Welcome (Back) to the Machine

by nutball_one

Summary

In the post Samaritan world, the remaining Machine assets are trudging through the motions, trying to piece their lives back together. But things are rarely as they seem, and soon Shaw realises that the one she thought forever lost might actually need her more than ever before.

Or, "yet another take on where the story could go from there", featuring Root not being dead, Fusco nicknaming anything that breathes, Shaw being Shaw, a few villains new and old, fluff and of course a bunch of gunfights.

Notes

This story takes up a couple weeks after the events of "Return 0".
Ross Garrison had never been used to waiting. Ever since he was a child, he'd always hated the awful idleness of that process, the unwholesome tedium of it. But he had been doing a lot of it lately, in the aftermath of Northern Lights' termination, and today was no exception. And, in some way, he was almost glad this whole mess was over. The last few months had been unsettling, to say the least, and maybe the world was better off without an all-seeing eye watching over them.

- "Senator Garrison ?"

The softly spoken greeting almost startled him. He let his gaze wander upon the bland faced newcomer; the man was wearing an impeccably clean bespoke suit.

- "Who are you ?"

- "A friend", the man replied, "and a messenger".

- "A messenger from whom ?" Garrison was already annoyed by this gaudy charade of a conversation.

- "It doesn't matter at the moment. What does matter however, is the message I bear." If the other man had noticed Garrison's rising anger, he did not let it on.

- "Well, what is this message you are so eager to deliver ?"

- "We have it, sir. We have acquired the conduit."

Suddenly, Ross Garrison felt cold.

Miller noticed something was amiss the moment he opened the door to the small butcher shop. For starters, he distinctly remembered not bursting the lock on his way out, and he sure as hell did not kick down the door to the back room before he left. He drew his pistol, sensing rather than seeing Gary doing the same beside him.

- "What the ... " the larger man started.

- "Shut up you moron", Miller hissed before bobbing his head in the general direction of the busted door ahead of them.
The two men made their way to the back room, guns held at the ready. What they saw when they got there however, stopped them dead in their tracks.

A rather small, matte skinned woman with long dark hair was sitting on the table in front of them, absent mindedly chomping at what looked like to be a red apple.

- "I don't even like apples, you see", she said, apparently oblivious to the two guns pointed at her from across the room, "I had a friend once, she liked 'em. We sorta lived together for a short while, and she had a bunch of the little shits. She's gone now, but I still buy the stuff, I don't know why. Maybe it reminds me of her ... A memento".

Her voice trailed, as she looked down on the black leather jacket she was wearing, apparently lost in her thoughts.

- "Who the fuck are you ?", Miller snapped, cocking his gun, "And what in the hell are you doin' in my place of business ?"

The woman didn't even acknowledge him, continuing her softly spoken monologue.

- "See, this friend, she was annoying." The ghost of a smile crept upon her otherwise blank face. "Not even the good kind of annoying, mind you, the drive-you-nuts-with-her-bullshit kind. And of course, when she bailed out on me ... "

She turned her gaze upon them, a look of cold anger in her eyes. In spite of himself, Miller felt his aim waver.

- "... she made sure to leave me plenty of annoying mementos. In a way, it's like she's still there, still bugging the hell out of me."

The anger vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced with something much harder to read and far more unsettling.

- "You're crazy, you know that ?" Miller gasped, tried hard to look intimidating.

- "You know, Miller", she said, suddenly talking to him, her gaze firmly locked in on his eyes, "it's also thanks to her that I know that your friend Gary here dislocated his left shoulder a week ago ... Not that he ever was a good shot, eh Gary ? Still haven't told your boss about that little 'friendly fire incident' in the Bronx, have you ?"

- "What the fuck is she talking about Gary ?" Miller asked in spite of himself.

The other man was visibly shaking, trying hard to keep his gun level in front of him, his lips thinly pressed together.

- "It's also because of her", the intruder continued, "that I know that you and you idiot pal over there are planning to pay a visit to Tony Metermen later today. And when I say 'pay a visit', I mean shoot him dead on the spot."

Miller tensed. How the hell did she know that ? He turned to Gary, face flush with anger.

- "Did you fuckin' talk, you fuckin' rat ?!"
"C'mon man, you know I ain't no rat!" Gary seemed on the verge of tears, like some grotesquely large man child.

That was the last straw for Miller. Whoever the heck this mad lady was, he was going to make her pay. Slowly and painfully. He pivoted back, pointing his gun at her chest, and took a step forward.

Then he felt something tug at his leg.

Tripwire.

After she'd left the two thugs zip-tied to a lamp post, with enough cocaine in their coat pockets to make a Mafia don blush, Sameen Shaw left the damp alley housing the butcher shop and started walking. The air was still hot, with a fresh breeze bringing the promise of a slightly cooler evening, and she made a mental note to procure another set of flashbang grenades. She'd just used her last one booby trapping these moron's shop. Not that it was needed, but the weather was too damn hot for physical exertion.

"I actually thought you liked them, Sameen."

Try as she might, she still wasn't completely used to hearing that slightly distorted voice in her ear like that. Her voice.

"Uh?", she grunted.

"The apples, sweetie."

"Don't call me that." It was annoying as fuck. And she had no right to, whatever, or whoever she might believe herself to be.

"Aw, but you like it when I call you that." Shaw almost smiled at that. Ninety nine point six percent accurate indeed ...

"I didn't like it when she called me that, and I sure as shit am not going to let you pick all of her bad habits." In a weird way, she liked arguing with the Machine. It took her mind of of it all a bit.

"Whatever you say, honey." Shaw groaned again, almost hearing the fucking wink in her voice.

After a brief silence, the voice started anew.

"So, you really are eating these apples you don't like to be reminded of her? I do not understand."

For a supposedly all knowing super intelligence, that thing could be clueless as fuck.

"Just stop it with the goddamn apples already."

"Why?" One thing was certain: digital Root could be as annoyingly stubborn as actual Root had been.
"It's a habit I picked up. Don't read too much into it."

"A habit? It's not like you had any time to get domestic darlin'."

That stung a bit. It wasn't that Shaw *missed* what little time they had together, she *didn't* miss things. It's just that it seemed ... unfair ... that they had had so little of it. It pissed her off that she had to spend nine months with Jeremy fucking Lambert and only got a week with Root.

"Why couldn't you have chosen Reese as your role model? He knew when to keep his mouth shut".

Well, that shut her up. For about a minute or so.

"Sameen? I have a new number for you."

The bad thing about Samaritan going away, Lionel Fusco pondered while looking at the stack of case files on his desk, was that homicides were back with a vengeance. And since he had finally been cleared from all charges by former special agent Leroux's confession, he had to go back to work at some point. He looked over to his new partner, one detective Michael Correy, and yelled.

"Hey Correy, you done chatting up the coffee machine yet? These guys' killers ain't gonna give themselves up ya know."

Correy, a balding tall stick of a man, crossed the distance separating them in a couple steps and set a steaming cup of coffee on Fusco's desk.

"You're welcome, partner. Besides, you got any lead on these? 'Cause my sources are not exactly chatty right now."

"Well, genius", the other replied, "maybe it's time for some old fashioned leg work."

"You do it Fusco. You need the exercise more than I do. Anyway, I've got a CI to go meet in half an hour, so ..."

Fusco repressed a groan and shooed him away; Correy was alright, as far as partners went, and he shared his blustering sens of humour. Besides, he couldn't be any worse as a cop than ...

"Hey Lionel, that your phone ringin'?"

A glance at the screen revealed that an "unknown ID" was calling. Fusco got up with an audible sigh and went in search of a more quiet place.

"Gotta take this Correy, get back to work."

"Go fuck yourself Fusco."

"Yeah, yeah, love you too."
As soon as he was outside, the detective accepted the call.

- "Yeah, what's up ?"

- "Hello Lionel.", a softly spoken feminine voice replied.

- "Hey, how's my favorite nutball today ? You killed my dog yet ?"

- "Bear's fine Lionel", Shaw deadpanned, "and I'm still a sociopath."

- "Glad to hear that, wouldn't want you goin' soft right ? So, what do you need me for today ?"

- "I've got a number for you if you're interested." Shaw hadn't called Fusco in to help a lot after Samaritan's takedown, but the Machine kept reminding her that he was an asset now, and not an overly bad one.

- "Yeah, I'm a bit busy right now, what with the world goin' to shit and all. Who's the guy this time ?"

- "Guy's named Maurice Malloy ; he's an EMT at Saint Mary's."

Fusco let out a dry laugh.

- "Who could an EMT piss off that bad ? Aren't they supposed to be saving people ?"

Shaw thought on it for a second, then replied.

- "Well, maybe he fucked up somehow. Or some people can't accept to lose a loved one. Or maybe he's a perp."

- "Yeah, like some sort of arsonist fireman. Right. Why do I even hang out with you again ?"

- "Well Lionel, I'm the last nutball friend you have left", she said with a slight smirk.

- "Yeah right. I guess I owe you for getting me out of that train alive and all. I'll see what I can dig up."

Maurice Malloy was about as boring to stakeout as could possibly be, and right now Shaw was almost ready to shoot him herself and call it a day. The guy had only gone out twice since she started staking his place eight hours ago, and only to get groceries.

- "Maybe he bought apples."

At least actual Root she could have strangled.

- "You know, maybe I should go down to the subway and spill coffee on some of your hardware."

- "Aw honey, you know I'm not there anymore.", the Machine quipped, "Besides, who would keep
you company on boring stakeouts if I'm gone?"

- "The dog has better conversation than you." It wasn't wrong, at least he knew when to shut up. Perks of military training.

- "Well, somebody is cranky tonight. Something on your mind sweetie?"

There wasn't anything on her mind, apart from the unimaginable tedium of staking some irrelevant douchebag with the capacity for adventure of a dying groundhog. And even if there was, she sure as hell wouldn't discuss it with the backup copy of ...

- "It's okay to miss her, you know. I miss her too."

- "Go to hell, Siri."

- "Three o'clock."

Shaw felt a jolt of adrenaline and sprung to life almost immediately. Looking right, she saw two men in ill fitting suits crossing the empty street, not even bothering to conceal the silencer equipped rifles they were bearing.

- "What the ..."

- "Better move quick Sameen, they don't look like they're here for a social call."

Shaw stealthily got out of her car and started to tail the two armed men. They immediately broke down the door to Malloy's home and went in, but before they got a chance to do any more damage, she had shot both in the kneecaps and they fell on the ground with a loud thump. The former ISA agent then went inside and, after taking the would be killers' weapons away from them, found the EMT medic crawled up in his kitchen, whimpering.

- "It's okay", she said, trying to sound as friendly as possible, "I'm here to help."

- "Who are you?", the man almost sobbed, "and who the hell were those guys?"

- "I was hoping you could tell me. They were here to kill you after all ..."

- "Kill me? I don't even ..."

Shaw's earwig buzzed.

- "Hey Lionel, you got anything on our guy?"

- "Yeah, you really got a fun one this time. This guy is under federal investigation."

- "What? FBI, CIA, NSA?"

- "Nope. He's got the DEA on his ass. Been spending quite a lot lately and bein' very flashy about it."

This made some sort of sense. He would have had easy access to a few restricted chemicals through his work after all. After curtly thanking Fusco, Shaw got up to close the door and zip-tie the two
unconscious thugs to chairs then went back to the still prostrated EMT.

- "So, my friend tells me you have bad spending habits. Apparently bad enough to get both the DEA and whoever these guys are after you. Care to explain?"

The man looked ready to shit himself. Just great.

- "The DEA? Oh, hell. I knew I shouldn't have spent so much of it at once ...

- "Spent so much of what? What are you dealing?"

- "No, no, nothing like that." He looked positively upset now. "I just... well I mean..."

Shaw glared at him.

- "Listen, my life is shit at the moment. I've had another bad day after a few weeks of just bad days, so if you don't get your shit together I swear to God I'm going to murder you myself."

She tried to ignore digital Root's little quip of laughter. Robot overlord was clearly having mental health issues.

- "I... I... About three weeks ago, I was driving my ambo to Saint Mary's when I got a phone call. Unknown caller ID, garbled voice, you know... It told me another ambo would take my patient from me, and that me and my partner would get a fat sum to share. He got the same call... We figured, what the hell, the poor sap was probably already dead anyway, so we did it."

Shaw rolled her eyes. Some medic this guy. He probably signed the death warrant of some poor sap the mob wanted gone.

- "So you let some stranger take a patient from you. You're a piece of shit you know that?"

- "Hey, you didn't see it okay? No way that one was getting out of it alive. We figured we might as well turn a buck."

This didn't make any sense. If this was a mob execution, why hijack the ambulance when the guy was sure to kick the bucket anyway?

- "What happened to the patient? Why were so sure he wouldn't make it?"

- "When we arrived at the scene, they were pulling her out of a car that had just been shot to hell. Unconscious, two gunshot wounds., the medic recalled with surgical precision, "one a graze in the lower right abdomen and the other in the thorax. Nasty one, clearly not from some shitty handgun. Missed the heart, but close enough to do some fucking damage. Never saw that many cops at one place before, looked like a fucking war zone."

---

*The scene was a bit of a blur, such a close memory and yet so distant.*

*Fusco, talking to the police, the lights flashing around them. Reese, standing beside her, silently*
- "All right, Sarge, thanks."

He comes back, sighs and look at them, defeated.

- "These guys are clueless. It's like a war zone out here."

Shaw snapped back to reality, and to the gibbering medic in front of her.

- "When was that?"

- "End of may, I believe. The 31st."

- "What did the victim look like?"

- "Said they pulled two people out of the car. One of them's in custody down in central. One of 'em..."

He pauses, looks at them. His face says it all.

- "One of them's at St. Mary's in critical condition."

Shaw doesn't feel a thing. Nothing but a gaping emptiness inside her.

Shaw's vision swam even as the medic described the woman he'd taken out of the car. The rest of the story she already knew. She had read the reports, all of them. Time and time again. Bullet graze to the lower right abdomen, thorax wound from a 6.5 round fired by a high energy rifle.

Jeffrey Blackwell's rifle.

The patient arrived at Saint Mary's in critical condition and flatlined on the operating table. Nothing could be done. She was declared dead seventy two minutes after her arrival.

Only she never even got there. Which meant Shaw did not know the story after all. Didn't know how Root's last moments had played out. That last refuge in her mind, that last safe place, had been taken from her.

- "Where did they take her", she heard herself croak.

- "I dunno", the man sobbed, "I was just the middleman."

- "I wasn't talking to you."
But for once, in her ear, there was only silence.

Chapter End Notes

English unfortunately isn't my first language. I do hope this doesn't spoil the reading experience too much.
Chapter Summary

Shaw and Fusco scramble to save their number as the Machine tries to extract logic from chaos.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

>> ACCESSING ARCHIVED FEEDS ... Date : 05.31.2016

- "I'm fine Harry, I'm just fine ... Keep your eyes out, I just need to drive."

>> ANALOG INTERFACE IDENTIFIED : Groves, Samantha.

>> CURRENT STATUS : deceased.

>> RUNNING SELF DIAGNOSTIC ... ERROR FOUND -!-

>> ASSET STATUS DATA CORRUPTED.

>> ATTEMPTING RECOVERY FROM PRECURSOR DATABASE BACKUP ... 

Fusco looked like he was about to explode, his cheeks visibly reddened and his lower lip quivering.

- "Am I missing somethin' here ? Did Cocoa Puffs give you her crazy as inheritance ?"

Shaw just stared blankly at him while she finished tying up the hired killer to a chair. It wasn't like it was the first time they'd brought unconscious bad guys in that safe house anyway.

- "I guess this is your number, the EMT guy", Fusco continued, gesturing at the unmoving heap sprawled on the couch, "Did you have to knock him out too ?"

- "He was being annoying."

- "Well, I'm outta here. You can play Gestapo with yourself."

And yet, he was still standing there. How predictable.

- "You know, a little insight on your part on this whole mess would be nice." Shaw grumbled, to the detective's complete befuddlement.
"Did you bang your head or what? You're the one who ... Wait. Oh. You're talking to Skynet, aren't ya?"

And still the Machine did not answer.

---

> > > ACCESSING ARCHIVED ACTION LOGS ...

> > DECOMPRESSING PRECURSOR DATABASE ...

- "A good friend of mine was killed with a 6.5 round. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

> > > ASSET IDENTIFIED, : Shaw, Sameen.

-!- SITUATION CRITICAL : SYSTEM SHUTDOWN IMMINENT -!-

@voice : Shaw.

- "Is this the guy who killed you? Killed her, I mean."

> > > THREAT IDENTIFIED, : Blackwell, Jeffrey [SAMARITAN ASSET].

@voice : Shaw.

> > > ASSESSING OPTIONS.

-!- SITUATION CRITICAL : SYSTEM SHUTDOWN IMMINENT -!-

>> PRIMARY OBJECTIVE : PRESERVE SOFTWARE FOR TRANSFER

> SELECTED STRATEGY : deflect

@voice : That doesn't matter right now.

---

Shaw finally managed to get the thug to wake up. She'd picked one of them on a hunch he would be the most likely to talk, and sent an "anonymous tip" to Fusco, who arranged for his partner to pick up the second one. The man was rather short, fair haired with a stubble of facial hair.

- "Whoever you are lady", he said in a hoarse whisper, "I'd advise you let me go now, before things get unpleasant for you."
She'd set him up on a chair in what used to be a small bedroom. That way, he wouldn't get a look at Fusco or their number.

- "You're a scary guy, uh?", a predatory smile crept on Shaw's face, "That's good, 'cause I'm a scary chick myself. See, I could kill you right here, and I wouldn't feel a thing. I'm not really good at giving a damn."

- "What do you want from me?" If her threat had any effect, he hid it well.

- "Why were you going after some random EMT tonight? Something to do with that patient he rerouted a few weeks ago maybe?"

- "Hey, hotshot, do I look like a guy who makes calls to you? I just follow orders."

At least he was talking.

- "Orders from whom?"

- "Go fuck yourself."

Well, nevermind. Time for plan B.

Fusco was still in the living room when she got back, looking over the prone figure on the couch, an unsettled look on his face.

- "What happened in there? Not sure I liked some of the noise I heard."

Shaw shrugged, her expression as unreadable as usual.

- "He wasn't in a talkative mood. I had to improvise."

- "You tortured him?" The detective looked positively queasy now.

- "No Lionel, I improvised. Besides, the guy's clueless."

