

# AN EVENING WITH SEVERYN GRIMES

Rich Larson

**Rich Larson's latest news is that his is work being translated into Polish, Italian, and Chinese. The author, who is in Ottawa, Canada, pursuing graduate studies in translation, recently set up a Patreon Account. Readers can support him via [patreon.com/richlarson](https://patreon.com/richlarson). In the meantime, get prepared for a thrilling and suspenseful ride when you spend . . .**

## AN EVENING WITH SEVERYN GRIMES

“Do you have to wear the Fawkes in here?” Girasol asked, sliding into the orthochair. Its worn wings crinkled, leaking silicon, as it adjusted to her shape. The plastic stuck cold to her shoulder blades, and she shivered.

“No.” Pierce made no move to pull off the smirking mask. “It makes you nervous,” he explained, groping around in the guts of his open Adidas track-bag, his tattooed hand emerging with the hypnotic. “That’s a good enough reason to wear it.”

Girasol didn’t argue, just tipped her dark head back, positioning herself over the circular hole they’d punched through the headrest. Beneath it, a bird’s nest of circuitry, mismatched wiring, blinking blue nodes. And in the center of the nest: the neural jack, gleaming wet with disinfectant jelly.

She let the slick white port at the top of her spine snick open.

“No cheap sleep this time,” Pierce said, flicking his nail against the inky vial. “Get ready for a deep slice, Sleeping Beauty. Prince Charming’s got your shit. Highest-grade Dozr a man can steal.” He plugged it into a battered needler, motioned for her arm. “I get a kiss or what?”

Girasol proffered her bruised wrist. Let him hunt around collapsed veins while she said, coldly, “Don’t even think about touching me when I’m under.”

Pierce chuckled, slapping her flesh, coaxing a pale blue worm to stand out in her white skin. “Or what?”

Girasol’s head burst as the hypnotic went in, flooding her capillaries, working over her neurotransmitters. “Or I’ll cut your fucking balls off.”

The Fawkes’ grin loomed silent over her; a brief fear stabbed through the descending drug. Then he laughed again, barking and sharp, and Girasol knew she had not

forgotten how to speak to men like Pierce. She tasted copper in her mouth as the Dozr settled.

"Just remember who got you out of Correctional," Pierce said. "And that if you screw this up, you'd be better off back in the freeze. Sweet dreams."

The mask receded, and Girasol's eyes drifted up the wall, following the cabling that crept like vines from the equipment under her skull, all the way through a crack gouged in the ceiling, and from there to whatever line Pierce's cronies had managed to splice. The smartpaint splashed across the grimy stucco displayed months of preparation: shifting sat-maps, decrypted dossiers, and a thousand flickering image loops of one beautiful young man with silver hair.

Girasol lowered the chair. Her toes spasmed, kinking against each other as the thrumming neural jack touched the edge of her port. The Dozr kept her breathing even. A bone-deep rasp, a meaty click, and she was synched, simulated REM brain-wave flowing through a current of code, flying through wire, up and out of the shantytown apartment, flitting like a shade into Chicago's dark cityscape.

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Severyn Grimes felt none of the old heat in his chest when the first round finished with a shattered nose and a shower of blood, and he realized something: the puppet shows didn't do it for him anymore.

The fighters below were massive, as always, pumped full of HGH and Taurus and various combat chemicals, sculpted by a lifetime in gravity gyms. The fight, as always, wouldn't end until their bodies were mangled heaps of broken bone and snapped tendon. Then the technicians would come and pull the digital storage cones from the slick white ports at the tops of their spines, so the puppeteers could return to their own bodies, and the puppets, if they were lucky, woke up in meat repair with a paycheck and no permanent paralysis.

It seemed almost wasteful. Severyn stroked the back of his neck, where silver hair was shorn fashionably around his own storage cone. Beneath him, the fighters hurtled from their corners, grappled, broke, and collided again. He felt nothing. Severyn's adrenaline only ever seemed to spike in boardrooms now. Primate aggression through power broking.

"I'm growing tired of this shit," he said, and his bodyguard carved a clear exit through the baying crowd. Follow-cams drifted in his direction, foregoing the match for a celebspotting opportunity: the second-wealthiest bio-businessman in Chicago, 146 years old but plugged into a beautiful young body that played well on cam. The god-like Severyn Grimes slumming at a puppet show, readying for a night of downtown debauchery? The paparazzi feed practically wrote itself.

A follow-cam drifted too close; Severyn raised one finger, and his bodyguard swatted it out of the air on the way out the door.

\* \* \*

Girasol jolted, spiraled down to the floor. She'd drifted too close, too entranced by the geometry of his cheekbones, his slate gray eyes and full lips, his swimmer's build swathed in Armani and his graceful hands with Nokia implants glowing just under the skin. A long ways away, she was dimly aware of her body in the orthochair in the decrepit apartment. She scrawled a message across the smartpaint:

HE'S LEAVING EARLY. ARE YOUR PEOPLE READY?

