

EXCEPTIONAL FORCES

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EXCEPTIONAL FORCES

I knew I would die the night before the conference started. Conferences are where people network, gossip, discuss ideas, draw diagrams on the backs of beer coasters, and exchange gigabytes of data on USB sticks. Conferences are security nightmares, but conferences of scientists push the idea of nightmares to new extremes.

The hotel's restaurant was empty as I entered, so I had the undivided attention of the staff when I ordered dinner. While I waited for the meal, I read through my paper on my iPad. It was forty minutes long, written in clear, accessible English, and guaranteed to plunge the world into terror.

* * *

"Hi there, mind if I join you?"

I looked up at the woman.

Sophisticated, tastefully dressed, thirties, I thought. *Professional, successful, travels a lot, and married.*

"Please, sit down," I said, trying to sound affable yet not eager. "You are, of course, a journalist?"

Her composure remains flawless. Worst fears confirmed.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

"You are outgoing, you dress well but not to intimidate, a large astronomy conference starts here tomorrow, and I look like a scruffy scientist who would love to be interviewed by a beautiful woman."

Her smile remained, but she hesitated.

I'm being a little confrontational, but it no longer matters.

"Leone Barker," she finally said, holding out her hand.

I must ask about her first, put her on the back foot.

"Vladimir Kubarov," I said, shaking her hand over the table. "You can also put professor and doctor in front of that if you like. So, why are you in Boston?"

She focused on me all the more tightly.

"Just a contract to sort out. And you? You have a Russian name but your English is great, so I'd say you're an astronomer who does a lot of international conferences."

Northeast coast American accent, but sort out? Either she spends a lot of time in Britain, or she is a British actress.

"Yes, that is so."

"And you're a professor? I bet you're important."

Trying to get me talking about myself. Her persona is limited, like the booster stage of a rocket. It will be discarded later tonight.

"Yes and no," I replied. "I am here to give a paper on junk."

"Junk? In astronomy? I thought astronomy was all about satellites and telescopes that cost billions."

"Not always, but should you not be recording this if you want to interview me?"

She laughed, then reached over and squeezed my hand.

"Sorry, I should have said earlier. I'm not a journalist. I just don't like having dinner by myself. Best to hook up with someone who looks nice before some creep tries to move in on me because I'm alone."

"Ah, very sensible. I am flattered."

I was also surprised. I had been expecting a broad-shouldered young man in a moderately expensive suit who would tell me to cooperate because a concealed handgun was trained on my forehead.

"So, how does junk get used in astronomy?" Leone asked, sounding genuinely interested.

"Some people would not call it junk. After the Soviet Union collapsed there was a lot of military equipment in service with not much to do. Radar dishes, communications satellites, that sort of thing. Most of my colleagues ran off to make money, so I was left in charge of lots of expensive toys. I was young, clever, and ambitious, so I abused my authority."

"You mean you sold all that gear to foreign astronomers?"

There was a coy tap against my calf. I gave her the best smile I could manage.

So, this is how I am to be removed from a public place without any fuss or violence. Pleasant.

"Ah, so perhaps you think I am now rich and exciting, and in the Russian mafia. No, I networked all that equipment together by forging work orders, and built an interferometer the size of Siberia. I ran it for three months and was never caught."

She pouted, and made a show of looking puzzled.

"What's an interferometer?"

No um or er. She already knows what an interferometer is.

"Think radio telescope, but as big as a continent."

"Hey, that's seriously impressive. So what did you do with it? I suppose if you picked up alien radio shows you would have announced it back then."

"I did a broad spectrum, wide area survey of the galaxies in the local cluster."

She gave me a blank stare without looking puzzled.

Good enough to fool a drunk at a cocktail party, but not a socialized savant like me.

"Er, was that in Russian?" she asked.

"In simpler words, I was like Galileo pointing his new telescope at Jupiter, four hundred years ago. I did not know what I would find."

"Well, what *did* you discover?"

"In 1993? Nothing, but I have been processing and analyzing the data ever since."

"For twenty years? Man, that's patience."

"Patience is part of being Russian. Finally I have some results, and they are very exciting."

"Tell me."

I wagged my finger and grinned.

"Ah no, not until I have given my paper tomorrow. What about you and your contract? Is it a software contract, or are you contracted to kill someone?"

She gave a little start, then laughed aloud.

Good at spontaneous laughter. Too good.

