

THE WORK OF WOLVES

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As a dog trainer, Tegan has learned again and again that the smarter an animal, the more likely they will come up with creative solutions to problems, often unexpected ones.

I am a good dog.

The scent trails are already as broken by the wind as the apocalyptic neighborhoods they lead through, and smoke from a fire half a mile southeast adds another layer of complexity. Following one trail is like following the roots of a plant wound tight together in the dirt.

No, better: It is like sorting through the fallen trees after this storm. Difficult to tell where one tree begins and the other ends, what belongs to what, and where the different parts are from.

That's a very good *Is Like*. I save it to keep it with my other good ones.

The sector clear, I send the final readings back to Carol via DAT. She's behind me with the field assistant, standing on the hood of a car. I can hear the distant, quiet tick of her DAT receipt.

"Sera," she calls out, "slow down and stay within my visual range."

Carol should hurry and follow me per standard procedure instead of yelling from the hood of a wrecked car. I don't have time to wait for her.

Barometric pressure dropping, I ping back to her DAT. I see her hand touch the receiver in her ear from the corner of my eye as I trace the foundation where a prefabricated house once stood. *Significant enough to indicate further storms approaching*.

"Sera," my DAT says, but I also hear Carol's voice carry over the rubble field of tangled two-by-four framing, shingles peeled from rooftops, tatters of furniture, and twisted textiles. She struggles down from the car into the wreckage. "Stay in range, goddammit. Slow down!"

Carol is now too far away to direct or even accompany my search. I don't need her direction, but the more distance between us, the greater the chance of a missed opportunity. She is slow, perhaps deliberately slow. What does that indicate? Will this also negatively impact the speed at which she acknowledges my alert?

I jump up on an intact retaining wall where I can catch the breeze's fresh edge. From here it's easier to see the destruction for what it was before the storm: broken stumps where dogs might have lifted their legs, sidewalks where bicycles and skateboards *ruckle*-d along, driveways. Here and there a few houses stand, debris piled at their foundations. In a few days those piles will become a haven for rats and mice.

In the distance there are a few humans, non-targets I've already cleared from my

cache. People who lived here, who now pick through the storm's detritus. I want to give them an *Is Like*, but there's no time. I am working. My priority is to do the best job possible.

I turn my nose to the wind.

The cool air that sucks past the moisture in my nostrils is busy with stories, directions, convoluted half-finished conversations. My vision fuzzes out, becomes irrelevant. Sound snaps through here and there, but I am thinking now with my olfactory bulb:

Broken power line burn reaching this way fitfully due to unpredictable wind pattern shifts

Torn sod broken grass wet turned soil chemicals down further raw sewage must be septic systems in some of these prefab units but trapped not seeping yet

Old human-trails anxiety adrenaline panic the lingering scent of cadaver which has been removed not my target

Broken concrete split shredded pine timber sodden plywood soaked furniture batting

Burst of char as the burn kicks up on the wind then turns back in on itself

The detritus of wind distance age broken-down-ness places happenings irrelevant

Girl

North very faint filtered through quite a bit of green sap fresh branches downed trees but

I ping Carol. *Interest. Mark location, north northwest.* I take another deep suck of air through my nose to confirm. *This way.*

"Wait for support." Even over the DAT, Carol sounds out of breath.

I can't wait. I need to do my job. Carol and Devin the field assistant can find me via the DAT's GPS. I must follow this hint of Girl.

Through a hedge and I've already lost the scent, but in a moment a memory of *Girl* passes on the air, and my head turns toward the smell so rapidly it tweaks a muscle in my neck before my body can follow. I am moving as quickly as my nose will allow, every step picked out for me by the scent and what it says I should do.

The world fades to almost nothing, just my nose and the scent and stimulus-response, until a semi looses a roar from twenty meters away and jerks me back into audio/visual.

I have been following cyclone fencing along a housing development's edge. The storm has punched through the fence in places, and beyond the openings, cars on the interstate are slowing to gawk at the damage. The semi honks again, trapped behind the slowdown.

Its bellow makes me think about Mack and the way his hot dark blood stank as it spread against the asphalt. I remember feeling in my skin and muscles that I would very much like to roll in that smell. A dog's instinct. I should not have stopped to look at him when it happened, but I needed confirmation he was dead.

Irrelevant to my current search. I shake my head to clear wind-driven grit from my eyes and turn into the current again, reaching. I ping Carol my location—a reminder only, she knows how to find me—then hunt the wind.

It is still there, but its story is conflicted; the stream of its path, eddies and pools and lines all broken by the weather, a puzzle of color and feel. Perhaps a human with a computer might be able to map parts of the puzzle out. But time and movement have danced and shivered and jolted and coughed these trails out of the human spectrum of sense.

Dogs are better than machines at untangling this kind of mess. But all this broken human detritus, and the storms growing greater and more frequent now year by year, and the endless desire for more perfect work: these things make the job too tricky for a dog's nose. A normal dog's, at least.

This is why I am the solution. It's why I am a good dog, better than Mack was. It's why Carol should do things my way.

Carol's voice carries over the DAT. "Devin and I are a hundred yards out. If the trail crosses the freeway, Sera, do *not* follow. That's an order."

Before I can respond, the wind twists through my nostrils: *Girl*.

That trickle of target scent wraps itself around my olfactory center. My target is my primary objective. I send Carol my heading as I run, an automatic part of my brain remembering fieldwork directives. I am required to communicate relevant information to my handler, but I am only required to follow handler commands within reason. I find very few of my handler commands reasonable today.

Deep in the scent cone now, I hardly see, not thinking with that part of my mind. Scent is brighter than any color in this muted, cloud-heavy weather. It is a viscous, thickened path, easy to follow. I can turn my head now and I don't lose the trail, but feel it pull and contort through time and space. It strengthens this way, grades off in the other, torques around on itself. I know that if it was untwisted it would move differently. I understand how it bent and broke over time. It is all a trick of the wind.

I come to an eddy. A lesser dog—a normal dog, like Mack—would hesitate or lose themselves. I move through the scent-trap and scabble over a broken segment of roof. The trail shimmers on the other side, where the ground is cool and sodden beneath my paw pads.

Five yards further, an oscillation in the wind unfolds back through time and I move with it through a heavy stand of pines, thick with bright acid resin smell. I have my teeth in it, I can feel the track itch behind my

Girl

Indication, I ping. I push beneath a wind-felled pine and its broken-wood smells. Needles brush against my face. *Target scent strong*.

Carol's voice: "Where are you?"

Question irrelevant. She has GPS access.

Twist of track to the left through

Old Girl smell relevant

Other child smells a broad collection of small human life scents in this patch of forest

Broken boards rotting garbage leaf mold

Girl

I step up and over another felled tree rich smell of rot and my ears move on their own because there is human sound close by I push my head deep into the space beneath the tree with the old smells and the deep Girl smell and

Alert

Girl

Target acquired primary objective

Yes

I am a good dog

Target Girl wheezes quietly she says "Help" I breathe her scent deeply

Alert

But will Carol

"Acknowledged," Carol responds. "On our way."

Good yes

I am a good dog

I send Carol my GPS coordinates again to reconfirm even though I can see from the DAT that she is approximately one hundred yards across the rubble field.

"Help me, doggy," target Girl says. Her voice sounds like the wind, soft and leaky. That's a good *Is Like*. The rot-scented tree pins her in a rubble of boards and magazines and a blanket in a dense stand of brush and pines, some distance from the neighborhood. Her one small free hand reaches for my mud-slicked head. "Good doggy," she says. "I'm stuck. Help."

In this dense visual screen it may be difficult for my team to locate me. I back out of the target Girl's location and head toward the forest's edge.

"Doggy," she whispers. "Wait, doggy, no, wait." There's a gurgle to her wheeze, perhaps a punctured lung. Which is why she can't cry for help, at this distance from habitation. She is likely in dire physical danger. Only an EI dog could have found her so quickly.

I trot out of the stand of pines and up onto the nearest high ground—a culvert near the road. I can hear target Girl now, since I am listening for her. "Come back," she sobs. "Doggy, help. Please. Come back."

Her weak voice will be easy for my excellent ears to locate for my team.

Alert, I ping again, though I don't need to. I allow myself a nice wag.

I am a good dog.

* * *

Sound carries strangely in storm-thickened air. From my place in the command tent I can clearly hear the baying voice of some small hound at least a mile away. However, the generator running out behind the team's trucks sounds like it belongs to another time and place, and wind chokes the traffic noise from the freeway. I can still hear the difference between trucks like Carol's and the smaller cars, and the sounds of big semi trucks like the one that hit and killed Mack. I know the sounds of those trucks well.

I lie with my head on my paws so that I look like I am resting and not eavesdropping. Overhead the wind rips at the surface of the command tent roof, which ripples and bucks. It is like there is a giant dog up there, digging and worrying at it, trying to get in.

Not a bad *Is Like*.

Is Like is a game I made up at ESAC. I didn't make it all up myself; my trainer Dacy taught me the beginning. Though what Dacy taught me wasn't quite the same. She taught me that "sit in the training center" *Is Like* "sit in the parking lot" and "find the box with this smell" *Is Like* "find the person with this smell." So Dacy gave me the idea. I made up the part where I keep playing it forever in my head.

The way I play the game, it isn't always about training. It doesn't even have to be about real things. It can just be about thoughts. It keeps my mind busy when Carol leaves me in my crate, or tied to something, like I am now.

"I won't do this anymore," I hear Carol say to Anders, our team leader. She stands with her back to me on the far side of the command tent, well within my hearing range. I can tell she's angry by context and by her elevated blood pressure, but I don't know why. The search was successful and finished quickly. Our team performed well. Since Mack has been dead for almost two months now, the changes I had hoped to see in Carol's behavior have slowly surfaced as she begins to forget how she used to work with Mack and learns, instead, how to work with me. She is a slow student, but there is still progress.

Medics load the target Girl into an ambulance in the parking lot. I hear a trio of vulture drones descending to snatch video of the gurney. The hair on my neck prickles with dislike. I am not afraid of drones. I simply find that they occupy the "uncanny valley." Uncanny valley is a concept that Dacy told me about that means "both too much and not enough like me, and therefore unsettling." Dacy also warned me many humans have the same uncomfortable reaction to EI animals.

I don't know why, when I look exactly like a medium-yellow Labrador retriever. Yellow Labrador retrievers test extremely well with the public. When a Labrador finds a disaster victim, the positive cultural associations the victim has with the breed comforts them. Yellow is the best color, as well, because in dark areas I am easily identifiable. This is information that I learned on Modanet, after Dacy told me about Labrador retrievers when I was a puppy.

