

Kill Code_

Jordan T. Hariel

Note from the author:

Hey there, I'm Jordan! You may or may not know me, but I am an aspiring author trying to get my book, with working title *Project Fire*, published! I've created short stories like these in the meantime for you to enjoy. I'm so glad that you've taken valuable time from your day to read my work, and I'd like to personally thank you for doing so. It means so much to me. Writing a spy thriller was a new venture for me. I hope that this tale of action and surprises will delight you.

With love,

Jordan T. Hariel

KILL CODE: PART I

“I have another assignment for you.”

The short-haired, gray-headed man with square glasses and chiseled jaw at the opposite end of the table from Darci Mendelsohn leaned forward. Mendelsohn fluttered her keen green eyes and shook her head, her curly blond locks bouncing. “For me? I think you mean for me and this old joker.” She nodded her head in the direction of Thaddeus Dane, who was a frequent target of Mendelsohn’s elderly jokes, for he was about three years older than her at 41. He bowed his black-haired head, which, as was the case today, was normally topped with one of his many leather fedoras. He was often her partner-in-crime, though in this case, I suppose it could be more accurately expressed as her partner-in-fighting-crime.

Both Mendelsohn and Dane were agents of the Crypt, an extraordinarily secret division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation specializing in investigating new and even unearthly tech, along with its potential abuse. The inventions with which they dealt were never short of fascinating, but it was dangerous work. Mendelsohn had barely escaped gunfire and even fire on numerous occasions, and Dane still cringed when he remembered the pain from the gun wound he received near his hip. To be frank, Mendelsohn was one of the lucky ones. Most agents harbored at least one severe wound from showdowns with hostile actors, but for every wound they received, they returned two. There was no guilt on the agent’s part for doing so, though. It was just protocol.

The man at the other end of the long, shiny table, whose name was Supervisor Damian, slid a manila folder down to Mendelsohn. It was stamped on the front with large red letters: CLASSIFIED. She opened it to find a picture of a familiar face. “Dr. Croy? We’ve investigated him several times, and he’s never done anything suspicious.”

“Yes, but he is, well, seclusive,” replied Damian, tapping his fingers together. “He’s hard to get a read on. Plus, preliminary intelligence suggests that the applications for his latest device are broad--too broad. You know how that works. If it can happen, it will happen. Someone always finds a way to exploit a weakness.”

Both Dane and Mendelsohn had been skimming over the file. “It says here,” remarked Agent Dane, “that he has created a device which allows humans to communicate with computers.”

“Precisely,” answered Damian, rising from his seat. “Need I say more? You know

where to find him. I've arranged a meeting at two o'clock sharp. Don't be late." He grabbed his briefcase and departed the conference room, leaving the two agents alone.

"This could get interesting," said Dane after the supervisor had left.

"Isn't that the fun part?" laughed Mendelssohn.

They gathered their things and headed downstairs for Dane's black sedan. Most agents rode separately; for there was a potent fear in the Crypt that someone, somewhere, was a mole that would shoot them the moment they sat down. Mendelssohn did not feel the need to do so with Dane. They had been friends for twenty-two years. They had trained together, and they worked together on virtually every assignment. Sure, other agents had played the "friendships are dangerous" card on her more than once, but it did not faze her. He had never given her a reason not to trust him, nor she him. Supervisor Damian even once conceded that they were "a perfect team." They were, too: she was creative and lighthearted, and he was logical and serious. Together, their minds could figure out nearly any problem. Did they drive each other crazy at times? Yes, absolutely. But she would not have traded him for anyone else.

Traffic that day in downtown Los Angeles was slower than usual, pushing their fifteen minute drive to thirty. Luckily, they had accounted for this and still arrived promptly at the striking 1,500 foot tall Terracom Center at 1:55. Crossing the granite plaza, they entered to see the familiar lobby, lightly furnished with modern chairs and tables, and a familiar secretary behind the desk. Behind her, the slogan for Terracom, Inc. was spelled out in large metal letters: "Connecting the World." She was typing away on her keyboard when she noticed the two coming close to her desk. She looked up and grinned. "Good afternoon, and welcome to Terracom Center! How may I help you?" she asked.

"We're with the FBI," replied Dane, flashing his ID. "We have an appointment with--"

The secretary squinted and adjusted her glasses. "Dr. Croy? My goodness, could it be Darci Mendelssohn and Thad Dane? You two have not been here in months! Forgive me for my slowness, my vision is not what it used to be. Please, go on ahead. I'll inform the doctor of your arrival."

They both nodded and caught an upward bound elevator just in time. Terracom

Center was always terribly busy; therefore, the elevator stopped about every two floors to pick someone up. Dane did not take well to this, as it gave them even less time to reach Dr. Croy's office in time. He had begun to get visibly stressed when the elevator monotonously announced their arrival at the 58th floor: "Experimental Communications Unit." They shoved their way through the overcrowded elevator and out into a short foyer. Mendelssohn stretched after the doors had shut behind them.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed.

Dane removed his aviators and glanced at his watch. "1:59."

They hurried over to the solitary door at the end of the hall. "State your name," droned the computer.

"Darci Claire Mendelssohn," came the reply.

The computer paused for a moment. "Look here, please." A panel to the right of the door lit up. Mendelssohn complied. "Retinal scan complete. Welcome, Agent Mendelssohn."

After the process repeated for Agent Dane, the door before them unlocked. As they opened it, Mendelssohn looked at her watch and pointed to it. "2:00. See? Worried about nothing."

The lab behind that door was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Some scientists, clad in customary lab coats, buzzed about and discussed their latest findings, while others tapped, swiped, and typed information on their glass tablets. In an enclosed area to the far right of the lab, two scientists experimented with telepathic communications apparatuses set upon their heads. To the right, up against the wall, another researcher conducted studies on moving objects with mental power. To the left of the agents, a scientist attached a device to a rat in an attempt to display the animal's emotions on a large, transparent monitor. Though Dane and Mendelssohn had visited that lab several times, it always seemed different. The researchers employed there were some of the nation's finest and did not stay on any one study too long. They did not need to, either; within two to three months, they had discovered everything there was to know about the topic they were investigating.

To the front of them lay the offices of the more distinguished scientists. Dr. Croy's office was obvious: it was the only one whose glass was tinted. His door was

rarely seen open either, unless he was entering or exiting. It was not that he was doing anything suspicious; he was simply a man of privacy (with maybe a dash of paranoia). They approached his door and gave a gentle knock. A few moments passed before the door flung open to reveal the middle aged man, who appeared much older than he actually was. His unkempt black hair had thinned almost into nothingness. His forehead was wrinkled with long periods of intense pondering, and the area around his mouth was wrinkled with many times of disapproving frowns. Though he was not considerably tall in the first place, his slouch gave the illusion of a rather short man. He was not a sour or sad person, but he was not particularly happy either; however, he always delighted in seeing the two agents.

“Darci, Thad! I’ve been expecting you,” said he, glaring at his watch, “since one minute ago. You’re late.” Dane nudged Mendelssohn with his leg, but the doctor followed it up with a lighthearted “just kidding.” Mendelssohn nudged Dane back.

In stark contrast to his disheveled hair, Dr. Croy’s office was extremely orderly, a reflection of his logical and calculating mind. Two chairs sat before his sleek, white desk, which sat before a full glass bookshelf softly illuminated by a futuristic white light. In keeping with the white color scheme, the wall was also painted white. The entire setup mirrored the cutting-edge technology studied in the lab. The two agents seated themselves while the doctor sat in his white office chair and adjusted his glasses.

“So, you are here to see the Telepathic Digital Messaging and Commands Array?” he asked.

“It would seem so,” replied Dane.

The doctor opened one of his desk drawers and removed a small earpiece. Placing it in his ear, he remarked, “This is something I was working on far before the rest of the unit was studying telepathy.”

Mendelssohn laughed. “Hold up. Telepathy? Like, mental communication? I thought that had been proven impossible a long time ago.”

The doctor shook his head. “You may be part of the FBI, but I’m afraid that even secret organizations keep secrets from their own. Telepathy was not proven impossible, Miss Darci. It was covered up. The implications of this kind of mental manipulation are far-reaching. But men, especially the government, are always afraid of the new. They are

like gods, and we, like craven mortals. They frighten us with thunder and lightning and we blindly follow them.”

“It’s all good and dandy to discuss political conspiracies, doctor, but we came to conduct an investigation,” interrupted Dane.

Dr. Croy frowned. “You did, didn’t you?” he answered in a somewhat condescending tone. He took his (surprisingly) black laptop and spun it around, so that the agents could view the screen. “I have already installed the receiver in the laptop’s processor. This earpiece will read my thoughts, and the computer will do whatever I wish.” Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes. For a few moments, nothing happened; but soon, the computer opened the notepad app and typed, “It works.” Dr. Croy opened his eyes, and said, “Like so.”

“May I test it?” asked Mendelssohn.

The doctor consented. Inserting the earpiece, she asked, “Okay, how do I do this?”

“Just be natural. Think what you wish the computer to do.”