"Nothing so boring or dramatic. I'm a design consultant, and I visit big companies to tell them why their websites and Facebook pages are crap."

"You must travel a lot."

Again, there was a little flinch and hesitation.

She is one very large lioness, but I am a highly alert gazelle.

"What makes you say that?"

There was a slight edge on her voice now.

She is definitely off-balance. Time to put her at ease.

"There are so many crap websites."

She laughed rather louder than my joke deserved, and again her foot pressed against my leg. This time she let the pressure linger. Our meals arrived, and we continued to chat while we ate. Whenever I moved my leg her foot followed, but that was all.

I am expected to make the next move. Death is definitely standing nearby, but he will have to be patient.

"Hotels like this are such exciting places," I said. "There are lots of people here alone, with classy restaurants and bars downstairs, and private rooms with nice, comfortable beds upstairs."

"Just the place for a discreet adventure," said Leone.

"I am sure more adventures happen to people in hotels than to hobbits in Middle Earth."

She put a hand over her mouth, giggled, and rubbed my calf with her calf.

"My feet are not hairy, but I like adventures," she said with her fingers still over her lips.

"I notice the presence of a wedding ring."

"My husband is a wonderful man," she said as she scanned the restaurant, which was still nearly empty.

"But he is not here?"

"Can't say I see him."

* * *

We did not go to Leone's room together. She left before me, paid, and went to the elevators. I checked emails while I let five minutes pass, then made my way to the room number she had given me. She opened the door at the first tap, and checked the corridor outside as I entered. I crossed the room and sat in an armchair.

"I believe I can save us both a lot of trouble by getting straight down to business," I said, holding up a USB data stick.

Leone froze with her back to the door.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said, alert but not alarmed.

I put my iPad and the data stick on the coffee table.

"That data stick contains my 1993 observation data sets, analysis files, and the paper about what I found in the Andromeda galaxy."

"Is something the matter?" Leone asked.

I folded my arms and shrugged.

"You are going to kill me, but that is no problem."

"What?" she exclaimed, putting on a very credible show of surprise.

"A woman as beautiful as you who dresses so tastefully does not seduce a Russian astronomer of my age in a two hundred dollar suit. You just wanted me in this room, not its bed. You may take out your gun if you like."

She finally moved away from the door, sauntered across to the bed and sat down.

"I've heard a lot of lines from a lot of men, but you keep surprising me."

"I am in your room, and nobody else knows I am here. By morning, my body will be in an unmarked truck on the way to some industrial incinerator. You are an assassin, and a real *klassnyy*. I am flattered that they used you."

"What do you mean?"

"*Klassnyy* is Russian slang for a very classy person, there is no English word quite like it."

"I mean about me being an assassin. That's nonsense."

"When I made a joke about you being a contract killer, your eyes widened for a moment and your hand jerked back toward your body. You have a concealed gun, probably quite small."

She finally shrugged, then took out her iPhone and pointed the hole for the ear-phone jack at me. She held it in both hands and aimed it at my forehead.

This is highly confrontational. What does one say to Death? Does it matter?

"It fires a 3 mm bullet, and I never miss," she said. "Happy now?"

"About dying? No, but it is nice to have everything in the open. Do you know why you are killing me?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

"I mean why I must die."

"No. Someone else would be sent after me if I did."

"But I want you to know."

This is not victim talk, and she is finding it a strain to seem cocky.

"What's your agenda?" she asked.

"Your employers think I have a dead-hand switch in some computer, and that unless I reset it every so often, my secret will get spammed everywhere. You will threaten to torture me unless I tell you where the switch is."

I am in her power, yet I am ahead of her. She is not happy about that.

"Go on," she prompted.

"What about a little game? We exchange secrets for as long as it takes to do seduction things, then I tell you where to find my dead-hand program. After that, feel free to shoot me."

"Why the game?"

"You are going to kill me, so you are a very important person in my life—what is left of it, anyway. I would also like you to know what I have discovered. I am rather proud of it, and this is my last chance to tell someone. Nobody else will ever know that you know."

"I may not want to play your game."

I held up another data stick.

"Semtex, detonator, arming switch, and release trigger," I explained. "If I let go, bang! I do not like the idea of torture, and I am sure you do not want to be splattered with my body parts, so let us be reasonable."

Very slowly, Leone lowered her weapon.

"Okay Vlad, let's hear your first secret."

