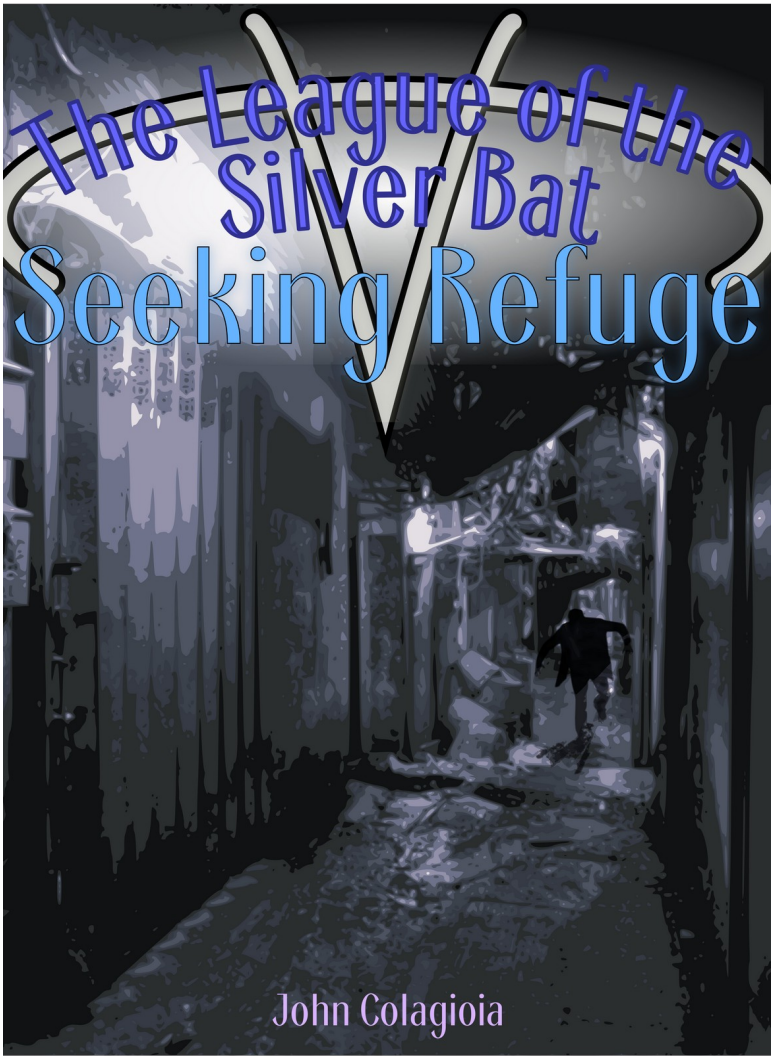




The League of the Silver Bat Seeking Refuge

John Colagioia

Seeking Refuge

The League of the Silver Bat

Book #1

by

John Colagioia

2019

Except where otherwise noted, content in this book is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike license](#).

You are free to:

- **Share:** Copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- **Adapt:** Remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms:

- **Attribution:** You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- **Share-Alike:** If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.
- **No additional restrictions:** You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation.

No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material.

Disclaimers

The characters, organizations, and events in the following text are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, to organizations extant or defunct, or to real events, is purely coincidental in pursuit of discussing broader themes.

In particular, unlike in fiction, there is no secret family of billionaires looking for clever ways to curb the excesses of the rich and powerful. Billionaires aren't going to get us out of any messes when they benefit from the messes remaining as they are. We, people on the ground, need to apply pressure to make change.

The aforementioned themes, however, are entirely intentional.

Please note that the opinions stated and implied by the characters don't necessarily reflect my own. Some are very close. Some are convenient to the story. Yelling at me, because you disagree with a fictional person, isn't smart. Don't be that guy.

Several characters, organizations, and events are drawn from content made available for use under appropriate Free Culture licenses. Please see the *Credits* section at the end for details on their origins and licensing arrangements.

As this is a Free Culture work, it may perpetually be a work in progress. If you, the reader, see a problem or a possible improvement, please correct it and contribute it back. Your contribution may be edited or rejected if it doesn't fit with the editorial intent of the story, but making it available means that it will exist for anyone who might want it.

Governments never lead; they follow progress.
When the prison, stake or scaffold can no
longer silence the voice of the protesting
minority, progress moves on a step, but not
until then.

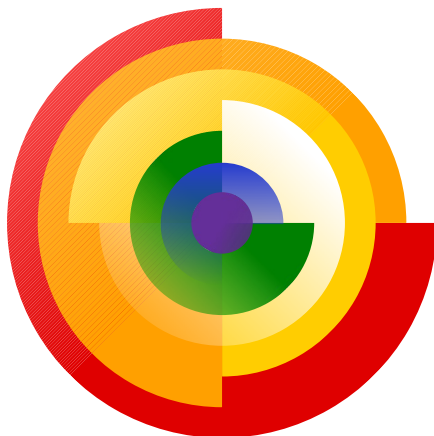
Lucy Eldine Gonzalez Parsons (1853–1942)

*Is our renown'd Dominion then so small
As not to hold this new inhabitant?
Or are her means so pitiably scant
As not to yield a livelihood to all?
Or are we lesser men, foredoom'd to thrall?
Or so much better than the immigrant
That we should make our hearts as adamant
And guard against defilement with a wall?
Nay, but our land is large and rich enough
For us and ours and millions more - her need
Is working men; she cries to let them in.
Nor can we fear; our race is not the stuff
Servants are made of, but a royal seed,
And Christian, owning all mankind as kin.*

The Exclusion of Asiatics, 1909, W. M. MacKeracher
(1871–1913)

Sapere aude

Foreword



When the Creative Commons licenses were first created, especially in the wake of successive copyright law expansions, I was excited for the flood of Free Culture franchises I anticipated. I still am, but they haven't *quite* manifested.

To be fair, we do have a fair amount of content available under a Free Culture license. The Blender Foundation's Open Projects are packed with a variety of interesting ideas and characters. David Revoy's **Pepper & Carrot** has an interesting high-fantasy world and there are other, less known, web comics such as **Homem-Grilo** by Cadu Simões. **Where Are the Joneses?** was a fully realized sitcom, despite the short episode lengths. There are novels and short

stories of varying levels of quality and completeness. And, of course, there is always more, though it's often difficult to discover.

If you're willing to expand into the non-free licenses, the list expands significantly, but I'm not interested in that world.

Regardless of the scope, though, very few of the properties feel like they could sustain an open-ended series in another medium, even with money and talent poured in arbitrarily. Those that do feel like they can survive tend to be built around the voice and aesthetic of a single creator. That's not to say that a Hollywood-style movie franchise should be some sort of ultimate goal anybody's work, of course. But, to the extent it feels like a work would be hard to adapt and extend, the work seems like it's cutting against the grain of the modern entertainment industry.

So, in true *be the crackpot you want to see in the world* spirit, the Silver Bat is an attempt to lay the foundations of a hypothetical superhero universe. It resembles, but definitely is not, our world. The organization has a hundred-year history, with many main and side characters at any given time. I can't vouch for the quality and realize that the story won't work for every reader, but I think this is the step forward on building a Free Culture universe that feels like the sort of place that big-name comic books or

movies might be set without being the sort of thing that a large company would rush to publish.

And there's more to this world to come. The Luminary and his associated heroes are still out there, and I have a fairly good idea of who they are, only waiting on a story.

But whether or not this series continues or expands, it is now available to the world, under a license that allows *you* to take it in your own direction. I will probably protect the trademark of the Silver Bat name, but the world and characters are now as much yours as mine, as long as you comply with the terms of the license.

Note that, for convenience and verisimilitude, just like I'm licensing this novel to be used by others, the novel makes use of works under compatible free licenses. Please review the **Credits** section for details.

Oh, and as a side benefit to the open license, I am presenting this as open source, with the files used to generate the book posted at <https://github.com/jcolag/silver-bat-01-seeking-refuge>. If you see any errors, feel free to sign in and create a *pull request* for me to review. Future versions of that **Credits** section will include people who helped with this.

Table of Contents

Seeking Refuge.....	
Disclaimers.....	ii
Foreword.....	vi
Just Another Night in the Life.....	2
The Silver Bat.....	11
Bertie Learns the Ropes.....	30
Bertie Descends into the Underworld.....	49
Rallying Round the Old Threshold.....	63
Lines and Businesses.....	74
A Signal of Introduction.....	86
The Unbidden Guests.....	97
Leave It to Verheyen.....	112
The Purity of the Turf.....	131
Managing the Old Bump and Run.....	148
Concealed Art.....	158
Absent Treatment.....	172
Sir Albert Comes to Breakfast.....	178
The Metropolitan Touch.....	193
The Inimitable Jeeves.....	202
Disentangling Old Bertie.....	220
Bertie Takes Charge.....	232

The Silver Bat in the Springtime.....	240
Credits.....	248
Plot.....	248
Premise.....	250
Locations.....	251
Secret Societies.....	254
People.....	256
Companies.....	258
Miscellaneous.....	259
Technical.....	259

Just Another Night in the Life

Clang, clang, clang. Bang, rat-a-tat. Clang, clang, clang, clang. Rat-a-tat. This is getting repetitive.

Weeks of planning, and some nights, it still just comes down to running across the city's catwalks dodging gunfire. Typical. What's the saying? No plan survives—

“No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main strength,” madame, as stated by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder,” he corrects me over the radio. I didn't think I said any of that out loud. Also typical, unfortunately.

The plan started out well enough. Truth be told, it's not going all that badly now, either, except for the bullets. Speaking of which...

“Jeeves, the apartments ahead are definitely abandoned,” I ask. I'm really not in the mood to stomp on these creeps with an audience available to be taken hostage.

“Indeed, it would appear that nobody has signed a lease for any of those squalid rooms in the three minutes since you last inquired, madame.”

Jackass.

“You may also wish to know that Miss Jumaima is disabling the security cameras in your projected path as you reach them. If any are not accessible to her, however, she sends her regrets in advance and suggests covering the lens.”

Getting caught on camera is the last thing we need.

Oops! A bullet nearly hit. I probably shouldn't divide my focus with snide remarks about people helping out. I don't need to fall hundreds of feet to my death, either.

Where was I? Right, the easy job. My local informants started hearing rumors about a sweatshop in Little Graustark a couple of weeks ago, tied up with Ouida Hepler's fast fashion line. A cabbie we protected a few months back came forward to confirm the conditions. Best our accountants can trace through the ledgers, the operation is probably technically run by the Central Anarchist Council, hiring immigrants from Javasus and keeping their passports in a safe to prevent their complaining about conditions, a disgusting but all too common practice around the world.

Distracting the guards was straightforward enough, a slightly sharp odor setting them on edge before coaxing a backfire out of a passing car. Everyone was quite accommodating about that part. With the

guards out of the way, it's not hard to crack a safe when you're working over a fly-by-night operation like this, either, so we have their passports. Asmait was even right on time with the bus, so I only needed to clear the guards as they began to turn back.

So, short version, all the workers are on a bus to a Wooster facility, where my people will get them good jobs and, for those that fear retribution from the Council, new identities. All in all, not a bad night's work.

Except that I didn't account for the sweatshop or the Council hiring Xavier Exley. The man has five best-actor awards and a decade of box office smashes under his belt, but one little encounter with a strange meteorite (or so he claims) that turns his hand into a necrotic mess that drains the life of anything he touches, and suddenly he thinks that moonlighting as a criminal henchman is a legitimate career move. "The Black Fist," as if anybody could take that seriously. There's even all kinds of "X marks the spot" motifs he could be using, but he has a blackened hand and punches people, so of course he's the Black Fist.

I could suggest that he's too old to spend his time like this, running around the city with his shirt unbuttoned trying to murder people, but then I might

have to think about how close we are in age and the fact that I'm running on the same catwalks as him.

Either way, let me tell you, his touch *is* cold enough to burn and takes the wind out of you, so that much about him is serious, at least. "Would not recommend to a friend," as my kid would say.

However, I also can't have that kind of danger following the bus, hence the merry chase through the rarefied air of the city's upper catwalks. Every time I'm up here, I'm reminded of how claustrophobic it feels. It's strange, too. Every move feels like it's leading into a trap, like the next step in any direction is going to smack right into a wall. And yet, the upper catwalks are one of the few places in the city to get a clear view of the night sky, and that's not even to mention the hundreds of feet drop back down to ground level. Leave it to the Seven Cities, of which there are really only two, to make a person feel isolated and trapped, suspended in as close to open air as the cities get. It's a place of contradictions.

"Madame, you should know that, according to all current scans, we have still seen no new occupants in the housing ahead. Repeat, no new occupants have been detected in the preceding two minutes."

I'm not sure if it bothers me more that he needed to twist the knife or that he knew I was genuinely about to ask.

Regardless, we're at the apartments, jutting out past the buildings they sit atop, to shadow the street even more than the other buildings. Most importantly, it's empty, meaning those bullets I manage to dodge aren't threatening anybody but me. And that means...

"Now!"

A flare passes right behind me, from down on the street. The guards hesitate, which is all I need to switch catwalks and get behind them on the high ground. In the distance, I vaguely hear the staccato of our shop-owner confederate barking to seem like the flare is part of a late-night sales promotion.

The distraction works. A strike to the back of their knees and the rear two go down.

The man in the middle loses his balance. He tips over the railing. I'll get back to him after the others.

The leaders pivot. A swift punch and Lefty's gun clatters to the catwalk below. Righty lets off another rat-a-tat that goes high. It leaves him open.

I dive, pushing the gun in Lefty's way, using his momentum to keep Righty in position. Grabbing

Righty's leg, I flip him into the apartment. I hear the gun hit the back wall.

Lefty pulls a knife. Middle is almost back up. Pulling Middle over my shoulder, Lefty takes out his own partner and goes down.

It takes a little bit more work to get these creeps secure in the apartment. Jeeves has a tip into the cops soon after. They obviously won't give up the Council, might not even know the Council exists, but the guns will get them arrested and Ouida Hepler's people will provide evidence incriminating them to keep the Hepler name out of it. They're sleazy, but predictable enough to plan around.

That just leaves...

"Face me!"

...Exley. Did he hang back a few minutes just to make a dramatic entrance? Hardly worth the trouble in high-end jeans and a flannel shirt. Every time I need to deal with him, I'm surprised by how much shorter he is in person.

"So," he intones as if he's trying to impress some invisible director, "it is down to you and it is down to me, foul fiend who was once my ally." Wait, he's shouting dialogue from the *Revenge of the Serpent*

Emperor series. I knew he wasn't creative, but this is a completely different level.

He jabs, coming too close.

"Madame, you will recall that he drains energy proportional to the momentum of his hand," comes over the earpiece. Yes, yes, dodge the fist, as if that wasn't already a priority.

Jab, jab. He's more aggressive with the normal hand, possibly so I'll focus on those punches for a while.

One, two. One, two. He learned to box, somewhere along the way.

Sirens. The cops are almost here.

One, two. One, two. One, two, a slight step for a haymaker. His fist flies out. I use the opportunity to slip inside his reach and slap handcuffs on his wrist. Then, over he goes, where I cuff the other end to the railing. The cops will want to chat with Mister ExEx, here, about some extortion cases, so he won't be dangling here for too long, assuming they're not on the take.

I can hear Cibola's finest breaking down the apartment door. Unfortunately, they would also want to have a chat with the mystery woman leaving a trail of beaten-up lackeys. The empty apartments weren't the only reason I took the fight up here, however.

A quick vault to the window's lintel and sprint over the rooftop, and bingo! A rat's nest of power and network cables most of the way down. It's not the safest way to travel if there are any breakages in the insulation, but it's probably a lot safer than exposing the operation by openly jogging away from a crime scene.

No breakages in the cable. Good. I didn't feel like an electrocution, this time of night. It takes over a minute to slide down to ground level, and I need to drop the last dozen feet or so down. Ditch the sunglasses and beret, roll the turtleneck off my face, and grab a cheap blazer at one of the ground-level kiosks hawking wares at night, and just like that, the Silver Bat vanishes into the night.

A bullet grazed my leg, though. I should probably take care of that. And almost on cue, here's one of the kid's mobile clinics he thinks we don't know about. The boy will go far, but needs to cover his tracks better. We can help him do that. Should. We *should* help him do that, soon.

In fact, "Jeeves, put an appointment on my boy's calendar, tomorrow afternoon. Say nothing about his birthday. And tell the in-laws that it's time we let him work his magic, no excuses." We used to need throat microphones to inconspicuously talk, but mobile

phones changed that expectation, as long as we don't say anything incriminating.

"Indeed, madame, no excuses, no reference to Master Egbert's birthday."

"Excellent. And see if Albert wants to go dancing after my leg stops throbbing. We should celebrate. Oh, and the party?"

"Scheduled with full attendance. Miss Yelena has agreed to contrive an encounter that guides him to the museum's rear hall."

A passing kid takes two bucks to get me a bandage and some antiseptic from the clinic. I probably should've offered him ten, but figured he'd haggle. Oh, well. I'll figure out who he is later and pay the family's rent. Or buy the entire block and lower the rent. People down here work too hard for not enough.

Tomorrow. After the family business changes hands. And dancing. It has been a good night, with a new dawn just on the horizon.

The Silver Bat

I woke up to five messages, this morning, two parents and three grandparents. Were they wishing me a happy birthday? No, that's not how my family works. Instead, they all summoned me to the Quivira headquarters of Wooster Amalgamated, as if I scheduled an important meeting and flaked on them. And "report for duty" doesn't sound like it's for a surprise party.

And all five of them said that!

Wooster Amalgamated. Yeah, that one. You know the name. The "you name it, we make it and sell it" company that my British ancestors founded. The business that the founders' dimwitted descendants proudly brought to governments that consistently violate human rights. The company that has offices in towns across the United States that you would never be able to find on a map, hiring people nobody has met. There's a decent chance you've seen pictures of my father or grandfather shaking the hands of more than one despot or cutting the ribbon on an office building in the middle of some barren landscape.

I'm not saying that I definitely come from a long line of criminal fascist idiots. But I *am* saying that a lot of my family seems to like standing in the shadows of fascists and doing things that criminals might also enjoy doing.

They're also not particularly bright. My father has an hour blocked off on his schedule every morning to pick out a *wristwatch*. Three assistants guide him through his day and he's still late for everything, but the man will have a watch band that matches his socks, by God, or die trying! He got the habit, and most of the watches, from his father, just like I have a closet full of watches I only use when I need to kiss up to the family.

Granted, I'm a waste, too, living off a trust fund partying and playing lacrosse when it isn't polo season, but I'm not doing it to make a buck off of oppressed minorities. I'm doing it to burn off some of the family fortune. I'm doing it so that nobody notices the money that goes to soup kitchens and mobile clinics, which it turns out are just petty cash when you go through money like I do, and hiding it keeps Wooster Amalgamated from *helping* by supplying equipment and supplies sourced from what I can only imagine would be the very best sweatshops and slave camps around the world.

Me? I'm Egbert Buckminster Mannering Wooster. My family calls me "Bertie," just like my father, grandfather, and so forth going back at least a hundred years, and I'm not sure which name is worse. My friends just call me E. B. or Eebee, which is at least *slightly* less awkward. For a few years at school, I campaigned for "Bucky," but nobody took my lead on

that, even when I took jobs and introduced myself that way. I should just be happy that I'm rich enough to not have been a B. M. or an E. W., I guess.

Regardless, duty, whatever horrifying family duty this might be, calls. I text Jeeves, but it turns out he already did his valet magic for the morning, setting out a double-breasted three-piece that's precisely the shade of blue that makes grandpa angry. Jeeves is an artist. His family has been working for mine for generations, for some insane reason. His father still works for mine. We bond over how stupidly evil my family is, sometimes, and he's gotten me out of more than a few scrapes.

Now, I *should* head directly to the Wooster Amalgamated headquarters, honestly, but I'm feeling surly about the entire family ignoring my birthday to force me to turn into a corporate drone. So, I'm going to make a few stops, first.

I pull up to a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop on the Cibola border. Most of the young Quiviran elites meet up in places like this, simply because it's usually a safe bet that our parents wouldn't be caught dead anywhere near here.

"Waleed, it's been too long!" We hug. Waleed Sadozai was one of my close friends in college. A sharp, up-and-coming investigative journalist with a few published historical fiction novels on the side, he's

the kind of guy I can rant with about the cognitive dissonance between living with what's basically unlimited wealth and working quietly to fix inequality. I do it as just a dilettante, but he very deliberately made it his career.

"It has, man. I'm sorry I didn't swing by when your grandfather passed."

"No worries. I knew you were doing good things, and honestly, reading your articles on the uprisings in Tarshish did a lot to help me get through the grief. Sounds like there's still a long way to go, there, but am I right in saying their new unions actually push back on working for the Tarshish war machine or supporting any harmful policies?"

"Wow, you *were* reading them! Yeah, it was this amazing outpouring of frustration with a government completely out of control and, while President Sha'ban is still in power, the majority of the country stand in solidarity and refuse to provide support for his policies, and that has forced his administration to mostly behave. We can't get near enough to their concentration camps to get confirmation, but it sounds like they may have even started releasing the Kirii."

"Just amazing, and a nightmare that it doesn't happen in *other* places." I gesture to a rack of newspapers

with headlines trying to dance around saying that certain border patrols have been ripping children from their families and either imprisoning the children or leaving them with foster families with no paperwork, like an industrial-scale kidnapping scheme. “A work stoppage in protest wouldn’t be the worst thing, and I wish someone would have suggested something like that under the previous administration, the one that wasn’t completely off the rails.”

“Believe me, I know. But I can barely convince my own colleagues that we shouldn’t let our employers pay people artificially low wages and then sell out to hedge funds intent on gutting the entire operation. A national work stoppage seems out of the question, when even the people who would report on such a movement aren’t sure that cooperative effort is worth the trouble. Sorry to be a downer, though. How are your...side projects shaping up?”

“Not bad, actually. Your girlfriend put me in touch with a few companies looking to get cheap food and meds off the market, which I’m all too happy to help them out with. And one of the kids who works with me on the clinics came up with a design for the cars that’s not only appealing, but distinctive enough that we can spread the word and have people who need us find us while also being generic enough that we can quickly camouflage them and merge into traffic if any

authorities get suspicious that we're aiding and abetting or something. We're also in the very early stages of maybe looking at putting some effort towards housing issues."

"That's amazing. I wish I could put my trust fund to better use."

"Stupid question, but have you considered buying your employers out? Or smaller outlets that are struggling? It would give you more flexibility and, since I know you don't want to become *management*, you could have a lawyer wave their magic wand and turn those papers and podcasts into worker cooperatives, solving your unionization problem at the same time."

His eyes suddenly widen. "I really want to say that I've been thinking of doing exactly that, but no, I'm an idiot who's been throwing an extended pity party for myself instead of looking at my problems like an outsider. I blame television."

"Seriously, man? We're far too young to blame television, and our parents love being on the bleeding edge of the technology curve so much that I'm actually surprised that either of us has ever even *seen* a television. We're supposed to blame social media or voice assistants or something."

“Fair enough. I’ll blame the white supremacists and sexists quietly lurking on Brainz and NuloNetu.”

“Dude, they do *not* lurk. Something like seven out of every ten posts is some crazy conspiracy theory about the country ‘collapsing’ because we don’t have vigilante mobs roaming the streets to murder uppity minorities anymore. And something like another two out of every ten is someone’s failed bot that serves up word salad.”

“Funny you should mention that, actually. I have colleagues who are investigating moderation on social media sites. Every time I talk to them, it’s like someone *just* told them something that took years off their lives. Watch out for those articles, but be careful going in, because they’re not going to make readers happy.”

“I really want to say that I can’t wait, but you’re right, there’s really no excuse for the way things are and no explanation is going to ease the pain of someone whose home address was made public so that certain people will attack.”

“Yeah.” His phone makes some sort sound that’s of cross between a beep and...I guess a fart, maybe, and I’m uneasy at how unsure I am about how funny it is. Fortunately, Waleed interrupts my confusion. “I’m so sorry, Eebee. That’s my editor. Something significant

is going on in Gondour. They have the potential to push out another tin-pot dictator wannabe. I'll think about what you said, though, man, because that might be the solution."

"Seriously, no worries." I give him another hug. "Go save the world by exposing corruption and lifting up heroes, man. Go save us." He gives the barista a huge tip and leaves.

All right, that was fun, but *now* it's time to follow suit and head off to the Arcology!

Wooster Amalgamated's American headquarters is "the Arcology" in downtown Quivira.

If you haven't been out this way, from a distance, the entirety of the Seven Cities (as a side note, not really seven) comes close to resembling a single building. One building blends into the next, sometimes constructed on top of each other or over and under roads, with sky-ways and suspended walkways creating an environment where a person could live an entire life without touching the ground or seeing the Sun, and quite a few of our poorer residents do exactly that, unfortunately.

The Arcology takes that a step further. Downtown comprises several buildings that stand discretely apart from the rest of the city above-ground, where

zoning laws give capital a little bit of elbow room, and one of those buildings is the monster architected by my great-grandfather. Inside Wooster Amalgamated's headquarters is a complete ecosystem with air and water recycling and some indoor farming, plus facilities where the thousands of employees can move in, if they so desire. So far, no actual employee has taken them up on the offer, of course, except during the occasional divorce or eviction, so the housing mostly serves as a hotel.

Typical Wooster folly, thinking that workers would want to live at their offices and shop at the company store. It's late-stage capitalism at its finest.

The family offices are in the penthouse, the better to look down on everyone else, I'll bet. The glass elevator through a jungle is pretty, at least.

On the higher floors, a surprising number of people wear similar jewelry, silver rings, pins, and brooches that look like the an upside-down A with the crossbar extended into a kind of frown. That's one weird rich-people fad, weirder that I'm not in on it. Must be someone's "follow your dreams" kid selling them or something.

Dad's assistant Nisa, one of those strange pins on her lapel, ushers me into the office.

“Bertie, my lad, take a seat. Oh, maybe not *that* seat. The sun just draws attention to that travesty of a blue.” What would I do without you, Jeeves?

“Father, knock it off. We’re here to reveal secrets, not perpetuate them.” Dad clicks a remote control and the screens behind the family light up. They’re...uh-oh, they’re all images from the soup kitchens and clinics. They *know*.

“Bertie, relax,” Mom tries to soothe. “We’ve known about these side projects all along, and we want to help.” I’ll bet. Help use them to funnel opioids directly to kids, so pharmaceutical partners don’t need to spend so much time marketing that crap? Help exploit them for cheap labor?

“I’m sorry, guys, but this is money you’ve already given me and I’m not interested in Wooster Amalgamated oversight or handshakes with war criminals.”

“You misunderstand, son.” Another click changes the screens. Sweatshops. Illegal detention camps. Torture sites.

“If you’re threatening me...”

“Ha! Oh, no, keep watching. The bottom left is my favorite of them, if you’re not sure where to direct

your attention.” I’m not going to lie, it still sounds like a threat.

Then, shocking me in how abrupt the transition is, in each of the terrible scenes—synchronized by my father’s editing, no doubt—someone bursts in. They represent a wide variety of genders and ethnicities. Some are masked, some just wear street clothes. Some physically fight the abusive authorities in charge, some tranquilize them, one bribes them. But each of these interlopers protects the people in trouble and guides them out before each screen goes black.

And to every last person, they all wear that same jewelry. So are my parents. So are my grandparents. Something isn’t connecting, here. I guess I might as well ask.

“OK, so what, Wooster Amalgamated produces action movies, now, and you want to use my network to find your next star?”

“Oh, Bertie, so cynical for such an idealistic rebel.” Grandma Serafina knows how to hurt a guy. “Third screen from the left, what do you see in the background?” The videos either restart or change to a new batch.

There’s a woman with a bandana over her face. A cartel agent tries to sneak up and stab her, but she

elbows him at the expense of a flesh wound, knocking him over with a boot on his neck. While I watch the loop, Grandma rolls up her sleeve to reveal the scar.

“So, we’re secretly a family of superheroes posing as vulture capitalists that teams up with Madame Strange on the weekends to fight alien invasions?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Bertie.” Mom, the former actress, telling *me* not to be dramatic. “For one thing, Madame Strange was just a part Olga Mesmer created for the serials because she couldn’t get anybody to take her seriously.”

“My father claimed he did help the Luminary out a couple of times, though.” Grandpa Robert somehow managed to survive this family with a reasonable name.

“Grandfather, the Luminary was just some kind of urban legend. Strange visitor from another–”

“He’s long retired, and he helps fund marketing that keeps Madame Strange productions in the public eye to misdirect, but he is real enough that you have met him once or twice. Can’t tell you who, though. That would be for him to tell, some day.” A likely story. Unless...

“That’s also not the point of this meeting, Father. Bertie, you have the details wrong and we’re no

heroes, just people who try to do our parts in the world with a lot of help.”

“Oh, I see. So, Wooster Amalgamated is *really* a secret front for some sort of expensive Scarlet Pimpernel? Sure. I’ll be going now, maybe find some not-lying people to talk to for a while. And maybe the superheroes you claim are real can be the entertainment at the next holiday party.”

“Bertie, let’s start over, because you’re quite close to the mark and I think we’re looking in the same direction. Walk, and remember who used to read you *The Scarlet Pimpernel* when you were young.” He gestures out and we all get into the elevator as I get a pit in my stomach, like I’m about to get a theatrical *we’re not so different, you and I* speech. “You know, and have probably come to hate, the image of Bertram Wooster.”

“The man who expanded Wooster Amalgamated and started collaborations with war criminals? Yeah, you might say that pretty much covers my feelings.”

“What we generally don’t put in the biographies is that he lost his parents young, murdered by an anarchist because of their aristocratic backgrounds.”

“Good for the anarchist,” I mutter. I know that I’m not improving things and yet, somehow, Dad isn’t taking the bait.

“Heh. Well, the murder happened as they left one of the few stagings of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The play stuck with him and inspired him to live his life defending people under attack for their identities.”

“What, hence palling around with war criminals?”

“Bertie, my sweet child,” Grandma Serafina interrupts,” recall Poe’s *Purloined Letter*, where the detective finds what the prefect cannot, because it’s sitting right out in the open, while officials are looking for elaborate hiding places.”

“And you’ll learn quickly that the merest display of vanity,” Grandpa Robert sniffs as he strokes his eyebrow, “a few well-timed malapropisms, and the occasional gallingly conspicuous disregard for human rights in front of the right people, and like the Pimpernel, they seek you here and they seek you there, never considering the damned, elusive agent is posing with them for a photo op.”

“No...”

“You already know a little something about that, yourself, given the number of sports cars you seem to lose in funding your own enterprises.” Without any warning, I’m in the middle of an argument and losing badly, without any idea of how I got here. Of all the times to have the realization that I might have become just like my parents...

“And that brings us back to Bertram, who tried but failed to do anything about the Thracian genocide. He later hired a team to join him in Armenia, only saving a few dozen lives, but he knew he was onto something. His underground railroad in the face of the October Revolution was a bit more successful, but it wasn’t until a few years later that, with a small inheritance of technology from a former drinking buddy, he came on the plan for the League of the Silver Bat, a resistance organization modeled on the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.” There’s no way he could have successfully timed that speech to end just as the elevator doors re-open, but here we are.