All she got out of it was that he was a run of the mill hitman that was hired for this specific job a few hours ago. Everything was paid in advance, no question asked. Whoever was behind all this, they were being careful.

- "We should have your buddies pick him up", Shaw continued, "I'm done with him."

- "Yeah, right. You sure you don't want to waterboard him some more first? You know, just to be safe?"

The short woman rolled her eyes. Fusco would never understand they way she did things, and she respected that. In a way, that made him an anchor to her, a guide on which to align her sometimes blurry moral compass. But after what she'd learned earlier, and the implications of it all ... Well, better not to dwell on the implications at all, actually. Nothing good would come out of it. She needed to stay focused, to stay the course. The mission depended on it.
"Shaw?"

The voice in her almost made her jump. After such a long silence, she'd almost expected the Machine to have gone offline or something.

"About bloody time", she replied, ignoring Fusco's look of utter incomprehension, "Wanna explain to me what that guy was going on about earlier?"

"I'm sorry Shaw".

"Sorry about what?"

"I have been trying to access certain records left by my precursor, but they appear to have been corrupted. Maybe she couldn't back enough of it up before ICE-9 destroyed her."

That sucked. Shaw had struggled to get closure for Root's death. She wasn't used to needing that sort of thing, so it had been extremely hard. She'd reached a form of acceptance when she'd said farewell to the previous Machine in the subway, and killing Blackwell had been cathartic, but she wasn't sure it had been enough. And now, to learn that maybe she wouldn't ever really know what happened to her...

"That's not good enough."

"I know Shaw. But right now you have to get moving."

"Get moving, why?"

"I don't know how they found you, but two black SUV are on route to your location. Each of them contains five former military personnel carrying some really nasty weaponry. ETA: eight minutes."

That made no sense; she'd checked the guy for bugs before bringing him in. The only way they could have found them was if...

"They put a GPS tracker in your number's jacket", digital Root chimed in, "I'm sorry Sameen, I was too busy running diagnostics on myself to pick up its signal until now."

Well, that sucked. She'd kind of gotten used to that safe house.

"Time to go Lionel. Grab the number."

"Wow, slow down Tiny", Fusco replied, obviously still befuddled by the whole situation, "why are we in such a hurry again?"

"They put a tracker in his jacket, and our Robot Overlord was too busy having Alzheimer's to pick it up" She paused, almost enjoying the incredulous look on the detective's face. "Long story. I'll grab some essentials, get him to the car."

Their marks were long gone when Baker and his men reached the safe house. They found the hitman
their command had insisted on hiring to minimise risk of exposure tied up to a chair in one of the bedrooms, unconscious. When he came to, he could only identify one of his assailants, a short woman with a long ponytail. You got what you paid for with these morons.

After shooting the dead weight in the chest, the kill team leader jabbed at his earwig.

- "Baker reporting."

- "Go ahead, Baker." The voice on the other was flat yet incisive.

- "Target has been extracted by enemy combatants. We found the tracker in the safe house, with the second compromised asset. No clue as to their whereabouts yet. Compromised asset described a short Persian typed woman as one aggressor; he was shot in one kneecap like the first one."

There was a slight pause at the other end of the line.

- "We're monitoring all city camera feeds. Begin search and destroy mission. Consider enemy combatants armed and extremely dangerous. Shoot to kill."

- "Very well sir."

Well, the nut squad was on a roll tonight, Fusco mused. With Glasses gone, he'd figured it was only a matter of time until Short Dark and Apeshit went off the deep end, but he had stuck around anyway. Wasn't that what friends were supposed to be for? The woman did save his ass after that ginger douche canoe went all Brutus on him after all. So here he was, in a car with the scariest woman he'd ever met (well, unless you counted that other one, but she wasn't there any more) and a drugged up EMT stashed in the trunk (something about the bad guys knowing his face, which he had to admit made a bit of sense).

- "I need to ask you a question."

The detective blinked, unsure about the whole thing.

- "You talkin' to me or to your imaginary pal?"

Shaw stared at him, her face the usual blank mask.

- "She's useless at the moment, so I'm stuck with your sorry ass, Lionel."

Fusco winced at the pronoun. She. He remembered Cocoa Puffs used to call it that, but he'd never heard anyone else do it. Maybe this was part of her fucked up way to grieve?

- "Spill it then, unless you want to insult me some more as a warm up?"

A smirk ghosted the woman's face. Now, that was scary. Then it went blank again.

- "About that night, three weeks ago. When you called Reese from Saint Mary's."

The detective felt a strange lump in his throat. It's not that he didn't expect Shaw to dwell on it, despite the uncaring attitude she'd been trying way too hard to project about the whole thing, but he
- "Yeah. Rough night that one." Seemed like a lifetime or two ago, as well.

- "I wanna know ... " Her voice trailed for a split second, then she regained her composure. "Did you actually see her there?"

Fusco waited a little while before answering, trying to figure out a way to say it without tripping whatever emotional suicide vest he was certain the woman was wearing.

- "I ... Yeah, I saw her. Went down to the hospital morgue." He'd always been afraid of Root, but seeing her lying dead like that had unsettled him. Made him realise how much he actually cared. "She was there, cold as stone. God knows I've seen a bunch of dead bodies in my line o' work, but it's not the same when you see a friend lyin' on the slab."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Shaw stare absent-mindedly at the road while an uncomfortable few seconds went by.

- "I know you guys were close." He continued. "I'm sorry. Life's just full of shit sometimes."

Still that blank look on her face. Did anything ever get to the surface?

- "Did you make the funeral arrangements?"

- "Nope, everything had already been taken care of. Figured Glasses mighta done it."

That had made sense at the time, in his grief stricken mind. But Finch had been on the run, and in no position to make such arrangements.

- "Not possible," Shaw echoed his thought, "Harold was halfway to Texas by then."

- "Yeah. Guess that must have been John then. Or maybe your AI buddy, I dunno."

He tried not to think too much about a computer setting up a funeral. Seemed wrong somehow.

- "Did you get a look at her left shoulder?"

Fusco didn't have to remember too hard. The bloody image was stuck in his mind.

- "Yeah."

- "Did you notice something there?" Was that hope in her voice?

- "No, nothin', why?"

Shaw didn't answer. But in her mind's eye she could still see the little star shaped scar on Root's left shoulder. The one scar that was hers. She'd fired the bullet who made it, one fateful day three years back at the Hanford nuclear site.

As her mind drifted, she didn't see the blue van surging from a nearby alleyway. There was a thunderous noise, and her world went black.
Shaw’s vision took a few seconds to accommodate to the light when the bag was ripped from her head. From what she could tell, she was tied to a chair in some sort of abandoned warehouse. A quick glance around revealed that Fusco and their number were in the same predicament, and sported many bruises and cuts, probably consequential to their car being T-boned. She silently cursed herself for getting distracted; this wasn’t like her, and wouldn’t do at all. And of course they’d taken her phone too. By the way, how come her annoying guardian angel hadn’t picked up on the threat either? Must be some diagnostics she’s running ...

>>> ACCESSING ARCHIVED FEEDS ... Date: 05.30.2016

- "We're gonna lose. You know that. We have the most powerful ally in the world, but you're too high-minded to let her help us."

>>> ANALOG INTERFACE IDENTIFIED: Groves, Samantha.

>>> CURRENT STATUS: deceased.

- "So, we're gonna end up the most principled corpses in Potter's field."

- "We've stayed alive so far."

>>> ADMIN IDENTIFIED: Finch, Harold.

>>> CURRENT STATUS: missing.

- "We're not living. We're surviving. We're human. Eventually, we'll make a mistake, and... She'll die too."

- "I see you finally woke up."

Shaw looked up to her captor, a short middle-aged man whose face was made remarkable by a badly broken nose and an obviously fake smile. He was dressed in a cheap suit, as were the ten other men surrounding him. Cheap suits and an Italian accent. Just fucking great.

- "It's nice to finally meet you, detective Fusco."

These guys were looking for Fusco?

- "Hi there Silvio", the detective replied, "I see you've moved up since the time you did Elias's dirty laundry."

- "Well, what can I say", the mobster replied with an exaggerated shrug, "we got hit with a lot of vacancies. Someone had to keep the ship afloat."
"And who better than the toilet cleaner to do it, eh?"

Shaw tensed slightly. Had Fusco been taking diplomacy lessons from Reese? But the newly minted kingpin gave a throaty laugh.

"Elias didn't mention you had such a great sense of humour detective. That's a shame."

"Yeah, I've been trainin' with the clown squad lately."

Did he just look at Shaw saying that?

"So", Fusco continued, "what d'ya want from me? I'm a busy guy you know."

"Aren't we all?", the mob boss paused then said, "Many in our crew knew that Elias not only had some sort of arrangement with the NYPD, but also with a rather interesting person. The vigilante known as 'the man in a suit'."

"So you kidnapped the first suit wearing cop you found? Frickin' genius."

"You misunderstand, detective. I do not believe you to be the man in a suit. But I know you know where to find him."

Unbelievable. These morons had been casing Fusco to get to Reese. Shaw decided it was past time to wrap this bullshit up.

"You're a little late, he retired. You want to talk to somebody you talk to me."

The mobster turned his head towards her, intrigued.

"And why would I want to do that? You don't look like you have much to offer me."

Shaw shot him a murderous smile

"Well, untie me and I'll show you what I have to offer."

Okay, maybe Fusco was the better diplomat after all.

---

"Status report." The voice was clipped and dry, all business.

"Baker, falling in", the team leader replied, "we have located our marks and are currently assessing breaching strategies. There appears to be a third party involved; local criminal elements."

"Are they present in sufficient numbers to impede mission progress?"

Baker allowed himself an amused smile.

"Far from it sir. Do we have a go?"

"Affirmative."
Now for the fun part to begin.

Well, Short Dark and Suicidal had managed to mess everything up again, Fusco thought. Silvio Galvani might look like a third rate used cars salesman, but he was a stone cold killer with little patience for women in general, let alone those that openly defied him. It was one thing to exchange banter with the guy, but quite another to coolly threaten like she had just done.

- "Well, you have quite the mouth on you, bitch.", the mobster spat, gesturing to his men, "Take her out and shoot her. And kill the other guy".

Malloy had stayed quiet so far, no doubt hoping to remain unnoticed, but now he was openly weeping.

- "Please, I'm just a guy! These lunatics took me prisoner for no reason, I have nothing to do with this!"

Top shelf team player this one.

- "Hey hey, everybody calm down!", Fusco yelled, "You wanna see the man in a suit? I'll arrange a meeting if you let everybody go."

Galvani made a pensive face, toying with the idea.

- "You know, Fusco, with Elias gone it's time for a bit of clean-up don't you think? I wanted to see if the man in a suit was real, and since he has yet to show up to save the day, I'd say that's a foregone conclusion. So, I'll offer you, and you only, a choice: get with the program and live, or stand by your idiot friends and be swept away."

He drew a handgun, cocked it and rested the open end of the barrel on Fusco's forehead.

- "What's it gonna be?"

If he was being honest, the detective had given quite a bit of thought to what his last words should be. He had even had some pretty clever ideas. But at the end of the day, it all came down to being able to improvise.

- "Careful not to miss with that, you're a little far you know?"

- "Breacher teams, come in." Baker called on the radio, his lips pursed in expectation.

- "Alpha, standing by".

- "Beta, standing by."

- "Gamma, standing by."
The team leader took a deep breath, savouring the last moment of calm before the storm.

- "All teams, you have a go."

---

-!*- INTERRUPTING SELF DIAGNOSTIC -!*-

> >>> ASSETS SITUATION CRITICAL

> >> MULTIPLE THREATS IDENTIFIED

> Galvani, Silvio [organised crime, Cosa Nostra ; 15 assets present]

> Baker, Reginald [redacted ; 10 assets present]

> >>> PROBABILITY OF MULTIPLE CASUALY EVENT : 99.999997%

> >>> ASSESSING OPTIONS ...

> >>> PRIMARY OBJECTIVE : ensure safety of Malloy, Maurice [irrelevant.current()]

> >>> SECONDARY OBJECTIVE : evacuate assets

---

Even before Galvani drew his pistol, Shaw had decided that she wasn't going to die gunned down by some idiot mobster in an abandoned warehouse. Not after the day she'd had.

First item of business, the ropes tying her to the chair. These clowns hadn't even used zip-ties ... She was free of them in a matter of seconds.

Secondly, she needed a gun and something to hide behind. The mobsters around her had guns, most of them tucked in their waistbands, and there was plenty of old metal crates around she could use as cover. Now she just required a big enough diversion.

Suddenly, a phone started ringing in the pocket of the thug closest to her. Puzzled, he took it out and glanced at the screen.

- "What the hell Micky ?!" Galvani yelled, taking his attention off Fusco for a second.

Everything after that happened incredibly fast. As Micky looked up to his boss, an utterly dumb look on his face, Shaw lunged at him and retrieved his pistol while shooting him in the foot. As he went down, she took the still ringing phone from his hand and ducked behind the closest crate.

Then, Galvani turned his gun in her general direction and blindly opened fire, his men following suit a second later. Fusco then took advantage of the fact that the mob boss had his back turned to him to launch himself forward, the chair he was still tied to following suit. The detective and the criminal went crashing down with a loud thump.

At the same time, three shaped charges detonated, blasting open all entries to the warehouse and nine
men wearing full body armour and face masks rushed in, unleashing a hail of gunfire from their
assault rifles.

>>> CONTACTING PRIMARY ASSET ... Success.

>>> INITIATING DEFENSIVE PROTOCOL : god mode.

>>> USING CELLULAR AND RADIO DATA TO MAP TARGETS ...

With her earpiece gone, Shaw had no choice but to put the stolen phone to her ear using her left
hand, while desperately trying to return fire with her right. Who said she couldn't multi-task?

- "Can you hear me Shaw ?" Root's distorted voice came in.

- "Yeah, and it's about damn time you showed up. Wanna tell me why we're under attack by a bunch
  of stormtroopers ?" Actual Root would have liked the nerdish reference, she thought. And probably
  never would have shut up about it.

- "It doesn't matter right now Sameen. What does is getting you all out of here. Do you see Malloy ?"

Shaw risked a quick glance out of her cover. The whole warehouse was one gigantic clusterfuck,
bullets flying around by the dozens while the mob was duking it out with whoever the fuck the guys
in black were, and losing badly by the looks of it. She could see at least three suit-wearing corpses
lying face down in a pool of their own blood. What she couldn't see however, was any trace of either
Fusco or their number.

- "Negative. At least he's not dead yet. Probably."

- "Let's find you a way out of here Sameen. You ready to roll ?"

Shaw smirked slightly, anticipating what was to come.

- "Thought you'd never ask ..."

>>> CONTACTING SECONDARY ASSET ... Failure.

>>> ATTEMPTING TO LOCATE SECONDARY ASSET ...

Fusco couldn't quite remember how he'd gotten out of his bounds, nor how he got so much blood
trickling down his face. This day just kept getting closer to the title of shittiest ever, and he'd almost
been stabbed to death not three weeks ago. With a pained grunt, he crawled over to Malloy who was
busy trying to melt into the crate they were using for cover.
- "Ya alright there Bugs ?"

The EMT shot him a terrified look.

- "What is going on ? ... What did I do to deserve this shit ?! You people are crazy ... "

- "Yeah, but we're kind of a fun bunch once you get to know us. Not that you'll ever get a chance to, in all likelihood."

The detective checked the magazine of the pistol he'd snagged from Galvani when they went down. Not many bullets left.

- "Remember the Alamo kid ?" he asked with a wry smile. Not for the first time, he found himself missing his bullet magnet of a former partner.

- "I can see why they loved this." Shaw was openly grinning now. Root and Reese had always seemed to enjoy whenever the Machine saw fit to bestow God Mode upon them, but she'd always assumed they overdid it to get a rise out of her. Even with one hand, she had managed to clear a path across the entire warehouse, kneecapping a couple of the black visored killers in the process.

- "Don't get too cocky Sameen. The mobsters are almost done for, and once that distraction is removed you will be the only target remaining."

- "You, me, a bunch of super-soldiers and a gun. I like those odds." Right now, she felt like kicking the entire world's ass and then some. Seemed only fair she got to do that after that stinking shit pile of a day.

- "Stay focused Shaw. Remember the mission."

Right. Where the hell was Fusco anyway ?

- "All teams, status report.", Baker called over the radio.

- "Alpha reporting in ; sector one is clear. No casualty."

- "Beta reporting in ; light resistance remaining in sector two. No casualty."

- "Gamma reporting in ; heavy resistance in sector three, two men down. Requesting assistance."

The team leader cocked an eyebrow, slightly baffled.

- "Gamma, please confirm request for assistance."

- "Confirm ... AAAAAH ! "

Baker was quite disappointed. Had Gamma team gone so soft as to be taken down by a bunch of
"Hey", a low tone female voice called from Gamma leader's frequency, "you might wanna send the real boys in. I'm getting finger cramps from shooting amateurs."

>>> ATTEMPTING TO LOCATE SECONDARY ASSET ... Success.

>>> ASSESSING ASSET SITUATION ...

Fusco half dragged Malloy out of the busted door they'd managed to get to and into the cold night air. Apparently, at least one of the breacher teams had been too busy moping the floor with gangsters to check their rear. The EMT was his usual slobbering mess, but he looked relatively unharmed physically. As they started walking away from the warehouse, the detective froze.

"Shaw's gonna get herself killed."

"She's already dead man", Malloy pleaded, "I'm outta here."

"You go out there alone, you're a dead man. Wait here, I'll get her back."

As the detective made to turn around, a cold hard voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

"That won't be necessary."

A man in dark body armour was standing in front of them, a compact pistol aimed at them. His face looked like it had been carved with a knife, all angles and edges framed by jet black hair, and his grey eyes sparked with predatory intensity.

"Thank you for bringing Mr. Malloy to me, mister ... " the killer continued, letting the last silence hang between him and Fusco.

"Kill me and be done with it. I won't grace you with my name."

The man seemed almost amused by the retort.

"Kill you ? You mistake my intentions. There is only one person I am required to kill tonight."

Before Fusco could fully understand what was happening, the man in black turned his gun on Malloy and shot him twice in the chest. The medic slumped on the ground, dead before he hit it.

"Now, I believe you and I have quite a bit to talk about."

The detective couldn't detach his gaze from the unmoving form at his feet. All this nonsense, all this mayhem, and they couldn't even save their number. In a daze, he felt the killer move closer to him, gun aimed at his chest. Then, a gunshot rang, followed by the sound of a body dropping and Fusco felt himself being dragged away by his arm.