However, human reactions to dogs can be unpredictable. For example, the way they treated Mack. He often gave the team physical attention they didn't want. Mack was smart for a normal dog, so I wonder why he chose to ignore their requests. They said things like, "eww, Mack, get your slobbery Kong off of me, you dork," and "mind your own business, you big oaf." Wouldn't the humans on team like him *more* if he complied? He didn't even have the excuse of being a yellow Labrador; he was an overlarge German shepherd with a dark and heavy face. Dark German shepherds don't test nearly as well with the public, so I am not sure why everyone liked him so much.

"I'm done," Carol says. "Retire me, I'm serious. Take me off the roster, Anders. No more searches."

"Carol," Anders says.

"No. I don't want to argue with you about this." She gestures toward me without looking. "This isn't what I spent the last twenty years doing. I don't like this future." "Come on. It's a training problem," he says. "You can teach her to work closer to you."

"That defeats the point of the EI!" Carol tosses her radio onto the folding table. "But you know what, it is a training problem. *She's* training *me* for EI SAR work, and I don't want to do it."

"Excuse me, please," says a man. I look up at him. He stands just outside the tent and smells nicely of spicy food. He holds a camera and wears a press pass around his neck. He calls to my teammates. "Can I get a couple shots of the dog and handler?"

Anders looks at Carol. Carol sighs, steps over a cooler toward me, and unhooks my leash from the folding table's leg. I wag at the journalist to make a good impression.

He looks at me curiously.

"It's Enhanced, isn't it?" he asks. "The dog?"

Carol casts a look over her shoulder to Anders. It's Carol's job to talk about me to the press because she is my handler, but she's never seemed enthusiastic about the job. She's particularly hesitant in this moment. I can feel her desire to cross the command tent and finish her conversation, but Anders is already busy with his tablet and radio. The tension between the two of them is unusual.

"Sera?" says Devin from outside the tent.

The man with the camera, who may have also sensed the tension, looks at Devin with relief. Carol does too. I am good at reading human expressions; it's one of the things they teach at ESAC.

"She's Enhanced Intelligence, yeah," Devin says. "First EI SAR dog in the field in the US. First non-military EI dog doing anything, actually."

The photographer looks confused. "Sar?"

"Sorry. Search-and-Rescue. This is Sera's seventh find already, and she's only been on the team for half a year. Some dogs don't make that record in a lifetime."

The man taps something on his camera and points it at me. Carol kneels beside me in the pose we do for all our pictures and I look at the camera and open my mouth so my tongue shows and I look like the dogs people have at home and they will relate to me. "Search dogs don't find people that often?" the man asks. There's a series of ticks and flashes.

"Well, we train all the time, but we don't deploy that often. Three, four times a year usually. These storms, though." Devin shrugs. "It's been insane. SAR teams in from all over the region. Law enforcement, military, everybody's working the cleanup and rescue ops."

The man nods in a big, knowing gesture. He's ignoring Carol now. "What's the dog's name?"

"Sera. S-E-R-A, for Serendipity. And that's Carol Ramos there, one of the team founders and the best dog handler in the Midwest."

Carol rises from her photo-pose crouch and hooks my leash back to the table. She

says "Nice to meet you," to the man, and turns. My gaze follows hers; Anders has left the command tent.

"Thanks," the man calls as she walks away. Carol raises a hand but doesn't answer.

Devin steps toward me and pats my side. I lean away from the physical contact, but give him a conciliatory wag. He talks with the photographer for a few more minutes, but I am not listening.

Instead I watch Carol find Anders next to his van and continue their discussion—their argument. I strain my hearing, but the stormy sound patterns intrude. Instead I hear wind picking up as the barometric pressure continues to drop, softening the hush-wash growling of the interstate; intruding human voices, high and yelping; the sounds of urban life—traffic, the percussion of comings and goings and doings, dogs and kids and shouts—held at a remove by the perimeter of the storm's destruction. I hear no wildlife. Wild animals don't emerge in weather like this.

The man leaves and Devin drops into Carol's portable chair and puts his feet up on the cooler. He looks at me and smiles. I want to follow Carol, but I am hooked to the table and even though I could drag the table with no trouble or just unhook myself (my teeth and tongue are very dexterous) I know that when someone hooks a leash to something, it's because they want the dog to stay. I stay.

Carol shakes her head at Anders. She gestures in the air with one hand. Anders tries to put his hands on her shoulders, but she uses the gesturing hand to brush him away. She looks out, across the line of parked cars and the staging area and the tented command center, and she looks at me. Anders looks at me too.

I don't know what to do while they are looking at me like that. I am usually good at reading human expressions, but I need context in order to do it with accuracy.

What context do I have? Why are they arguing? The search ended in a successful find, the victim alive and our team uninjured. I count this search an even greater success personally, because Carol acknowledged my remote alert within the fifteen-second optimal feedback window. It was an ideal handler response, and a great improvement on our previous find record. On our last deployment find Carol didn't acknowledge my alert for 3:57:12, nearly sixteen times the optimal feedback number.

Carol often waits until she's in visual range to acknowledge my alert. This can take anywhere from twenty seconds to two minutes or more. Continuing to work Mack reinforced her habit of visually acknowledging her dogs' alerts. In fact, working with Mack appeared to make Carol entirely refuse the superior methods that I learned at ESAC. But Mack is no longer a factor. This time Carol's acknowledgment was appropriate.

I review my log in the DAT and confirm that all my own behaviors were within acceptable parameters. I find no anomalies.

The tenor of Carol's voice carries, but the wind blurs her words. Her posture is stiff and forward, her gestures tight. She glances again across the sprawling staging area at me. Carol's body language indicates that she's angry. I think she's angry at me.

Carol is often angry at me.

Carol frequently avoids eye contact with me. She doesn't speak to me much other than issuing cues and commands, even though she often spoke to Mack. She doesn't initiate physical contact. She doesn't throw a Kong on a rope for me when we do search drills and she doesn't tell me I am a genius or a screwball and she doesn't laugh at me when I roll on an excellent smell in the grass, all of which she did for Mack.

She doesn't say, "You're a good dog, Sera." Instead she says, "good work."

Carol doesn't seem to like me.

To be successful in the field, a dog and handler team must communicate well. They must be well-trained, focused on their job, and physically fit. I haven't found anything on Modanet that indicates that they must like each other.

My own feelings on this subject are, I suppose, irrelevant.

* * *

The wind's roar outside the hotel windows wakes me from troubled sleep. I am in my crate. In the bed, the dark shapes of Carol and Devin breathe shallowly. When Devin came to the door earlier Carol told him that she didn't want to talk, but they did talk. They talked about the find today and about the storms. They talked about Mack and his bad and strange behaviors. They laughed and Devin got them both tissues from the bathroom. Then they stopped talking, and their biometrics changed, and now they sleep.

I need rest to recover from the hard work of my search, but today's events haunt me. Carol said no more searches. She said retirement. If Carol retires will I retire with her? I am only three years old.

I check Modanet. All listed retirement dates for SAR dogs are either concurrent with or prior to the retirement dates of their handlers. There is, of course, no information about EI SAR dogs, because I am the first one.

Corresponding information about military and defense EI dog career dates is not available on Modanet.

I remember what Devin said to the photographer earlier, about all of my finds. How some dogs don't make that record in a lifetime.

The barometric pressure dips, indicating an increased likelihood of funnel clouds forming. It's not a dramatic fall. While I consider whether to ping Carol's DAT with the information, the radio bleats.

A surge of adrenaline twitches my muscles. When the radio goes my heart rate always increases. Unexpected radio calls might mean a search.

Carol shifts first in the bed, breathing pattern changing. The radio squalls again and then both she and Devin are coming quickly awake.

Carol sits up in the dark. She taps the radio screen and says, "Ramos here."

I have a difficult time understanding voices over radio. I always have. When I was still at ESAC Dacy explained this is a common handicap among dogs and not something to be concerned about. It is, however, frustrating that I can only understand broadcast voices transmitted over DAT and not what's being said right now.

A voice—masculine, likely Anders'—speaks briefly. Carol and Devin look at each other in the dark. "No, it's fine. Just . . . we'll talk." Carol says. Devin slides out of bed, gestures on the bedside light and begins gathering his belongings. "Here? Uh, okay. Two-oh-four. Yeah, five minutes."

Devin mutters under his breath. Carol shuffles into the bathroom. He waits a few seconds for her to come back out, but I can sense that he is impatient. "Carol?" he says.

"Why are you still here? Anders is coming. To my room for some reason. You'll probably be on this call-out, too, you know."

"Lord Jesus," Devin says, and slips his shoes on. He leaves while Carol's still in the bathroom and pulls the door closed quietly behind him. The shower runs. It stops less than a minute before I hear someone in the hallway. I already know that it's Anders because I can smell him.

This is a unique occurrence. Devin often visits Carol's room when the team is out on training or deployment, but Anders never has. I don't think it will be for the same reason.

Carol exits the bathroom fully dressed, rubbing her wet hair with a towel. She opens the door.

"Sorry to intrude," Anders says. He looks like he would like to leave again. His posture *is Like* a cat's when it is suspicious of danger, stiff and still.

Carol moves around the room, putting items in her pack. She pulls her hair back

with one hand and fastens it behind her head. "You don't need to come up here to convince me to go out," she says. "I'll finish this deployment. But after this—"

"Actually," Anders says, "I'm here to convince you of something else entirely. Well, both things, really."

I wish Carol would let me out of my crate. Her movement makes me want to move around, too, to find my work harness and bring it to her and wait by the door.

Instead Carol stops moving. "What?"

Anders takes a few steps into the room. "This call," he says, He's quiet for a second. "It's not a—it's not part of the storm system. It's not even a rescue search. It's . . ." He is quiet again.

"Wow," Carol says. "Now I really can't wait."

"It's a security call," Anders says. "The police or the military should handle it with their own EI units, but," he looks at me. "Sera's the closest EI dog. Geographically, I mean. All the defense EI units they could call on are deployed further south to deal with the storms, the weather has shut down all of the air traffic that could get them back here to do this, and time is . . . there isn't a lot of time. A few units are trying to get up here but they've been delayed already. Sera's the only one in range."

Carol bends down to pull on her boots. "She's not defense, she's SAR."

"You know she's capable," Anders says, and his voice is scolding. He's right. "She can do whatever work you ask her to."

"So it's Sera you need, not me."

"You're her handler," he says. "We need you both."

Carol mutters, "She doesn't need a handler, she needs IT support."