“But it’s not always about large-scale, capital-O oppression,” Dad continues. Often, it can’t be, because those cases are too high profile. Vigilantism, exploitation, domestic abuse, terrorism, even abuse of power, each individual in danger is important and, yes, sometimes that means cozying up to some spectacularly nauseating people, using the image of stupidity to pump them for information, convince them to let their guard down, or even set them up to take a fall. Bertram actually dressed up like a bat on his first trip to America to expose a phony detective on the take from the mob, so a little bit of superhero-style melodrama isn’t out of the question, either. But, sometimes it means getting into bad markets to subtly inject subversive messages into the discourse

or to fleece the so-called ‘centrists’ or ‘moderates’ who don’t seem to mind seeing the people in their midst being harmed, because they don’t want to rock the boat too much.”

“So, then what’s all—”

“OK, OK. Skipping ahead a few generations to get to you. Last night, I broke up a sweatshop in Little Javasú.” Dad gestures around and, suddenly, I actually look at the office around me, not decorated like the rest of the building and no direct natural light, except maybe through little pipes poking out of the ceiling. The workers, all with that same jewelry, are all having intense conversations with anywhere from one to three people who look to be in pretty bad shape, with a couple of dozen of them almost certainly from Javasú.”

Off in the background, someone is listening to the news, something about actor Xavier Exley being arrested for connection with something unfortunate.

“This is our company’s *other* Human Resources department, the one that official applicants never see. The folks from the sweatshop are here, as well as the usual daily handful of people who our associates have found trafficked, abused, or otherwise harmed without much recourse. Down here, we make sure to place them in decent jobs with Wooster Amalgamated

and other companies where we have an ‘in.’ For the handful who are in immediate danger, they’ll be quietly moved somewhere else in the country with a new identity, though we don’t have the resources of an actual Witness Protection Program. And those who are in an opportunity to provide evidence against their abusers, we schedule court appointments and provide security. Some also need housing, and we just so happen to have open rooms in the Arcology at any given time.”

“Well, congratulations, it sounds like you have it all figured out.”

“Our family and friends *have* been at this for more than a century, after all. So, it’s a well-oiled machine, but any machine can be made better by the next generation, Bertie, children being the future and all that.” Again, I point out, that’s a pretty dramatic assertion for someone who *just* told me not to be dramatic. “It’s time that the League has new leadership.”

“Georgiana, don’t be so dramatic. You’re scaring the child.” Heh. I’m not happy with the “child” comment, but damn, Grandpa Robert knows where to hit hard. As long as I’ve known him, despite the obsession with looking his best, he has been the social version of a jeweler, carefully inspecting the facets he needs to work with and, after careful consideration, taking one

decisive *crack* that causes everything to break his way.

“To the extent that any of them takes orders. Can’t really lead a group of go-getters like this, so much as point in a direction and be good enough for them to want to follow, or identify the best ideas and back them,” Grandma Serafina corrects. “You know the story about the marksman calling his target after taking the shot. We never would have prevented the Kravonian genocide if one of our associates hadn’t pulled us in.”

Dad takes something shiny out of his pocket. “Wait, what are you—?” It’s that upside-down A, which I now see is obviously a stylized bat, the **Silver Bat**, and pins it on my lapel.

“The insignia identifies you as part of the network, with code phrases to allow you to ask for and offer assistance when needed. Many of the people we help want to pay it forward, and so we induct them into the League. You’ve probably seen the rings on people in the city throughout your life and never noticed until you walked into the building, this morning.” Now that he mentions it, actually, that sounds familiar.

He continues. “We have been watching your little network of care for a few years, now, and the way it has grown and the way you haven’t compromised on

your mission shows that you're ready to take Wooster Amalgamated and the League into the future. If you'll come back up to the office, we'll handle the paperwork to give you control of the company and start training you."

"I'll also introduce you to some of the accountants, Bertie, because you need to put in some work to better cover the tracks of those clinics. Shell companies and big purchases aren't enough of a shield."

I almost jump out of my skin as Nana Isla speaks. I almost forgot she was even there, her smirk hinting that wasn't accidental. "But also, no pressure, Bertie. If you want to just keep feeding and healing people from the shadows, it's not like we could be any prouder of you."

Well, I have to admit it, they surprised me. This is not at *all* how I thought my birthday was going to go and for the first time in twenty years, I kind of want a nap. Oh, well. I guess it's time to get to work.

Bertie Learns the Ropes

I've seen a lot of relationships—I've been in a few, too—where you suddenly notice one *tiny* inconsistency, something that almost seems like it should be inconsequential. But you tug on it like a thread, because it seems out of place, and then your understanding of the entire relationship suddenly falls apart, bringing everything crashing down in the realization that your lover, your friend, your parent, your whatever isn't the person you thought they were.

Imagine that, but where the artifice of uncaring white-collar criminals falls and you find out that it has all been in the service of protecting the less fortunate, the exact thing I've spent my adult life trying to secretly build on a much smaller scale. They do say that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

This morning has been a blur of introductions, meeting dozens of people just at Wooster Amalgamated's Saracinia headquarters who are responsible for either keeping the company running or ensuring that the League operates safely.

The tone varies wildly as we move through the building. All offices have those awful pictures of members of my family grinning for the camera while shaking hands with the likes of ^{Mar}ku^z Schmachtenbùrg, Baron Ozama, Josef Stalin, or Laden

Twala Twala. But, in some of the less accessible rooms, dedicated to League business, each picture has a list of names next to it, people saved from labor camps or military raids, secreted out of the country often right under the smug despot's nose. There is also a list of those millions the League has failed to save, from around the world.

And that doesn't even touch on the hour-long session with the scariest accountant I've ever laid eyes on, who created a system of shell companies, political committees, and charities that make it easier for me to funnel my trust fund into feeding and healing disadvantaged people around Cibola...and apparently, my mother's leg, the other night. It turns out that I've been accidentally aiding and abetting the liberation of local people in danger for the past few years, at least inside the Seven Cities.

When bringing this up, Mom brings me by the realty department, telling me about the neighborhood she found herself using as an escape route and how she wanted to pay a token of gratitude to the people who helped her by lowering rents in the neighborhood.

I interrupt. "Putting the complex under Wooster management only means they're beholden to whoever is in charge of the account and assumes we're in business indefinitely."

“Do you not trust those conditions after what you’ve seen, today?”

“People change. The economy changes. Nobody has power forever, which is almost the entire point Bertram was making with the League. What about creating something more like a community land trust, instead? They get equity instead of a nominal discount and Wooster Amalgamated isn’t standing around like we saved everybody.”

“We would still need to buy it to hand it over.”

“True. And then we give them some bogus song and dance about corporate mergers accidentally putting us in the landlord game—I’m sure the accountants can make that a reality—and how that’s too much work for our lazy, corporate fat-cat butts, and so we’re highly motivated to help them take it off our hands at a small loss.”

“Son, you learn fast.”

“Apparently, from the best.”

The whole thing as we walk back into the C-suite, hugs included, is surreal, even dizzying, especially after a lifetime of assuming that my family was the problem. They family signs over enough of their shares to me to make me the majority shareholder and then...I really should have seen this coming.

“Bertie, it’s been a long morning. Go grab lunch to process all of this.” Mom gets that knowing grin on his face. “Oh, and since you were so passionate about the apartment ownership issue, you should probably grab the paperwork from Julieta in Realty on your way out and pitch your community land trust to them. I assume you’ll want to see your idea through, after all. You have an appointment to speak with the renters this afternoon.”

Well, I walked right into that one. Nana Isla surprises me again, seeming to appear out of nowhere on my way to the elevator. Is my nana a ninja? Do I call her nana because it sounds a little like ninja? I’m almost afraid to ask a question like that, after the morning I’ve been through. “Your grandfather used to say that a critic is just someone who hasn’t realized he’s about to volunteer. Words to live by.”

“My son’s first mission. Awww.” Yep. *I*’m definitely the dramatic one, Mom.

It occurs to me that I’m going to need backup on my—ahem—first mission. So, a quick stop between Realty and the front door. “Eun-Ju?” Bhang Eun-Ju is the terrifying accountant from before. She nods me over, lighting up as she pulls out a set of ledgers.

“Yes, Mr. Wooster. I’m glad you’re back. I realized that we can set up an entire layer of political committees

to completely hide the money moving through them, as long as a few dollars occasionally go to politicians you want to support, and you might also invest in a car dealership to move your—”

See? Terrifying! I sat through an hour of this and I still sometimes need to count on my fingers.

“Thanks, but I’m just going to trust you on all that. You’ve seen my spreadsheets and it presumably proves that I don’t know what I’m doing, financially, better than anything I can tell you. I’m actually here for help on another project.”

“Do tell...”

Mission accomplished!

We’re loaning each of the residents some money, so they’ll effectively be paying some “rent” for a while. Three of them needed better jobs and two needed childcare, which I think Wooster Amalgamated can handle. Three more needed Eun-Ju’s magic accountant pixie dust to keep the purchase off of the radar of abusive exes. And we’re going to need to set them up with a good contractor willing to negotiate their rates, but the city has twenty-six new homeowners and their umbrella organization has a fiscal duty to keep prices affordable, should they expand in the future.

Eun-Ju stays behind to help a few of them with business plans, most legal, one or two...less so, but we can't exactly judge, since they're not hurting anybody and it's not like Eun-Ju's work doesn't already include an almost comical amount of money laundering. Since she's acting like a kid in an actual candy store, I slip out, but not before making a note to ask her if this sort of scheme would scale through the entire city, empowering hundreds of thousands instead of the dozens we happen to notice.

"You look like the lady who fell from the sky and hurt her leg!" Ah, this must be the kid who helped Mom, last night.

"I ask you to please pardon my Jawara. He has been telling stories about how he helped his *lady from the sky* when he really shouldn't have been out in the first place." His mother picks him up and holds Jawara close.

"Well, he sounds like quite the hero in training, patrolling the streets and saving people's lives. I hope there's someone around that brave when *I* fall from the sky, some day." I wink at the kid when I realize I'm probably speaking past him. The wink gets the laugh where the half-joke couldn't, and I quietly see myself out.

Down on one of the street levels, I'm about to get in my car, when I hear an almost-familiar voice over my shoulder.

"Eebee? Eebee Wooster? Can that be you?"

"Yelena, it's been so long since we got together! What are you even doing in this neighborhood? I know why I'm here, but isn't it a little bit...beneath your station?"

"Of course not, silly, no more than it's beneath yours. My father may have re-married into money, but his sister's daughter's cousin's uncle's girlfriend lives up yonder." A beat, then, "OK, I was born down here. You've heard my father call me Marcia? When he met my step-mom, he decided that sounded too low-class and tried to use my middle name, but we still have friends down here."

"I'm sorry, I had no idea." That's an understatement, but it's all I have.

"For a lot of my life, that was sort of the point, with my parents trying hard to hide where we came from. But that's not worth obsessing over. Y'know, I'm meeting some folks down at the museum for a small auxilliary art installation, sort of a private preview show. You should come along, actually! It's a lot of that industrial-look stuff you used to like and the artist is big on grand scale arguments about economics. It's definitely your crowd."

I check the time. I do still need some time to absorb this morning and looking too anxious to get back to the office might seem suspicious. "I think can do that, at least for a bit, for an old friend."

"Exceptional! However, this is definitely...how can I put this? It's *not* a three-piece business suit crowd. Let me take you shopping, Eebee." Yelena's comment reminds me of Grandpa Robert's comment about affecting vanity to become invisible. He's not wrong, and this is an excellent excuse to start.

"Then onward, fair maiden!" I clumsily jump to the car door and wave her in. "You're right that I simply shan't be seen in this nightmare." Heh. Shan't. OK, now I'm being dramatic. Thanks, Mom. I'll probably need to dial it back.

Off we go for bespoke clothes, nevertheless. Two grueling hours and change later and a lot of banter with Yelena and a series of tailors, and I don't think I look *entirely* ridiculous or show my exhaustion, but I would definitely laugh at me if I saw me walking down the street. And I suppose that is technically the point of the exercise.

I briefly remember the passage in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* describing Percy Blakeney, with his sleeves edged with,

...billowy frills of finest Mechlin lace: the

extravagantly short-waisted satin coat, wide-lapelled waistcoat, and tight-fitting striped breeches, set off his massive figure to perfection...

I haven't gone that far, but the goals?

...one might have admired so fine a specimen of English manhood, until the foppish ways, the affected movements, the perpetual inane laugh, brought one's admiration of Sir Percy Blakeney to an abrupt close.

That hits a little bit close to home.

Yeah, that's right. Some kids grow up with stories about knights errant or youxia or whatnot rescuing rich people in distress in want of a spouse. Some kids get picture books. I was regaled every night by my family with the adventures of a rich guy creating a network of resistance fighters to save people from executions, a hero who pretends to be an idiot to hide in plain sight. I'd argue that's a bit too on the nose for what my family was hiding, but more to my immediate point, it was years before I realized that not everybody could quote from the original novel.

Regardless of my exposure to the book, I hope that the family is wrong about this. I would rather be able to find some balance between the weighty responsibility I feel, now that I've seen behind the

curtain at Wooster Amalgamated, and acting like a jackass to keep people from trusting me.

Despite my distaste, I start to play the part. As Yelena and I traverse the city, we stop off for manicures, pedicures, hair styling, fragrances, and so forth. I leave myself a note to send more business to that tailor, too, since this outfit looks like a nightmare, but still somehow manages to be comfortable.

“We might be hitting the point of diminishing returns, Eebee,” Yelena finally suggests, probably finally bored of this shaggy dog story of an outing. “You look great, considering where we started, and the show is getting pretty close.”

OK, fair. I did forget that this was all to visit with Yelena’s friend rather than my building a disguise. Back in the car!

When we arrive at the museum, Yelena identifies us to the guard, who sends us to another door and apologizes that it’s not a private entrance. We walk around and enter. I see a handful of Wooster Amalgamated people milling around outside and then looking at some of the outer exhibits. I guess that shouldn’t be surprising, since we’re not far from the office and it’s not a bad museum at all.

A host spots Yelena and, after looking my outfit over as if I just stepped out of a flying saucer, escorts us

down a snaking corridor to what must be close to the rear of the building. And when we reach the door...he vanishes. I feel my heart rate increasing, suddenly concerned this is some sort of scam as I open the door into absolute pitch blackness.

Yelena senses my hesitation and nudges me in. “Oh, exceptional! It looks like we made it in time for the unveiling.”

I can’t see or hear a thing. I can’t smell a thing, either, after the cologne Yelena picked out for me, so *that* bit of feigned vanity probably wasn’t the best plan. I step carefully, as if I’m going to fall into some sort of tiger trap, while Yelena suddenly becomes cartoonishly confident, grabbing me by the elbow and marching me a few more dozen paces into the room.

And then, just like that, she’s gone, too. This is—

“**Surprise!!**” The lights come up and, when my vision clears, I see the entire exhibit hall packed with friends and family. Nobody wished me a happy birthday, nobody gave me a moment to breathe, all to keep me from expecting *this*. And I didn’t expect it. But, in all fairness, it feels like it’s been a week since I woke up, this morning, so I probably would have been less surprised to discover that I missed my birthday.

I try to find something to say, something that lets me at least lie to myself that I'm not the sort of person touched and caught off-guard by something like a surprise party. But I fail, and end up spending the better part of an hour gape-mouthed, hugging friends and family.

As I slowly manage to pull myself back together after an emotional day, Yelena admits that visiting her family was pretext to meet up with me. She tells me all about them and the new land cooperative they bought into. From the sound of it, one of Eun-Ju's new clients is her cousin.

Grandma Serafina and Grandpa Robert pull me aside to compliment the new outfit, too. Not that they can help providing notes in their back-handed compliments, and I will want to take them into account. They also promise to help me find that balance, so that I don't need to exclusively live the life of a moronic fop to get anything done.

The British cousins all showed, too, amazingly enough. Some are with the family business. Some are with the secret underbelly of the family business, too. I've only met a few of them before tonight, and most of them when we were just children, so there is no way I'm going to remember even a quarter of their names.

After an hour, like a lot of the guests, I'm acting sloppily drunk, even though I noticed early on that the bartender was serving me non-alcoholic drinks. When my mother passes by, I hang around her neck for show and ask her about the drinks. Seeing other people approaching, she slurs out, "unfortunately, we have another errand to run, after the party is over."

I'm almost afraid to ask.

Ohhhh, crap. Oh crap oh crap oh crap. This is how I'm going to d—

No, get it together, kid! Let them see weakness and they'll eat me alive.

"Bertie, even your wings out. You don't want to stall at that speed," Mom explains over the radio. "Also, your heart rate and galvanic skin response..."

"Aware of and working on both. It's just a *bit* stressful moving at this speed." There, levelled off. Now to fight down the panic.

No big deal, right? It's just that old Bertram Wooster's iconic inspiration turns out to be a nuclear-powered jet with a literal face of a bat plastered on its nose. It was invented by an amateur scientist a century ago, who used it along with some sort of atomic rifle to assassinate a bunch of proto-fascists before he

realized he was the bad guy, committed suicide, and left his estate to Bertram.

Bright side, I guess, not only was anti-science, anti-democracy Greenleaf P. Stubbs not elected president, but nobody really even remembers that he was considered extremely likely to sweep the 1920 election. I only wish I could say that Stubbs was the last or the most successful of that ilk...

C'mon, *focus*.

I can't give in to panic. I'm *only* hurtling along at hypersonic speeds in a coffin-sized box that doesn't look remotely aerodynamic and was built a century ago by a murderer with a bat fetish. It's just a normal day with the League of the Silver Bat, apparently. And I guess it's better our mad scientist Fordyce was into bats and not capybaras or dik-diks or whatever. The League of the Porcelain Dik-Dik probably wouldn't have gained as much traction.

Honestly, if this wasn't so obviously dangerous, it would probably be reasonably fun.

Seriously, though, focus. Hawaii below, less than half an hour from the mainland. One wrong move at this speed would be a disaster, and I'm told the techies haven't even figured out the top speed or why it doesn't produce a sonic boom.

“Banking left, Control, heading for Bensalem.”

“Roger, Silver Bat. Notifying ground.” As I make the turn, even slowing down, I can feel the change in direction. I have to wonder how this thing turns so smoothly. At this speed, I’d expect to not so much “feel” anything as find myself thrown violently to the side fast enough to break most of my bones and pulp most of my internal organs.

The computer shows a landing platform ahead, inside a ring of some sort—of course, it’s going to be a volcano. Hopefully dormant, but even active would probably be safer than flying this monster. I activate the detection counter-measures and cut my speed. As the island comes into view, yep, it’s a volcano, and I flip on the automatic landing sequence, the metal wings starting to flap on a mostly vertical descent.

After touching down, I roll out of the bat while a middle-aged local mounts the platform and approaches.

“Welcome to Bensalem, Mr. Wooster. My name is Rangi and I’m glad you were able to come here on such short notice.” Unsurprisingly, Rangi wears a silver bat ring.

“I only wish I had more information, but I wasn’t—”

“Nor would you be. We only pass details up the chain in an emergency, otherwise we invite the compromise of the network.” Rangi seems to have a way of taking the tension out of situations. “By briefing agents on the details in person, we don’t risk any third party intercepting descriptions of people in danger that they can exploit.”

“Fair enough. Let’s get me briefed, then.”

“In this case, the danger is to a raft of refugees. We had been coordinating with them to arrange for sanctuary while they make asylum claims. However, a group that we believe is directed by the Jade Moon Society took a boat out to scuttle their raft, stranding our refugees clinging to a reef. They have some time, but obviously not much.”

“The aircraft doesn’t have much passenger space. Truth be told, it doesn’t even have much pilot space.”

“Indeed, we thought that this fantastical craft might be able to tow everybody to safety. Once they’re no longer in immediate danger, we can coordinate an offensive to drive the Jade Moon out of state while lawyers file the asylum claims with Washington.”

“Well, it’s worth a try, at any rate.”

“Good. We have a second raft ready to be deployed with a lightweight tow cable.”

Loading the new raft into a torpedo tube, I start the wing-flapping again to lift off and begin a search for the reef."

"Ground to Silver Bat," Rangi cuts in on the radio. "We have a reading in the refugees, on bearing three-two-two. Infrared should detect them." He's right. I see them.

I circle the reef a couple of times, both to make sure I can see how bad they have it and so they understand that I'm here to help rather than make their situation worse. I come in low behind them to launch the raft, watching it expand a good mile away from anybody, so that it doesn't do more harm than good *and* gives me some space to make sure this towing scheme will work.

Touching down on the ocean's surface, I find a speed to drag the raft around and bring the raft to the reef. When half the group is aboard the raft, so that we don't overload it and risk more lives, I slowly make my way to the shore.

"Silver Bat to Ground," I tell the microphone, "the first batch will be in hour hands shortly and I'll set up for the next run shortly."

Everything works fine until I return to the reef. There is another boat, there. Men with guns are running across the reef towards our refugees. Probably those

Jade Mooners or whatever out to finish their job. I don't like that one bit.

However, I have one small trick up my sleeve. As I near the midpoint between the two groups, I set the wings to flapping and start up the nuclear engine. The engine literally roars to life, scaring the living daylight out of these creeps. Those that don't balk at the noise coming from a gigantic, silver bat certainly balk when I swing the raft into them and knock them a few hundred feet out into the ocean.

I tow the rest of the refugees into the Bensalem shore, tell Rangi about the attackers on the reef, and realize that, due to the magic of time zones and high speed travel, it's still my birthday, which makes this one extremely long day, in every sense of the word. And with that realization comes one about me finally needing some sleep, soon, so I say my goodbyes to Rangi and fly home.

On the way back to the mainland, Mom corrects my flying technique a few times, surprisingly appreciated, given that I'd *still* just as soon not crash this monstrosity into the ocean. Between near death experiences, though, she fills me in on the long legal process of getting the refugees resettled and how we keep our part quiet, despite exposing the Silver Bat itself to the Jade Moon Society...whatever *that* might turn out to be.

All things considered, though, it's rough work, but it's work worth doing. I just never thought my family would be the people doing that work.

Bertie Descends into the Underworld

We seek him here, we seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.

Is he in Heaven? Is he in Hell?

That demmed, elusive Pimpernel?

Grandpa Robert keeps making the point that I saw him nearly every day of my life and completely dismissed him as a vapid dolt, happier to be seen with tin-pot dictators than his own family. “And if that’s what *you* thought, Bertie, imagine how those loser despots saw me. They were convinced they found a patsy to give them legitimacy, even when their secret police came to them with evidence that I was talking to rebels or standing around wherever they stash their political prisoners. The response was always *he’s just a useful idiot under our thumb. He must be lost or spreading our message*, because as vain as I pretend to be, warlords and fascists are always twice as vain.”

“So, there’s no way of maintaining anybody’s respect, though?”

“I never could, at least not with anybody outside the League. It’s been much more useful to seem to be the sort of person who won’t surprise anybody if I flake out on a million-dollar meeting or seem to be willing to turn a blind eye ethnic cleansing because a bigot

has complimented my shoes. It makes you invisible when you need it most. We can't all be as silent as Isla, after all." He grins at that last part.

"But it seems cruel to carry that over into my personal life."

"That's true, but it will also be dangerous to your operations and to the people you protect to be seen in public as having strong convictions or a sense of responsibility, when you conspicuously refuse to display those same traits in front of the Board of Directors or some abusive government. And it's also cruel to ask the people you care about to take on your secret as their own, putting them in a position where they can treat you as respectable in private, but remember that you are to be treated as an imbecile as soon as you cross a threshold into another room."

"I suppose, but what about—?"

"The League is not some exclusive club, Bertie. We often work with—hrm—"independent contractors,' let's say, who we give glimpses into the bigger picture. If they take the bait, if they're willing to continue cooperating once they've seen hints of what we do, we can bring them closer to our core operations until they become permanent parts of the organization. Most of the brilliant people you met the other day started out running small errands or making some

tiny, superficial update to a spreadsheet. And you've seen your father when he walks into that isolated section of the accounting department or personnel; he's not the vapid heir to a corrupt corporate throne, but a respectable man of the people. I also would never want to go toe-to-toe with the version of your mother who walks in League spaces and am proud to work alongside her, even though the public hears my daughter-in-law and I throw insults at each other regularly in the tabloids, as if we're squabbling children. It's not ideal, but the League, in some ways, is our community as well as our life's work."

"That's *some* consolation, at least. But how do I become this worthless pile of garbage? I can't exactly call my friends to declare how, henceforth, I will be irresponsible and obnoxiously stupid. I started acting the part while getting dressed for what turned out to be the surprise party, but that was a nauseating experience and I don't think Yelena bought it."

"For better or worse, you get used to the nausea. But the actual process is up to you, since only you know your friends and your reputation. The family story is that the Woosters were already pretty awful in this respect, and so Bertram continued that act in public as he grew up and established the League in private. My late mother claims that she had the luxury of not having many close friends. I used a death in the family to declare *carpe diem* to mine. Your mother

went into a rehabilitation facility for a faked drug overdose to distance herself from everybody. Isla spent years undermining her own reputation and driving people away. I won't lie. It's some of the toughest, most painful work you'll ever do in your entire career. However, as I mentioned, that pain will free you, later."

Rehab might be the way to go, here. It gives me an excuse to isolate myself and provides a reason to need to immerse myself in company politics and join up with the notional Evil Empire in addition to siding with actual evil imperialists in the world. Of course, to sell that idea, I'll need an abuse problem. I text Jeeves asking for options that aren't likely to actually kill me. Death would really spoil the scam.

"Thanks, Grandpa. At least I'll have support in this."

"You do. All of us are right here with you, whatever you ultimately decide. Don't get any ideas about deaths in the family, though..."

I approach my father, worried about how this discussion might go. I've been pleasantly surprised throughout the last couple of weeks, despite faking my way through a descent into substance abuse and trip to rehab. But as I think about things, I wonder if we're missing the forest for the trees.

“Dad, help me out, here. A lot of our work is—big picture—mitigating secondary and tertiary effects of inequality.”

“In some respects, sure. I’m not sure ethnic cleansing, for example, falls out of economic issues, but I can accept the premise.”

“OK, and yet we operate a large, multi-national corporation that gets most of its money through extractive means, perpetuating the inequality that causes problems.”

“Well, yes and no.” Oh, no, I can already see this is going to end in a headache at best and a furious argument at worst. “Like a lot of things at Wooster Amalgamated, the reality depends on which sets of books you look at. The public version of our finances does paint a picture of exploitative robber barons out to make a quick buck at every turn, and we do need to do a *little* bit of that to cover our tracks, unfortunately. But a lot of our income actually comes from the patents on esoteric devices we’ve seized, once our engineers have figured out how to eliminate their destructive power.”

Oh, definitely a headache thing. Oh, well, in for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. And that’s sort of weird, since we say that as people who don’t use pounds as currency, not to mention the number of

people trying to phase out pennies. Anyway, my father has an expression on his face suggestion that I'm supposed to ask him what he's talking about.

"Devices? What devices?"

"You haven't seen that end of business? Interesting. Well, you remember your mission to Bensalem, yes? Rangi probably mentioned that the Jade Moon Society was involved and you let the reference slide past you to focus on saving lives, which is a call I'm behind." He issues a couple of commands to his computer and a chart of interconnected bubbles appears on the office's big screen. "But Jade Moon is one of many secret societies around the world."

"Secret societies like the League?"

"We're similar in the broadest concept, but as far as the term of art goes, the League is less a society than...well, a *league*, just like the name says. We're a network of people cooperating on projects, almost all of our so-called agents paying forward help they've received from someone else and only participating voluntarily. The likes of Jade Moon are generational, often pseudo-religious with offers of revealing hidden secrets, helping members gain power, making elitist claims, demanding oaths of loyalty, and intent on either local or global governance."

Bubbles on the screen start lighting up with icons that presumably are used to identify members of each society as Dad continues. “Jade Moon, the Central Anarchists Council, Laboratory 23, the Palladists, the Bird of Hermes, the Illuminati, ASGARD, the Friends of the ABC, and so forth. Some of these societies have been around for centuries; some are younger, many of the newer being rogue intelligence or security agencies that have figured out how to fund themselves after being officially shuttered by their governments. Some are well known, albeit as urban legends or fiction; some are far more obscure. They’re all violent and fight almost constantly over territory like gang turf wars, sometimes spilling out into the public for brief periods in what we call the Underworld Wars.”

“Underworld Wars? You’re pulling my leg.”

“Nope. It’s the actual term the League, some of the societies, and even a handful of governments have been using for at least half a century. It’s not an accidental term, either, despite it obviously being tongue in cheek. A lot of these societies have connections high up in governments, their native governments, especially. And as a result of those relationships, they can sometimes command entire armies by convincing leaders that their priorities overlap. So, certain small wars are actually proxy

wars between these secret societies, and so take on a much more global significance to us.”

“Fair enough, but what does any of that have to do with Wooster Amalgamated?”

“Only *everything*, my boy. A lot of the incidents we deal with are the result of underworld activity, whereas we tend to shy away from legitimate government activity unless things are going too far to be solved through politics.”

“Not to interrupt,” I half-mutter, “but put a pin in that, because I’m going to want to ask about so-called *legitimate government activity* that we’re ignoring.”

“Indeed. Where was I? Ah, we deal with incidents that stem from underworld activity from secret societies. Because they’re trying to—among other things—destroy each other as efficiently as possible, the societies put a *lot* of effort into research and development projects, often engineering technological marvels. When we discover such technologies, we have the Wooster Amalgamated teams reverse engineer it and then we commercialize it. And that’s all a *very* long-winded way to say that we actually manufacture and sell some useful things at a fair price, rather than making all our money from oil or eviction.”

“Really? For instance...”

“Well, the first big success was Bertram selling what we’d now call televisions as far back as 1915 and there were primitive digital computer networks during World War II available, if the League believed in the work to which the computers would be set. The Avalon office has had a quantum computer in the basement for about sixty years and rents time on it. There are a few ray-guns that we’ve turned into cooking devices or energy generators, too, preventing them from being used as weapons ever again.”

“Whoa.” I can’t believe such an idiotic non-comment slipped out of my mouth, but seriously, whoa.

“Yes. In addition to that, we also have initiatives quietly replacing power grids with renewable energy sources, so the utility companies generally pay us for that while reducing bills. We have a few other revenue streams along similar lines. It’s still not ideal, but as you point out, unfortunately a certain amount of income is required to make us look like the sorts of people who would cozy up to dictators to see their golden toilets and jewel-encrusted limousines; without that, we could never play the big cons. But you were going to ask about government action. Go ahead.”

“Well, yes. You’ve seen the same news I’ve seen. Family separation. Kids in cages. Our own country is denying people asylum and imprisoning them in

internment camps with substandard conditions, and the Hepler administration has only made the usual terrible situation worse and more explicitly cruel. If the League is about preventing and rescuing people from oppression, we're not doing a very good job with the oppression being done in our name with our... well, OK, I assume the accountants make sure that we don't pay any tax dollars, but you get the idea."

"That's more than a fair criticism, Bertie, but represents a problem that's a little bit more complicated than sneaking into a facility."

"Of course it is. Enlighten me."

