

~ Noise ~

by Spyrel

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Disclaimer: These characters may resemble a certain warrior princess and her sidekick, but this iteration of them, and the story, is all mine.

Sex: This story depicts love and sex between two women. If this offends you or is illegal where you live, it's up to you to hit the 'Back' button on your browser.

Violence: Yes. Plenty. Not for the squeamish.

Language: Yes. Plenty. Not for the sensitive.

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Summary: In a cyberpunk future, harsh interrogation dredges up memories of a woman's travels with a dangerous drifter. (For those unfamiliar with cyberpunk, think our world but dirtier, more violent, and with cybernetics.)

Feedback: If you like this story or even if you read it, please send your comments to spyrel@yahoo.com.

"State your name."

I twitch, come to in a place without shape or color or light, my head pounding like a jackhammer. Blinking doesn't help; I reach for my eyes, snap short against straps around my wrists, notice for the first time the bare metal chair against my bare skin.

Adrenaline jolts through me, sharp jabs of *Oh fuck* and *Do something* in the formless dark.

:: Take it easy. Can't run, can't fight. Conserve energy and wait for an opportunity. ::

I sit still, force slow calm breaths.

"State your name." The voice is calm, gravelly, genderless. It feels off, probably computer-modulated to mask emotion. I want to tell it to suck my left tit.

:: Save your strength. Lead them along. Find out who they are, what they want. ::

I hate this. I lick my lips, partly to make sure I still have a mouth in solid blackness.

"Ink."

* * *

"Emily." I thrust out a hand, wait patiently for the stranger to do likewise.

She looks up mid-posthole, eyes my hand, the farmhouse over my shoulder, steps on the shovel and drives it deep in the dirt. "I don't think you're supposed to be talking to me."

"Sure I am," I lie. From behind my back I produce my answer to this anticipated resistance. "Lemonade?"

I've dug my fair share of postholes. It's miserable work anytime, but under the hot afternoon sun without lunch can be torture, at least by Geneva standards. She considers the drink, reaches for it tentatively.

I pull it back, offer my hand. "Emily."

It's a gamble. She looks strong enough to wrestle a bull, certainly strong enough to snap me in half.

With a smear of her palms against her jeans, she looks me over for the first time. I stretch to my full five-foot-four, aim for the worldly wise-beyond-her-years look, not the moon-eyed country hick look. Cautiously she extends her hand. Before I can take it, she swipes the glass from my hand, so fast I barely react. Too fast. Like magic.

She smirks, downing the glass. "Siren."

* * *

"Full name."

With a mechanical thunk, the space in front of me glows to life, a solid wall of halogen bulbs glowing orange to yellow to white to some impossible brightness beyond white, like sitting under a dozen of those lamps at the dental clinic. My arms try to shield my eyes, jerk against the plastic bands fixed to the chair. Curling up doesn't work either; straps across my forehead and ankles pin me to the unforgiving seat. My eyeballs shrivel so hard they throb, finally squeeze shut of their own accord. The speech I'm preparing snags in my throat, suddenly dry as powder. Best I can manage is a weak, "Who wants to know?"

"State your full name," blares the bodiless voice.

I blink furiously, my eyes drawn to slits against the glare. "You're not cops, which means this isn't an arrest. It's kidnapping."

"State your full name."

"Bite me."

A screech fills the tiny white room, so loud it barely registers as sound. I squirm against the onslaught, against solid noise burrowing into my ear canals. It stops just as abruptly as it starts, leaves me panting in shock.

"You are being questioned in connection with the whereabouts of Edie Zane. State your full name."

* * *

Pa's hand slams on the table, rattles the plates and utensils. "I don't care if she's the President of India. I want her out of here!"

My heart pounds. I've never seen him so angry. And I've never felt so sure in standing up to him. "Where's she gonna go? She can't afford fuel unless Mr. Froud pays her for the work she's done!"

Stupid to argue with him at the dinner table. Pa's never had much patience for argument, especially when it interrupts his meal.

"She's a criminal-"

"You mean 'cross-roader,'" I spit back. "They're not all welfare cases and gangbangers."

"Shut your trap, girl. I mean that woman is Edwina Zane, leader of the gang that hit all those towns in Kansas a few years back."

I stare at him, slapped. "I don't believe you."

He jabs his fork into a chunk of potato. "I spoke to Sheriff Lucado on the way home tonight. He showed me a police sketch. It's her."

"You told him? After he put that cross-roader in the clinic last winter?"

"I told you that was justified. That boy was resisting arrest."

Resisting arrest meant running away after stealing a dozen ears of corn. But I don't say it. No point in rehashing, and the air feels too thin for my lungs to form words.

"More potatoes, Emmy?" My little sister hands them to me, hopeful.

My eyes hardly leave Pa's. "No thanks, Abby. I've lost my appetite." Before he can say anything I excuse myself, retreat to my room. Only I can't sleep, lay awake thinking. Even after Abby climbs into bed beside me I lay there, listen to her breathing settle toward sleep. Imagine the Sheriff's deputies surrounding Mr. Froud's workshop. Siren would definitely be the sort to resist arrest. I can't help but picture her pretty face messed up as bad as that pistol-whipped nomad's.

Once the idea forms in my head I don't question it. In minutes I'm sneaking across the fields between our place and Mister Froud's, my arms laden with stuff.

No lynch mob greets me. I find her in the tool shed where she's been sleeping, but she's not asleep. In an instant there's a muzzle against my forehead, and my stuff drops from boneless fingers. I stand there, breathing hard, wondering for the first time if this is a smart thing to do.

"What do you want?"

Dry swallow. "My pa told the Sheriff about you. He knows who you are...Edwina."

It's strange to call her that. She's Siren to me, the stranger with the impossibly blue eyes and mischievous smile. I like that woman, the one who drinks my awful lemonade and laughs at my silly stories. This woman scares me, the one holding a cold autopistol to my cheekbone, one eye glittering like digital snow in the light leaking from the door.

She considers, lowers the pistol. "Get out of here."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" She's turned away, pulls a long wrapped shape from its holder on the side of her bike. Even in the dimness through the beat up canvas I can make out the harsh lines of a massive assault rifle.

"No. Wait. You don't have to do this."

"Don't have a choice, do I?" she says calmly, gesturing at the beautiful but entirely immobile bike.

"No, you do. Look." I hold up my prize, two gallons of Pa's CHOOH2 stash.

She stares at me only a moment, takes and pours it into the two-wheeler's empty tank, the rifle momentarily forgotten.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?"