* * *

"I detected carrier wave background noise in the Andromeda galaxy."

Now her blank stare is genuine.

"Let's try that again, this time in English."

"Evidence of alien radio transmissions."

"Wow!" she exclaimed, but now the excitement was feigned. "You mean you really heard aliens talking?"

"No. One would need an interferometer the size of the Solar System to detect individual radio signals across two and a half million light years. I could not play so big, so I played smart."

"Smart as in what?"

"It is not so easy to explain, so please concentrate. If you point a radio telescope at Earth from Mars, you could hear lots of signals."

"Like crap free-to-air television?"

"Yes. Now move your radio telescope to another galaxy. The distance is too much, so you hear nothing."

"So what did you hear?"

"Think of a galaxy jammed solid with Earth-like planets, all with identical civilizations. All those planets together would have identical radio chatter. Together, that background can just—only just—be detected by what I networked in 1993."

Her expression hardened.

She does not want to be impressed. Politicians on funding committees get that look, and I know it well.

"That's just technobabble," she said, pointing her weapon at me again. "If I want science fiction I can watch SyFy Channel."

"I did not ask you to believe me, just to listen," I said. "Now tell me your secret. We have an agreement, remember?"

"What secret?"

"Any secret. It is your turn, and it is quite safe. You will kill me soon, so I cannot repeat whatever you say."

* * *

"My husband is impotent. It was a botched operation for a misdiagnosed prostate condition. I still want a sex life, so I only screw people I'm about to kill."

A highly intimate secret, the sort that would only be whispered to the dead or dying, so probably true.

"You started with the prostate specialist."

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged.

Spontaneous reaction. So, it was a real secret.

"How—I mean . . . Who told you that?" she demanded.

"You spoke the words *botched* and *misdiagnosed* with particular venom. I am good at picking up nuances."

She stared at me intently. It was not a glare of hate, but the stare of a master chess player who realizes that her opponent is more than a talented amateur.

Surprise, mixed with intense concentration. Splendid.

"Your turn," she said.

* * *

"From my 1993 data, I calculated that there are three hundred billion Earth-type worlds in the Andromeda galaxy, all at the same level of technological progress. Think of Earth in perhaps five hundred years. With the carrying capacity of each planet maximized at about ten billion aliens, you get a total population of three

thousand billion billion. That is enough aliens to cause public panic on Earth, do you not think so?"

She did not seem shocked.

Perhaps the sheer scale of the figures is beyond her, or perhaps she now has herself under better control.

"What's all the fuss about? Isn't two and a half million light years a pretty safe distance?"

"The radio noise I detected took two and a half million years to get here. The aliens may be traveling just behind those radio waves. They could arrive tomorrow."

"Okay, I suppose that's going to hit the public's panic button."

"But not yours."

"I'm not the public."

"That is quite obvious. Next secret, please?"

* * *

"I have killed a hundred and fifteen men and seven women. I seduced all of them first."

"I imagine that some were very unpleasant people. You must have a strong stomach."

"If I don't like the target, I refuse the job. I got my standards."

"So you like me. I am flattered."

"But you worked me out. Tonight will have to be just the killing."

"Understandable. My apologies for being a little ahead of you."

The muted lighting of a room meant to host a seduction is good for casting shadows, especially those of the muscles in a face.

She is angry, her shadows say it all.

"Tell me another of your boring secrets," she muttered.

* * *

"The Andromeda galaxy is full. *Every* Earth-type planet has been colonized. From what I calculate, every other suitable rocky planet has been terraformed and moved into an orbit that supports liquid water and the carbon life cycle. Living on those planets are aliens with identical cultures and technology. Andromeda is one titanic monoculture, a bland suburb two hundred and twenty thousand light years across. That means aliens with needs like ours and an expansion culture. Think about it: total stability, total conformity, built-in expansion, and no empty planets left."

These figures seemed to impress Leone, because she frowned a little, then nodded.

She is an intelligent specialist who can grasp big concepts on first hearing. Impressive. They sent someone smart, presumably because I am smart.

"Meaning the Andromedans are looking for new real estate?" she asked.

"Meaning that they were looking for new real estate two and a half million years ago, when our ancestors were dodging saber tooth tigers and worrying about where their next banana was coming from. Remember my previous secret? *They* may not be far behind the radio signals that I detected."