"They're, shit, they're on their way. Stall him." Pierce's voice was distant, an insect hum, but she could detect the sound of nerves fraying.

Girasol jumped to another follow-cam, triggering a fizz of sparks as she seized its motor circuits. The image came in upside down: Mr. Grimes clambering into the limo, the bodyguard scanning the street. Springy red hair and a brutish face suggested Neanderthal gene-mixing. Him, they would have to get rid of.

The limousine door glided shut. From six blocks away, Girasol triggered the crude mp4 file she'd prepared—sometimes the old tricks worked best—and wormed inside the vehicle's CPU on a sine wave of sound.

\* \* \*

Severyn vaguely recognized the song breezing through the car's sponge speakers, but outdated protest rap was a significant deviation from his usual tastes.

"Music off."

The backseat was sealed in silence. The car took an uncharacteristically long time calculating their route before finally jetting into traffic. Severyn leaned back to watch the dark street slide past his window, lit by lime green neon and the jittering ghosts of holograms. A moment later he turned to his bodyguard, who had the Loop's traffic reports scrolling across his retinas.

"Does blood excite you, Finch?"

Finch blinked, clearing his eyes back to a watery blue. "Not particularly, Mr. Grimes. Comes with the job."

"I thought having reloaded testosterone would make the world . . . Visceral again." Severyn grabbed at his testicles with a wry smile. "Maybe an old mind overwrites a young body in more ways than the technicians suspect. Maybe mortality is escapable, but old age inevitable."

"Maybe so," Finch echoed, sounding slightly uncomfortable. First-lifers often found it unsettling to be reminded they were sitting beside a man who had bought off Death itself. "Feel I'm getting old myself, sometimes."

"Maybe you'd like to turn in early," Severyn offered.

Finch shook his head. "Always up for a jaunt, Mr. Grimes. Just so long as the whorehouses are vetted."

Severyn laughed, and in that moment the limo lurched sideways and jolted to a halt. His face mashed to the cold glass of the window, bare millimeters away from an autocab that darted gracefully around them and back into its traffic algorithm. Finch straightened him out with one titanic hand.

"What the fuck was that?" Severyn asked calmly, unrumpling his tie.

"Car says there's something in the exhaust port," Finch said, retinas replaced by schematic tracery. "Not an explosive. Could just be debris."

"Do check."

"Won't be a minute, Mr. Grimes."

Finch pulled a pair of wire-veined gloves from a side compartment and opened the door, ushering in a chilly undertow, then disappeared around the rear end of the limousine. Severyn leaned back to wait, flicking alternately through merger details and airbrushed brothel advertisements in the air above his lap.

"Good evening, Mr. Grimes," the car burred. "You've been hacked."

Severyn's nostrils flared. "I don't pay you for your sense of humor, Finch."

"I'm not joking, parasite."

Severyn froze. There was a beat of silence, then he reached for the door handle. It might as well have been stone. He pushed his palm against the sunroof and received a static charge for his trouble.

"Override," he said. "Severyn Grimes. Open doors." No response. Severyn felt his heartbeat quicken, felt a prickle of sweat on his palms. He slowly let go of the handle. "Who am I speaking to?"

"Take a look through the back window. Maybe you can figure it out."

Severyn spun, peering through the dark glass. Finch was hunched over the exhaust port, only a slice of red hair in sight. The limousine was projecting a yellow hazard banner, cleaving traffic, but as Severyn watched an unmarked van careened to a halt behind them. Masked men spilled out. Severyn thumped his fist into the

glass of the window, but it was soundproof; he sent a warning spike to his security, but the car was shielded against ad bombs, and theoretically against electronic intrusion, and now it was walling off his cell signal.

All he could do was watch. Finch straightened up, halfway through peeling off one smartglove when the first black-market Taser sparked electric blue. He jerked, convulsed, but still somehow managed to pull the handgun from his jacket. Severyn's fist clenched. Then the second Taser went off, painting Finch a crackling halo. The handgun dropped.

The masked men bull-rushed Finch as he crumpled, sweeping him up under the arms, and Severyn saw the wide leering smiles under their hoods: Guy Fawkes. The mask had been commandeered by various terroractivist groups over the past half-century, but Severyn knew it was the Priesthood's clearest calling card. For the first time in a long time, he felt a cold corkscrew in his stomach. He tried to put his finger on the sensation.

"He has a husband." Severyn's throat felt tight. "Two children."

"He still will," the voice replied. "He's only a wage-slave. Not a blasphemer."

Finch was a heavy man and his knees scraped along the tarmac as the Priests hauled him toward the van's sliding door. His head lolled to his chest, but Severyn saw his blue eyes were slitted open. His body tensed, then—

Finch jerked the first Priest off-balance and came up with the subcutaneous blade flashing out of his forearm, carving the man open from the hip to ribcage. Blood foamed and spat and Severyn felt what he'd missed at the puppet show, a burning flare in his chest. Finch twisted away from the other Priest's arm, eyes roving, glancing off the black glass that divided them, and then a third Taser hit him. Finch fell with his jaws spasming; a Priest's heavy boot swung into him as he toppled.