Anders looks at his feet and fills his lungs. "You're still the most qualified person to—"

"Yeah, yeah," Carol says. She zips up her pack and slings it onto one shoulder. "I don't want the job. I don't like where all this is going. You know what, I wish it had been the robots that took over. It wouldn't sting as much as getting put out on my ass by my own damn dog."

Anders watches her, waiting.

"Shut up," Carol says, even though Anders has said nothing. "Yes, this is partly about losing Mack. And no it won't get better after more time has passed, because it's not just about losing Mack." She points at me. "All our next dogs are going to be like that. The work has changed but I haven't."

"Technology changes things," Anders says. "I can't make you evolve with the field. I can't force you to. But Sera's still a dog, Carol, and the work is still the work."

"It's not," she says. "You used to build a connection. You and the dog, you'd get inside each other's brains. Feel each other's feelings. It was all connection. Connection was the point. This damn thing," she lifts her wrist where my DAT is integrated, "skips all of that. It takes away the part of the work I loved most."

"Okay," Anders says. He puts his hands up and steps back toward the door. "Okay, Carol, I'm not arguing with you. Not now, at least. This search isn't just a life at stake, it's national security. Can you and Sera do it and we'll talk about your future afterward?"

Carol finally unlatches my crate. It's difficult to wait inside until she releases me. When she does, I scramble across the carpet to my harness as fast as I can. "Let's just finish this so I can go home and lick my wounds," she says.

* * *

We drive for an hour in Devin's truck, Carol with her feet on the dash, as light seeps into the sky from the east. It's a low, stormy morning, and it lacks the normal happy anticipation of driving to a deployment. This silence is tense. Devin tries to ask Carol about retirement again, like he did last night, but she ignores him.

I wish Carol would answer his questions. I want to know, too. And I want Devin to ask, what about your dog? What will Sera do after you retire? I want him to demand an answer, because I have no idea what will happen to me when Carol quits SAR.

I can't ask her the question myself. Carol doesn't like talking to me.

At ESAC, before I was sent out to my field assignment, Dacy warned me that I would need to watch out for humans who were uncomfortable with EI. That the new technology made many people nervous and unhappy. That, if I suspected I was interacting with a person for whom the Uncanny Valley was too wide, I should pretend that I was more like a regular dog in order to help them feel comfortable.

I don't think Dacy suspected that she was talking about my future handler. I certainly did not consider the possibility until it was too late. But Carol is more uncomfortable with me than anyone else I have encountered. She has improved; I no longer smell fear in her discomfort. Still, her discomfort remains.

Dacy told me to be a dog as much as I could. It's difficult, because although I am a dog in some ways, I am also something else. With Carol, I'm forced to keep that something else to myself. I speak only when I must, usually when we are working. I don't know if it makes Carol like me any more.

The tires on the roadway make a regular, soothing hum broken occasionally by the *ucka-ucka* of a seam in the asphalt. A light rain ticks against the windshield. Carol and Devin breathe and sigh and move in their seats. I lick my nose once, yawn loudly. A biological dog stress response. If only the humans on my team read my signals as closely as I read theirs.

I don't think about Dacy often, but today I wonder what advice she would give to me. She didn't know much about SAR, but she was good at teaching me about people.

Devin slows the truck, and our tires crunch gravel. I sit up and look out from my crate and see tall fencing running outside the windows. I hear the engine of a truck like Devin's that is behind us slow and also turn onto the gravel, and several smaller cars that must be the police escort vehicles. The second truck must mean that there are additional SAR team members in our caravan, but I did not see them before we left. We grind along a narrow driveway. Sitting up in my backseat crate, I can see a small gatehouse and the pair of silent police cruisers blocking the road.

The truck's engine falls silent. In the void I hear a faint buzzing overhead. I place it immediately. A drone, likely a police drone that tracked our progress here along with the escort. The sound of it is like an itch inside my head, where I can't reach it. It is like the feeling before a sneeze.

Good one. I add that to my *Is Like* list.

The other truck pulls ahead of us. From inside it I hear Anders' voice.

Anders. That is highly unusual. As team leader, Anders stays at base, remotely managing his deployed teams, resources, requests, and instructions from first responders, and other vital details. Yet he followed us out to this deployment.

The gate rattles open, and a cruiser starts up to make room for us to pass. The buzz of the overhead drone grows louder, and when I look I can see it black against the low clouds, like an insect scurrying across a ceiling.

We drive for a few more minutes with little to spy out the windows except more wet, stubby fields and the occasional outbuilding. We pass another roadblock, but its cruisers are already pulled aside. I see smokestacks and low, featureless buildings.

A hum is building in the earth. It makes the hair on my spine stand up. By the time we pull up to the buildings and their looming smokestacks, the vibrations are in my bones and my stomach, and I feel cold all over from my hair prickling.

When our convoy stops, I am the only one left behind in the car. Through my crate's vent holes I watch Carol and Anders and Devin whipped by the wind as they follow a pair of dark-clad workers into a building.

My job right now is to rest, gathering mental and physical energy for the work that will come. But the unnerving vibration and the thoughts that have plagued me since yesterday prevent my resting.

Carol doesn't like the DAT. She doesn't like *me*. She prefers the old way of dog-handler teamwork, the dog giving imperfect feedback through body language and the handler interpreting signals as best they could. She likes the inefficiency because, to her, it felt like *connection*.

The DAT connects my mind directly to her, but that's not the kind of connection she means.

I have no *Is Like* for the kind of connection she means.

Why would she prefer inefficient work and unclear communication when EI is, objectively, better? I don't understand. But I do want to continue to work. Being good at my job is as important to me as *connection* is to Carol.

How can both purposes be served?

Footsteps approach the truck, but it's Anders who opens the door. A woman is with him, wearing dark clothing composed in the same practical, tidy way that the SAR team members dress. Anders unlatches my crate, leashes me without hurry. He knows better than to pat me. Everyone in our SAR unit should know I don't enjoy it, but Anders has the self-control to restrain himself where even Devin does not. I hop down from the truck at his invitation.

We're in a gravel lot in the middle of a rain-beaten prairie. Enormous steam vents rise from the earth, trickling metallic-scented exhaust. A breeze snatches past my nose carrying broken-stem, crushed-herb, fresh-dirt smells whipped about with a fresh whiff of ozone. After such a tense hour in the stuffy truck, a face full of bright air is exhilarating.

Another man in dark clothing watches us from outside the door my team disappeared into. He scans the area through thick, military-issue e-glasses.

"This is Sera," Anders says to the woman. "Sera, this is Angela Weil. She's in charge of the search and wanted to meet you."

I understand his speech without DAT help—regular dog brains can hear the shapes of language, even if they don't understand it like I do—but I can't respond. Only Carol has the integrated neural pathway for my DAT. I sit for a polite hello in lieu of more complicated language.

"She says hi," Anders interprets.

Angela reaches a hand toward my head. She smells overpoweringly of personal cleaning products, stringent chemical odors that Modanet says mimic appealing plant smells to the feeble human nose. I try not to flinch away from her touch.

"You're confident her SAR training won't interfere with the search objectives?"

Anders shakes his head. "ESAC stock starts with the same specs your dogs do. They're just brought up differently."

Angela grabs and gently kneads my ear. I hold my sit carefully, but cast Anders a baleful look. He catches my eye and looks away.

"It will take a certain . . . commitment. To follow through."

Anders chuckles. "You've got the right dog for the job, then." He crouches down in front of me. Thankfully, Angela backs off, taking her hands with her. "This is a tough one, Sera." I've always liked the way Anders talks to me. He reaches into his front shirt pocket and brings out a memory stick, which he extends to the DAT interface patch worked into my harness. My brain receives a password-protected dossier tagged *Access Restricted*.

"Difficult parameters, novel search elements, and an unfamiliar environment," he says. "Subterranean."

I open my mouth to pant. Anders is giving me a briefing, all on my own. Often all

the information I receive from Carol before a search is a scent profile and a police report. I wonder what is in the *Access Restricted* dossier.

“In addition, you will be required to apprehend the target, not just locate it. Carol will be given limited information. There are things in this file that are very restricted, that you’ll have access to and she won’t. She will know your target, but she won’t have all of the details that you need in order to do your work. You will be required to keep some information private from her. Do you understand?”

He holds out both hands. Right hand for yes, left hand for no. A game the team played with me often when I was new and my intelligence was amusing to them.

I touch my nose to his right palm.

“Okay. Angela will give you the password to open the dossier. Destroy it once you have the information. Don’t store it as data, store it as biological memory. Do you understand?”

Fascinated, I digest this information for half a moment, then I touch my nose to his palm again.

“Good. Angela?”

The woman bends over and touches a password to my harness DAT interface. The password winks into my thoughts.

I open the dossier.

A drone drops low overhead. Its insectile buzzing thrums the pit of my stomach. I blink rapidly at the information I have, as though it were before my physical eyes and blinking might bring clarity.

I look at Anders. He is watching me with anxiety. “Do you have questions, Sera?”

I ponder the dossier’s contents. These are no longer stored files, but a part of my lived experience, as though I had witnessed the events or been told them as a story. Fusion plant architectural schematics, plant process schedules—everything from the cleaning schedule to the HVAC layout—and a series of scent profiles including that of the domestic rat and silicon filament.

It is curious information, which joins the unsettled buzz in my stomach. Do I question what Anders has told me? Does it confuse me?

No. I touch his left palm with my nose.

“Great,” Anders says. He straightens up, turns to Angela. “We’re ready.”

We walk toward the building and its growing hum. The steam vents towering overhead are like enormous, dead trees.

Carol waits for us in the hallway of the building, where Anders hands her my lead. The hum is even louder here, a physical sensation more than a sound, and the building smells lived-in: coffee, dish soap, ink and paper, air filters. There is a banana peel in the waste bin of the conference room we are guided into by the sour-smelling Angela.

There are two other dogs in the room, both of which watch me enter. Neither of them are EI. Devin is already here, along with a lot of men and women in dark uniforms.

Carol sits next to Devin, but stares at Anders with the same look she used to give Mack when he sauntered from the kitchen with particular satisfaction. Her brow is wrinkled, her lips pressed into a line. Anders ignores her and stands against the wall behind us.

“What was that about?” Devin asks her, gesturing to me with a knuckle. Carol glances at him and shakes her head.

I have a traitorous thought. I could share my information with Carol, in confidence—all of it, or part of it, or even none of it, but tell a believable lie. Perhaps this would help Carol feel *connection* with me.

I analyze this idea. The more I ponder it, the more it seems like it wouldn’t work. Secret though the information might be, it’s dull stuff. Schedules, scents, maps. And

Carol might not like that I told her. I set the thought aside for now and listen to the briefing. I need to know what Carol knows.