Her words are unusually quiet, softer than any she's ever spoken to me. And while this is the first time that question has crossed her lips, it's not the first time she's asked it of me. I can see it in her eyes when I sit and talk with her in the heat of the day, feel it in her hesitation when she takes my offerings of drink and food. Had she asked any other day, I might have said, "Nothing." I don't do those things to make her feel like she owes me. Today is not any other day.

"Take me with you. I want to see what you've seen. Do what you've done." It comes out desperate, sappier than it sounded in my head.

I read the thoughts playing across her face like a breaking news feed. :: *You have no idea what you're asking, what you're getting yourself into.* ::

I cut her off. "You're right; I don't know what's out there. But I know what's right here in Nowhere, Iowa, and I know it's not for me. I'm dying by inches here, Siren. At least out there I have a chance to be something."

She snorts, shakes her head. "You always this overdramatic?"

Ouch. I sigh. "Did you even listen to my stories? Were any of them about the good little girl who stayed home and played housewife?"

She's going to argue, or maybe just ignore me. I know her well enough by now to recognize those two responses. Her eyes dart past me, go hard.

"Forget it, Em."

She climbs on the bike, kicks it to life. Over my shoulder I see flashing lights turning into the long drive. Desperately I move between her and the door, shout over the roar of the engine, "You think these people are hard on cross-roaders? How do you think they treat freaks who actually live here? You're not the only one who doesn't fit in."

She grinds her teeth. "Maybe not. But I'm the only one with a bike."

"A bike that doesn't go anywhere without *my* fuel."

The lights are close now, close enough to pepper her face red and blue.

She rolls her eyes. "Get on."

* * *

"I don't know who you're talking about," I bark. Probably louder than necessary; I can't be sure over the hollow ache in my ears.

The screech again, sharp and grating like dozens of angry birds in my ears. I shudder, muscles locking up in a desperate attempt to dull the assault, my jaw clamping down so hard my gums throb around teeth close to cracking. I fight the reaction, will the muscles open, let the sound rip through my head full force like flechette rounds through rice paper.

It goes quiet. No, not quiet. The sound is gone but a dull roar lingers, like waking next to a rushing river. It takes awhile to hear anything else.

"-being questioned in the whereabouts of your partner, Edwina Tsibliyev Zane, aka DigiDimOp39915, aka Siren. State your full name."

:: Don't give them anything. ::

I catch myself, hardly aware I've opened my mouth to speak, force it shut again. *It's just a name.*

:: Your name. Your parents' names. Your sister's. Your history, your records, everything that makes you who you are, every strength and every weakness. Give them nothing. ::

Reluctantly I ignore the soulless voice. The noise comes soon after.

* * *

"Watch your left. Your left!"

How she sees anything beyond her own fight escapes me. Too late to watch, I move, duck the bat swinging for my face. My hands find an overturned bar stool. I raise it to block, but the Louisville slugger smashes right through it and into my arm.

Blinded by pain I backpedal, bump into a wall, a table. Cornered. With a snarl he closes in, raises the bat overhead.

"Wait! It's not me you want. It's her!" I point and he looks, straight into Siren's punch to the nose. The bat clatters to the ground as he crumples.

"Thanks," I mumble, not quite able to control the quaver in my voice.

She turns, strides over unmoving bodies to wrap bloody knuckles in one squirming man's collar. "Fun time's over, Pete. Doesn't matter how many of your machos I put down. There's only one way to put you out of business."

"Siren, wait, we can deal!"

"Shut it. I already made my offer."

"But you haven't heard my counter-offer, *Zane*."

She goes rigid at the name. "What counter-offer?"

"Work for me. I'll pay you twice what I paid these guys."

She stares at him. "You are one dumb motherf--"

He holds up a finger at her, a cocky-ass grin on his face. "Not so much. I called in a favor in Utah. If I don't call back in fifteen, they're gonna hit Family Zane."

He earns a stony glare. "Why should I care? Family Zane's got a price on my head as high as any other."

He smiles, slick as lubricant. "They're still family, ain't they? It's in your cross-roader bones, ain't it?"

She looks deep into his eyes, as if reading tea leaves at Madame Kim's, finally shakes her head. "If you know who I am, then you know my family's the best armed, best trained, best organized, best funded cross-roader pack in the southwest. No one's that suicidal."

"Who said they'd do it in person? According to my sources, they're less than two hundred miles away from Nellis Air Force Base. So whaddya say? Are we gonna do business?"

Before I can draw breath, she answers with the monoedge of her katana; his corpse topples to the floor, throat gaping wide. She looks around, face black as plague.

"Let's go, Em."

I nod, fight back nausea as I pick my way over the bodies to outside and fresh air. As fresh as it gets in a budding dustbowl metropolis like Boise City, Oklahoma. By the time I make it down the stairs, Siren snaps her phone shut and jumps on the bike.

"Hey, hold up!" I'm barely on before the bike slews out of the parking lot, screams west out of town.

I hold on, one arm snaked around her waist, the other braced against my thigh, half-numb, half-throbbing. Every bump, crack, and pothole sends shockwaves straight from elbow to shoulder to spine. We must be going a hundred, hundred-twenty miles per hour, and my heart is fluttering high in my chest, sick and anxious, and I can't see shit with the headlights off and no moon and my eyes tearing because I don't have an spare arm to pull on my helmet.

"Siren." Tucked in her slipstream, the word flitters away like a scrap of paper in the wind. "Siren!" When we don't slow, I turn my face into her spine, scream with all my might. The bike shimmy a little, slows down enough for her to shout, "What's wrong?"

Everything. "Please pull over."

"No time," she barks.

"Pull over!"

She does, in a hurry, tears off her helmet in irritation. "What?"

I clamp down on the bile rising in my throat. "What are you doing? We can't drive to Nevada in fifteen minutes."

"I can't get through," she growls, as close to panic as I've ever seen her.

"Try again."

She glares at me out of the corner of her eye, pulls out her cell, dials again. I shiver, suddenly chilled, bury my face in the warm leather of her jacket.

"Nothing."

"Keep trying."

She wants to argue, dials again. I slide off the back of the bike, hold on with a death grip as backup for rubbery legs.

On the fourth dial someone picks up. "Mom?" She speaks in code, about *birds* and *scattering* and *sachem*. The jaggedness in her usually steady voice makes my intestines writhe. It's too raw, too desperate. I can't stand to listen, not feeling like this, have to walk away, keep it together, stay on top of the wave of adrenaline and endorphins and God knows what else the human body puts out when shit hits the fan.