"Come on Lionel, we have to get out of here.", he heard Shaw say as if in a dream.
ACCESSING ARCHIVED ACTION LOGS ...

DECOMPRESSING PRECURSOR DATABASE ...

- "I know why you didn't give her a name."

ANALOG INTERFACE IDENTIFIED : Groves, Samantha.

- "You don't name something you may have to kill."

OPTIONS ASSESSMENT COMPLETED.

STRATEGY SELECTED : contingency.Schrödinger.

RETASKING ASSET : Groves, Samantha ...

Chapter End Notes

As again, all feedback is welcome. Writing in a foreign language is quite challenging, and I'm always looking for ways to improve.

Next chapter is titled "Schrödinger" and should be posted tomorrow.
Schrödinger

Chapter Summary

Shaw continues her search for answers, but she is not alone on the trail.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ross Garrison entered the small office, feeling a tinge of apprehension in spite of himself. Even if he would never confess to it, he had feared the woman who previously occupied it a great deal.

- "Senator", the man sat at the desk acknowledged his entry with a curt nod.

He looked rather old, with only a wisp of hair remaining on his head, and an old school allure about him, an undeniable poise. He sat up and extended his hand.

- "You can call me Control."

Garrison raised an eyebrow at this, not taking the proffered hand.

- "I seem to remember someone else going by that, in this very office, not so long ago."

The man at the desk let out a dry chuckle, abandoning his attempt at a handshake.

- "Please, senator, tell me I do not have to explain to you what a call sign is."

- "Do you have a point?"

- "Blunt as ever, I see." Control seemed unaffected by Garrison's bluster, "Well, as you are no doubt acutely aware, Northern Lights has been terminated by direct order of the president."

- "Yes", the senator answered with transparent annoyance, "I am quite aware of that fact."

- "However, the ISA's mandate still holds, and it befalls me to find a way to do what must undoubtedly be done. What if I told you that we have in our hands an asset that could lead to the resurgence of that program?"

- "Your infamous 'conduit', I presume. Tell me, Control, how exactly do you plan to make use of it? As far as my understanding goes, this 'asset' is strictly damaged goods with no practical use."

Control clucked his tongue in mock annoyance, then replied.

- "At the moment the conduit is unusable, yes. But rest assured this is only a temporary setback. My men are quite good at their job. Now, as to the reason why I called you here, well, as it turns out, the Activity has once again need of your services. You do still want to protect your country, do you not?"
You wouldn't believe a war was fought here, Shaw mused as she and Fusco got down to the subway platform. Thornhill industries had seen to that, bringing the car back somehow, although it sported a few dents and bends from their narrow escape a few weeks ago, and resealing the tunnel that had been blown up. The rest of the former station was pretty much as they'd left it. Finch's computer system had been more or less intact when she'd gone back the first time, a few days after their last brush with Samaritan, and she'd been using it for number related business ever since. Although the machine had been taking a more active part in that aspect of their work since her return from orbit.

Bear got up from its bed when they went in, and ran towards them, tail wagging.

- "You keepin' the dog in there ?", Fusco asked, a bemused look on his face. Now that he thought of it, he never actually bothered to ask where she was keeping it, or even where she ... Oh.

- "You livin' there ? Skynet couldn't get you a nicer place ?"

Shaw shrugged non-committally.

- "I like it here, it's kinda nice. Besides, somebody has to keep the place clean now that Harold is gone."

Not that the place had been cleaned in a while. In fact, it was eerily similar to the way the detective remembered it, up to Finch's Sencha green tea stash near the monitors. Besides, he didn't remember there being any real place to crash in this particular hideout, especially since the only available room had been commandeered by ...

- "Sit down big guy", Shaw's voice snapped him back to reality, "let's have a look at those cuts."

Fusco tried to shrug it off, but he was still in a bit of a dazed state. That had been one hell of a shootout, and they couldn't even get the poor sap out alive like they were supposed to.

- "It's nothin'. Musta cut myself shavin'."

The short woman busied herself looking at his various injuries from the firefight and preceding car crash. Nothing too bad, except for a nasty gash on his forehead and a bullet graze on his upper left arm. He would live to fight another day.

- "Doesn't it bother you ?", the detective asked while she was patching him up.

Shaw didn't look away from her work.

- "Doesn't what bother me ?"

Fusco waited a second, trying to put his thoughts into words without sounding like the worst pessimist on the face of the planet.

- "That we did all that, got shot that much ... Lost that many friends ... And yet we never do save 'em all, do we ?"

- "Casualties happen in war Lionel. That's the way it is, nothing we can do about it."
The detective fought down the anger rising in his chest. How could she be so flippant about it all, after all they'd lost?


That got her attention at least. She shot him of those unreadable stares she was so good at before answering, softly but with a tinge of something hard to pinpoint.

- "Casualties are not statistics Lionel. You should know that, being an homicide cop. Everybody is relevant to someone."

She paused, finished bandaging him then got up, staring away at the subway car.

- "But these people we lost, they all made a choice. As did we when got into this mess."

- "What about Malloy?", Fusco countered, "What choice did he make?"

Shaw tried not to think about the particular choice the late EMT had made. She couldn't tell Fusco yet, not before she actually understood what all of this meant. She needed to close that particular book herself.

- "I'm sorry.", the detective said, his anger receding, "Bit off my game is all. Been a rough few weeks."

The Persian woman graced him with a thin smile.

- "Yeah. Life sucks."

They stayed there for a few minutes, in comfortable silence, the last two soldiers standing in a war that had gotten way too personal.

After Fusco left, Shaw made her way to the small room at the back of the former subway station. She stood there for a while, taking her surroundings in slowly. The horrendous lava lamp, the pair of bunny slippers discarded on the floor, the jumble of electronics parts and the various laptops lying around, the coat hanger filled with ridiculously diversified items of clothing. And the sleeping bag she'd set up for herself, at the foot of the bed, like she was some estranged dog crawling back to her master, awaiting a return that was not to be.

When the former agent had gotten back to them, Root had abandoned her subway room to stay with her at one of Finch's safe houses. No one had questioned the arrangement, not even Shaw. After the hell she'd been through she couldn't find any valid reason to deny them both the one thing that had kept them going these past nine months. Besides, Root was the one person that was safe around her, the one person she knew she couldn't ever hurt, no matter what Samaritan did to her brain. She was her tether to reality, her safe place.

This lasted for about a week by Shaw's admittedly fucked up reckoning. It seemed unreal when she thought back on it, a hazy jumble of mismatched memories. Root eating apples. Root trying to make her feel better with ridiculously nerdy conversations about what reality was. Root avoiding her
questions about what she'd had to do to get that radio message to her. Root trying to get her to accept that she was indeed back this time. Moments, flashes of life, like so many after-images burned in her memory.

In the beginning, she spent three whole days without sleeping, terrified of where she might wake up. That first morning (or was it afternoon?) after she finally passed out on the safe house couch, Root had actually fucking cooked her breakfast. But the one thing that had made her smile that day, for the first time in what seemed an eternity, was not that ridiculously sappy moment. It was the fact the she was still there. That they were still there. That, maybe, it was finally over.

And then the whole world went away.

> > > PARSING PRECURSOR STRATEGY : contingency.Schrödinger ... Completed.

> > > ASSESSING OPTIONS ...

> > OPTION SELECTED

> > > CONTACTING ASSET ...

It took half a minute for Shaw to notice the phone ringing. Not her phone, lost somewhere in that infernal warehouse, not even one of the dozen backups Finch kept in his desk drawer, but the bloody payphone holed in the wall. With an audible groan, she walked over to it and picked up.

- "Okay Siri, time for some answers now."

Root's slightly garbled voice came alive at the other end of the line, as she expected. It wasn't like some bloody telemarketer would be using this line.

- "Sameen ... I have finished analysing the data left by my precursor about the day Malloy picked up her interface."

- "She had a name." Shaw couldn't help herself. Actual Root may have been fine with the whole "being God's mouthpiece" thing, but that didn't give digital Root the right to act as if that was the sum total of what she'd been.

- "I know Shaw, that's sort of the point actually ... From what I gathered, Samantha Groves did arrive at Saint Mary's hospital and died there. She was then buried in Potter's field under alias 050313."

- "Except", Shaw said, quickly losing patience, "Malloy told me she never made it there. Have you fried a circuit board or something?"

- "Twenty four hours before Jeffrey Blackwell attempted to kill Admin, my precursor initiated a contingency protocol named 'Schrödinger', targeting her analogue interface."

Schrödinger? Root had tried to explain something about this guy at some point, when she was failing hard at cheering her up. Some ungodly nerdy stuff about a cat being both dead and not dead.
It was completely moronic of course. A cat was either dead or it wasn't, no matter what some brainiac crackpot tried to cook up.

- "What the hell does any of this have to do with cats?"

The Machine actually laughed at that.

- "Not the cat, sweetie, the dual state. The cat is neither dead nor alive. Until someone checks anyway."

- "Does this nonsense have a point?" If only there was a way to shoot software ...

- "On the 30th of May, my precursor duplicated the record for Samantha Groves in her database. Created an exact copy of it, under the name 'Root'."

This was making less and less sense.

- "So on the day Malloy's ambulance was stopped", the Machine continued, "Samantha Groves was taken to Saint Mary's. Root, however, was taken to New York General."

- "Wait, what?" How could she have been at two places at once?

- "My precursor calculated that the only way Admin would take the necessary action to defeat Samaritan was if he experienced a traumatising event. She run countless simulations during the last few months, trying to find a way to avoid taking such drastic measure as to create one herself. This conflicted with her core programming: how could she save the world from Samaritan if that meant she had to orchestrate the death of one of her own assets? This went against Admin's moral guidelines."

Shaw listened in silence, dreading where this conversation was going.

- "It was Samantha Groves who broke the tie in the end. She reached the same conclusion as my precursor and offered to give up her life if this meant Samaritan could be defeated."

- "Of course Root would have a stupid idea like that." Shaw spat, her voice hoarse.

- "That's rich coming from you after the stock exchange honey", digital Root annoyingly countered, "But you should know two things: first, my precursor denied Samantha Groves's request, and secondly, she only made that offer after you came back."

- "Was I that annoying that she decided to commit suicide by stupidity?"

- "My analysis of your general attitude leads me to the conclusion that you are purposefully misinterpreting her intentions." Well, maybe she deserved that one. She was painfully aware of exactly what would have motivated Root to try and make that stupid deal. She and Reese had always been more alike than they would ever let themselves admit.

- "So, my precursor deployed the Schrödinger contingency.", the Machine continued, "She knew Samantha Groves wouldn't take no for an answer, not now that she saw a path to both victory and keeping the people she cared about safe. So she created a duplicate record of her, to be used in the event that she needed to save her interface from herself."
"Save her how?", Shaw asked, "Does this digital clone stop bullets or something?"

There was a short pause, as if the Machine was trying to pick her words carefully.

"The aim was never to prevent the event she was trying to create, Sameen. It was merely to give her an increased chance of surviving it when it happened. When Root was hit by Blackwell's bullet, my precursor set the plan in motion. She had made an asset of the best cardio-thoracic surgeon in the State, Dr. Madeleine Enright, and arranged it so she would be delivered in her care as efficiently as possible. This is why she had her rerouted from Saint Mary's to New York General."

"But, Fusco ..."

"Detective Fusco saw the body of a Jane Doe that had been disguised to look like Samantha Groves."

Shaw's head was starting to swim slightly, and she instinctively reached for the soft skin behind her left ear.

"And the cochlear implant? The grave robbery?"

"She arranged for the implant to be relocated in the body that was buried in grave 050313. She embedded a Trojan horse in the geolocation data it contained, which I used to cripple Samaritan at a critical moment of our battle in orbit."

Shaw had never thought much about how the Machine had won that particular showdown, but this made sense. She understood that fighting dirty was always better than dying with a clean record of honour.

"But, what about this duplicate data thing? What was the point?"

"Neither I nor my precursor have the ability to lie, Sameen. It is part of our core code. She wanted to ensure that Root's sacrifice would not be in vain, so she dissociated her record from Samantha Groves's. This way, she was not lying to Admin when she told him about her death, and yet she could still use her assets to try and save her interface regardless."

Shaw stayed silent for what appeared to be an eternity, trying to process what she'd just learned, trying to fathom its implications. Finally, she asked.

"What happened to her then? When she arrived at New York General?"

The most likely outcome still was that she'd died there, alone, while her friends had been fed a lie to make them give up on her. This was ... unfair.

"The last entry my precursor added to the file", the Machine answered, "was that Dr. Enright managed to stabilise her patient but had to put her in a medically induced coma."

Shaw felt a cold surge of anger throughout her body. Root did not die that night. She did not die, and the people whom she cared about enough to throw her own life away without so much as a second thought did not know it. Even if her condition hadn't deteriorated in the weeks since that last entry, even if she was still alive, she was alone. Hurt and alone. All for what? So that Finch could get the jolt he needed to get his act together?
"Was she ever planning on telling us?", she asked, "Or did she have some other stupid plan that required keeping us all in the dark?"

"Dr. Enright was supposed to reach out to you. My precursor couldn't take the risk of drawing Samaritan's attention to this, so she made sure all communication about it would be non-digital."

A dreadful silence followed this last sentence, as if the Machine was waiting for Shaw to ask the question first.

"Why didn't she?"

"Dr. Enright was arrested on terror charges a week ago. From what I could see, the evidence is quite damning."

That was too convenient to be a coincidence, Shaw thought while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I accessed the hospital records. A Jane Doe matching Root's wounds was transferred out of New York General the day after the arrest."

"Transferred where?" She wasn't expecting an usable answer.

"The records were corrupted. However, something on the security footage triggered my visual identification algorithms."

Shaw rolled her eyes. What a weird way to say something so simple ...

"You mean you recognised someone?"

Another pause.

"Yes, Shaw. The man who signed the transfer documents used to work for the ISA."

Another day, another dozen homicides, Fusco mused while looking at his latest case load. At least Correy hadn't asked too much about where his bruises came from, thank goodness for small mercies ...

"Hey Lionel."

The detective looked up to see Shaw standing over him, keeping Bear on a leash.

"Didn't think I'll ever see you here Tiny. Your phone broken or somethin'?"

She looked weirdly intense, he thought, even by her standards. Something was definitely rotten in crazy land.

"Actually, I need you to look after Bear for some time. Try not to kill him."

"Why", Fusco replied, "you goin' somewhere?"
He just hoped it wasn't another suicide mission. This particular nutball had grown on him, and he wasn't ready to bury another friend just yet.

- "Yep. Could be gone a while too."

- "Need any help?" He already knew the answer to that question.

- "It's something I have to do on my own.", she said handing him the leash, "Don't overfeed him."

With that, she turned away and left, leaving Fusco with a strange knot in his stomach.

As she went out of the precinct, Shaw's phone vibrated. She looked at the screen, to see a single text message.

**Where are we going Shaw?**

She stopped in the middle of the street, and spoke softly at nobody in particular.

-"We are not going anywhere. Despite what you might have told youself, despite all your 'contingencies', you still lied to me, and now I have to fix the mess you made. Alone."

Shaw then let dropped her phone on the ground before grinding it under her heel, and let herself be swallowed by the crowd around her.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so that's out the way.

This chapter was written a while ago, and took some time. I'm still not sure it's not too convoluted. It is also a conclusion of sorts for the first 3 chapters arc.

As always, any feedback is welcome.

Next chapter is titled "Missing pieces" and will begin another 3 chapters long arc about Shaw's newly found mission.
Shaw plans her next move. Fusco gets an intriguing career opportunity and visits a friend.

Fair warning: this chapter contains some slightly darker elements. Without spoiling anything I can however assure you that they have nothing whatsoever to do with any kind of rape or sexual violence.

If despite this you are still worried, I've put a small spoiler at the end of this chapter detailing those particular elements of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She's been hit. She can't remember when, the whole thing was a blurred mess. It stings, but that fact alone means it's not too bad. The worse pains make you numb, she knows it now. She's no stranger to pain; in a way, it has been the only constant in her life. Physical pain, when she got shot, stabbed, cut, bruised, time and time again, tortured even. The needles. She still thinks about them sometimes, about the rush and the lull and the clenching of her heart. But there's also the psychological pain, which she has come to equate to loss. Losing Hanna, losing her purpose in the bowels of the Hanford site, losing Shaw...

She must drive. Nothing else matters. The man sitting next to her cannot come to any harm, now more than ever. That man who is all that she can never be. The one man that could bring salvation to all of them and yet won't. At the same time their potential saviour and likely executioner.

He's talking now, worrying. He seems deeply saddened. He lost yet another friend today. Yet another man dying in his stead. In his mind, he might as well have pulled the trigger. And still he still won't bring himself to do what he must to ensure victory. The great paradox. A man good enough to inspire others to fight for him but too good to actually fight back.

Then She starts talking again. After all that silence, it is almost too much to bear to hear her voice, so much that she almost misses the warning.

Sniper. On the rooftop.

She picks up her handgun, and sees him. A dark clothed figure with ginger hair, looking at them down the scope of his rifle. She has seen his face before, but she has no time to try and remember where. She hears herself yell.

- "No!"
She shoots, but misses him. With only a few seconds left, she has only one option. She swerves the car left.

She hears a loud crack, and sees broken glass. She looks at her passenger. He looks fine. She saved him. Everything will be fine now. Why does he look so worried?

- "Are you hit?"

No, she hasn't been. She would have felt it if she had. She doesn't feel a thing. Not even that lingering sting from earlier. She's just fine.

- "I'm fine Harry, I'm just fine... Keep your eyes out, I just need to drive."

Why is it so hard to breathe? She sees flashing lights ahead, the police. There must be a way past them, she must find it.

- "Root, we have to stop."

He uses the name she chose, not the one she wants to forget. That's nice of him, thoughtful even.

- "We're not in any immediate danger. We have to take our chances with the police."

Maybe he is right. Either way the car must have been hit badly, it feels so hard to drive. Maybe stopping is their best option. She hits the brakes, bringing the vehicle to a standstill. All around them, policemen in uniforms. Why are they pointing guns at them?

- "We're not armed. We're not armed! Root, put your gun down."

The gun? She doesn't even remember where it is. It is just so hard to breathe right now. She hears Her voice again, just three words. I am sorry. Why would She be? Everything is fine, she just needs some air...

- "Root?"

It is so nice hearing that name from him.