"But surely they would have developed faster-than-light spaceships by now?"

"Only on *Star Trek*. Nothing travels faster than light, but if they can go nearly as fast, they may be nearly here."

She lowered her phone gun, and her cocky smile returned.

She is amused. This is unexpected.

"I suppose that's the sort of secret presidents and prime ministers don't want made public," she conceded.

"Secret people have the real power, they run the world. The power people, that is my name for them."

"That's crazy. Politicians run the world."

"I detected intelligent life in the Andromeda galaxy. Do you think I cannot detect stupidity on Earth? I looked at the power structures, and I saw power being exercised by people who do not seem to exist. The people who hired you were the CIA, but the people who gave the order do not live in the White House."

"Now I'm not in the mood," she admitted. "Someone owes you his life."

"Ah, so you were planning to visit the bar after dealing with me, to select someone at random for sex and death?"

She gasped, lips parted.

The lioness has realized that the gazelle she was stalking is really a tyrannosaurus.

"You can't be married," she replied. "No partner could cope with a mind as sharp as yours."

"True, for better or worse."

"I think it's my turn."

"Indeed it is."

* * *

"I had my first climax when I screwed the specialist. I only ever have them when in bed with a target."

That was meant to shock. What does it feel like to be shocked? She probably expects a reaction.

"That was ten years ago, and your husband is twenty years older than you."

Her muscle vanished, and the barrel of her phone gun came up to point between my eyes.

"How do you know that?" she snapped.

"Know what?"

"Those figures are so close to the truth, it's not funny. You knew about me in advance, didn't you?"

"Not at all. Assassinations are a sexual ceremony for you, this is obvious from what you have told me. Sexual ceremonies are often performed monthly. Fact. Ten dozen killings at one per month equals ten years. Prostate problems surface from the mid-forties onward. You are in your mid-thirties, so I would say you married your husband at about twenty-five. Given the age difference, there must have been a good business case, that is the term, yes? I think he was a rich criminal and you were an exotic dancer with expensive tastes. He later married you on the condition that you boast about how good he is in bed. Bad look for a big-time hit man, not being able to get it up."

Some muscles in her face relaxed as I spoke, and her alert but confident posture sagged slightly.

"So you just guessed," she said with feigned relief.

Sweat glistening on her forehead. She is finding me quite a handful.

"My guesses had an education. You were an actress, British, good at accents, in Los Angeles to get into movies. There was too much competition, and you got tired of cheap apartments and cat food for dinner, so you started dancing in bars and performing additional services for men who were not very nice. Your attitude to sex developed there, yes?"

For the first time since we entered the room, she stared into space.

"Vlad, have you any idea how provoking it is to talk to you?" she asked.

"People sometimes beat me up instead of just saying it like that."

"What do you think of me now? All that glam turning to sleaze?"

"I am about to die. What I think is not important."

"Why am I telling you all this?" she suddenly shouted, her face contorting into something like a fancy dress mask.

“People need to confess their secrets when the burden becomes too great. I am about to die, so I am a safe listener and you are confessing. You will feel better for getting it off your chest. You may even remember me fondly.”

“I guess that puts me in my place. Why are you telling me *your* secrets?”

“So they will outlive me.”

“Vlad, you should have been an assassin. What you’re doing to me is what I do to targets: seeing through them, staying way ahead of them.”

“But I am not going to kill you.”

“I appreciate that. Your turn, Professor.”

* * *

“The Andromeda civilization is absolutely stable, it does nothing but expand. No progress, no invention, no development, just sub-light-speed starships and terraforming technology. Other intelligences and civilizations get swamped and obliterated. Extrapolating backward to a single planet of origin, I estimate it took five million years to fill their galaxy. I think their technology stalled only a few hundred years ahead of ours, because they are still using radios.”

She did not reply at once, but drew her legs up onto the bed, put her phone gun down, and tapped her fingertips against her temples.

This is not a sexy look, it is what eccentric scientists do when staring at computer screens full of data that does not make sense. I am seeing a side of her reserved for locked rooms.

“Why is this a secret?” she asked. “Like, if these power people exist, why did they hire me to kill you and keep it quiet?”

“Because humanity is going the same way as the Andromedans, and I am being killed to make sure that we do. Your turn.”

“No, no, explain yourself. The folks who hired me were . . .”

She caught herself, but I knew what she had nearly said.