The flare died inside Severyn's pericardium. The limousine started to move.

"He should not have done that," the voice grated, as the bleeding Priest and then Finch and then the other Priests disappeared from sight. Severyn watched through the back window for a moment longer. Faced forward.

"I'll compensate for any medical costs incurred by my employee's actions," he said. "I won't tolerate any sort of retribution to his person."

"Still talking like you've got cards. And don't pretend like you care. He's an ant to you. We all are."

Severyn assessed. The voice was synthesized, distorted, but something in the cadence made him think female speaker. Uncommon, for a Priest. He gambled.

"What is your name, madam?"

"I'm a man, Parasite."

Only a split second of hesitation before the answer, but it was more than enough to confirm his guess. Severyn had staked astronomical shares on such pauses, pauses that couldn't be passed off as lag in the modern day. Signs of unsettledness. Vulnerability. It made his skin thrum. He imagined himself in a boardroom.

"No need for pretenses," Severyn said. "I merely hoped to establish a more personable base for negotiation."

"Fuck you." A warble of static. Maybe a laugh. "Fuck you. There's not going to be any negotiation. This isn't a funding op. We just caught one of the biggest parasites on the planet. The Priesthood's going to make you an example. Hook you to an auto-surgeon and let it vivisect you on live feed. Burn what's left of you to ash. No negotiations."

Severyn felt the icy churn in his stomach again. Fear. He realized he'd almost missed it.

\* \* \*

Girasol was dreaming many things at once. Even as she spoke to her captive in realtime, she perched in the limousine's electronic shielding, shooting down message after desperate message he addressed to his security detail, his bank, his associates. It took her nearly a minute to realize the messages were copy-paste. Grimes was trying to trigger an overuse failsafe in his implants, generate an error message that could sneak through to Nokia.

Such a clever bastard. Girasol dipped into his implants and shut them down, leaving him half-blind and stranded in realtime. She felt a sympathetic lurch as he froze, gray eyes clearing, clipped neatly away from his data flow. If only it was that easy to reach in and drag him out of that pristine white storage cone.

"There aren't many female Priests," Grimes said, as if he hadn't noticed the severance. "I seem to recall their creed hates the birth control biochip almost as much as they hate neural puppeteering." He flashed a beatific smile that made Girasol ache. "So much love for one sort of parasite, so much ichor for the other."

"I saw the light," Girasol said curtly, even though she knew she should have stopped talking the instant he started analyzing, prying, trying to break her down.

"My body is, of course, a volunteer." Grimes draped his lean arms along the backseat. "But the Priesthood does have so many interesting ideas about what individuals should and should not do with their own flesh and bone."

"Volunteers are as bad as the parasites themselves," Girasol recited from one of Pierce's Adderall-fueled rants. "Selling their souls to a digital demon. The tainted can't enter the kingdom of heaven."

"Don't tell me a hacker riding sound waves still believes in souls."

"You lost yours the second you uploaded to a storage cone."

Grimes replied with another carefully constructed probe, but Girasol's interest diverted from their conversation as Pierce's voice swelled from far away. He was shouting. Someone else was in the room. She crosschecked the limo's route against a staticky avalanche of police scanners, then dragged herself back to the orthochair, forcing her eyes open.

Through the blur of code, she saw Pierce's injured crony, the one who'd been sliced belly to sternum, being helped through the doorway. His midsection was swathed in bacterial film, but the blood that hadn't been coagulated and eaten away left a dripping carmine trail on the linoleum.

"You don't bring him *here*," Pierce grated. "You lobo, if someone saw you—"

"I'm not going to take him to a damn hospital." The man pulled off his Fawkes, revealing a pale and sweat-slick face. "I think it's, like, shallow. Didn't get any organs. But he's bleeding bad, need more cling film—"

"Where's the caveman?" Pierce snapped. "The bodyguard, where is he?"

The man waved a blood-soaked arm towards the doorway. "In the arcade. Don't worry, we put a clamp on him and locked the van." His companion moaned and he swore. "Now where's the aid kit? Come on, Pierce, he's going to shit, he's going to bleed out. Those stairs nearly did him in."

Pierce stalked to the wall and snatched the dented white case from its hook. He caught sight of Girasol's gummy eyes half-open. "How close are you to the warehouse?" he demanded.

"You know how the Loop gets on weekends," Girasol said, feeling her tongue move inside her mouth like a phantom limb. "Fifteen. Twenty."

Pierce nodded. Chewed his lips. Agitated. "Need another shot?"

"Yeah."