She shut her eyes and focused. Within a few moments, the web browser had opened and pulled up cat pictures. “Honestly, Darci? You might have picked something more grand!” sighed Dane.

“Aw, come on, Thad, have a heart! Look at how adorable they are!” responded Mendelssohn, sticking her lip out.

Dane, in his usual prompt manner, quickly changed the subject. “Well, doctor, not to downplay the work you put into it, but all I’ve seen this device do is type something and find stupid photographs. Can’t any human do that?”

“Perhaps your supervisors were not clear about the intent of my device,” replied Dr. Croy. “Pray tell, how often is the average man or woman frustrated with their everyday devices because they freeze, or slow down, or shut down sporadically? Imagine a world where coding is simplified to merely thinking about what you want to happen. Imagine a world where computers don’t slow down or freeze because they are in perfect sync with your will. This device makes that possible. And it isn’t just limited to computers. This works with printers, smartphones, ovens, drones, industrial machinery, you name it. No more lengthy manuals or tech support. Everything does whatever you

want, simply because you think it. This,” and his dull eyes lit up for just a moment, “revolutionizes everything.”

“Doctor, the applications you have proposed are astounding, but I see one obvious issue. How secure is this device from hackers?”

“You needn’t worry about that,” answered the doctor, waving his hand. “I have had our best cybersecurity specialists inspect it and they have triple encrypted the connection. Even the most skilled hacker would spend days before they could break the first encryption.”

“Doctor, could, in the event of a major cyberattack, the reverse happen?” asked Mendelssohn. “Could this device tell *humans* what to do?”

“No. It is a one way connection. The only feedback I receive from the computer is what appears on the screen.”

“Could it be modified to communicate with humans?” inquired Dane.

“Of course it *could* be, but--”

“All I need is a possibility,” replied Dane, rising. “I apologize for the inconvenience on your part, but, due to potential vulnerabilities, I will have to refer our cybersecurity experts to review your device. It’s protocol.”

The doctor stood and grimaced. “Yes, I know it is. You must do what they tell you.”

Dane typed something into his phone. “I have bills to pay, doctor.”

The doctor smiled and nodded. “Money is not everything. Sometimes the hopeless find the very thing they need under a rock.” The two began to leave, but Dr. Croy cried, “Wait!” He grabbed Mendelssohn by her coat. Smiling, he whispered, “It was nice to see you two again.”

A week later, Mendelssohn swung her car door open. Tossing her briefcase into the passenger seat, she sat down and sipped her coffee. The sky was clear that morning, giving her a mesmerizing view of the orange and pink that tinted the heavens. A cardinal chirped nearby and fluttered back and forth between trees. Spring was just beginning, and thus the scent of blooming flowers permeated the air. Even though she had to go into work early, she could not have asked for a better day to do so. As she took a moment to

admire the scene, her earpiece beeped. “Mendelssohn,” she said, tapping it.

It was Dane. “Hey, Darce, Damian wants you down here right now.”

“I’m in my car. What’s up?”

“Croy’s missing. I’ll get you up to speed when you get here.

Mendelssohn entered the board room to find Supervisor Damian seated in his normal place at the end of the table and several other agents, either seated or standing, talking in subdued voices. The moment she entered, they all went silent. Anxiety was potent in the room--more potent than she thought it should be. She hurriedly sat down next to Dane, who was near the supervisor. Before every seated agent was a manila folder, stamped in red with TOP SECRET.

“Thank you, Agent Mendelssohn, for joining us,” Damian said. He then addressed the other agents. “Please open the files before you. Here is everything we have on Dr. George Allen Croy. To sum it up, he works for Terracom International as a part of the Experimental Communications Unit, or ECU. Last we know, he was working on a device which allowed humans to telepathically execute commands on a digital device. Our own Agents Dane and Mendelssohn interviewed him last week, subsequently referring his device for review by the Cybersecurity Division. Before our specialists could set up a meeting with Dr. Croy, however, he vanished. Witnesses in the lab where he was working said they saw him leave with a leather messenger bag around his shoulder three evenings ago. He did not indicate where he was going. In fact, he did not speak to anyone before he departed. When he did not return for work the following mornings without any notification, his colleagues notified the police. The police turned the case over to the FBI, and the FBI to us. Investigation of his lab found that every drawer and cabinet had been thoroughly cleaned, without leaving so much as a fingerprint behind. His house was also empty. It is for such reasons that I have declared Dr. Croy missing, and his safe return is priority number one. Understood? Good. This meeting is adjourned.”

As the other agents swarmed out of the room, Damian motioned for Mendelssohn and Dane to follow him into the hallway which led to his office. Once they were alone, he questioned them. “You two were one of the last to see him. Did he act or say anything suspicious during your visit?”

“He seemed like he always was,” replied Dane. “Reasonable, analytical, and just a little paranoid.”

“More so than usual?”

“No, not at all. Just talking about conspiracy theories and suchlike.”

Damian froze for a moment in deep thought. “Supervisor,” said Mendelsohn, breaking the silence, “Dr. Croy is a good man. He would not evade further investigation.”

“I would not think so, either, but we must weigh every possibility. At any rate, evasion of investigation is the least of my worries.”

“You think he was kidnapped?”

“Unfortunately, it is quite likely. But, details are few at the moment. You two knew him best. If anyone could find him, you could.” He straightened up, and his disposition switched from compassion to graveness. “Dane, I want a transcript of your meeting with the doctor in my office pronto.”

“Very good, sir. I will have it done right away,” answered he, as the supervisor scurried off.

“I have to go to Terracom,” Mendelsohn told Dane, strutting away.

“Without me?” exclaimed Dane. “I don’t think so. This could be a seriously dangerous case.”

Mendelsohn swung around with a hand latched defiantly on her hip. “Thad, I love ya, but I think you’ve got business to take care of right here. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Dane reluctantly relented. She had no doubt she could take care of herself, but there was a part of her that was, admittedly, rather anxious. She knew that if Dr. Croy had suddenly disappeared, he would have left for a good reason; but was the “good reason” to save his life? Questions like this swirled in her mind as she got into her sedan. Even though she had been involved in life-threatening situations before, it never became less frightening. Hopefully, it would not go that far, but she braced herself for the worst.

She pulled up at Terracom Center around seven that morning. Several other FBI vehicles were already parked in the garage across the street. As she strode over to the crosswalk, Mendelsohn shook her head thinking about how such a simple interview had become a manhunt in a week’s time. It was why an agent always had to be aware of--

All at once, she found herself leaping backwards to avoid a car that had ramped up on the sidewalk. She watched in horror as the vehicle slammed into a lamppost on the sidewalk next to the park at the end of the street, hood smoking. Screams resounded as unsuspecting civilians narrowly dodged the oncoming car. Another black vehicle, an SUV, soon slammed into it from behind. The driver of the second car, swung his door open and dashed away from the scene. Mendelssohn joined several other witnesses in surrounding the wreckage. She approached the first car to crash.

“Hey, are you--” She stopped short as she felt her heart come up in her throat. The driver had six bullet wounds in his back, and had died at the wheel with his face towards Mendelssohn.

“Dr. Croy!” she gasped.

PART II

Just as she was opening the car door, sirens wailed. Police cars screeched to a halt just before the crash scene. "Clear the wreckage!" officers shouted as they made their way toward the totaled cars. She showed them her ID. "FBI," she said.

"Mendelsohn? What happened here?" barked one cop she knew to be Officer James Lannis.

"I'm--not--sure," Mendelsohn managed to get out through her panicked breathing. "This man. He--was my friend."

"Where's the other driver?"

"Gone. Left the scene--right after--the crash."

"Do you have a description of him?"

"Tall. Black hoodie. Didn't--see much else."

At that moment four black SUVs pulled up. Out of them came Damian, Dane, and a few other agents. "Don't worry, officers. We've got it from here," said the supervisor. The officers complied, having worked with Damian several times. The moment the police cars had left, agents set to work establishing a barricade around the scene. Damian and two investigators began inspections of the cars and the body. Dane grabbed Mendelsohn and pulled her to the side.

"Thad, he's dead," she sobbed.

"I know, I know," replied Dane, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I'm just as crushed as you are. We're going to figure this out. For now, just sit down and gather yourself. It's going to be all right, ok?"

Wiping her tears, she nodded. There was a short hill in the park next to the sidewalk, and she sat down there. She wanted to pull herself together, but she could not restrain the weeping. For the following hour, she remained there, crying intermittently. Everything that morning had happened so suddenly. She had only known Dr. Croy was missing for under an hour before he was dead. Obviously, she had been worried about him, but she did not expect him to die, at least as quickly as he did. Who or what would have caused him to get in what seemed to be a car chase? If he were kidnapped, how did he get a car?

Just then, Mendelsohn noticed something peeking out from under a rock about ten feet away from her. Instantly, Dr. Croy's words replayed in her head: "Sometimes the

hopeless find the very thing they need under a rock.” Adrenaline rushed through her, but she restrained herself to avoid drawing attention. She nonchalantly slid towards the rock and lifted it up. It was a note. Opening it, she found it was written in Greek; however, it was signed at the bottom with the doctor’s initials. After glancing around her, she stowed the letter in her coat pocket.