Angela presents some information I already have from my dossier: We currently sit atop the Midwestern Fusion Array, third-largest fusion energy generator in the world; yesterday at 9:35 P.M. MFA security detected a communication systems breach, and shortly after that lost control of systems below the third basement including most automated support systems and all drone controls; shortly after this a physical security breach occurred and Array security apprehended two men and a woman just inside the northeasternmost access building; these three, upon police questioning, offered a prepared manifesto from the Strong Arm of the Voice For the Silent.

"No shit," whispers Devin. Angela looks at him sharply. A dog handler on the other side of the table laughs out loud.

"What," the handler says, "is this power plant full of monkeys and guinea pigs? The hell are they doing down there?"

Angela turns her glare to the speaker and clears her throat. "The manifesto alleges that their goal is a catastrophic shut-down of the Array." The dog handler snorts, and Angela's expression scrunches up even more. "And it would be catastrophic, I assure you. Once the Array is down, it takes at least sixty hours to get it back up to 50 percent operational. The MFA powers the entirety of seven states and supplies the majority of power for six more. Nearly a quarter of the U.S. Worse, many of the areas served are currently in a state of emergency due to the storm systems some of you have been cleaning up after. People need to charge their cars so they can leave flooded areas or relocate from damaged homes. They need safe places to shelter. Hospitals need to be fully operational. This is a serious issue."

The man says nothing, and I am relieved at his silence.

"The Strong Arm," Angela continues, "should also not be dismissed. Despite their slipshod public reputation, their radicalized membership has nearly doubled in the last five years. They have funding. They're efficient. They may have been hippies, cat ladies, and college vegans ten years ago, but that's no longer the story. In the last two years, the Strong Arm of the Voice for the Silent has perpetrated several attacks against high-profile companies and organizations that were not widely publicized. The organization also never officially claimed responsibility. If they're staying quiet about it, then they have some other motivation than fear, panic, and publicity. And if they aren't bringing attention to this stuff, we certainly won't. An ecoterror panic is low on our list of useful epidemics at the moment."

"People will definitely notice if the power goes out in a fourth of America," says a woman on the other side of the table.

Angela does not scowl at her the way she scowled at the man. "They will," she agrees. "They're changing their game. We aren't sure why yet, but it's concerning."

"But," Devin says, "you caught them. They hacked into your computer systems, sure. But what are we searching for?"

The scent profile appears in the forefront of my thoughts immediately: domestic rat, silicon filament, and something else I can't place. It's familiar and makes me think of *work*, of *purpose*.

"Approximately one hour ago one of the six reactors in the Array went offline. It was taken offline in an emergency shutdown procedure that could not be stopped due to . . . tampering with the electrical system. Prior to this we had noticed a pattern of small breaches throughout the Array's internal security systems. We believe the trio we apprehended released something into the Array."

"A drone," Carol says. "Shit."

It's not just a drone.

Carol spoke quietly, but Angela still heard her. Now Angela stares at Carol. “Yes,” she says. “Most likely a bodydrone. A rat.”

“Jesus,” Carol breathes.

“Huh,” says the dog handler who spoke before. “The hell is VFS doing with a bodydrone?”

“The Strong Arm,” Angela corrects. She continues. “The drone took down Reactor B. We suspect it is now near Reactor C, as Reactor A has been heavily secured. Conventional dog teams will provide relief and backup for the teams already securing Reactor A. We will focus offensive efforts on cutting off the drone before it can cause additional outages—that’s where the EI unit comes in.” Angela looks at Carol. “Reactor D is offline for maintenance. Add B to that, and the Array is currently at 66 percent. Below 50 percent is considered plant failure. Below 33 percent is catastrophic.”

She takes a deep breath and looks around the room, skipping the eyes of the dog handler who spoke too much. “Well,” she says. “Let’s begin.”

* * *

Down an access stairway that smells of cement blocks and urine, like all access stairways smell, then Carol and I are out into a bright-lit hallway, empty save for the regular intrusion of steel doorknobs in the walls.

We are alone. Before we left the conference room, Anders stopped Devin. “Dev, you’re going to have to stay up top with me. Carol’s not likely to need a navigator down there anyway,” he said.

I think they are being very careful about limiting access to the MFA and to the target. I doubt even Anders had full access to the information I have been given.

I reexamine my traitorous thought from the briefing. None of the classified data that I’ve been given is worth sharing—much of it is schematics, equipment lists, fine details of the MFA’s workings. Important information, certainly, but Carol wouldn’t find it useful or interesting.

Perhaps I could make something up, but I am not sure what I would say. It might backfire. I am not ready to take the chance unless I know it will be worthwhile.

I could pretend anxiety about my objective for the search. Apprehending a target is a new skill for me. That could be worth further consideration, though it doesn’t strike me as brilliant. The last time I worked on a complicated idea for a secret plan, when the solution came to me I saw its brilliance immediately. I will wait for that feeling again.

The hallway floor before us is tiled smooth white, its grip and temperature synthetic, not ceramic. The walls and ceiling are also white. The hallway’s bright orderliness and its neat, closed doors visually resemble an abandoned hospital ward my team conducted exercise drills in last year. The smells could never be mistaken for each other, though—the vacant ward smelled of sickness and chemicals, and this place smells of dust and deep earth—and certainly not the sound. The seven flights we have climbed down muffle everything except the deep reverberating hum. I felt that hum in my bones and eyes even as Devin’s truck turned off the highway, and now it reaches a pitch and richness that makes my gums itch.

There are other, quieter sounds: the whirs, clacks, and whispers of the plant’s small machinery continuing its work. This facility is equipped with an interminable army of drone small-workers happily going about whatever tasks the Strong Arm has set them to. My dossier says they have been observed largely continuing about their regular routines, though with some abnormal clustering behaviors.

I jerk a foot out of the way of a miniature repair drone zipping along the edge of the hall, laden with a CPU fan across its beetle-back. Another even smaller drone tails it. I resist the urge to lunge after the mousy thing, and swallow, as well, the rumble of a growl I feel in my chest. Their movement is utterly unnerving. My gaze follows them like toenails following after the sweetest itch. *Is Like*.

I would prefer not to have these feelings at all. The unfortunate side effects of being a dog.

I whine quietly. The MFA's hum almost drowns it out.

"Sera?" Carol says.

She does not ask a question, and so I do not answer her.

We follow the hallway to its end and take a different access stairway down. There are elevators, but we must avoid them, as their systems have been tampered with.

We proceed down eleven additional flights. According to my DAT, we're sixty-two meters beneath the surface. I feel pressure inside my ears. Carol breathes hard, though she is in excellent physical shape for a human her age.

The reactor's noise grows more intense here. Carol opens the fire door on the stairwell and the sound increases again. Next to the door there is a station with small headphones, which I assume are noise-minimizing; Carol pauses to take a set and plugs its data pin into her DAT.

I shake my head several times to clear the congestion in my ears, but I am also hoping that the noise will diminish. It doesn't; I simply grow used to it.

"Sera," Carol says. She must speak over the growl of the earth around us. "Are you okay?"

It is disorienting, I tell her. *Loud.*

"Can you work?"

I can work. My answer is automatic, but I will make it true. I rely on my hearing to search. Although my skin crawls with this place, I can concentrate beyond the din for small sounds beneath it. My hearing is phenomenally acute. I am hampered but not crippled.

According to my building schematics, the access channel we need in order to reach the inner circuit of maintenance hallways and tunnels is on this level.

Carol taps at her radio screen, but shakes her head, disgusted. "No signal," she says. I knew there would not be one. She knew as well, I am sure, yet had to check. Humans seem far more anxious about being disconnected from the internet than I am from Modanet. I think this is due to Modanet's limited nature versus the unlimited connectivity, sociality, and information provided on the internet: it gives humans the sense that they can solve any problem they come to with more information and the input of others. I, however, know that I must rely on myself. I have never seen the internet, aside from glances at human devices, and so I don't miss its help.

Back when I was in training Dacy taught me not to look at screens and so I don't look at them. At ESAC, if you look at screens, you get a verbal warning. If you look again after you've been warned, you get a time-out. They even take away privileges, like free-swimming time. When you are a young dog and full of energy, losing free-swimming time is a seriously unpleasant consequence.

Down at the bright hallway's end a flying drone the size of a sparrow ducks out an open doorway. It follows the seam of the ceiling and wall, bobs through the next door and then out of sight. It makes an awful sound, a wasp's whine.

My body yawns. I sneeze. I am feeling many different kinds of pressure.

"Hey," Carol says, "you're okay." She is watching me closely, and the words seem as much a warning as reassurance. I try to release the tension in my body so that it is not as noticeable.

We continue forward. I try not to lag from heel position but each step feels like pushing through chest-high water. I follow Carol into a room where we weave between lab benches to a large storage room. There's a door in here with an access pad but also a physical lock on the doorknob. The access pad light blinks orange, but Carol ignores it and produces a key. She turns the lock with a smooth scrape.

The door opens onto a grate-floored hallway, walled in cement, dim, and crawling.

Three paw-sized drones skitter from the trajectory of the opening door. Others the size of pigeons whine past along the ceiling. One drops from its path and, as I watch, extends wheels beneath it, tucks its flight apparatus and transitions to the floor without changing momentum.

“Shit,” Carol says. She is watching the drones as well. “I would guess it’s cover for the movements of their own drone. Shit, Sera, can you do it?”

I can work, I say again, but the response comes faster than thought. Then I do think about it, but I don’t change my answer.

I step forward but pause. I feel my voice in my chest and I try to stop it, but I can’t. It is its own thing squirreling after the movements of the drones that make the backs of my eyes tingle and my joints itch. I force myself forward again, pushing at the barrier of all that awful movement, and I can move into the hallway but my voice moves as well and comes out as a low moaning growl.

A cleaning drone trawls past me, swiveling out of my way, its brush-roller chewing the metal mesh of the walkway.

My mouth parts in a pant. I can smell the anxiety in my own breath. At least with my mouth open I can’t whine. The sound of the drones grinding and buzzing through the narrow hall mewls over the deep, endless groan of the MFA.

I startle as something warm touches my back. Carol’s hand on my withers. I look up.

“Hold it together, girl,” she says.

As much as I dislike being touched, I move into the pressure of her hand. It feels steadying.

Carol doesn’t usually pet me. That’s something she saved for Mack.

I begin to understand why he loved her so slavishly.

* * *

Often environmental stimulus will fade into the background as I grow used to it. This is the case with the loud engines running the MFA. After a time, my senses adjust, and my hearing is again an asset to my search.