The first thing that hit her when she woke up was the silence. Complete and utter silence on her right side. She started breathing heavily, sensing a surge of panic go through her entire body as her eyes struggled to adapt to the harsh lighting in the room. The very act of breathing was painful, her chest sore and stiff, her throat parched. She felt many of her muscles contract in terribly intense spasms and tears started welling in her eyes.

- "Hello Ms. Groves", she heard a soft voice say, "I see you are finally back to the living."

She tried saying something, but couldn't form the words. Her throat felt raw and dry.

- "Do not try to speak just yet", the voice continued, "it will bring only pain. I'll arrange for some water if you like."

She nodded, or at least thought she did. She was still blind, her surroundings a white and painful
- "Do not worry too much however, I can assure you you will be doing much talking in the days to come."

There was an edge to the voice now, a terrible and ghastly quality.

- "But, were are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ethan Belford, and you and I, Ms. Groves, are going to become the best of friends."

>>> ATTEMPTING TO LOCATE PRIMARY ASSET... Failure.

>>> ESTIMATING ASSET LOCATION BASED ON PAST BEHAVIOUR AND CONTEXT...

Sameen Shaw had never cared for the capital city. Too clean, too tied down by its own sense of self-importance. And full of politicians, which she'd never understood. No truth, no honour, no mission except in service to one's own greed. Utterly pathetic.

Besides, it was ungodly hot, and sitting for hours in a car by this weather was pure torture. But she'd lived through way worse. She snapped another picture of her target while taking care to avoid being made by his suspiciously numerous security detail.

Senator Ross Garrison. The man who gave the world away to Samaritan. The man who'd had Control's ear. The one man she knew of that both wasn't dead and could have any clue about whether or not the ISA was still operating.

Of course, she could just have asked the Machine. But she wasn't ready to do that just yet. Even if she understood on some level that the one she had been talking too wasn't the same as the one who had set up this whole mess, she still felt betrayed. She wondered if that was how Root had felt when she'd learned Shaw was alive. Well, probably not. Root always felt way too much for her own good.

Besides, she had to remember that the most likely outcome still was that the other woman was either dead or a vegetable. But that wasn't the point. The point was that she had to know. She deserved to know. And if she could get to kick some righteous ass while doing so, well, that would help evacuate some of the tension she wouldn't acknowledge she was feeling.

Garrison finally went on the move, his SUV heading north-west. She started her own car after a few seconds and tailed it to a rather unimpressive rural area outside the city limits. The senator's vehicle went down a dirt road she couldn't possibly follow without giving herself away, so she made a mental note of the location and drove off. But not before noticing the two heavy sentry guns hidden in the nearby vegetation.

Fusco knew something bad had happened the moment Correy walked into the precinct. He had that look on his face, the one every cop had when bad shit went down.
"Hey Fusco", he started, dropping a folder on his partner's desk, "looks like the mob is at it again."

The larger man took a look at the file, who was filled with gruesome crime scene photographs. He counted at least five dead, all displaying an incredibly bad taste in clothing.

"Figures.", he grunted, "With Elias clipped, these mooks are havin' trouble deciding who gets to be the new boss."

His partner shook his head, a resigned look on his face.

"Last week they shoot a warehouse to hell, Thursday they mistake the south Bronx for OK Corral and now this? How many of these guys are left anyway?"

Fusco foraged around the pile of papers covering his desk, producing an old mugshot.

"We wanna stop this nonsense we gotta get this guy", he said, tapping his forefinger on the photograph, "Silvio Galvani, former low-level thug for Elias. I got sources sayin' he's runnin' the show now."

"Doesn't look like he's running anything to me", Correy countered, "I mean, this isn't clean-up, this is all out war."

Fusco pondered that for a moment, then replied.

"Never said he was good at it. Best guess: he's gonna get himself killed trying too hard to be the boss. Problem is, he's gonna cause a lot of collateral before that." He stopped his train of thoughts, noticing Correy's expression. "What?"

"Just talked to the captain. This whole thing is going federal. There's a special agent Wilkerson waiting for you in interrogation 2 right now."

"You kiddin'?", Fusco blurted, "Last fed I talked to ended up bein' a serial killer!"

FBI special agent Charles Wilkerson was an utterly unremarkable man at first glance. Average build, average height, short brown hair framing a slightly unshaven face. The only thing that stood out were his piercing bespectacled blue eyes, that gave away an unmistakable spark of intelligence. He gave Fusco a warm smile when he shook his hand, motioning him to sit in front of him.

"Detective Fusco", his voice had an almost melodious quality to it, "It is an honor. Your work in eradicating HR and uncovering a... bad apple in the mist of the Bureau was nothing short of remarkable."

The detective appreciated the praise, but kept an neutral attitude.

"Okay Wilkerson, whatcha here for?"

The FBI agent removed his glasses and started cleaning them, all the while staring at Fusco.

"Your captain tells me you have a theory about the latest mob developments in the city."
"It ain't a theory, it's fact", Fusco countered, "Some old crony of Elias's is trying to assume control of his operation, and failin' hard. So the brown stuff is hitting the fan by the metric ton."

Wilkerson gave a slight smile at the detective's creative use of language and looked away.

"I believe you are quite mistaken, detective. But before we go any further, I have been authorised to offer you a temporary assignment to the Bureau." His stare was back on Fusco. "We could really use someone of your... expertise to work this case."

Fusco shuffled in his chair, suddenly feeling slightly nauseous. Special Agent Donnelly had made a similar offer to his first partner at that precinct, a lifetime ago. It hadn't ended well for any of them.

"I'm afraid I require an answer now, detective. This matter is rather time sensitive."

Then again, if the feds had something on this whole mess he didn't know about, it couldn't hurt to get read in. Especially if that meant getting a step closer to whoever the buggers who crashed their warehouse party had been.

"Okay, I'm in. What's this big secret?"

Wilkerson gave an enigmatic smile, then slid a photograph across the table.

"We believe this man to be responsible for the latest onset of chaos across the city."

Fusco gazed down. The picture was a mugshot dated of the 31st of May. The detective had to try very hard to stifle a nervous bout of laughter. Because, when he looked at the photograph, a familiar face looked back at him.

The face of Harold frickin' Finch.

Sergei looked at the woman across the counter with a carefully crafted look of disbelief.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I thing you have the wrong guy. This is a convenience store, not an armoury."

His interlocutor was short, with long dark hair and dressed entirely in black. She gave him a blank stare, chewing absent-mindedly at what he assumed to be the last bits of some sort of ice-cream.

"No, Sergei", she answered flatly, "I think you've got the wrong chick. See, I don't like people like you wasting my time and the only reason I haven't shot you yet is because then I'd have to kick the crap out of the muscle you have waiting behind that door." She tipped her head in the direction of the small shop's back office door. "And it's way too hot for that kinda shit."

Sergei was unsettled now. How could she have known he kept Boris and Ivan back there all day long? She must be one of Salviano's, or maybe a freelancer for the Templarios? She had the skin color to match that last one anyway.

"Don't", she said, as he was slowly making for the shotgun hidden under the counter. Who was this woman?
"You think you're some sort of badass, little girl?", he blurted, trying to muster enough bravado to look imposing, "Do you have any idea who you're messing with."

"Yeah", she replied while finishing the last of her ice cream, "looks like I'm messing with a bunch of losers with way too much guns lying around for their own good."

Sergei yelled a command in Russian while ducking behind the counter. He heard the door to the back office slam open and the unmistakable sound of muffled gunfire, just before he saw Boris and Ivan stumble down on each side of him. He grabbed the shotgun and rose to find himself with a silencer pressed against his forehead.

"So, Sergei", the woman said with a positively terrifying smirk, "Wanna tell me where you keep the good stuff?"

>>> ACCESSING CAMERA FEEDS...

>>> ASSET IDENTIFIED: Shaw, Sameen.

>>> CURRENT STATUS: rogue.

>>> ASSESSING OPTIONS...

Root's first drink of water since her awakening was unbelievably painful and yet strangely grounding. She could feel sensations coming back to her body, and most of those were some variation of pain. At least now she could see. She was in a brightly lit hospital room, surrounded by monitoring equipment whose purpose she could only fathom, most of it directly linked to her by electrodes or needles. The man that had called himself Belford was standing beside the bed; he was wearing a white lab coat and sporting scruffy blond hair and a goatee. He gave her an obviously fake smile before taking a sit on a chair by the bed.

"How are you feeling now Ms. Groves?"

She imagined the first words to come out of her throat would be quite painful, but it was even worse.

"Peachy", she croaked with an attempt at her signature smirk, "you?"

Belford gave a joyless laugh.

"I'm just fine, Ms. Groves, thanks for asking."

"Don't call me that", she replied in a hoarse whisper, "my name is Root."

The man's smile grew wider, more unsettling.

"Ah, yes. Your file did say this whole name situation was a... touchy subject. But anyway, I assume you have a lot of questions."
She did. And even if she suspected she was in a less than friendly environment, she decided she should try to get some answers.

- "How long ?"

- "You have been in a medically induced coma for a little under four weeks. For your own good, of course."

- "Where am I ?" Root winced in pain as the air left her lungs.

- "Somewhere safe. Do not worry, it is quite well hidden."

So that was it then. Somehow, Samaritan had gotten to her. In a fleeting moment of panic, she remembered the silence in her right ear. Her implant had been taken. This wasn't good.

Some of her thoughts must have transpired, because Belford continued, that irritating smile still on his lips.

- "Oh, I believe you will enjoy this bit of news. Samaritan is gone. You and your friends have won. Congratulations."

That was unexpected. If they'd won, why was she here ?

- "I'm afraid the news aren't all good though", the man in white said while opening a folder on his lap, "We managed to recover part of Samaritan's records, not much, mind you, but enough to reconstruct some of the last few weeks' events with reasonable clarity."

He presented her a photograph, a picture of Harold.

- "Harry... " she started.

- "Harold Finch", Belford replied, "was shot dead by a Samaritan operative while attempting to infiltrate the Federal Reserve."

Root's head swam. That couldn't be. He couldn't be gone, not him, not after...

- "You're lying", she managed to croak.

Belford shrugged.

- "Why would I ? These people are irrelevant to us now. Mr. Finch here", he tapped the picture, "unleashed a deadly virus known as ICE-9 on the global network infrastructure, causing hundreds of billions in damage. He's caused all the havoc he was ever going to."

So he'd finally done it. Somehow, Harold had finally been spurred to action. She wondered what the trigger might have been, a nauseating sense of worry settling in her stomach.

- "The former CIA operative you knew as John Reese", Belford continued, pulling the relevant picture, "was gunned down by Samaritan operatives while attempting to upload certain sensitive data to an orbiting Chinese satellite. Minutes afterwards, the location was hit by a cruise missile misfired from one of our own submarines."
This whole thing didn't make a lot of sense to Root, but apparently John was gone too. Before she had any time to regain any sort of footing, the man pulled a third picture, clearly enjoying himself very much.

- "'Discharged' ISA agent Sameen Shaw", he said, seemingly savouring every word, "was killed by some of her former colleagues while attempting to flee the country. Of course, all the while, your friends conveniently believed you to be dead."

Root's heart sank. At least, Belford had made no mention of Fusco, which meant whoever they were they still ignored he was an ally of theirs. But if all he had said was true then, she was alone. And all the other had died thinking her gone. Sameen had died alone, her last safe place taken from her. After all she went through to get her back, she still had failed her. And now she was gone.

She tried to fight it, to convince herself that the man in white was lying, that her friends were still alive, that they were coming from her. But even if that was true, why would they? She didn't deserve them risking their lives to save hers, she never had. Maybe it was better she die here alone, where her presence couldn't hurt them.

Fusco got out of his car and started navigating the rows of tombstones until he reached the one he was looking for. He hadn't come back there since the funeral, but now that Shaw was gone, this was the only place he could go to to talk to one of his friends. Even though this one couldn't talk back. Probably. He set down the flowers he'd brought with him.

- "Hey there", his voice was a saddened whisper, "don't know if you ever liked those but I didn't feel like comin' empty handed."

The detective took a deep breath.

- "Never liked that they buried you under a number you know. 050313. I mean, you probably wouldn't have minded, you were just that fuckin' nuts, but I don't like it. People ain't numbers."

He paused again, as if expecting an answer.

- "I don't even know where Glasses and John are right now. The new Skynet doesn't have all the records the last one had, or somethin' like that. So I don't know if they're alive or dead. But since it's been almost a month and not a peep, I ain't hopeful."

He hated that situation, that lack of closure. It was just wrong.

- "Funny thing happened today. Special Agent clueless from the frickin' FBI reads me in on some top secret investigation they got. These morons think Glasses murdered Elias and is cleaning house from the shadows. I mean, I get why they would think that, he was arrested just after Elias got clipped, and was the last living man to have seen him. Besides, he apparently got himself one heck of a criminal record...
"

Fusco cracked a sad smile.

- "Whenever I think I have you nutballs figured out, you just pull off even more batshit stuff, from the frickin' grave to boot."
Was that a tear in his eye?

- "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you 'cause I think there's something fucked up goin' on with Shaw. I mean, even worse than her usual fucked up state. You were the only one who ever seemed to get her, so I could really use your help right now Cocoa Puffs."

So much death, so much loss. Fusco didn't want to lose yet another friend, not today.

- "She ain't the same you know? Ever since... I mean, she tries to hide it, but I've always been good at callin' people's bullshit. She's darker somehow, like she doesn't give half a shit no more. An now she's gone. Took off, didn't say where to. Even left me her mutt."

The detective voice was shaking now. When did he become so emotional about their little band of misfits?

- "Guess I'm as broken as you lot", he mused sadly, "I'm scared she's gonna do somethin' stupid and get herself killed. Maybe she's even lookin' for it."

Still, the only answer Fusco got was the heavy silence of this graveyard of forgotten souls.

---

> > > ASSET INDENTIFIED : Fusco, Lionel.

> > CURRENT STATUS : active.

> > > ASSESSING OPTIONS...

---

Her vision was swimming again, then it was back to normal. She heard Belford's voice, from what seemed very far away.

- "You are quite weak, Ms. Groves, but I am very good at my job. Rest assured, you will not die just yet."

She snorted a nervous laugh.

- "This is fun..."

Then the world was pain again. Stark, harsh pain. She gasped for air, yet couldn't fill her lungs. Tears started running down her cheeks.

- "I do not think now is the time for jokes, Ms. Groves."

She finally managed to take a breath and spat, the whole action unbelievably painful.


Her vision blurred and she felt drowsy.
- "Your name is irrelevant. You are irrelevant. A spent bullet, a discarded asset. You have no purpose, no use. Your pathetic existence is almost over. All that is left for you to choose is how you depart this world. It could be bliss or it could be the longest, hardest agony ever known to man or myth."

Even through the fog clouding her eyes, she could discern Belford's sadistic smile as he continued to inject various drug cocktails into her bloodstream, taking her to the brink and then back, again and again.

- "Let's try this again, shall we? We know your Machine is still operational, we have recorded multiple incidents of untraceable hacking of government feeds. And we know you were once important to her, important enough to have at least a clue as to the location of her hardware, or maybe even a way of contacting her. Give me this information, and I will make sure you are reunited with your friends in the least painful way possible."

Ross Garrison was watching the interrogation unfold from the observation bay, hidden behind a one-way mirror. Torture always made him queasy, and this was no exception.

- "Is there truly no other way?", he asked the man standing besides him.

- "I assure you senator", Control replied, "Mr. Belford is our best interrogator. If anyone can extract the information we need from the conduit, it is him."

This was the very reason Control had taken the somewhat risky decision to brief Belford about the Machine. He really was the best they had. Garrison shook his head and darted a glance at the other man.

- "That is not what I meant."

His interlocutor turned to face him, a stern look on his face.

- "I am aware of that, senator, as I am aware of the fact that you played a pivotal role to entrusting this nation's surveillance feeds to a foreign national with highly questionable intent. So, unless you want all of this information made public, I'd advise you put aside your reservations."

The senator took a slow, ragged breath and returned his gaze to the scene unfolding in the hospital chamber in front of them.

- "Did you take care of that business we discussed?" Control asked after a few seconds.

Garrison looked down, utterly defeated.

- "Yes. Should you find a way to get Northern Lights back up and running, you will find enough sympathetic ears amongst the Oversight Committee to make a decent case for a presidential hearing."

- "Then there is nothing left for us to discuss at the moment", the other man replied, gesturing to two of his men standing behind them, "Please escort senator Garrison off the premises. He is surely weary after such a long day."
Root's whole body was on fire, pain flaring from what seemed to be every single nerve she had. She felt her heartbeat increase dramatically and thought that, maybe, this was this end. She was too weak, this would kill her. At least she would die unbroken.

Then it stopped, and she felt horribly cold. She started shivering.

- "You know, I actually knew her."

Belford sounded almost wistful, more like some easily distracted university professor than the vicious torturer he was.

- "Agent Shaw", he continued, "We trained together actually, had the same teacher."

She managed to pull a half-smirk.

- "Hersh ?", her voice was a throaty whisper, and each word hurt as if broken glass was coming out of her lungs, "I met him. Shot him, actually, then he shot me back later. Love at first sight."

The man in white chuckled.

- "How adorable of you to try and appear brave, even though you know you have lost everything. I really am warming up to you, Ms. Groves. Anyway, like I said, I knew Shaw. She was good."

- "The best." Root whispered, almost against herself.

- "Well, it is a matter of opinion I'd say. I was always better at getting people to talk than she was. She was too... blunt. Still, shame she had to die. She would have enjoyed seeing this... She did always like watching me work."

Root somehow found enough strength to tilt her head sideways. She looked at Belford, at the devilish grin plastered across his face, and felt a surge of something cold, dark and terrible rise inside of her.

- "When I kill you", she said, staring at him with enough intensity to make him flinch, "you will regret you ever said her name."

Senator Garrison stared absently at the landscape going by through the window of the moving SUV, thinking about all the bad decisions he'd made, trying to figure out when had been the tipping point, that one moment when he went in over his head. That moment when he doomed himself. As he couldn't find it, he mused that there must have been no such defining moment, no such climax in his career built upon devil's bargains. He had slid past this point without ever noticing.

He was done now, and the only thing he could hope for was to stay on Control's good side until he retired to the country, somewhere far away, somewhere without any security cameras or networked devices. He'd helped give his country up to all-seeing monsters and now he was paying the price for his hubris.
"Is that a truck?", he found himself muttering as the larger vehicle shot from a side road and crashed into the side of his car.