"Well, for one thing, there are limits to our power. Taking on some cult or the security state in some banana republic is one thing, but taking on the security state of a superpower is another thing entirely. As much as I hate to admit it, sometimes might does indeed make right. For another thing, while we have some separations, the fact of the matter is that Wooster Amalgamated and the League of the Silver Bat are in a symbiotic relationship in many respects, and Wooster Amalgamated genuinely needs to do business here to survive. For the League to confront the government risks exposure and destruction. Additionally, policies in democracies should be decided on by the people. We do our part on that end, advertising, lobbying, and funding

journalism in the public interest, but interfering risks a slippery slope; as you yourself pointed out with respect to that apartment complex, people change and it would be naive to trust even ourselves to maintain standards once we make a compromise.”

“Well, that’s pretty disheartening.”

“It really is. We’re constantly trying to navigate these waters and try to influence policy in legitimate ways, but you’re right, it feels terrible to not be able to protect every last person in need, especially when—as you say—what they need to be saved from is being done in our names. However, saving some is still far better than saving none. And even domestically, we have some options.”

“Really?” The headache has firmly set in and I don’t want to get my hopes up, here.

“Those secret societies I was talking about, not to mention their agents, are everywhere, including here in the states. Bertram’s parents were murdered by the Central Anarchists Council, and the Council was also the power behind the sweatshop your mother liberated back before your birthday. Jade Moon seems to be centered on the Korean peninsula, but clearly have some agenda in Bensalem. And then there are societies such as GORGON’s local factions and the Clan of the Fiery Cross, operating across the country,

and that set themselves distinctly against refugees and with white supremacist ideals. And they're all fair game, frankly, since any damage done to their organizations can't exactly be reported to the Bureau of Criminal Investigations to protect their human trafficking or extortion rings."

Dad continues, as the bubbles on the screen multiply and spread out across a world map, little tentacles reaching into what looks like capital cities. "And that has its own effects on the process. Since members of societies have infiltrated governments and push for policies that match their priorities, defanging one often causes the other to falter. And similarly, as you can guess, GORGON and the Clan of the Fiery Cross both deliberately support Hepler and his policies, many of them posing as those non-violent rabid fans you see in the media eating in diners. Laboratory 23 also seems to have pulled most of the levers on the voter suppression tactics we saw in the election."

"Wait, so when Hepler rants about his enemies in ORIA, the Elders of Zion, or Tres Lunas, those aren't just paranoid delusions of an idiot playing to the cheap seats on the Fediverse?"

"The groups do exist and they're as dangerous as any of the others, though not as the swarming armies he claims on social media, nor are they as nation-centric or ethnocentric as Hepler's followers claim. For

example, a far cry from what **The Protocols of the Elders of Zion** claims, the Elders are unconnected to Judaism and there's some evidence that they've been involved in ethnic cleansing against Jewish populations. In the same way, Hepler keeps naming them and his allies keep trying to expose them in hopes of forcing them to retreat from their strongholds in the country."

We go on about this for a while, but it finally sinks in that tech startup darling David L. Hepler comes from a family involved in GORGON, Fiery Cross, Laboratory 23, and others. His companies, from fruit-sharing platforms to collaborative walking apps to romance training simulations to secondary coffin markets, all of those incredibly stupid ideas gathered the venture capital he used to get the attention of societies friendly to his garbage eugenicist philosophy for help in getting elected as President of the United States on the Folkhood Party ticket, with the Singularity Party also endorsing him instead of fronting one of their usual useless candidates.

Hepler won largely on technicalities, despite the Enlightenment candidate overwhelmingly supported by polls. And while that victory will probably be investigated for centuries, the involvement of Laboratory 23 and similar groups probably means the evidence isn't there to prove anything.

However, as we talk out the connections between organizations, known members, and some of the operations we know about, a pattern starts to form in my head. And where there's a pattern, there's opportunity to disrupt the pattern.

Rallying Round the Old Threshold

I'm still not used to this being my office. Honestly, I'm still not used to this being an office at all. The hexagonal space dwarfs even my cartoonishly enormous desk, to start with, but more than that, the walls are all screens. In this case, I'm looking at maps, surveillance, dossiers, and profiles of agents. We might not be able to go toe-to-toe with the United States government, but President Hepler's cronies using him as a smokescreen, they're far more vulnerable.

Now I just need a team and a plan. It's time to buckle down...

"Welcome to Koralo Dareo International Airport," the attendant reiterates the banner hanging above his head, presumably not realizing the banner, the captain's announcement, the tickets, and probably a dozen other points where the airport all mentioned where I am. Such is life.

"Mister Wooster, over here!" Ashraya, my icare driver, recognizes me and waves me over, loads my bags into the trunk without a comment about the weight. I'm too tired and he's too nice a guy for me to refuse when he insists on showing me around the city of San Grobiano. I guess he needs the business, which I suppose isn't surprising, all things considered.

Listening to Ashraya, I quickly discover that, despite some architecture inspired by pre-Columbian structures and the assorted multicultural names, the native populations of South Jefferson have been effectively erased from history. Narratives focus on brinksmanship between Americans and Mexicans, so much so that Ashraya shifts his “tour” to restaurants and theaters after I ask about the people who worked on the restored cotton plantations we pass on the outskirts of the city.

As expected, though, Flint Consolidated Services Corporation appears frequently on the tour. “Old Isaac Flint,” Ashraya explains in a well-rehearsed speech, “revolutionized the country’s water infrastructure, starting around his South Jefferson home.” Actually, Flint tried to privatize and monopolize all access to water, and he had an uncomfortable number of discussions with his researchers about monopolizing access to oxygen, as well. He’s also apparently celebrated in some circles as a GORGON leader. I don’t have the heart to correct Ashraya and tell him his hero would happily have killed everybody to make a few extra bucks, or that the state’s largest employer probably hasn’t gotten any nicer in the last hundred years. Sitting quietly through the tour pays off, though, as we pass several large facilities owned and controlled by subsidiaries, though, including Flint Correctional Services.

Soon after, checking into the Mammoth San Grobiano, receiving yet another redundant message welcoming to the city, and discovering that Jeeves booked a suite and that he has had the equipment shipped there and unpacked by local League members. That probably means they disabled any listening devices and set up countermeasures, but I still need to make a quick sweep of the suite, just to be safe.

“Central,” I use the old-fashioned throat microphone to minimize sound as I set up some white noise emitters. “Excellent work on the suite. Patch me through to Pandora.”

“Acknowledged, Reremouse. Pandora online,” he explains. The codenames are, honestly, pretty stupid, but this operation is a big enough deal that I don’t want to risk any explicit information getting out until long after we’ve packed up and left.

“This is Reremouse, Pandora. What’s our status?”

“Target-Alpha will take the meeting with me. I’m already connected to their internal network and am entering the Consolidated building now.”

“Acknowledged, Pandora. I’ll stay on to monitor. Signal if you need assistance.” She won’t. Pandora may just be a codename, but *pan-dora*, the all-gifted... well, it wasn’t chosen at random.

“Marwat Eadil to see Mister Flint,” I hear over the link.

“Welcome to Flint Consolidated, Mrs. Eadil. I’ve been instructed to direct you to take the elevator to the thirty-fourth floor, and then you’ll need to take the escalator the remaining two to the penthouse for security reasons.” I would accuse Flint of paranoid fantasies where he needs to see any potential enemies coming, but unfortunately, I’m literally adding a hidden microphone to the soundproofed collection the previous sweep team left me.

Data flashes on the computer monitors as Eadil moves through the building: Construction blueprints, organizational charts, chat logs, financial records, surveillance footage, more than a few photographs that are probably harassment lawsuits in the making. It’s probably too much to hope that *all* their security will be this superficial, but Pandora has cracked the legendary box open.

“You’re late,” Flint grumps, like he’s in a bad mob movie.

“Your watch is fast, if my punctuality is even relevant. In this day and age, unsynchronized clocks cost the economy billions of dollars every year. If your operation is this sloppy, Mister Flint, then it seems we don’t have anything further to discuss.” The clack of

her heels echoes in Flint's office for a few seconds, before...

"My apologies. It appears that you're right. Please, have a seat and accept my apologies for relying on simple wound springs to judge people. Also, it's Will; Mister Flint is my father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so forth."

"Your time isn't as valuable as you think, Mister Flint. Maybe don't judge people on punctuality at all. Empty shibboleths like that are ill-suited to the modern world." She is every bit as good as her reputation. A college friend had a job interview with her, years ago. He said that, a lot like this, she never said anything overtly offensive and she didn't say anything she hasn't said a million times about herself in public, but she's apparently so remarkably forceful and charismatic that the mere hint of disapproval reduced my friend to tears.

"...Note taken. Now, you wanted to talk about a possible merger."

"Yes. As you know, my consortium includes several dozen startups across multiple verticals, pooling and leveraging data on the back-end for..." They go back and forth about business things for quite some time. It's not that I tune out, because I definitely need to focus on the mission, but the specifics of the

conversation are literally corporate jargon to burn time in Flint's office.

Remember Pandora being all-gifted? Not to mix metaphors, but as they say, beware of Greeks bearing gifts. Because what Eadil *isn't* mentioning in her portfolio of technology—probably because it's more useful than yet another dating app for people who want a giraffe as a pet and so Flint would absolutely want to acquire it—is a small gadget that can patch into a computer's input ports, allowing her confederate to more carefully hack into the CEO's computer than the network dragnet Eadil is running.

Fāng Tè, the aforementioned confederate, is a hacker currently interning with Eadil's security company. I *think* he's making progress while Eadil pushes Flint around, but looking at the chat log, I'm...not entirely sure what's going on, he's typing some sort of stream of consciousness miasma of English, Chinese, Arabic, chat abbreviations, and emoji. I'm seeing phrases like, “لأ 🖱️ # 单据, ♡👉 fraud w00t” go by. And well, at least one of those words makes sense and looks important, and page after page of that sort of thing make an interesting contrast to the mergers and acquisitions speak I'm getting over audio.

On the other hand, after a couple of pages of watching this spew across the screen, I'm increasingly convinced that Fāng is seeing how long

he can do this before I break, especially when lines suddenly start running from the right side of the screen.

Now there's something in the chat about a kangaroo and footprints...jumping to another computer, maybe? Following a trail? I suddenly spot the name Euryale whiz by on the chat, one of the names of the three mythological Gorgons. Fāng must have gotten access to Flint's GORGON files. "It looks like ENIAC has breached Euryale. Central, a variety of ledgers are coming through that accountants should get to work on decoding, in case there's something beyond their normal operations in there. Pandora, download is progressing, so keep Target-Alpha in your sights. ENIAC, signal when you find the target."

Twenty percent.

"Nothing like this merger will work, without enhancements to the existing privacy policy. They have all accepted agreements to allow their data to be shared between services under my umbrella, but sharing them outside the company is impossible." Eadil is playing this out thoroughly, even though she has no intention of selling at the end of this.

"Fair enough, though we wouldn't be able to promise such a thing in perpetuity. Perhaps for two years, no longer. I can have my lawyers draft a preliminary

draft for review while we discuss this. You don't need to object that we haven't made any decisions. If we don't complete this merger, I'll acquire some similar organization eventually, and would require something similar." Flint is trying to keep up, willing to tie up his legal department on the mere hint of potential market consolidation.

"It might be interesting, at that, to see what your team comes up with."

I obviously don't see Flint send the message to his legal team, since I only have the audio, but the message comes up on one of the screens. "Pandora, be advised that Alpha's message includes explicit direction to deceive about privacy. Might be worth capitalizing on when the draft arrives."

The conversation changes direction for a while, and...

Forty percent.

"Security is important, of course, but we're not convinced that the investment is warranted by such a cost sink." Irony, thy name is Flint, I guess.

"Our experience, by contrast, is that even the rumor of a breach is enough to warrant skepticism with respect to the service's utility. After all," Eadil

emphasizes, “such incidents bring risks of exposure, integrity problems, the inconvenience of...”

It increasingly sounds like she can bulldoze this jerk all afternoon.

Sixty percent. I spot an American flag scrolls through the chat log, suggesting that Fāng has located files for stateside operations.

“...would not be comfortable, given the reliance our users have on these services, without a guaranteed median response time.”

“If users are as reliant on the services as you say, would they not be willing to wait a little bit longer?”

“We do track usage during congested periods and can easily see that there is a precipitous drop, some users never returning.”

“Well, if that’s the case, we’ll want to see that data to see what the most economical response time looks like.”

“My people will supply that.”

Eighty percent. Wooster Amalgamated lawyers have been summarizing the choice bits from the privacy agreement for Eadil, giving her ammunition to push things further.

“...impossible to even consider allowing such a flagrant dismissal of a user’s right to privacy, and the alleged timeline is entirely undercut by this clause down...”

During Eadil’s tirade, I hear Flint actually gasp. He’s now facing both Eadil and an invisible team of lawyers, and even he can see that he doesn’t have a chance.

Ninety percent. Almost there. Fāng posts a series of building emoji, indicating that we’re on real estate deals and allocation. I forward some of these numbers to Eun-Ju, because some of the residential data looks like we might be able to swoop in on some of these and create additional community land trusts to fend off Flint and their ilk.

“...and yet, if we pay for each account at the time of the merger, we would have no idea which accounts have been created by real people or are at all active.”

“Mister Flint...*Will*, the only reasonable measure of the strength of the network is the number of accounts, to which you have already agreed. Therefore, it must stand to reason that each account carries a value, whether or not your team has the interest in authenticating anything they see. Your lack of diligence does not decrease the value of the property.” Wow, she’s really putting the screws to him, now that we’re getting towards the end.

“But we would need to invest in...”

I don't know if I can take much more of Flint's rants about not wanting to spend money, as if he's on a limited budget. Thankfully, we're almost done, here.

Ninety-nine...and one hundred percent, and true to form, Fāng floods the chat with a checkered flag.

“Pandora, we are clear. Disengage at your pleasure.”

“Mister Flint, it's clear this isn't going to work. Your team has only the most grudging interest in security or privacy, and even less in making this potential relationship worth anything resembling my time.” Well, that didn't take long. I would've put good money on her going another couple of rounds with him just to put him in his place. “As-salāmu ‘alaykum, sir.”

“Pandora, ENIAC, thank you very for your help. Stage one has been put to bed.” I only wish it got easier from here.

Lines and Businesses

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to
land;*

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall
stand*

*A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command*

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

*"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"
cries she*

*With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Emma Lazarus, 1833

Maps, rosters, schedules, inmate lists, blueprints, schematics, it's all in front of me, thanks to Eadil, Fāng, and a bunch of code-breakers. That's the good news. The bad news? It's all in front of me and my eyes are going bleary.

As has been in the financial press to praise their impending rise in stock price, Flint Consolidated Services Corporation owns and operates the Kinneson Operations Facility. Most of the structure is a typical private prison: It's bad, Flint almost being the embodiment of the school-to-prison pipeline in this part of the country, but it's all in a repulsive legal way that we can better fight with elections and by demanding better candidates. If we can take the San Grobiano city council, then FCSC gets some well-needed oversight. Granted, I'd rather punch someone and stop the exploitation today, but as Grandpa Robert pointed out, that might be more cathartic, but it exposes and endangers enough of League operations that our story would end there, whereas oppression is much bigger than some minimum number of faces to be punched.

One wing of the complex is worse, the family-separation and kids-in-cages sort of place that has been in the news, their Refugee Resettlement Center that has no intention of resettling anybody. That's also all mostly legal, unfortunately. Putting an end to it requires removing President Hepler from office,

replacing his followers in the bureaucracy, and then digging a few layers deep in policy, since it's not like we've ever been particularly kind to immigrants if they weren't considered "white." While I'm mostly what they call *passing*, Nana Isla and Mom still get "go back to where you came from" and far worse, sometimes. And, if a wealthy woman who beats up the forces of evil in her spare time isn't acceptable, it's hard for me to even imagine what someone like Jawara's mother probably deals with every day.

Interrupting that line of thought in order to head back in the general direction of a plan, as bad as Flint is as a whole, in the back part of that refugee wing of Kinneson Operations Facility is something even worse. We started with theories and a lot of this data provides proof that, there, agents from GORGON and the Clan of the Fiery Cross are running their own refugee processing operation, smuggling vulnerable people in need across the border, stealing their identities, and putting them to work in a labor camp. It's highly illegal, secret, and symbolic. It's an ideal kind of target for us. Except...

"Kinneson Air Force Base. Highly classified and in the way of Flint's facility."

I nearly jump out of my skin at that comment. And of *course* it's Nana Isla. All the alarms at every possible entry and disguised guards lurking out in the hall,

and she still manages to get in without even a tiny disturbance. I don't get it.

"How on Earth did you even—" Actually, I'm not convinced I want the answer to that question, at least, not yet. "Errr, I mean, what brings you to the great, historic city of San Grobiano? Surely, you're not checking up on your favorite grandson."

"Don't be paranoid, Bertie. Well, not about me, at least. There was an assassin running around the suburbs, trying to take out progressive political candidates, best we can tell on behalf of the Dzyan Society. A particularly strange one, too, that I'll have to tell you about, some day. It must mean the money we're investing in the races down here is worth it, if they're going to these lengths to eliminate our candidates. Anyway, he won't be doing *that* anymore."

"You didn't...?"

"Hm? Oh, no, no killing. He's bruised and probably has a pretty bad concussion, but he's safely in police custody. Well, safe until the Dzyan send another assassin to keep this clown from talking to the authorities, of course. That wouldn't be my first choice when he can be usefully interrogated, and probably not his first choice, either. Oh, and after all that, *then* I decided to check up on my favorite grandson."

“Well, fair enough, I guess. I could actually use some help in getting all this information on the Kinneson Operations Facility under some sort of control.”

“I think I can do that. In fact, like I said when I made myself known is that the first thing you’ll notice is the facility’s proximity to Kinneson Air Force Base. The entire place is in the way of getting to Flint’s monstrosity, but because the place is highly classified, we’re not going to have a map of that, so we’d be flying blind, but we might know someone...”

“I can’t provide any specific information on anything inside the perimeter, or provide any abstract information that might allow the specifics to be inferred, because it really may be a matter of national security.” Major Merald Rubio Guerrero is one of our operatives and, fortunately for us, was recently transferred to Kinneson Air Force Base, so knows a thing or two about what we’re getting into and was able to get far enough off the base for a couple of hours for a secure call. “But I don’t think it would be too much of a problem to provide information about the space immediately *outside* the perimeter and arrange for the watch to turn a blind eye for around fifteen minutes.”

“At twenty miles across, that’s going to be awfully tight.”

“Definitely tight, but it should be doable, and it’s also the amount of time our surveillance resets take, including paperwork and coordination overhead. Any

more time would require sabotage, and that's more than a few steps too far, with all due respect."

"Understood. Is there any other caveats I should know about?"

"Well, air-men still have eyes and ears, and we can't really reset *them*, so the more inconspicuous you can be, the better off we'll all be."

"So, eighty miles an hour, invisibly, without making a sound. That could be interesting. Major, thank you for your service, in uniform and out." That may be a problem. The Silver Bat can certainly do it, traveling much faster and almost silently, but only carries one person. If that was all we needed, I could just bring it in from above. "You'll also need another way out. It might be possible to re-cycle the security system, but like the entry, the timing would need to be pre-scheduled far enough off to not raise suspicions, and I assume you don't want to be trapped between military security and paramilitary attackers."

"Damn. That...I should have thought of that." I guess, if there were still drawing boards, I'd have to imagine bringing this plan back there. "Hang on. We're going about this the wrong way. We can make this work, but we'll need to take some time and...take a page out of Flint Consolidated's own playbook."

“What the Hell is all of this!?” Admittedly, a bunch of soldiers with guns trained on me isn’t *exactly* the way I wanted to run this operation, especially so early in the game, but this can still work.

“All of this, as you put it, is a pipeline to be. There’ll be some noise for a day or two, but we’ll be out of your hair before ya know it.”

“On whose authority? This is government land!”

“Well, not anymore. This being oil country, the government was highly motivated to unload a sliver of land to help executives sell more of that crude. It’s a Wooster project, I hear from the boys.” I never thought I’d be thankful for the Hepler administration’s cartoonish corruption, let alone in the context of monopolizing natural resources, but here we are. At least we went for land where nobody lives, I guess, and aren’t actually planning to tear up the countryside.

“I will need to check this with my superiors. We cannot—repeat, cannot—have your operations this close to classified activities. None of this equipment has been cleared.”

“You go do that, Colonel. We have a pipeline to position before we start digging. And have someone check out the equipment, while you’re at it. It’s pipe. Ain’t nothin’ going to be hidden inside except oil in a

few weeks.” Well, the accent certainly wasn’t the best choice available. With any luck, he’s too wrapped up in the indignation to notice how dumb I sound. Fortunately for our purposes, the excuse doesn’t need to hold up for long. A couple of hours more, and he’ll never see this workman again and this whole strip will be just one more derelict fossil fuel project.

Ohhhh...we’re going to die. I thought flying the Silver Bat was frightening, but driving through an unconnected pipeline? That’s so much worse than I imagined. And sound-proof the pipeline, and the roar of the engines and suddenly every tiny bump or skid echoes and cuts through even this fancy-pants head-gear.

The sound-proofing solves a couple of problems, though. First, even though we’re still moving as fast as these things will go without causing a disaster, we should be sufficiently hidden and muffled that the Air Force won’t throw any of their UFO technology, or whatever they’re testing in there, our way.

Yikes! Almost drifted up the pipe. Falling would not only be a mess for me, but cause some serious damage to the people behind me, too, and scrub the mission. Deep breaths.

Anyway...

Second, we're pointing all the sound at Flint's people, and with the famously mysterious Air Force Base in full view, they should write off the sound as a flight test of some sort. Major Guerrero has done some quiet surveillance and reported that the guards rarely take notice of loud noise from this direction, whereas they tend to shoot first and shoot more later, if anything seems out of the ordinary from another direction.

As we get near a quarter of the way through and I nearly ride up the side *again*, I realize that we probably should have rigged something with enough wheels to brace each of us near the center. Dizziness would be easier to manage.

Oh, well. Live and learn, as they say. Assuming we live, of course. Living would be nice.

Nearer to the halfway mark, it feels like an eternity, even though the calculations beforehand said that it would probably only be around five or six minutes at the most. But I also have a sudden confidence that we'll get to the light at the end of the literal tunnel, possibly because I can actually see that light for the first time. The rattling sound has lessened, which should mean that we've all gotten better at riding without shifting too far off the center-line, just single file along the length of the pipe. Readings suggest that the air is completely unbreathable, now, with all the

exhaust pouring out. To his credit, Guerrero caught that possibility and recommended oxygen masks; I'll have to owe him lunch for that insight.

Three-quarters, the knot in my stomach is back as it sinks in how much needs to be done to pull this off, how many of those tasks require precision timing, and how thoroughly inexperienced I am, potentially taking this group into a fire-fight with members of actual evil secret conspiracies bent on destroying democracy and equality. As a bonus, despite that little crisis of confidence, I manage to not wreck the vehicle.

I'm coming up on the last mile, less than a minute until all Hell breaks loose, and there's suddenly plenty to do besides merely managing to not die.

Each of the vehicles has a radio jammer, activating one after the other to prevent the guards from coordinating easily. Instead of receiving orders and status reports, they'll all be listening to **H.M.S. Pinafore**.

Then, seeders on the axles throw off a series of small explosive charges, set to detonate by proximity, unless they receive the coded signal, just as a small safety measure.

Finally, a switch on my steering wheel launches a smoke grenade. We're already going to be pretty

conspicuous screaming out of this, so we might as well use that confusion to cover ourselves. The explosion causes the pipe to shudder and shift over to the left, but I make it out. I pull to the side, behind the pipe, to watch for four more of the team shoot out behind me.

The five radio jammers all launch into the air on small drones to land in positions separate from our own, giving them more to do. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one heading to trees, which should make it a bit more interesting to stop. While that happens, I set up a strobe light to keep the guards off-balance.

Other drones, programmed to follow the smoke and then make it for the trees, shoot non-lethal rubber shot. It shouldn't cause anybody any real harm, but it should give the impression that there's a significant force keeping the patrols busy.

Unfortunately, off through the smoke, I hear real gunshots in the direction of the prison. The guards must have already figured out this isn't just an Air Force experiment or a pipeline. We can't fight back directly, but a couple of concussion grenades should quiet them down a bit.

Either way, we're in it, now, past the point of no return, and the odds of pulling this off without hurting anybody has just gone down dramatically.

And the guards keep coming.

A Signal of Introduction

The guards keep coming and we're on the verge of being overwhelmed. We aren't going to deliberately kill anybody and we don't have the means to fight off an entire army, even if we didn't care about casualties.

And then, out of nowhere, everything breaks out in complete chaos when the Silver Bat streaks overhead, engines screeching like an injured animal. I didn't schedule it, but whoever it is—my money is on Mom, always out for the dramatic twist—must have been monitoring, probably with the help of Guerrero. Guerrero's involvement becomes more obvious when an honest to goodness flying saucer screams through the sky, getting into what appears to be a dogfight with the Silver Bat, completely pulling the attention of the guards away from us and occasionally firing ordinance in the space between the guards and us to keep them from approaching us.

“Go,” I signal, and the five of us rush to the side door, still under the cover of smoke.

The shroud of smoke covers us as I pull the other four into the alcove. I wave Fāng over to work his magic on the security system. He looks younger than I expected, but also a lot more intense for someone who was recently communicating in a fog of international incoherence. “Think you can manage?”

“I was born for this, boss! Talking about it or fighting, not so much born for that.” He pulls out a tablet computer and a screwdriver, rewiring the pad to his rig. Hearing the kid speak so fluently in English, I realize that his incoherent chat log from the other day was *definitely* a put-on for my benefit.

Over Fāng’s shoulder, I see him modifying data and reprogramming the security routines, one after the other. He grins as his screen goes a stark white, then unplugs his system and restores the original connections and...

“Whoosh,” he announces, as the double-doors swing open for us. On the way in, I kick the smoke grenade over to a nearby window. With any luck, they’ll waste time figuring out where we could go from there instead of looking at where we are.

“Well, time to change,” I whisper. We won’t last long dressed as we are, so the others have replicas of Flint’s standard-issue correctional officer uniforms, while I put on a jumpsuit and Chakladar—Dipankar Saifuddin Chakladar, our resident thespian—adds some stage make-up and prosthetics to my face to make it look like I’ve been badly beaten. A disused supply closet works to stash the equipment we’ll need on the way out. Our ID won’t stand up to any scrutiny without unleashing Fāng on the central computer,

and we won't have time for that, but this should get us through the lazier checkpoints at this time of night.

We head down the corridor, the most no-frills industrial building I've seen, walking directly into the proverbial belly of the beast. We stop every twenty feet or so, giving Fāng the opportunity to cut any surveillance feeds, supplying them with archive footage to camouflage our passage. He also mentions in passing that he's leaving a few other surprises on the servers, in case someone reports our presence.

Every so often, the hall intersects with halls to the prisoners' cells. A glance into one shows that we're in the refugee management area, confirming that we're probably heading in the right direction and allowing us a supplemental mission. We convince the prisoners to keep quiet as we quickly pass out "care packages" with snacks, hygiene products, legal-related reading, and cellular phones pre-programmed with the numbers of immigration lawyers on both sides of the border. The phones use a proprietary frequency band that'll bounce their calls onto the conventional networks, making them more difficult to detect by the management. Breaking them out may not be an option, but breaking a few laws to re-humanize them and give them a fighting chance, *that* I can do.

Finally, we reach a manned gate. I start struggling as if in pain. “The boss wants this one brought to the rear for enhanced interrogation,” Chakladar offers.

The guard opens his mouth to respond, but Chakladar doesn't give him the chance. “Look, I get it. It's late. I don't want to be involved in this any more than you do, especially with whatever is going down outside. But this man has information that can prevent a crime, saving millions of dollars...and maybe a couple of lives, too. Nobody told me anything about lives, but there's definitely a pile of money on the line, and lives seem likely.” The guard tries again, this time getting out a loose, sputtering vowel sound of some sort before, “you're not wrong that this is weird, but this is being escalated quickly and I would just as soon Mr. Flint not personally know my name...or yours, but I can still pay my mortgage if you're the one who gets fired over this.” I sincerely hope he's not overplaying this.

The guard taps on his keyboard and I'm suddenly convinced that our prestigious (in regional theater circles, anyway) Mr. Chakladar has over-acted us into some pretty serious Federal charges, but instead of klaxons, the gate opens. “The interrogation center is almost to the end of the left-hand hall, two doors from the end. Don't go any further than that, because that's the end of the prison. Whatever is past there is some other division of Flint Consolidated, and word

is that they do *not* like visitors and I gather visitors aren't happy to be there, either, especially when those visitors aren't...well, *you* know." He gestures at his face. Apparently, Flint Consolidated doesn't exclusively hire monsters. I'll need to keep correctional officer Nick Liang in mind in the future.

"Oh, I definitely know what you mean, sir, and thanks for the heads up," Chakladar offers, but the guard is already back checking his text messages. If Flint wasn't scum that actively goes out of his way to undermine the strength of democratic institutions or if Nick didn't seem to be offended that he's not quite on the right side of history, I'd probably complain about the weak work ethic in the organization's employees. To be fair, it's not like there are many employers in the area that aren't Flint or subsidiaries.

Regardless, we walk the remaining length of the hall, unable to see beyond the windowless doors, this far in. A group of guards passes us from the opposite direction, barely paying us any attention. Normally, that would be a good thing, but not here. I briefly struggle and push Fāng enough to get them to focus, giving Verheyen the opportunity to quickly step to the side and pick the rear-most guard's pocket to grab his security key-card. Fāng smacks me in the shoulder with his weapon to force me down to my knees—a surprisingly good shot from someone who makes such a big deal about not being a fighter—and I raise

my arms in surrender before the other guards decide to help. They see that I'm back under control and we all move on.

We finally reach the interrogation room, two doors up from the enormous steel door separating this wing from Flint's Fiery Cross and GORGON activities. As we enter, making sure nobody is looking in our direction, Verheyen silently vaults up the edge of the door to the overhead lighting. She adds a small transformer to the circuit that increases the brightness on the fixture, ideally making any guards slightly less likely to scrutinize anything strange they might see in this direction; thank goodness for harsh fluorescent lighting. When Verheyen comes back down, she has a GORGON-issued pistol in her hand, presumably left in the lighting fixture by one of our adversaries who wanted to stay undercover at Flint.

I backtrack quickly to the last intersection and close their acrylic glass gate, hoping to muffle any sound that might come out of the work ahead of us.

Inside the interrogation room, we set up our temporary base of operations, Fāng already laying out several computers of various sorts. I change out of my jumpsuit and into a uniform. We can't be entirely sure that the same uniforms are used on both sides of the big door, but better to look like we're just in the wrong part of the building than to stick out like a sore

thumb in 1940s GORGON regalia or similar nonsense. In one case, we can at least apologize and beg anybody who spots us to not report us while we retreat. In the other case, we look like a paramilitary assault team wearing what might very well be an outdated costume, which would be spectacularly likely to get us shot. So, it's not like there's any pressure, here.

"Tè, can you get us any information on the other side of that door, out there?" I probably already know the answer, but I wouldn't mind being pleasantly surprised. Regardless, Fāng is already prepared for the question.