Girasol monitored the limo at the hazy edge of her mind as Pierce handed off the aid kit and prepped another dose of hypnotic. She thought of how soon it would be her blood on the floor, once he realized what she was doing. She thought of slate gray

eyes as she watched the oily black Dozr mix with her blood, and when Pierce hit the plunger, she closed her own and plunged with it.

\* \* \*

Severyn was methodically peeling back flooring, ruining his manicured nails, humming protest rap, when the voice came back.

"Don't bother. You won't get to the brake line that way."

He paused, staring at the miniscule tear he'd made. He climbed slowly back onto the seat and palmed open the chiller. "I was beginning to think you'd left me," he said, retrieving a glass flute.

"Still here, Parasite. Keeping you company in your final moments."

"Parasite," Severyn echoed as he poured. "You know, if it weren't for people like you, puppeteering might have never developed. Religious zealots are the ones who axed cloning, after all. Just think. If not for that, we might have been uploading to fresh blank bodies instead of those desperate enough to sell themselves whole."

He looked at his amber reflection in the flute, studying the beautiful young face he'd worn for nearly two years. He knew the disembodied hacker was seeing it too, and it was an advantage, no matter how she might try to suppress it. Humans loved beauty and underestimated youth. It was one reason Severyn used young bodies instead of the thickset middle-aged Clooneys favored by most CEOs.

"And now it's too late to go back," Severyn said, swirling his drink. "Growing a clone is expensive. Finding a volunteer is cheap." He sipped and held the stinging Macallan in his mouth.

Silence for a beat.

"You have no idea what kind of person I am."

Severyn felt his hook sink in. He swallowed his drink. "I do," he replied. "I've been thinking about it quite fucking hard, what with my impending evisceration. You're no Priest. Your familiarity with my security systems and reticence to kill my body-guard makes me think you're an employee, former or current."

"People like you assume everyone's working for them."

"Whether you are or not, you've done enough research to know I can easily triple whatever the Priesthood is paying for your services."

"There's not going to be any negotiation. You're a dead man."

Severyn nodded, studying his drink, then slopped it out across the upholstery and smashed the flute against the window. The crystal crunched. Severyn shook the now-jagged stem, sending small crumbs to the floor. It gleamed scalpel-sharp. Running his thumb along it raised hairs on the nape of his neck.

"What are you doing?" the voice blared.

"My hand slipped," Severyn said. "Old age." A fat droplet of blood swelled on his thumb, and he wiped it away. He wasn't one to mishandle his bodies or rent zombies for recreational suicide in drowning tanks, freefalls. No, Severyn's drive to survive had always been too strong for him to experiment with death. As he brought the edge to his throat he realized that killing himself would not be easy.

"That won't save you." Another static laugh, but this one forced. "We'll upload your storage cone to an artificial body within the day. Throw you into a pleasure doll with the sensitivity cranked to maximum. Imagine how much fun they'd have with that."

The near-panic was clarion clear, even through a synthesizer. Intuition pounded at Severyn's temples. The song was still in there, too.

"You played yourself in on a music file," Severyn said. "I searched it before you shut off my implants. 'Decapitate the state/wipe the slate/create.' Banal, but so very catchy, wasn't it? Swan song of the Anticorp Movement."

"I liked the beat."

“Several of my employees became embroiled in those protests. They were caught trying to coordinate a viral strike on my bank.” Severyn pushed the point into the smooth flesh of his throat. “Nearly five years ago, now. I believe the chief conspirator was sentenced to twenty years in cryogenic storage.”

“Stop it. Put that down.”

“You must have wanted me to guess,” Severyn continued, worming the glass gently, like a corkscrew. He felt a warm trickle down his neck. “Why keep talking, otherwise? You wanted me to know who got me in the end. This is your revenge.”

“Do you even remember my name?” The voice was warped, but not by static. “And *put that down.*”

The command came so fierce and raw that Severyn’s hand hesitated without his meaning to. He slowly set the stem in his lap. “Or you kept talking,” he said, “because you missed hearing his voice.”

“Fucking parasite.” The hacker’s voice was tired and suddenly brittle. “First you steal twenty years of my life and then you steal my son.”

“Girasol Fletcher.” There it was. Severyn leaned back, releasing a long breath. “He came to me, you know.” He racked his digital memory for another name, the name of his body before it was his body. “Blake came to me.”

“Bullshit. You always wanted him. Had a feed of his swim meets like a pedophile.”

“I helped him. Possibly even saved him.”

“You *made him a puppet.*”

Severyn balled a wipe and dabbed at the blood on Blake’s slender neck. “You left him with nothing,” he said. “The money drained off to pay for your cryo. And Blake fell off, too. He was a full addict when he came to me. Hypnotics. Spending all his time in virtual dreamland. You’d know about that.” He paused, but the barb drew no response. “It couldn’t have been for sex fantasies. I imagine he got anything he wanted in realtime. I think maybe he was dreaming his family whole again.”

Silence. Severyn felt a dim guilt, but he pushed through. Survival.