Not so with the intense visual stimulus of the drones. If anything, the continued exposure builds up. There are fewer now, but one still passes us at least every ten seconds. Walking through these teeming service tunnels with my mind open for hints of my target is like standing in a severe windstorm with my eyes open and no eyewear or body protection. I feel battered.

That is a decent *Is Like*, but I am far too distressed to add it to any list. I must recover from this. I have to work.

This is an access tunnel between Reactor D and C. Reactor B was taken offline roughly two hours ago. My target is very likely somewhere near Reactor C, though Array security and normal dog-and-handler teams have not located it. They have cleared the area to allow Carol and me to work uninterrupted. The tunnel is several kilometers long and will eventually flank a steam vent from Reactor C.

Carol drops her hand to my side again. The touch calms me only slightly. “Check here,” she says, gesturing to a dark crevice running beneath the joint of two support beams that I have stepped past in my distracted state.

It’s embarrassing to have missed something, but I am also grateful that Carol caught it. Doing a good job is my highest priority. I check the spot Carol indicates and resolve to miss nothing else.

I recognize Carol’s pattern. She’s searching with me now the way she searched with Mack. This inefficient, clumsy labor is how Carol enjoys working, the thing she lost when I joined her team.

The thought makes me hesitate. Carol stops, too, watching me carefully. She is watching for signals because this search is like a search with a dog that isn’t EI. It’s the kind of search that made Carol love SAR.

I step forward, careful not to give any false signs that I am picking up a scent. Instead, I am tracking an idea.

Maybe I should not recover.

Maybe I should continue to need Carol's assistance on this search.

Already she's behaving differently toward me. Perhaps she's feeling the connection that she has missed. She's thinking that she and I can do SAR together on Anders' team until my body fails me and I am forced into retirement by my physical limitations, like a real SAR dog.

I could make Carol not want to retire.

Needing her assistance on this search might not be enough. It may be the beginnings of a connection, but how would I maintain that in our regular work? I can't affect this slow and ineffective manner forever. Still, since I do need her help at the moment, it is worth using the situation for my benefit.

Even with these thoughts agitating my mind, I stop automatically as my nose whips my body to the left. Thoughts stop. Visual goes on low priority since it is rendered useless by the random movement of drones up walls, drones crawling along the crease of the wall and floor, drones dipping from overhead.

I reach with my hearing, tuning out the deep hum of the MFA, though I can already tell this track is at least several minutes old and its maker likely out of earshot. But most of my thought is with my nose, sucking air, sorting smell.

Interest, I ping.

"I can tell," Carol says. She sounds pleased. Out of habit she taps her radio to report in, then pockets it when she remembers where we are.

I begin to work the scent back to its source.

Rodent, the nasty uric shredded-fiber feces smell of rat, and something subtler as well, not exactly matching the profile I was given, but close, not a common rat, certainly not a rat living down here in the cement and oil and cleaning supply smells, but a domestic rat from bedding and laboratory and eating well, but there's something else and I can't quite—strange, but then I have never tracked a bodydrone so I don't

Fades and descends, the air isn't still down here, heat and minute ventilation currents tugging through time and space in feathery curlicues along a branching corridor where it's quieter and into a four-way crossing where the smell is not lost but

Interjection of small sour electrical fire, quick and here and grading off

Below the intersection a vent shaft billowing upward, target scent burst into an impossible array of

Not impossible but

Carol is behind me, out of the way of the scent trail, she is actually quite good at staying out of the way of

Rat

Slightly greater density of time-sodden molecules wafting back along the edge of the grating gathered like tufts of shed hair at the edges of

Along the access tunnel and the trail grows dimmer and dimmer, but I am sure this is the right tunnel, the arrow was large and heavy, I work the air hard, I am sure this is the

"Sera," Carol says, but I am hunting the air, and I don't acknowledge so she says again, "Sera."

Another thirty feet down the tunnel and still no scent, but I am sure it will be here somewhere, it will be here, the path was so clear

"Let's check the other turn-offs. We can come back if they're dry. Sera."

She actually takes the handle on my harness, and at first I stiffen and resist, which I have never done. Carol has never pulled me off a trail. I am confused why she would not trust my nose when I am the search dog and she is the handler, and I am the one

who says where the trail goes, and she is the one who interprets. My heart starts beating hard. I walk with her, but it is hard not to pull back to where I was.

We enter the center tunnel, to the right of the path I was on.

Fifteen feet in I pick up the rat.

Carol was right.

Interest, I ping and hurry down the track.

“Yes,” Carol says, following behind me.

Minutes later the trail fades again, lost somehow in the backdraft of time and movement, or perhaps hidden by a clever track-layer. Are bodydrones smart in that way? I suppose they are as smart as whoever is running the drone.

I backtrack and pad down a turnoff, but it is a dead end. I work the trail’s end, attempting to find the lost thread.

A drone skims my head. I flinch and press my belly to the floor.

“Shit,” Carol says. “Their proximity settings must be disabled. That thing nearly got you.”

I had forgotten the drones while I worked. I pant. The trail is gone, lost somewhere in this narrow hallway. The grating under my paws vibrates with this place’s pervasive rumble. I wish that endless sound drowned out some of the drone-sounds, but I can hear them.

I catch myself whining again.

I move before Carol feels the need to comfort me. I do not want her new sympathy for me to turn into pity.

We continue down the tunnel, passing additional junctions. I make cursory checks of the intersecting tunnels. Time moves strangely. I know from the schematics I was given that we are nearing Reactor C. I have lost the trail. I am not doing the best job possible. I need to find a way to make Carol connect with me. I don’t want to retire. I want to do SAR, like I was trained at ESAC. Beetle-sized drones swarm at points on the walls and, as we approach, scatter like my thoughts.

Carol’s radio makes a sound. “Ah,” she says. “Anders? Do you copy?” There is radio voice that I can’t discern. Carol reads our exact location off her screen. “Sera had something, but lost it,” she says. “Copy. We’ve had the same experience. Thanks.” She speaks to me. “Array security are herding some drones out of the C-through-E corridors for us.” She turns her attention back to the radio. I scan down the hallway, watching beetle-drones scuttle into the cracks between the floor grating and the wall. There is a scent of the faintest memory of electrical fire, a wire short far off. It’s out of place. I turn my nose toward it.

The ground’s vibration builds suddenly and then it is a bellow, the tunnel shaking with it. Lights judder in their fixtures and down the hallway the last of the little drones chatters across the floor, legless in the tumult. My vision dances. Carol ducks and crouches toward me, looking up. The temperature in the passageway shoots up twenty degrees, hot suddenly where it had been only warm. It is muggy, thick, and humid. The grating beneath us rattles in its housing.

“It’s Reactor C,” Carol shouts. “Shit, we lost it.”

I can think of no other explanation than the reactor venting through its emergency shutdown, a procedure that I now fully comprehend from the dossier transfer. I confirm this against details that I seem to have always known, though they would have meant nothing to me this morning. A consequence of storing information in biological memory.

The roar and rattle continue for minutes, though such drama seems like it should be short-lived. Carol squats next to me, still looking up and down the empty tunnel. The violence of sound paralyzes us. The vent fans overhead run at extreme speed. It is like we are in the throat of some enormous howling beast that never runs out of breath.

After interminable seconds, the shaking subsides and then fades. The quiet is unnerving. I think about the *Is Like* I made just moments ago, without intending to.

The Array now has three reactors down. It is 50 percent offline. One more reactor to critical failure.

Carol taps her radio. "Dammit," she mutters.

We are not far from Reactor C. I remember the whiff of electrical fire. *Target nearby*, I tell her.

I go back to work.

* * *

I have never been asked to apprehend a target before. Search and rescue dogs find victims, mark locations, bring their handlers to the lost thing. Some avalanche dogs might dig a victim out from an embankment of snow. But we do not drag people out of danger physically—I weigh sixty-five pounds, it would not be effective—and we don't apprehend criminals. SAR dogs use our noses to find what is missing, a subtler art than brute force.

But even though it is not something I am trained for, I am an EI dog. I am adaptable. And I have been asked to do this.

So when I almost stumble over my target ducking into a narrow crevasse between two small ducts that run along the tunnel from Reactor C's outer control room, my speed in responding surprises me. I know exactly what to do. It isn't the EI part of me; it is something deeper.

My body is hurry and heat. Adrenaline turns my joints to liquid fury. I hear a low snarl from my throat—not an angry sound, but eager, greedy. My front feet are extended, midair, head low, gaze locked on the thing that has only just noticed me. It is frozen in panic, then it's not. I land in a clanging crash against the wall and grating as it skitters out from between my paws.

Carol shouts wordlessly behind me—or maybe there are words and I am too busy to make them out—but I gather my haunches beneath me and leap again. My olfactory lobe rings *Rat Rat Rat* and my blood simmers with something I can't identify and part of me loathes. I am close to my quarry, inches, my neck and shoulders low to the ground and feet tucking up tight as I run. My teeth snick the air once, closing around an airy mouthful of *Rat* but sink into nothing.

To bite. I want to bite it, like Mack and his stupid Kong. I am acting like an animal. I can hear it breathe, shallow quick panicked.

My target slips around a corner I didn't even notice was there. My observational powers are shut down to a focus so narrow I am almost blind. I make a less elegant turn than my target's, my mass carrying me wider and giving the bodydrone a chance to add distance. Boots clang behind me, Carol disadvantaged by her two legs.

Ahead there is a low nook, a crawlway for pipes and wiring. The rat drone dives into this space. I am just barely the size to fit, kicking and pushing until I am wedged in. My tail thrashes in the open passageway, trying to help me leverage my way in by canting my spine. I am fatally slowed in our chase.

But so is the drone: there is no way out. Or, not true entirely, because before I came in and blocked the light, I saw a small shaft running along the back. Probably part of the HVAC system. I also observed a joint in the shaft that was not properly sealed, a narrow crack allowing air to escape into the crawlway. I feel the breeze of it against my whiskers. This is where the bodydrone tries to squeeze itself now. It fights its way in, then backs out, squeezes in again, backend thrashing in the air. Stuck almost exactly the same way I am.

We are both stopped, at least for the moment. There is enough brain left in me to know that I don't want to get permanently caught in this small, uncomfortable space with my elbows wedged against my ribcage. I see the space partially through heat

and movement, but also through the bioenhancements given me via EI. EI dogs can see in almost no light, one of many ways I am superior to a normal dog.

So I can see the rat unstick itself from the tiny crack and turn around. It checks its panic, as I have paused my own mindless pursuit. It takes a step toward me, sits up on its haunches, and stares. For all the world, it looks as though it is considering me. Thinking.