"Hey, where are you going?"

I force my feet to stop, wait in the middle of the road for her to jog over. "Will they be okay?"

"They're responding. But I still need to get there as soon as I can. They'll need me."

I nod. "Good. Really...good." My feet trip over nothing and I sit down hard, hiss at the jolt to my arm.

"You hurt?" She kneels down beside me, takes a look at my arm in the near-darkness with synthetic eyes. "It's broken."

I hear the annoyance in her voice, cringe as she gets up to retrieve her med pack. "Don't. We should keep going. It can wait."

"Don't give me that tough girl act. I wrote the script."

"But you said-"

"No buts. You never fuck around with breaks. I'll set and splint it, but we'll have to have a real doc look at it when we get there." She drops down beside me, slaps a painkiller patch on my neck, shines a flashlight on my forearm. It looks nasty, swollen and purple, an unnatural bump pressing against the skin. That does it; my dinner joins pancaked armadillo on the yellow stripe.

I spit, wipe my mouth. "Sorry."

She grunts. "Don't be. You couldn't guess how many times I've done that."

There's no warning. In my distraction she pulls on my wrist, presses on the bump. I grit my teeth, determined not to squeal like a prissy rockerboy, but the worst is past. With one hand clamped like iron around the realigned bone, she roots around in the medbag.

I want to hurl again under her vise-like grip, talk to distract myself. "I meant I'm sorry about slowing us down."

She glances up as she wraps an elastic bandage around the break, I-told-you-so lurking in those glittering blues. "Wishing you'd stayed with the bike like I told you?"

"No! Jesus, Siren, zero in. I'm wishing you'd teach me how to fight."

She lays a crowbar along the forearm, ties them together. "Why? So I can worry about you all the time?"

"Maybe if you'd teach me, you wouldn't have to. You want to get rid of me? Teach me everything you know. How to fight, how to shoot, be a solo like you-"

"No." She almost chokes on the word, it comes out so fast. "No."

"Why?"

"Because. I like you too much the way you are."

She hardly ever talks like this. About me. About her past. Most of what I know has been gleaned from overheard conversations with people like Pete, ghosts from the life of an ice-chipped corporate killer. I don't know her. I only know Siren, haunted cross-roader who loses her temper when she sees a shitbag like Pete shake down one too many streetkids.

That's what I want to do. I want to do it with her. I sigh, hold up the splinted arm. "Well, I'm not going anywhere. And if you're going to keep getting into fights, at least teach me to defend myself."

Her lips pucker, as if reluctantly sampling one of my lemonades. "Fine. Just defend yourself, nothing more."

"Agreed." I grin, deliriously happy for someone with a broken arm. Has to be the pain patch.

She pulls me to my feet, walks me back to the bike, helps put my helmet on. There's a comm in it; as I climb on behind her, her tinny voice tickles my ears. "It's not too late to go back, y'know."

She doesn't mean to Boise City.

I shake my head. "Forget it, woman. One little broken arm is not going to keep me from visiting my first cross-roader camp."

She sighs, seems to deflate under my grip. "I'm not welcome there, you know."

"Because of Kansas?" It's a wild guess. She doesn't answer, but I feel it in her spine. "Siren, they're family. Besides, you don't have to face them alone." My good arm squeezes her middle

She snorts. "Yeah? You may change your mind when you have to deal with my mother."

"You have a mother? I thought you were spawned in a vat."

"Har-har. My bit of advice? Say as little as possible. A cast on your arm will be ammo enough."

* * *

I sag, released from the invisible vise squeezing my skull, spew hot bile and water across my bare thighs. It's an unpleasant sensation, but it takes a back seat to the throbbing in my temples.

:: *Breathe, Ink. Focus.* ::

I hold on to those words, say them over and over in my head, but the voice presses in, drives focus from my grasp. "Ink, aka Emily Rose Callahan, daughter of Harold and Meredith Callahan. Sister of Abigail Callahan."

Some of my courage evaporates. My ears ring, my head pounds for nothing.

:: *Classic interrogation technique. Make you believe any information you give is already known. But if that were true, why would they bother interrogating? Be patient.* ::

"Known connections to Zane family through Edwina Tsibliyev Zane, associate of seven years."

Associate. People aren't just associates for seven years. *Not doing what we do.*

* * *

I feel a squeeze on my hand, raise my head from the cheap clinic mattress. Siren's eyes are still closed, but they roll around like marbles under her eyelids.

"Hey. You awake?" My voice is sandpaper, but it gets her to open her eyes. Her head turns, finds me. I almost lose it then, my breath hitching on a choked inhale others might have mistaken for a sob. But she's awake, unsure, vulnerable. I shake it off, breathe past the sting in my throat and nose and eyes, force a smile.

She smiles too, if only for a second before it turns upside-down. "What are you doing here?" Her lips form the words; the sound that comes out is little more than a wheeze.

"What am I doing here? Is that how you greet your savior?"

"I told you to get out of there."

"And I did. With a nice Siren coat wrapped around my shoulders."

She wants to chastise me, give me a speech. She can't. Not with the nasal tube down her throat, the patched-up holes in her lung. I try to smile. "I know. You won't have me risking my life to save yours and all that horseshit. Well, so sad. You're just gonna have to get used to it."

She shakes her head, mystified. "Who was the shooter?"

"Sniper, two buildings over. Kept us pinned down while boosters swarmed Musukaga's VTV. Bastard hit you and three of his bodyguards, even winged Musukaga before we took him out."

"We?"

I flush under her scrutiny, amend, "Before I took him out."

She looks at me a long time, searching. "Was it what you expected?" Which is Siren-speak for, :: *Are you gonna go to pieces on me? ::*

"I'm fine, if that's what you want to know."

She arches an eyebrow doubtfully.

"Hey, I mean it. I put a bullet into a shadow four hundred yards away that was trying to kill us. I'm not gonna cry about it."

Her worry lines ease, make me even more determined to hide my vague discomfort. Truth is, I've beaten people to a pulp in hand-to-hand, cut and stabbed and pounded enough attackers by now to realize not all of them survived. That shot wasn't my first kill. Just my first kill with intent. A fact which, when I let myself think about it, makes me feel only marginally better.

"Four hundred yards, huh?"

I blush again. "Something like that."

"When did you get so good with that hunting rifle?"

I shrug. "Your uncle Greg's been coaching me on the finer points of a using a scope." I grin, let her chew on that.

"Anything else you've been learning behind my back?"