“He was desperate when he found me,” Severyn continued. “I told him I wanted his body. Fifteen-year contract, insured for all organic damage. It’s been keeping your cryo paid off, and when the contract’s up he’ll be comfortable for the rest of his life.”

“Don’t. Act.” A stream of static. “Like you did him a favor.”

Severyn didn’t reply for a moment. He looked at the window, but the glass was still black, opaqued. “I’m not being driven to an execution, am I?”

\* \* \*

Girasol wound the limousine through the grimy labyrinth of the industrial district, guiding it past the agreed-upon warehouse where a half-dozen Priests were awaiting the delivery of Severyn Grimes, Chicago’s most notorious parasite. Using the car’s external camera, she saw the lookout’s confused face emerging from behind his mask.

On the internal camera, she couldn’t stop looking into Blake’s eyes, hoping they would be his own again soon.

“There’s a hydrofoil waiting on the docks,” she said through the limousine speakers. “I hired a technician to extract you. Paid him extra to drop your storage cone in the harbor.”

“The Priesthood wasn’t open to negotiations concerning the body.”

Far away, Girasol felt the men clustered around her, watching her prone body like predatory birds. She could almost smell the fast-food grease and sharp chemical sweat. “No,” she said dully. “Volunteers are as bad as the parasites themselves. Blake sold his soul to a digital demon. To you.”

“When they find out you betrayed their interests?”

Girasol considered. “Pierce will rape me,” she said. “Maybe some of the others, too.”

Then they'll pull some amateur knife-and-pliers interrogation shit, thinking it's some kind of conspiracy. And then they may. Or may not. Kill me." Her voice was steady until the penultimate word. She calculated distance to the pier. It was worth it. It was worth it. Blake would be free, and Grimes would be gone.

"You could skype in CPD."

Girasol had already considered. "No. With what I pulled to get out of the freeze, if they find me I'm back in permanently."

"Skype them in to wherever my bodyguard is being held."

He was insistent about the caveman. Almost as if he gave a shit. Girasol felt a small slink of self-doubt before she remembered Grimes had amassed his wealth by manipulating emotions. He'd been a puppeteer long before he uploaded. Still trying to pull her strings.

"I would," Girasol said. "But he's here with me."

Grimes paused, frowning. Girasol zoomed. She'd missed Blake's face so much, the immaculate bones of it, the wide brow and curved lips. She could still remember him chubby and always laughing.

"Can you contact him without the Priests finding out?" Grimes asked.

Girasol fluttered back to the apartment. She was guillotining texts and voice-calls as they poured in from the warehouse, keeping Pierce in the dark for as long as possible, but one of them would slip through before long. She triangulated on the locked van using the parcade security cams. "Maybe," she said.

"If you can get him free, he might be able to help you. I have a non-duress passcode. I could give it to you." Grimes tongued the edges of his bright white teeth. "In exchange, you call off the extraction."

"Thought you might try to make a deal."

"It is what I do." Grimes's lips thinned. "You lack long-term perspective, Ms. Fletcher. Common enough among first-lifers. The notion of sacrificing yourself to free your progeny must seem exceptionally noble and very fucking romantic to you. But if the Priesthood does murder you, Blake wakes up with nobody. Nothing. Again."

"Not nothing," Girasol said reflexively.

"The money you were paid for this job?" Grimes suggested. "He'll have to go into hiding for as long as my disappearance is under investigation. The sort of people who can help him lay low are the sort of people who'll have him back on Sandman or Dozr before the month is out. He might even decide to go puppet again."

Girasol's fury boiled over, and she nearly lost her hold on the steering column. "He made a mistake. Once. He would never agree to that again."

"Even if you get off with broken bones, you'll be a wanted fugitive as soon as Correctional try to thaw you for a physical and find whatever suckerfish the Priests convinced to take your pod." Grimes flattened his hands on his knees. "What I'm proposing is that you cancel the extraction. My bodyguard helps you escape. We meet up to renegotiate terms. I could have your charges dropped, you know. I could even rewrite Blake's contract."

"You really don't want to die, do you?" Girasol's suspicion battled her fear, her fear of Pierce and his pliers and his grinning mask. "You're digital. You saying you don't have a backup of your personality waiting in the wings?"

She checked the limo's external cams and swore. A carload of Priests from the warehouse was barreling up the road behind them, guns already poking through the windows. She reached for the in-built speed limits and deleted them.

"I do," Grimes conceded, bracing himself as the limo accelerated. "But he's not me, is he?"

Girasol resolved. She bounced back to the apartment, where the Priests were growing agitated. Pierce was shaking her arm, even though he should have known



better than to shake someone on a deep slice, asking her how close she was to the warehouse. She flashed TWO MINUTES across the smartpaint. Then she found the electronic signature of the clamp that was keeping Grimes's bodyguard paralyzed inside the van. She hoped he hadn't suffered any long-term nerve damage. Hoped he would still move like quicksilver with that bioblade of his.