“So ordinary? True. Ordinary, normal people run the world. They talk about *good outcomes*, say they are *excited* about projects, they look for *leverage*, and they like to *progress issues*. My death will be announced as *signoff* on having me *functionally stabilized*, and they probably refer to you as a *bleach asset* because you *sanitize issues*. All of human progress is dedicated to giving the power people tighter control over the rest of us. When science gives them immortality, science will be shut down. Creatures like that run Andromeda, too. Next secret?”

* * *

“My husband thinks I can cope without sex.”

“Lie,” I said at once.

“What do you mean, lie?”

“He knows what you do with your victims. You enjoy the thrill of infidelity. He gets a thrill from seeing a functional man killed after doing what he cannot.”

“You don’t let me get away with anything, do you?” she said, raising her voice and snatching up her phone gun.

“I am betting that assassinations have replaced sex for you two.”

“You’re good.”

She hugged her knees, resting her chin on them. Several minutes passed in complete silence.

Now it is my turn to be uneasy, but best to say nothing.

“What are you?” she said finally. “And don’t say professor of astronomy. You’re not a psychopath, a sociopath, or Asperger’s; I’ve done contracts on lots of those and they’re nothing like you. You’re fast on pickup and have observation skills that would make Sherlock Holmes run screaming, yet you’re good with people. What’s your IQ?”

“It cannot be measured properly. I get everything on the tests right.”

"Who has all that? *What* has all that?"

"The term is socialized savant," I replied.

"Savants? As in people who are crazy but calculate faster than computers?"

"Exceptional mental abilities but impaired social skills? Yes, this is the commonest type of savant."

"But you're so . . . well, normal is the wrong word, but your manners are fine, and you have a sort of kooky charm. Like, you might not be first choice for a gal in a nightclub, but you would definitely be on her list."

"A very small number of savants have the exceptional abilities, but can also pass for normal, more or less."

"Normal, more or less. Yeah, that's you."

"We have problems, of course."

"Problems?"

"I see the world in slow motion, I live my life being impatient with everyone. The Andromeda data was the only problem that ever really stretched me. I was alone against an entire galaxy. I had no team, I used hijacked equipment and computers, I had no funding, yet I finally filtered the evidence out of the background noise. Everything else in my life has been too easy. I feel like an adult among children, in a world where there are no other adults."

"So I'm a child too?"

The muscles of her face say something a little less extreme than anger. Annoyance, perhaps.

"A bright and charming child."

People don't have to feign annoyance very often, so they are not good at doing it. That is why genuine annoyance is easy to spot. I held up my USB bomb and clicked the safety switch.

"There, it will not explode now. Time for me to die."

Her lips parted slightly and her eyes widened. The reaction was fleeting, but too quick to be an act.

I am no longer just a target to her, yet I am still resigned to being a target. Unexpected. I do not like to be wrong. Annoying.

"But it's your turn to tell a secret," she protested.

"I have no more secrets, and there is no deadhand program. It is quite safe to kill me."

She raised her weapon, but the muscles of her face said that she was under stress. Seconds dragged past.

What comes next? It keeps not coming. This suspense is killing me. Are you listening, Death? That was a joke.

"Should I move somewhere where the exit wound will not make too much mess?" I asked.

"My phone fires a timed percussion bullet that detonates a moment after it penetrates the skull. Tiny explosion, no mess, but brain scrambled."

"So I will not feel a thing?"

"Nobody's ever complained."

"Then shoot."

"I gave you two secrets, so you still owe me two."

"We are finished with the secrets game."

"Your turn!" she insisted.

* * *

"I was not going to reveal anything about Andromeda at the conference. If nobody had tried to kill me, I have a very boring backup paper about the way magnetic fields affect interstellar gas clouds."

Leone thought about this carefully, taking her eyes off me and staring down at the coffee table where so many secrets lay locked in my USB stick.

The assassin has taken her eyes off the target. She is no longer an assassin. The game has gone somewhere unexpected. Where is Death? Probably wandered off to the bar for a drink.

“Why?” she asked.

“After this conference was booked I thought it through, and asked myself *why distress people?* When the Andromedans arrive, they will wipe us out in hours, maybe minutes. Why make generations of people live in fear when the end may be a thousand years away, and be mercifully quick?”