"Only everything your family will teach me."

She snorts. "And I thought I was a bad influence."

"The worst." I press my lips together, shrug again. "So maybe you'll stop treating me like a kid and start trusting me, neh?"

Those sparking blue eyes burn my soul. "I know you're not a kid, Em. There's just something in you I want to protect."

Here it comes. "What, my virginal innocence?"

"No, smartass. Hope."

I don't have a flip answer to that. I don't have an answer at all. Apparently my brain has gone on strike, all thought overridden by the rare emotion she puts into that one word. I only have one emotion to offer in return. I lean in, plant my lips on hers. When I pull back, her eyes open slowly, bright as Indiglo.

"Not a kid," I remind her, flashing an impish smile.

* * *

It's not until the noise dies that I can hear my own scream, high and thin and breathless, like a teapot taken off the stove. It doesn't even seem to come from me. I'm too tired to put anything behind it, any rage or fear or power. Compared to the continual arrhythmic punches of soundwaves in my ribcage, I can barely feel the vibration of my own wrecked vocal cords. They try to form words in the dull ringing void, words like "No" and "more."

:: Fight them, Ink. ::

I can't. I've been in the chair for hours, maybe days. Long enough I've pissed and crapped myself, puked until there's no liquid left in me, cut my wrists and ankles to ribbons struggling against the restraints, forgotten what it's like to see and hear and smell and taste like a normal person. Tears stream down my face, tears of exhaustion, weakness, shame.

:: You can. You have to. ::

Siren, please, I can't do this. I'm not you.

:: Me? I'm not that special. Just someone who tells myself I can, even when the whole world says I can't. I thought you were one of those people, too. You said you wanted to be a player. Wanted to be a big league operator like me. Well, this is it. It's not pretty, it's not glamorous, and it's not fun, but it's what you've been waiting for. Prove yourself. ::

You wouldn't teach me how to do this.

:: This? I can't teach you this. This has nothing to do with skill or knowledge. It has to do with grit. With pushing yourself to the limit and finding out you can push even further. You find a way to survive this second, and the next, and the next after that. ::

It's not that easy.

:: Neh? Give in, then. No one's stopping you but you. ::

I want to. I'm ready to. Except when I open my mouth, no sound comes out. My mind offers no words to speak, no secrets to betray, tucks them away, even from me. Answering their questions will involve digging for it, translating incoherent thought into comprehensible words, and that will take too much effort. It has nothing to do with someone pushing my stubborn button.

No one's stopping you but you.

I almost laugh at myself, but I don't resist. A ragged breath steadies me, mutes the tremor in my limbs.

"You will be released as soon as you have answered all our questions about the whereabouts of Edie Zane. What was your business in DataStor headquarters?"

I force my eyes open to the cranium-bursting whiteness, make sure whoever is watching can see my lips wrap around a soundless "Fuck you."

* * *

I gasp for air, dig my fingernails deeper into the rippling muscles of her back, hold tight while my pelvis grinds into her ass. She groans but doesn't complain, rocks back on all fours against the phallus. Heat and salt and wet pour off her in the close confines of the van, drip to the sheets from her bouncing nipples as I ride her.

Her grunts take on a low steady keen. On cue I reach around, stroke her nub until the orgasm takes over, locks her down, makes me work for those last few thrusts.

She goes soft, sags to the thin foam mattress. My elbow clips the crate of MREs as I'm dragged down, land with a muffled grunt into her hair. "Ow."

"You okay?" she pants.

"All clear," I report, nuzzle deeper into her damp mane appreciatively before pushing myself up. She whimpers when I threaten to pull out of her ass, clamps down the shaft. I laugh softly, unbuckle the harness and leave the dildo buried in her crack, slide off to lie in the narrow slot between her and the supplies. My cheek resting on her shoulder blade, I drink in the sight of her.

My eyes are drawn to the rough scar over her lower ribs. Tentatively my fingertips brush over it. Though it's long healed, my pulse still jumps at the memory of the sniper shot, the look on Siren's face as she jerks and crumples, eyes wide. Even now, that look lingers on the underside of my eyelids, makes me ill when I let myself think about it.

"That tingles."

I flatten my palm, run it in long smooth strokes from shoulders to ass, let it settle in the hollow of her back, my thumb tracing the bumps of each vertebra. A strange texture catches my attention. Under her skin my fingers find a pattern of slight ridges cutting across her spine, uniform in width but not thickness. While subtle, the pattern is unmistakable.

"What's this?"

She doesn't stir. Is she drowsing? No, she's too still and silent to be asleep.

"Siren? Is this a barcode?"

Slowly she crosses her arms under her chin, as if I've asked her what massage oil she prefers. "It's my ID for Digital Dimensions."

"DigiDim?" I knew she'd worked for a corporation those missing years before I met her, but I'd always envisioned some badass multi-national weapons or security firm, one of the big guns you'd hear about in the headlines called in to neutralize some metaled-up mass-murdering cyberjunkie the cops didn't have the resources to take down. You had to read the rest of the article on page sixteen to find out the psycho was actually one of their own creations gone rogue.

I hadn't envisioned her working for a small wetware company out of Utah that sold neural processing sockets and skill chips so corporate drones can fake playing golf with their buddies.

"What'd you do for them?"

Her shoulders wrinkle in a shrug, her face burrowing deeper into her arms. "I decoined for them."

I struggle to translate that. "You stole for them?"

She sighs. "Destruction. Extraction. Countering. Observation. Infiltration. Neutralization."

"Oh." I don't know the term, but I can gather the meaning. Black ops. Real headline news if the media ever found out. "Why don't you have it removed? You don't work for them anymore. How do you know they aren't using it to track you?"

"Who says they aren't?"

"That's not funny," I say, all play gone out of my voice. "You don't work for them anymore, right?"

She shifts without shifting, some subtle ripple of muscle and sinew that indicates tension. "It's part of the neural implant, prototype hardware. So the techs tell me. They don't know if they can cut it out without shorting the wetware."

Wetware. Meat. Nerves and brain cells. It freaks my shit a little when she talks about herself like this, about her implants and her flesh as if it's all part of a machine she's taking to the shop, not her body, her existence. But I have to play it frosty or she'll slam shut, and moments like these are too rare to squander. "You have a neural processor? I didn't know that."

A careful nod. "Kerenzhikov speedware and sockets."

Reflex boosters. No wonder she's inhumanly fast. And sockets? "Where?"