Mendelssohn rose and approached Dane. “Are you okay?” asked he.

“Yeah, I’m all right,” she replied, rubbing her forehead. “I’ve gotta go.”

Dane cocked his head. “Really? You sure you don’t want to stick around?”

“I’m sure. It’s not a good place for me to be right now anyway.”

“All right. Take care of yourself.”

“You know I will.”

She made her way back to her sedan. “281 Lambert Drive,” she said once inside.

“Navigating to 281 Lambert Drive,” the computer answered, displaying a map in the bottom left corner of the windshield.

She then dialed the number of her longtime friend and Greek scholar, Sid Lane. The two had met in college and had remained in sporadic contact since. She had not seen him personally for a few years, not because she was avoiding him, but because they both remained rather occupied. The Crypt owned computers with extensive translative capabilities, but she figured visiting Sid would be a pleasant break from the current, hectic environment at the Crypt.

It was a thirteen minute drive to Sid’s office at the L.A. Center for Cultural Preservation. The LACCP had taken over a building erected during the Spanish occupation of California that was just outside of downtown. With its elaborate architecture bearing unique Spanish accents, it fit the name of the group perfectly. When she entered the lobby, Sid was awaiting her. He was a short man with short, black hair combed over and held in place with an excessive amount of hair gel. He pulled his sport jacket together, pushed his square glasses up his pointy nose, and cleared his throat. “My, Darci, you look well,” he remarked.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” she replied. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been all right. Please, come back to my office and we can talk.”

Naturally, the building had been untouched in places it could, and touched in

places it could not; for example, there were extra furnishings, new doors, and, of course, air conditioning. On the way to his office, they passed several different offices dealing in the preservation of several different cultures from Hebrew to Roman to Persian. The entire building was deeply silent, as if all throughout there was a profound reverence for each culture they were conserving. So quiet was the place that the constant click of Mendelssohn's heels seemed like cymbals clashing during a orchestral rest.

At last, they reached Sid's office. It was a fairly standard affair, with two expansive bookshelves on the back right and left walls, a large wooden desk in between and slightly to the front of those, and a seating area with a couch and two armchairs in front of the desk. One object, however, did catch Mendelssohn's eye as they entered: a huge painting on the back wall, framed in gold, and depicting an epic Greek battle. Though the pure artistry of it appeared to be hundreds of years old, the colors were so bright and vivid that it almost seemed fake. Sid explained with great pride that it *was* real, and that it was the only artifact he was allowed to keep with him.

"I restored it myself," he continued. "I was so taken with its beauty that I begged them to let me keep it. Of course, I had to pay a large sum, but it was well worth it."

"It's beautiful," Mendelssohn remarked as she took a seat.

"So what is it you've found? I did not realize you had become an archaeologist."

She laughed. "Not quite. This was a letter someone wrote to me, but it's in Greek. I knew you'd be able to read it."

He took the note, but raised his brow. "Someone wrote a letter to you in a language you couldn't read?"

"It's complicated," she replied, shaking her head.

Sid opened the note and cleared his throat. "It's in ancient Greek. Whoever wrote you this is well versed in it, too. It says, 'The kill--' em, how would you say it in modern English--ah, 'code,' perhaps? Yes, 'is in the coat.' 'The kill code is in the coat.' Hm. Odd thing to say in a letter, to be sure."

Mendelssohn reclined back in her chair, mumbling that sentence to herself repeatedly.

"Are you all right, Darci?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied. "It's not me I'm concerned about, anyway." She

stood. "I know it's been short, but I've got stuff to do at work. You know how it is. Thanks for the interpretation. I enjoyed seeing you again."

"As did I. I only wish it might have been longer." They shook hands, and she left. Indeed, she thought that her sudden departure was rather rude, especially considering that they had not met in a long time. But the message from the doctor had made her gravely fearful. She knew what kill code Dr. Croy was likely referring to, but why would he want her to know where the kill code for his newest device was? Could he have known something that she did not? What if his technology had fallen into the wrong hands--the hands of the one who murdered him? She had to get answers.

As soon as she got in her car, she called Dane. "Hello?"

"Hey, Thad, I was just calling to ask you where they took the doctor's body."

"To Base Kappa for a detailed autopsy. Why?"

"I may have something on the person who killed the doctor. I need to see the body again."

There was a moment of silence on Dane's end, as if it took him a moment to process what she had said. "Really? What?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone. I'll have to tell you about it later."

"You don't have the clearance to get in the autopsy rooms, though, right?"

"Well, no. I have some friends at Kappa, though. I'm sure they'll help me out."

"Hey, why don't I just meet you there?"

"Are you sure? You don't have to do that. Plus, it's a pretty long drive."

"I'm positive. You got a camera disrupter on you?"

"Always."

"I was his friend, too, you know."

"I know, I know. I'll see you there."

Base Kappa was in a secret location roughly three hours outside of Los Angeles. The closest thing to which it could be compared is Area 51, but Area 51 is not nearly as advanced or secure. It could not be seen from any aerial vehicle or satellite because of a cloaking device that covered the base's entire thirty square miles. No signs or warnings indicated its presence, only an unsuspecting telephone pole about three miles outside of

the invisible gate. To grant entrance, the telephone required voice activation, a twenty digit access code, scans of all ten fingers, and a retinal scan. Once an agent drove another mile down a barely visible dirt path, ten guards checked the agent and the agent's car for explosives or automatic weapons; if they were unauthorized to be carrying such weapons, they would be confiscated and the agent detained. ID was required, in addition to the appropriate security clearance, which most Crypt agents possessed. It was because of this rigid security protocol that Mendelsohn wondered why they had taken Dr. Croy to that base. Something was *seriously* important about the doctor's death, or he would not have been taken here. But she was beginning to deduce that anyway.

Once inside, one could see everything: the towering barbed wire fences, the numerous titanium complexes, and the armed soldiers running to and fro. Mendelsohn assumed that they would be investigating the body in complex 1D, which is where most corpses, human or not, were autopsied. Entering, she found a long corridor extending to her right and left. Lining the corridor on either side were small labs, of sorts; looking through their glass facades, Mendelsohn could see bodies, one per room, laid on a table in the center of the lab. Most of the rooms had a couple of pathologists in white lab coats carefully inspecting each corpse. She scanned each room as she walked by, searching for the doctor's corpse.

At last, she spotted his body through the glass. Next to the door, a plaque read, "SUBJECT 233F." Normally, that did not bother her, but, having known the man personally, it seemed insensitive in that case. Looking through the glass again, she saw the doctor's body, clad in a hospital gown. She noticed that his bloody clothes had been placed in long, plastic bags and hung on the wall. She was eager to get in there and start searching, but she would have to wait for Dane. Because she technically did not have the proper clearance, she would have to jam the security cameras for a second so she could get in. Pretty much every Crypt agent had a device for doing so. It made getting in somewhere and getting out without a trace much easier. The cameras in Base Kappa were obviously quite resistant to camera disrupters, but Dane had discovered a way to jam them for about three seconds before the feed refreshed. It served as a useful feature if they wanted to evade punishment for breaking the "stupid" kind of protocol.

A few minutes passed, and Dane had not arrived yet. Suddenly, a bell screeched

throughout the corridor. Mendelssohn checked her watch. It was noon. All the pathologists streamed out of the rooms, two by two, and headed towards the exit, presumably to get lunch. The ones looking over Dr. Croy's body were no exception and merged with the crowd en route to the cafeteria. Without thinking, she pressed the button on her disrupter and caught the door to the lab where the doctor's corpse was. She slipped inside just before the camera feed in the hall refreshed. The whole thing was a bit of a blur, but she was so keen on solving the meaning of the letter that she had impulsively grabbed the door and slid inside. She was normally a fairly patient person, but Dane was being too slow for her, in this instance.

Entering the lab, it was all she could do to prevent her emotions from overwhelming her. The sight of the doctor's glazed eyes and pale face ripped her heart out. But the question of *why* he died pressed on her more profoundly this time. Whoever killed him should, and *would*, if she had any say in it, be severely punished.

She strolled over to the coat and examined the bag it was in. She would have to remove it without a trace, or risk being discovered and reprimanded by the supervisor. She tilted her head back and forth in cautious inspection until she thought about a way she could get it out. However, just as she was donning her gloves, she discerned shouting out in the hall, followed by obnoxious laughter. It was not Dane's laugh, or his voice. Guards!

Panicking, she scanned the room. On the back wall, there were some steel cabinets supporting a counter where the pathologists analyzed evidence. They were a little small, but she might could squeeze inside. While she was getting in, she thought that she probably looked rather ridiculous trying to hide in a cabinet, but thankfully, no one was there to see it. She could almost fit, but she had to leave the cabinet open very slightly to fully fit. For a few moments, there was silence. But the horror that she might have felt if someone had seen her crawling inside a cabinet immediately became insignificant when she heard the lock to the room she was in open. Her heart raced. She slid as far back into the cabinet as was physically possible.