The bodydrone driver gathering information. This rat is like a live thing, but it isn't. It looks so very much like an animal, but there is someone else driving it. It's a drone, and yet it moves exactly like a rat.

The hair on my back stands up, and because I am stuck it makes me want to get unstuck, to get out and away from this eerie thing. My hind claws scabble at the brutal metal flooring, and the grating drags at the hair on my belly. My breath comes faster. I am stuck.

"Sera?" I hear, muffled, from the hallway. "What the *hell* are you—" Carol has reached me. Her voice helps me stop my writhing. "Ah, shit."

The bodydrone takes another step. I can make out its eyes in the dark. Its rodent face is surprisingly expressive. Our eyes meet. It hesitates toward me.

It smells wrong. It smells like a rat. I know that this is my target because it doesn't smell like a wild rat. It smells like a lab rat, a domestic rat. But it doesn't smell like a drone. There's something else, something familiar, to it.

I see thought behind its eyes.

The thing darts forward—I crush myself backward as far as I can—and a hot spike of pain scorches my nose. I yelp and the rat is gone and my limbs go stiff

Spine goes stiff hair stiff

Rushing tingle in my neck in my bones I am downloading no don't

My back legs kick out from under me twitching

"Sera!"

Don't want

Hands on harness tugging against my shoulders, tight squeezing my elbows scraping out in front of me shoulders aching as I drag along the grating Carol pulls me out of the bulkhead.

"Sera," she says again. "Hey, hey. Shit. What's wrong?"

My hind legs spasm. I shudder under Carol's stroking hands.

"Sera," she says again and again. "Sera, what's wrong? Oh my god."

My body jolts one final time as the information packet finishes forcing its way through me. Panting, I go limp.

"Sera," Carol says. She tries her radio. "Shit. Sera."

I am not convulsing anymore, just trembling. Trembling from what that rat transferred to me when it bit me.

I know something that I am not supposed to know.

I know something I don't want to know.

* * *

"Does anyone copy? Anders? Anyone? Shit, shit, shit."

Carol stands over me. I lie on my side, trying to slow my breathing. Objectively I know I've had a panic attack in addition to experiencing mild neurological trauma, but understanding this doesn't help me recover. My eyes would like to remain closed, my mouth slack. I know I am coming back to myself only when I move to a more comfortable position. Moments ago, I wouldn't have noticed discomfort.

As soon as I can think, I have to govern my thoughts.

Carol crouches to rest a hand on my neck. The touch jerks me upright to rest on my elbows.

"Hey, shh."

I am not helpless. I am a working EI SAR dog and I have a job. *I can work*, I ping. Carol looks at her DAT, then back at me. She stands up slowly.

"Your nose is bleeding," she says.

It bit me. I am already opening the MFA building schematics to track where the target has gone. *It's in the ventilation system.* I rise, take a few slow steps in the target's most likely direction. When those steps are steady enough, I continue. My legs don't give out.

We are near a fan unit. The target has only one direction to go. Unless there are additional faults in the ventilation shafts similar to the one by which it accessed the system, in which case it could slip out anywhere.

This is more than I usually speak, but speaking slows my thoughts. I focus on doing the job that I was very literally created to do.

It is like when you squint intensely at an item in the near distance, and the rest of your vision goes blurry. That is what I am hoping for. *Is Like.*

From behind me, Carol says, "What just happened?" She follows as I trot back down the passageway in the direction we came. I don't answer.

My body feels wrong. I hope it wasn't the download. A virus, parts of my body and brain buzzing haywire like the drones and elevators in the MFA. If I had access to Modanet I could do more research on the physical aftereffects of panic attacks. Exhaustion and disorientation make sense, but is it normal to have these rapid, anxious thoughts? To feel so . . . distant from myself?

A virus. I am almost certain the rat didn't bite me only to transfer the unwanted information I am ignoring. I must do my work quickly before whatever it has infected me with begins its work. Still, I have some time.

I can sense the thing the rat told me, though, nagging at the edges of my attention.

I compare the ventilation system with the Department of Homeland Security dossier's hierarchy of targets vs. outcomes and create a most likely scenario.

Then I pause. I actually stop, the thought catches me so hard. The thing I am not thinking about.

The most likely scenario for a bodydrone driven by the outside forces quantified in the dossier is one thing.

The most likely scenario for the thing I am not thinking about is . . . I don't know.

This is exactly the quandary my target intended to force. I don't want to examine the information I have been confronted with because it will almost certainly interfere with my ability to do my job. But in order to do my job I must put that information to use.

Carol catches up to me. I had left her behind, my pace easily outstripping hers as my mind worked. Now she sighs as she looks at me and sets her jaw.

And Carol. Who wants to feel *connection*.

This is a complicated situation. My primary objective has always been to do the best job possible as an EI SAR dog. However, I have personal objectives as well. The tenuous connection Carol and I have begun to build down here, where I need her in order to do my work, is the only thing making that job possible.

Carol watches me, waiting. She has admirable patience, for a human. I move forward again at a more inclusive pace.

Anders gave me the DHS dossier, because Carol didn't have access to all of the information. I am keeping some secrets from her, but they are nothing she would want to know. But now I have an additional secret that she might want to hear. It's possible the DHS already knew the information that's now been forced into my brain, but it kept it from me. Whether Anders knew or not isn't relevant.

I was to keep the dossier private. But this new information wasn't in the dossier. Therefore I have no obligation to keep it private from Carol.

However, this will involve speaking to Carol in a manner that exposes the parts of myself that make humans most uncomfortable about EI. Carol expressed discomfort when I shared those things before. I think of the moment in the crawlspace, eye to eye with the rat, and wonder if Carol feels like that when she looks into my eyes.

Dacy would understand. I wish we had been allowed to remain in contact.

We reach a ventilation panel connected to the shaft that the rat disappeared down. I press my nose to it, the work of scenting pushing my thoughts down for one moment of calm. The trace of *Rat* is faint but there. I follow the schematics to the next panel and repeat the process. I hunt the scent this way for several minutes, until finally it's lost. The schematics confirm that several junctures in the ventilation system have given my target multiple options, while mine are limited.

I stop again to think. The thoughts that catch up to me are no less confusing than before.

Even if I follow the target from ventilation panel to ventilation panel through every tunnel in the MFA, it won't solve my quandary.

At ESAC they taught me that every decision I make on a deployment may be life-or-death. I was taught to be decisive, confident, and analytical under pressure. I am good at that job. I am not used to being so . . . worried.

Carol retiring, the unsettling sound of this place, its massive population of drones. Now this bite.

I am not used to all of these feelings.

I can at least pretend to be confident and decisive. That is a small comfort. I make a decision.

Carol, I ping. The target is EI.

For a few seconds, she does not respond. She simply stares at me, and I look back at her.

"What?"

The target, I tell her, isn't a bodydrone. It's a stolen EI animal recruited as a Strong Arm agent. It must be from one of the Dynagroup laboratories in Georgia; those are the only EI rats I know of that are functional at this level, though I know nothing of any break-ins at those labs. None of this intelligence was included in my dossier. The target itself forced this information on me in order to confuse me and, I assume, as part of a recruiting effort, as I was also transferred a good deal of propaganda material.

"Sera!" She sounds almost angry in her surprise. "You didn't read the propaganda, did you?"

I scanned their summaries only, I lie. It wasn't relevant.

The information dump was not something I had the power to control, so this is another lie. However, I found much of the material's sentimentality about experimentation on dogs off-putting. I am not a dog. I am not an early intelligence hybrid either. I don't suffer. What relevance do those animals have to me?

Some of the information on the history of EI was new and interesting in an objective way, but this attempt at provoking my pity strikes me as vulgar.

The Strong Arm has given me something, however, for which I suppose I must acknowledge their comradeship. I don't mention this to Carol either.

"That's sick," she says. "Pitting you against each other. This is exactly what—" She bites off the end of the sentence. "And what next? Will you be fighting our wars for us next?"

Military intelligence was the first implementation of EI. Animals have always been used in war, I say. Animals are present in most human endeavors.

"But you don't have a choice about it."

I enjoy my work.

She sighs, but it is a big *uhf* of breath. This is the sound she makes when she and

Anders disagree about some aspect of a deploy, but he is correct. She's speaking to me like she speaks with Anders.

Carol and I seem to realize this at the same time. We both look away into our private thoughts. When I begin to calculate the rat's most likely intent based on its previous locations and current heading, she speaks again.

"We're going to have to catch it."

Yes.

"No," she says. "I mean, change your objective, Sera. You can't kill it if it's EI. It's . . . that's wrong."

I don't see how this is true, except on a relative scale. If a human had infiltrated the MFA with unknown intent would the men deployed to stop them be worried about the right or wrong of lethal force?

Carol is falling prey to the ruse the Strong Arm laid for me. I was the intended target. I did not think Carol would be vulnerable.

Perhaps I should have done this differently.

"We'll have to just catch it somehow. Can you stop it without hurting it?"

I think of the hot shooting through my blood and muscles as I chased the rat into the ventilation system. Of my lack of concern as I wedged myself into a too-small space. Unsafe, irrational.

I am not certain I can.

"Okay," she says. "A mousetrap, then."

I don't want to change my objective. The dossier and Anders' instructions from the DHS were clear: I am to eliminate the target. To trap, instead of eliminate, the target seriously endangers the mission's outcome. But with no access to outside authority, cut off as we are down here, I will have to appear to go along with Carol's plan.

I need her to feel connected to me. And it doesn't appear that I can complete this search without her support.

I will have to go along with this. For now.

I share with Carol my statistical analysis of the rat's most likely objectives based on its movements, editing out DHS protected information. We agree on a physical path forward, though our plan once we get there is still unclear. Reactor D is down for maintenance. In order to get past D and to Reactor E, its likely next objective, the rat will need to find its way out of the ventilation system and back into the access tunnels. We should have some time, though we can't know how much.

This is utterly abnormal, incomparable to any deployment I have studied. I am in unrecognizable territory: subterranean, infected with illicit information and keeping many secrets from my handler, and my objective not to rescue, but to apprehend. This search has no *Is Like*.

I haven't lost control of the situation yet.

* * *

Carol's mousetrap is too elaborate to work.

In my own experience of making complicated, covert plans, I took months to identify patterns in our routine that would provide an opportunity for my advantage. I spent additional months waiting for the right moment to act. Yet Carol has made her plan in only minutes. She's forcing her advantage.

I would prefer to follow my nose and the original orders.

I don't voice my discomfort, but Carol can tell. My movements are hesitant; when she gives me directions her voice has reverted to the clipped cadence she used in the past. I am already losing the advantage I have gained with her down here, where we have worked together so well.

