nothing. "Time for some more Ninja Turtle shit." That's what this is starting to remind me of, with the incredibly stupid villainy and all- some kid's cartoon gone horribly wrong.

"Not even going to ask how you've heard of them..", Paul replied from inside, and we crawled down

for more. The sewers were slightly convoluted- apparently they connect all the buildings in this area- and we slowly went back and forth, trying to confuse anyone else with a scent detector.

Chapter 63

Sarah easily tossed off the manhole cover, and we climbed out.. into the basement of some normal building. A large metal object in the corner grunted and groaned noisily as if it was having a bowel movement. Shelves full of junk were everywhere, and the room was completely dark except for Sarah's light globe. What a place for the controller of the world to be.

"Are we going to rest here?", the Anarch (we have nothing else to call him) asked, as I helped Fido out of the hole.

"Definitely.", Sarah replied. Go out or stay here, there's a chance of dying either way.

"I have a nightmare to complete, from which I may not wake up.", the Anarch said, no concern in his voice. "My survival is not critical to your survival. If required, I advise that you leave me here.", he said, lying down on the cold brick floor.

"Yes, but you're still damn useful anyway.", I replied. Although I don't care about him- he's an Enforcer, after all- he represents an additional element of fighting force I don't want to lose. He put on the Walkman and turned up the music. His brain is obviously quite weird if he thinks that'll do anything for him.

"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" **Her** secrecy squads? Maybe.. "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." Or the orbital lasers. They'd paste this building off the map if they had access to that power and knew we were here.

"I'm inclined to agree with that.", I replied. "But.. **your** secrecy squads?"

"Aren't they, Howard?", she asked, smiling at me. "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." Yes.. yes, it is. But for me to just replace.. I should do it. This is, after all, Sarah.

"Is that all you want, Sarah?", I asked.

"It's what I was promised.", she replied. And, after two years, she's going to get it. Nobody in the Illuminati would dare oppose her on this, especially not the ones that promised it to her in the first place. She is, after all, the world's greatest assassin.

"We'll do the formalities when we can. And I think you'll look wonderful in white." We both smiled at each other.

"Howard, you said I'd get anything I want if I was unimplanted, right?", Billy asked, and I knew immediately how this conversation was going to go.

"Name it.", I replied. That was the only answer.

"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.", he said with a growing smile. He'll still be at my side, only as a fellow master, not a servant. It's where he should have been in the first place, really.

"Dominator William.", I said, and the words were like a lightning rod. Fido barked as if he understood what they really meant. No longer just Billy, but Dominator William. For the first time the position will be held by two people, not just one. The Levels would accept it, of course. They'd have to, especially since we're at war with an entity we know nothing about right now- they need all the Domination force they can get. I didn't feel like my power was being halved. I felt like it was being **increased**, in the same way it was when I realized how incredibly effectively we fight together.

"Wow. That **does** sound weird.", he said.

"Oh, you'll get used to the title."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean being called 'William'." I chuckled. Nobody's called him anything but 'Billy' for at least two years. "I've been called Dominator pretending to be you. And.. Howard.. I forgive you for everything." Everything he could be mad at me for, gone just like that. "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 said simultaneously. That cell was absolutely not supposed to divide. There was only supposed to be one Dominator, after all, one guy for whoever did it to implant. If the Operator hadn't made the decision he had, killing the other cell instead, Billy wouldn't be here. I didn't even want to think about that. I'd still be implanted or, assuming the Anarch had done the same things, dead. They probably had a plan to replace me as well.. meaning that Billy and I, and everyone loyal to us, are the only ones standing between control of the world and a group of people devious and powerful enough to influence the creation of the Dominator, people who want desperately to kill us before we kill them, because the impossible has happened.

Good. You idiots want some of me? Here you go, and it's a double helping.

"Tomorrow's our birthday...", Billy and I said simultaneously again, and smiled at it. We'll have to get used to that.

"I wish we could bring the engineered kids here for it.", Billy 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." Oh, what a party **that** would be!

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?", I replied with a smile. "Some of those kids aren't good enough at fighting, though."

Which reminded him. "Paul..", he started.

"I'll do anything for you.", Paul said, his voice one of stalwart conviction.

"I'm not going to let you get killed.", Billy said, equally stalwart. "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." The expression on Paul's face was one of absolute joy and triumph. He completely deserves it, though.

We heard a gibbering from the Anarch and moved towards him- the implants were winning. We dodged the spittle flying out of his mouth, as his head loudly cracked against the brick surface again

and again as his body jerked in the throes of seizure. He choked out unintelligible nonsense in Enforcer-latin as he twisted wildly about, his skin the color of a beet. And his jerking stopped, he sat up, each of his eyes fixated on our faces, and he 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.**" Then he slumped backwards and his last breath came out as a sigh. Damn. Oh well. Just another dead Enforcer, really.

"That could have been us..", Paul said, shocked.

Sarah nodded and thought. "Yes. It could have. All right, guys. Here's what I think will end up happening..", she started, but it didn't really matter how she finished. This was the end of my rule as sole Dominator of Earth. We would fight against insane odds and overwhelming force, keeping secrecy and fighting betrayals, but it wouldn't matter.

Because we were together.

And when we're together, nothing can stand in our way.