"Hmm. Empty. That's strange," said one man with a throaty, heavily modulated voice. "I thought we'd have to kill someone to get in here."

Another man replied, and his voice was also very modulated. "Well, it makes

getting that kill code easier, anyways.”

Mendelssohn wanted to jump out and attack the men, but the second man’s words piqued her interest. Perhaps she could find out what she needed to know about this kill code by eavesdropping on their conversation. She decided to continue listening. There was a rustling noise.

“How do we get this thing out of here, anyway, without anyone knowing?” said the second man.

“Just rip it open. Look, I already killed the guy. I ain’t getting in worse trouble than that.”

Mendelssohn almost let out a scream, but she covered her mouth. She almost leapt out--

“Don’t *you* take all the credit for it. If it weren’t for Arachne, you would never have had this chance. Neither would I. Remember, it’s bigger than just this guy.”

Arachne? As badly as she wanted to kill the first man, the emergence of this new information caused her to hold back.

“Yeah, I know, I know.”

She heard someone writing something down. “The Body will be most pleased that we have this. Change is very near, now.”

Suddenly, there was a resounding crash. Machine gun fire rang out, along with shouting and cursing. Bullets clinked against the metal cabinets, and glass tinkled outside. Mendelssohn squirmed around until she could close the cabinet all the way to shield herself from the crossfire. Adrenaline coursed through her, and her head grew light. Even amidst the gunfire, she discerned punching and grunting. *What was going on?* Gradually, the number of guns firing decreased and the volume of the screams fell, until everything was silent again.

Mendelssohn remained still for a moment to ensure that the two men had left and then kicked the cabinet open. She crawled out as quickly as she could and drew her pistol. She was horrified to see several heavily armed and protected soldiers dead. The door had been knocked down, and the thick glass at the front of the room had been completely shattered. As she made her way to the hall, she scolded herself for not getting a better look at those men. But out in that corridor, it seemed that nothing had ever

happened. Everything was so *eerily* silent. Her self-hating thoughts seemed to be the only noise, until a rasping emergency alarm sounded throughout the corridor.

She darted out the emergency exit. Emerging, she found that the base had, in one moment, become like a disturbed bed of ants. Personnel and soldiers alike scrambled about in different directions. The siren that echoed across the campus aggravated her already ringing ears. She looked to see if she could find a familiar face somewhere in the crowd so she could ask what was happening. While she was searching, the PA crackled to life.

“Code 38-B, Code 38-B,” a voice barked. “Rogue agent. I repeat--”

And everything went dark.

Mendelssohn awoke in an alleyway in Los Angeles in a cold sweat. She gasped for air. The sky was dark, and her only light was a flickering orange streetlamp above her. Every joint in her body ached, and so did her head. She rolled her neck around to try to relieve some of the dreadful cramping. The last thing she remembered was that voice on the intercom at Base Kappa. How had she gotten there?

Just then, her phone rang. It was Dane. “Thad?”

“Are you encrypted?”

She glanced at her phone’s screen to see a large red banner that read ENCRYPTED. “Yeah, I am.”

“Good. Are you okay?”

“Uh, well, not really. I’m somewhere downtown, but I don’t know where. I’m aching really bad, too. I have no clue how I got here. Last I remember, I was at Kappa.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, Darce. I put you there. I had to smuggle you out of Kappa.”

“Wait, wait. What? Why? How?”

“Ah, it’s kind of a long story. There was a security breach--”

“A rogue agent?”

Dane gave a sharp sigh. “Uh, yeah, yeah. They killed several soldiers and removed some classified info.”

“Do they know who it is?”

“It’s you, Darci. It’s you.”

All at once, Mendelsohn felt like someone had punched her in the gut. Her head spun, and her thoughts with it. She blinked to try to focus. “Thad, it wasn’t me. You--you know it wasn’t me.”

“I know. But they don’t, and since I was your closest aide, I’m gonna be questioned, no doubt. But meanwhile, they’re looking for you. Find a safe place you can go. There are no orders to kill on site, but it might happen. I couldn’t bear for you to die.”

“Look, Thad, I appreciate your trying to help, but I can’t run from the FBI. It’ll only make things worse.”

“Darce, Damian’s already briefed me on the evidence. The perpetrators did a pretty good job of framing you. If you go back, you’ll get a life sentence for sure.”

“Is it worth my integrity, Thad?”

“Look, I’m trying to help you. If integrity is more important to you than not rotting in jail, then turn yourself in, by all means.” He sighed again. “I’m sorry. I care about you a lot, and I don’t want you to leave. Trust me, I’ll do what I can to get you cleared, but for now, I don’t think you should come back. Give it a little while and see if things cool off. I’ll be in touch, okay? Bye.”

The line buzzed. Mendelsohn shoved her phone back into her pocket and got up. She was extremely conflicted inside. On one hand, though she knew she was not guilty, turning herself in would be the honest thing to do. In ten years or so, she *might* be cleared *if* some evidence *maybe* came out in her favor. But that was a good many *ifs*. One hundred years in jail did not sound appealing. As she weighed each option in her mind, she remembered the conversation between the two men back at Base Kappa. *Change is very near, now*. Those foreboding words echoed in her mind. Whoever was able to infiltrate the most secure fortress in the world was not a mere thief or troublemaker. Something huge and terrible was imminent that stretched far beyond the doctor’s death. This “Arachne,” whatever it was, had to be stopped--quickly. She knew it would be like an act of Congress before the Crypt could get enough information to justify carrying out a raid on them. Who knew if they even had any information on them at all? And who knew if they had a meeting place that could be raided, or if they were some kind of global network? What if the Crypt did not believe her account? There were too many risks to be

taken for her to simply walk away from something like this. She would have to evade the FBI for a little while, for the greater good. And she knew exactly the place where she could do so.

PART III

The door to the unsuspecting suburban house opened slightly. “Darci Mendelsohn, is that you?”

“Hey, Vanessa! It’s so good to see you again,” came the reply.

The door shut. Mendelsohn could hear locks being unlatched inside. A few moments later, the door swung back open to reveal a dark-skinned woman with dark brown eyes and dreadlocks. She was a modest woman, much shorter than Mendelsohn and clad in a tan blazer with a white tank top underneath. A long navy skirt drooped all the way to her ankles, where her brown loafers just peeked out. She gave a wide grin. “Come here, give me hug! Goodness, come in, come in!”

Before she entered, Mendelsohn glanced over her shoulder.

The interior of her home was much like the exterior: neat, with enough homeliness to be attractive. The floor was covered with dark wood throughout. To the left of the entryway was the living room, and to the right was the dining room. Vanessa showed her to the living room, where a gorgeous stone fireplace with a wooden mantle lay. Next to the fireplace were two armchairs, and directly across from them was a floral yellow couch. Vanessa urged Mendelsohn to take a seat. “Can I get you something to drink?” she asked. “I have water, lemonade--”

“Lemonade would be great,” Mendelsohn replied.

She thus scurried off and returned promptly with a wooden tray, with two glasses of ice cold lemonade. “So, what’s going on?” she asked as she handed Mendelsohn a glass.

“Well, I’m here because--”

“I know *why* you’re here, Darci.”

Mendelsohn cocked her head. “How?”

Vanessa set her cup down and picked up her phone. After typing something in, she gave it to Mendelsohn. She had found a news article with the headline, **FBI WARNS OF DANGEROUS ASSASSIN ON THE LOOSE IN LOS ANGELES**. Below it was a fuzzy photograph of Mendelsohn herself. She did not know what to say. She stared at that headline for a while in total shock. When she finally looked up, she saw Vanessa, standing, with a pistol aimed directly at her. “So, Darci, tell me what’s *really* going on.”

Mendelsohn’s lip quivered, and tears welled up in her eyes. “Vanessa, it’s not

true, I swear.”

“You’d better give me a good reason why.” Her stare was firm and unwavering, demanding submission.

Mendelssohn took off her jacket and put her hands up. “There’s a note in the inside pocket.”

Warily, Vanessa reached into the pocket with the gun still pointed at Mendelssohn. She removed the note and opened it. “This means nothing to me.”

“Does the name ‘Doctor George Allen Croy’?”

“Killed yesterday, downtown. I read about him in the news, too.”

“Well, he was my friend. Someone or something murdered him, and I need to know who it is. It’s a long story, but if you put the gun down, we can talk.”

“I have the gun. You are on my terms. Talk, then I’ll put the gun down.”

Mendelssohn proceeded to relay the entirety of the events from the interview with the doctor to the events at Base Kappa to that moment. After she finished, Vanessa contemplated what had been said and lowered her gun. Still, she was clearly tense and cautious. “So, you were framed?”

“Completely. I *have* to find out who or what Arachne is and what they are planning to do. I need a place to crash in the meantime. I thought your house would be good, because you’re off the grid now.”

Vanessa shook her head. “I’d love to help you, Darci, but I can’t harbor a fugitive from the Crypt. Do you have any idea what they would do to me if they found you here? It wasn’t easy to convince them to erase all my records and cease surveillance of my house after I retired. If they found a fugitive here, whether you’re in the right or not, my peaceful life would be ruined.”