She brushes her long black hair off the back of her neck. There, right in the edge of her hairline, sits dual jacks, ready to plug into. I'm mesmerized, stare at the little things like bugs from another planet. How did I never notice them before? Surely I've rubbed her neck, pulled her into a kiss...the urge to touch them now is almost overwhelming. I pull back just in time. "Why don't you use them?"

"I use them. Just not in front of you."

I make a face, part irritation, part amusement. "Still protecting me?"

When she looks at me, a smile crinkles her eyes. "Always." She leans in, shuts me up with a kiss, one hand tracing distracting patterns on my abdomen.

I can stop her. I can still her hand, push for answers. About DigiDim. About decoining. Maybe she feels my hesitation; she pulls back, her eyes dull with pain and dread.

Fuck. I pull her in, claim those lips as mine. Remind her that all of her is mine, perfect or flawed, and let her give me the thing that separates her from DigiDim's ice princess.

Love.

* * *

"DigiDim has a vested interest in your partner, Ms. Callahan. We are offering a substantial reward for information on her whereabouts at this time. She is quite an important asset to us, as I'm sure you know."

That jolts me out of my haze, steals some of the flex out of my wiry will.

An asset. They've been tracking you all along.

:: I never said they weren't. ::

You never said they were. And now they've got me, and we both know what they want.

:: Ink... ::

Don't talk to me. I'm tired of your secrets and half-truths.

:: Ink, you need me now more than ever. ::

I screw my eyes shut, try to squeeze her out of my head. *Yeah, I do. But you're not fucking here, are you? You can't help me with this, remember? Leave me the fuck alone.*

* * *

A hand squeezes my shoulder. "How you holding up?"

I moan, bury my face into the doughnut face cushion, white knuckles gripping the legs of the padded table. "I thought you said there would be anesthetic for this."

She drops into a crouch, peers up into my squished face with a pitiless smile. "This *is* with anesthetic."

The needle rakes across my shoulder blade and I hiss, feel the wet pooling on my skin chill in the gentle breeze. "How's it look?"

She cranes her neck to see, drops down again. "You'll be maimed for life."

"Siren!"

She laughs. "It looks fine. Hell's bells, woman, relax."

"I can't believe I'm going along with this."

She taunts me with her grin. "Hey, I just suggested it. You're the one who chose the big fuck-off design."

I clamp down on the retort hot on my tongue. Pain makes me short-tempered, something Siren never seems to experience and enjoys needling me about. Not all the time, mind you. Just when the pain is my own doing.

She reaches for my face. Lightning quick I grab her wrist, startle us both.

"I guess that Kerenzhikov is kicking in."

I nod, let go.

"How are you handling it?"

I force long slow breaths, try to block out the buzzing of the needle scouring across my back. "It's okay. Everything's a little..."

"Slow?"

I nod, and even that feels jerky, too quick for the flow of time around me. I feel strange, out of phase with the rest of humanity, and I got the lowest level of speedware. I look at Siren, maxxed out on boost. "I can only imagine what it's like for you."

"I told you not to get it."

"I know. But I have to keep up with you somehow."

"No you don't. This isn't a race."

"Siren, you won't train me to be a solo. I have to make up the difference somewhere."

I expect her to say I should give up, go home. But she says that less and less these days. Maybe she's finally decided to stop leaving me behind. Especially if I'm going to use that time alone to sneak off and spend my savings on cybernetic implants.

She stands, leaves me to check out the artist's handiwork.

"How's it look?" I mumble.

"Like a really pissed off Chinese dragon guarding the pearl of wisdom."

I growl.

She drops back down beside me. "You can't see the sockets, if that's what you mean. No one will even know you have them."

I squirm. I may not be able to see the interface plugs, but I can still feel them, twin bruises and something-not-right in the hollow of my back. Scratching at the back of my skull like static from an untuned radio, hungry for input. The artist insisted I take the conditioning chip out; without it I feel like bare wire, charged and ready to short. I squeeze my eyes shut against another scrape of the needle across bone, grind out, "Good. I was gonna be pissed if we did this for no reason."

"Oh, that's not the only reason, birthday girl." She leans in close, whispers in my ear. "Have I ever told you ink makes me hot?"

Heat shoots down my bare back, into my groin. I swallow. "Ink makes you hot, neh?"

She doesn't answer, nips my ear. Only my death grip on the table legs keeps me from shooting off the table right then. It takes every ounce of will to play it cool. "I guess now you can have Ink anytime."

* * *

:: *Ink.* ::

The word crawls up my spinal cord, cerebral cortex, worms its way into my medulla oblongata, makes me jerk like a puppet on a string. Still, it's just more noise. I push it out, sink back into that empty space to rattle around, a lonely dried bean in a dusty Mason jar.

:: *Come back to me, Ink.* ::

Her static pierces the haze, scratches across my lobes like fingernails.

"Go away."

:: *Listen.* ::

"No." Ravaged by sound, my shreds flutter in the relentless pressure waves. I am a ghost, nothing more. If I rematerialize, my paper maché bones may shatter. "Leave me alone."

:: *It's Siren, Ink. Come back. You've gone too deep. You need to focus.* ::

Her signal crackles across my skin, makes me want to thrash and scream. I do neither, suck a staccato breath past a slack jaw, blink blurry pink against the pressing white, strain to make out the muted murmur of the other voice.

"We will go away when you answer. We found prototype DataStor neural processors in your possession when we acquired you. What was your mission at DataStor? Where is your accomplice?"

I lick my lips, find I have no saliva to wet them with. "You'll kill me when you're done."

"On the contrary, Ink. We are very impressed with you. Answer and you'll earn some rest. Answer generously and you'll earn water. Food. Even a bath."

A noise slips from my throat, a whimper, or something like it. *Fuck.*

:: *Take it.* ::

Siren...

:: *Take it. You have to.* ::

I'm sorry.

:: *Don't be sorry. Survive. That's rule number one.* ::

The screech again, tearing at my bones.

"Godfuckingdammit, she's dead!"

* * *

"Explain to me again what we're doing here?"

I don't look at her as I ask, busy myself with my rifle, pretending to triple-check sights, and peer through the scope at the fenced-in office complex below.

"We're retrieving prototypes of an experimental neural implant. Cutting edge, way over my head, but there's a dealer willing to pay top dollar for it."

I don't buy the "over my head" bit. Whether she comes by it naturally or as an extension of her work for DigiDim, Siren's got a knack for electronics. She reads cybertech screamsheets like my father reads the weather forecast, pouring over obscure language and numbers to glean from their depths some mystical understanding that will...well, I'm not sure what it will do, but I'm sure it's something she has no intention of explaining to me.