"Fair enough," Girasol said, stretching herself thin, reaching into the empty parade. "All right. Tell me the passcode and I'll break him out."

\* \* \*

Finch was focused on breathing slowly and ignoring the blooming damp spot where piss had soaked through his trousers. The police-issue clamp they'd stuck to his shoulder made most other activities impossible. Finch had experience with the spidery devices. They were designed to react to any arousal in the central nervous system by sending a paralyzing jolt through the would-be agitator's muscles. More struggle, more jolt. More panic, more jolt.

The only thing to do with a clamp was relax and not get upset about anything. Finch used the downtime to reflect on his situation. Mr. Grimes had fallen victim to a planned ambush, that much was obvious. Electronic intrusion, supposedly impossible, must have been behind the limo's exhaust port diagnostic.

And now Mr. Grimes was being driven to an unknown location, while Finch was lying on the floor of a van with donair wrappers and crumpled anti-puppetry tracts for company. A decade ago, he might have been paranoid enough to think he was a target himself. Religious extremists had not taken kindly to Neanderthal gene mixing at first, but they also had a significant demographic overlap with people overjoyed to see pale-faced and blue-eyed athletes dominating the NFL and NBA again.

Even the flailing Bulls front office had managed to sign that half-thally power forward from Duke. Finch couldn't remember his name. Cletus something. Sometimes Finch wished he'd kept going with football, but his fiancé had cared more about intact gray matter than money. Of course, he hadn't been thrilled when Finch chose security as an alternative source of income, but . . .

In a distant corner of his mind, Finch felt the clamp loosening. He kept breathing steadily, kept his heartbeat slow, kept thinking about anything but the clamp loosening. Cletus Rivas. That was the kid's name. He'd pulled down twenty-six rebounds in the match-up against Arizona. Finch brought his hand slowly, slowly up toward his shoulder. Just to scratch. Just because he was itchy. Closer. Closer.

His fingers were millimeters from the clamp's burnished surface when the van's radio blared to life. His hand jerked; the clamp jolted. Finch tried to curse through his lockjaw and came up with mostly spit. So close.

"Listen up," came a voice from the speaker.

Finch had no alternative.

"I can turn off the clamp and unlock the van, but I need you to help me in exchange," the voice said. "I'm in apartment 401, sitting in an orthochair, deep sliced. There are three men in the room. The one you cut up, the one who Tasered you, and one more. They've still got the Tasers, and the last one has a handgun in an Adidas bag. I don't know where your gun is."

Finch felt the clamp fall away and went limp all over. His muscles ached deep like he'd done four hours in the weight room on methamphetamine—a bad idea, he knew from experience. He reached to massage his shoulder with one trembling hand.

"Grimes told me a non-duress passcode to give you," the voice continued. "So you'd know to trust me. It's Atticus."

Finch had almost forgotten that passcode. He'd wikied to find out why it made Mr. Grimes smirk but lost interest halfway through a text on Roman emperors.

"You have to hurry. They might kill me soon."

Hurrying did not sound like something Finch could do. He took three tries to push himself upright on gelatin arms. "Is Mr. Grimes safe?" he asked thickly, tongue sore and swollen from him biting it.

"He's on a leisurely drive to a waiting ferry. He'll be just fine. If you help me."

Finch crawled forward, taking a moment to drive one kneecap into the inactive clamp for a satisfying crunch, then hoisted himself between the two front seats and palmed the glove compartment. His Gnasher was waiting inside, still assembled, still loaded. He was dealing with some real fucking amateurs. The handgun molded to his grip, licking his thumb for DNA confirmation like a friendly cat. He was so glad to find it intact he nearly licked it back.

"Please. Hurry."

"Apartment 401, three targets, one incapacitated, three weapons, one lethal," Finch recited. He tested his wobbling legs as the van door slid open. Crossing the dusty floor of the arcade looked like crossing the Gobi desert.

"One other thing. You'll have to take the stairs. Elevator's out."

Finch was hardly even surprised. He stuck the Gnasher in his waistband and started to hobble.

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Half the city away, Severyn wished, for the first time, that he'd had his cars equipped with seatbelts instead of only impact foam. Trying to stay seated while the limousine slewed corners and caromed down alleyways was impossible. He was thrown from one side to the other with every jolting turn. His kidnapper had finally cleared the windows and he saw, in familiar flashes, grimy red Southside brick and corrugated steel. The decades hadn't changed it much, except now the blue-green blooms of graffiti were animated.

"Pier's just up ahead. I told my guy there's been a change of plans." Girasol's voice was strained to breaking. Too many places at once, Severyn suspected.

"How long before the ones you're with know what's going on?" he asked, bracing himself against the back window to peer at their pursuers. One Priest was driving manually, and wildly. He was hunched over the steering wheel, trying to conflate what he'd learned in virtual racing sims with reality. His partner in the passenger's seat was hanging out the window with some sort of recoilless rifle, trying to aim.