“I know, I know, and I really hate to drag you into this, but I fear that this is much bigger than one death. If Arachne is allowed to grow, people are going to die. I just know it. Plus, I have Thad covering me on the inside. Trust me, he’ll mislead them for as long as he can.”

Vanessa sighed. “What’s your plan?”

“Honestly, I don’t really have a plan until I know more. I don’t know if they have a headquarters or anything. I need more intel.”

Vanessa chuckled. "I don't have access to that kind of information anymore, Darci."

"I know. But Thad still does. I'm sure he can help."

Vanessa bit her lip. "All right, you can stay. But I have one condition. Don't tell anyone you're here, not even Thad. If you do, you're out. Got it?"

Mendelssohn nodded. She loved Vanessa and admired her fortitude, but for the same reason she admired her, she also feared her. Upsetting her would be a decision anyone would quickly regret. During her days in the Crypt, she was renowned as one of the most skilled and perceptive agents the organization had ever known. It was for her many years of dedicated service and excellence that the Crypt agreed, in violation of protocol, to halt surveillance of her. After a long time of nonstop violence and action, being taken off the grid was something every retiring agent dreamed of, but very few obtained. Vanessa was a lucky one.

Just then, her phone rang. It was Dane. "Put it on speaker," Vanessa ordered.

Mendelssohn complied. "Hey, Thad."

"Darci? Sorry I took so long. I got held up here at HQ. Did you find a place?"

Vanessa glared at Mendelssohn. "Yeah, I did."

"Oh, really? Where?"

"That's--uh--that's classified."

Dane laughed. "C'mon, Darce. You don't trust me?"

"Of course I do. I'm just trying to keep tight lips on it. Ears can be everywhere, you know?"

"Okay. All right. You need anything?"

"Yeah, I do, actually."

"Name it."

"I need everything you can get me on a group called Arachne."

There was a pause. "You mean the hacktivist group?"

"I guess so. While I was at Kappa in the lab with Dr. Croy's body in it--"

"--you overheard someone?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Well, apparently, they heard you, too. Whoever killed all those soldiers knew

you were there. Darce, they modified their assault rifles to shoot the same ammo as your pistol. The evidence was presented to the supervisor today. It's crazy. They framed you *on purpose.*"

Mendelssohn rubbed her forehead. "All the more reason to pursue them."

"Whoa, whoa, what?" he exclaimed, but, not wishing to draw suspicion, his voice dropped to a whisper. "What? These people massacred highly trained soldiers and you're just going to go running after them?"

"Yeah, basically. Look, if I don't, no one else will. They are up to something more than just a political stunt, and they need to be stopped. Send me everything the Crypt has on Arachne as soon as you can, okay?"

"Fine. I'll have to send it in small packages to avoid suspicion, so stand by." He stopped for a moment, and said, "Don't get yourself hurt, please."

"Don't worry about me." She hung up.

Vanessa showed her to her room, a simple affair with a queen-sized bed, beside which was a desk with a desktop computer on it. After her hostess had left, Mendelssohn sat down at the computer and began to scour the Internet. First, and most logically, she searched "Arachne." An encyclopedia entry came up regarding Arachne in Greek mythology. She opened it.

The story went as follows: Arachne was a beautiful girl, the daughter of a shepherd and skilled at weaving from a very young age. She boasted in her talent and cried, "My skill is much greater than Athena, goddess of crafts! Who is she to claim responsibility for my talent?"

Athena was most offended at her insolence, and spoke from the heavens, saying, "Listen well, Arachne, foolish girl! If so lovely you deem yourself, let us have a contest to settle it for sure."

Arachne accepted her challenge, and the date was set. Now, when the day had come for the contest to take place, an old lady approached the young girl and cautioned her. "Beware in testing the gods! If now you plead for forgiveness, perhaps Athena shall spare you."

But Arachne laughed. "Ha! Has Athena become weak and feeble that she must shy away? Let her come forth!"

The old woman then transformed to reveal the shimmering figure of Athena. Immediately, the two set to weaving. Hours passed before both the weavings were complete. Athena touted her weaving, declaring, “Look here! Here I have woven the likeness of four contests which the mortals have had against the gods, and all four times they have lost, for the gods punished them.”

Arachne was not moved. She held up her weaving and exclaimed, “Nay, this, truly, is the way of the gods: here I have woven the likenesses of the gods punishing and abusing the mortals for no reason. Even Zeus, king of the gods, has done evil, seducing many innocent women.”

Athena was outraged that Arachne would dare offend the gods. Further, she observed how Arachne’s weaving was indeed more beautiful than her own. She drew her sword and sliced Arachne’s weaving to pieces. Then, she cursed Arachne and said, “You shall never rest from weaving: for eternity you and your descendants must weave or die.” Sprinkling her with a poison, Athena turned Arachne into a spider. In this way, the Greeks believed, the goddesses punished mortals for defying them.

Mendelssohn leaned back and tapped her finger on her lips. What connection did this story have to the group? At that moment, she received a text on her phone from Dane. “Sent first packet. Next will come in two hours.”

Mendelssohn hastily logged into her email account. Locating Dane’s email, she opened the attachment inside. It was a document marked with the Crypt seal and CLASSIFIED in large red letters. Below this, UPCLASS 4-C was printed in black, signifying that Arachne had been upgraded to “Moderate Threat” status. “What is presently known as Arachne has its origins in the Spider Initiative at Terracom, Inc.,” the document began. “The Spider Initiative was a subdivision of the Cybersecurity Department, whose sole purpose was to find and patch flaws in Terracom servers. However, after Terracom contracted a new server farm with its own cybersecurity specialists, the Spider Initiative was shuttered and all employees in said initiative were laid off.

“In 2003, the first traceable Arachne attack took place at a genetics and chemistry lab in Austin, Texas. After all power was cut off at the facility, Arachne operatives infiltrated the facility and stole a prototype of a non-organic cloning device, a new

venture for the lab. The device possessed the ability to clone non-living subjects. Since their first attack in 2003, Arachne has been suspected to be involved in the 2004 cyberattack on Ultim Corp., which at the time was developing invisibility technology. They were also accused of another cyberattack on Manta Engineering in 2005, which was then testing a device that would induce a state of unconsciousness. Arachne has been involved in several other minor attacks, with the targets usually being companies and organizations with experimental technology. These attacks are seemingly random, but in all the cases since 2003, nothing was found to be missing from any of the respective targets either digitally or physically. Detectives at the Crypt, however, have found negligible traces of gamma rays at each victim's physical locations, a predictable byproduct of the non-organic cloning device."

The document ended there. For the following two and a half hours, Mendelssohn sat on her bed, pondering and writing her thoughts furiously. What was Arachne looking for? How were these events connected? Did they plan to use these things today or had they already used them in some way without the Crypt's knowledge? Finally, at 3:30 P.M., the second email came through. Again, she opened the attachment. "The Crypt has determined that Arachne cloned the tech which each respective target was experimenting with at the time. There have not been any known uses of these devices since they were cloned, however. The most recent documented occurrence involving Arachne was the murder of Dr. George Allen Croy on March 7th. Dr. Croy was originally employed at the Spider Initiative but had no known ties to Arachne. At the time of his death, he worked in the Experimental Communications Unit at Terracom Center and had developed a computer-human communications device, permitting humans to execute commands on a computer telepathically. Only a few days after an interview with Crypt agents concerning said device, Dr. Croy disappeared, only to die in a car wreck in the following days. Investigators also found six bullet wounds in his back. His assailant fled the scene, but based on a thorough inspection of his car, the Crypt has confirmed his involvement with Arachne. It is the first documented murder the group has committed."

As she finished reading it, a text came through on her phone: "Just sent you the second packet. Busy at HQ. Won't be able to send you next packet until tomorrow."

Her heart fell. She needed to know more, and just when it was within her reach,

she was forced to wait. The desire to know the unknown felt like it was clawing on the inside of her. Through the rest of the evening, this yearning consumed her conscious. At the dinner table that night, she found it difficult to focus on her conversation with Vanessa. Finally, her hostess set her utensils down and asked, “What’s on your mind, Darci? You can hardly talk straight!”

Mendelssohn sighed. “I just need to know the full story about Arachne. I need to know where they are and how to defeat them. The docs that Thad sent me don’t tell me any of that. He’s sending me a third packet tomorrow, but I was just hoping I would get them all today.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what: after you’re done eating, go get showered up and get some rest. Unwind, and get your mind off of it. You’re doing a fine job.”

Mendelssohn nodded. Maybe she was right. Some relaxation would help her think more clearly. After dinner, Vanessa offered her a change of clothes (which, admittedly, were a little bit too small for her, but she gratefully accepted them anyway), and she took a short, hot shower. After drying her hair, she went back to her room and fell down on the bed. Almost instantly, she slipped into a deep sleep.