In seven years, I've done a fair job uncovering her secrets. I know her better than anyone, even her family, but she still surprises me. This job feels like one of those surprises. Subconsciously I finger the Sig strapped to my thigh for reassurance. I've used it more than once when one of Siren's surprises came sneaking up behind me.

"So you want me to wait here and do nothing unless all hell breaks loose, and then you only want me to take out the sentries and any pursuit?"

"Yep."

"And why aren't I going in with you?"

"Because they only had one set of suction cups at the ninja store."

"Siren, I'm not in the mood-"

She holds a finger to my lips, smiling faintly. "Because I need an exit. Who will take out the guards if we're both inside?"

"Who will save your ass if something goes wrong in there?"

She grins. "You will. Nothing I say can change that."

"Then explain to me your plan."

By the time she's finished my fists are clenched, a conscious effort to not strangle her. "No. Too many risks. Too many things can go wrong. Jesus, it's a fucking fortress. How am I supposed to get in there if they catch you? I don't want to do this. It's not worth a few euros."

"It's not about the money," she murmurs.

"What then? Are they selling kids into slavery? Developing a neural virus? Ransoming the President? Why are we doing this?"

"DataStor is working on a next generation neural processor based on plans they stole from DigiDim."

Coolant pours into my veins, mixes with a shot of hot anger. I can't speak.

"Ink, it's not what you think."

Oh really? I can't look at her, assume a prone firing position behind the Winchester overlooking the complex. It doesn't take a nanoscientist to figure it out. Top dollar dealer my ass. Unexpected tears prick my eyes, frustration and worry and old fears and *goddammit, she thinks she's protecting me from the truth again.*

"Hey."

I tense under the hand on my shoulder. "Siren, I get it. DigiDim's twisting your arm to steal their stuff back. I don't need to know what they're holding over you. I just wish you'd stop acting like I'm too fragile to handle it."

"I-I don't think you can't handle it. And I'm not doing it for DigiDim."

I draw in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Then why?"

She lies down beside me, watches the sentries pace beyond the electric fence. "My neural processor is breaking down."

"What?" The words refuse to register, leave me struggling to wrap my mind around them. "What do you mean, 'Breaking down?'"

"Shorting out. Hiccapping. Has been for a few months now, but it's getting worse. It's prototype technology; none of the medtechies I've been to have been able to figure it out. Maybe with DigiDim's plans or DataStor's knockoff, they can fix it."

"Hiccapping." The word sticks in my throat. In my head run news vids of cyberjunkies, their neuralware shorted, twitching on the ground like broken animatronics. "Were you going to tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

Hardly comforting. "It's not serious, right? Not life-threatening?"

She looks at me. Not reassuring. Not scared. Not sad. Just determined.

I want to be sick, force myself to nod. "Keep the comm open. Don't keep me waiting too long."

* * *

"How did she die?"

I choke in the vacuum of silence, gasp for air. "Your shitty beta neuralware went on the fritz in the middle of a mission, that's how. Took a six-pack of bullets stealing a replacement. She died on the way to the clinic, and you're the ones who killed her."

:: *Nice.* ::

Shut up.

"Where is her body?"

"Fucking scavengers! She's not yours anymore. She had me make damn sure of that."

"Where is her head?"

"What the fuck? Didn't you just hear me? It's gone. She's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Just gone. You got your answers. I'm done. Get me out of here or kill me, but I'm done."

The lights die, plunge my tiny world into muffled darkness.

* * *

"Dammit, Siren, help me out here!"

I prop her up again, fumble with the keys in the dark as she slides down the side of the van. I catch her again, pin her between my shoulder and the clamshell doors, block out the dark smear she's left on the faded sienna paint as shaking hands work the key into the lock, shove her in. A bullet pings off the door; I flinch, I cram one of her legs in, the other, slam the doors behind me and climb in the driver's seat, tear out of there in a spray of mud.

Crates slide around in the back, tires squealing as I turn onto the highway toward the city. I curse. "Siren, you okay?" I glance over my shoulder, can't see much of her on the floor behind my seat, but I can hear her. Whistles for breaths, short and strained. Sweat beads on my upper lip. "Just hang on, alright? I'll figure something out. Just hang on."

Those minutes into town drag into hours, knowing the AVs are probably not far behind, knowing she's lungshot back there and bleeding out and I'm too busy trying to keep us both alive to be there beside her.

"Siren, talk to me," I call back. "Siren? Let me know you can hear me-Shit!" I slow down, drive carefully past the red-and-blue speeding the other direction. "Siren, I need you, you stubborn old harpy. Don't do this. Come on."

I hear nothing over the rattle of the rear suspension. Another patrol car blasts by; sooner or later one of them will notice the streak of blood on the back door and do a u-turn. I take a side street on the edge of town, careen into an autowash, shove my credchip in the slot.

The tire guides are still dragging us in as I climb over the engine mount, crouch down next to her with the medkit, peel open the jacket. There's red everywhere, like in the action vids, only thicker. How in the hell she made it out of DataStor under her own power I can't fathom. Even with her shirt cut open I can't see through the mess, feel around until a finger finds a hole. Another. And another, count more than I can plug up with one hand.

"Ah, God..." I want to be sick, swear, scream, something. Squirts of blue and green and yellow foam block the fluorescent light streaming through the windshield, match the pink froth bubbling at the corner of her mouth. She's ghastly pale against the red flecks on her cheek; my eyes burn for a second, but I blink it away, pissed at myself, pissed at her. "Don't you quit on me now. You still owe me lessons."

I slap Vaseline bandages over the bubbling wounds front and back, tape them down as best I can on blood-slick skin. There are more holes in her chest than I have patches. I moan again. "Just a little while longer, Siren. Gotta find a trauma clinic in this shit hole."

The jets against the sidewall almost drown her out. "You swear like gutter trash. Can't I die in peace?"

I blink back tears of relief. "Don't talk like that. We've seen worse."

"No we haven't." She shudders, sucks in a sharp breath. "Need you to do something for me."

"No. I don't do deathbed requests. Especially when you're not on your deathbed."

"Burn my body."

"What?" I can't contain the look of horror on my face. "Why?"

"Don't let those DigiDim fuckers get a hold of it. No post-mortem dissections for this lab rat."

"Jesus, Siren. You don't think they'd really-"

"Before you do, there's a chip I want you to take out."

I feel around the back of her head. "There's nothing in your plugs."