"No, boss. It looks like the walls are all lined with metal sheets. The other side might as well be stashed inside of a Faraday cage."

"Hm. Alexia, is there any chance your bag of tricks has something that can cut through metal sheets?"

Verheyen stops to think for a moment, then, "maybe. I have a laser cutter, but it's not exactly industrial. Tin, I can definitely do. Copper, definitely not. A weak aluminum alloy, yes, but slowly. Probably the last, and that's probably the most likely, as well. We could probably go faster with a drill, but there's every chance it'd cause the entire wall to echo with the scraping noise."

“Fair enough. Get over to the next room and see if you can poke a hole big enough that Tè can shove an antenna through. Saifuddin, go with her, in case anybody else tries to use the room.”

“Will do!”

“Bill, I couldn’t help notice that the door didn’t seem to have any handle or locking mechanism.” William Lindsey is San Grobiano’s youngest detective. “I realize it’s a bit outside your experience, and there isn’t much to go on, but see if you can figure out how guards get in from this side of the door. I’ll double-check the equipment and review the prisoner manifest.”

“Sure.”

Splitting up, we settle into position. Minutes in, however, there’s the crashing of metal on metal and then footsteps in the corridor, slowing nearby. And then I hear a door open and a gruff voice in the distance.

“Hey! This room is off-limits to all personnel!” They’ve found Alexia and Saifuddin next door. I run for the interrogation room door, sighting Bill across the hall as I crack the door open and wave him across.

I drop a white noise generator in the doorway as Bill kicks the door wide open to get their attention and, well, if it worked for them...

“Hey! This room is off-limits to all personnel!” They turn and Saifuddin knocks one of the pair out. The other turns back and I jump him. He fights back, stronger than I expected, but Bill and Alexia help and we manage to subdue him without too much trouble.

They’re both wearing GORGON rings. Making sure both men are unconscious, I grab them and we search the two thugs for any other identification that might help us as we go further into this labyrinth, not to mention relieving them of their weapons. Their uniforms seem to be the same as ours, so there’s a decent chance we chose correctly.

“Alexia, how’s that hole coming?”

“I just got started, but it looks promising. It might be an hour, could be sooner.”

“All right. Keep at it. If there’s anything we can do to speed that up, it looks like this isn’t the out-of-the-way staging area we expected.”

“Understood.”

And then I see why GORGON agents came to this room, a wall full of filing cabinets with the distinctive Medusa-head logo. While we’re waiting anyway, we

shouldn't let the opportunity pass. "Saifuddin, help me out, here. Let's crack the locks on these and get pictures of what we can." While I set up to take pictures, a quick glance at my cellphone shows that the jammers are apparently still working, too. That's an encouraging sign. It probably means they're still scrambling out in the yard, too.

"Bad news, Eebee," Bill returns. "I can't find any affordances on this side of that blast door, no fingerprints, nothing exposed. Odds are really good that the control is entirely from the other side, so we'll need access or help in getting through."

"Well, help doesn't exactly seem likely, but if Alexia can manage to cut through, Tè can probably rig up access. In the meantime, let's relocate Tè in here for when that happens and have the two of you join us in copying these files. They all look encoded, but if they're anything operational, we may be able to use them in the future.

"Sure thing. I'll be back with Tè in a minute." He slips back out of the room.

"Psst." Alexia waves us all over from the files. "OK, everybody. I think I'm through. Tè, grab an antenna and let's punch through to find out."

About an hour later, we haven't put anything like a significant dent in the files, but that's not why we're here and we still have a fair collection to bring back. Of course, we're also not in the business of knocking out and collecting GORGON agents, and yet we've got six of them tied up and tranquilized in the corner, so sometimes life is full of little surprises, I guess.

"I'm on their network! It's completely different than what's on this side, completely different protocols and security, but it's a lot better to work with than taking pictures of files." The kid brings up a fair point. "Working...working...I can see their security setup, a lot more sophisticated than what we've been dealing with out here, but I think I can weaken it a little. And those are the controls for the lighting, the interior door controls, separate from the cell doors over here, and this looks like the door right out there. OK, I think I've got it."

"Well, then," I ask, "are we all ready to walk into the lion's den?" Granted, this would be a highly awkward time to decide to turn back, but it's also the last time we'll have that option.

"Absolutely," they all say in unison.

"Then gather up your stuff and let's go!" Tè works a bit more and there's a clanking sound in the hall, the door unlocking for us.

The Unbidden Guests

We pull the door open and stare into darkness, voices screaming in the distance.

Tè beams at us. “I figured we’d have an easier go of things if they couldn’t see us and couldn’t set off any alarms.” He’s probably not wrong.

We pass through and pull the vault door closed behind us, giving a feeling like it traps us in a claustrophobic, inky blackness until we can get at our night-vision glasses. We’re about to split up, when Tè stops us for another surprise. “Two incoming from the left,” he whispers, just as a flashlight beam sweeps an intersection. He holds up his tablet, showing GORGON and Fiery Cross icons overlaid on the floor plan, then pulls out four more tablets with the same map for each of us. He then points to a cluster of a few of the icons at the bottom of the screen. “The rings have tracking devices in them, which we can follow, here. Inside their Faraday cage, we don’t have signals scrambled, so they still work.”

At the realization that radio will work, I motion to have everyone switch over to the throat microphones to minimize the chance of being overheard. “Can you change the signal on the five rings we grabbed from those clowns, so that we can tell the difference?”

“Each signal is unique, boss. I can tweak the code and...” The five icons at the bottom show up as the League of the Silver Bat’s insignia. “Better to change our presentation, I think, than make a change to the signal someone else might notice.”

“Fair point, Tè. Got any more little surprises in store for us?”

“No, boss. Well, no surprises for *now*, at least. I’m working on something for the way out. We’ll see.”

“Anybody else? No? Let’s get right down to work, then. We’ll meet back here in thirty minutes. Good luck.”

With that, we head off on our assigned tasks. We planned this assuming that we wouldn’t be able to communicate, see the movement of our adversaries, or hide, so this might be more or less by the books.

As I walk along the perimeter of GORGON’s special detention block, I come up behind two guards trying to patrol with flashlights. Since they can’t see me, I decide to have a little bit of fun with them; a little bit of paranoia will only help our situation, after all. I creep closer, closer, close enough to reach out and tap the one on the left on the upper arm.

“What,” Left asks, turning to his partner.

“*What* what?”

“You just grabbed my arm.”

“You’re crazy. Bad enough we have to deal with the lights, but you need to start seeing ghosts, too?”

I slip back over to them, slowly pushing in close again, creeping in and reaching out to flick the guard on the right’s tricep.

“Very mature, jackass.” Right seems almost pleased to be able to lash out against his partner.

“What are you on about?”

“Oh, right. You fantasize that I hit you and denied it, so now you want me to see how it feels? Is that it?”

“I did no such thing, you nut. Take your own advice. Do your job.”

“Whatever.”

Well, getting these two into a fist fight would certainly make it easier to get past them. I give them another minute to let their attention lapse again, then creep towards them again. Closer.

Closer...

Closer...

I reach out slowly, and...

“Hey!” Guard-on-the-Right pivots on his heel and throws a punch at me. Left spins, shining his light at me, blinding me for a second while Right dives at my mid-section. I go down hard. Damn!

I kick out, buying myself a couple of millimeters, but not more than that. I use that to get another kick in to rotate away. “Hawkshaw, Houdini, I could use a little help.” They should be the closest, not that I really have the time to pull out the tablet to double-check that instinct.

Righty grabs me again, just as I start to lift myself back up. I take a jab to the gut. Another. I get a hold of his right arm and twist. As he lurches back, I return the favor of his jabs and sweep his feet to push him off balance. I rise back up to my feet in time for Lefty to rush me, but he’s far enough away that I can grab him and use his momentum to cause him to take a tumble.

Unfortunately, Righty is also back on his feet. He pulls a knife. “Stand down, intruder. If I need to forcefully subdue you, I’ll just kill you.” He points his flashlight at my hands. “Hell, I may just kill you just to *save* a mongrel such as you.” A small part of me admittedly half-wants to be surprised that he’s a bigot, hoping that some of them don’t see the effects of the policies they support, but...well, let’s just say that GORGON didn’t side with the Allies during World

War II and they haven't really updated their policies in the intervening decades; the Clan of the Fiery Cross has held a grudge since they were told that people couldn't be bought and sold.

I switch on my voice scrambler. "Oh, give it up. Your side not only lost the big war, but keeps trying to stage a come-back tour only to lose again, every last time." If he's going to be melodramatic, maybe he'll pay a little bit of his limited attention to a little posturing of my own. "You're on the wrong side of wars, on the wrong side of history, and on the wrong side of this fight."

He snarls as he swings the knife. I jump out of the way. Swing. Jump. Swing. Jump. Swing. Drop and kick. His knees fail and I get back up. He swings from his prone position before I can disarm him, slashing my pant leg. Maybe my leg, too, but there isn't time to check.

He thrusts again, as I close in, this time definitely digging into my leg. As I scream, I discover that Lefty has gotten back onto his feet as he rushes me and slams me into a wall, knocking the wind out of me.

I push back and wait for Lefty to rush me again. He does. This time, I grab him as he comes near and throw him into the wall. The leg hurts like Hell, though, and I scream at the extra weight, again when

Lefty kidney-punches me as he loses consciousness and collapses.

I'm not far behind, honestly, but Righty is back up. I suddenly realize how ignorantly dismissive I was about learning to fight and bringing weapons, thinking my teenage self-defense classes would be fine. I still don't want to hurt these dolts, even if they are bigots literally looking to undermine everything the nation stands for. But a non-lethal way to take these two down would've gotten them out of the way without causing them nearly as much pain, let alone risking exposing League operations.

I lash out, diving for the knife. I probably can't stop him completely, at this point, but I can at least make it harder to gut me. I connect, grabbing and pulling down his arm. I kick him in the ribs, screaming again as my other leg throbs. I slam his arm into the wall once, twice, a third time and he finally drops the knife. Another kick and this time the knife goes skittering into the darkness down the hallway.

He kicks at my leg, now. I scream in pain again as I fall. I grab onto his leg and twist, hoping to keep him down for a while. He lets out a yelp, but keeps at me, getting a grip on my tunic.

Footsteps, off in the distance, getting closer. Finally.

I don't think I can hold out much longer like this and don't even remember how long it's been since I called Alexia and Bill.

“F̃l̃o utezzia laaz chołder wi!” Ugh. GORGON's guttural patois. It's not enough to be a fascist fan club with delusions of grandeur, but they have their own language to identify people outside their group. This isn't Alexia and Bill. That's not good. That's not good at all.

“Ēr owṛṛa!” I punch my dance partner in the jaw, hoping he won't make the situation worse than it already is. He's dazed, but not out.

I hear two guns cock. “Ēr owṛṛa,” I try, and almost certainly fail, to reproduce the sounds to maybe buy myself some goodwill before they gun me down. I pull my hands out of view and bow my head, limiting their view of my darker skin. I'd say that I should have learned the language, but nobody really teaches courses in secret languages used by international terrorist organizations. Wait. There was *one* word I saw on the files. “Jælp̃en!” With any luck, the pronunciation is close, otherwise...

“Ændēr open, bl̃ānhet̃ una, ezzia zw̃ ød̃el̃æzz̃aar̃ diz!”

That's probably not the best sign. So much for luck.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the flashlight of the guard I just managed to stop. It's here, damaged and gone out, right at my fingertips. They won't be able to see it in their own weak light. It's probably just about the only chance I have. I palm the light. Stand up. I'm wobbly, but I get to my feet. The guards hold their rifles on me.

I fake a stumble. It's only half-fake, honestly, but I do need it to happen. They lower their rifles slightly. I'm not a threat, after all. Except that I am. I need to be.

I take the flashlight and fling it at one of the guns while I jump for the other, surprising both of the guards. I pull on the nearer rifle, bringing the guard towards me, and throw him over my shoulder. He loses his grip, but not soon enough. My arms aren't in a position to defend myself when the butt of the other rifle is thrust into my chest.

However, my arms just happen to be in the perfect position to bring my new rifle down on her arm, knocking her own weapon from her hand. She kicks out, though, flattening me against the wall and dives for her gun, grabbing it and aiming it right at me. I'd have a chance if I could focus, but I might be losing too much blood.

I lose my footing and pretty much just wait to die, wait for the sound of the rifle.

Yet the sound that follows isn't a gunshot. It's the clang of metal on metal. A knife flies out of the darkness, catching the guard in the hand, forcing her to drop the rifle. Two—I sincerely hope that it's two and not just double vision—more knives flash through the air, hitting her in the arm. It's the cavalry. It must be Alexia, Lexi Magnus when she's on stage.

Alexia rushes in and begins fighting with the remaining guard. She moves quickly and efficiently, as befits a magician, I guess.

I stumble away from the wall, thinking I'm going to help, but one of the guards I thought I knocked out has gotten back up in my haze, slipping behind me and pulling me into a choke-hold. I try to throw myself down, hoping I can take the guard down with me, but he's prepared for it. I try to fight back, and even think I get a couple of good shots in, but can feel myself losing consciousness.

Just as I think I'm on the verge of blacking out, though, I hear a thumping sound behind me and a groan. When my eyes clear, and if I'm being honest, probably after I wake back up, Bill is patching up my leg. "I don't think this is too bad. Lost some blood, but you're probably more taken off guard than in trouble, unless you lost a bunch more somewhere else. Good chance of infection, though, if we don't get that treated as soon as we get back."

“Thanks.” I never noticed his drawl, before. He must be shaken, too, if it’s coming out.

“Thank us after we’re back home. Between now and then, we still need to pull this off and we should also clean up this blood, or at least degrade the DNA so your identity doesn’t suddenly end up in the tabloids. Oh, and eat this.” He hands me some sort of health bar that I’d probably never touch under normal circumstances. “It should help with electrolytes and blood sugar. And you’ll need water, too.”

I nibble, unsure how my stomach will react. “Fair point. Let’s get back to work.” I get back up on my feet. I’m wavering and my leg hurts, but I’m not collapsing or screaming. That’s something.

Bill hands me another bottle. “This is a mild acid. It should degrade the DNA in your little puddles of blood past the point where GORGON will be able to use it to get any information on you. It’s probably easier than cleaning it up. Houdini and I will secure the four guards.” Alexia is already at it.

I check the tablet. There are about twenty more guards posted around this facility, too many take time out in order to try and sideline them to get that obstacle out of our way, tempting as that suddenly is. The next shift should only be an hour or so away, too, making that counter-productive. We’ll need to work

around them as originally planned. I should've stuck to that plan in the first place, really.

Before splitting up again, Bill gives Alexia a boost up to the ceiling. She kicks through the drop ceiling and vanishes for a couple of seconds. I hear some crashing around before she comes back out. She drops down to the floor and presents me with some sort of metal railing, a few feet long. "You're going to want a cane or a walking stick to keep your weight off that leg, especially with that makeshift splint."

"Probably a good idea. And it's a whole lot better, if I get into trouble again, than trying to punch people. Because that *clearly* did not work out."

"Yeah, try not to get in any more fights. You are...not good at that."

"In my defense, I didn't think I was going to be involved in that fight. The four-on-one aspect took me by surprise, too. All right. Let's go."

They each head off in opposite directions, back to their previous positions. Heck of a little diversion, and a lot more of the schedule probably needs to be pushed because I needed to be clever.

Steadier now, I continue back along my route. Step by step down the dark hall, I realize that the four guards

behind me were probably everybody covering this wing. Finally, I find my first target, the records room.

Of course, unlike Flint Consolidated proper, GORGON hasn't kept physical records since the late 1990s. They're computerized now, which would make this a lot easier with power.

"Hacker, fiat lux," I mutter into the microphone.

As I hear "gotcha, Honcho," in my ear, the computer starts booting up. I pull the control dongle out of my pack and plug it into the back of the machine. Once the computer is running, I copy all the files. Then, I activate Tè's little surprise. The dongle lights up and, so I'm told, the computer is instructed to delete all the files and to propagate the deletion command through the backup system when it's back online. That won't be a complete victory, but it means that this facility should no longer be usable by GORGON once we leave.

"Hacker, we're clear. You can pull the plug." Tè acknowledges and the power goes back out, here.

As I re-pack the dongle and grab my walking stick, my heart sinks as I hear the door unlatch. I glance at my tablet and see it's not one of my team. I should've been watching.

I duck down behind one of the desks near the middle of the room, hoping I can escape without another fight and gripping the walking stick tightly in case I need to. The door opens slowly and silently, the GORGON agent obviously planning to catch someone by surprise.

The agent whispers something incomprehensible in that GORGON patois, though I'm pretty sure it's addressed to someone named Cicilia, probably the guard whose ring I took. That puts each of us in danger, me most directly.

The agent calls out for Cicilia, again. I can see him looking at a tablet of his own, walking towards me. I consider backing away, but realize that gives away the presence of a person. Meanwhile, he gets closer, ever closer. He reaches the desk I'm using and calls out one more time.

It's a risky move, but I remove the ring and roll further back into the dark room. He jumps over the desk, looking to save his friend. "Cicilia!?" He sweeps his flashlight around the room, then again, more systematically. So much for him finding the ring and walking away.

It looks like he's going to brute force this. He walks to the other end of the room, four desks from me, circles it, and looks underneath. His rifle is out,

almost seeming like it's leading him. As he searches the third desk down, I do some back-of-the-envelope guesswork about lines of sight. I'm pretty sure the safest way—the only way—to do this is also the absolute stupidest way.

He's two desks away, now, using his flashlight to sweep under the desks, which is potentially going to make this more difficult.

One desk away, now. I continue to notice that this is not a particularly good plan, but all the better plans require me not being in this room alone with the guard. I check the tablet again, to make sure this isn't about to get worse and...it might. One GORGON guard heading this way, though slow enough that it's probably not in response to my guy in here.

He's at my desk. I slip behind it to get out of his line of sight and, when he peeks underneath, throw a pen behind him, hoping for a brief distraction and crawl to the next row of desks toward the door. Another pen tossed into the corner as I make a break for the next row of desks. This time, he shoots near where it lands. While he's distracted, I do some quick and *ideally* quiet rewiring I hope will work to my advantage. One more pen flung to the opposite corner and I'm at the door. I slip out and—

“Waa er dē t?”

Damn. I took much too long in there. Still, I do have half of a backup plan. I kick with my remaining good leg, catching the guard in the shins. He cries out, which has exactly the effect I wanted, for once. The guard inside the records room panics, letting off a burst of gunfire and rushing to the door, bringing him up against the cables I ran across his likeliest route out of the room. We both see him topple over and, when the new guard is distracted, I bash him with the walking stick. I tie the two of them up inside the room, grab all three rings as well as one of the rifles that I hope I won't need to use, and close the door as I leave.

The rings, I throw down the hall in the direction I came. If I'm very lucky, anybody else looking for this Cicilia will follow that trajectory instead of me.

That's still another delay. We're coming precariously close to the deadline and that's almost entirely on me.

Leave It to Verheyen

O Exiled Hearts—for you, for you—

Love still can find the way!

Hear the voices of the women on the road!

O Shadowed Lives—for you, for you—

Hope hath not lost her ray!

Hear the laughter of the children on the road!

O Gloomy Night—for you, for you—

Dawn tells of coming day!

Hear the clink of breaking fetters on the road!

O Might sans Right—for you, for you—

The feet of crumbling clay!

*Hear the slow, sure tread of Freedom on the
road!*

William Arthur Dunkerley (John Oxenham), 1904

Finally, I reach the back corner of the facility. I open communications. “Hacker?”

“Waa kan” ^{éjz} ^z ^{ra} ^f ^{er} ^z, jefu? Sorry, I’ve been trying to pass as an agent while I waited. I mean, what can I

do for you, Honcho?” Did Fāng pick up their entire language in twenty minutes?

“I ran into a couple of old friends who delayed me, but I’m in position.”

“Understood. The very far corner should double as the opening to a maintenance hatch.”

“I don’t see it.”

“Can you pry off the wall facade? The facility looks fancy and new, but remember that it’s the same cinder block box we started in. Would’ve been lowest-bidder thinking to not expose a hatch someone might need.”

He’s right. Looks like the wall is mostly plastic sheeting with computers and screens mounted behind. And, pulling it away, I can now see the hatch.

“OK, open the maintenance hatch. If it doesn’t open easily, just pry it off, like the facade.” I do so. “According to the schematics, you should see a couple dozen connectors. Any that have switches, turn them off, since I assume we don’t want anybody to die.” Well, that’s just wonderfully nice and vague. “Everybody ready?”

We wait a couple of minutes while everybody else gets back into position. The entire secret facility is

now disabled from four locations, and Tè has been coordinating a plan for us to get some use out of that.

“Everybody hold the tablet up to the hatch. One of the conduits comes directly from the main circuit. Another goes to where we need it. The tablet will show which those are. I need you all to bridge those two conduits. Update when you’re done.”

“Houdini clear.”

“Hawkshaw clear.”

“Histrion clear.”

“Waa er dē t?” Damn. Another one?

“Looks like I’m going to need a minute, all. I’ve got company.” The footsteps are definitely coming this way. Probably caught a glint of the tablet while investigating the rings I scattered.

“Again?”

“I can’t help it if I’m popular.” I try to act like I don’t know the guard is coming at me until he’s just a few steps away. I pivot and swing the walking stick hard on his shoulder, loosening his grip on his rifle and pushing him back. I press my advantage and knock the rifle away, kicking it down the hall.

He's not as fazed as I hoped. I realize that when I get an uppercut to the chin. I also realize that he's a lot bigger than I expected. Just what I needed.

He jabs. I duck and hear the crash against the wall behind me.

I take the walking stick in both hands and use it to push this gorilla back, but a left hook connects with my chin. I come back in close and jab at his gut. He grabs me. I throw myself back, pulling him off-balance. I kick out with my good leg and bring us both down.

I take a roundhouse to the chin, but get a couple of hits in, myself.

He still looks steady—I don't even want to know how *I* look, at this point—so I jump out, hoping to tackle this guard and get back to the panel. He stays up and pushes me to the side, but that gives me enough momentum to pull him in and flip him over my shoulder. From there, I'm able to keep him unable to fight back until I can knock him out. Again, I take his ring and throw it down the hall. I hope their infirmary knows how to deal with concussions.

I check the table to make sure nobody else is crashing my party. They're not, luckily, so I add the connection Fāng described. "Honcho clear...finally."

“Cool. Cool, Honcho. OK, now, this step needs to be in unison, so on the count of three, everybody flip the switch identified on the tablet. One...two...three!”

With the switch on, the cables roar to life, putting power somewhere the electricians never anticipated. “Oh, you’re not going to want to stare at that, once you flip the switch. There might be a fire. There might be some sparks. There could be some shrapnel. I wouldn’t recommend keeping your face there, like, at all.” Tè is many things, but punctual, he is not. I hear what sounds like an explosion, off in the distance.

I tie up the guard on the floor, grab his rifle to go with the one I already have, and head to the rendezvous point. I’m an idiot, almost forgetting to leave the package in the maintenance hatch before rushing off.

Now I run for the rendezvous. We have people to save, after all, and we’re down to the wire.

As I approach the others, I see guards, unconscious, bruised, and trussed up in corners, doorways, and just off to the side of the hall. It looks like everybody else’s luck with the guards was about the same as mine, though none of them look injured. I check the tablet again and realize that none of the guard icons are moving, meaning their luck was probably far better than mine, now that I think about it. We’re not anywhere near done, yet, but at least that’s one problem off our plates.

“I’m glad you could join us,” Alexia points out.

“You know how it is. A little bit of traffic on the freeway and everybody’s schedule falls apart.”

Fāng shows up. “With the extra power,” he explains, “I was able to overload some key circuits to zap or just distract the remaining guards. That one,” he points over his shoulder to a guard thrown over a chair, “even got a jolt out of his identification ring.”

“Nice work! OK. We only have a few minutes before all the work we’ve done gets trampled. Let’s hop to it.”

We walk into the central hall. Unlike the rest of this corner of the facility, this has the stereotypical look of a prison, probably because it’s the original construction. Where the rest of the building has undergone inspections and needed to modernize, this area has been off the books for decades and hasn’t had a reason to look pleasant.

That raises a new issue.

“Hacker,” I use Fāng’s code-name, since I’m not sure how many of the guards are unconscious and probably shouldn’t expose the other players, even in front of the prisoners. “I can’t help but notice that the cell doors aren’t electronic.”

An issue beyond that, the prisoners have started to notice that we're speaking English and aren't the GORGON guards. They want out.

"Uhm...Yeah, boss, that's going to be a problem."

"I believe you're overlooking one significant resource in our tool-chest," Saifuddin interrupts. "One of us is an escape artist who *might* be able to pick a lock or two."

"Ta-da! Guilty!" Alexia bows. I motion and she gets to work, one lock at a time, an astonishing few seconds per lock. Twelve attempts, twelve open cell doors, over a hundred refugees to get out of here.

I jump up on a chair, stifling a scream when my leg reminds me that's a bad idea, to quiet them all down. "We are here to get you out," I shout, pausing to give the bilingual people a moment to translate for the others. We need to move quickly, though, and may need to fight our way out. If anybody feels safer staying, we disagree, but if so, you can and should return to your cell before any new guards arrive." Nobody does. In fact, several of them step forward.

"We will help you fight."

"Then let's move out. Stay close. Keep organized. Don't allow anybody to fall behind."

We run for the main door of the secret facility, still closed and still deactivated. Bill and I pull the door open. Tè pokes a camera out. The hall is clear back as far as the checkpoint. That's a good sign, for the first time in a while.

We file out the door and congregate in the interrogation room to pick up the equipment we left behind, including a large number of corrections officer uniforms and a handful of prisoner jumpsuits. This will be a much more difficult bluff than on the way in, but it's what we have to work with.

As we approach the guarded checkpoint, I see that Liang is still at the desk, meaning we might have a fighting chance, here.

"Multiple prisoner transfer to the front of the shop," I offer. "Problem with the plumbing in Cell-Feoh, back there." I didn't check to see how the cells were named, but naming them after runes *sounds* like the kind of approach to things that GORGON and the Clan of the Fiery Cross would agree on, at least.

"I'm not sure we have room up here. Can I see your authorization?" I'm about to mime searching my pockets for the paperwork, when he continues, "wait a second, weren't you the prisoner being interrogated?"

“Obviously, I gave them the right answers and got a promotion.” Instead of laughing, he reaches for his keyboard. I see the refugees tense up and I wave them down. “OK, look, I overheard you before. There’s no love lost between you and the jackasses who work back there, because you know they’d just as soon have you in a cell, too. These people have been here illegally, as part of a trafficking ring. So, if you can see your way to turning a blind eye for a couple of minutes, you would literally be helping to make the world a better place.”

“I don’t like this. I could get in a lot of trouble, and if you’re right, their kind of trouble is dangerous. Now, if one of you were to knock me unconscious without doing too much damage, I wouldn’t really have much of a choice in the matter, though.”

I shake his hand. “We’ll be in touch. You may want a better job, come morning, and I think you’re meant for better things.”

Alexia slips behind him and puts him in a choke-hold until he passes out.

Bill pipes up. “Shift change in two minutes.” I knew we had taken too long, that *I* had taken too long, but was still hoping we could be out the door by the time twenty-something fresh GORGON guards come flooding through the area.

The lock on the door to our left clicks. Looks like it's show time, ready or not. "Everybody, go! Turn right and stay quiet." I start waving people through. I wave to Tè to push Liang under the desk and replace him. The last of our people is just moving through when the door opens and the GORGON guards start coming out. "...right in the foot," I exclaim for the benefit of the guards. "So, my foot bloodied, now I gotta find a flight of stairs for the little monster to fall down a couple of times, and I'll tell you, that ain't easy with all these cameras." Tè takes the hint and reactivates the security systems further into the complex.

"Out of the way, slacker. Some of us have important work to do," the lead guard spouts off.

I shrug. "Union rules. Sorry."

"Unions. Pfft. You should just learn how to negotiate, like a *man*. Wait. Who in blazes are you? I have seen files for this wing and you are not in them." He pulls out a card reader. "Give me your identification card."

I look over at Tè while I mime checking my pockets. He gets the message and runs a quick command on his tablet. "Stop stalling, swine," the GORGON creep raises his gun, the guards behind him unsurprisingly apathetic at the implied threat of murder.

And then the cavalry arrives, or the simulated cavalry, at least. One after the other, the five explosive packs

explode, right where we stashed them in the secret wing's walls. Several of the guards shout "Waa er dē t?" and I attempt to join in to not look too far out of place.

The lead guard barks orders at the others, who run into the other wing, weapons raised. The whole point is to sound and look like an escape, after all. But the guard remains behind and pushes me against the wall, his rifle in my ribs. "Who do you work for!?"

"I—I work for Flint, just like you," I plead, Mom's melodrama showing in full force. "And I got my job through completely real channels, not just because I'm Flint's cousin's step-grandson like some of those jerks in Human Resources keep saying." He's still raging out—probably on some sort of drug—but he slowly lowers his rifle. There's nothing scarier to a lot of these people than the prospect of offending a member of some rich racist's self-entitled family. I know, because I grew up thinking that described me, only recently discovering that the family wasn't racist. Well, it's more that they're not *deliberately* racist, at any rate, and they do try to correct themselves when they put their feet in their mouths. The point is, I know a little something about nepotism and fascists.

I'm getting off topic, here, and the rifle predictably comes back up. "The boss wouldn't dig it if, like, one of the president's favorite extended family members

had to file for workman's comp. Forget about what *his* bosses might say."

He lowers the rifle again and our freed prisoners swarm in to take the jerk down. He goes down almost instantly, which is good, because I'm only just barely hanging on. One of our new friends grins at me. "Cũ cĩo bona, estro?"

I nod and put my hand on his shoulder. "Dankegon." After all this, I'm surprisingly thankful for a lot in my life, but mostly for the rescue.

After securing the guard, we rejoin the rest of the group. "We're not done, yet," I explain. "We have a couple of minutes to catch our breath, but we still have miles to go and more guards outside. Shall we?" They cheer, which is probably not the smartest idea given our surroundings, but as far as enthusiasm goes, I'm on board.

We head for the supply closet out front that we used to stash our gear and change back into the more forgiving and utilitarian outfits we wore on the way in. I break out packs of more comfortable clothing than prison jumpsuits for the rest of our group and, having passed them out, start inflating the sledge. The quads barely got five of us through the pipeline, and we can't exactly have a hundred more people ride along, let alone the number of oxygen tanks we'd

need to keep them out of that polluted air. But wrapping them in a cushioned air pocket, they'll be fine for the few minutes we're pulling them along.

Everything ready, Fāng hits his panic button to activate every alarm in the facility and we move out, all of us carrying the inflated sledge to the pipeline. A couple of guards remain, many of them unfortunately cut down by friendly fire and many more called away to other emergencies or simulated emergencies we called. That's the good news.

The bad news? Our quads are trashed, probably hit with grenades in addition to getting pretty thoroughly shot through. About all that can be done is set the charges to blow them up after we're gone, to minimize the evidence or technology that GORGON might be able to access.