In the middle of the night, she was suddenly awakened by static noise coming from somewhere in her room. *Odd.* She gingerly got out of bed and listened. The sound emanated from her closet. She opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out her gun. Slowly and smoothly, she approached the closet doors. She reached for the knob, swung the door open speedily, and raised her pistol. What she saw inside took her breath away.

Within the closet was a tall man dressed in a black suit and shiny black shoes. The frightening part was not his clothing, though. Instead of a head, he seemed to have an old computer monitor. The screen switched between different types of static, as if it were tuning in to a frequency. For a moment, everything was eerily still. Mendelssohn froze in utter shock. *What should I do?* “Who are you?” she asked him.

He remained motionless for a few more seconds as the display continued to cycle through static screens. Finally, the man seemed to awaken from a thoughtful daze. The screen turned white, and he began to walk towards Mendelssohn. She backed up and attempted to fire her weapon, but she felt as if her limbs were numb for some reason. As she struggled to pull the trigger, the man--or rather, the computer atop his head--began to

speak.

“D--D--Dar--ci?” the audio stuttered in a haunting muffled voice.

“Who are you?” Mendelssohn demanded again.

“Whoooo am I--I? I am y--your great--est fear.”

“And what’s that?”

A symbol of a spider appeared on the screen. Gradually, below the image, the monitor typed out: A--R--A--C--H--N--E. “That there’s no one you can trust,” the computer replied, this time in a deeper, more foreboding tone.

At last, Mendelssohn gained control of her arms and shot the gun directly at the monitor. The man tumbled backwards, the monitor went dark, and all fell silent once more. She cautiously approached the body and peered at the shattered computer display. Behind it was a normal man’s head with glassy eyes and a bloody lip. As she stared at it more, though, she felt as if she had seen his face before. And it suddenly hit her. It was the face of Thaddeus Dane. She screamed.

Instantly, she sat up in bed. Her breathing was short and rapid, and she had broken out in a cold sweat. *Good, it was only a dream.* Of course, she did fear that there was no one that she could trust. She always did. *But I have friends I can trust, right?* Or maybe not. She didn’t want to even go there. What she needed was rest. Nonetheless, for the next few hours of the morning, her sleep was fitful. When she finally decided to get out of bed, she was so tired that she thought it might have been better not to sleep at all. Still, her anxiousness to find out more about Arachne energized her somewhat.

At breakfast that morning, around 9:15, Dane sent her another text. “Third and last packet sent.” Mendelssohn wanted to wolf down everything on her plate, but she felt it would be rude to do so. She stayed and chatted with Vanessa for a few minutes, then sped upstairs to open the email. “Motivations behind the murder are not known specifically, but our investigation has discovered no trace of Dr. Croy’s computer-human communications device. It is likely that Arachne targeted Dr. Croy to obtain his device, but according to witnesses, his murderer left the crime scene immediately following the wreck. This suggests that Dr. Croy was in previous contact with Arachne operatives to either have it stolen or handed off, if our assumptions are correct. Their use for such a device again remains a mystery. Dr. Croy’s body was taken to Base Kappa for

investigation, after the Crypt was informed that Arachne could be building a weapon with all their acquired technology. The Crypt hoped that an autopsy of the body may reveal a clue about what Arachne was seeking, but it returned nothing of interest, save a random series of letters and numbers on his coat sleeve.” She scrolled down a little farther. Something caught her eye. “Arachne has, on the whole, been rather elusive. Out of the twenty-eight documented Arachne heists and cyberattacks, in which forty-three individuals were involved, only two have been captured and condemned. The two that have been captured have refused to divulge any information involving the group.

“The Crypt has picked up pieces of conversation between Arachne-associated hackers on the dark web, a division of the Internet mostly populated by illegal activity. Most of this data self-corrupts by the time Crypt agents can recover it. We were recently tipped on a possible physical location for Arachne, 228 Seville Street.” The document ended abruptly. She was puzzled. The Crypt had been tipped on a possible headquarters and did not care about it? It seemed so wrong--so unusual. Arachne could not be allowed to finish what they had begun. If she had to, she would have to go in alone. Was it possible that the Crypt was luring her to Seville Street to capture her? She did not believe so, but even if they were, at least she could say she tried.

She rose, walked over to her closet, and paused. The wool coat that hung in the closet was the same one she had worn to interview the doctor just a little over a week before. As she stared at that coat, any hesitation she had at leaving left. Her friend would not die in vain. She donned her black leather boots, jeans, blazer, and that coat. She brushed her unruly hair and set out. Vanessa endeavored to stop her as she headed for the front door. “Darci, let the Crypt handle this. If you leave this house--”

“Vanessa, I truly appreciate your help and advice. But I know the Crypt. They’ll spend more time searching for me than they will the real threat to avoid a subpoena from Congress regarding their ‘rogue agent.’ As much as I hate to admit it, they take the easy way out sometimes. They’ll ignore the problem to avoid scrutiny. Luckily, I’ve been disavowed. I don’t have to play by their rules, and darn it, if I have to die to blow the whistle, I will! But I can’t let innocent people die, Vanessa, and that’s what’s gonna happen if I just sit here and do nothing.”

Vanessa nodded. “Then Godspeed.”

PART IV

Since it was a lengthy drive into Los Angeles from Vanessa's suburb and since Mendelssohn did not have a car, she had no other option but to take a bus. A dangerous thing to do, to be sure, but she took some necessary precautions. She donned a pair of sunglasses and flung her hood over her face, not daring to make eye contact with anyone. Though there were a few times she felt as if she were being observed, she made it safely to the drop-off at San Juan Avenue, about three blocks away from Seville. It seemed like a fitting area of town for an organization like Arachne to hide. It had once been a thriving industrial district but had slowly run down until many of its once bustling buildings were vacant. 228 Seville Street was no different. The exterior was rusting and the windows were broken, and she could still make out "J & M Warehousing" in faded letters above the entrance.

The entrance door nearly fell off its decrepit hinges as Mendelssohn opened it. Seemingly, there was nothing inside. It was simply a massive, totally empty warehouse. She strolled around, carefully scanning the walls and the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone enter the warehouse. She halted, stepped back from the wall, and put her hand in her coat pocket. She drew her gun and turned it in the person's direction, but she breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it was Dane. "Thad! You scared me. How did you know I was here?"

He chuckled. "I sent you the docs, remember?"

"Oh, right. How did you leave work without raising suspicion? And uh," she pointed to the assault rifle he bore at his side, "isn't that overdoing it a little?"

"No, no, I don't think so. I think it'll do the job just fine." He pointed it. *At her.*

Mendelssohn laughed nervously. "Thad, that's not funny."

"It's not supposed to be."

She labored to keep her breaths controlled. "Thad, don't do this. Think about what you're doing."

"I already have, Darce. I thought about how I didn't want to kill you. It's why I snuck you out of Kappa. It's why I told you to find a safe place. It's why I told you that they, or we, I guess, framed you on purpose. I didn't want them to find you. I didn't want you to find Arachne. But when you got too close to figuring it out, I had to stop it."

"You altered the docs!"

“Yeah, I did, okay? Plus, the Body discovered the real meaning behind the doctor’s note. That kill code we got from Croy’s coat was a phony. Turns out, you have the real one.”

“Me? I don’t--” She stopped. Groping around in her pockets, she discovered a flash drive. She gasped. The kill code had been in *her* coat the entire time!

“*If* you don’t want to die, I’ll give you one last chance. You can hand over the flash drive, go into hiding, and I’ll never bother you again.”

A tear dripped down her face. “I trusted you!”

Dane grit his teeth. “We’ve established that I betrayed you. Get over it, Darci! We’re not kids anymore. This is real life, and right now, you need to make a real decision.”

Tears poured from her eyes. “I would never, *ever* give this to you. And I hope that, after I’m dead, my memory will haunt you forever.”

“I cared about you, Darce. I really did. If I didn’t, I would have killed you before now.” With that, he shot her several times in the chest, and she collapsed on the floor. He dashed over to her body and plucked the flash drive out of her hands. However, turning around, the appearance of a brawny, armed figure stunned him. Like a flash of light, the man delivered a kick to Dane’s gut and shot him once in the leg with his pistol. “And if I didn’t care about her, *I* wouldn’t have done that.” Dane groaned and clutched his leg in reply.

The man bent down and patted Mendelssohn lightly on the cheek with his tan hands. “Mendelssohn? You still with me?”

She winced. Blinking a few times as if she had awakened in an alternate reality, she remarked, “Gee, that gun’s got a kick.” The man offered her his hand and pulled her to her feet. “Thanks, Don. I owe you one.” She silently thanked Vanessa for loaning her the bulletproof vest that slipped under her clothes.

“Don’t mention it.” He shook his bald head. “I have to admit, Thad, I never expected you to go this low. You’ve shamed the Crypt.”

Through squirming and screams, Dane replied, “I hope I have. It--would be my greatest--honor.”

Mendelssohn knelt and snatched the flash drive out of his hand. For a moment,

she just glared at him. “How long, Thad? How long have you been lying to me?”