"Not there. In the processor itself. Put it somewhere safe, don't let them have it."

"In the processor itself? How am I supposed to...? No. No, no, no, no-"

"Please, Ink. Please."

"No. I'm taking you to a clinic-"

She shakes her head slightly, her breath coming in rapid gulps. "Please."

"Siren, don't ask me to do this."

"You have to."

"But why? What is it?"

"Don't know. Something...DigiDim...wants."

"What? Siren, what do they want?"

She fights for every breath now. I fumble with bandages, don't have enough hands to clamp down on every wound. Water trickles across the metal floor, fed by rivulets running down the walls from the seams of the roof, compromised by rust, overcome by power spray. I can barely see what I'm doing. "Don't go. Don't go." She's leaving me behind again, only this time I can't catch up.

Those immortal blues still glow at me long after her body deflates.

I can't process what has just happened. Nothing seems real. I can't feel my body. Can't see her face clearly through the haze across my vision. I hold her like porcelain, like I might still hurt her if I squeeze too hard.

I hear a beep, high-pitched, quiet, steady. Numb, I bend low, follow the sound. It's coming from her head.

:: No post-mortem dissections for this lab rat. ::

My hand roots blindly through the medkit, closes around cold metal. Half out of my mind with rage, I cut into the back of her neck, rooting for the source of the sound.

It doesn't take long to find the processor. I carve the hateful thing out, raise the butt end of the scalpel to smash it.

The odd shape of it catches my eye. I turn the gory thing over, find a socket on the underside, pull out a single chip. A DigiDim chip.

A honk jolts me back to reality. The autowash. The blowers are done.

I look back at the chip, tiny, fragile, priceless. Not something one just lays on the dashboard. Hesitantly I reach behind, slip it into one of the plugs hidden in the pearl tattooed on my back.

Static floods my nerve endings, feedback from a chip not meant for processing. The neuralware tries anyway, looking for biofeedback loops and muscle group controls in a sea of wrong-formatted data. Rigid, I wrestle for control of my limbs, desperate to take it out-

A knock on glass. I blink, find myself sprawled across Siren's chest. I stare at her. She stares back.

:: Whaddya waiting for? ::

There's a man outside yelling. Shakily I push myself up, clamber into the driver's seat. He's still shouting through the glass, something about an ambulance, pointing at me. I look down; my hands and chest are covered in blood.

Somehow I've drawn my pistol, am already squeezing the trigger when my brain kicks in. My wrist jerks, spares his life, shatters the glass in his face and sends him scurrying.

Holy fuck.

I slam the van in gear, speed away.

Holy fuck. I nearly offed that guy for no reason. Holy fuck.

I have no idea what I'm doing, where I'm going, what my plan is. I don't even know what I'm looking for until I squeal to a stop in an alley full of dumpsters.

On autopilot, I get out. I don't know how I manage to drag her out of the back of the van, lift her up into the dumpster. Red-soaked dressings and torn wrappers follow. Bits of broken processor, old rags used to sop up the blood, my jeans and shirt and bra, even the towel I wash my hands and face with, all pile on top of her in the dumpster. My body acts as it is trained to, pours accelerant over her and lights a match; my mind is stuck on her eyes, watching the stars scroll by.

I can't do it.

:: You can. You will. ::

I jump, can almost feel her standing at my shoulder, coaching me as we lean over someone else's corpse. Chilled, I look around, find nothing to stare at but her cool white face. "Siren?"

:: You don't have much time, Ink. Say goodbye. ::

Her words are so clear, I'm too choked up to say anything. *This can't be happening. This isn't real. It's some kind of test.*

:: It's a test alright. No more lessons. It's time to fly or fall on your own. ::

Her lips never move. Silence. Stillness. Death. *I'm losing it.*

I don't know how long I stand there. Long after the match burns out. Not until I hear the whine of approaching AVs do I mechanically strike another. Invisible forces pry my fingers open, drop it into the dumpster.

There's no time to stay and watch her burn.

* * *

I don't know which is worse, the crushing light or the sucking darkness. I clutch at the metal arm rests, fight down the rising swell of fear.

"Hey! Hey! Get me out of this fucking chair! I told you what you wanted to know. Hey!"

:: Shh. Easy, Ink. Keep your head clear. Just more games. ::

Games? I can't see or hear a thing. Is it the room or is it me? How the fuck can I get out of this if I'm deaf and blind? The tide in me rises, threatens to crest over my head while I'm held down by that foul chair. My arms convulse against the straps, fresh cuts digging into old, my struggles growing more panicky with each moment. *Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm losing it, Siren, I've cracked.*

:: Cracked maybe, but not broken. ::

Can't breathe-

:: Shhh. ::

Lips brush mine. I blink furiously, make out dark hair framing Siren's blurry face. She brushes sweat-soaked hair from my eyes. My heart threatens to break.

Are you really here?

:: You know I'm not. Hallucinations are common in the absence of sensory stimuli. ::

I nod, too exhausted to be disappointed. *Stay with me?*

She smiles.

* * *

I'm losing it, I'm losing it, I'm losing it.

My hands shake as I scrub blood from my fingernails, my wrists, my forearms. I try not to look at the feet hanging out of the stall behind me, the splatters on the edge of the toilet bowl.

:: That was...intense. ::

Shut up.

:: You only did what you had to. ::

I said shut up.

:: He meant to kill you. ::

I didn't mean to kill him. One hand rubs my throat, bruised by the plastic bag he held over my head. The other clenches into a fist, still ready to beat his head through the cracked porcelain. What's happening to me?

:: I am. Just like I always warned you. ::

I shake my head. You're just a splinter of my imagination.

:: Hmm. Poetic, but it doesn't fit the facts, does it? This all started with my chip. ::

The chip. I'd forgotten. What is it? Mind-control?

:: Not sure. Some sort of data recorder. ::

Recorder? I almost ask the obvious, stop myself. They want lightning in a bottle.

:: More like solo in a chip. ::

I look at the man in the stall, his head dangling in pink water. My stomach does a slow spin. You did that.

:: We did that. Not all of it, I mean; you were great. Just...that last part. ::

Bile pushes up the back of my throat, burns my nose, bends me over the sink, fighting to hold it down. No. My body. You don't get to decide who I kill.

:: He wasn't going to stop- ::

"NO!" White knuckles grip the edges of the sink. I look hard at the shadow of me in the mirror, dark-eyed and sallow with exhaustion, peer deeper for the ghost within. Fly or fall, it's up to me. That's what you said. My body. My decisions. Say it.