"A change of plans, everybody. We have a twenty mile walk ahead of us without our expected protection. I'll cover the rear. If you see anybody struggling, help them along. I admit that it'll be tough, but I can't help but suspect that it might be tougher to stay here."

The remaining guards finally start to notice us. One runs back into the prison, while the others take position behind some debris to take aim. "Everybody go, now!"

Our people start filing into the pipeline. First five enter, then ten. The guards fire a volley of shots. I realize I've been carrying around one of the GORGON rifles, so while I'd rather not reduce this mission to a shoot-out and risk manslaughter, I send out...what's the phrase, suppressive fire? I try to keep them on the defensive, while we evacuate. Thirty through. Forty through. The guards try to advance, but I've gotten the hang of the aim on this thing to shoot in front of them without hitting any of them, penning them in.

Sixty through. Seventy-five. Ninety.

Another barrage comes through, hitting one of the straggling young men. A woman helps him through. I shoot back, seriously tempted to aim right at them, at this point, but I manage to restrain myself. We're over a hundred through.

I take one last try at pushing them back, when I realize I'm out of ammunition. I grab our remaining stragglers to get them into the pipeline and throw the rifle at the guards like I'm a criminal in a comic book. It probably won't help, but it's surprising cathartic. Anyway, time to go!

We're about half a mile in when the guards reach their end of the pipeline. I pause and turn to make sure our preparations work. As they get a small distance in, the concussion explosives we planted detonate, throwing them

back. If we did our jobs right, we calibrated the explosives to just hurt them a lot instead of killing them.

A couple of seconds later, though, the shock wave from the explosions hit us, too, knocking most of us down. Could be worse, but it's not great for the fellow who got shot, certainly, and I feel it in my leg. From now on, it'll need to be shaped charges only for this sort of work.

We recover, helping one another to our feet, and push ahead.

Another mile down the way, more guards enter the pipeline. The crowd passes one of the other collected rifles back to me to hold the guards off. I need to come closer to hitting them, this time, since they're not as easily scared off, not to mention a limited range to aim. And they also take shots at us. We start running, even though there's no chance of keeping this pace up for long.

The next mile brings a realization that we still have a resource available. "Hacker," I say, hoping our communications are still working in here, "can you control the drones from here?"

"Not from inside a metal pipe, boss. But there should be an open seam in a few hundred feet. I'll run up ahead and try from there."

Every hundred feet or so, I fire off another burst at the guards. We're slowing down, but there's no reason they to just *let* them catch up to us.

After a while longer, I pass the seam that Fāng mentioned, and see that he has rigged up some sort of a relay station that probably allows him to broadcast his signal to outside the pipeline. If it's still here, that probably means he made contact. And given their speed and how far in we've gotten...

Roughly another mile, off in the distance, I can hear the drones coming, apparently undamaged in the fight. It's impossible to see the details at this distance, but from the sound of it, Fāng has the drones strafing our pursuers with rubber bullets, pushing them forward from their position to avoid the pain but unable to push forward due to my rifle.

Then, to the microphone, I figure we might as well make their position more difficult. "Hacker, do those drones still have the audio?"

"They do, boss. Let's see how it sounds," he laughs. And then, off in the distance beyond the guards, tinny speakers come alive.

I am never known to quail

At the fury of a gale,

And I'm never, never sick at sea!

What, never?

No, never!

What, never?

Hardly ever!

...and so forth. I let them stew in another verse and some of *I'm Called Little Buttercup*. Psychological warfare to go with the physical harassment, since they don't exactly seem like Gilbert and Sullivan fans.

"Surrender," I call out.

"Why would we ever surrender to a mob storming a prison?"

"These men and women have been held illegally. If you only work for Flint Consolidated, you won't have anything to fear from us. If you work on Flint's *other* project, we'll turn you over to the proper authorities. You might also notice that we also have you surrounded." Honestly, I'm tired and my foot is only getting worse. Fifteen more miles or however much it is to the other end won't be easy, even less easy with these clowns in our trail.

They pause and have a quick debate amongst themselves. "OK, let's talk."

"No negotiation. You surrender. We capture you and treat you humanely. Well, as humane as a twenty mile

walk can be. I repeat: We won't harm you and you're on the wrong side of this argument in every respect."

"...Fine."

"Guns down. Come forward slowly."

The drones stop firing. They start walking towards us when, about halfway over, one of the guards slips on the metal. As he goes down, his finger squeezes the trigger of his rifle. We can all hear the ricochets. The bullet needs to come out somewhere, though, nailing me right in the leg.

Suspecting a betrayal as I fall over, somewhere around a dozen of our new group rushes out, braving more gun-fire to capture the guards. For their trouble, the guards are beaten and then forced to the front of our little caravan. One of the former prisoners approaches me.

"Give me your hand. We will fix that wound and carry you," she says.

"I can't let you do that. We're here to help *you*, not to add to your burdens. I'll walk. It's only a few hours to the other side."

"A few hours can be the difference between life and death. You also already helped us and you have already forgotten that we have spent the last months

at a forced labor camp for eighteen-hour days. *You* are not a burden, my friend.”

That’s the nicest anybody could have possibly said to me, in this situation, so I’m glad I heard it before I pass out.

The Purity of the Turf

I come to a few more miles in, what seems like it's probably somewhere near the halfway point. Both legs throb and are tied up in assorted improvised first aid devices. It should go without saying that I don't stay conscious for long, just long enough to moan and possibly scream in pain.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, I have dreams of monstrous bats diving from the night sky doing battle with snake-headed beauties. I dream of Bertram, my ancestor, watching his parents die and dedicating his life to freeing oppressed people around the world. I dream of Bertram's friend, Bruce Fordyce, using his technology to assassinate—murder—people he saw as a threat to progress. I dream of Nana Isla appearing in a puff of smoke to arrest criminals. I dream about those classic comic book heroes—the Madame Stranges, the Clocks, the Blue Bolts—coming to life and suddenly needing to understand the law and post-traumatic stress better than a lazy writer would want to. I dream of threatening my friends, scaring them to get them to run away from me, then despairing at my loneliness. I dream of being a child again, held like I'm flying by a laughing old man whose skin is red and scaly. I dream of the bright future the Nick Liangs and the Jawaras of the world can have, if we can only dismantle the ideas and

systems holding them back. I dream about playing chess against a man in a black robe, which a bit more derivative than I usually prefer, as metaphors go. But most of all, I dream about falling, falling endlessly with no end in sight, half-wondering why my life isn't flashing in front of my eyes and feeling like I'm just on the verge of some kind of a revelation in that respect.

In my lucid moments, assuming I'm not just dreaming about being carried through a pipe, too—what would have to be the most disappointing fantasy life imaginable—it finally sinks in just how much information I've had to absorb. It finally sinks in how many changes I've had to make, the completely different life I lead. And it sinks in how much prouder I am of my family and the struggle I have ahead of me to be worthy of what they do, what *I* do, now, too.

I slowly regain consciousness, finally. I'm still in a fog and still in all kinds of pain, but I think I can make out the end of the pipeline, off in the distance. That's at least five hours I've been out, assuming a brisk walking speed. Somewhere along the way, someone had the probably smart idea of tying me to some sort of board to keep my body steady.

"How are we doing," I ask.

One of the men responds. "It has been mostly quiet. One of the guards tried to hurt one of your people and

escape, but she is back under control. Another patrol tried to follow us, but Fojaist,” he gestures to someone out of my field of vision, “held them off and chased them back. And Mnoqislasch,” he gestures at another one further ahead, “is trying to learn the songs from your drones. Right, Slaschi?”

Further away, I hear, “The hours creep on apace, my guilty heart is quaking! Oh, that I might retrace the step that I am taking. Its folly it were easy to be showing, what I am giving up and whither going...” The pronunciation on some of the vowels is a little bit off, I guess, but I’m barely able to form complete words, so I shouldn’t really criticize, even silently.

The original man continues. “We were also able to remove the bullet from your leg and stop the bleeding; Dunspri says it was a flesh wound and you should be fine. We also cleaned the wound on your foot. You should be safe.”

“Thank you. And thank you,” I try to wave my hand to the underside of whatever I’m tied to, “for carrying me for so long a trip.”

“You took more risk to save us.” I think he bows, but I can’t quite see that far. “We could do no less than carry you when you are in trouble.”

I realize that I’m hungry, that after at least six hours, everybody must be hungry, and that we never

planned for such a long trip; this leg of the journey was always meant to last fifteen minutes at most. I suppose that the upside is that walking makes much less noise than speeding through here on motor vehicles, so we're much less likely to tangle with the Air Force again.

As we get closer to the exit, I feel the caravan moving me further towards the front, angling my body so that I can see more than the pipe moving above me. Several people grab my shoulder as I pass as a show of support.

"I'm glad to see you're still with us, Honcho," Saifuddin beams. Next time, we definitely need better codenames. H-words sounded like an amusing theme last night, but that was probably after a couple of drinks.

"I'm pretty happy with that, myself, given the alternative. The folks back there filled me in as well as they could. Quite the talented bunch: Doctors, soldiers, singers..."

"They're very talented, yes. You didn't even meet the engineer, the pilot, or the novelist. The job would've been a lot easier if we had them on the way in. Well, you know what I mean." He laughs at the stumble.

We're definitely down to somewhere around the last mile, the end of the pipeline in sight. The Sun has

come up, which could have gone better. I'd really rather not be this conspicuous in broad daylight. A hundred or so human trafficking victims sneaking out of a detention facility would be interpreted as the sort of group that the various South Jefferson authorities aren't particularly fond of.

In fact, even though we're near the end, so close to freedom for our new friends, I can't help thinking of all our problems. I missed obvious complications that set us back. I didn't think to have a way to feed my guests, after weeks or months of treatment I can't even imagine. I didn't think to continue the phony construction work so that we could have getaway vehicles standing by. The throbbing in my leg reminds me that I didn't even think to bring a medical kit, as if we're all invulnerable. And that reminds me that I'm not the only one of our group who was hurt.

"Histrion, how has the young man been doing, the kid that the GORGON agents managed to shoot before we escaped? I don't think I saw him as they passed me up here."

"Thankfully, Odesl was only grazed in the shoulder. They patched him up and he's been moving along fine ever since. He helped carry you for half an hour or so, even."

“Thank goodness for small favors.” For the first time, I notice a few people ahead, the guards we were forced to take prisoner. “What about them?”

“The clowns got pretty well banged up after that one shot you. Our friends rushed off to avenge you and didn’t *quite* have your philosophy of only using violence as a last resort. Another tried to make a break for it and got a bloody nose for his trouble. I think we’ve convinced our guys to stop beating people up, even if they happen to be really annoying.”

“I *did* apologize for firing the gun. It was an accident,” the former guard pleads.

Saifuddin jogs up to the front of the pack and brings the guard—just a kid, really—back to where we were talking. “You apologized to some of us. Maybe try apologizing to the man whose leg you shot, now.”

“You’re right. Sir, I’m very sorry about hurting you, earlier. We had every intention of surrendering, but I fell over and my fingers reflexively clutched. Unfortunately, one of those fingers was still on the rifle trigger. But you were right. We all had some idea of that secret camp in the back, but we all assumed it was for the really dangerous prisoners. I think all of us are done with Flint, if there’s any proof that we’re not doing the right thing.”

“Just the fact that you’re detaining refugees should have been the first clue that something was wrong,” I offer.

His eyes widen in a way that suddenly worries me. “President Hepler told us in his toots that people would say things exactly like that to undermine his war on the gangs and conspiracies that have been carried across the border by the secret cabal of radical Bilphists! They’re not like you and me. They don’t have the same rules for us as they do for themselves, you know, and they hold it over our heads by hoarding their wealth and controlling the media. You can’t trust any of them!”

Sigh. It almost seemed like I was going to get through to the kid for a split-second, there, but a lot of Hepler’s fans are going to require a lot of long-term deprogramming to puncture through the constant stream of propaganda he feeds everyone, through social media and his allies in media. “Head back to the front of the group. I’ve heard enough of those sorts of lies to last a lifetime.” Saifuddin escorts him and returns.

“Sorry about that. He really seemed like a good egg up until that mustache-twirling monologue.”

“He’s redeemable. I’m sure of it, just like a lot of the population isn’t beyond the reach of simple

compassion. But, he's definitely no good to us—no good to anybody, really, except President Hepler and his cronies—believing those sorts of bigoted lies.”

We finally reach the end of the pipeline, sun filtering in. Our captured guards walk out first, but as soon as they're lit with sunlight, I scream out as they fall, gunned down by somebody outside.

“No! Everybody get back! It's a trap,” I hear myself hoarsely shouting, half panicked for not being able to get involved from this position.

The entire group shuffles back, except for the couple of the group that have been carrying seized rifles, preparing to hold off anybody who tries to rush us. Another hail of bullets crosses the entrance, but thankfully doesn't hit anyone. Damn! They've had almost an entire work-day to investigate all our quick misdirection and come up with a real plan, while we were trapped with only one possible way out. Of *course* they're waiting for us.

“Someone tell me we have something to help with this mess that *isn't* a spirit of adventure and righteousness!” I need to stop shouting. That can't be good for anybody.

“Presumably, the Silver Bat itself will fly through to help, once someone realizes we're here, if we can hold out that long,” Alexia explains.

“Do we have any leftover equipment? I’d like to be able to hold out that long.”

“At last count, we had six rifles, one of which was out of ammo. There’s also a smoke grenade someone scavenged from the wrecked quads, an extra explosive charge, the night-vision gear, and a couple of the oxygen tanks. With a little bit of time, we should be able to get one of the drones flying again, too.”

“All right. Get the drone working. I’m not sure I definitely know what to do, but the more options we have, the better. And speaking of options, someone untie me from this thing. I won’t be much use on the ground, granted, but I’ll be less than useless if I need three people to coordinate just to move me around.”

They cut me loose and, probably entirely predictably, the second my feet touch the ground I want nothing more than to collapse and scream in pain. This is going to be rough, but at the very worst, only one person needs to drag me around, like this, and it’s easier for me to convince them to cut their losses if it looks like it makes more sense for them to leave me behind.

“Hacker, how far back is the nearest seam in the pipeline?”

“Yeah, boss. Three miles back, maybe?” Probably too far.

“Any chance the seam was open?”

“No, this half was pretty well sealed to keep the Air Force Base from noticing us on the way in.” That’s pretty much exactly what I was afraid of, but there’s another route to this that’s feasible, but not nearly as easy.

“Someone grab me a tablet. Two, rather. And anything like a light rope we can find, like whatever you used to lash me to that board. At least fifty feet.” I get the tablets and confirm that they have cameras. “Hacker, can you connect these so that we can see the view from one camera on the other tablet? Maybe record it?” A memory stirs from an old science class. “And is anybody here very near-sighted? The worse, the better. You know what I mean.”

“We can get a recording, for all the good it’ll do,” Tè says, getting to work as Bill hands me a pair of glasses.

“My vision should be the worst, here, for people who can...y’know, *see*. I have contacts in for now, but you break’em, you buy’em.”

“I think it’s probably in the budget, but I don’t think this’ll be permanent. Well, OK, it *might* get shot or blown up. Thanks!”

I disassemble the glasses and rig something up to hold the two lenses together, looking through to make sure it’ll be better than nothing. It’s certainly not great, but it’s not like we can run out to a camera shop.

Tè hands one tablet back to me and I secure the lenses to it. Someone hands me a chain of various straps and other lengths of fabric, which I tie to the tablet. Grabbing the useless rifle, I creep near the end of the pipeline, trying not to scream in pain with every step. Nobody reacts, so I assume I’m successful in that, at least.

Crouching down, I toss the table out into the light and nudge it as far as I can with the rifle. Another barrage of gunfire peppers the area, but not as much as when there were people visible.

Tè shows up with the other tablet. The disassembled glasses make an extremely mediocre fish-eye lens, giving us an image that isn’t just showing us some clouds.

The image is terrible, but...I hang a helmet on the rifle barrel to show it, predictably getting the GORGON people or whoever they are to shoot. They

hit a couple of times and it feels like I'm going to damage an arm to go with my bad legs.

I reel the tablet back in and review the recording. "All right. Once they started shooting, they jiggled the camera enough to show us that they're over there," I point off to the right and hand the makeshift wide-angle lens off to Bill. "No bullet holes, so I should be able to put it all back together once we're not all about to die."

Hm. We're going to need a distraction. "Grab me the board you had me tied to, and let's say," I find myself snapping to try to get myself to focus, which isn't a great habit, "let's say two of the rifles. Secure them to the board."

While they're doing that, the other arts and crafts project is to secure the explosive charge to the drone, now that it's working again.

When I rig up a few knots on the board with the rifles, I think we're ready to go, or at least as ready as we're going to get.

We throw the grenade out, releasing billows of smoke for cover as the gun-men out there start firing blind. Once it's no longer possible to see through the smoke, I heave the rifles out into the line of fire. Pulling the cord, our rifles start returning blind fire. It won't hit anything like this, but it's pointing roughly in their

direction, so it should look something like our making a break for it.

And that's where we launch the drone. Tè steers it to the left, then backward. If our would-be attackers are focusing on the rifles firing at them, we should be able to get that far enough away to pull this off.

"Pull up high," I suggest. "We don't want it in anybody's hair when it goes off, but we definitely want it seen."

Watching its position on the map move further and further away, I see it getting closer to what we think is going to be a good target.

"Now!" Tè executes the command. A few seconds later, off in the distance, the shockwave from an explosion rocks the pipeline. Seconds after that, sirens sound. We managed to wake up the Air Force. They won't be happy, so it's more than a little bit important that we're not visible when the unwitting cavalry shows up.

Our rifles stop firing, so I pull the sled back in. "Everybody back! Things are going to get a lot worse out there before they get better, so let's get clear, at least half a mile in." I lean on Saifuddin as I bumble my way back. Sitting would be a very good idea, right now.

As we settle in, we hear jets flying overhead, gunfire increasing in frequency and the first bombs shaking the pipeline.

“Further back! We don’t want to deal with a direct hit.” It’s dangerous, but it’s less dangerous for us than trying to escape or sitting here for another six hours.

The fight rages on outside, surprisingly long, given that GORGON or whoever is out there is risking exposure to the United States Armed Forces by fighting in the open, and are potentially exposing Flint Consolidated. That exposure would be good for us, but a particularly bone-headed move on the part of the agents, unless I’m missing something. Maybe they’re just not carrying ID, trying to make it look like run-of-the-mill militia fools taking potshots near the super-secret military base. It’s not like that would be out of the ordinary, with the way President Hepler talks about those people as the only real Americans.

While we wait, I reassemble Bill’s glasses, mostly. It’s not perfect, of course. We didn’t bring a first aid kit, so of course we didn’t bring little eyeglass repair kits, but I’m doing as well as I can with the lousy tools available.

Ultimately, the fighting subsides. We still hear the jets overhead, but the bombs and guns seem to have stopped. When the jets finally disperse, we wait a bit

longer to ensure that there isn't another attack waiting for us. And we all tense up when we see a lone figure walking towards us, hands up. Behind me, I hear a rifle cock and I wave my hand down to suggest we stand down until we know what's next.

"I come in peace," Major Guerrero says, crisply, saluting. "When I heard the alarm, I figured that something must have gone wrong with your in-and-out plan and figured you might need help with the cleanup." His Silver Bat ring glitters in the weak light in here.

I struggle to my feet to return the salute. "That'd be very appreciated, Major."

"Now, you might want to know that, while we were taking care of some...little group of vandals out there, Kinneson Air Force Base needed a fairly significant delivery of groceries and construction supplies for normal operations. Unfortunately, when I walked in here, I noticed that one of the trucks got a flat tire, probably punctured it on a sharp stone. So, I hope you folks, here, in the pipeline construction industry don't mind, but I suggested they park at the end of the pipeline to change that tire."

It takes a while for Guerrero's plan to sink in. The pain must be getting to me. "Ladies and gentlemen," I announce, "let's move out. Our ride is here."

Guerrero helps me up and supports me the mile or so walk to the exit. The sunlight pleasantly burns the skin on my face after being cooped up in the pipe for so long. As my eyes adjust, an older woman approaches us from the truck.

“Hlaing Yee Nilar, sir,” she introduces herself in a heavy British accent, showing her Silver Bat ring when she shakes my hand. “It’s unorthodox, but Major Guerrero mentioned that you folks might need a ride, and seeing as how one of you is my new boss, it seems like getting you closer to home is a good way to make sure Wooster Amalgamated doesn’t go under from mismanagement. Oh, since it looks like you might need some rest, you might want to know that it’s not much, but I have a small bed behind the main cab.”

Hliang reminds me quite a bit of my mother. In a good way, I mean.

“Appreciated, but I’d like to stay with the rest of the group after everything we’ve been through together.”

She lowers the rear gate, providing a ramp up into the empty trailer. “Fair enough. If you change your mind, it’s not pleasant to try this while the truck is moving, but there’s a hatch in the front of the trailer that you can use to get into the cab. Let’s get you all settled so that we can move.”

She and Guerrero help me up first, then bring the rest of us in, one at a time. I shake Guerrero's hand again, promising to come back for lunch with him, after my leg has healed. He leaves while the rest of us sit and the truck starts moving.

Managing the Old Bump and Run

Once the truck has gained speed, we hear staccato sounds from outside as the trailer sways from side to side.

“Sorry about this, folks,” Hliang announces over a small speaker, “but it appears that we have attracted some attention and picked up a small stalker.” I wonder how long we’ve been taking on operations like this that Wooster Amalgamated cargo trailers are outfitted with a public address system. I guess my idea wasn’t as original as I thought it was.

Unwilling to sit out yet another threat to our new friends, I make my way forward to the hatch Hliang referred to. I grab our remaining couple of rifles and, finally with some pain-killers in my system to not need to scream in pain every time I move my leg, I claw my way across the tractor-trailer’s connector to the rear of the cab. From there, I climb over the bed and step between the two front seats to sit in the passenger seat.

“What’s our situation, ma’am?”

“Looks to be eight utility vehicles, all black, driving in formation. Apparently, their training comes entirely from bad action movies. They occasionally fire off a couple of shots or sideswipe us to convince me to get off the road. It’s not working.”

“Lovely. Well, let’s see if I can’t thin the herd a little bit.” I pat the dashboard. “Keep her steady, but move as fast as you can.”

“Will do!”

I roll down the window. A burst of gunfire flies by. Leaning out, I can make out three of their trucks that seem to be pushing to keep pace with us. I can’t be totally sure from this angle, but it looks like they have a black-on-black GORGON logo on their hoods. I suppose that could just be a trick of the light, though.

I carefully aim my rifle at the front of the nearest truck and pull the trigger, but the driver swerves right, dodging out of the way of my shot and trying to return fire.

As the lead truck pulls back into position, I take aim again. I fire low. Once again, the driver swerves out of the way, but this time, I pull the barrel towards the passenger side as I pull the trigger, catching the front-right tire. Said tire goes flat, forcing them off the road.

That’s one down, seven to go. Piece of cake. Sure, just keep telling myself that.

The second truck starts side-swiping the trailer, trying to disrupt Hliang’s driving, but by the looks of it, she’s been at this longer than I’ve been alive and so

she isn't particularly shaken. "Please," she says emphatically, as if she can hear my thoughts. "I drove this baby across two hurricanes, an ice storm, and more flash floods than I can recall. Side-swiping is barely even a mild nuisance.

I take a shot at them, confident that I learned some universal trick on the first truck right up until the driver changes speed and swerves in unexpected ways. I should've realized that they would learn from each other at least as fast as I'm trying to.

I get more aggressive. If the driver is good enough to evade, the best point to aim for is the center of the hood. I pull the trigger and the truck speeds up slightly, catching the bullet in the windshield. Another shot goes to the side of the hood, apparently with no internal damage. On the third attempt, a quick burst, the truck slows, taking the shots in the radiator. Steam spewing everywhere, the truck spins off the road as the engine overheats.

Six to go.

I duck back inside when I see the third truck's passengers hang out the windows, a hail of bullets flying by and shattering the side mirror.

"Try not to make right turns," I half-suggest with a grimace.

“I don’t know if I can promise that. Sometimes I do just have a strong hankering to veer right. And it’s not like we’re not insured...”

I hang out and take a quick shot. It goes wide and cracks their windshield on the passenger side. I dodge another incoming barrage and fire at the truck’s front grill. Another burst spreads hits across the hood. I apparently hit *something*, because the truck starts to fall behind.

Five to go: Three on the driver’s side, two behind.

Hliang waves me across. “You look skinny enough to fit behind my seat. I’ll try to keep out of your way if you don’t distract me.”

“That’s a hard bargain for gun play, but I’ll see what I can do.” I’m getting used to the pain in my legs, I think. I hope that’s the pain-killers doing their job instead of a sign that I’m doing more damage and need to get to a hospital immediately, even though I pretty clearly needed to do that, anyway.

When the bullets stop flying past the driver’s side window, I hang out my arm and head, behind Hliang, to see that the lead car is right below the door. With the driver unable to see me from this position, I take careful aim at the hood and let loose. Again, I hit something important that causes the car to slow

down quickly, the truck behind it rear-ending them and thankfully taking them both out.

Three to go.

“Hliang, one of the remaining trucks is right back there, but I haven’t seen the other two.”

“Don’t worry too much. They’re right behind us. I’m watching them on the rear-facing camera.” She points to a small screen on the dashboard.

“That’s something, at least, but they’re probably planning something.”

“True. My guess is that the goal is to follow us or maybe get someone on our rig if we get distracted. And that would probably be why I’m watching them like a hawk. Now get the bad guys to our left. The road gets rough up ahead and I think I have lasted this long in trucking primarily by limiting the number of catastrophes I need to deal with at any given time.”

Among many other regrets, this reliance on weapons that could easily kill someone if I miss even one shot seems extremely ill-advised. On top of that, none of us is great with these things. Either way, the family lore says that Fordyce tried to save the world by murdering people and we can all see how *that* turned out for him.

Anyway, one more time. I go all out on the engine, unloading the rifle into the hood and grill. I run out of ammunition and have a brief moment of panic, worrying that I've left us vulnerable, but the truck sputters and falls behind. It's still not great, but it's close enough, I guess. They're not shooting at us.

OK, two to go.

"Hliang, any thoughts on shaking our friends, back there? Shooting at them is no longer an option."

"As it turns out," she opens a hidden panel on the dashboard.

"No way!"

"Just so you have the context, here, I've been with the League since you were in diapers. You'll do fine with experience, but the first lesson really should be to prepare everything you can in advance."

She flicks one of the revealed switches and closes the panel back up. I hang out the passenger's side window to check out the floor show. An honest-to-goodness oil slick drops to the road behind us, the two black trucks behind us skid and spin out. I feel like a child, and not in a good way, once I realize that the sound I hear is myself cheering. Arm motions figure in, too. I knew I was exhausted, but this is precariously close to giddy.

“So, I realize you’re riding pretty high, right now, but it looks like we have some bad news,” Hliang interrupts my reverie. “Somewhere in that little fracas, one of those GORGON thugs shot up our gas tank. We’re not going to make it more than a couple more miles.”

“Do you have any recommendations?”

“Since you’re asking, an electric fleet would be really nice.” I really have to hope the jokes are because she’s actually confident and not faking it so I don’t panic. “Short of that, the best bet is probably to call for help and get another transport down here before the authorities notice us and start getting suspicious.”

“All right. None of our communications equipment has the kind of range it’d take to call Central. What do you have?”

“I have a radio and obviously my phone, but neither of them are secure channels.”

“So much for preparing everything in advance.”

“Touché.”

“Hm. OK, let’s go with the radio. It’s not ideal, but it won’t leave any records of a call, which should minimize the fallout.”

“I like the way you think, kid. I should probably update the passengers, too.” She explains our predicament to the group and then gets on the radio, connecting with Starcross Shipping with a truck in the area and explaining that our cargo is highly secretive with a severe time-pressure. It’s risky, but there’s a lot more risk in repeating our calls, and I’m vaguely certain I’ve heard that Starcross Shipping was a Wooster subsidiary at some point. Expecting to wait for about an hour, we have our people get comfortable and settle in.

We cheer when it’s only about half that predicted hour when the Starcross rig screams down the highway and comes to a shockingly abrupt stop alongside us.

“Ahoy, someone needs a ride? Julia Cole and Starcross Shipping, at your service.”

“Thanks for getting here so soon, ma’am. You’re OK with the cargo being kept secret?”

“Sure thing. You load it here and unload it at the depot, and I won’t see a thing or ask questions as long as you promise to indemnify us.”

“You’ve made yourself a deal.”

We’re able to quickly organize everybody to quietly move from one trailer to the other. This one isn’t designed for living cargo, unfortunately, so it’s stuffy

and there's no way to get word out in an emergency, but it should do for a short haul. I close the trailer door, say our goodbyes and thanks to Hliang who'll be staying with her truck and calling in for service, and get in the cab with Cole as we get moving.

"You look pretty dehydrated," Julia points out, not incorrectly after what must be close to ten hours without anything like a real rest. "Grab a water bottle from behind the seat before you crumble to dust." We take off down the highway and, as I guzzle the water, off the side mirror, it looks like another truck is pulling up alongside Hliang's. That must be the fuel and repairs she needed.

She continues. "So, where are we heading?"

"There's a Wooster Amalgamated facility up this way. My organization has an account with them, so from there, I can get the cargo to where it needs to be and not tie you up any more than necessary."

"Oh, that's OK. My next pickup is in this direction, so it's not out of the way at all. Protein bar?" Also not the worst idea. I only wish I could admit that we're hauling over a hundred dehydrated, hungry, and exhausted people so we could start solving some of those problems instead of just taking care of myself.

The little bit of food and water does wonders for me, and for the first time in hours, I'm able to rest without

passing out in pain. I'm extremely relaxed, in fact. My arms and legs feel heavy and I can only barely feel the pain in my legs at all. I must be far more tired than I even realized, my eyes on the verge of closing, so close to dozing off that it doesn't quite register when we continue on at full speed right past the Wooster Amalgamated shipping yard.

"I...think," I try to push out the words around a tongue that doesn't seem interested in working. "Ms. Cole, I think...we maybe passed the...Wooster...uhm, place."

"Good catch. I'm surprised you can focus on anything with the amount of tranquilizer in the protein bar and water."

Concealed Art

I want to say that my mind is racing. It certainly feels that way, but the fact of the matter is that I can barely string two words together, so “racing” is relative. Trapped. Failed. I might as well have signed death warrants for people I thought I was saving, not to mention four people I hand-picked for this mission.

Soon enough, I drift back out of consciousness. At least, that’s the hope, since I would much rather that getting swallowed by a giant snake and set on fire is just another dream. There’s a lot of that sort of thing. There’s a lot of someone cutting off my feet while I impotently watch. There’s a whole lot of running to get to the people I’m responsible for, but falling further away with every last step or being unable to find my way into a Wooster Amalgamated facility with an obvious door.

Eventually—I can’t even guess how long—I come to. I’m still foggy around the edges, but can see, hear, and mentally name things. That’s an upgrade, at least. “Wh—What?” It’s the best I can get out.

“Interesting. All that tranquilizer in your system, and you managed to be back among the living in less than an hour. I have to say that I am quite impressed.”

“Live to serve,” I mostly spit out and try to reach for the steering wheel.