He grit his teeth but kept silent. Mendelssohn did not need him to say anything, though. His furious gaze screamed that it had been many years. She wanted to curl up and sob, but at the same time, she wanted to beat the life out of him. She restrained herself. If she wanted any chance of stopping Arachne, she needed the information he had. She held up the flash drive. “What do they need this for? Why do they have Croy’s device?” she barked.

Dane spit blood out on the ground. “Give me a good reason why I should tell you.”

Agent McKeller cocked his pistol. “Give me one good reason why Don shouldn’t shoot you again, and we’ll be on the same page.”

“All right, fine! They needed the doctor’s invention to overthrow the government.”

“As in, the U.S. government?”

“Yeah, what else? The government has been played us for too long, Darci. They make us fearful that there will be chaos without them. But we were always better off on our own. All those other robberies we did were trifles compared to the prize Dr. Croy possessed. We’ve made a few changes to the device, of course. Now, a simple command can control all of Congress. Over the years, we’ve planted receiver chips all over the Capitol and the White House.”

“How did you know to do that?”

“We have our sources--” He cried out as a wave of pangs hit him. “Anyway, you don’t need to worry about it. Only a few people will have to die to make way for the new order.”

Mendelssohn shook with anger. “How could you, you despicable coward?”

“Coward? I think I deserve a little more credit than that. Dethroning the gods is no small feat.”

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. “I’ve heard quite enough. You don’t need to speak anymore. I just want one thing. Since you’re one of the spiders, lead me to the web.”

Don carried Dane, disabled but his leg now bandaged to slow the bleeding, to his car so that he could personally direct them to Arachne headquarters. The place that Dane led them to was not what they expected it to be: Terracom Center. After Agent McKeller persuaded him by brandishing his gun at him, Dane divulged the way to infiltrate Arachne's headquarters, located under the parking garage. "You'll need the key in my back pocket--" McKeller took the liberty of getting the key himself, since Dane was handcuffed, "--once you get in the elevator, the one to the right. Insert it into the keyhole below the level numbers, and press 348890 in that order. You'll be taken to the admissions security level. There, you'll find a voice-activated lock and a fingerprint and facial scanner. Once you input the required passwords and scans, you're in."

"It can't be that simple," Mendelssohn replied.

"It is. The passcode in the elevator is enough to keep most people out. I would ask you how you plan to bypass all these security measures, but I'm guessing you've already thought of that."

"Of course I have, you simple thing." She smirked. McKeller removed a device from his black leather bag that Dane recognized all too well: a facial reproducer. One part of it was shaped like a wand, which he waved over Dane's face. The other part was similar to a helmet that covered the entirety of Mendelssohn's face. As he scanned Dane's face, the wand wirelessly communicated with the helmet, which created a perfect replica of Dane's face on top of Mendelssohn's. The process of creating the mask took about an hour. During this time, McKeller duplicated Dane's fingerprint on a transparent, adhesive film, which Mendelssohn was able to wear on her finger inconspicuously. He also took the voice sample from Dane required for the lock. After the mask had finished, McKeller removed a wig and a suit from his deceptively spacious bag; taking them from him, Mendelssohn ordered the men to turn around while she struggled to change into the clothing in the front seat of her car. Further complicating the situation was the fact that the suit had been shaped to give Mendelssohn a more masculine figure, a feature that made it stiff and difficult to get on. Nevertheless, she did eventually manage to shimmy into it. "How do I look?" she asked, turning around.

McKeller gave an approving nod. "Like him." He nodded his head in Dane's direction.

“Gross.” She smirked at Dane again, and, in reply, he just rolled his eyes. As she got out of the car and headed for the elevator, she reminisced of the events of the day. Her closest friend had betrayed her, and now she knew that he had been for quite some time. How had she not deduced it before? When she gained a suspicion that the documents Dane had sent her had been altered, she deeply hoped she was wrong. His behavior had recently seemed suspect in a subtle way, such as his pauses when she mentioned Arachne. In light of the doctor’s death, it seemed feasible and seemed to explain many of her questions. Nonetheless, she had prepared for the worst, borrowing an inconspicuous bulletproof vest from Vanessa and calling in help from Agent McKeller of the Cellar, a secret division of the CIA that was similar to the Crypt on an international level. She held out hope that, perhaps, her guesses were incorrect. But to see him with that gun at his side dashed her heart to bits. If she were not on a mission, she probably would have wept for a long time. Her worst fear had been realized, and now she was going into Arachne’s base. Alone.

Upon entering the right elevator, she inserted the key that Dane had given her into the keyhole below the level buttons. She pulled one of the gloves she was wearing up slightly to reveal the code written on her wrist. She gingerly entered the code--348890. Sure enough, the elevator went downwards. It moved somewhat slowly, so she turned on her comm. “Don, you read me?”

Her earpiece hissed. “I read you, Darci. How’s it looking so far?”

“Well, I’m going down. I could end up in the janitor’s closet, but we’ll see.”

McKeller chuckled. “I doubt the janitor prizes his brooms that much.”

Finally, after a painfully slow ride downward, the elevator screeched to a halt. For the brief moment before the doors opened, she took a deep breath. No turning around now.

The doors split apart to reveal a small, rectangular room. With its smooth white walls and bright white lights, the room reflected the advanced technology Arachne had gained possession of over the years. The room was essentially bare, except for a panel on the back wall flanked by sliding doors on the right. Mendelssohn sighed softly, but the room seemed to magnify her volume tenfold. Startled, she strolled toward the blinking panel at the other end of the room, but her footsteps sounded like earthquakes in the

profoundly silent space. This reverberation unnerved her a little, as she suddenly felt as if the entire headquarters beyond those doors could hear her. She wanted to dart over to the panel, but she had to keep calm. As far as the people watching on the surveillance camera in the left corner of the room knew, she was Thaddeus Dane. *Stay calm.*

As she approached the console, a computer greeted her. “Voice activation code, please.” Casually, she reached in her pocket, simultaneously pressing the button on her camera disrupter and pulling out the recorder that contained the required passcode. She scrambled to hit the play button before the camera feed refreshed. “Nikó,” Dane’s echoed through the recorder.

“Accepted. Please place your finger on the scanner for analyzation.”

Darci complied. The fingerprint and facial scans were accepted without any issues. When she had completed all the necessary inputs, the computer said, “Welcome, Honorable Thaddeus Dane.”

The sliding doors opened to reveal the interior of another elevator. Entering it, she surveyed her surroundings. There was another camera nestled in the right corner. She nonchalantly slipped her hand into her pocket, pressed the button on her camera disrupter, and turned on her comm. “Don, quick, are you there?”

After a brief pause, the reply came. “Here, Darci.”

“I’m in. Going down to--” She gasped.

“What? What is it?”

Through a thin strip of glass in the elevator doors, she could see two guards standing on either side of another set of sliding doors. In front of the one on the left was some sort of machine. They were both heavily armed. “What did you do?” Don barked over the comm, but he was not talking to Darci.

“Don, what’s going on?”

He gave a sharp sigh. “There’s something Thad didn’t tell you.” There was a moment of silence on the other end, after which she heard a loud pop and a cry of pain. “Those men are gonna ask for something you don’t have.”

“What are you talking about?”

Don grunted. “There’s some sort of chip inside every Arachne operative that they have to scan for you to get in. They’ll kill you on the spot if you don’t have it.”

Mendelssohn began to hyperventilate. Two armed hostiles--one basically unarmed woman. The chances of her weaseling out of this one were pretty slim. But she had had slimmer chances before. As the elevator opened, she calculated.

She casually walked toward the guards--all she needed was one weakness, one mistake.

"Thad, what's up, buddy?" one of them said. Mendelssohn nodded. "Just a quick chip scan--"

She saw her chance. As the guard reached his hand out, Mendelssohn slipped her hand in her pocket, pressed the button on her camera disrupter, grabbed the man by his wrist and flipped him on his back. The other guard cried out and fired his weapon, but Mendelssohn slid across the floor and swiped his legs out from under him. While they were stunned, she hit her disrupter once more and tasered them both. As rapidly as she could, she lifted their bodies up one at a time and propped them against the wall. She snatched an emergency entry key off one of the guards and entered it into the keyhole next to the sliding doors just before the camera feed refreshed. She breathed a sigh of relief. She was in.

Behind those doors, in stark contrast to the room behind her, lay a shadowy hallway, illuminated feebly by some eerie red lights. A party of five men dressed in suits with blue ties were awaiting her. They stood in a triangle formation, and the man at the front grinned. "Honorable Thaddeus. I presume you have the object in your possession?"

Mendelssohn removed the flash drive from her pocket and waved it. "Good," the man replied, visibly pleased. "Follow Acacius and Androcles to the testing room. We don't want another phony code." The man chuckled villainously. "Now, no arm of the deplorable government shall stop us. It is a shame that the doctor died in vain."

Mendelssohn wanted to punch him, but she remembered that she was Dane, at least for the moment. The difference between she and Dane, though, was she did not know where to put the flash drive, or what to do with it once she did. As far underground as she was, she could only hope her comm's signal would be strong enough to talk to Don. If not, she hoped that, somehow, the instincts that got her to Arachne's lair would help her figure out what to do with the kill code, too. Acacius and Androcles motioned for her to follow them. As they went, the man she discerned as Androcles spoke up. "You

seem quiet today, Thaddeus. Does the death of your friend trouble you?"

