

1.

The terrorist was placing explosives on the pipeline. The spy could see him clearly in the pool of yellow cast by the overhead lights.

The CIA agent drew her sidearm. Its smart bullets should be able to hit the target even at this distance. The target in question was a man called Sellers: an unassuming person whose most striking features were his large ears. His colleagues poked fun at them behind his back.

She'd trailed him from the oil storage site, something in his behavior seeming off to her. After a month undercover at the facility on the Scottish coast near Aberdeen she knew most of the site's workers, knew their routines, knew when one of them was acting out of character. She hadn't suspected Sellers capable of acts against the state like this. He'd fooled her, and that hurt her professional pride.

She edged farther around the corner of the port building adjacent to the pipeline, aiming her weapon. The port where the pipeline terminated was controlled by the US; it was where the tankers picked up the crude oil and transported it across the Atlantic to American refineries. She had caught Sellers in the act. He was an eco-activist, intent on sabotaging the oil supply. He must think he was saving the planet. That's what activists usually claimed.

Her mission as a CIA case officer was to identify subversive elements and provide that information to teams that would handle the messy business of capturing or killing the terrorists. There wasn't time for that now. In urgent situations, she had broad authority to protect the interests of the state.

Nothing about the CIA process was unusual by modern standards. Most everywhere employed people like her. Governments around the globe felt the same way as Uncle Sam. Maybe there would have been a fig leaf of handwringing in calmer times, say a hundred years back. Not now. Not when every day was a struggle against some new conspiracy, some neophyte outfit trying to tear down the way of life the United States worked so hard to keep going. These days it paid to stamp on the first sign of trouble. It was an attitude that had caught on faster than a forest fire, even in parts of the world that had boasted the most about cherishing gentler philosophies.

She squinted through the handgun's holo-assisted sights. Strange. Sellers was sitting on the gravel of the port's ground. He was holding his head in his hands, the bag containing the rest of the charges by his feet.

In the dark sky behind him, she saw the distant light of a rocket flare: a momentary distraction of no importance. It must be a launch from a mobile platform, one of the pads that moved about the Atlantic, staying ahead of the storms that wrecked land-based rocket sites too often for them to be practical. Just another uncrewed mission to replace a damaged section of solar sunshade. The sunshield was off in space somewhere. The L1 Lagrangian point, if she remembered right. A wide expanse of ultra-thin films that formed a parasol, keeping the Earth safe. She'd learned about its construction in school. Project Erebus. It had required a launch a day for ten straight years. Uncle Sam's gift to the human race. And it was the United States of America that kept it functioning when pieces drifted out of place or suffered impact damage. It was the Party's greatest achievement: the solution that had saved the world.

While all that was true, it was also old news. She was here for Sellers, not to gawp at the faint glow of a routine rocket blasting off.

The spy crept closer. Sweat beaded her brow. Despite the early November evening, it was ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Another winter heat wave. Summer had felt year-round ever since the start of the

twenty-second century. A thin drizzle began to fall; warm droplets dampening the thin fabric of her blouse.

She barked an order at the terrorist. "Don't move."

He didn't answer.

Maybe it was the oppressive warmth getting to her, the air hotter than her body; she could feel her temper fraying. She stepped out from cover and moved closer still, her gun trained on him every inch of the way.

At this distance, she could see inside his duffel bag. It was packed with enough plastic explosives to take out the entire network of pipes at the port. That would cause massive disruption to US operations.

"You are an enemy of the state," she called. "I am placing you under arrest. Get down on the ground. Do it, or I will open fire."

Still, he remained frozen, unresponsive.

She risked tapping her wristband, triggering the preset to her supervisor. Senior Case Officer Elliott White picked up on the fifth soft pinging sound. "Sorry to disturb you, sir." She kept her pistol aimed at her target as she spoke. "I have the suspect."

Her superior's smug expression hovered near the pistol grip, projected from the wristband. She hated using a holo-display on calls, finding it more distracting than simple audio. Her superior insisted on seeing who he was talking to, though. He seemed confused by her report. "You know who it is?"

"I mean I caught him placing the explosives. It's Sellers."

"That non-entity? I'm on my way." Elliott cut the connection. She knew her supervisor would trace her location through her all-purpose wristband. The CIA mission office was in a disused building a couple of miles along the main road. Backup would arrive soon.