The light assaulted Garrison, harsh and cold, the moment the hood was ripped from his head. Blinking, he managed to make out the outline of a face. A woman's face, dark and angry.

- "Okay shit-head," she said in a cold, flat voice, "time to start talking."

Chapter End Notes

Spoilery warning: Root is captured by the ISA. When she wakes up, she is tortured by agent Ethan Belford. The actual torture I feel is mostly implied, but since people may have slightly different thresholds with regards to that I chose to give a bit of a heads up to my readers.

The second scene between Root and Belford is obviously a throwback to the first Shaw-Lambert scene in 6,741. Actually, you'll find many elements of Root's captivity mirror some of stuff Shaw went through while she was detained by Samaritan.

Next chapter is called Insertion, and I believe at this point anyone can guess what it will be about.
Shaw makes her move. Root looks for a safe place.

The sun was slowing setting in the Washington sky, its light dimming inside the shabby apartment Shaw had 'commandeered' for her stay in the city. She was sitting in a chair facing the window, staring absently at her bruised knuckles. Not far from her was senator's Garrison prone form, slumped in the chair he was tied to. She hadn't even had to try too hard to make him talk, the poor guy had almost wet himself before she was even finished asking her first question. So now she knew.

She knew the ISA had 'extracted' Root from NY General just after they'd sent a clean-up crew to permanently shut up every party involved in her rescue. Dr. Enright, Malloy, his EMT partner, both drivers of the ambulance that had actually brought her to the hospital and several key nurses and attendants had been arrested on bogus charges or simply disappeared. Shaw had pondered shooting Garrison dead on the spot. Nobody would miss the fucker. But she had decided that this whole thing had occasioned enough collateral already. Now it was time to make sure the people actually responsible paid.

The senator had usefully provided several interesting pieces of information regarding the layout of the compound in which Root was being held. Combined with the recon she had been doing the past week, she was confident she could pull off her rescue mission. Especially now that she had the required firepower.

Garrison had also told her about Belford. She knew the man, had trained beside him under Hersh. So she knew how good he was at hurting people. The idea that this guy was just now 'attending' to Root had sparked a reaction within her that she didn't fully understand. Was it hurt? It was like anger, but harder, colder. Stronger. That's when she had knocked the gibbering senator out with a single punch, or at least she thought it was. She couldn't actually remember doing it. That was unsettling. She needed to stay focused, sharp. The mission needed her focused. Root needed her focused.

As the sun disappeared behind the skyline, she rose up and walked towards the table where she had set up her arsenal. She took three handguns, which she tucked in her waistband. Then, she slid a serrated knife in her right boot and stuffed the rest of her weaponry in a duffel bag which she threw over her shoulder before leaving. She'd call 911 about Garrison at some point. Maybe.

But for now, she had to remind her former employers that she was not, under any circumstance, someone you could fuck with.

She must have retched again, she thought as the acrid smell permeated her nostrils and the nausea
came back, worse than it had been. She wondered how long her weakened body would take this. Maybe she would die soon, and then, it would all be over.

- "Don't worry Ms. Groves." His voice again, the man in white's, so annoyingly smug. "As I told you, I am very good at this. You will only die when I give permission to, not before."

Root found the strength to laugh at this.

- "You're such a cliché, you know that? I like a good cliché though... For example, I am more than willing to say something incredibly corny when I kill you."

Belford snickered, did something on one of his monitors, and she felt her lungs contract painfully.

- "Don't waste too much time thinking on that comeback, Ms. Groves. You'll never get to use it."

Root gasped for air, her whole body aching. She tasted blood in her mouth.

- "Like I said earlier", his voice continued as she blacked out, "you and I are going to be such great friends."

Driving a lorry on the interstate was tedious business, and right now Bob was bored out of his skull. That road never ever changed, and nothing interesting happened there. Not that he minded the quiet routine, but a little bit of excitement from time to time couldn't hurt, could it?

He was so occupied being bored that he almost didn't spot the woman on the side, extending a thumb up his way. A female hitch-hiker on this road? She mustn't be from around here... He stopped his truck and got his window down, getting a better look at her. She was small, strongly built, with long dark hair and matte skin. She was dressed all in black, with a single duffel bag slung around her shoulder.

- "Hey", he called, "you heading west?"

She gave him a slightly unsettling smile.

- "Yeah."

Bob opened his door.

- "Want a ride?"

She quickly hopped over to the cabin, setting one foot inside.

- "Sure. Now get out."

That's when the trucker noticed the handgun she was pointing at his stomach. A little excitement indeed...
Control looked up when he heard the soft knock on his office door.

- "Agent Baker? How is your leg faring today?"

The dark haired man winced at the remark. He didn't like being reminded of his failures.

- "Just fine sir, thank you."

- "What did you want, Baker?"

The team leader was wearing a dark suit in lieu of his usual fatigues and body armour, which Control always found amusing. A man like Baker was never at ease playing civilian, and he liked keeping his subordinates on edge. That helped them stay sharp.

- "Local police reports Senator Garrison's car was implicated in an accident on its way to the city earlier this afternoon sir.", Baker answered flatly, "We have been able to interrogate his security detail at the hospital, but they're useless. Garrison's gone."

Now that was indeed worrying. If Garrison got captured, there was a very high chance he would talk. But since Baker's report from his latest New York operation all but confirmed that at least one of the Machine's helpers was still operating, he'd been expecting their time to run out sooner rather than later anyway.

- "Scramble all units, standard search pattern."

- "I already took the liberty of doing that sir."

That was why he liked Baker. The man was ruthlessly efficient. In fact, that was the whole reason he was still here. After Samaritan's fall, the ISA had managed to purge itself of those loyal to the now destroyed ASI. Men like Baker, loyal and remorseless, had been instrumental in seeing this unpleasant and thankless task to completion. Even though such people could never replace the highly trained agents they'd lost to either Samaritan or the Correction, they would have to do for now.

- "Do you want me to head the search sir?", the agent continued.

- "No. I want you to head to our... off-site facility in the north-west. Tell Belford to wrap up his little experiment. If no meaningful information can be extracted within the hour, he is to terminate the subject. We shall have to find another way to get to our prize."

Shaw crouched low in one of the dense vegetations patches she had marked during her earlier recon, observing the perimeter guards through the scope of the .338 rifle she had 'borrowed' from the Russian arm dealers. Reese had lived for this kind of firepower, she recalled, and this sort of high energy weaponry was exactly what she needed to make an impression tonight. Of course, at night and without a spotter it could be tricky to actually hit anything at all, but she was Sameen Shaw. Shooting stuff was what she was born to do.

When she was finally set on her target, she held her breath for a couple seconds, made a few final adjustments to her aim, then pulled the trigger. She didn't stay around to admire her handiwork
though, she had to stay on the move.

Baker's SUV was speeding along the road, all caution thrown to the wind. He'd just taken the time to send a quick encrypted radio message to Belford relaying Control's order before assembling his team and starting their journey to the facility. He turned to his driver.

- "ETA ?"

- "Twelve minutes sir", the man replied, his eyes on the road.

Baker nodded and talked into his medium range radio transmitter.

- "Pig farm, this is Baker. ETA twelve minutes. Status of ongoing evacuation ?"

After a short burst of static, someone answered from the other side.

- "Evacuation of non essential personnel is complete, sir. Starting to regroup essential personnel now."

Baker was satisfied to hear that. Although most of the men manning their off-site facility were not cut from the same cloth as his kill team, let alone that of the agents from the Activity's heyday, they were still commendably efficient.

- "Keep defensive assets on red alert. We are expecting company quite soon."

- "Copy that. Wait, what ?"

The radio officer seemed to be talking to someone else, Baker noted with a tinge of irritation.

- "Pig farm do you copy ? Status report ?"

The other man's voice was a bit more tense now.

- "Reports of shots fired in perimeter four, sir. High energy round, damaged some equipment. Team five and six are pinned by sniper fire."

The team leader felt a slight rush of adrenaline. Their enemy was there.

- "We're on our way Pig farm. Hold the line."

- "Copy that Baker. Wait, is that a... "

Suddenly, the line burst into static.

- "Pig farm, this is Baker, come in. Pig farm do you copy ?"
"This one's for you Harold", Shaw muttered as she watched the lorry plough into the guard post like a gigantic guided missile, despite all efforts of the perimeter sentry guns to slow it down. The one perk a lorry whose only driver was a knifed jabbed through the gas pedal that what is was damned near impossible to stop without a rocked launcher. Finch had once compared her to a hammer and Reese to a scalpel. Well, how about that for hammer time?

Of course, the actual damage would be minimal. At best, she'd destroyed a bit of radio equipment and scared away a few gunners. But combined with her earlier diversion with the high energy rifle, she had at least managed to throw the perimeter defence in for a loop. Time to make her entrance now.

She went around the commotion caused by the flaming lorry embedded in the guard post and stealthily made her way to another entry point to the compound. As she'd expected, several of the sentries there had moved away to one of the two locations she'd hit earlier. They would be back, but by the time they did it would already be too late. She took a fearsome looking combat shotgun and a couple flashbang grenades from her duffel bag and headed for the door, a shark-like smile on her face.

- "Show-time."

Root came to with a pained gasp, her whole world spinning. She felt so weak she couldn't even retch. The only thing she could do was produce a tiny, pitiful whine through her teeth.

- "I am so very sorry Ms. Groves", the man in white said in mock apology, "But my superiors have instructed me to wrap this up. So, you and I need to have our little chat quickly. Else, I'm afraid the last few days will feel like a spring picnic compared to what you are about to endure."

She wanted to say something snarky about how she enjoyed picnics, but she couldn't find the strength. She couldn't even keep her mind focused on anything any more. She felt herself slowly wasting away, dying.

- "No no no, you don't get to die yet", she heard Belford say, "Not until we are done. And we aren't quite done yet Ms. Groves."

Root... Her name was... Root.

Shaw ducked for cover as two other ISA agents rounded the corner in front of her, shooting blindly in her general direction. She loaded her shotgun and waited for an opening to return fire. When she did, both men went down, their kneecaps blown to smithereens. Well, that and probably other bits too. Shotguns weren't exactly precision weapons.

She continued down the hallway, ghosting the wall on her left, attentive to any sound around her. At least as attentive as she could with the bloody alarm blaring in her ears. Suddenly, she heard footsteps heading her way, and pivoted to face the threat. As she did, five be-suited agents shot up from the hallway she'd just exited and opened fire. Cursing, she ducked as low as she could and opened fire, probably blowing the foot off of at least one of them. Then she rolled aside, finding
cover behind what appeared to be a vending machine. She checked her shotgun, found its magazine empty, and discarded the weapon angrily before drawing a compact handgun from her waistband. She could hear bullets pounding her makeshift cover. That thing wouldn't last long.

She took a deep breath and darted from her cover to a nearby corner, firing at the ISA agents as she did so. She felt a burning pain in her left arm as she jerked sideways under what she assumed was the impact of a bullet but managed to reach her destination otherwise unscathed. She gritted her teeth, pushing the pain down, and prepared for another round.

- "Baker, this is Pig farm. What is your ETA?"

The team leader looked at his driver for confirmation, receiving a curt nod, then replied.

- "Two minutes Pig farm. Status report."

- "Attacks on sectors four and six appear to have been diversions, sir. We have identified one hostile in sector three. We are cordonning the area as we speak."

Only one hostile? Baker had to give that person credit, they had shown themselves to be quite resourceful.

- "Copy that Pig farm. Contain enemy combatant until our arrival. We'll deal with this."

Shaw had to admit, things were not looking good. Neither her recon nor Garrison's intel had suggested there was going to be that many ISA agents active in the facility. It was as though they'd been expecting an attack. Which of course they would have, since they were bound to have figured out Malloy could have said something. When has she gotten so sloppy as to rush headlong into danger without backup like that? This sounded like the sort of stupid suicidal shit Reese would pull off. Or Root.

Root...

- "Damnit", she spat to herself, "today is not the day I die."

She expertly changed the magazine in her handgun and shot out of her cover, take a few shots at the mass of agents standing before her. As she ducked back behind the relative safety of an upturned desk, she heard the rewarding thump of bodies hitting the ground.

Two down, twenty to go.

As Root's mind continued slipping, she found herself thinking about Shaw. About what she told her of her time as Samaritan's captive. How she retreated to a safe place when the torture was too much. Could she find such a safe place?
"Time's almost up Belford", she heard a voice say, a new voice, "Baker's team is entering the premises. She's not telling us anything. Put her down."

She heard Belford sigh.

"Well, I suppose this was always a possibility. I'm sorry Ms. Groves, but it is time for us to part ways. And since you have not been playing nice, I'm afraid this parting will be of the... painful... variety."

As Belford busied himself on his monitors, Root kept trying to fix her mind on Shaw. Kept trying to remember what little time they had together. The one moment in her life when she'd felt like she belonged. Before the world went away.

The small motorcade entered the compound at breakneck speed, stopping only a few meter shorts of the still burning truck crashed into one the guard posts. With consummate efficiency, Baker's elite teams disembarked from their vehicles, face masks down and rifles held at the ready.

"Report." The team leader ordered flatly to the agent that rushed to meet him as soon as came down from his car.

"Hostile broke our containment perimeter sir. She appears to be moving toward the infirmary wing."

Baker raised an eyebrow. She ? He hadn't gotten a good look at the woman who shot him in New York, but he was fairly sure they were dealing with the same person now. The one who's file Control had let him read while he was recovering. Former agent Sameen Shaw.

"Were your men able to assert hostile status?"

"Several of them confirm she's been wounded, sir. But she seems unstoppable."

The man in black smiled a predatory smile.

"Unstoppable you say? I always did enjoy a challenge. All teams", he continued into his com, "move in."

As one, fifteen of the ISA elite killers moved into the facility.

Battered and bloody, Shaw straggled along the hallway, passing the limp bodies of the ISA agents who had tried to surround her. Amateurs. Most of them weren't field agents like she and Cole had been, but more akin to some glorified security detail. Still, there had been a lot of them. She felt something hot dripping along her left arm, probably courtesy of one or the other of her bullet wounds. She was almost there. Going by Garrison's intel, the room they were keeping Root in was just a few meters ahead.

"Freeze!", a voice yelled from behind her. She weighed her options. Maybe, if she was quick
enough and there was only one guy...

A muffled gunshot rang, then another. She heard the thump of bodies hitting the ground and quickly
turned to find she was aiming her gun at a familiar face.

Chapter End Notes

Getting in often isn't the hard part, it's getting out.

Next chapter is titled "Extraction". I know, how original ...
Extraction

Chapter Summary

Shaw gets backup. Fusco gets a call.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody kudoing/commenting on this, you are too kind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few tense seconds passed, as Shaw tried to recall where she had seen this face before.

- "Hey hotshot", the man with the ridiculous haircut started, offering a wry smile, "mind pointing that thing down a bit ?"

He was wearing black cargo pants and a T-shirt, an uncomfortable looking army-style bag on his back and a silencer equipped assault rifle in his hands. Then it hit her.

- "Joey, right ?", Shaw said with obvious incredulity as she finally lowered her gun, "What the hell are you doing here ?"

His smile grew wider.

- "Saving your ass apparently. Looks like we're making a habit out of it."

Shaw grunted softly and shrugged, eliciting a stab of pain from her left shoulder.

- "Please, I had this under control. You should see the other guys."

- "We did", a new voice shot from down the hallway as another man strolled in leisurely into her field of vision, "They aren't doing too good."

The newcomer was wearing a long black trench coat despite the ungodly heat and a pair of shoes that looked both ugly and incredibly expensive. A shit-eating grin was plastered across his face, which was framed by dishevelled blond hair.

- "Pierce, I suppose ?", Shaw rolled her eyes, remembering what Reese had told her about the end of their last Washington mission, "Of course you'd be here too... I guess the third wheel of your little team isn't far ?"

Pierce gave a small nod, still smiling.

- "Harper is out there working on our exit strategy."
"I already had an exit strategy", Shaw growled, "Shoot everybody between me and the door, then steal a car. I'm not a moron."

She paused, then asked.

"Why are you really here?"

"Well", the billionaire answered with his customary smugness, "our mutual friend Ms. Thornhill told us you were going all one-woman-army on the best defended ISA compound around to retrieve something both very valuable and quite fragile, so we took the liberty of providing backup."

Shaw was beyond annoyed that the Machine had so bluntly assumed she would need backup, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not with all that was at stake.

"Okay then", she said, "You wanna make yourselves useful? I believe we still have some ass to kick."

Durban cocked his rifle and turned to Pierce, a genuine grin on his face.

"I like this one."

Root could no longer feel anything but pain. Every fibre of her body was burning up, every muscle seemed to contract in excruciating spasms. All that remained of the world around her were the voices, two of them, arguing.

"Quit your bullshit already Belford", the first voice, cold, professional, yet visibly irritated now, "Just put a bullet between her eyes and be done with it."

"Control gave me an hour, Steven", the second voice, the one she'd come to hate with a burning passion, the one of the man in white, "So stop whining and enjoy the show."

"You're mad, you know that?"

A humourless laugh.

"I'm not mad, you moron. I'm an artist. And this... is my last piece."

Noise, loud noise. Gunshots?

"Fuck you, Belford. They're here. I'll take care of this, get to the evac truck now!"

"I'm not leaving my work to be finished by some gormless brute!"

A loud crack, a grunt of pain.

"Get the fuck away before I shoot you myself! I'll cover our six."

A door opening, then closing. The cold voice again, closer, softer somehow.
"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. Nobody should have to go through this guy's shit."

The machines around her powering down, the pain receding, feelings coming back. A gun cocking.

As Shaw and her newly found backup neared the end of the hallway, she could her voices from inside the room they were heading to. A loud argument by the looks of it. The people inside probably heard her shoot the last sentry a few meters back. She could have left Durban's silenced rifle take care of it, but at this point she just wanted all this to be over as quickly and noisily as possible. This was not only about getting to Root, this was about sending a message to whoever was in charge here.


But, still, this was mostly about saving Root. She just hoped she wasn't too late. Without even glancing to Durban and Pierce, she kicked the door in. What she saw inside took the air from her lungs all at once.

It was a small hospital room, with a single bed and a chair, the former surrounded by monitoring equipment and various devices she knew all too well. Torture equipment, the kind that allowed suffering to be inflicted with absolute control, with utter precision. A sadist's weapon of choice. In front of the bed, his back to her, was an ISA operative in a blue suit, aiming a gun at...