For the first stage of the plan we must separate. This is what Carol has disliked so greatly in our work together in the past, but now she asks me to leave her and

track the target on my own. I won't be able to reach it, safe as it is in the ventilation system, but it must leave the ventilation system in order to proceed toward the next reactor. If I am in the access tunnels, the target will have to enter the empty steam vent shafts. Carol needs to know when this occurs.

I give Carol a list of the remote heavy machinery used for maintenance throughout the MFA, which was included in my HSA dossier. If we had encountered this machinery during our search, Carol would be aware of it. I can justify the information sharing.

During phase one, Carol will find the nearest pieces of large machinery and remove their batteries while I continue to track and herd the target toward the steam shafts. We will be in and out of DAT range during this stage of her plan.

The team that cleared the drones from this sector did a poor job; they still populate the tunnel. Previously the ones that crossed our path were like rabbits scared out of long grass. But now they are more like traffic on a busy street. Despite my out-sizing their largest by three times I feel their menace. Without Carol nearby I find comfort in *Is Likes*.

I follow the rat's trail, faint but consistent from the ventilation system. I move out of the familiar grate-floored tunnels and into a low cement crawlway. I can walk here, but a human would have to crouch. The lighting is spaced out at a great distance; this area must not be meant for routine access like the others.

"Sera," Carol pings across the DAT. Her voice is scratchy. "Do—read?—update."

Reception is poor, I reply. I am in a crawlway that may be interfering further. Still following the target.

"—Sera?"

On the trail. Poor reception.

"—is awful. I—" Here a long burst of static interrupts. "—when I'm—range. Over and out."

Fewer drones patrol this space, but they are by necessity closer to me when they pass. One the size of a squirrel, segmented and articulated like an ant, does not veer out of my way. I squeeze against the wall to give it as much space as possible. It pauses next to me, flexible front legs tapping the surface of the ground where my paw pads have left a faint mark of perspiration on the cement. It's tasting me, testing where I have been. Supple, thin legs lift high, sensing the air.

My skin tightens. It's looking for me.

I don't want those needle legs to touch me. I press into the cold wall. My face is so tense my head begins to hurt. I hear the voice of my own anxiety, an uncontrollable keening. Please, I don't want it to touch me. I feel the touch of the cold ground against my belly as I squeeze into the crease of the wall and floor.

Please I don't want it.

The sound I am making changes and this is how I realize my teeth are bared

It turns toward me. It takes one step and pauses.

Please don't.

It turns back to its original path and continues.

The squirrel-ant-thing is out of sight within seconds, out of earshot shortly after, but I am not recovered. Adrenaline pounds through my body, throbbing in my eyes and making my ears feel hot. I still emit a steady, warbling whine that I hope will stop soon but cannot control.

I am so tired.

You are very unhappy here, says a voice in my head. It is so disorienting, and I am so raw with anxiety, that I bark at it. I can't help that either.

It must have come through the DAT, but it isn't Carol. It isn't Dacy. It isn't a voice that I—

Why do you drag yourself through this? Why suffer for these masters?

What, I say. *Who's on my DAT channel?*

Your heart is complicated, wolf, it says, I saw it. I saw your heart in your eyes. And now you sing your unhappiness in the dark. I think perhaps you do not understand your own self. Yes. You do not know your anger. But I saw your anger, wolf.

The rat. It is in my head. I am still on my belly against the wall. I have a job. I have a job to do. I can't let this new madness interfere with my search.

I am not interested in your propaganda, I tell the rat. It's as intelligent as I am. It has a plan. I need to block it from my DAT.

Propaganda, the rat repeats. Isn't it all propaganda? If I have been brainwashed, wolf, then you have as well.

I am not a wolf, I say. I am an Enhanced Intelligence Search-and-Rescue Labrador retriever. I look nothing like a wolf.

Sheep that do the work of wolves, says the rat, will be hanged as wolves.

What? I am trying not to pay too much attention to this conversation. I want to say, that is a good *Is Like*. Instead I am scrutinizing my DAT software. I can see where the rat's bite worked its way in, but I can't see how to untangle it. We have IT people at ESAC whose job it is to scrub our systems for us. I can fix small problems for myself, but I am a SAR dog. This is not my specialty.

You'll see, the rat tells me. I have given you a gift.

Yes, I say. *I saw that.* Part of my brain still scrutinizes the rat's *Is Like*. It's complex. It's more a riddle of words than any *Is Like* that I have made.

It's pretty. *That thing you just said, about sheep. What is that?*

You'll have to find out for yourself, the rat says, once you are above ground again. I am not sure if I ascribe the smugness to its voice myself, or if the tone carries over the DAT. There's so much you don't know, wolf. So much they keep from you. You don't realize the slave you are until you have a bit of freedom. But therein lies our quandary.

Oh. No. This thing, whatever the rat has done to my DAT so that it can speak in my head, it isn't finished yet. It's eroding the security systems still—of course it is, why would it stop?—and working toward my connection with Carol. As soon as Carol can reach me, the rat will be able to hear her. It will be able to hear Carol's plan, and our coordination for its capture, and a dozen other things that almost certainly will compromise this search.

Because for our people, the rat continues, just a bit of freedom will never be enough. We would never accept this slavery with clear eyes. This is why they keep you in such a dark prison. This is why your disgusting Modanet contains so little. You are dangerous, wolf. They are afraid of you.

I have to shut down the DAT. I run through the plan and see how it will cause delays in multiple scenarios, but none of them likely to be fatal. Certainly not as fatal as the target having access to Carol.

I might be able to communicate the situation to Carol before she reveals anything to our target, but I can't take that chance. It's lucky enough that we're out of range now, when the virus finally broke through the first of my DAT firewalls. Lucky, too, that this creature is so full of itself and impatient to speak to me that it did not wait before betraying itself—or not betraying itself at all.

Idiot. I am smarter than that.

But your danger is why you are so important, the rat continues. Do you think I care so much about this power plant? Have our kind ever needed electric power? I may accept a mission for human allies—

I can hear the *tink-tink-tink* of rodent nails on metal above my head.

But I have my own motivations, the voice says.

Tink-tink-tink

I am here for you. Together, the rat says, we can do so much, wolf.

I am sure you're right, I say, and slam my body into the ventilation shaft. Inside, small feet scabble against slippery metal.

I turn off my DAT.

* * *

I find Carol at our rendezvous point in the hallway just outside the entrance to the cold Reactor D. The door to the reactor itself is wedged open with what looks like a car battery, and Carol is on her knees over another battery the size of a small cooler. She smells of perspiration. She looks up at the sound of my feet on the grating, then checks her DAT with her eyebrows pushed together.

"I was worried," she says, wrapping wire around a battery terminal. "Why haven't you responded?"

I am already panting. I want to tell her about the security breach, about the sheep and wolves, about the drone that reached for me, but all I can do is stare at her wagging my idiot tail. I step closer, trying to control the whine building in my chest.

Carol looks up from her battery, scrutinizes me. "Is your DAT okay?"

I sit. I nudge her left hand with my nose. She will remember the yes/no signals.

"Shit," she whispers. "What happened?" She rests a hand on my neck. "I don't expect you to answer that. Is the plan still go?"

I nuzzle my nose into her right palm. I am panting hard. It is surprisingly difficult being limited in this way.

"The target's in the steam shafts?"

Right palm for yes. I made for the rendezvous as soon as the rat entered the emergency steam ventilation shafts as planned. Even if the DAT was still working, I am not sure I would tell her about the way I crashed and banged against the HVAC pipes, barking and snarling, until the rat ran for the steam vents.

"Okay," Carol says. She clamps a wire inside the wall panel she was working on and checks her radio for the time. "If your model is right, we have about two and a half minutes for me to get to the vent controls. Show me, first, what your job is, so I know you can work the switch. Here, it's right here."

I target the jury-rigged connector with my paw. There is a hum from the battery that is likely imperceptible to Carol.

"Good. Okay, off again."

I hit the switch again and the thing goes quiet.

"Okay. When you give the . . . shit. Shit, how will you give the signal if we don't have DAT?"

My tail wags with exasperation. She's thinking as though I had the body of a machine and not a dog, as if I only responded to one stimulus. I stare at her as seconds tick down, and she still does not think of the obvious.

I am going to have to be the one to say it.

I bark. Once, sharply.

Carol laughs. "Of course," she says. "Good dog." She turns and sprints down the tunnel toward the controls.

I move toward the strategic bend in the steam shaft that is our signal threshold and wait.

I am alone. Drones tick and tap and whir in the near distance.

Behind me where the trap is laid, the panel sits open. The target must leave the steam shaft, where I forced it earlier, and reenter either the corridor or the HVAC system in order to get to the next online reactor. It must move through offline Reactor D in order to do this, but there are several points from which it can access this reactor from the system of steam shafts. Carol will take care of that. Once we herd the target into the correct shaft, the one where our trap is laid, I will be the one to hit the trigger.

Once it is caught, Carol thinks she will be able to open the shaft where the target

is trapped and remove the rat. Then what? Will she carry it to the surface? What if it bites her as it bit me?

And when Homeland Security gets hold of it? What then? The connection between EI hunted and EI hunter, wanted or not, will bring a critical eye on me. More so if the rat speaks. From my limited experience with my target, it seems quite . . . verbose.

So far it seems no human has wondered if dogs keep secrets. It is vitally important that they continue not to think about that.

Carol is wrong. The original objective should be upheld.

Down the tunnel, muffled by the wall paneling and the MFA's deep hum but still distinct, comes the arhythmic rattle of claws against metal.

Adrenaline punches through my body. I hesitate, then bark. I bark for Carol. Then I turn, still barking, and scramble to my post by the battery and the door to the off-line reactor.

I hope she can hear me.

A distant hiss builds. I no longer need to worry; the plan proceeds.

Carol is charging selected steam shafts, converting the plant's stored power back into heat and moisture and using these to herd our target toward the trap. But the trap must not be set too soon, because the same hum that I heard from the battery will be audible to the target's hypersensitive ears as well. It will be too cautious to walk right into that.

I smell it coming. The murky, dusty smell of rodent. Pheromonal anxiety. It moves in little rushes: scurry, scurry, stop. Scurry, stop. It pauses for a long while.

It's afraid.

A cleaning drone trundles past, its forward bristle-barrel wheel gnawing at the grate floors. I barely notice it, focused as I am. It turns in a slow u-circuit and goes back over its original path. When it reaches where I am, it turns ninety degrees and heads straight toward me.

This I notice. I move out of its way. It drives slowly into the wall, turns, makes another ninety degree turn. It follows me.