Sellers continued to ignore her. She tried a firmer tone. "I told you to get down on the ground. I *will* shoot." She stepped closer.

Twenty paces from him, she saw a glint of metal tucked into a pants pocket: the telltale angles of a pistol. Sellers was armed.

"My head," he said at last. "It won't stop hurting."

"Face down on the ground right now, or I shoot." She put every ounce of authority she possessed into the command. He was already sitting—stretching out flat shouldn't be that much of a challenge for him.

"It's the headache that doesn't stop." He pulled his hands away from an anguished face. She met his gaze. "Don't you know what's happening?"

"You're dying," she spat, "that's what's happening."

He wasn't going to surrender. She pulled the trigger.

Ten minutes later, Elliott was at the port, a political officer in tow. The Patriot Party's representatives were everywhere, ensuring ideological purity. This favored son of the Party appeared very happy with what he saw.

Her supervisor was likewise ecstatic. "You saved the pipeline," he told her, a smile gracing his chiseled features. "You're a hero."

She mumbled a "Yes, sir."

Her eyes couldn't tear themselves from the sight of Sellers's blood. He'd reacted the strangest way when she'd shot him.

He'd smiled, as if welcoming death. As if knowing something she didn't.

Her supervisor was talking, boasting of her skills to the political officer. She realized she'd missed most of it.

"Plenty of opportunities for case officers like her, that's for sure. The Patriot Party rewards loyalty like this. You mark my words, she's going far." He chuckled. "Creature of a thousand identities, that's her. Her next one will be... Valerie, I think. Yeah, Valerie Alice Quint. That's got a nice ring to it."

He glanced at her, looking like a fashion model in his preppy cotton jacket. The man was immaculate no matter how hot it got. "How does that sound to you?"

She replied, "Just fine."

Far as she was concerned, who she was didn't matter.

#

The billionaire sent one of his boats to collect Valerie from the New Jersey pier. There was a polite crewmember on the launch dressed as an old-fashioned chauffeur, who introduced herself as Margot. She was mainly for show; the boat drove itself. Margot did stow Valerie's bags for the short transfer, so she wasn't completely ornamental.

The sleek launch took twelve minutes to cut through the choppy sludge of Newark Bay. Margot chattered all the while, barely pausing for breath and managing all the while to never say much of consequence. She spent more than a few seconds dwelling on the strangeness of the patch of water where they were headed—Mariners Harbor—lacking an apostrophe in its name. She contrived to find other topics even less consequential.

A few new jetties and warehouses jutted up from the edges of the slate gray water, built farther inland where the ground was at a higher elevation. Most of Port Newark's old twenty-first-century waterfront was submerged, abandoned to the rapacious grasp of the ocean. Not everything could be rebuilt, not even in a modern twenty-second-century city so awash with cash. They were running out of space on the west side of the bay, cramped up against the edges of an airport too big to move.

Every few seconds, Valerie heard a soft thump: the boat colliding with objects in the obscurity of the bay's murk.

Margot noticed her concern. "Dead fish. Floating on the surface."

The crewmember's accent was a weird mixture of Britisher and somewhere-in-South-America, as if she'd lived in many countries. Her light brown skin tone reminded Valerie of the tawny summertime hue of a sundrenched deer in her native Boise. "Didn't realize the bay was that polluted."

"It's complicated." Valerie waited for Margot to elaborate. She didn't, instead lapsing into an uncomfortable silence. Remaining quiet seemed a challenge for her, so Valerie could only assume she was under instructions to steer clear of certain topics.

In the absence of conversation, Valerie wondered what *was* killing the fish. The only headlines related to the environment at the moment were the ones about recent air quality alerts—the usual factors now complicated by the burning of the last of the Canadian forests. Stupid trees. Damn things were more trouble than they were worth if the Canucks couldn't stop them from catching on fire.

On reflection, she didn't see how bad air and a bunch of piscine corpses could be linked. The issues with air quality were a temporary inconvenience, nothing more. Government announcements were clear on that. Bad Air Days caused unimportant headaches soon cured by a pain pill, and the Patriot Party administration had a plan to fix the issue which they intended to release any day now.