Mendelssohn swallowed hard. She would have to speak, but how? Her voice was of a woman. She had hoped to sneak around without drawing much attention, but that would not work now. *Think--think--* "I'm sorry, I--" she rasped, giving a very convincing cough, "--I've come down with something." She coughed again.

The men paused for a moment and glared at her. *Oh no. They suspect something.* She braced for them to sound an alarm or shout for security or something of the like. Instead, Acacius simply replied, "How terrible! On the eve of our greatest day. Feel better soon, Thaddeus. Ah!" He exclaimed as they passed a spacious room on the right. "You will be glad to hear that all of our systems are back up and running again after that brief outage this morning."

Mendelssohn nodded, though she was not exactly sure what about. Peeking her head into the room, she gasped quietly. Every inch of the towering walls was covered in rounded computer monitors. Each one played surveillance videos of different people. She guessed that these were the government officials Dane had referred to earlier. The central console sat on the wall to her left, itself surmounted by an vast digital display. It was overlaid with myriad keys and buttons and dials that she did not even attempt to determine the use of, but below them all, her keen eye spotted a USB port encased in glass with a warning printed on top. *Bingo.* She had to get in there, but somehow she had to lose the two men accompanying her. She straightened herself and bade the men to continue down the hall with her. When they were well past the room, Mendelssohn grabbed their heads, and, with all her might, slammed them together. They fell limp on the floor, without uttering a sound.

She dashed around the corner and into the quiet control room. As she entered, the computer said, "Welcome, Honorable Thaddeus." The large monitor over the console changed, now displaying a gray screen with "PASSWORD:" on it. "Please enter the password to continue." She approached the console. *Password? What could be the password?* she mused. *Ah!* "Nikó," she typed, but the computer rejected it.

"One attempt remaining," it warned.

"Don, you read me?" she whispered into her comm.

Static.

“Don, come in.”

No reply.

Just what she feared: she was on her own now. She would have to give it her best guess--but who knew what it would do if she guessed wrong? She thought hard, and she thought back. Had Dane said something that would hint at the passcode? A million things flew through her head, but one memory stood out. Five years ago, she had been attempting to hack a stolen computer with sensitive information on it. The device was password-protected, and she was on her last passcode attempt. Dreamily, Dane had said, “Try ‘Ovid55.’ That’s the password to everything.”

At the time, she had laughed. “What in the world, Thad? Where did you get that idea?”

He jolted out of his absent-minded state. “What? Oh, sorry, I guess--I guess I drifted off there for a second. I’m really tired today.”

She elbowed him jokingly. “Wake up, slacker!”

The recollection of the laughs they used to have made her pause. How had she not figured out his treachery before? And why had he turned on her--suddenly, she shook her head. She needed to focus on the task at hand, not ponder on the wasted past. It was a long shot, but it was her only lead: she typed “Ovid55” into the computer and braced herself as she hit the enter key. Immediately, the computer responded. “What would you like to do next?”

Mendelssohn opened her eyes to see a vast menu of different commands. She skimmed over the options a couple of times, until she found one labeled, “Initiate Complete Shutdown Sequence.” She selected it. The glass covering beneath the console lit up green. “Insert the kill code below,” the computer instructed. She lifted the glass case, but she was taken aback when an alarm blared across the lair. She stumbled backwards a little ways, but she poised herself and inserted the flash drive into the USB port. Lines of code began to run across the screen. “Complete shutdown sequence initiated,” it announced.

As she watched the progress bar move gradually further with hopeful gaze, she heard shouting in the halls behind her. “Thaddeus!” a man thundered.

She turned around to see the man that had greeted her when she had first come in.

The two guards that she had tasered on her way in flanked him on both sides. “What has come over you, Honorable Thaddeus, that you should attempt to use the kill code against us?” He accosted Mendelssohn. “What defense do you make?”

“I think you’re the one who should make a defense,” she replied, punching him in the face. He toppled over. The two guards open fired on her, but she charged at them. The bullets that hit her, hit her in the chest, where Vanessa’s bulletproof vest absorbed them. When she had reached them, she dropkicked the guard on the left, got up, and wrenched the assault rifle from the hands of the other guard. She then executed a kick to his gut, making him fall to the ground. Blowing the hair out of her face, she jogged back over to the computer. “Forty percent complete,” the computer said.

Unbeknownst to her, the man she punched had gotten back up to his feet behind her. In return, he punched her in the back of the head, forcing her to the floor. A stream of blood trickled from her lip. As her gun spun across the floor, all the exits from the room shuttered shut. “Your pitiful plan is ended, Darci Mendelssohn,” the man gave an evil chuckle. “Fear not: I will finish you quickly.”

Mendelssohn leapt to her feet and swiped at his face, but he blocked her attack with his forearm. He punched her in the face twice, until she finally grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back. As he cried out in pain, she kneed his back once. While he was neutralized, she scrambled over to the assault weapon she had lost hold of. But the struggle was not to be ended that quickly.

Two gunshots sounded out from behind her, and she suddenly felt a burning sensation in her thigh. She collapsed on the ground and screamed. It was a pain like she had never felt before--and she certainly had not. The fiery pangs crawled up and down her leg so deeply that she felt as if she could not move it. Still, she propelled herself along the floor using only her hands. She was just within reach, when the man shot her again--this time, in the other leg. She stopped, for she could not continue. The throbbing was so terrible now that she felt as if she would surely die.

“Ninety-five percent complete,” the computer said.

“Computer, executive override,” the man said.

“Acknowledged,” the computer replied. “Halting shutdown sequence, Honorable Pollux.”

“You are lucky I didn’t put *that* one in your head.” Mendelssohn felt his barrel hit her head. “But your luck has run out.”

So it was to be the end. But Mendelssohn, being the fighter and quick thinker she was, seized the automatic weapon, swung around, knocked the pistol out of his hand with it, and shot him repeatedly in the chest. He soared backwards and slumped to the floor, dead. Mendelssohn, having lost use of her legs, dragged herself across the ground and used the central console to prop herself up. She had to figure out a way to stop the override before all her progress was lost. “Computer, cancel!” she gasped.

“Request denied,” the computer answered. “Executive voice confirmation required.”

A tear ran down her blood-stained face. Pollux, obviously the executive, was dead. All her work, the doctor’s death, the bullets in her legs--all came to nothing. *No*. She was not a quitter. In utter desperation, she took up the assault rifle again, and with a failing shout, she unleashed a barrage of bullets on the large screen above the console. Flashes of bright blue light emanated from the electronics behind the screen. As the voice of the computer morphed into the digital void, it said, “Shutdown sequence complete.” The room went dark, and Mendelssohn slid to the floor. She nearly closed her eyes, when all the circular monitors covering the wall lit up with a familiar face.

“Well done, Darci.” It was Dr. Croy. He gave a warm smile. “I knew you could do it. I wish I could be there with you now, but realize that I shall rest in peace knowing that Arachne has fallen. I must go now. Goodbye, and I bid you farewell.” Then all was dark once more; and there, on the cold floor of that wretched lair, Mendelssohn wept herself into unconsciousness. As the last hazy glimpse of the dark lab left her, she whispered, “And fare you well, my friend.”

Mendelssohn awoke to find herself in a bright room. A beeping noise steadily repeated close by. As her awareness slowly returned to her, she realized she was in a hospital bed, with a man sitting at the end of it. His gray brow was furled, and he glared directly at her. She knew his face: Supervisor Damian.

“I’m pleased to see you are well,” he said, his face unflinching. “You’ve been asleep for a few days. In fact, the doctors worried you wouldn’t wake up, but I told them

that you could do nothing but wake up. ‘She’s no sleeper’ I said. ‘She escaped even my ever-watchful eye.’”

Mendelssohn chuckled groggily, but soon fully realized who she was speaking to. “I thought you wanted me to die.”

“That wish has transferred to your friend, Thaddeus Dane. He’s being detained. You should also know that you have been cleared of all charges against you, and you have been reinstated as an agent of the Crypt.” He rose. “You’re an unconventional person, Miss Darci. But perhaps that’s what we need in such an unconventional time: a trailblazer, that’ll disregard the challenge and plow onward.”

He turned to leave, but Mendelssohn asked, “What about Arachne? Did you catch everyone involved?”

He nodded. “After they realized that their plan had fallen apart, they escaped through a secret exit and scattered across the city.”

“How did you find them?”

“Oh, someone left a trail for us to follow.” He winked at her, and with that, he departed.

Mendelssohn sighed with relief.

It was over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey! I'm Jordan Hariel. I am sixteen years old. I (obviously) love to write fantasy/sci-fi stories. The biggest inspirations for my writing would probably be C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Lewis Carroll. In the time that I'm not writing, I do robotics, watch TV, and occasionally edit a video. I also play the piano, but I'd really love to learn the cello. My dream is to one day be a published author!