"A few minutes, max."

A dull crack spiderwebbed the glass a micrometer from Severyn's left eyeball. He snapped his head back as a full barrage followed—smashing like a hailstorm into the reinforced window. By the time they burst from the final alley, aligned for a dead sprint toward the hazard-sign-decorated pier, the limousine's rear was riddled with bullet holes. Up ahead, Severyn could make out the shape of a hydrofoil sliding out into the oil-slick water. The technician had lost his nerve.

"He's pulling away," Severyn snapped, ducking instinctively as another round raked across the back of the car with a sound of crunching metal.

"Told him to. You're going to have to swim for it."

Severyn's stomach churned. "I don't swim."

"You don't swim? You were All-State."

"Blake was." Severyn pried off his Armani loafers, peeled off his jacket, as the limousine rattled over the metal crosshatch of the pier. "I never learned."

"Just trust the muscle memory." Girasol's voice was taut and pleading. "He knows what to do. Just let him. Let his body."

They skidded to a halt at the lip of the pier. Severyn put his hand on the door and found it blinking blue, unlocked at last.

"If you can tell him things." She sounded ragged now. Exhausted. "Tell him I love him. If you can."

Severyn considered lying for a moment. A final push to solidify his position. “It doesn’t work that way,” he said instead, and hauled the door open as the Priests screeched to a stop behind him. He vaulted out of the limo, assaulted by unconditioned air, night wind, the smell of brine and oiled machinery.

Severyn sucked his lungs full and ran full-bore, feeling a hurricane of adrenaline that no puppetshow or whorehouse could have coaxed from his glands. His bare feet pounded the cold pier, shouts came from behind him, and then he hurled himself into the grimy water. An ancient panic shot through him as ice flooded his ears, his eyes, his nose. He felt his muscles seize. He remembered, in a swath of old memory code, that he’d nearly drowned in Michigan once.

Then nerve pathways that he’d never carved for himself fired, and he found himself cutting up to the surface. His head broke the water; he twisted and saw the gaggle of Priests at the edge of the water, Fawkes masks grinning at him even as they cursed and reloaded the rifle. Severyn grinned back, then pulled away with muscles moving in perfect synch, cupped hands biting the water with every stroke.

The slap of his body on the icy surface, the tug of his breath, the water in his ears—alive, alive, alive. The whine of a bullet never came. Severyn slopped over the side of the hydrofoil a moment later. Spread-eagled on the slick deck, chest working like a bellows, he started to laugh.

“That was some dramatic shit,” came a voice from above him.

Severyn squinted up and saw the technician, a twitchy-looking man with gray whiskers and extra neural ports in his shaved skull. There was a tranq gun in his hand.

“There’s been a change of plans,” Severyn coughed. “Regarding the extraction.”

The technician nodded, leveling the tranq. “Girasol told me you’d say that. Said you’re a world-class bullshit artist. I’d expect no less from Severyn fucking Grimes.”

Severyn’s mouth fished open and shut. Then he started to laugh again, a long gurgling laugh, until the tranq stamped through his wet skin and sent him to sleep.

\* \* \*

Girasol saw hot white sparks when they ripped her out of the orthochair and realized it was sheer luck they hadn’t shut off her brain stem. You didn’t tear someone out of a deep slice. Not after two hits of high-grade Dozr. She hoped, dimly, that she wasn’t going to go blind in a few days’ time.

“You bitch.” Pierce’s breath was scalding her face. He must have taken off his mask. “You *bitch*. Why? Why would you do that?”

Girasol found it hard to piece the words together. She was still out of body, still imagining a swerving limousine and marauding cell signals and electric sheets of code. Her hand blurred into view, and she saw her veins were taut and navy blue. She’d stretched herself thinner than she’d ever done before, but she hadn’t managed to stop the skype from the end of the pier. And now Pierce knew what had happened.

“Why did you help him get away?”

The question came with a knee pushed into her chest, under her ribs. Girasol thought she felt her lungs collapse in on themselves. Her head was coming clear. She’d been a god only moments ago, gliding through circuitry and sound waves, but now she was small, and drained, and crushed against the stained linoleum flooring.

“I’m going to cut your eyeballs out,” Pierce was deciding. “I’m going to do them slow. You traitor. You puppet.”

Girasol remembered her last flash from the limousine’s external cams: Blake diving into the dirty harbor with perfect form, even if Grimes didn’t know it. She was sure he’d make it to the hydrofoil. It was barely a hundred meters. She held onto the novocaine thought as Pierce’s knife snicked and locked.

“What did he promise you? Money?”

"Fuck off," Girasol choked.

Pierce was straddling her now, the weight of him bruising her pelvis. She felt his hands scrabbling at her zipper. The knife tracing along her thigh. An old panic kicked at her.

"Oh," she said. "You want that kiss now?"