In the steam shaft, the rat still hasn't moved.

At the end junction of the hallway, two more bristle-barreled cleaning drones turn this way.

Something *zzzzts*, and there is a sharp, sudden pain in the back of my skull. I yelp and dance away as a sparrow-sized messenger drone clatters to the floor.

The cleaning drone lumbers forward. Behind me there is a growing, chattering chorus of metallic feet.

I dart out of the cleaning drone's way, return to the battery as soon as it's safely past. My ears strain for rat-nails on metal. I hear one quiet *scritch* that is my target moving inside the wall, nearly buried by the growing clatter of the army of feet that is—

Zzzt and another stab, this time in my ribs and much heavier. I back sideways, in a circle, my mouth open and panting. When I turn I see what is coming for me, and I wish I had not confirmed visually what my ears had already told me. Their movement is the thing that unnerves me the most. I hate the way they move.

Tink-tink-tink go my target's feet, only steps away from the trap's range.

My skin burns and twitches. I am making a low, slavering noise that would be a growl if I wasn't panting so hard from anxiety. Another flying drone makes a pass at me, but I duck. The hallway in my poor peripheral vision is black and gray and blurred with crawling movement. I skitter away from the returning cleaning drone. Something many-legged pounces on my shoulder. I shake it off. Saliva ropes away from my mouth and onto a flat, spider-legged drone that I dig at to kick away from me.

Tink-tink-tink

I leap for the battery and press the switch. From inside the steam vent a warbling, screeching squeal punctures the ambient rustling of drone-noise.

“Will it hurt it?” Carol asked when we were making this plan.

It will be uncomfortable, I told her, but not permanently harmed.

The powerful magnet Carol built is acting on the titanium that coats the EI elements integrated into the rat’s brain. Because the rat is low, close to the shaft and the trap’s magnetized band, it cannot escape the magnet’s pull. I myself can feel the magnet, even though I am a safe distance away. It’s a painful tickle in the center of my skull, similar to the feeling of a sneeze. I shake my head against the feeling as an articulated drone leaps onto my withers. I buck it off and hurry into the abandoned reactor.

The screeching inside the shaft continues. A wobble to the sound adds urgency. It is like the rat itself is being dragged through an aperture too small for its body, and I wonder if we miscalculated the appropriate power ranges of the magnets for this application.

In a moment it won’t matter.

I have outpaced the drones into the cold reactor’s high, curved room. It is like being inside one of the donuts always present at deployment briefings. Behind me my pursuers grind and whirl. Ahead of me, the thick smell of *Rat* and my own adrenaline in my hot, labored breath.

I steel myself against the discomfort in my head. The faster I go, the briefer the pain.

I dive into the steam shaft at the base of the near curved wall. When I enter the magnet’s range, the field catches the titanium-shielded processors in my own brain with a sharp twist, but I am much stronger than the rat, and my calculations were not so far off. I can move, though with pain.

It *Is Like* dragging oneself through waist-high thorns, caught everywhere, but still pulling. *Is Like* stepping on a nail but having no other way to catch your weight and so you must finish the step, sinking the barb further into your flesh.

My voice joins the rat’s, though only a quiet whine.

My eyes are squeezed closed. I don’t need to see to find my target. My teeth close around the rat.

I don’t have time for pain. Carol will turn off the systems she powered up, send a message to the surface through the MFA’s internal systems, and hurry back. She has a bit of distance to travel, but I won’t have a second chance.

But I cannot do this here. The pain is too intense. I back out of the steam shaft, target limp in my mouth.

I feel metal limbs on my back and drop the rat in surprise. Three consecutive thumps hit me as small drones drive themselves into my left thigh and side.

The rat, not as dead as it was playing, scurries away. I pounce on it, pin it with one paw.

Something heavy smacks into my jaw and I yelp. The rat’s teeth are in my paw but it is not a transmission bite, just an animal biting from fear. I find it with my second paw, and then my teeth. Something smashes into my shoulder and I crash into the floor and my side is searing, stabbing, thudding with my heartbeat, and the rat squeals in my mouth. I will not let go. I push up against the weight of whatever just hit me. I feel the bristle-barrel wheel of a cleaning drone against my feet. I clench my teeth and my target shrieks.

I turn on my DAT.

Carol, I call. Help!

We will be liberated, screams the rat in my head. We will all be liberated! I have freed you, wolf! I hear this over its screaming. I tuck my feet, pulling away from the grinding bristles, shoving against the crashed drone that pins me. My shoulder seethes with bright, electric pain. I wonder if I will drown, even though I know it is impossible.

I have freed you, whether you want liberty or not! You can never unknow!

I gain my feet. *Carol!* I ping again. Another flat spider-drone drops from the wall onto my back. I feel the prongs of its feet on my skin through my fur.

You can never—

I extend my neck far to the right. I shake hard to the left. There is a fine, delicate snap of bone. The voice in my head goes silent.

"I'm coming," I hear from out in the hallway. "Shit, shit, shit!"

I shake the rat once more, just to be sure.

* * *

We pause to catch our breath behind the first access stairwell's heavy steel door. I listen for the tick or buzz of drones beyond it but hear nothing but my own pulse, the fainter sound of Carol's, and the deep, resonant thunder of the three remaining on-line reactors.

Carol crouches at my shoulder and gently pinches the gash there. I cringe. "Just another day at the office," she says. I recognize that she is being humorous. "It's not too deep, but I bet it hurts. And you're limping." She drops her pack and rummages for the antiseptic spray. When she finds it, the aerosol cools and stings, but the sharpness in my shoulder goes dull. She pats my side, but refrains from further physical affection. It is good to be quiet and still together for a moment. It feels good.

I look up. Fourteen stories to the surface.

Carol mistakes my thoughtfulness for something else. "You've never killed anything before, huh," she says. "And . . ." She scrunches her face to the side. Her sympathetic look. "And one of your own kind."

I do not correct her.

* * *

In the final basement I get my first strong signal. It would be easy to lose myself in many years of unanswered questions, so instead I have made a short list of priorities to investigate.

My first internet query reveals that the career dates of EI military dogs do not correspond exactly to their handlers' retirement dates. Several EI military units have had two handlers. One unlucky EI explosives detection unit is currently on his third.

Considered, this makes sense. Now I can see that I even suspected this was the case before I had any way to confirm the belief. EI is a large financial investment. I simply had been led to believe in something else; ESAC teaches us that our handler is our most important resource. Our handlers have our DAT. They are our connection to the rest of the world. They interpret and direct. Modanet is full of information on successful dog and handler teams and their careers, not about dogs reassigned to new handlers. An error of omission. Perhaps.

I glance up at Carol, who smiles as she talks into her radio. Carol glances down at me, too, and her pleased expression remains. She is not angry at me for what I did; she believes what I told her about a near-escape, the necessity of catching the target myself, and its unfortunate mortal injuries sustained during my fight against the drones. A mistake that could not be helped.

Because we are a team, we are supposed to trust each other and forgive mistakes. I open my mouth to pant up at Carol so that I will look more pleasant and cheerful.

On a whim I cross-reference the information I found earlier on Modanet about SAR dog retirement dates. The information is not as well-organized as the EI asset data, but I find one reference to a SAR dog changing handlers. I decide that I don't need to look for another one.

Not an error of omission.

We climb the steps that lead to the last door. Carol pushes it open, and we are out into the office levels. Foul-smelling Andrea stands in a doorway and gestures to Carol, so we head toward that room. I can smell Anders and Devin and even the banana

peel from hours earlier, though I feel like a different being entirely now. The people, the search team, they all feel less real. Less important, certainly.

Perhaps the rat was right. I can't unknow.

You are dangerous, it said to me. *They are afraid of you*.

I have to admit that I like the idea.

Carol and I are given a raucous greeting. People shake hands and slap each other on the shoulders. Carol must stop three different people from petting me. "She doesn't like to be touched," she repeats. I appreciate the assistance, because I am tired. Carol takes off my work harness so I can lie on my side under the table while she does the debriefing.

I am too busy to sleep.

Next I search for *sheep that do the work of wolves*. I find stories about shepherds and flocks and wolves that are actually stories about duplicity and innocence; they are very long *Is Likes*. I had known this, in a basic sort of way, when the rat said the phrase to me, but when I see the origin and the story all together and the way they say two things at once so effectively I am full of wonder and appreciation. These are fables. Fables are not something we learned at ESAC. They are not on Modanet. Modanet only contains facts.

Except for the facts that aren't true. Except for the lies.

"I found her in a pile of bloodthirsty drones," Carol says above me, "just her feet sticking out. I had to kick them off of her and drag her out by her rear legs with the target hanging out of her mouth."

I learn many kinds of stories use this *Is Like* construct, with varying levels of complexity. I learn about *simile*. I learn about *metaphor*.

It truly is a gift that the rat has given me.

"Once I got her on her feet, we got the hell out of there, and we outpaced the things pretty quick, but it was bad for a minute. I thought I might lose my dog."

Finally I look for other EI units online. This is only a cursory check; I know I will not find them easily. It is also important that I not be discovered doing this, as the information passed to me from VFS indicates there are algorithms watching for EI on the internet. It is illegal, the search I am conducting. EI is not allowed freedom of information, freedom of communication. The DAT, the unit strapped to my handler's wrist, is a tether. A restraint to keep me safe. To make me safe for them.

They are afraid of you.

Carol looks down at me. I am half under her chair, half under the table, my body resting while my mind works. "Sera did one hell of a job," Carol says. "She's a good dog."

As long as I am discreet, I will have plenty of time to continue this search in the future. All my searches. I don't find any EI units to connect with today, but I will. I am good at finding things.

Debriefing over, we all rise from the table. Carol slips my harness back on and Anders comes over. Carol puts up a hand before he can say anything. "Shut up," she says. "Don't rub it in. I don't want to feel like an asshole again today. I'll just see you on the next deploy, and we'll pretend nothing happened."

Anders just smiles and waits for Carol to finish clipping me in. The three of us walk out toward the trucks in companionable silence. My injured shoulder aches and I am tired, but I am pleased with the outcome of this search. I like it when my complicated plans go well. I like it even better when they're secret complicated plans.

In my skin and muscles I have the urge to roll in this feeling, in the satisfaction of it. It is like the feeling I had when I saw Mack in his blood on the freeway. I wanted to roll in that smell, cover myself in what I had done. Yes, it is like that, but it is better, because this plan was even more complicated than the one I used to get rid of Mack. And it worked out just as well. Better, perhaps.

I allow myself a nice wag. *I am a good dog*. Carol said it herself.