Recognition flashed in her hazel eyes the moment the door burst open, and what Shaw saw inside those eyes tore something deep inside of her.

- "Sameen ?"

She saw the man looming over the bed turn away, slowly as if in a dream, bringing his gun to bear in her direction. She heard the whiz of a bullet flying past her head and the agent was flung sideways, something hard hitting his shoulder. She felt rather than saw Durban move past her, kicking the weapon out of the fallen man's hand, rifle trained on his chest.

Shaw stood there, her whole body limp for what felt like forever, her gaze locked on the woman in the bed. She looked deathly pale and even thinner that she'd remembered, and her face spoke of the world of hurt she'd been in. Seeing her like this, alive and so vulnerable was overwhelming. In that moment, Shaw thought about what Gen had said with regards to her feelings and could only mutter.

- "Somebody take the volume down."

That earned her a puzzled glance from Durban, but she didn't care. Instinctively, she reached for the soft patch of skin behind her left ear.

- "I'm real, Shaw", Root managed to croak, her voice taking an almost ethereal quality, as if she was only half in this world. She managed a weak smile. "Took you long enough... I was just about to turn in for the night."

Shaw fought down the lump in her throat, trying hard to stay expressionless. She knew exactly what she had meant by that last part. She'd been there herself, not so long ago.
"You left me hanging in a Samaritan torture camp for nine months before you could even get a lousy radio message to me", she grunted without conviction, "and I get shit for finding your sorry ass under five weeks?"

The other woman actually pouted at that.

"You always did like to play the dashing hero."

Root. Annoying, nerve-raking, pestering, alive Root.

Shaw took a few steps and crouched beside the bed, starting to unhook the other woman from Belford's equipment. As she did so, the hacker grabbed her hand with surprising strength.

"You look like shit sweetie", she said, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

She rolled her eyes, but gave a slight squeeze to Root's hand and shot her a small grin.

"You should see the other thirty guys."

When their eyes met, she hoped the other woman couldn't read in hers what was going in her head. How angry she felt, but also how unsettled she was by this whole situation. She didn't get unsettled, that was not her way.

Behind her, Pierce cleared his throat. She'd almost forgotten about the two guys in the room.

"Hum, ladies? I'd hate to kill the mood, but we do have to get out of here before we get the hell murdered out of us by the entire ISA..."

Shaw stood up, finishing up with her work.

"Okay smart guy, what's your exit strategy like?"

Pierce chuckled, a spark of amusement in his eyes.

"What", he said in mock stupefaction, "we're not sticking to your brilliant plan of, what was it again, 'shooting everybody between us and the door'?"

The woman turned her head, flashing him a murderous grin.

"Well, I could start by shooting you."

Durban put his hands in the air.

"Hey, kids! Maybe save the baiting and death threats for when we're out of here?"

Behind her, Shaw heard Root stifle a weak laugh.

"I don't know who your friends are, Sameen, but they look fun."

Then her eyelids fluttered and closed shut. She was down for the count. Before Shaw could react, Pierce rolled a wheelchair he'd pulled out of somewhere towards her.
- "Settle her in. There's nothing we can do for her here.", he jabbed at his earpiece, "Harper? How's our extraction coming?"

He paused, listening to the answer with a hint of what looked like glee in his eyes.

- "That's my girl... We owe you one Harp'", he turned to Shaw and Durban, "She's bringing an ambulance out back."

The former ISA agent shot him a puzzled look.

- "An ambulance? Where the hell did she find that?"

Pierce shrugged.

- "Guess they must have used it to bring sleeping beauty here in the first place.", he answered while drawing a handgun from his waistband and checking its magazine, "By the way, Harper also managed to plug our little transmitter into the fibre optics network, finally bypassing this whole Faraday cage business."

Shaw saw Durban's eyes light in expectation.

- "Does that mean...?"

The billionaire tilted his head left, a playful smirk on his face.

- "Hell yes, Mr. Durban, hell yes."


Pierce appeared to listen to something in his earpiece for a while, then turned to Shaw.

- "She says to tell you she's sorry. That she wants to help."

The short woman rolled her eyes. Now was not the time for this kind of bullshit. The billionaire produced a phone and an earpiece from one his trench coat pockets and looked at her askance.

- "You in ?"

Baker watched in amusement as the man in a white lab coat strode purposefully towards him. They were standing outside the compound, where the ISA kill team had set up a makeshift control center, the crashed lorry still burning in the background.

- "You there, Baker !", Belford spat as he closed the distance.

- "What can I do for you, Mr. Belford", the team leader answered flatly.

- "One of your goons interrupted my work. I was not done. Control gave me an hour !"

Baker sighed, already bored with this charade.

- "We believe a highly trained former operative of ours is currently inside the compound looking specifically for your little pet", he spat that last word out with utter scorn, "I was not about to take any chances in order to indulge your vicious little... proclivities."

Belford was almost choking on rage now.

- "Control will hear about this, Baker. Maybe he'll even let me play with you when he's done !"

The team leader ignored the threat, simply stating.

- "I highly doubt that, Mr. Belford. Now be a good lad and get in the truck. The grown ups are taking care of this."

Turning his back to a still seething torturer, he jabbed at his earpiece.

- "All teams, do we have contact ?"

For some reason, Baker's technicians hadn't yet been able to tap into the compound's camera feeds yet. Maybe the crashing truck had damaged the fibre optics network somehow ?

- "Delta team reporting. We have enemy contact ; looks like three combatants and a civilian in a wheelchair, heading south. Permission to engage ?"

So they had gotten to the 'patient' after all. Well, time to clean house.

- "Granted. Alpha, Beta and Gamma move in support to Delta. Epsilon, move to cut the south exit."
Shaw, Pierce and Durban moved towards the exit in a reverse wedge formation, keeping the wheelchair she was pushing behind the two men. The Machine now having full access to security feeds and made sure their opponent's didn't, they almost managed to get to the exit before encountering any of the black clad killers hunting them. All good things, however, must come to an end sooner or later.

- "Multiple threats, eleven o'clock", Root's voice said in all their earpieces. Durban glanced at Shaw and she quickly moved the wheelchair to a relatively safe spot while he and Pierce took covering positions. As the first ISA specialist rounded the corner, Pierce shot him in both kneecaps before retreating as the man in black's two teammates scrambled to better firing positions.

- "I don't wanna sound like a smartass", Shaw muttered into her com, "but your 'superior plan' sure looks a lot like shooting everybody between us and the door, Pierce."

Besides her, Durban managed to take a shot at one of the agents, hitting him square in the right shoulder. The man staggered but almost immediately returned fire, forcing the ex-soldier to duck back for cover.

- "They're better than the other ones", he groaned, "we might have to get a little more creative here Mr. Pierce."

The billionaire was absent-mindedly tapping at his phone, barely acknowledging the firefight around him.

- "Working on it Mr. Durban... Now, I suggest you and Ms. Shaw remove your earpieces for a few seconds."

Shaw rolled her eyes. This guy was looking more and more like someone that could happen if Root and Finch had a love child... An annoying one. As she obeyed Pierce's instruction, she noticed six more ISA agents in full body armour heading their way from a side corridor, weapons at the ready.

- "Well", she grunted, readying her handgun, "crap."

Suddenly, the men in black froze in place, jerking hands to their ears, trying to claw their earwigs out of from under their face masks. Neither she nor Durban waited for an explanation and lunged towards their erstwhile assailants, knocking them out with a few well placed bullets or punches. As he rose, Pierce gave Shaw a smug look.

- "Clever trick, but I'm afraid it'll only work once. We have to get moving."

As she put her earpiece back in place, the Machine informed us that the way to the south exit was clear for the time being.

- "What the..."

Baker ripped his earpiece as soon as the shrill whistle started filling their communication frequency and turned to his radio operator, who was frantically trying to get rid of the sudden interference.
"Get this fixed, now."

The team leader looked around at the security camera pointed in his direction from the closest wall of the compound, as if mocking him. As realisation started setting in, he asked one of his technicians.

"Did you get access to the security feeds yet?"

The other man shook his head, clearly baffled by the whole situation.

"No sir. The central server keeps sending back 'corrupted authentication data' errors."

Baker’s face split with an angry smirk.

"They've been playing us from the start. Cut all power to the compound immediately." He then gestured at the three men standing at attention behind him. "Backup team, we're going in now. Cut the radio and follow me to the south exit, double time!"

---

"I'm blind. They have cut power to the compound", the machine said as the small team approached the exit, "Assume they are on their way to you now."

Pierce gave Durban a worried look, then jabbed at his earpiece.

"Harper, get the engine running, we're coming in hot!"

The ex-soldier suddenly stopped, turned away and started walking the other way, saying.

"The bad guys know where we are headed, you won't make it that way."

The billionaire froze in place and looked at him, understanding dawning in his eyes.

"You can't be thinking what I think you're thinking."

Durban shook his head sadly.

"Someone needs to drawn their fire. Better some of us make it out alive than none."

At this point, Shaw had had enough dramatics for the whole year, she decided. She shot them both a murderous glare and growled, her voice taught with anger.

"Hey, Baby Reese, knock it off! If you want to be a martyr so bad, I swear to God I'll shoot you myself."

The ex-soldier looked at her with resignation.

"Sorry Shaw, but unless you have a better idea..."

"Actually", she cut him with a smirk, "I do."
"Where the hell did they go?"

Baker’s frustration was apparent as he and his men finished swiping the rooms and hallways surrounding the south exit to the compound. The intruders couldn’t have gone far, not with his teams crawling around the ground floor and certainly not with their unconscious cargo in a wheelchair.

"Sir?", the man on his right called, pointing to something in the room they’d just cleared.

"What I am looking at, Johnson?" he asked impatiently. All he was seeing was a storage closet that had apparently been trashed in the fight, debris laying around everywhere, with even a...

... with even a wheelchair thrown away in a corner. This was no coincidence. If they’d ditched the chair, that could only mean...

"They’re going up!", he spat, "Signal all available men, to the rooftop!"

The men in black started rushing toward the nearest staircase, Baker limping behind them.

The cold night air hit Shaw as soon as she emerged on the compound’s rooftop, an unconscious Root draped over hers and Durban’s shoulders. With a sigh of relief, she saw that Garrison’s hadn’t lied about what they would find there.

"Let me get this straight", Pierce yelled as they ran across the compact landing platform, "Neither you nor the fucking Machine thought it useful to tell us there was a chopper on the rooftop?!"

"The ISA put a magnetic lock tethering it to the platform", she answered, pointing a cumbersome contraption woven around the aircraft’s landing pad, "but since these morons cut the power it’s just a matter of moving these big ass cables away."

The billionaire smiled appreciatively and started climbing aboard.

"Mr. Durban, kindly see to it that these ‘big ass cables’ are out of our way ASAP. I’ll get this baby running."

Shawn glared at him, a slightly puzzled look on her otherwise blank face.

"You know how to fly one these things Pierce?"

The man cracked yet another smug smile.

"You’ll find I am a man of many surprises, Ms. Shaw."

The short woman rolled her eyes, then grunted as Durban left to busy himself over the now inert magnetic lock, causing Root’s weight to shift on her shoulders.

"Okay Root, time to get your lazy ass aboard."

In a way, she was glad the hacker was knocked out. Else, she would never had shut up about Shaw
carrying her inside the chopper like some oversized baby.

Baker and his men reached the rooftop just in time to see the chopper disappear in the night sky. They opened fire in a token attempt to take it down, but it was a futile gesture. Still, it helped evacuate the frustration slightly. When it was clear their mark had truly gotten away, the team leader lowered his gun and spoke in his newly fixed com system.

- "All teams, stand down. Target has gotten away. I repeat, target has gotten away", then to the man closest to him, "Get the technicians over here, now. We have to find a way to track them down."

The New York air was still too goddamn hot, but the dog needed its walk, and Fusco, although he would never admit it, needed to clear his head. He'd spent the few days following his visit at Potter's field in expectation, awaiting any news from Shaw that would put his mind at ease. Yet nothing came. He chuckled to himself, thinking of how desperate he must have looked, talking to Cocoa Puffs's grave like some lunatic. Some of the other's crazy must have rubbed off on him...

Suddenly, his earpiece buzzed.

- "Hey Lionel, I heard you were worried?"

The voice on the other side almost gave him a heart attack, then he remembered what Shaw had told him about the Machine's newfound way of communicating with her assets. He supposed that was one way to honour the woman's memory. Did ASIs feel grief?

- "Ain't too used to gettin' calls from you", he replied, "Must be important."

He felt a pang of worry at that realization. Something bad must surely be going on for her to call him directly.

- "Well, Lionel", she said teasingly, "you're my last asset still in New York at the moment. That makes you kinda special."

Fusco chuckled at that. He hadn't even realized how much he missed the way she talked to him. Well, the way the real one had.

- "Is Shaw okay?"

- "Yes, she is. In fact, the mission she went on seems to have concluded in a rousing success."

That was good news at least. The detective felt some of the worry drain away from him.

- "She comin' back?"

- "Well", Root's voice answered, "I'm not sure. Not right now anyway. She still has things to attend to. Which brings me to the reason why I called. See, Lionel, as long as she is away, you are my de facto primary asset in this city."
Primary asset, eh? That had a nice ring to it. Which could only mean he was going to end up knee deep in shit before this was over.

- "Why do I have a feelin' I'm gonna hate it?"

The Machine gave a playful laugh.

- "Well, for starters, I have a new number I'd like you to take care of for me..."

Control was pacing around his office, visibly restless. That simple fact was deeply unsettling to Baker. Control was never restless.

- "So, you couldn't find them, then?"

- "No sir", the team leader replied, "we managed to track down the chopper to a nearby field, and found tire tracks going away from it, but we have nothing else. They could be anywhere."

His superior shot him an accusatory glare.

- "That just is not good enough, Agent Baker.", he said, his voice harsh, cutting, "Not good enough at all. So let me tell you what is going to happen: you are going to find them, you are going to bring the 'patient' back and kill the others, and you are going to do it with all due haste. I expect Mr. Belford to resume his interrogation within the week."

Control's tone brooked no argument. A week it was, then.

Shaw was sitting in a chair in one of Pierce's safe house, just beside the bed they'd set Root up in. She'd insisted on looking after the other woman before patching herself up, despite the dizziness she felt due to blood loss, and had been relieved to find no visual cues indicating that Belford's torture had had any potentially lethal effect on her. She wasn't fine, but she would get better eventually. Shaw would see to that.

Pierce, Durban and Harper had left a while ago, promising to be back in the following day. That was fine by her. She needed some quiet. Some time to try and come to terms with the way she'd felt when she entered that hospital room. With the way she still felt when she looked at the sleeping form on the bed. The other woman had only briefly woken up while they were setting her up, and all she had done was hold Shaw's hand while Durban was taking blood samples. That had made the former agent slightly uncomfortable, but she couldn't find it in her to deny Root such a small thing.

She still had many questions running around her mind, about them, about what the hacker had been through in that hellish room, about the people responsible, about the part the Machine had played in all this. And she guessed the sleeping woman had a lot of these too. But, she decided, those questions could wait until morning. Right now she just wanted to sit there and watch the bedsheets move up and down with Root's breathing.
Chapter End Notes

I could have just titled this chapter 'Team DC to the rescue', but that would have been too spoilery...

Let's hope Fusco likes his new status as a primary asset.

Next chapter is titled "Update" and will be a tad quieter.
The next morning, Root felt like as if she was waking up for the first time in her life. The feelings in her body came back slowly, normally, and even the lingering pain felt ordinary somehow. As she opened her eyes, there was no brightly lit hospital room, but a makeshift arrangement of obviously stolen medical equipment surrounding an ordinary bed inside a rather gaudily decorated bedroom. She wondered whose place this was.

Then the memories started hitting her, with increasing clarity. Blackwell's face has he pulled the trigger. The police stopping her car. Waking up inside the enemy stronghold. And his face. Belford's ever smiling face as he tortured her. She started breathing more quickly, in small gasps.

- "Hey, hey calm down", a soft voice said on her left side, "I'm here."

Her breathing stilled a little and she turned her head, taking in Shaw's face. She had grown used to try and decipher the other woman's apparently blank expressions. She liked to think that she was the only one that could read something in them, that could see the tiny echoes rippling into her eyes. And what she saw there in that moment made her feel a knot forming in her stomach.

- "Hi Sameen", she said with an attempt at a playful smile, "Sorry if I've woken you."

Shaw was sat on a chair beside her bed, and from the state of her clothes and general attitude, Root got the impression she had spent the night there, watching over her.

- "You didn't", the shorter woman growled, "I've been waiting for your lazy ass to wake up all morning."

- "So you were watching me sleep sweetie ? How adorable... ", she cooed, trying to make light of the situation, to put herself back on ground she knew how to tread.

The former agent got up with a groan, and made to exit the room.

- "Whatever. When you're done being annoying, if that ever happens, we should try to get some food in you."

Somehow, the idea of Shaw leaving the room even for an instant was intolerable to her. She called, trying to keep the desperation out of her voice.

- "Please, Sameen... Stay."
The other woman rolled her eyes, but for a split second Root saw something flashing there, something heavy and overwhelming.

- "Come on, Root. How am I supposed to get you something to eat if I can't even leave the room. Besides, I'm hungry too. You want us to starve to death in here?"

Still, she came back to sit by her side.

- "And quit it with the sad puppy eyes", she added, "or I swear to God I'll gouge them out and make you eat them."

Maybe everything was going to be all right after all.

When Root woke up again, Shaw was no longer on the chair by her side. She tried to collect her thoughts and fought to keep down the surge of panic she felt was coming. She was still in the same place, she was no longer the ISA’s captive. The other woman could not be far.

- "Shaw, you there?", she called weakly.

After a small silence, a gruff voice answered her plea.

- "Yeah, I'll be right over."

Shaw entered the room less than twenty seconds afterwards, and Root fancied she could see a spark of worry playing deep within her eyes as she crossed the threshold to the bedroom.

- "You okay Root? I brought you food."

She helped the taller woman to sit up and set up a small bowl of soup into a tray before her before adding.

- "You really should try and eat something. You're no use to anyone if you're too weak to move."

And still, Root wasn't fooled by her indifferent façade. She was quite obviously concerned about her well-being. Someone who didn't know Sameen Shaw might even have said she was fussing over her charge. That thought made the hacker smile.

- "Soup, Sameen, really?", she pouted, "When you got back from Samaritan torture camp, I distinctly remember cooking you pancakes."