“A thousand?” she exclaimed. “If the Andromedans don’t arrive for a thousand years, we’ll be ahead of them by then. Our idea of a warship was a couple of dozen Vikings in a rowboat a thousand years ago, but now we have nuclear aircraft carriers. If what you say is true, Andromedan science is stagnant, and has been stagnant for five million years. We can catch up, then leave them way behind.”

Impressive. For someone who lives for homicide, infidelity, and high fashion, this is a radical change in outlook. She is suddenly eager, rather than suave. If I die without finding out why, I shall be very annoyed.

“No chance,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Will my answer count as a secret?”

“Okay.”

* * *

“If humanity is left alone, we will become exactly like the Andromedans.”

“No way!” she exclaimed at once. “You can’t know that.”

Her eyes are blazing with anger and her phone is again pointing at my forehead. She is a fighter and talk of defeat offends her.

I sat back and shrugged.

“If you do not like my answer, you can shoot me.”

“Everything you’re telling me could be a pile of crap. You could be my contract because you . . . you stole a load of cocaine, not all this bullshit about aliens from Andromeda. You’re trying to trick me into letting you live.”

“If you did that, your employers would send others, and they would kill both of us. Best to shoot me now. I like you, you are interesting, not one of the herd. I do not want you to die.”

“You’re saying that humans will become just a huge ant colony.”

“Suburb—but same thing.”

“It can’t happen. We build rockets and computers. Humans are all about progress.”

“So were the Andromedans—once.”

She flung her phone gun down on the bed, then pressed her hands against her ears as she rocked back and forth.

Not coping. She loves adventure, and death means no more adventures. Death while fighting is the only death she can accept.

“What did the power people say to you?” she asked, her voice more of an angry hiss than a whisper. “Like, the people who hired me.”

“I finished my research a few months ago, and decided to tell the world about my findings. All my letters and emails to the authorities vanished, unacknowledged. I tried telling my colleagues, but those emails vanished too. When the people that I spoke to directly began to vanish, I knew that I was a very large blip on someone’s radar. Finally I was abducted and taken to a room with mirrors for walls. The men and women on the other side of those mirrors warned me to shut up, then offered me billions of dollars to build more advanced alien detectors.”

"But surely that's good."

"Rubbish. The power people think the Andromedans have a good business model, and that we have plenty of time to fill our own galaxy with humans watching cable television, voting status quo and doing lots of consuming. As long as the economy expands, power people stay in power."

"I think I know what you told them."

"I said no."

"Brave of you."

"The power people want things to stay the same, because change puts new types of people in power. Perhaps science has already made them immortal, so they hope to be in charge forever and do not want things disrupted. I can cause disruption, so I must be killed. Are we finished?"

She sagged as if someone had texted her with very bad news.

"Pathetic, aren't we?" she said, shaking her head. "I waste my life on weird sex, and you can't be bothered saving the galaxy."

I think I have just been insulted. Do I deserve it?

"At least you have had one hundred and twenty-two successes," I replied. "The odds against me succeeding are followed by twenty zeros."

"No, I mean it. People like me are all style and sophistication, we have power and money, but all we're really doing is trying to impress each other. Then there are the geeks that invent phones, computers, television, airlines, and cancer cures. They're not much fun on a date, I know, I've offed quite a few. Still, no geeks, no glam lifestyle. Living in a cave and wondering if mammoth is for dinner runs a pretty poor second to five star hotels, limos, and restaurants with nothing under a hundred dollars. It's weird, and it probably sounds sick, but right now I'd give anything to be like you."

I felt strangely elated. I had made an impression.

Against all odds, a spark just might burn on after I am gone. If not, there is a good chance that more sparks will flare up in the future. They are good thoughts to die with.

"I did not mean to upset you," I said, and I meant it. "I just wanted someone interesting to talk to in my last moments. You exceeded my expectations."

"And you annoyed me," she said, but she was smiling.

I laughed. For me this is very rare.

"You are meant to kill me, so it is good for you to be annoyed."

She nodded.

"It's late. Time to earn my fee."

She picked up her phone and tapped out a text with her thumb. I waited quietly as she stood—but then she went to the bathroom.

Now what? I wondered. *Death must have given up on me.*

"Are there many others like you?" she called.

"I know of five, and I have met two of them."

"Did you get along?"

"There are no rules for people like us interacting, so we do it badly."

"But you people are super-bright. You could work something out and start changing the world."