“What...is all this?” Wow, that was finally actually English-adjacent.

“You and your...*cargo*, as you called it, are very much desired by our friends at GORGON for your little jailbreak, last night. The word is that your team put on quite the performance. Once you have been interrogated, my superiors might want to sell you back to them or they might want to put you all to work for themselves, depending on your natural abilities.”

The implied racism of the phrase *natural abilities*, knowledge of GORGON’s Flint Consolidated operations, and the extremely deliberate twang to her accent all seem like they mark our Ms. Julia Cole as an agent for the Clan of the Fiery Cross. Again, I realize what a dolt I’ve been, not connecting the name *Starcross* to a *fiery cross* and, maybe worse, not realizing that the second truck arriving at nearly the same time as *Starcross* appeared might have been a pretty obvious sign that our entire escape was monitored by friend and foe alike.

Quickly diagnosing myself as well as I can, my vision has cleared, I can wiggle my fingers and make a fist, and I can wiggle my toes, although the pain is back in

both legs. The pain-killers must be wearing off. I feel like I've been saying this a lot over the last two hours, but it could be worse, albeit not much, and it'll have to do.

I try to goad her. "So, let me guess, the difference between you and GORGON is that your work camps are decorated with Greek columns and murals, and the overseers are so very polite when they whip their unpaid, forced employees?"

"The difference is that we treat our prisoners humanely. We recognize the humanity in everybody. It's just that science tells us that certain strains of humanity are meant for manual labor and some are meant to lead and enforce." If I can keep her eyes focused on the road, maybe I can work some impromptu magic with what's very literally at hand.

"Right, the fact that the science you're citing has been discredited and surpassed for more than a century should in no way impact your belief in it, so long as you invoke the word *science*, itself."

"It is the politically correct, Godless modernist that has perverted science, making it an idol to be worshipped rather than a tool to support worship." So, that seems to be your all-purpose crazy talk. I'm starting to see how some of these societies have

survived for so long despite consistently being on the losing side of every single fight.

I slowly reach behind my seat, trying not to move the rest of my body to hide the motion. “So, your position is that science is right where it supports your beliefs but wrong where it corrects you? That sounds very convenient.”

“There are things that we can determine to be true and there are things we need to trust are true, because we know them deep inside. I wouldn’t expect your kind to understand the subtleties.” She’s convinced that the group’s narratives have some sort of emotional truth that’s more important than perceptions.

I grip and twist my fingers opposite her. “Hang on. What, exactly, is my kind?”

“It’s not your fault, of course, but your blood line is very clearly impure. Your body is tainted by divergent evolutionary backgrounds, reducing space where intellectual pursuits might be maintained. We could help you overcome those deficiencies, however, if you choose to join us. Our regional director has instituted a program to burn the impurities out of a body, disconnecting each of us from our lesser ancestors.”

Well, I’ve heard enough. I switch hands and swing my now-open water bottle out, splashing Cole as I throw

it straight at her. Luckily, I catch her off-guard, I guess wrapped up in her racist monologuing. As she flinches, I jump for the steering wheel, pulling it to the side.

She recovers and lashes out. I had hoped that she was only a driver, but no, of course she's also a trained fighter. Either that, or I'm still too groggy. Her arm comes down on my elbow, snapping my hand away from the wheel. I grapple, pulling her away from the seat and elbowing her in the lower ribs.

The truck starts to swerve out of control. It's a choice that endangers the people in my charge, but at this point, it's much more important to distract the driver from endangering their freedom than avoid whatever broken bones we'll be able to heal. I suspect I can also rely on Alexia to keep them mostly safe, too. Besides not being a crazy fanatic who thinks I'm inherently superior, I have the huge advantage, here, in that I'm not working alone. I don't need to.

I swing and connect with her jaw, probably not with as much force as I need to stun her, as she plows into my gut. She twists my leg and I shriek in pain. Fighting through the pain, I reach out to grab Julia's shoulder and let myself drop between the seats, throwing her to the side. She recovers faster than I do and has the high ground, so I push myself up as quickly as I can, take the punishment as she punches,

and finally get her in a choke-hold until she loses consciousness.

One problem down. Unfortunately, the new problem is that we're careening out of control at highway speeds. As I get my bearings, I see the shoulder on either side of the road fall away, giving no room for mistakes.

I may regret this later, but I buckle into the driver's seat. I take hold of the wheel to stop the bucking, and tap the brakes.

Nothing. Yeah. That tracks.

I down-shift, hoping to at least slow us down and probably stripping a gear along the way, and then I see the downhill stretch ahead. Of course, that's the route we're going. Why would our crazy racist driver with a poorly inspected truck take us somewhere *easy*?

I try the brakes again, this time a little more forcefully. Still nothing. I down-shift again, hearing the engine revving. It looks like we're slowing down and, as long as the trailer doesn't jackknife on us, we might pull out of this.

We might, except that I can't cut the engine entirely. If a hundred and change people weren't in mortal danger, I'd joke about how this shouldn't be the hard

part of this mission. As it is, I'm on the verge of collapse.

As I'm trying the brakes one more time, carefully pushing the pedal all the way down and desperately hoping that some loose mechanical bit suddenly falls into place, I spot a parking brake. It's probably all or nothing, so it's risky, but it's either risk jackknifing or risk going off-road or plowing into traffic at some point. So, I pull on the knob, as slowly and as smoothly as I can manage. I check the mirrors like a paranoid teenager, desperately hoping the trailer stays behind us.

It starts to sway...just as we *finally* come to a stop, the trailer blocking three lanes.

I tie our Ms. Cole to the passenger seat, take the keys, and hop out of the cab. I'm not entirely sure what our next step is, but my next step needs to be to get our friends out of the truck. The hatch has a lock on it, of course, but I'm able to find the key.

"What in blazes was that all about," Bill asks?

"*Is* still about, unfortunately, Hawkshaw. Our rescuer turned out to be another not so great person who gave me an earful about selling the impure back to GORGON."

“You can drop the codenames,” Alexia points out. “When you’re trapped for an hour with a hundred people who have been through all this right alongside us, they’ve more than earned our names.”

“Definitely a fair point.” We move everybody off the side of the road. I scavenge through the cab to find a couple of blankets to keep the Sun off of us and a little bit of food and water that I suspect Cole didn’t drug. “I apologize it’s not much and I don’t know what our next step is, but it’s something. Everybody rest while we come up with a plan.”

I share the story with them, from driving by the Wooster Amalgamated depot and getting drugged to fighting Cole to finding the truck damaged and finally getting it to a complete stop.

“That explains the wild ride,” Tè says.

“I definitely regret not getting a commercial license. Of course, I also regret not having a more thorough plan. Doing this without backup systems for backup systems was insane.”

“We are *safe*, though,” Mnoqislasch points out, “and I even learned that Buttercup song!”

I really appreciate the sentiment, of course, but I can tell that’s a transparent lie. I mean, sure, Mnoqislasch probably does have the lyrics down, but sitting

around in the desert, already getting dehydrated, as we get close to noon? I'm not convinced that should be on the right side of anybody's definition of safety.

Honestly, after fights, stabbings, gun-fights, a car chase, and kidnapping, sitting out on the side of the road would be a truly obnoxious way to die. It's certainly not the story I want told at my funeral.

Nevertheless, we settle in, telling each other stories and singing songs. I learn about where they're from in Arceblanka, how GORGON has been using the jungle near their villages as places to train soldiers. I learn more about the threat to indigenous peoples from the area and their cultures. Even though I'm still struggling to stay awake, I try extra hard to focus and remember, whenever anybody talks about their hopes for the future, swearing to myself that Wooster Amalgamated will make every last one of those dreams come true. It was already part of the plan to resettle them and give them better lives, but after what I've put them through and after being accepted by them, I don't think I can accept anything but the best for any of them.

Soon, though, I see some of us tensing up. A couple stiffen at first and I briefly wonder if all the water was drugged, but they're still moving, just...worried, and that worry ripples through the group. I look over my shoulder to see why: Another tractor trailer is driving

down the highway, coming to a stop alongside Cole's truck. I tense up, too, knowing that this could easily be some bystander who's about to ask far too many questions or one of Cole's confederates.

A figure walks around the truck to our side and looks out. "The bat has mended its wing," a voice calls out in a thick enough British accent that it must be Hliang improvising a pass phrase. I wave her over, she and the man she introduces as Rajesh Kadam, the driver we should have waited for instead of getting on the Starcross truck. They carry a crate down to us, containing food, water, and more comfortable clothing.

"I'm sorry it took us so long to get out here," Hliang admits, "but I was suspicious when Raj showed up right after you had left and, once we figured out what had happened, it took a bit to piece together the reasons. Regardless, Raj's truck is finally ready to go when you are." She points at me. "Your mother personally vouched for him, told me how he saved her bacon in Krông Kmar, back in the day, unlike the woman you lashed to a seat with jackets, who has such charming things to say about your and my presumed parentage."

"She definitely wasn't as good a road-trip buddy as you were. She drugged me, insulted me, tried to rip my leg off. Did she try to recruit you? Apparently, the

Clan of the Fiery Cross has some sort of secret pseudo-science to pray the non-white away or some nonsense.”

“Oh, cool, so we didn’t miss anything, just a normal day on the job!” Yeah, Raj would absolutely get along well with my mother. I can already see that he’s definitely her kind of people.

“Well, that’s what everybody keeps telling me, but I find it hard to believe that any rescue goes this badly, let alone enough to make this one seem normal.”

“Oh, you have no idea, kid. Your grandfather needed to be rescued by a task force from a black site in Djinnistan. Your grandmother nearly started a civil war in Costaguana by leading factions too close to each other in her rush for the airstrip. I lost three people on the mission I led and it tore me up for years. There are so many ways any of this can go wrong, and something certainly will go wrong. Really, read the mission reports when we get back home, after you file your own. Look, we’re not superheroes, just people. Nothing in the League of the Silver Bat is ever straightforward and there’s always going to be one more thing you didn’t think of. It’s the nature of the work, but,” he emphatically gestures around to everybody around us, “every inconvenience, every panic, every injury is a very good price for even the slightly better world we get out of the bargain. Plus,”

again, he gestures around, “the disasters are when we have the time to get to know each other.”

“Well, that’s not exactly reassuring, but it’s... something, I guess. I’ll be right back.”

Clumsily, I walk over to Cole’s truck to check in on her. I notice that Raj and Hliang replaced my improvised knotting with handcuffs. She wakes up as I enter the cab and immediately starts struggling.

“What’s your plan? What are you going to do to me, swine? Torture me for other members of my lodge? Force me into an interracial, lesbian relationship? Kill me?”

“Do you really think our goal is to hurt anybody? We have gone—*I* have personally gone—out of my way to hurt as few people as possible, and I only harmed you, because it was the only way to stop the truck and save my friends.”

“Sure, tell me another story. We all know that the world’s goal is to destroy us, exile us from the mainstream society that our ancestors and predecessors built with the sweat of our brows!”

“Sweat of *your* brows? Are you maybe forgetting who did most of the labor in the areas you’re talking about? I’ll give you a hint: You wouldn’t allow them to join your little club. Face it: Your underworld

societies are poisoning your minds, making you think you're constantly under siege."

"The Leftists and Globalists are always using violence to—"

"Can you name a single incident?"

"The media is protecting the perpetrators."

"I think you know that's a lie, just like I think you know that you're told to fear us to prevent you from having conversations exactly like this one. To answer your original question, friends of mine are going to have some questions for you so that we can protect our operations. We might refer you to the licensing board, since your truck is in terrible shape. If the District Attorney is interested, we'll refer you for kidnapping me and trying to hijack my cargo. We'll give you the opportunity to learn things the Clan of the Fiery Cross doesn't want you to know. But in the end, if you want, we'll turn you loose in San Grobiano to go wherever you please. If you want a new identity for a fresh start without all the hate, instead, ask. We mostly want you to be happy and healthy and so does the country, even though you claim to not be interested in the reverse. I hope you understand. It's primarily the secret societies that are out for blood or bent on forcing their will on people."

I head back to the group. “All right. Everybody rested up? Then let’s finally get back on the road and get everybody where they need to be. All aboard!”

Absent Treatment

Raj gets us back to the Wooster Amalgamated depot without incident, and I have to admit that I'm almost shocked at the lack of betrayal, ambush, or sudden disaster. Workers at the depot split us up into much smaller groups, anywhere from three to eight in a batch, and parcelling us out into an assortment of unmarked cars and vans from the fleet, each with a driver selected a couple of days ago. Unlike the fiasco with someone beating Raj to us when we didn't know who to look for, these drivers have been vetted and identified.

The goal is to drive back to Quivira across a variety of routes to make us more difficult to track, while keeping in constant contact with Central so that we don't risk yet another surprise attack. It's another eight to twelve hours of driving, depending on conditions. It'll be a little bit more stressful, but we can't easily get a hundred undocumented people through security and onto commercial flights, a charter flight would be suspicious in this case, and everyone can finally get some sleep in the cars.

While I'm looking at the map with some of the drivers, Hliang arrives in her truck shortly after we do and I'm about to wish her luck when she reveals that she will be my driver once again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cole moved into a security patrol car. My understanding is that a doctor and psychiatrist will evaluate her, someone will try to debrief her, and she'll be handed off to the South Jefferson District Attorney to talk about the crimes for which there's actual proof. If the city thinks it's worthwhile, I'll come back to testify to the broad strokes of our kidnapping, carefully talking around why we were stranded on the side of the road and willing to get into a stranger's tractor-trailer. But that's all for another day.

Getting into the van assigned to us, a medic is waiting for us, Dr. Alaba Olaleke. She examines me first, not surprising, since I'm the one with a makeshift cane, splints, and bandages. Given the improvised treatment I've gotten and the punishment I've had to put my legs through in the last few hours, it's so obvious as to be barely worth mentioning that the good doctor isn't pleased with my state.

She pulls out her medical kit and pumps me full of antibiotics and pain-killers, then cleans and re-dresses my wounds, chiding me for not having done more to promote healing, as if this was my first choice.

After Dr. Olaleke is finished harassing me about not rushing to a hospital in the middle of a heist, she suggests that I try to sleep and moves on to check up

on the other passengers to make sure we haven't overlooked any problems or ignored any injuries. Other than some bruises, exhaustion across the board, and a possible cold, the rest of them seem fine and, knowing that, I can finally think about getting some sleep.

Of course, sleep never comes this easy when I'm this wired. I've been up for almost thirty hours and about half of that has been a consistent fight-or-flight state, including getting knocked out by both injury and drugs. But eventually, the monotony of the landscape and the exhaustion hit, lulling me into a real sleep for the first time in a while.

My dreams are a little more on-the-nose than I'd ordinarily expect: Running for extended periods without getting anywhere, being trapped while bad things happen around me, screaming when nobody can hear me, and falling forever with nothing to hold onto. The usual, basically. There's a decent chance the screaming isn't a dream, which is probably not going to endear me to the other passengers or Hliang. Either way, I suddenly feel like I'm being deprived of a better imagination with dreams like this.

When I wake up, it's pitch black outside, not surprising in the middle of the desert and well after dark. Only tiny indicator lamps on the dashboard providing anything like

detail inside the car.

“How are we getting along?” I try to whisper, but I’m groggy enough and it’s quiet enough that I have no idea how successful that is.

“We’re across the Saracinia state border, just a couple of hours outside of Quivira,” Hliang tells me. “If we don’t hit any disasters,” c’mon, don’t go and *jinx* it, “you might be able to sleep a few of hours in your own bed before breakfast. And according to our transit communications, only one car stopped off at a Wooster Amalgamated-owned garage to help one of the passengers with some sort of panic attack.” She flicks a tablet over her shoulder. It hits me square in the chest before I even realize it’s in the air. “But everybody else is an hour or less in any direction from here, about to plan our final routes into the city and to the Arcology or safe-houses. Even the delayed car is in constant contact to make sure we don’t lose track of them.”

“Very nice work. This is the third time you’ve saved our bacon.” I look at the screen to see the constellation of dots representing our cars and vans all heading generally towards the city limits. Maybe I need to de-stress, but at this point, I almost feel let down by the fact that nobody’s shooting at us or trying to run us off the road. I half-expected to wake

up in chains on a cement floor, the way this has been going.

“It’s all part of why we do this. Think about how many people you saved just yesterday, lives changed. Really think about that and let it sink in. Then think about a few decades of it. Just...try not to think about the pain and exhaustion, maybe. Definitely don’t think about needing to run from explosions.”

“Explosions? Seriously?” I can’t help laughing and hope I don’t wake anybody else.

“I mean, not every day, but it happens from time to time. Things explode. OK, mostly warehouses explode, for some reason. Secret societies *love* to blow up warehouses. Their insurance premiums must be the most insane thing in groups that mostly believe that science only exists to trick them into not being terrible human beings.”

“Well, regardless, thanks.”

“If you fall back asleep, the best way you can thank me is to not scream so much, this time.”

Well, that’s a bit mortifying. “Oh. Sorry about that. I was afraid those screams weren’t just a part of my dream.”

“I’m *mostly* just getting your goat about that, to be fair. Your fit didn’t last long and we all understand the day you’ve had.”

We continue talking for a while and, true to her word, Hliang drops me at my apartment complex around midnight. I change and collapse into bed. Eventually, I fall asleep again, but not before I watch every last one of our cars—minus the one that stopped off for the panic attack that’s still in transit—arrive at the Arcology on the tablet and then put together maybe half of a plan for tomorrow. Or today, I guess, since it’s well after midnight.

And this time, I sleep without dreaming, though I’m pretty sure I scream again.

Sir Albert Comes to Breakfast

I'm up with the Sun, making myself an omelette with whatever vegetables in the refrigerator are past their prime. Realizing I probably want a little bit more, I call down to the bakery to have them run up some rolls. Jeeves is away for a couple of days as his family gets him more involved in League operations, but I can mostly fend for myself.

Just as I sit down to start eating, there's another knock at the door.

"Dad," I shout in surprise as I open the door. "What are you doing, here so early? Is everything all right?"

"Well, I remember my first mission for the League as the organizer. I spent days, maybe weeks, second-guessing every single choice I made during the entire fiasco, and I wish your your Grandpa Robert or at least someone with more experience took the time to sit with me and help me work things through, afterwards. Would you be game for something like that?"

"As a matter of fact, I think I might be. Please, sit. Do you want half my omelette? I can toast up and butter another roll for you, if you're up for it."

"You cook, now? Omelettes, no less?"

“I can’t guarantee it’s particularly good, without Jeeves backing me, and they’re definitely not fancy, but I can guarantee that it’s definitely cooked egg with vegetables, and the rolls are as fresh as they can be.”

He sits. “Well, that sounds like a start. Worst case, we can always head out and grab something.” I see we’re no longer in that handy we-couldn’t-be-prouder-of-you space.

We eat in silence for a bit, and I’m suddenly highly conscious of every spot where my eggs are over- or under-cooked and wondering if I should have heated the vegetables aggressively enough to crisp them up. I’m self-conscious about not shaving and especially not showering after getting shot, stabbed, kidnapped, drugged, stranded, and...basically, my odor is almost certainly pretty musky right about now and I’m concerned that might be a bad look—or smell, as the case may be, I guess—for my father to take me on a walk down memory lane.

About halfway through the eggs, conversation tentatively starts again when my father compliments me, first on choosing the bakery for the rolls, then later on the eggs themselves. Finally, he’s warmed up enough to dip his toe into something like a real conversation.

“So, tell me what your plan looked like, on your way in.”

I pull out a large tablet where we can access the various schematics and blueprints and give him the basic rundown of setting up the fake pipeline, driving the quads and using their various gadgets to protect us, getting through both doors, taking control of the lighting and communications around our targets, setting the explosives as a distraction and misdirection, back out the doors, and towing the inflatable sledge back. “Even as I say it all out loud, I can hear how complicated the plan sounds.”

“Oh, it’s not all that bad, when you consider that you were breaking dozens of people out of a secret wing in a high-security prison. For getting a reservation at a restaurant, though, it’d probably be a little bit much, but liberating an internment camp generally has a few steps to it. Anything involving GORGON tends to have a little bit of complexity, too. It’s hard to find a more paranoid bunch out there. I’d call them a bunch of fascists, but it’s less funny when we’re talking about literal fascists.” He smiles. He’s not wrong to do so. It’s funny enough. “So, now that I have a sense of what you expected to happen, let’s walk me through the first point that things went wrong.”

I start replaying every step of the operation, as if I haven’t been repeatedly doing exactly that since I’ve

had any time to think. “Near the start, as we came out of the pipeline, we were nearly overwhelmed by the guards outside. We probably would’ve been, too, if the Silver Bat and an Air Force UFO didn’t run interference for us.”

“All right, so why do you think that turned out to be overwhelming, and what do you think your mother and Major Guerrero saw that convinced them you would need the help?”

“Ah, I think I see where you’re going with this. I used a typical work schedule that we found in the Flint Consolidated files to plan that part, but we could have looked at real-time images of outside the facility.”

“Good, good, you’re learning. Was there anything else just for that fight?”

“Not specific to that, but quite a few times, we could definitely have used more non-lethal weapons to disable the surprising number of people trying to kill us.”

We continue on like this for hours, eventually ordering lunch in. We dig into the specifics of our engagement with the detention facility’s entrance guards, my attempt to take down to trained guards with schoolyard tricks and getting stabbed for my trouble, the guard captain catching us on the way out, our finding the destroyed quads, my feeling the need

to resort to using the rifles, my getting shot, the endless walk, the ambush at the end of the pipeline, and our travel woes including fighting for control over a tractor-trailer. It's not lost on me how often the problem with the plan was letting adrenaline drive my actions, stupidly thinking I was going to successfully fight someone who was armed and had better training without consequences when I had neither weapons nor training. I blew off Dr. Olaleke's anger about not acting more conservatively, but she was absolutely right. With the way I acted, it's a shock that I survived this at all.

My father—knighted across the pond, incidentally, the popular musician and rich-person kind of knight, of course, not the useful kind, since that would draw too much attention—listens carefully to each part of the story, asks questions pushing me to do the analysis I probably should have done in the first place. On each of those items, he pushes me through a *five whys* process of trying to find the root causes beyond what I saw in the moment; I now realize that all of the fishbone diagrams hanging on the walls of League sections of the Arcology are probably a reminder that problems start long before we see them. And occasionally, he makes a small recommendation or gives me the name of one of the League members he knows who might be a good person to talk to further on the specific topic. While

we talk, it dawns on me how much the family treats the League as if it was a thriving cooperative, rather than a hierarchical corporation, mercenary team, or criminal enterprise.

“So, all of this conversation will certainly help out planning in the future,” I explain, “but if I’m going to be absolutely honest—”

“Please do. You’ll find out pretty quickly that dishonesty in the League, especially with yourself, is almost always a fast track to getting someone killed. Not that holding back has ever been your problem, of course.”

“OK, so if I’m being honest,” I repeat to make sure I don’t lose my train of thought, “I already feel bad about all the parts of this mission that I didn’t see coming, but know that I easily could have. I’ve already been mentally reviewing every single decision I made during my entire time in and around San Grobiano. So, what was the point of us doing that together, if you don’t mind my asking?”

My father doesn’t bat an eyelash at the question. “Remember, I said I wish someone had done this with me, and I wanted that because, like you just admitted to doing, I not only blamed myself for every last glitch, but got trapped in my head, painfully reliving every step as if some sudden flash of insight was

going to allow me to change what had happened. From what Hliang and Rajesh sort of hinted at, it sounds like you've been beating yourself up in a lot of the same ways, and what helped me was getting all my faults out in the open and talking it out, in my case, with the woman who would later become your mother. Talking about it out loud also shifts the conversation from what you failed to do to what you *will* do in the future."

Then, Sir Albert suddenly turns the table on me. He tells me about the plan he created for his first mission, in some cases literally sketching out a highly ambitious scheme to evacuate an entire village in Jolliginki—hundreds of people, including everyone from senior citizens to babies—in the path of a genocide movement, orchestrated by a secret society calling itself *Usikivu* or The Sentience. The evacuation involved diverting the militias from the road, a slide down a hillside, a river escape propelled by water pumps, large baskets, and a skyhook system. My mind actually boggles at the complexity, there. It makes my adventure look like an impulsive smash-and-grab at a jewelry store window.

"Wow, that's a lot going on," I point out. "Do I want to know how all of that panned out?"

"On some level, you probably don't. It didn't go nearly as well as I was banking on, certainly, and that still

weighs on me. But I want to go through it with you, anyway, so that you can understand that making all of the underestimates and mistakes, learning from them, and living with the guilt are just part of the job, part of our lives. The ideal is perfection, by definition, but it's worth remembering that the very best we can do is to trade between expedience and thoroughness. Another day of pre-planning might save another hundred people, but waiting can often easily increase the overall risk to a thousand people, so there's no one-size-fits-all solution."

"Fair enough, we're not perfect, because the world isn't perfect. Got it. So, let's dig into this Jolliginki affair."

"Well, a lot like your situation, the first problem we ran into was my own over-confidence convincing me that I needed to engage with the Jolliginki forces fairly directly in order to divert them. Back in the 1920s, Bertram created a particular scam for the purposes of getting the cops to chase down criminals they'd otherwise ignore. He would put on this hand-made bat costume, commit a few high-profile burglaries with enough evidence to draw attention to himself, like bats cut out of black paper as calling cards, to get the police to start a manhunt, then lead them on a chase to the door of—in his original case in the United States—a crooked detective involved in human trafficking; he met and fell in love with Dale

Ogden during all that chaos, soon marrying her and buying the Fleming Mansion where your mother and I still live.”

“I had no idea. I vaguely remember stories about the Bat serial killers over the decades that always turned out to be someone who would’ve been untouchable, but thought it was paranoia or copycats.”

"One day soon, stop by the house. Fleming’s grandfather was a brilliant architect who planned to make the outskirts of Quivira a major stop on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War. Anyway, every once in a while, one of us pulls a similar stunt with bat costumes, and I thought I could do the same to get the attention of the militias and draw them away.

“I did get their attention, of course. A man in a giant, floppy bat-suit running around the desert is quite a bit harder to ignore than you might suspect. However, what you might not realize out of the gate, is that a man in a giant, floppy bat-suit running around the desert is *also* quite a bit more likely to suffer from heat exhaustion.”

“Oh, no!”

“Yep. It was definitely not my finest moment. I slipped at the top of a dune and took a few bullets to my leg.” He rolls up his pant leg to show a *whole* mess

of scars. "Honestly, I lucked out just making it to the top of the dune, since I at least rolled down away from the Usikivu militia where my team could retrieve me and patch me up enough to keep moving. I can tell you, it would've been mortifying to bleed out in the middle of the desert and die. Don't look at me like that; you know what I mean. But my point is that it's very easy to get overly involved in the beginning and that invariably leads to the mission getting derailed."

"So, all the rest of those steps to your plan..."

"Oh, well, they happened, more or less. About the only thing that went well was evacuating down a hill, though, since we literally planned that as sliding down, which was about all I was able to do, anyway. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Our backup plan to slow down the militia was to set explosives to kick up something that looked enough like a dust storm to get them off the road. While that was going on, we had a team in the village organizing the evacuation itself, about five hundred people, all told.

"I was only on the one leg, but we pushed the militia off long enough to get our people to the river bank, allowing us to slide down the bank into the river and onto a series of rafts pushed by hydrojets. However, we weren't fast enough. I still blame myself for not

letting my team just carry me out, instead insisting on limping at the rear of the caravan.”

“Well, that sounds awfully familiar,” I point out.

“I’d bet that all of us have stories about refusing to admit that we’re hurt badly enough to need serious help. It’s natural, when you take responsibility for people. If you think it’s bad now, wait until you become a parent and you have those feelings all the time.

“In any case, my limping along slowed us down enough that, while we made it into the river, the militia was right behind us. And, as you’ve noticed, a lot of these societies aren’t shy about arming their little foot-soldiers. They unloaded their machine guns pretty indiscriminately. We lost at least fifty people outright, at that point alone. Another twenty were wounded badly enough that they didn’t make it to the extraction point. Too many are still scarred or have some sort of motion impairment.” He pauses, needing to compose himself as he dredges up these memories. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him in anything but complete control of his emotions.

I shift over to put my hand on my father’s shoulder.

“Mwezi Ntare, Ange Agrcoah, Cijiucr Biha.” I don’t know how he does it, but even after more than a quarter of a century and as shaky as his voice is, he

names each person who died that day, each person who was wounded. By the time he's done listing the names, he has regained his composure. "Those people," he explains, "the dozens of people I failed, inspire me to always try to do better, always think of one more problem we might encounter."

I don't have much to offer, but I try. "I—"

"The story still isn't quite done, unfortunately. We ride for hours, occasionally coming under fire from another militia. Eventually, though, hours later, we make it to the border. But, not having thought to make deals with the government of the Democratic Republic of Kôr, they wouldn't allow the refugees entry.

"Our team needed to scramble, arguing to delay Kôr's border patrol from notifying the Jolliginki government, which would aim the Usikivu people directly at us. We even offered them the hydrojets as a bribe. In the meantime, we had to get on a series of satellite links to change our exfiltration site, while also finding a way to replace the baskets in our plan—hundreds of miles away from where we were stopped—with the rafts we had.

"Thankfully, we were able to make that work, though we nearly lost more people by carrying rafts from the underbelly of helicopters while militias shot at us

from along the border. Even one bribe in advance would have solved that, but it didn't occur to me at all until it was too late."

I broach the worst part of this subject. "With the casualties and wounds, do you regret getting involved? It seems like you're blaming yourself for the people you lost, but had you not cleared them out of the way, all five hundred of the villagers would have remained in the path of the militia and been killed or suffered worse."

"I regret my mistakes, of course, and not having a good enough plan to save them all. But no, I'm intellectually aware of where my responsibilities start and end, even if my emotions haven't quite caught up to that understanding. Given the constraints, I would do the same thing again, every time. Saving even one person would probably have warranted the pain and grief. And that's the reason I wanted to have this conversation, because you keep telling yourself that aching legs after a twenty-mile hike and a little bit of dehydration was the end of the world, whereas you rescued a hundred people with no casualties and only a couple of flesh wounds, except for GORGON indiscriminately murdering down their own people."

And then Sir Albert surprises me again. He starts listing names, again, this time with towns and jobs, listing the hundreds that the mission did manage to

save, people rescued from the path of a militia out for blood and set up in careers around the world. I recognize some of the names, men and women who held me when I was a child, or children I was left to play with when the adults left the room to talk. I'm even still on an occasional e-mail thread that includes a certain Ms. Faepar Qogha. It never occurred to me that so many of the people I've been introduced to come from the same tiny country half a world away.

We continue talk for another few hours, more openly than we ever have, now that there aren't many secrets left behind us, fewer still secrets we're keeping intentionally.

Cleaning away the dinner we ordered, my father looks at me with a gleam in his eye. "Bertie, there's one more thing, if you think you're up for it."

"Up for what?" It's been an emotional day and I'm not convinced I can handle any more of a marathon of gut-wrenching storytelling.

"Jeeves—Jeeves at the mansion, I mean—tells me that there's evidence of a sex-trafficking ring in the city. It's only a couple of slime balls and probably only about ten kids wrapped up in this, which is usually small enough to take care of without much of a plan. So, are you in?"