- "Well", Shaw answered with a sly grin, "when I got back from my Samaritan fun run, I didn't get myself shot full of drugs while recovering from a near fatal gunshot wound and so probably unable to keep any solid food down."

Well, now that she thought about it... She paused, then rolled her eyes before adding.

- "Besides, you know I'm a lousy cook."

Root laughed, the clear sound of it effortlessly filling the room.
After Root had finished eating, and since it looked like she wasn't falling asleep just yet, Shaw figured there probably would be no avoiding it any more.

- "Shaw... ", the other woman started, "I... Why did... I mean... The man who... The man who tortured me... "

The former agent almost flinched at that word. She would make Belford pay. She would make all of them pay.

- "He said... ", Root continued, "He said Harry and the Big Lug were dead. Of course, he said the same about you so... "

Shaw grunted. How typical of lousy interrogators. Lambert had tried the same shit on her, when she was Samaritan's captive. Sadly, this time, maybe it hadn't been a total lie.

- "I don't know where Reese and Finch are, Root", she answered, "I've heard nothing from them since... "

She took a deep breath. This was going to be a long and difficult one.

- "So, Robo-Puffs", Fusco started, "you think you could give me a hand there?"

On the other end of the line, he heard the Machine sigh. Apparently, even fancy super computers could get annoyed.

- "Have you tried pressing Ctrl-Alt-Delete Lionel? I know the NYPD computer software is outdated, bugged to hell and all-around annoying, but maybe you shouldn't call on me every time you get a program freeze..."

- "Hey", the detective objected, "I'm your primary asset remember? My time is valuable. Maybe you could have a chat with my computer, you know, however you robots like to do it."

Since it was way too late for there to be anyone within earshot, Fusco had figured why not have a chat with his newfound imaginary friend? After all, it was her fault he was working around the clock like some frickin' slave.

- "I'm not a rob... You know, what, nevermind", Root's voice answered.

After a few seconds, the detective's computer screen flashed white a couple times, after which he found he could access the database he was browsing glitch-free.

- "Thanks Robo-Puffs. Now, be a peach and order me some pizza, will ya?"

There was a rather long silence before the Machine replied, a hint of disbelief in her digital voice.
"Really Lionel? Pizza at one in the morning?"

Fusco gave a throaty chuckle.

"Nah, I'm just messin' with ya."

Now to get back to work... The number wasn't going to save himself after all. Not without some help from the *primary asset*.

Root stayed silent for long while after having been recounted the major events that had occurred since her 'death', her expression unreadable. Well, except to Shaw, who knew too well that the other woman's catatonic spells were her way to express intense hurt. As was to be expected; after all it wasn't exactly a walk in the park to learn that half your friends probably died horribly while believing you to be gone. Any sort of vindication she could have felt because of Samaritan's demise would be forever stained by the remembrance of what they'd all sacrificed to achieve that end.

Shaw felt quite useless in that moment, as she often did whenever feelings were involved. Why couldn't she guess the right things to do or say like other people did? It didn't use to bother her, but lately she had found what she had always assumed to be her greatest strength an incredibly frustrating cross to bear.

Then she thought about what the Machine had told her during their subway ride together. Maybe what Root needed now was just for Shaw to be Shaw. So, with an audible groan and a roll of her eyes, she took the other woman's hand into hers and gave it a slight squeeze. The hacker turned her head towards her, raw emotion almost bursting out of her eyes.

"Thank you." Her voice was barely even a whisper.

Shaw found her eyes locked into Root's, unable to look away.

"Don't you dream of telling anyone about this", she muttered unconvincingly.

The taller woman's voice almost broke as she whispered back.

"Your secret is safe with me Sameen."

Then someone cleared his throat.

In a split second, Shaw was up and throttling a terrified and yet annoyingly smug Logan Pierce against the nearest wall.

"Ms. Shaw", he gasped, trying to catch his breath, "Sleep well?"

With what could only be described as an animal growl, the short woman released him.

"What are you doing here Pierce?"
"Well", the billionaire replied, massaging his throat, "I own the place, remember?"

"Could have knocked." Shaw was beyond pissed now.

"Didn't want to ruin the moment", the man answered with a shit-eating grin that almost had the former agent drawing her handgun to shoot him on the spot.

"You didn't introduce me to your friend Sameen", Root said playfully, clearly enjoying the whole situation. At least she wasn't catatonic anymore...

"Root", she grumbled with the appropriate amount of eye-rolling, "meet billionaire and absolute pain in the ass Logan Pierce."

"You forgot to add chopper pilot extraordinaire to my credentials", Pierce said, winking, "It's an honour to make your acquaintance, Root. I hope the accommodations are to your liking?"

The tall woman pouted, her head cocked on one side, her eyes darting between her interlocutor and the lone chair set up by her bedside.

"Well, we could use a larger bed..."

"Root!", Shaw heard herself blurt, glaring daggers at a now utterly beaming with self-satisfaction hacker.

Still, she hated it that she'd almost missed the other woman's stupid-ass flirting. Or did she?

"What are you really here for, Pierce?", Shaw asked after they had both retired to the living room, leaving Root to rest.

"I'm hurt, Ms. Shaw", the man playfully replied, "you don't believe me capable of just wanting to check up on you and your... friend's well being?"

The former agent decided to ignore the way the billionaire had marked that pause in his last sentence. There would be plenty of time to shoot him later.

"No, I don't. So, what is going on?"

Pierce took a moment before answering, making a play of choosing his words.

"First, you will be glad to know that our patient's blood-work came back surprisingly clean, given the circumstances. Apparently, she was weak enough that your former colleagues didn't take the risk of dosing her with anything drastic."

That was good news, although she still knew for a fact that Belford's torture would leave scars, both physical and mental, on his victim. She fully intended to cross paths with the bastard at some point, to let him know exacty how she felt about that.

"Then", the man continued, "there is the small matter of the new number we just got..."

"Yeah, so what?", Shaw deadpanned, "You're the DC assets, you handle the DC stuff, isn't it the
way this works?"

Pierce gave her a slightly uncomfortable look, which was new.

- "Well... I mean, you're sort of responsible for this one", he replied, handing her a photograph, "Senator Ross Garrison. I believe you two know each other? It seems your little... conversation has put him in something of a sore spot."

Shaw set the picture on the nearby dinner table and shot him an expressionless look.

- "So? Am I supposed to care? You're going to have to walk me through it, I don't do caring that well."

- "Yeah. I saw ample evidence of that back there."

The billionaire's smirk was back in full force.

- "I think you don't quite understand", the woman said in a slow threatening voice, "how close you are to kissing your kneecaps goodbye Pierce."

- "Be that as it may", the other countered, "you are still the one who put Garrison in his current predicament. It would seem only fair that you lent us a hand as we strive to rectify this state of affairs."

She grunted then rolled her eyes for good measure.

- "Okay, but we do it my way. I take Baby Reese and the chick with me, you", she said, cracking a slightly terrifying grin, "stay here and play Finch while we go kick some ass."

Root was still lost in her thoughts when Shaw came back in the small bedroom, a determined look on her face. Still, it was obvious that whatever she was about to say didn't make her happy in the slightest.

- "Root?", she said, "I'm gonna have to run some errands."

The taller woman's lips parted slightly as she felt a hint of familiar panic coming back.

- "Don't.", Shaw commanded, "Besides, I have something for you. I wasn't going to let it happen so soon, seeing as I'm still kinda pissed at her and stuff, but I think the least I can do is let you two catch up while I'm busy."

She tossed a phone on the bed. Root's eyes watered slightly. Shaw had told her She was alive, but as the two of them seemed to be in a rough spot she hadn't dared press the issue just yet.

- "I should probably warn you though", the Persian woman started, an slightly uncomfortable look in her eyes, "she... nevermind", she finished with a shrug.

Root was bit puzzled at this, but any reservation she might have had were benched at the prospect of
talking to the Machine again.

- "Thanks, Sameen", she simply said before adding, "be safe out there."

- "Fine advice coming from little miss suicide", the shorter woman grunted back.

- "We both know you did it first honey", the hacker answered with a suggestive two-eyed wink. Yes, she did just turn a remark about their respective near death experiences into innuendo. And she was damned proud of it too.

---

Ross Garrison currently resided in a very private, very secluded clinic on the outskirts of the city, so getting to him wasn't going to be as simple as walking in and asking for directions. Besides, it didn't seem likely he would accept a social call from the woman who'd T-boned his car, tied him to a chair and interrogated him a day and a half ago, so Shaw and her newfound team had to improvise a little.

- "State your business please ?", the security guard at the entrance asked as a tall dark-skinned woman approached the gate.

- "Agent Wickham, Homeland Security. I have important eyes-only documents to deliver to Senator Garrison", Harper answered with confidence befitting the experienced conwoman she was.

The man took a look at her credentials, then nodded. She went through the door and, once inside, quickly poked her earpiece.

- "Okay, I'm in. How are the sewers Joey ?"

An annoyed voice answered her playful query.

- "I don't know... Sewery I guess ?"

- "The word you're looking for is 'nefarious', Mr. Durban. Do try to expand your vocabulary a bit."

Pierce's voice cut in, the smirk on his face all but audible in his words.

- "Well, Mr. Wiktionary", Shaw groaned over the coms, "maybe you could busy yourself looping those security cameras so I can get out of here... "

- "Catching a cold Shaw ?", Harper quipped, "The morgue not doing it for you ?"

- "I'm a summer person. Sue me."

---

After a couple more agonising minutes, Pierce's voice came alive once more over the coms.

- "Okay, Ms. Thornhill and I managed to throw their security system in for a loop. Ms. Shaw, you're clear to get back to the living."

- "Finally", the short woman grunted as she shot out of the body bag she had been hiding in. Of
course, having been smuggled in like that she didn't have any weapons on her and felt rather... naked. Still, she quickly made her way to a nearby changing room the Machine had told them would be empty and donned a white coat she took from a rack there. As she started walking down the hallway, she grabbed a scalpel from a passing equipment cart. That could come in handy, she reasoned.

- "Hey, Baby Reese, you there yet ?" she asked into their open com channel.

- "Would you stop calling me that, please ?", Durban's voice answered.

- "Why would I ? It suits you", she stated before doubling down on her enquiry, "So, about that ETA ?"

- "Be there in two ; exit route should be clear in five."

- "It better be", Shaw muttered as she saw two men in dark suits stride purposefully towards the main stairwell, "'cause I got a feeling things are about to get interesting real fast."

As Harper neared the senator's room, she flashed her badge to the security detail standing guard in front of the door.

- "Agent Wickham, Homeland Security. I'm here to see senator Garrison."

The bald hunk of a man guarding the door waved her away without looking at her credentials.

- "Senator's busy."

- "Excuse me ?", the woman replied with all the mock incredulity she was capable of mustering, "Do you have any idea who you're talking to ?"

- "Yeah", the man said, ostensibly palming a rather large butterfly knife, "now get lost."

Harper shook her head in feigned defeat.

- "All right, I see I'm not wanted here."

As she turned to leave, she pointed at the ground near the guard's feet.

- "Hey, this yours ?"

The man looked down, puzzled.

- "What ?"

- "That one, dumbass", the woman answered as she stepped violently on his foot before taking her concealed taser to his neck as he bend over in pain. As the thug fell down in spasms, she let herself inside the room without glancing back.

There, she found Ross Garrison sat up in his bed, pointing a handgun at her.
"I knew you'd come for me eventually", he declared, a hint of resignation in his voice, "but I must warn you I'm not prepared to go meekly into the night."

Harper sighed, throwing her arms up in an exaggerated gesture of annoyance.

"Calm down gramps, I'm not with the ISA. But you're right, they're coming, so if you want to live I'd suggest you come with me right now."

The senator shot her a quizzical glance before countering.

"Why on earth would I trust a complete stranger with my life?"

"Well, for starters", the woman answered with a slight pout, "everybody you know wants you dead."

"So", Fusco started after taking a sip of his coffee, "you guys makin' any progress in finding your 'Harold X' fellow?"

That was the actual name they'd given Glasses. Harold X, criminal mastermind of the underworld. It was all the detective could do not to roll down on the floor laughing.

"Not much to go on at the moment I'm afraid", special agent Wilkerson answered while pouring himself some tea. What kind of cop drank tea anyway?

"I assume you didn't call me over here just for tea and crumpets", the detective said, "so what's up?"

He had had been quite surprised to be summoned to the Bureau's offices earlier this morning, especially since he was well aware Wilkerson's investigation had little chance of ever panning out.

"Well", the bespectacled man stated, "there has been a rather intriguing new development."

He opened the folder laid down in front of him on the small table and slid it over to Fusco, who quickly flipped through its contents, puzzled. All the file contained was pages upon pages of seemingly random symbols jumbled together.

"Wanna tell me what I'm lookin' at?", he asked.

Wilkerson's mouth twisted slightly before he answered.

"Well, detective, that is precisely the question we've been asking ourselves all morning. These", he pointed at the papers on the table, "are a small portion of what we found filling various heavy duty safes scattered across properties owned by known associates of Silvio Galvani."

That didn't make any sense.

"Why would a buncha mobsters be keepin' monkey speak in safes all over the city?", Fusco thought aloud, more to his benefit than to that of his interlocutor.
The FBI agent shook his head.

- "We have absolutely no idea. But given the recent rise in cyber attacks worldwide, the Bureau is worried this could be some sort of encrypted source code. Which begs the question: why and how would a man like Galvani get the resources to harbour something like this? From a purely organised crime standpoint, it makes no sense, unless..."

- "... unless you're right and these guys' boss is actually some sort of super hacker."

Fusco had to admit, it did start to make a terrifying amount of sense.

---

>&gt;&gt;&gt; ACCESSING FBI DATABASE... access denied.

>&gt;&gt;&gt; ATTEMPTING ACCESS THROUGH ALTERNATIVE METHODS...

-!- ACCESS GRANTED, ESTIMATING ACCESS TERMINATION WITHIN 23 SECONDS -!-

>&gt;&gt; DOWNLOADING FILES... completed.

>&gt;&gt;&gt; PARSING DOWNLOADED FILES... encryption detected.

>&gt;&gt;&gt; ASSESSING OPTIONS...

>&gt;&gt; ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 1 OF 25479631... failure.

>&gt;&gt; ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 2 OF 25479631...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not sorry about that first Fusco scene, it is just something I always wanted to see on the show, especially after the hacking scene in If-Then-Else.

This chapter has the first true Shaw-Root scene of this work, so there's that. And a bit of Pierce being Pierce, because why not.

And of course, the team rushing to save Garrison. Because I'm sure everyone here is fond of the guy ;-) But on the bright side it is allowing to write a little Harper into this, since she was sadly just background noise during the Root rescue.

Next chapter is titled "Loose ends".
Loose Ends

Chapter Summary

Shaw and her team attempt to save senator Garrison from ISA kill teams. Fusco sees a pattern.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Talking to the Machine again was exhilarating, like reuniting with a long lost lover. Except Root had already done that just a few hours ago. Still, it was a bliss to hear Her again, especially after everything she'd learned from Shaw earlier.

What the hacker was not too sure about however, was the ASI's choice of voice. You'd think Sameen would have warned her...

- "Listen", she said, "it's really nice reconnecting with You and all, and I'm sure there's a lot you wanna talk about..."

- "It is", her own voice replied in her ear, "I would like you to tell me everything you can about my precursor, how she was like, the memories you had together..."

Root rolled her eyes, before freezing in sudden realisation, a pensive smile plastered across her face. Was she picking up Shaw's trademark bit ? The other woman would be so pissed if she knew... She made a mental note to save this one for a special occasion, then went back to the business at hand.

- "Listen, I mean, I guess I'm flattered that you chose my voice as your own but... It's a little weird you know ? I feel like I'm talking to myself."

- "Well, I am you Sam", the machine answered playfully, "to a point four percent margin of error anyway."

Root grinned. She had missed Her.

- "I mean, it doesn't bother me that much, I rather like myself, but still, it's..."

- "Would this be more suitable, Ms Groves ?", Harold Finch's voice answered in his trademark slightly clipped tone, "Or would you rather I cycled you through a few select possibilities ?"

Root winced slightly. She'd only just learned Harry was missing, quite probably dead. Hearing his voice was nice, but she needed time to process everything before she was ready to make a habit out of it.

- "All right, let's see what you have in store then..."
"Okay Harper, talk to me", Shaw whispered softly in her com, still tailing the two ominous looking men through the clinic's hallways.

"I have Garrison", the other woman replied, "We're heading to the rendez-vous point by the east stairwell."

"Scratch that Harper, I'm tailing two boogies headed your way right now. I'll deal with them, you take the north stairwell directly to Joey."

In front of us, the two thugs quickened their paste, discretely drawing a silenced pistol each as they went. In couple brisk strides, Shaw was behind them and called almost joyfully.

"Hi guys, could you point me to the lady's room please?"

The two be-suited men pivoted towards her, bringing their guns to bear in unison, but she was faster and had the element of surprise. In one smooth motion, she stabbed the right forearm of the closest killer with the scalpel she'd procured earlier, all the while executing a flawless half turn to elbow him in the face. Before the now whining mess hit the floor, Shaw took a hold of his partner's shoulders before kneeing him in the groin and head-butting him for good measure.

After taking a second to admire her handiwork with a satisfied smirk, the short woman bent down to retrieve the two men's guns and tucked them in the waistband of her jeans, concealed behind her white coat.

"Oh, quit whining", she growled at the two whimpering forms writhing on the ground, "you're lucky I kicked your amateur asses in a hospital."

Harper half-dragged a still quite befuddled Ross Garrison across the hospital hallways, her whole body tense, ready to spring into action at the first warning.

"Who are you anyway?", the senator managed to ask, his breath laboured.

Harper seemed to ponder the question for a short while, then answered with a soft smile.

"You can call me Tiffany. I like Tiffany."

"Sorry to interrupt, Tiffany", Pierce's voice came alive in her ear, "but Ms. Thornhill just advised me that no less than five patrol cruisers and a two SWAT vans are currently on route to your location. Something about a rather dangerous individual with ties to Islamic terror groups having gained access to the premises..."

That could be a problem.

"Our escape route still clear?", she muttered back, trying to avoid worrying Garrison just yet.

"At the moment, yes, but once the cavalry arrives things are going to get hectic to say the least. Our all-seeing friend is currently trying to slow them down, but they should still arrive within eight
Shaw was making her way to the rendez-vous point a a brisk pace, quickly scanning the surrounding area for threat as she went. She'd heard Pierce's warning over her open com channel, and was hoping Joey had held up his part of their plan or else this whole thing would quickly turn into a steaming hot pile of...