Thiago Castillo's yacht was moored in the deep waters off Mariners Harbor. Four hundred meters in length, ten stories above the main deck in height, glistening white, bristling with antennas, equipped with radar and sonar, boasting a row of docks at its rear—it was the mutant offspring of a yacht and a

cruise liner. Other than the docks for the launches, of which it had several, the yacht was sealed tight.

Valerie saw robot welders closing up the last of the balconies, dragging large pieces of transparent polymer composite into place. The material was lightweight, flexible, and stronger than steel. It was the same stuff the US army used for body armor. Castillo was preparing his mobile home and global business headquarters for something. War, by the looks of it.

A hollow-cheeked woman with a pallid complexion and blond hair tied back in a severe bun was waiting for Valerie at the rear of the ocean-going fortress. The boat moored itself and the blond woman stepped forward. “Welcome to the *Clean Sweep*,” she said in an upper-class New England accent dripping with private school privilege. “I’m Emma Rain. You must be Valerie Alice Quint. Pleasure to have you aboard. Mr. Castillo will see you now.”

Valerie reminded herself of her cover identity and nodded. She felt her mass of unkempt hair shift with the movement. Like her calf-length frilled skirt, it was longer than normal for her. All part of the look. Writerly. Or what the agency thought writers looked like.

Christmas music wafted from the vessel’s interior. Something about chestnuts and an open fire. The choice of entertainment seemed odd. It wasn’t even Thanksgiving. Stores might blare out seasonal tunes half the year, but it was unusual to hear the like in a private residence in mid-November.

To the launch’s custodian, Emma said, “Have Ms. Quint’s luggage taken to her stateroom and confirm the stern is secure for departure. We lift anchor in ten minutes.”

“We’re going somewhere?” Valerie asked. Even in the haven of her own thoughts, she thought of herself as Valerie, and would for as long as she inhabited the role. All the better to avoid giving herself away. It helped that her assumed first name rhymed with her true one.

“International waters,” said Rain. “We have a few dozen of our autonomous submersibles to rendezvous with and we don’t want to divert them any more than we have to. The work never ends, you know.” She paused, a look of grief flitting across her features. For a second, Valerie thought Emma was going to say something. Then, the woman shook her head, and the moment was lost.

“You said to bring clothes for a few days. I assumed we were going to float along the coast. I didn’t know we were leaving the States.” They were the objections of the writer she was supposed to be. The real her had anticipated Castillo would head for open water. All the better to hide what he was doing.

“If you grow tired of our company, we can drop you off in London after finishing the Atlantic leg of our trip. Mr. Castillo will happily have you flown back to New York on his private jet.”

The Atlantic leg of the trip? How far away were the submersible drones? “I didn’t bring my passport.”

Rain narrowed her eyes. “Oh, yes, America still uses physical passports. The authorities in London won’t require one. They’ll process your biometrics, and you’ll land at a private airstrip in the States where no one will check your paperwork. It’ll be fine.” Her pronunciation was so punctilious Valerie could almost hear the commas.

“I forgot. The rules don’t apply to the rich.”

Rain shrugged. “I fail to see why that matters.”

“Remind me. What do you do for Castillo?”

She answered as she walked toward the hatch leading to the yacht’s interior. There was an observation deck above it, handy for seeing threats coming. “I’m his chief scientific advisor. I track how well our drones are doing.”

So that was why she was so miserable. Cleaning the seas was a labor without end.

Valerie ran through everything she knew about the billionaire as Rain led her to the famous man.

Castillo's parents had made their fortune from Ocean Cleaning Drones. Doctors of the sea, the two pioneers had called themselves, on a quest to cure the oceans of the disease of pollution. The media of western nations, by contrast, fixated on how the seagoing robots were unceasingly single-minded and, when their name was translated into English, had the acronym OCD. How that amused them. The Castillo clan were rather more concerned with microscopic particles of plastic insinuating their way into aquatic food chains.

In the early years, the robots scooped up large, obvious waste items: floating masses of trash in rivers and along coastlines. Municipal and state governments were willing to pay to keep tourist-spot beaches and waterways unspoiled. When oil tankers, which never seemed to quite slip into obsolescence, ran into trouble, drones were flown in as the first line of defense, intercepting spills before they reached land. These lawsuit-averting efforts were not only a considerable cost saving for the oil companies they were also wildly profitable for the Castillos.