His backhand smashed across her face, and she tasted copper. Girasol closed her eyes tight. She thought of the hydrofoil slicing through the bay. The technician leaning over Blake's prone body with his instruments, pulling the parasite up and away, reawakening a brain two years dormant. She'd left him messages. Hundreds of them. Just in case.

"Did he promise to fuck you?" Pierce snarled, finally sliding her pants down her bony hips. "Was that it?"

The door chimed. Pierce froze, and in her peripheral Girasol could see the other Priests' heads turning toward the entryway. Nobody ever used the chime. Girasol wondered how Grimes's bodyguard could possibly be so stupid, then noticed that a neat row of splintery holes had appeared all across the breadth of the door.

Pierce put his hand up to his head, where a bullet had clipped the top of his scalp, carving a furrow of matted hair and stringy flesh. It came away bright red. He stared down at Girasol, angry, confused, and the next slug blew his skull open like a shattering vase.

Girasol watched numbly as the bodyguard let himself inside. His fiery hair was slick with sweat and his face was drawn pale, but he moved around the room with practiced efficiency, putting two more bullets into each of the injured Priests before collapsing to the floor himself. He tucked his hands under his head and exhaled.

"One hundred and twelve," he said. "I counted."

Girasol wriggled out from under Pierce and vomited. Wiped her mouth. "Repair-man's in tomorrow." She stared down at the intact side of Pierce's face.

"Where's Mr. Grimes?"

"Nearly docking by now. But he's not in a body." Girasol pushed damp hair out of her face. "He's been extracted. His storage cone is safe. Sealed. That was our deal."

The bodyguard was studying her intently, red brows knitted. "Let's get going, then." He picked his handgun up off the floor. "Gray eyes," he remarked. "Those contacts?"

"Yeah," Girasol said. "Contacts." She leaned over to give Pierce a bloody peck on the cheek, then got shakily to her feet and led the way out the door.

\* \* \*

Severyn Grimes woke up feeling rested. His last memory was laughing on the deck of a getaway boat, but the soft cocoon of sheets made him suspect he'd since been moved. Something else had changed, too. His proprioception was sending an avalanche of small error reports. Limbs no longer the correct length. New body proportions. By the feel of it, he was in something artificial.

"Mr. Grimes?"

"Finch." Severyn tried to grimace at the tinny sound of his voice, but the facial myomers were relatively fixed. "The *mise à jour*, please."

Finch's craggy features loomed above him, blank and professional as ever. "Girasol Fletcher had you extracted from her son's body. After we met her technician, I transported your storage cone here to Lumen Technohospital for diagnostics. Your personality and memories came through completely intact and they stowed you in an interim avatar to speak with your lawyers. Of which there's a horde, sir. Waiting in the lobby."

"Police involvement?" Severyn asked, trying for a lower register.

"There are a few Priests in custody, sir," Finch said. "Girasol Fletcher and her son

are long gone. CPD requested access to the enzyme trackers in Blake's body. It looks like she hasn't found a way to shut them off yet. Could triangulate and maybe find them if it happens in the next few hours."

Severyn blinked, and his eyelashes scraped his cheeks. He tried to frown. "What the fuck am I wearing, Finch?"

"The order was put in for a standard male android." Finch shrugged. "But there was an electronic error."

"Pleasure doll?" Severyn guessed. Electronic error seemed unlikely.

His bodyguard nodded stonily. "You can be uploaded in a fresh volunteer within twenty-four hours," he said. "They've done up a list of candidates. I can link it."

Severyn shook his head. "Don't bother," he said. "I think I want something clone-grown. See my own face in the mirror again."

"And the trackers?"

Severyn thought of Blake and Girasol tearing across the map, heading somewhere sun-drenched where their money could stretch and their faces couldn't be plucked off the news feeds. She would do small-time hackwork. Maybe he would start to swim again.

"Shut them off from our end," Severyn said. "I want a bit of a challenge when I hunt that bitch down and have her uploaded to a waste disposal."

"Will do, Mr. Grimes."

But Finch left with a ghost of a smile on his face, and Severyn suspected his employee knew he was lying.

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"One aspect of *Asimov's* that I'd like to praise is their sponsorship of the Dell Award for Best Short Story by a College Student. Being named a runner-up for the award in 2013, and winning it the following year, helped put me on my way to a career in writing SF. When I attended the ceremony in Orlando, Florida, Rick Wilber and Sheila Williams introduced me to an absolute deluge of writers and editors. It was my first experience with the speculative fiction community at large, giving me the chance to put faces to names I had seen online or in print. I connected with several established professionals in the field, one of whom later helped me get an agent for my novel. I highly recommend attending the International Conference on the Fantastic if you're ever a finalist for the award. You'll get beautiful weather, a positive atmosphere, and the opportunity to make genuine connections with other people who love the genre. There will be too many names to keep straight, but that's a good reason to come back the following year. And the one after that."

—Rich Larson