“I have to admit, that’s a pretty innovative approach to bonding. And it’ll be an opportunity to work off some of the food we just packed away. Sure, let’s go for it!”

On the tablet, he pulls up floor plans and architectural models as we weigh our options. He also hands me a briefcase I hadn’t noticed him carrying around, but has apparently been with him since he got to my place.

The Metropolitan Touch

In most neighborhoods in Quivira, status equates to altitude. There, the most manual laborers and retailers toil away at sea level and below, while the wealthy manage our investments while breathing the rarefied and much more open air of penthouses.

In parts of Cibola, however, that rule falls apart. Mom used to tell me stories about meeting school-friends on rooftops in so-called bad neighborhoods, which I'm now guessing were more about League activities than teenage parties. She would say that there was something about those neighborhoods where, even standing on top of the city, itself, with nothing but stars in sight in every direction, it still manages to feel at least as claustrophobic as a street with no sidewalk and only a sliver of the night sky visible directly above.

We're heading for the latter kind of place, of course. In these high-crime parts of town—street crime, I mean, rather than white-collar crime that we also try to do a lot about, but doesn't make as exciting a story—the upper levels of the city are ideal, as drones and even makeshift airships make it easy to shift contraband and people around quietly.

On the way up, Dad walks up to a clothing kiosk that looks to mostly sell shawls and jackets. He flashes

some sort of hand signal to the owner and, when he nods, nods back and hands him a roll of cash. Presumably, it's preparation for the trip down.

Looking down below us, I can see the entire spider-web of catwalks, miles of walkways criss-crossing and traversing the block, along with the occasional elevated road. Because natural light doesn't penetrate far down from here, it's bustling at all hours, with day often indistinguishable from night except by clock.

We approach the target by the highest catwalks, the operation being set up in the top floor of a building in the center. We're both wearing what my father calls a Silver Bat "uniform," the contents of that secretive briefcase Dad handed me back at my apartment: Dark blue tactical pants with mostly concealed pockets, a matching turtleneck shirt, and cap with a dark reddish-brown fabric belt. As we reach the entrance, I see the intent as my father unrolls the turtleneck up over his mouth and puts on tinted glasses and the cap: It's a simple mask. I follow suit and also suddenly realize all the times when I was growing up that one or the other of my parents showed up to an event wearing something similar but with a blazer on over the turtleneck, making them suddenly look the part of an iconoclastic board room executive who cares more about fashion than the ins and outs of their own business.

It also occurs to me that the pants are probably the only piece of this that isn't easily replaceable at any retail outlet in the world. That's probably intentional, as a way to prepare on-site instead of shipping unique clothing that might be recognized.

"Jeeves, we're here," he whispers into his headset. His valet has been acting as the signal caller and support for my parents' missions for a couple of decades, now, with my man, also Jeeves, being trained to support me when I'm in the field, like he doesn't do enough for me already, but this keeps League activities in the family, so to speak. "We can see our two targets. Can you cut the power to this and the surrounding units?"

He holds up his hand in order to count down with his fingers. Five, four, three, two, one...and suddenly the lights go out, leaving us in darkness, except that the glasses my father gave me seem to peek into the infrared, so I can still make out the shapes of our two thugs standing guard flailing around in the dark, albeit barely.

We burst in, each rushing straight for one of the guards. I knock mine against the wall, bringing home a series of jabs to his jaw. He tries to fight back, but unlike my previous fights, I have enough of an advantage that he can't do much. He finally goes down. I search him, relieving him of his weapons, a pistol and a baton.

Looking over at Dad, I see that he's not far behind me. He delivers a devastating roundhouse to his opponent that flattens him completely. When he's done taking the thug's weapons, he wheels around with a small flashlight in hand to show their would-be victims. They're all wearing nothing more than rags and are huddled together in terror.

"If you want to stay with these jackasses," Dad announces, "you can feel free to do what you please. Everybody else, follow us out the door. We'll get you home, resettle you, find you new homes, if you need." The thug behind him stirs and my father kicks his foot back, smacking right into the man's head and knocking him back out.

A few seem hesitant or confused, but others translate for them, a language I've never heard. Soon enough, all of them are ready to go.

"Jeeves," Dad is back on his headset, "it looks like we have twenty, here. Is Asmait available? Or another driver nearer to our location? Uh-huh. Sure. Look, nobody likes a smart-ass, Jeeves. Can you get a driver down there with enough seats or do we need to take care of this locally? Yep. OK, that should work. You probably should have led with that, honestly. Fine."

He addresses our little crowd, again. "OK, we have a bus coming to take you to safety. Come on, out here

and down to the street.” He waves one after the other through the entrance. “That’s right, straight through and start making your way down.” He stops a woman, briefly. It’s the woman who translated for him, before. “Dibgha, Avisha told us about your disappearance. You should be reunited with your wife by morning. She should already be on a flight out this way.”

She brightens considerably, given what everybody here has been through, and shakes Dad’s hand. I can’t see the expression on her face, but if it’s anything like how I feel watching as little I can see in this darkness, it probably involves a fairly large smile and at least a couple of tears.

“Right. Just keep heading down. Five levels down, there’s a kiosk where we’ve purchased jackets to keep you warm as you go. When you reach the ground level, there should be a bus. Your driver will be Asmait. She’ll take you someplace safe for the night and we’ll figure out the best way to get you somewhere permanent and safe in the morning. If anything goes wrong, contact this number as soon as you can.” Dad hands out cards with a dedicated Wooster Amalgamated phone line, shaking each of their hands.

“You won’t be coming with us,” one asks.

“We think it’s less safe for you to be seen with us. An escort will draw attention, while a more homogeneous group should be ignored until you’re on your way.”

He needs to explain himself a couple more times to convince them, but eventually they accept that they’ll be able to make it twenty floors down without our help.

As they move out of sight, the lights turn back on and he turns to me.

“I think that takes care of everything.” He kicks the thug again. “And Jeeves tells me that the police should be here shortly. Shall we head out?”

“If we’re just going to head down, why wouldn’t we watch the victims?”

“I only bent the truth when I mentioned that an escort would attract attention. I didn’t mention that it would specifically attract attention to the police, undermining our operation and making them seem too conspicuous.” In the distance, we can hear sirens. “Speaking of which, now would be a good time to get moving.”

“Sure.”

I follow him out and up to the roof. We cross to another street where the police aren’t congregating. A

quick glance shows that there aren't many catwalks, either.

"Do you trust me," Dad asks.

"Errr..."

He grabs my arm and jumps off the roof, pushing me slightly ahead of him. We drop for what seems like an eternity, but is probably only four or five seconds. It's a terrifying few seconds, regardless, with Dad pushing off of cables and pipes on our way down to reposition himself. While he does that, I struggle to keep myself from screaming. I'm enough of an adult to accept that fear and screaming are normal parts of life, but noise isn't a great idea while on the run from both the police and organized crime.

Then, somewhere near halfway down, I'm shocked as bursts of warm air seem to erupt from the street, slowing our fall to slightly less-dangerous speeds and triggering a small, high-tech parachute my father apparently attached to my back when I wasn't paying attention. He's sneaky, I have to give him that.

We drop another couple of floors until a large cable of some sort angles across the street and down. My father is prepared for it and grabs with his belt and I follow suit, sliding our way a few blocks along as we finally reach the ground.

There, we mingle with a crowd while we put our belts back on, roll down the turtlenecks on our shirts, and remove the hats and glasses. Buying cheap sweaters at another clothing kiosk, we wander off with barely any evidence that the two mystery men, men who'll undoubtedly be reported as masked vigilantes in tomorrow's news, ever existed.

I raise a topic that makes me feel stupid. "One thing I don't understand is where those air bursts came from. I didn't see any industrial equipment near the ground that I'd expect something like that would take. What gives?"

"Jeeves coordinated it, so you'll want to ask him for a more detailed explanation. But my understanding is that it was something like a very slow explosion shock wave bolstered by what amounts to a handful of absurdly powerful leaf-blowers, though obviously an engineer would laugh at that kind of description. He planted confederates in the neighborhood yesterday, so that I—we, once I asked you to join me—had a safe escape route available."

"So, that's what a mission looks like when everything is planned out, eh?"

"Not quite. I know you overheard the transportation foul-up. Thank goodness for Asmait. Speaking of which, Jeeves tells me that they all made it onto the

bus safely and are en route to the safe-house, and the two new friends we left back in the apartment up there have been booked, their phones having a fair amount of evidence of their trafficking scheme. If the District Attorney is feeling particularly ambitious, they might even use that evidence to pick up a few of their colleagues in this project.”

“Well, I have to admit, that was impressive. Thanks for bringing me in on it, even though you clearly didn’t need me. It felt good having something go off without a hitch, and it was surprisingly fun making it work mostly through brute force.”

The Inimitable Jeeves

The following morning, I call around the office to make sure an absent and extremely new Chief Executive Officer isn't accidentally destroying the company. I shouldn't be surprised at any of this, but it looks like, after a hundred-plus years of being led by people who sometimes vanish for weeks at a time, the place more or less runs itself unless there's something big going on like a merger.

Honestly, as I think about how well the place runs without a leader, I suspect that Wooster Amalgamated should probably be run as a worker cooperative. I float the idea by a few of the League-associated accountants and business folks, who quickly point out that this has been considered many times over the years and the sentiment is always appreciated, but the plan is always rejected, since privately held corporations run from the top down make it infinitely easier to hide the money that goes into League operations. That's certainly a rational-sounding assessment, even if it is disappointing.

I also check in with Wooster Amalgamated's staffing people. As I assumed, Nick Liang did need a new job after realizing how Flint Consolidated is run and being reprimanded for not being dedicated enough to...not get knocked unconscious, I guess? Anyway, it turns out that his background is in graphic design and

teaching, so he'll be working out of one of our South Jefferson software subsidiaries working with our documentation teams and outreach programs. I set a reminder in my calendar to check with him around this time next year; I expect I'll get in contact with him before then, but I want to talk to him then specifically to start bringing him into the League of the Silver Bat. He does, after all, know how to handle himself in a pinch and his heart's in the right place.

Another phone call brings me into a discussion with our *other* staffing team about how the hundred or so refugees my team rescued are coming along. They're all in the country trying to escape some serious trouble or other, of course, and a few of them are concerned about their families, but it sounds like they're otherwise moving along nicely. I'll need to drop by and put in the time to get to know them a little bit better, maybe see how many of them I can put to work directly on projects.

For a few minutes, I look over statuses on various ongoing League operations, everywhere from Four Freedoms City back east to Javasu to Kukwana to Ruritania. I recognize some names on the reports, with more than a few investigative journalists who are famous for reporting around human rights in their parts of the world. I glance at the lists of people rescued and the lists of people we failed to rescue. As always, it's a lot to take in without retreating into cold

analytics where the numbers matter more than the people, and I refuse to go down that path.

That *few minutes* rolls into hours, while I let myself get involved, which I only notice when Jeeves opens the curtains in my bedroom and drops off breakfast. Yesterday took a lot out of me, I suspect, that any food would seem excellent, but returning to Jeeves's cooking after a week or so does my cold, dark heart some good and so I come precariously close to swallowing the entire meal whole in excitement.

"How was your training, Jeeves."

"Excellent well, sir, I have learned mission coordination from a fish monger." I've found the biggest problem with the sort of classical education my parents forced on me is that I can't be sure whether Jeeves is speaking literally that happens to include a literary reference or if the reference is the entire point of the exercise. To be fair, I'm not above either one, when talking to people. Maybe that was my parents' goal. Yes, that sounds weird, but I'm not sure that's less weird than a family fighting a war against oppression and secret societies from the shadows, to be honest.

"All right, so what's on the agenda for today?" I finish breakfast and crawl out of bed to head for the master

bathroom to clean myself up and start putting on the suit that Jeeves laid out for me.

“You’re scheduled to drop by the Arcology for some input on corporate acquisitions and to file your report on last night’s activities with your father. After that, you will be off to a lunch with city business leaders.” That sounds like a good place to get my feet wet as the vapid rich kid role I’m supposed to inhabit out in the world. “I then took the liberty of assuming that you would like to be at least somewhat involved with the processing of the refugees you liberated from the GORGON camp, back at the Arcology, so I have left you a couple of hours there.” That’s definitely something to look forward to. “After that, you have an introductory Baritsu training session, given that your recent attempts to fight have proven rather conclusively that the two weeks you tried to become a boxer in college was, perhaps, insufficient to cover your propensity to fight.”

“Wow, way to hurt a guy!”

“Ahem. My apologies to your ego, then, which apparently needs to learn to ‘hurt a guy,’ itself. And then, later tonight, we have what may well be your greatest challenge in recent history, far more dangerous than your previous League missions and possibly more stressful for you.”

That doesn't bode well at all. "And what might that be, pray tell?"

"Miss Yelena's family is throwing her a surprise birthday party, which is to include all of her friends, among whom, they list you, sir."

Damn. He wasn't exaggerating at all. Since the last time I saw most of these people—Yelena being the most recent—I had a bogus stint at a drug rehab facility. During that time, the goal was to distance myself from my friends, so that I could transform my image from that of a crusader out to save the world to a soulless and brainless corporate executive, in order to provide cover for League activities.

When it was just me, it was fine to let slip information about my secret clinics or to rant about rampant inequality enough that a clever person could connect it with what I do with my money and evenings, but those numbers add up much differently when I'm responsible for the secrecy of dozens of people actively putting their lives in danger at any given time. It's definitely not going to be easy to walk the line between being attentive enough to my friends to not seem like I'm acting, but not so attentive that it seems likely that I would be continuing my side projects running clinics and food banks.

Worse, we're not even talking about run-of-the-mill rich kids. Waleed is still the same investigative reporter he was a few weeks ago and Yelena investigates possible art forgeries at museums. So, a couple of hours of talking about coordinating my pocket squares and avoiding any topics relating to building a better world is just going to draw attention, I bet.

"Jeeves, can I count on you to help guide me through the party? You know most of these people almost as well as I do, and you have a good sense of what they need to believe about me."

"Indeed, sir, I am confident that we will be able to craft a public persona for you that fills the varied requirements up to and including deceiving Miss Yelena, herself, without alienating her."

"When you put it like that, it doesn't sound like such a hot idea."

"And yet, it is quite necessary, for now, I assure you. If anybody among the family or even acquaintances of your acquaintances has been initiated into any number of the seemingly unending supply of clandestine underworld societies, they might easily connect Wooster Amalgamated with the League of the Silver Bat, which would jeopardize every operation both now and in the future. You might say that they

can be trusted, and that is almost certainly true, but it is unfair and dangerous to demand that they keep the League's secrets without first earning their knowing consent."

"You're right, of course. But necessary tasks are not necessarily good tasks."

"As your father is frequently known to say, everything worth doing involves trade-offs of sub-optimal solutions."

"True. He gave me pretty much exactly that speech and encouraged me to get used to living with the consequences and hoping that the choices were the best available at the time."

"And I'm sure you have also been informed that, over time, you will be able to bring people into the League to let them find a level of exposure and secrecy that they're comfortable with. The walls you begin erecting tonight do not need to be permanent."

"No, but what if I'm not able to tear the walls back down?" I surprised myself a bit when I suddenly mist up at my own question, and I realize that I'm relying in many ways on Jeeves to serve as almost a surrogate father figure when he's no older than I am. That's unfair and will have to stop...after I hear his advice.

“In my admittedly limited experience, there is no wall that cannot be torn down, so long as the effort and time are set against the task, whether those walls be physical, conceptual, or emotional.”

“Thanks. Really, thanks.”

“I believe the relevant sentiment is ‘all part of the service,’ sir.” That’s either false humility for effect or a deliberate move to remind me that he’s an employee rather than a friend. I’ll probably need to tease that out some other time. Meantime, I have a meeting.

The acquisitions meeting is pretty much exactly what I expect, a dozen fairly arbitrary-looking small companies that do reasonably interesting things that overlap with less-interesting things that Wooster Amalgamated does. I have to suppress a laugh when I realize that, after decades of working with my father and grandfather in this position, the presentations about each of the companies are mostly about the corporate branding and pictures of their executives to make it all digestible to children.

Jeeves briefed me about the companies beforehand, though, so I’m able to seem to lean into this appearance while making decisions I’m comfortable with. One company is building infrastructure that’s obviously intended to be used to hide discrimination against customers, so the colors in its branding *really* “speaks to me.” We can squash that and use the

patents to slow down similar projects. A company that is going to undercut our renewable energy products, their logo is too boring for us to be able to deal with, so we're just going to have to license their technology or pour money into competing with them fairly. One is a Laboratory 23 front, so we're not going to want their people or computers inside our firewall. We go on like that for a while, until it gets near lunchtime. I stand up.

"My apologies, gentlemen. While you are all so especially charming and all of this debate about the usefulness of companies to the Wooster Amalgamated family is oh-so-entertaining, I have a prior engagement. So, to speed things along like a drunk on a highway, no, no, no, yes, no, yes, and yes, but only if they change that logo so it doesn't look *quite* so much like a...y'know." I gesture and it dawns on a few of them what I'm getting at. I know I was only joking to emphasize the act of not caring about the details of the company, but it's definitely not a great logo and the team is suddenly obsessed with something they somehow hadn't previously noticed. "We can't have the Wooster name associated with a... marital aid, especially not one so likely to *chafe*."

I get out of there before they can react further. Jeeves whisks me over to a trendy Valderian restaurant uptown for lunch with the other neighborhood

robber barons. We're on schedule, so I can't resist making a couple of stops, first.

Now fashionably late, of course, I storm into the lunch like I'm on a critical mission. "Why hello, my fellow captains of industry! Ooh, *this* one looks like a commodore of industry, n'est-ce pas? Now, because I know—I *know*—this is such an important outing for us, I did some preparation ahead of time. I brought everyone a fancy hat! I knew your business suits would be unspeakably drab, so please accept my contribution to the city economy." They're the bigger local employers, so plenty of software and movie executives.

I start pushing the hats on everybody's heads. I stumble once with an "oh my stars and garters" exclamation as I slip a Flint Consolidated Services listening device under the table as I hear mutterings about how I'm "worse than the stupid father." Dad will be hearing about *that* little tidbit, I can tell you that much. It's definitely not a competition, but if it was a competition, I'd definitely be winning the competition.

The meeting is a bunch of incriminating conversations as they look for buy-in on price-fixing, anti-poaching agreements, and blacklisting of labor organizers. I pay particular attention to that list to make sure I get a copy of those names, since we're

going to want to plant them elsewhere and get them to train other organizers. But mostly, I affect as much boredom as I can manage, double-checking my manicure and idly wondering aloud if my socks *really* match or if they're merely from the same batch of socks and whether it's in fashion to wear socks at all, these days.

Keeping track of all their blatantly abusive business practices is rough, but I keep asking them to get back in touch with me whenever I'm asked about participation. Helper's people in the trade commission are probably not going to do a whole lot, but the Wooster family has quite a few friends in journalism that wouldn't mind a scoop of this magnitude.

I've had enough of this. Even if I didn't already need to be bored, there's only so much open discussion of criminal plans before I actually fall asleep, especially since I assume that Jeeves must be recording this over the radio to parcel out what I can use directly and what should be published.

"This has been an absolute blast, y'all, but I have to see a man about a horse, if you know what I mean, so I'm just going to toddle my way out. But totally keep in touch, my new friends. Call my receptionist or just pixel-at me. Bye!"

I get in the car. Jeeves turns from the drivers seat. “How did it go, sir?”

“They think I’m dumber than Dad, and I can’t imagine how stupid *they* need to be that they didn’t realize I was playing them. I was half-convinced the hat stunt was going to get them to murder me outright, but no, they figured they were playing me. Now that I’ve seen how utterly unobservant they are, I almost wish I had someone stitch a listening device into each of the hats.”

“That may have been a step too far.”

“I did say *almost*.”

As we drive back to the Arcology, we discuss which parts of the discussion are useful for League or Wooster Amalgamated leverage against their organizations as opposed to the merely newsworthy or outright criminal. By the time I enter the offices again, I think we have a reasonably firm plan that I leave to Jeeves to expand on while I rush downstairs to what I assume is going to be the highlight of my day.

In the elevator, I throw my tie over my shoulder as if I’ve been running and it got away from me. On the way through, as I encounter Wooster Amalgamated employees here and there, I run up to them as if it’s a matter of life and death and ask them if they have an

orange pen. I'm offered a few pens and act like they don't understand me—frankly, I'd be disappointed in myself if they did understand my goal—and act like they've condemned people to death. “No. No, no, no. It needs to be *orange* or the project will be ruined!” As I get further down into the building, I notice that anybody who isn't wearing a Silver Bat ring or pin is steering clear of me, so it looks like word is spreading.

I could get used to this. My mother probably didn't choose the wrong career.

When I walk into our shadow Human Resources department, our agents and the former refugees give me a standing ovation. I shake some hands and ask what this is all about.

“About half of us are impressed that your first big mission only ended with some heat exhaustion and a couple of flesh wounds.” The mere word reminds me that my leg still hurts a little bit. “The rest of us have just been laughing at the texts being sent around to watch out for the loony boss and his mission to find an orange pen.”

“What can I say. Orange is an underrated color on sticky notes. I was also banking on it being extremely unlikely that someone would have orange ink, since that'd end the trip right there.”

As I get into the rhythm of things down here, both in talking to the former refugees for the first time in any real detail and in handling some of the paperwork, I realize how smart it was for Jeeves to schedule this time in for me and how Dad makes it seem so effortless to rattle off dozens of names of people he saved along with their cover stories. I should ask Jeeves to schedule some time for me every day down here, when I'm in town. It might not be important to the process for me to be present, but I suspect the process is going to be important to me, a constant reminder of why I'm getting stabbed in the foot and taking bullets.

Fojaist, who took my place pushing GORGON back with suppression fire, was an architect, who we'll apparently be using up north after his new identity has been licensed. Mnoqislasch is *still* singing selections from **H.M.S. Pinafore**, making that recording an amazing investment, but it sounds like we're going to try him out as a music teacher at one of our private schools, for now. Beelul was a software developer, so we can probably use her right away; we're at work looking to bring her family up from the Arceblanka Republic, since they may also be in danger from GORGON's agents. Dunspri will be going to nursing school. Ahagl, who carried me for hours and talked to me when I needed someone to talk to, he has asked to work in my office and wants to get

involved in League operations, so I'll have to find him something to do. We'll need to investigate him, obviously, but the idea that someone would sit in a prison cell for weeks just in case someone staged a jailbreak with an organization that can be infiltrated... well, even in a span of time that has asked me to come to terms with a wide variety of far-fetched ideas, the idea that he might be a spy seems cartoonishly far-fetched. And honestly, if someone is in for that long a con, I want that person at my side even if they're working against me, because that's dedication and talent. Regardless of the details, the upshot is that most of them have at least the kernel of a plan.

Many of them will, of course, also be taking intense English classes for a few weeks, so that they're less identifiable as *other* by the sorts of creeps who care and just so they can function more easily. At the same time as they talk about settling in on a new language, they invite me—well, more like *challenge* me—to join their Esperanto-only social media clique. I'm not surprised that my fumbling attempts to speak anything other than English came across as from someone who needs a lot of help, and I'm grateful for that help and this new community.

As we're processing the last of our refugees, I hear Jeeves buzzing around in my ear-piece reminding me that I still have my first Baritsu lesson. I try to make

excuses, but apparently, this part of the schedule is sacrosanct. It's so important that Jeeves shows up personally to escort me to the dojo.

Down in the deep sub-basements, Jeeves and I walk into the dojo, where I'm introduced to my instructor, Zhyparagul Kushbekov and sent into a small locker room to change into a loose-fitting robe.

When I return, in a vain attempt to show me what I should be capable of, she and Jeeves spar for a few minutes and I quickly realize that Jeeves would make an excellent ringer, going toe to toe with Kushbekov for a solid five minutes before getting knocked flat on his back. I have to admit that it's pretty impressive, all things considered.

Then, she motions for me to come over.

I assume that the repeated trouncings I receive, even when moving through the most basic sequences at quarter-speed, are not particularly interesting to most people beyond knowing that they are many and they are painful. I make that assumption, not *just* out of embarrassment—of which there is plenty, make no mistake—but also because my head rattles for so long that I'm not entirely sure what happened, precisely. If my face isn't completely bruised from all the punching and kicking, I'm going to be surprised.

“So, is the pain some existential lesson that all fighting is inherently problematic and I should always seek peaceful solutions when possible, leaving violence as a last resort?” I’ve had to push myself a lot, today, so I’m freely admitting that I may not be in the best of moods.

“Uhm...I mean, if that’s what you *want* one of your takeaways for this session to be, more power to you, I guess. But that was more a diagnostic session to get a sense of how you move, how that needs to change, and where we need to focus your training. You’re definitely not going to turn pro and rake in millions at fighting tournaments, but you’re also not quite a lost cause.”

“Maybe it’s the concussion talking, but I’m not all that convinced that those words make sense.”

“Sigh...All right, then. Come at me. I’ll work with your natural range of motion, instead of pushing back on it or exploiting the limits.”

I do so, rushing her at full speed. As I get close, she pulls on my shoulder and flips me over her shoulder like before, except this time, I land on my feet instead of my face. I twist in order to face her, my arm swinging in her direction and it makes contact. She counter-attacks and I take a foot in the chest, but I notice that my feet are in a position to sweep hers out

from under her. I do so, and Kushbekov finally falls to the ground.

“Now do the words make sense,” she asks. “I was almost as aggressive as when testing you, but the difference was acting as if my body was where your body expected it to be.”

“That’s absolutely amazing.”

“Standard stuff. You’ll get the hang of it, starting tomorrow. In the meantime, go hit the showers, kid. You reek after all that.”

She is not wrong.

Disentangling Old Bertie

Well, there isn't much wiggle-room left. It's show time. I need to do this. It's the last thing I want to do with my time, but it has to happen. But it's too dangerous. The risk is too high. I can't do it. I turn away.

Jeeves cranks up the volume on the bone-conducting speakers. "Sir, I must remind you of how many people are counting on your presence, this evening."

Fine.

I find some little scrap of courage to cling to and plaster a smile onto my face. I can do this. Deep breath. I walk through the door and brace myself for the attack.

Immediately, I'm attacked from all sides.

"Eebee, it's great to finally see you!"

"There's a familiar face!"

"I hope you're feeling better, Eebee."

"Good to have you circulating again, man. Really."

Is it wrong that I felt safer getting beaten up by GORGON loons? I at least know how to deal with that, even if it's just falling to the ground and screaming in

pain. I can't really get away with doing that here, though. Probably.

Instead, I smile and clasp so many people on the shoulder. I start reminding people that the evening isn't about me and I don't want to detract from Yelena's birthday, but Jeeves overrules me quickly, reminding *me* that I need to hide in plain sight.

In retrospect, rehab might not have been the best excuse for withdrawing from my peers. If I had picked literally anything else, I could fake getting blackout drunk and wander off. Instead...

"Yea, verily, I return to walk among you all, my life improved by leaps and bounds." Woof, *verily*? That sounded better in my head, though admittedly not a whole lot. I imagined it as goofy, rather than just pathetic.

I try to get into the spirit, singing and dancing with former friends and relying on the noise and festivities to keep any conversation from getting too far in depth, keep anybody from asking how a left-leaning revolutionary who defined himself by his hatred for his family's business comes out of rehab to captain that same business or how I was able to conceal a substance abuse problem—a problem allegedly dangerous enough for in-patient treatment—from literally everybody in my life. I start to think that

maybe, possibly, I can get through this as long as I can limit my interactions like this the entire time.

As that thought sinks in, I start to believe it. I wish Yelena a happy birthday, give her our clique's obligatory hug, and dance with her for a while. I congratulate her father and step-mother on an amazing party. I sing far more than common decency would have suggested. I take special care to be conspicuous about not drinking, since that's a role I need to play, so that any of my flamboyant stupidity isn't blamed on an addiction. Slowly and awkwardly beyond all sense, I actually begin to have some of the fun I've been pretending to have. After all, the biggest part of the reason I'm here is genuinely to celebrate one of my oldest friends, with all the other considerations intellectually important, but secondary.

And then, suddenly, my blood runs cold as ice. Waleed is here, not just an old friend, but a brilliant investigative journalist who has never let go of a story.

"Eebee," he comes right up to me, "I was worried that you might not show up, here, given the booze and... *other* temptations that are likely to appear, not to mention how you've dropped off the face of the Earth."

“For Yelena, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. For you, though, I might have missed it for a continent, maybe even one of the smaller continents,” I half-shout over the noise as we hug. We share a laugh over the idea.

“I mean, you dropped off the face of the Earth, except for posing for the local news in front of the Wooster Amalgamated logo. That seemed a little bit strange.” Uh-oh. “What really happened to you?”

“This isn’t the time or the *outfit* to have this discussion, Waleed. We’re here to party, to see and be seen!”

“You’re not wrong—wait, did you say *outfit*?”

I take advantage of that quick moment of confusion to get out on the dance floor, anywhere that conversation isn’t possible.

And, out on the dance floor, I accidentally dance my way right into Yelena’s arms as the song changes to something slower.

“Why, Eebee, to think that the last time we met, it was for me to lead you into your surprise birthday party and this time, you’re here to surprise me at *my* surprise birthday party!”

“Well, turnabout is always fair play, my dear. And it’s not every day that one of our kind admits to getting older, especially when she can still pass for twenty.”

“You’re too kind, Eebee. I’m blushing!”

“But, more importantly, are you blushing too much to compliment my new jacket?” I jump back a step and smoothe the jacket out.

She laughs. “Oh, yes, that’s very fancy, Eebee. Speaking of fancy things, I never had the chance to ask you why you were in my old neighborhood, back on your birthday? I heard some rumors that Wooster Amalgamated was setting up some sort of cooperative trust for the residents, but that doesn’t sound like the family business you’ve been railing against for so long.” She does the little angry hand motion to indicate me railing against my parents, and I’m back to a world where my blood runs cold. I have to think fast.

“Other than the party, that week is mostly a blur, probably because of the party and what happened after that. And I have to admit that don’t really remember the neighborhood or being anywhere that wasn’t impeccably decorated,” that’s enough of a lie that I wouldn’t be surprised if I got hit by lightning right about now, “but I have some vague memories of my parents getting me a really exciting birthday gift in exchange for taking over the family business. I was worried that I lost the gift, though, which would be so embarrassing, so I’m thrilled that *you* know where to look for it.” There’s no way she’s buying this nonsense

and Jeeves seems to have left me hanging, so, as the panic grows in me, I dip Yelena, even though that makes no sense for the dance.

“So, that brings up another question: How is working at Wooster Amalgamated? You’ve spent so much of your life identifying yourself as opposed to everything the company does and now you’re an executive there. Are you all right? Do we need to mount a rescue to prevent the great Egbert Wooster from becoming a sell-out?”

I try to shake the question off by dancing more intently. I try to change the subject. But, as with a lot of my friends, Yelena is like a dog with a bone when she thinks she’s found a mystery, so she keeps pushing me back on topic.