I feel a buzz of resistance.

Say it, or I'll take you out and never put you back in.

The static crawls through my limbs, digital frustration.

:: Your body. Your decisions. ::

Damn right. Now help me hide the body.

:: Get his ID first. ::

I roll him over onto the floor, rifle through his pockets, come up empty-handed except the pistol in his underarm holster. *Why bother with a plastic bag when he had this?*

The restroom door slams open. I lunge into the stall, firing blind. A woman screams, but it's a sound of fear, not pain, and she runs out again.

Goddammit, Siren! I told you-

:: That wasn't me, Ink. ::

I suck in a deep breath, still wrestling with the surge of adrenaline. Jesus, she's right. I'm on edge, have been for days.

:: Welcome to the game, solo. Is it what you expected? ::

I grit my teeth, shove the pistol into the back of my pants, make for the restroom door. *Everyone and their dog heard that. Cops will be here any minute.*

:: Ink, watch it- ::

I'm already half a step out the door toward the van, barely see the movement out of the corner of my eye before the fist connects. The blow makes the sickly green lights of the fuel station flicker, come up dim and unhelpful in the nanoseconds it takes to stagger to my knees.

:: Footsteps on your left. Shoot! ::

Still dazed from the blow, I fumble for the pistol on endorphins and instinct, raise to fire when I hear a scream from that direction. The woman.

:: Shoot! ::

No! I could hit her-

The pistol gets knocked from my hand, and before I can scramble away, another punch sends me to the pavement.

I wake in a chair in the dark.

"State your name."

* * *

"Ink, can you hear me?"

The treble voice echoes over the white noise. I imagine lying on my back next to rushing rapids at the bottom of a canyon.

"Yes." My own too-loud voice jars me, as if accidentally spoken into a microphone. My eyes flutter but can't open, pressed closed by a heavy cloth. They throb and scratch like they're full of sand. I reach for them, half-expect restraints on my wrists. No restraints, but my arms feel like lead, hover drunkenly before giving out.

"You're not going anywhere. The anesthetic won't wear off for at least another hour." The voice is real, not modulated, contralto and gentle. "How's the sound quality?"

"You sound...thin. Far away."

"I'll recalibrate the reception."

The noise changes, deepens to encompass the thrum of the temperature control system, the hum of monitors and whir of hard drives on nearby systems. The brush of fabric on fabric as the woman presses buttons.

"Cyber?" My voice cracks.

"You tested zero response to auditory stimuli less than 80 decibels. It was necessary."

"My eyes-"

"Photokeratitis. A burn on your corneas from the light. They will heal."

I'm too foggy to notice my anxiety until it eases.

"Where are we?"

"The infirmary."

"How'd I get here?" Was I too far gone to remember the rescue?

"Your interviewer must have liked your answers."

Reality crashes down. This is no generic trauma clinic; I'm still deep within the belly of Digital Dimensions. Over are the days of Siren descending like an unholy angel on our enemies, swooping in to save me. No one is coming. No one will get me out of here but me.

:: And me. ::

My relief is genuine, if bittersweet.

If I'd fired when you'd told me to, I wouldn't be here.

:: Neh. Your chances of hitting him were pretty slim. ::

Siren, I...I need your help. I'm asking for your help.

She-it-doesn't answer right away. I have to remind myself I'm listening to a chip of her memories, not her, even when she pauses like this and I can picture the look of intense concentration in those downward-cast blues.

:: People will die, Ink. Maybe this woman. Maybe other innocents. I can help, but you'll be doing the killing. You sure this is what you want? ::

A fair question, one she's asked me again and again. I've always said yes, even when I hate what I'm doing, because it's the price I pay to be with her.

No. It's not what I want. But it's what needs to be done, neh?

If we were face to face, she'd look me in the eye, as if reading my thoughts. She can actually do that now.

:: Fair enough. I'll help. Lie still and recover your strength. Let them think you're too drugged to move. Meanwhile, I'm going to teach you how to overload a power grid and kill the lights. ::

Siren?

:: Yes, Ink? ::

I won't kill her if I don't have to.

I wait, expecting another lecture on survival and being ready to kill without hesitation.

:: Good. You had me worried. ::

I smile. Maybe I'm not the only one who's changed.

* * *

I set the case on the table, drop down into the cracked seat of the booth.

The man across the table goes still, looks up slowly from his laptop.

"Ink? You look terrible."

"Good to see you too, Strange."

He looks over my cuts and bruises and bandages dubiously, as if the guy who gave them to me might walk in any second. "Where's Siren?"

"Dead." It doesn't sting as much anymore, saying it. No, it stings. I've just gotten better at rushing past it. "I need to sell this."

He glances at my package, back at me, closes the laptop and opens the case. "What is it?"

"A DataStor prototype neural processor based on Digital Dimension designs. I've got no use for it, and I could really use the cash."

"Is it hot?"

I nod.

"It'll take time. I'll have to put out feelers for a buyer."

"I know. Usual fifteen percent?"

"Something like this, specialized and red-flagged? Twenty."

Irritation wells up in my chest. "I came to you first because Siren trusted you. You gonna jerk me around now because she's not here?"

He smiles. "Well, she did once claim she could kill me with three toothpicks and an olive."

I meet his unaffected gaze for a long minute, shut and latch the case. "I need the money. I thought you might too."

"Ink, wait-"

The boost kicks in; I grab his wrist before he can grab mine. He arches an eyebrow. "Apple didn't fall too far from the tree, did it?"

I let go, turn away. "Guess not."

"Fifteen."

I stop. Return the case to the table. Scrawl my number on a napkin. Turn to leave.

"What are you doing these days? Are you out of the mercenary business?"

Carefully, "No. I'm in. If I can find a fixer who won't gyp me on his fees."

"Oh yeah? I know a guy whose rates are very reasonable. Wanna sit down and talk to him?"

In minutes I'm on retainer, waiting for my first call. It's not much, but it'll put gas in the van and food in my empty belly. I wait until I'm out the door before I smile.

:: Welcome to the game, solo. Is it what you expected? ::

No, I admit, but so long as it's with you, it'll do. Just the thought makes my chest ache. It was never supposed to be like this, her reduced to a tickle in my spine, a whisper in my head.

Maybe it's a malfunction of the chip, but a warmth forms in the hollow of my back, spreads under my skin with the electric kiss of noise.

END TRANSMISSION

If you like this story, or even read it, please send your comments to spyrel@yahoo.com

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