"If we ever did, I am sure that people like you would be sent to kill us. Too much of a threat to *business as usual, bad outcome*, you know the sorts of words used by people on boards and steering committees."

Leone emerged with a large, fluffy towel. She had freshened her makeup, but the expression beneath had changed. The intense focus on me had gone; it was almost as if I had ceased to exist for her. There were three taps at the door, followed by a pause, then two taps.

"That's my cleanup crew," she said.

“Make it quick.”

Someone slid a card into the door’s electronic lock. The door clacked open, and a man in some delivery company’s uniform strode in. He did not even notice me sitting there, alive, before the sharp pop that placed a small hole at the center of his forehead. His entire head bulged for a moment—the sound was like that of a melon being dropped. He fell forward, blood streaming from his nose, eyes, mouth, and ears, but Leone deftly dropped the towel in place before he hit the floor. The door clacked shut behind him.

“Allow me to introduce my husband,” she said.

I fought an urge to dash for the bathroom and throw up. I lost. When I returned, I gestured to the body, whose head resembled a yellowish-red jellyfish.

“Why?” I asked, my voice hoarse from retching.

“We need a body to show people.”

“Still, I do not understand.”

“Vlad darling, you need a really good PA. I’ve just accepted the job.”

* * *

Movie assassinations are easy to clean up after; the actor just walks off the set to have the artificial blood removed by makeup people. Not so in real life. We had to style the body’s hair to look like mine, then I exchanged clothes with it. Leone cleaned the blood from the head, then cut my hand and smeared my blood where blood was meant to be. It was a profoundly unsettling experience. We left the hotel just before midnight, both dressed as couriers, and wheeling a large sports equipment bag.

“People are slow, but they’re not that slow,” I said as we drove off in a small hire truck. “This will fool nobody.”

“You know what I’ve learned from ten years of contract assassinations? Humans are dead easy to manipulate. Just watch me and learn.”

We stopped at some prearranged place, then a car pulled up. Men in sunglasses and dark suits got out, glanced at the unrecognizable head of the body in the bag in the back seat, took a swab of the blood on the face, then nodded and left. We changed out of our delivery company uniforms before driving on to an industrial incinerator. The operator had been paid to burn a large sports gear bag and not ask questions.

“Professor Vladimir Kubarov has just become a missing person,” said Leone as we drove back to the hotel.

“This makes no sense,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“You are asking the wrong question, Vlad. I can organize, I know how things get done secretly, with no questions asked. Exceptional people like you are going to see a lot more of each other, and the Universe will never be the same again.”

She was not using her persona’s voice, and now she sounded like educated English middle management mixed with East Coast American academic, all soft and understated, nothing to snag the attention.

“Now what?” I asked after three blocks of silence.

“Now we go quiet while we get to work. The odds against us are a joke, but this is good because we don’t want to be taken seriously. Not yet.”

“Can you define what you mean by work?”

“You told me that all Andromedans are normal. *Absolutely* normal. They all have normal abilities and always do what is normal. They probably even cull the bright, the exceptional, and the savants. Humans don’t.”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever, because we won’t let it happen. We have just started a thousand year movement to hit the Andromedans with the one weapon they can’t ever handle: change.”

“Just you and I? A movement?”

"You said there are others like you."

"Five of them. With me, it is six."

"Six super-bright exceptionals are enough to run the world, but there are bound to be more. I bet they're bored. Something as challenging as the threat from Andromeda is sure to interest them."

"You don't understand. They are like me, they rub people the wrong way, have no political influence, don't see the point of being wealthy, and are probably nothing special in bed—not that I have done any research in that matter. Our idea of assassination is going after a cockroach with a spray can."

"I know it doesn't happen very often, Vlad, but it's you who doesn't understand. You changed me tonight. The idea of taking on an entire galaxy really, really does it for me."

"Taking on three thousand billion billion aliens with an iPhone that shoots exploding bullets?"

"Think lateral! I know about style, sex, scandals, killing, secrecy, lying, deviousness, and manipulation. They're all weapons."

"I can be devious. Where has it got me?"

"Hacking computers is not being devious. I do it with people."

"There is only one of you. One is not enough."

"Not for long. I may not be as bright as you socialized savants, but I can teach. I am going to teach you lot to be just like me."

Just like her? That was too much for my imagination. I settled back into the seat and tried to think about nothing in particular for a while. I was definitely pleased that Leone had not killed me, but in a sense, perhaps she had.