“It’s so great. Everybody compliments my clothes every single day—specific compliments, not just that generic *you look great* trash—and I remodeled my office as sort of a pueblo revival meets Jeffersonian meets Usonian style.” Wow, I *definitely* overplayed that, and now I’m going to need to hire a decorator who’s going to work with me on whatever that travesty of word salad is going to look like, just in case Yelena ever decides to visit me.

“I’d love to see that sometime soon, but you know that’s not what I meant. I know—we *all* know—that

your beliefs, your moral codes, are nothing like how Wooster Amalgamated does business, so a lot of us are worried that they're treating you like some sort of prisoner."

"It's not like that, Yelena." I have no clue where to go with this, but it's obviously the make-or-break moment, so I need to let some seriousness creep back into my demeanor. "In rehab, I realized that keeping up with my little excursions was the trigger causing me to use. So, I had to let that go and Wooster Amalgamated gives me structure and forces me to be responsible for someone other than myself so I don't fall off the wagon. It's past time I put away my childish things."

"That would be the tiniest bit more convincing if you were wearing different pants."

"I know it seems strange. Change is hard to deal with for some people." I'm deliberately pushing Yelena's buttons, here. Her life has exploded more times than I care to recall and she takes everything in stride. I'm banking on her stubbornness pushing her to just take me at face value. "Even though change is hard, I've had to change to be healthy. I hope you can see that. I hope that you can accept that, accept *me*, even though I'm a corporate fat-cat."

“We’re friends, Eebie. You know I’m always going to accept you for what you are, but—”

“There’s no room for buts, here. This is who I need to be, someone who needs to be and stay healthy, and is doing that by being very serious, if still very fabulous. We can’t go around leaving out the part about how legendary my clothes are and what a handsome mug they’re attached to.”

She laughs again, one of the best audiences in my life, if obviously one of the most demanding. “Well, if that’s what you think you need to do to take care of yourself.”

“It is. It has to be. Thanks for understanding.” I feel terrible for providing her with a bunch of non-answers and then pushing her to not give those non-answers any thought, but it’s the only way through, for now. I only hope she forgives me when she inevitably finds out.

When there’s a lull and I can pawn Yelena off on one of her other guests for a while, I head to the bar and drink a frightening amount of water. I definitely wasn’t ready for this at all. I’m not ready to go home again, as they say. And I can’t leave, since the only exit without a physical alarm switch is straight across the dance floor and everybody I can’t face.

“I saw you dancin’ with my girl,” I hear over my shoulder. The voice sounds like a caricature, so I expect one of my friends to be trying to get my attention. Instead, it’s a behemoth looking down at me when I turn, still guzzling water. I briefly overheard that Yelena was seeing someone that nobody here liked, but I imagined it was because he wasn’t from a wealthy family rather than because he might be a jealous ass.

Eager for a confrontation that will get my mind off of how I’m betraying my friends, I hop off my stool and immediately realize that I can’t be seen as assertive, here. I can’t stand up for my friend, not just because I’d be interfering in a relationship without a pressing need—word was also that she might be dumping him, soon, because of outbursts like this—but because, at least in public, I can no longer be the person who refuses to compromise on what’s right.

And yet, this jerk presents an opportunity to solve multiple problems at once.

“Well, yeah, we’ve been friends forever and her outfit looks great next to mine. You must be Declan, the beau-of-the-mo. That’s short for moment. Because of the rhyme? Anyway, I’ve heard so much about you, but they didn’t tell me that you were...I’m guessing some sort of construction worker, in that get-up?” He’s wearing a suit, actually, and a quick glance at his

hands shows that all the callouses come from some sort of fighting, probably an after-work exercise thing. “For a party like this, you really want to go with a brighter ensemble, so someone can see you instead of just looking for your shadow over everyone else. I mean, have you ever even *seen* a pocket square? And a belt without suspenders at a party? That’s totally last decade.”

“Shut up.” I’ve been carefully maneuvering him to the side so that, when he shows his fist, people don’t notice, letting me push a few more buttons and escalate this.

“Oh, allergic to color, are we? I guess I won’t worry about seeing big ol’ Declan at the next party. But look at you. If you’re spending so much quality time with me, you’re probably not in the business of sticking around. What are your intentions toward my friend, exactly?”

That did it. He screams and lashes out. The one thing Kushbekov managed to teach me in the few minutes we had when she wasn’t testing me was how to take a punch, so I let it connect and jump off in that direction to make it seem like a bigger deal than it actually is.

I go down and stay down, babbling about not wanting to ruin the party, which is true even if the babbling is

just cheap theatrics. Calls go out and I suddenly see Jeeves rush across the dance floor to me.

“Stand back, everyone. I will take responsibility, here, and get Mr. Wooster to a hospital. His car is waiting right out front.”

“Keep the party partying. I’ll be back in a few. Wooooooo,” I scream.

As Jeeves carries me off with a little bit of help, I see Yelena confront Declan. I hope I didn’t wreck a good thing for her, but this was an easy way out of the party that solidifies my image as a spineless weakling.

“Wasn’t that a rather extreme reaction to merely feeling trapped,” Jeeves asks as he loads me into the back seat.

“Well, I wasn’t getting any help from the support team I was promised when I was being interrogated by my two best friends. You know that, because you were there not doing anything. And, honestly, if Declan is that violent with some random jerk like me that he just met, it’s only a matter of time before any relationship he’s in goes sour. Plus, I’m not going to press charges, so even if Yelena wants to stay with him, she doesn’t need to choose between us.” We’re a few blocks away, so I sit upright to better give Jeeves the stink-eye. “Seriously, I was dying out there. Where *were* you, out getting sandwiches?”

“Sir, you had everything under control. You successfully avoided the bigger issues with Mister Waleed and successfully convinced Miss Yelena that the change in your demeanor was a choice for your health. My interference would only have made those interactions less honest and certainly would have been no help.”

I hate it when someone undercuts my anger by making me feel good about myself. This must be what it's like to be Declan.

Bertie Takes Charge

A few days later—no concussion from my run-in with Declan, thank you very much—I get a surprise visitor at my office.

I give him a hug and show him to a chair. “What can I do for you, Waleed? How’s Gertruda? I keep meaning to ask. And it’s pretty early for you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I’m still up from a project last night, which turns out to be why I’m here. But first, I wanted to thank you for that advice about buying the company. I fired the executives, hired some real editors, and we’re now employee-owned and -operated. If projections are right, we might even be able to expand.”

He’s testing the waters for any pro-worker reaction, so I fake a yawn. “Was that me? I guess it must have been. I’m happy for you. Tell me if you need money, I guess.”

“Uhm...no thanks. In fact, that might create a conflict of interest after what I have to say. I’ve been following some leads on Flint Consolidated Services and found some weird details that didn’t seem relevant or even interesting until I remembered a couple of things that Yelena mentioned after her party off-handedly, the other night.”

Uh-oh. I *knew* going to that party was a bad idea, and I'm not just talking about the black eye that you'd barely notice now.

He continues when I don't say anything. "Across the countries, there have been rumors that Flint Consolidated might have been involved in human trafficking."

"You're chasing conspiracy theories, now? Are they secretly run by the Illuminati?" Weirdly, it turns out that the Illuminati are one of the few groups out there that actually seem to mostly be fighting for equality and democracy, but they like the image of shadowy manipulators forcing people to be nicer.

"It's a *little* bit more substantial than a conspiracy theory, believe it or not, but you're not wrong to be skeptical. That said the interesting part is that, in every one of its facilities that could have been involved—refugee internment centers with secret wings, busing people to other secret facilities—there has been a sophisticated attack on that secret wing. That, and the cover-ups despite the obvious damage done to the facilities, takes this out of the realm of conspiracy theory and into the realm of conspiracy."

I'm glad the operations after mine look sophisticated, but this is hitting a little bit close to home. Ahagl lurks in my doorway and points to his wrist questioningly.

It's an out if I need it, but just like letting Declan punch me, I can't help but wonder if this is a huge opportunity, as long as I can get Waleed to compromise his ethics just the *tiniest* bit and not report on what's probably the biggest news outside of the existence of aliens like the Luminary. But I also need to know what he knows before deciding. "And you think I've been criss-crossing the country on some crusade to rescue victims from Flint's *alleged* nefarious activities?"

"No. Definitely not, especially after checking airline databases and seeing that you only made one trip to San Grobiano since your birthday." That's more detail than I expected him to have. I'm going to need to work with the Human Resources folks downstairs to get myself a second identity to travel without being tracked. "But, since you took over here, Wooster Amalgamated trucks have increasingly been seen in the vicinity of Flint Consolidated facilities. And you've obviously changed, barely registering that your suggestion to me improved the lives and careers of a *dozen* journalists, instead offering me what could be seen as a bribe. And then I remembered Yelena worrying about you, confiding in me that you were talking about making a deliberate change to become an amoral pro-corporate suit for your own health."

"That was not her story to tell."

“And she won’t tell it to anyone else, and neither will I. But we’re both worried about you, and now I’m worried that you’re wrapped up in something bad that you’re not going to come back from, no matter how many stints you do in rehab facilities that don’t actually exist.”

I stare at him, like the proverbial deer in proverbial headlights. I almost wonder how long he’s known, but odds are that he knew the moment he heard about me.

He continues. “Yeah, I followed that lead, too. So, what’s really going on, here, Eebee? Friend to friend, I mean. If it’s bad, I want to help and I’m sure everybody else will, too. If you’re doing bad things to help your stock portfolio, though, you know I’m going to try to stop you, one way or another.”

One way or another. I think that’s my entry point.

“Waleed, I wish I could tell you and Yelena everything. One day, I probably will. But, unlike Yelena, who is likely to put herself in harm’s way to investigate, I’d like to give you my consent to find everything out on your own, as a show of good faith, with one possible condition that I think you’ll find acceptable if troubling.”

“Oh, you would?”

“Like I said, I can’t tell you anything, but if you were to discover it on your own, nothing would make me happier than to have someone on the outside to share the secret.”

“So, what’s this condition?” He’s skeptical. He should be. This could easily be a threat or some list of items that’s off-limits.

“Like I said, I think this is in line with what you’d already do: Don’t publish anything until you’re absolutely sure that you have the whole story. Some things that seem good could be hiding bad actions. Some things that seem criminal could be hiding good actions.”

“Why not ask me not to publish at all?”

“I’m pretty sure that you’ll make that decision on your own and, if you come to a different conclusion about what to do, the other stories you’ll find along the way are just as important.” More to the point, Waleed is basically the ideal member of the League of the Silver Bat. He travels the world digging into abuses of power.

“But you can’t fill me in on what any of *those* are, I suppose.”

“Unfortunately, no. However...Ahagl, can you poke your head in?”

“Yeah, boss!”

“There were some recordings from that business lunch I attended, the other day. Can you get Mr. Sadozai a copy of the parts that aren’t proprietary? And I believe one of our systems people mentioned a hacker leaving us a dump of records from Flint Consolidated, which would obviously be dangerous for us to use. Throw those in, too. Provided, of course,” I check with Waleed, “that all fell off a truck when you were nowhere near here?” Ahagl runs off.

“I think I can keep your name out of it, if there’s anything in this.”

“I don’t think you’ll find answers, there, but you should find at least a few threads to pull on.”

“You’re really not afraid of me investigating you?”

“With anyone else, I would worry that they would stop when they found anything and use it to make a name for themselves. You, I trust to find the whole story. And if the whole story isn’t what I’m being *told* is the whole story, I need to know that. You’re the only one I can trust to do that.”

“And the only way I can do this is to work without your side of the story?”

“More or less. In addition to the more traditional reasons, I don’t want to accidentally bias your investigation. I’m already concerned that what little I’ve already told you might cause you to give some piece of evidence a charitable interpretation, but I can’t avoid that and still let you know that the story has layers.”

Ahagl hands Waleed a memory card. “Our apologies,” he says. “The information hasn’t been indexed. You may need to go through it piece by piece.”

“Understood. I guess I should get to work, then. Eebee, always a pleasure, if increasingly a particularly strange pleasure.”

I walk him out, muttering under my breath. “Seriously, if any of this starts to look bad, tell me immediately. Pull me out of meetings or wake me up, if it comes to that. My gut says that there’s no horrific underbelly to find, but I can’t fix what I don’t know about.” Then, loud enough for people to hear as I hug him, “it’s been so nice seeing you, but Waleed, my friend, I will have my tailor get in touch. We desperately need to get you into higher-end clothes if you’re going to be a powerful journalist.”

All right. Obviously, pretending to be Percy Blakeney won’t work with my friends. But openly telling them that I have secrets and putting them to work

unraveling them? I think I might just be able to make that work.

The Silver Bat in the Springtime

There are two important things I've learned in my first few months at this. First, as much training as I get, it looks like I may never be comfortable out in the field. Second, sending anybody into the field alone is always a recipe for unnecessary pain.

And yet, *sometimes* the experienced agents are all at least an hour away and babies stolen from refugees by the Hepler administration are being sold to fake foster families right in my neighborhood. So all those nice, clean guidelines to keep everybody safe and keep me from making a fool of myself get thrown right out the window.

And I'm not going to pretend that it's not fun to get out on my own, from time to time. Between Wooster Amalgamated and the League, I'm rarely alone anymore.

"Are we ready, sir, or should I wait while you prepare a soliloquy to deliver to the city?"

For example, right now, I'm not alone, because I have a snarky valet in my ear.

"I'm scoping out the space, making sure I have multiple ways out and a viable path for the kids, if anything goes south. I'm not losing any kids." It's not

completely false. I need to get this one completely right.

I unroll my turtleneck to cover my face while putting on the glasses and beret. Time to go in. "Jeeves, cut power to the elevators and all the emergency doors, but keep an eye on the surveillance. The *buyers* should be on their way and I don't want any of them making this any more complicated than it needs to be. If you can find any evidence on them that we can pass on to the police, so much the better."

"Yes, sir."

I swing down to the landing. Based on the infrared scans through the wall, there's one guard in the room with the children. I take pictures of everything through the window from my concealed position, sending them to the police, since I can't leave these kids in the system and, without the kids, the police won't have any evidence to charge these idiots.

I'm able to cover the walkway to the window without being noticed and the guard is facing away. I drill a tiny hole in the glass and push a small rod through to unlock it. Raising the window a small amount, I shoot the guard with a tranquilizer dart. Randomly drugging people isn't ideal, but it's the easiest way to disable the guard silently.

Climbing in, I ask the children to be quiet while I jam the door to the main room and pour acid on the doorknob to melt the lock into place.

“OK, quiet as you can and big kids carry the smaller kids, I need you to climb out this window and walk straight across to the window across the way with the scarf hanging out. Can you do that?” They agree and I start helping the kids over the windowsill.

Across the alley, I wave to Marco Quintero, one of my neighbors, a music teacher who I was able to save from a shakedown by agents of La Mano de la Serpiente. They wanted him to teach his students a slightly different musical scale to not interfere with some sort of mass-hypnotic scheme they had planned, as if that sounds the slightest bit rational. In any case, Marco said he'd owe me a favor and, while I assume he meant buying me lunch, I need him to wrangle the kids down to Zarifa, down on one of the street levels, where she can take the kids back to the Arcology where we can find their parents. And I'm pretty sure he didn't recognize me as anything other than a masked vigilante.

I follow them across to the apartment we're borrowing. “OK, kids, I'll meet back with you later, but you're safe now. Just follow Mr. Marco and he'll put you on a bus for a fun ride!”

One of the older kids hugs me. "They tried to hurt us and told us we didn't have families anymore." I suppose that crying would be a bad thing, right now.

"Well, we'll keep you safe and we'll try hard to find your parents. But first, you need to get to the bus and I need to make sure those men never hurt you again." I hand Marco a small radio. "A friend is watching on the building's surveillance. If he sees anything in your way, he'll find you another route. He'll also keep track of any of the little ones that might get sidetracked. I'm sorry to put so much on you as part of your favor."

"Hey, no problem. It's for a good cause and we're neighbors. Or am I not supposed to know who you are?"

Damn. "It wouldn't have been my *first* choice. But as long as you know and you're up for it, drop by for dinner one night, if you want to join the team."

"So, you do this a lot?"

"Well, it's not always *this*, and I usually find myself getting shot at a lot more than this, honestly. Speaking of which, I need to go tie those creeps up before the police get here."

"Go. We'll talk later."

I sprint back across the way and dive through the window. The one guard here is still out, but the others

are pounding on the door. I cuff this one to the radiator to make sure he stays out of the way, then set small explosive charges on the door's hinges and back out of sight.

The hinges blow and four thugs rush in and head right for their buddy at the radiator. I grab a chair and flatten one of these creeps with the chair while kicking another's knee out from under him. That should keep them out of my way for at least a few seconds.

The other two raise their rifles. I dive in, grabbing the one on the left and throwing the attached guard into the other, causing a few shots to go wild into the ceiling.

Then, moving as quickly as I can, I attack with the rifle butt, knocking the first one out and pushing him into his friend again while I spin around to clock the friend, too.

"The police are at the elevators, sir," Jeeves points out.

"Let them up," I mutter.

I whirl around in time to see the remaining jerk struggle to his feet, rifle raised. I kick him again and crack him over the head. Poking my head into the other room to make sure I didn't miss anybody and

coming up empty, I take a minute to tie them together in the middle of the room.

Just as the door bursts open, I jump out the window and back up to the roof. It's not exactly the best timing, but all they would've seen are shoes and they've got five people to book instead of me. I crouch down and run across a few rooftops where I hung a rope, where I slide down to the road level and grab the sweater I hid at the other end. Ditching the glasses and hat, I can easily cross the quiet street to my waiting car.

"How did Marco get along, Jeeves?"

"We have all children accounted for on the bus, in transit to the Arcology, with only one minor mishap along the way. Zarifa reports that they are content and she has handed out light snacks to hold them over."

"All right, excellent. I'm on my way. We're going to need all hands on deck to track down their parents. Odds are we're not going to get many full names and addresses, especially from the toddlers. Any chance we'll be able to incriminate the buyers?"

"Possibly. What I can only imagine might be the manager among the crowd you confronted had his phone with him. Our data recovery team found photographs of the would-be buyers on the device

along with pictures of the children and a list of prices.”

“Well, that’s something. Hopefully, the District Attorney will find that enticing enough to investigate further.”

My family likes to say that it’s important to celebrate the little victories, name every survivor, that it’s demoralizing to constantly focus on the scale of the work that needs to be done out there or, worse, to dwell on the failures. I have one small addition to that. For my own personal sanity, after all the times I’ve been shot, stabbed, electrocuted, and burned in the past few months, I’m going to celebrate the heck out of the simple fact that I managed to pull this off with surprisingly smooth sailing. Even Marco, more or less a stranger to me and the whole organization, seems to have come through, which is amazing.

Speaking of celebrating the little things, that reminds me. “Jeeves, do me a favor and call Yelena to ask if she’s free, this evening. Then, order a pair of earrings for my Nana Isla’s birthday. Check the roster to see if she’ll be in town any time that week. See if I can schedule the usual monthly meeting with Waleed to see how close he’s gotten. Oh, and reach out for meetings with representatives that aren’t blindly defending Hepler and his bigoted nonsense.”

“Indeed, sir. I will also dust the books while I am at it. Perhaps I will strap the duster to my elbow.”

Wait. Has he *not* been dusting the books for all these years? Well, whatever. I think what I’m really celebrating is that I might have actually found a way to make this crazy life work and hopefully even do some real good along the way.

Credits

As Isaac Newton put it in 1675, “if I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.” In this case, many elements from this story originate from other sources that have either fallen into the public domain (as of 2019) or have been made available under a Free Culture license.

In many cases, these Giants allow us to populate our world in a way that looks credible, but allows for some emotional distance (and, let’s be honest, probably some legal insulation) between the issues in the story and the issues in the real world.

As I think of this book as Free Culture and Open Source, these are the sources of the concepts.

Plot

Bertie’s overall personal story directly references and is inspired by Emma Orczy’s **The Scarlet Pimpernel** (1903/1905) and its sequels, here about someone at the beginning of building a double life, instead of living one.

The primary story of rescuing refugees references and exaggerates the global refugee crisis in general and the escalated crisis on the United States-Mexico border in particular. For examples of news on the topic from sources available under Free Culture licenses, please see any of the following:

- <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/10/28/i-went-mexico-meet-asylum-seekers-trapped-border-what-i-saw> (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License)
- <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/10/14/doctors-demand-trump-close-inherently-immoral-immigrant-detention-centers-ahead-mass> (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License)
- <https://globalvoices.org/2016/04/23/how-ukraine-is-dealing-with-the-european-refugee-crisis/> (Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License)
- https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/US_continues_to_deny_Red_Cross_access_to_al_1_detainees (Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License)
- <https://www.futurity.org/syria-united-states-refugees-1097812-2/> (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License)
- <https://www.futurity.org/modern-slavery-is-widespread-for-refugees-in-england/> (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License)

In short, the worst aspects of the story are combined for the version presented here, though largely attributed to shadowy secret societies (see below) rather than ordinary humans.

Of course, as mentioned in the disclaimer, these aren't issues likely to be fixed by even well-meaning billionaires, but rather by all of us keeping pressure on politicians to do the right thing and donating to support the work of real-world organizations such as the National Immigration Law Center, the ACLU, the Migration Policy Center, Alight, or quite a few others.

Charity Navigator has profiles and transparency ratings for many such non-profit organizations at <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=4665> as a starting point. Charity Navigator's data is *not* available under a Free Culture license, however.

Premise

Most prominently, the Wooster family and the valet Jeeves come from the early **Jeeves** stories by P. G. Wodehouse. For the purposes of the world in which the League of the Silver Bat exists, the stories in the public domain in the United States are considered a springboard for what is canonical and include:

- **The Man with Two Left Feet** (1917), "Extricating Young Gussie"
- **My Man Jeeves** (1919)
- **Right Ho, Jeeves** (1922)
- **Bertie Changes His Mind** (1922)
- **The Inimitable Jeeves** (1923)

Many, but not all, of the chapter titles are also copied or

derived from titles from these sources.

In this world, Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster was inspired after a childhood trauma by the (real-world) stage presentation of **The Scarlet Pimpernel** in 1903 to create an international organization dedicated to rescuing oppressed people, especially from secret societies. His "branding" is derived largely from Bruce Fordyce, the tragic protagonist of **Number 87** (1922), by Eden Phillpotts under his "Harrington Hext" pseudonym.

Wooster and the League of the Silver Bat began to have a presence in the United States during what amounts to an adaptation of **The Bat** by Mary Roberts Rinehart (1920, with film adaptations in the public domain in 1926 and 1959), where Bertie uses the Bat's notoriety to draw police attention to the fake Detective Anderson. The silver-haired bat is also, coincidentally, a fixture across most of the United States.

Does the Silver Bat concept take some inspiration from the success of a certain bat-themed superhero character? Maybe a little bit, but most of that evaporated as the world became better fleshed out.

Locations

Real-world locations are referenced, on occasion, but the geography utilized is a patchwork of states and countries

wedged in between the borders of what exists in our world. Cibola and Quivira, the “Seven Cities,” are loosely inspired by:

- The legendary Seven Cities of Gold, supplying its naming;
- Places such as Hong Kong’s *Kowloon Walled City*, Caracas’s *Centro Financiero Confinanzas*, East Jerusalem’s *Ras Khamis*, and Mumbai’s *Dharavi*, providing the idea of a massive ad hoc urban area grown into almost an arcology housing millions, where sunlight is rare except for the elites; and
- Major California economic centers such as Silicon Valley and Hollywood, providing an economy that’s likely to have serious inequality, with billionaires frequently rubbing elbows with the impoverished.

I’ve placed the Seven Cities in the fictional state of Saracinia and it’s likely that the other five cities (Hawikuh, Halona, Kiakima, Kwakina, and Matsaki) were annexed and absorbed into the two bigger cities over time, even though the nickname sticks.

The state of Bensalem originates as an unknown sovereign nation in Francis Bacon’s **New Atlantis** (1626), a quasi-utopia that, here, is used as a state similar to Hawaii.

South Jefferson was once a proposed state that never got off the ground, its major city San Grobiano

referring to Saint Grobian, described in *Das Narrenschiff* (1494) by satirist Sebastian Brant as the patron saint of vulgarity. I imagine the city (and state) as being highly influenced by a hypothetical Esperanto-based culture near the United States, with Koralo Dareo International Airport trying to hint at that.

Presumably, Esperanto is significantly older in this world, because the freed refugees speak Esperanto as their native language, also suggesting a link to that South Jefferson cultural blending. They come from the Arceblanka Republic, which (by way of translation) refers to Maple White Land, the hidden plateau featured in **The Lost World** (1912) by Arthur Conan Doyle.

By contrast to the Esperantists, the “guttural patois” of the GORGON agents is a modified version of Danish with many diacritical marks added. They also enumerate things like the detention center cells using the names of runes to suggest an obsession with Vikings.

Javaasu comes from the hoax crafted by Mary Willcocks Baker, also known as Princess Caraboo, in 1817. Javaasu was the alleged homeland of the Princess.

Jolliginki is an African Kingdom in Hugh Lofting's **The Story of Doctor Dolittle** (1920). Costaguana is a South American republic in **Nostromo** (1904) by Joseph Conrad. Djinnistan is in danger in Karl May's **Ardistan und Dschinnistan** (1909). *The Curious Republic of Gondour* (1919) by a posthumous Samuel Langhorne "Mark Twain" Clemens and **Graustark: The Story of a Love Behind a Throne** (1901) by George Barr McCutcheon introduce those countries. Kravonia is the setting of **Sophy of Kravonia** (1905) and Ruritania the setting of **The Prisoner of Zenda** (1894), both by Anthony Hope. Kukwana is a mild adaptation or modernization of Kukuanialand, a setting in H. Rider Haggard's **King Solomon's Mines** (1885). Valderia was presented as a South American dictatorship in **The Dreadnought of the Air** (1914) by Percy F. Westerman. Tarshish (תַּרְשִׁישׁ) appears in the Tanakh (Ezekiel 23-27, among others) as a source of King Solomon's great wealth.

Secret Societies

The Central Anarchist Council comes from **The Man Who Was Thursday** (1908) by G. K. Chesterton.

The Jade Moon Society, ASGARD, GORGON, and Laboratory 23 originate in **Bulletproof Blues** by Brandon Blackmoor and Sean Weir and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License.

The Bird of Hermes Initiative and the Sentience comes out of the Fear Mythos, listed as an Open Source Organization, seemingly licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License 3.0 Unported license. Here, the Sentience is renamed Usikivu, a rough Swahili translation to provide a group that fits into an African adventure.

ORIA (the Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts), the Three Moons Initiative (here presented as Tres Lunas), and Kinneson Air Force Base come from the **SCP Foundation**, made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license.

The Palladists were a hoax Satanist society reported on in 1891 by Léo Taxil (Gabriel Jogand-Pagès) and Adolphe Ricoux. The Friends of the ABC were French revolutionaries in Victor Hugo's **Les Misérables** (1862). The Clan of the Fiery Cross appeared in the **Superman** radio series from June 10th, 1946, to July 1st, 1946. The Dzyan are a fictional society discussed by Helena Blavatsky in **The Secret Doctrine** (1888) and credited as the sources of the book.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (1903) is a repulsive anti-Semitic hoax, here presented as a mass conspiracy blaming Jewish people for their own manipulations.

The Illuminati was a real-world secret society dedicated to the ideals of the Enlightenment and many progressive causes, bringing them into conflict with most established powers at the time. Beyond some Gothic fiction shortly after the society's decline, the idea of the Illuminati as a shadowy conspiracy manipulating world events seems to mostly arise after World War I in writings by Nesta Helen Webster and, rather predictably, is strongly tied to anti-Semitic hate.

People

Xavier Exley/*The Black Fist* by Vito Delsante is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. The *Revenge of the Serpent Emperor* franchise was created by the Fictopedia community, where content is available under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.

President David “Dave” Hepler appears to have been a 2008 hoax about fictional Presidents of the United States. As the hoax originated on Wikipedia, it is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License. Hepler appears to have been intended to be some sort of parody of President George W. Bush, though presented as his successor. His wife Ouida is original to this work, as is his background as a former “tech bro.” I’m assuming he is the current President, rather than getting elected in

2008, but his imperial impulses are curbed by the government and people around him. (Note: If there is a real-world David Hepler being mocked by this, I apologize for using and extending the characterization, but the character—a demagogue excited to put his name on everything and governing autocratically—is too useful.)

Mar, ku^q S^u Schmachenbùrg is based on *Cerebex*, appearing in Planet Comics #73 (Winter, 1953), where European dictator Schmachenburg had his brain implanted in a giant robot (Cerebex) that cut a path of destruction across Europe. His given name is original here, and bogus diacritical marks have been added randomly to make the character less overtly German.

Madame Strange was a superheroine who appeared in Great Comics #1 (November 1941), created by Charles A. “Chuck” Winter. The Luminary has not appeared yet, but will someday soon.

Note that most of the original characters—specifically the League agents and Bertie’s friends—were selected randomly across the world based on population centers, with many of their names selected using <https://uinames.com/>. The names of the Arceblankan refugees are randomly generated syllables, however, to isolate them from any real-world cultures.

Companies

Brainz and NuloNetu are fictional versions of real-world social networks running on open source software, which will not be named, that recruit users on freedom of speech grounds and cultivate communities that tend towards obsession with right-wing conspiracy theories. The Fediverse is real, a social network that uses the *ActivityPub* protocol and is spread across software such as Friendica, Funkwhale, Mastodon, NextCloud, PeerTube, PixelFed, Pleroma, WriteFreely, and others; it's community is mostly decent.

Flint Consolidated Services Corporation is adapted from ideas in **The Air Trust** (1915) by George Allan England. In that novel, Isaac Flint does indeed attempt to create a monopoly on oxygen, so a modern equivalent of that trust seems appropriate to be invested in industries that cut against what consumers would prefer.

The Mammoth is a fancy midtown Manhattan hotel in **Alias the Night Wind** (1913) and its sequels by Frederick Van Rensselaer Dey using his "Varick Vanardy" pseudonym. In this universe, they've expanded, buying high-end hotels in other cities.

The names of most of the online companies were adapted from output provided by Rico Sta. Cruz's Startup Name Generator, which dutifully throws all the available clichés at keywords.

Miscellaneous

Baritsu is a fighting style used by Sherlock Holmes, in all likelihood a typo for or spoof of *Bartitsu*, a self-defense art created by engineer Edward William Barton-Wright combining aspects of boxing, wrestling, fencing, savate, and other traditions.

Bilphism is a religion used, though not well described, in **The Beautiful and the Damned** (1922) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Poems used as epigrams are:

- *The New Colossus* (1833), Emma Lazarus, Chapter 6
- *Hearts in Exile* (1913), William Arthur Dunkerley, under the pseudonym John Oxenham, Chapter 9

It's a little bit pretentious, but they fit the chapters in question and maybe the whole story is at least a little bit pretentious...

Technical

The cover image is based on *An Alley in the City of Darkness* by Ian Lambo, made available under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license, and *dark, night, light* by Etienne Marais, made available under the Creative Commons Zero license. The cover text uses the Ardeco font designed by Irina Chukina and made available under the terms of the OFL.

Interior text is set in Adobe's Source Serif Pro with headings in Comfortaa, designed by Johan Aakerlund and Cyreal, both also made available under the terms of the OFL.