As the technology improved, the machines became capable of operating for weeks on end, recharging while deployed by unfurling solar panels. They graduated to touring the open seas, initially seeking out big targets, such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and then lesser ones, like clusters of trash lurking in the Caribbean Sea, before graduating to smaller and smaller pieces of non-biodegradable refuse. By the turn of the twenty-second century, the Castillo parents had passed on the torch to their son. Now, in 2127, their family-owned company possessed a fleet of over two hundred thousand self-guiding aquatic drones, each one sieving the seas of the world clean of contaminants.

It occurred to Valerie that such a large number of drones could be used in any number of ways, most of them not in the interests of the United States. The possibility was not lost on her superiors, either.

"He's in here," announced the hollow-cheeked scientist, pausing at a hatchway. The Christmas song was still playing, piped throughout the yacht. "This is the cabin he uses as his office. He's expecting you."

Valerie was glad to stop, even for a moment. Her breathing was labored for some reason. She'd have to work on her physical fitness after she completed her mission. "You're not coming in?"

"No. There are other calls on my time."

Valerie was surprised by how trusting Rain was being. No matter how convincing Valerie's faked credentials were, the scientist was exhibiting a curious lack of concern over security.

Rain must have sensed something was amiss. "You'll be okay. Thiago can be a little intimidating, but he's a good man. There's no need to be nervous."

"Yes, you're right, of course." The words fell smoothly from Valerie's mouth.

She put aside her unease and opened the metal hatch.

#

Thiago Castillo was looking at numbers. The digits swam across a broad hologram projected above his semi-circular desk. The data seemed to be related to atmospheric readings, as far as Valerie could tell.

The silver-maned gentleman emerged from behind his desk to greet Valerie. He pumped her hand with a surfeit of enthusiasm, his white teeth flashing in a wide smile. Swallowed within his grip, she saw her own hand was a sun-seared mass of pink in comparison to his deep brown tan.

"I'm so excited to have you here. Thank you for finding the time to humor an old man." His English was excellent, with no more than the slightest trace of his Argentinian accent.

“The honor is mine,” Valerie assured him. “It’s not often such a high-profile subject requests my services.” Her agency had toiled over her back-story, making her as attractive a candidate as possible for what Castillo wanted. He’d taken the bait and Valerie was now in the perfect position to discover his true intentions.

His watery eyes narrowed as emotions flitted across his features. Was that embarrassment she saw? Uncertainty?

He turned away, returning to his chair, and Valerie was left with an impression of an honest man caught in a lie. Her job was to deceive—she was adept at knowing when others were playing the same game. Strange how talking about what she could do for him had elicited such a reaction.

She took a seat opposite the tycoon. “You like Christmas music?”

He started. “Oh. Yes, we’re up to Nat King Cole.” Castillo rubbed his eyes. “He recorded this song a few times, you know. This is his 1961 arrangement of The Christmas Song. The famous version. The one everyone thinks of.”

Valerie was half listening to it. The singer was wishing everyone a Merry Christmas.

“Sounds like it’s ending.”

“Yes, those are the final notes.” He sighed. “We won’t play it again. Not ever, I expect.”

She stared at him. “Why not?”

Castillo waved a hand. “I’m not sure we’ll be in the right mood.”

She heard the strains of what sounded like the same song starting up. The orchestration was different, though, as was the singer.

“Andy Williams,” supplied Castillo. “We’re beginning 1962.”

“You’re going through Christmas hits, year by year?”

Thiago looked down at his hands. “You could say we’re paying our respects.” He coughed and met her gaze. “The plan is to get through them all by midnight on Christmas Eve. It’ll be a challenge. We have a hundred and sixty-five years of material left and we’re not sure if we’ll be...” He took a few moments to finish the sentence. “...interrupted.”

It sounded to Valerie like Castillo was expecting trouble. All innocence, she asked, “For me to ghostwrite your autobiography, I’ll need to spend time with you every day. The more questions you can answer the better the final product will be.”

“Of course. I’ll give you all the time you need.” His eyes turned to the hovering numbers. “You should rest now. Get your sea legs. I’ll have one of the crew show you to your cabin.”

Valerie rose and he added, “We’ll talk again over dinner. There’s so much I want to share with you.”

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