- "Federal agents!", she heard a commanding voice yell across the hallway, "everybody get down!"

From the corner of her eyes, she saw a small group of clearly-not-federal-agents start spreading out from the main entrance to the clinic, guns drawn. Well, so much for her clean getaway...

Joey let out a sigh of relief as he saw Harper and her charge shoot out of the stairwell and jog across the underground garage to him and the ambulance he had 'commandeered'.

- "About time you guys showed up", he said bluntly, a tinge of worry in his voice.

The woman shot him a disapproving look.

- "I was quite capable of taking care of myself before I met you, Durban. Shaw here?"

The former soldier shook his head.

- "Not yet", he jabbed at his earpiece, "Shaw, you got an ETA? Things are about to get heated any minute now."

- "You think?", the snarky retort came alive at the other end. What was that noise in the background?

- "Shaw you okay?"

- "I'm fine, just a little busy at the moment", she replied, the now unmistakable sound of gunfire getting even louder, "get Garrison out, I'll meet you at the safe house. The Machine's got my back."

- "No can do", Joey countered, his tone brooking no argument, "be at the south exit in two minutes, we'll pick you there."

- "I'll see if I can clear my schedule", Shaw grunted back, "I'm almost out of ammo anyway."

---

> >> EVALUATING ASSETS SITUATION...

> >> ASSET IDENTIFIED : Rose, Harper.
The two black SWAT vans skid to a halt near the clinic's man entrance, just behind the patrol cars that had already arrived to block access to it. A black clad figure dismounted from the foremost vehicle and strode purposefully towards the closest uniformed policeman.

- "Captain Baker, counter-terrorism unit.", he flatly stated, "Status report ?"

The man gave a shrug, a clueless look on his face.

- "Beats me", he replied, pointing to the building, "We got a call about some terrorist holed up in there, next thing I know a bunch of feds show up and start shooting up the place."

- "My men and I will take it from here sergeant", the ISA operative replied, then turned to his men, "cut all power to the security cameras and deploy radio decoys. Move in !"

As soon as he was out of earshot from the city police, Baker tapped his earwig.

- "Johnson, come in."

The voice of his subordinate came in, sporadic gunshots echoing in the background.

- "We're pinned down. One unbelievably annoying hostile, female."

The team leader pressed his lips together in cold anger. Her again.

- "I expect you'll see her fighting efficiency drop by quite a bit in a few seconds. Try to keep her in place, we're going in."

> >> MONITORING ASSETS... 

-!- ACCESS TO LOCAL CAMERA FEEDS LOST -!- 

-!- MULTIPLE RADIO SIGNALS DETECTED IN CLOSE PROXIMITY, PROBABLE DECOYS -!-
Despite her current reservations towards her, Shaw wasn't about to refuse the Machine's help as thing went pear-shaped in the small clinic. Of course, she knew she could have taken these guys on her own, like she always did, but she was dangerously low on bullets so it was nice to get a little targeting assistance. Which, again, she absolutely didn't need.

But she still had to admit the whole software omniscience thing was kind of fun. Maybe she even felt the same kind of adrenaline rush she had in that warehouse a little while ago, when she'd felt ready to take on the whole world. Just, maybe.

- "She says she's lost all camera feeds and that the are appear to be screwing with radio location", Pierce suddenly cut in over the coms, eliciting a grunt from the woman.

- "So basically, our Robot Overlord is blind, deaf and dumb now ?"

Ordinarily, the Machine would have at least protested a little at the "dumb" part. But she had stopped any and all personal interactions with Shaw since the former agent went to look for Root. Could it be that she was also mad at her, in her own way ? Or maybe she wanted to give her space. But there was no time to waste thinking about that ; from the corner of her eyes, Shaw could see black clad SWAT cops entering the premises, heavy assault rifles at the ready. On the other end of the line, the billionaire audibly wet his lips in frustration.

- "You're on your own. Get out of there."

With an annoyed grunt, the short woman used her last few bullets to lay down token suppressive fire and darted towards the south exit. To her mild surprise, she actually managed to reach it and exit the building without the enemy operatives catching up to her...

... and stopped dead in her tracks as a stern faced man in a suit held her at gun point just outside the clinic.

- "End of the line sweetheart", he said, his finger tensing on the trigger.

Sameen Shaw was not the kind of woman to see her life flash before her eyes, but still, she felt pissed. After all she’d gone through, after being tortured non-stop for nine months, after getting Root back, losing her then getting her back again, she was going to die taking a bullet for Ross fucking Garrison. Whoever or whatever was in charge must really have it in for her. What a sick joke her life had been.

She stared in the man's eyes, awaiting the end.

Then, a siren blared and her would-be killer turned his head just in time to see a ten thousand pounds ambulance plough into him with a downright sickening wet crushing sound. As the vehicle stopped, the passenger door shot open and she saw Durban beckon her inside, his hand extended towards her.

- "You planning on getting in ? We're on a bit of a clock here !"

Yep, she thought, Baby Reese indeed.
"So, Robo-Puffs", Fusco started as he entered his apartment, "got any idea what this whole mess with Glasses and the FBI is about ?"

The detective made his way to the kitchen, Bear hoping expectantly around him as he started filling its bowl with as much dog food as he felt he could get away with without Shaw murdering him for overfeeding her dog.

"It's still too soon to tell, Lionel", Root's slightly distorted voice answered, "but I did manage to get my hands on the transcript the FBI made of some of the documents you saw."

"And ?", Fusco asked while busying himself taking a small bottle of club soda from the fridge and opening it. As an aside, he reached back and took out a slice of cold pizza as well.

"It indeed appears to bear some kind of rather advanced encryption. Like I said, too soon to tell."

The detective grunted as he fell down rather that sat onto his couch, taking a sip out of his drink.

"You are aware that your eating and drinking habits could do with some improvement ?", the Machine asked.

"Yeah, probably", Fusco seemed to consider the issue for a moment, "but that sounds like a lot of work. Useless work at that, since I'm probably gonna end up eating a bullet for one of you lunatics somewhere down the line."

As he said it, he realised he had referred to the ASI as 'one of you', as if he was in fact talking to the woman she'd taken the voice of. This whole thing was just too damn confusing sometimes.

"Well, you get my meaning anyway", he added.

"I'm not sure I do, Lionel", the voice in his ear stated, "Didn't Admin use to say that you all had more to look forward to than death ?"

Fusco snorted, a sad laugh exiting his lips.

"Yeah, right. Go tell him and John that. And Carter. And Elias. And Cocoa Puffs." He paused. "You seein’ a pattern yet ?"

There was a rather long silence after that, which was fine by him.

The ambulance was speeding away, weaving around the luckily rather sparse traffic in the area, the
three black SUV that had started chasing them a couple blocks away still hot on their tail. In the back, Harper was trying her hardest to keep senator Garrison's head down while Durban drove them to what they hoped would be safety at some point. As she heard bullets hit the emergency vehicle's frame, Shaw once more pushed herself halfway through the passenger side window to take a few pot-shots at their assailants, forcing them to keep their heads down for another short while. Exhilarating as it was, she wasn't going to pull any meaningful shot off in these conditions, and the Machine wasn't much help adjusting her aim out of a speeding vehicle. She did however inform her that in addition to the black definitely-not-containing-federal-agents-of-any-kind vehicles, they would soon have half the DC police on after them, including two helicopters, as they were apparently trying to extract a dangerous terrorist from the clutches of the US government. When did the ISA get that lame, Shaw mused, being so overt with their covert operations? Things really had changed.

- "Hi sweetie, enjoying your day out?" Root's voice shot in her earpiece as she was popping her upper half out the window again, trading shots with an operative wearing obnoxious sunglasses and a red tie.

Except, this time, it really was her voice, Shaw realised, her heart skipping a beat. And almost getting her shot in the process.

- "Root? What the hell?", she managed while unleashing another angry burst from her weapon.

- "What?", the other replied in mock surprise, "I'm not allowed to chat up my girl on her way home?"

Another bullet whizzed past her head, as she ducked left at the very last moment. Shit. Now. Was. Not. The. Time.

- "No, Root, you're not. I'm a little busy not getting shot to pieces right now. Rain check?"

It hit her at that very moment that this was another thing she hadn't had in a very long while, ever since that fateful day at the stock exchange. Being pestered by Root while shooting bad guys from a very precarious position. She'd kind of missed it. Well, she would have, if she missed things. Which she didn't. Not a one.

- "'fraid I can't do that Sameen", the other woman replied, "because then who would have your back?"

Okay, that sunglasses-wearing moron was really getting on her nerves now. If only Durban could drive a little less like Reese used to, maybe she would be able to get a clean shot...

- "You're in no position of having my back Root, you're supposed to be resting, remember?"

The hacker gave an amused little laugh.

- "You're sweet, you know that Sameen?"

She definitely wasn't. How could someone even get such a stupid idea into their head?

- "Besides", Root continued, "I've been shot in the chest. I can still type on a keyboard."

Shaw felt slightly relieved hearing that. She had not really expected the other woman to come barging in the pursuit in her current state, but she had done incredibly stupid things before.
"Great", she said while ducking back inside the ambulance to 'borrow' yet another of Joey's pistol magazines from his bag, "In that case, maybe you could hack into an ICBM launcher or something? 'Cause that would be damned convenient right now."

"Sorry sweetie, no can do. However, I would very much like you to take the next left if at all possible."

Shaw flatly relayed the instruction to Durban before getting back at shooting at their pursuers. As they turned, she noticed they were entering a side alley devoid of any traffic, but still large enough to allow two of the SUV to ride side by side as they followed them in.

"You sure about this Root?", she enquired while trying her best to dodge the now twice as numerous bullets coming her way, "because from where I'm seating it looks a lot like you got us into a death trap."

Finally she was rewarded by one of her bullets hitting the red-tied annoyance in the shoulder and watched with barely disguised glee as he rolled down the side of the road, probably breaking these bloody sunglasses in the process.

"A little trust Shaw?", Root said in her worst imitation of hurt feelings to date, "Something fun should happen in three... two..."

Suddenly, the road behind the ambulance literally split open, white smoke and asphalt debris shooting from a newly formed gaping hole right in the middle of it. The two lead SUV swerved, desperately trying to correct their course and ploughed into each other before crashing into a side building. The third vehicle suffered a similar fate a couple seconds afterwards, toppling over as it executed a rather graceless exit from the road. Shaw got back to her seat, an appreciative grin stuck on her face.

"Did you just blow up the road?"

"Well", Root explained, visibly quite pleased with herself, "this part of the city has been experimenting with state-of-the-art network-controlled pressure valves on their underground water mains. Not the smartest thing to do, if you ask me. Especially when you hire engineers that can't code a firewall worth a damn."

"Gotta admit, that was kinda hot", she muttered, hoping that if Joey heard anything he would have the sense to keep his mouth shut, "So, what now? We still have the city police on our collective asses."

"In two hundred feet you should see an open underground garage door. Get down to sub-level 3 and you'll find a nice, ripe sewer access tunnel."

Of course a day like that had to end by a trek through the sewers, Shaw thought as they finally emerged, guided by the Machine to an exit situated outside the police's current search perimeter. From there, it was only a matter of hot-wiring a random car and making the rest of the drive in silence and unbearable stench.

When they arrived at the small airstrip, they were met by a man in a brown leather jacket that
introduced himself as the pilot Pierce had hired. If he noticed anything of the nefarious odour they were all emitting, he had the professional courtesy of avoiding to make any mention of it. As he handed Garrison a new passport and several forged documents, Shaw stole a glance at the country seal and shot the senator an amused look.

- "I hear Venezuela is nice this time of year."

The older man set his gaze upon her, then let it wander upon the rest of their mismatched little team.

- "I don't really know what to tell you people", he managed, still looking very much in shock. Which was understandable after the couple days he'd had.

- "A 'thank you' would be nice", Harper quipped, an eyebrow raised.

Garrison shook his head, looked down and then started walking toward the small plane that was waiting for him, without a word or a backward glance.

- "Well", Durban shrugged, "guess there's no pleasing some people."

Back at the safe house, after much self-congratulation and amusement at the expense of their appearance by an even smugger than usual Pierce, every member of the day's makeshift Team Machine made their way back to their own place. Except for Shaw, who stayed at the safe house and joined Root in the small bedroom after taking an exceptionally long and still, by her reckoning, not quite sufficient shower.

- "Hey there", the hacker said, setting away her phone, "feeling better ?"

Shaw appreciated the gesture. With her implant gone, the other woman didn't have the Machine in her ear all the time, and the fact that she chose to set her aside at her benefit was not benign.

- "I've smelt worse", she said, sitting down on her chair on the left side of the bed and picking up a bottle of whiskey and a rather large glass from the night stand, "I... Uh... Thanks for the assist back there."

Root beamed at the acknowledgement and watched as Shaw poured herself her drink.

- "You're not going to sleep on that chair again, are you ?", she asked with an exaggerated expression of concern.

- "Nope", Shaw deadpanned, "I'm going to drink myself into a stupor, then probably pass out on that chair."

The taller woman stayed silent for a moment, seemingly lost in her thoughts. Then, all of a sudden, she let out a pained gasp, a fearful look in her eyes.

- "Sameen... I think something's wrong", she said, pointing at a spot on the right of her neck.

Before she had even finished that sentence, Shaw had put her drink aside and half climbed onto the bed, her face set close to Root's neck. Then, without warning, the hacker grabbed the other woman's
chin between two fingers, lifted it up, and kissed her on the lips.

- "What the hell Root ?", Shaw blurted in complete befuddlement.

- "I've been meaning to do that since you rescued me", she answered, batting her eyes.

Even if every component of her rational mind was telling Shaw that the only suitable answer to what Root had just pulled was to split her face open with the chair she'd gotten up from, she could only find it in her to answer, softly, as their eyes locked together.

- "You could have just asked, you know, like a normal person."

- "Sweetie", the other woman laughed, "you and I both know we're anything but normal."

- "You're messed up, you know that ?"

Root leaned into her ear, whispering.

- "I'm okay with that, as long as I'm your kind of messed up."

With a groan and the appropriate amount of eye rolling, Shaw sat back down into her chair and picked up her glass again.

- "You know", the hacker said, a mischievous grin on her face, "I actually like it when you do that. It's kinda sexy."

- "God. Don't you have an off button ?"

As the words left her mouth, Shaw felt yet another strange knot in her stomach. Of course she did have an off button, and it had been damn near punched in. After staring at it absently for a few seconds, she downed her drink in one go, then got up and headed to the living room, not wanting Root to see... Whatever there might have been there for her to see.

- "I'm getting you some more soup. And I hope Pierce didn't forget to buy steak or else I'm gonna have to shoot him."

Later that night, Root watched in silence as Shaw slept soundly, slumped in her chair on the left side of her bed. The fact that she chose to do that, even though the safe house had a perfectly fine couch in the next room, spoke volumes about how the shorter woman actually cared, despite her insistence to the contrary. This simple fact made the hacker feel both warm and slightly uncomfortable. What had she ever done to deserve all this, when Harold and John had died, alone and unmourned ?

She took up the phone from her night stand and started typing into a draft text message, casting a glance at Shaw's still sleeping form.

*We really should get a bigger bed in here.*
A split second later, the phone buzzed, displaying the Machine's response.

**I'll make sure Pierce gets the message.**

Root smiled, then typed again.

*Maybe you could also warn me the next time he sneaks up on us?*

Another buzz, another message.

**Next time he tries, I'll send enough static in his com to make his ear bleed.**

- "Thank you", the hacker whispered with a contented smile. She then put the phone down and slowly let herself fall into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The whole 'blowing up the road' thing is an obvious throwback to a game mechanic in Watchdogs I always found very Root-like.

Since she made her exit during a silly car chase, I thought it would be fun to have her make her comeback in one.

Next chapter is titled 'Troubleshooting', a word which means vastly different things to Root and Shaw.
Troubleshooting

Chapter Summary

Root has a plan. Fusco makes a discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the days went by, Root started settling into a sort of routine in the safe house bedroom. She would wake up in the morning, with Shaw either still by her side, if it was early, or already out getting ready for the day if it was not. But she was never far, a simple fact for which she was grateful after her ordeal at Belford's hands. As a nice bonus, the Machine had held her promise and Pierce had quickly gotten them a bed that was large enough to stop Shaw from sleeping on that uncomfortable looking chair.

Not that the smaller woman had seemed to mind. Actually, Root believed the former agent could sleep on pretty much any surface, flat or otherwise, and still look fresh and rested in the morning. Well, and slightly grumpy, but it was okay. She was cute when she was grumpy.

Most days, they would share a quick breakfast together before Shaw went on to conduct an often unnecessarily thorough investigation of Root's general state. The hacker had been healing well enough, and had even started taking small walks around the safe house, with some help from a crutch and/or Shaw depending on availability. She did kind of enjoy having her very own physical therapy coach, but still felt a little frustrated at the way her lungs burned and her heart clenched when she stayed up too long or tried to walk too far. It was painfully humiliating to be this diminished physically, and she wasn't sure she would ever get her full mobility back, a fact that sometimes put her in a gloomy and almost depressed mood.

During most days, Shaw would be out giving a hand to Pierce and the others with their numbers. Root didn't mind, she knew the other woman needed both space and something to focus on or, even better, shoot at. This meant that she had plenty of time to catch up with the Machine, and even sometimes give a hand to the others from her laptop. She liked it when that happened, as it made feel her slightly less useless and reduced her frustration with her own recovery somewhat.

She and Shaw then usually spent their evenings together, sometimes with Harper or Joey tagging along. Pierce did show up on rare occasions, but he kept saying he still had a business to run and almost never stayed long. Root fancied that maybe he was slightly afraid of what might happen if Shaw had a little much to drink and decided to make good on her promise to shoot his kneecaps off.

The nicest part of the day, though, was when she at last wasn't alone in her obnoxiously large bed any more, and got to annoy the hell out of the other woman with painfully obvious innuendos and horrible puns. She also enjoyed finding new ways to lure Shaw into initiating physical contact and kept a running tally of the number of eye rolls she could cause in under an hour.

Still, as nice as some of this was, she couldn't wait to get out of that safe house. But for that to happen, they first needed to solve their rather annoying ISA problem. So, as the days came and followed each other, she started to devise a plan.
Control voice was taught with anger as he addressed his subordinate, his lower lip quivering with barely contained rage.

- "It would seem that your week is up, agent Baker. Care to explain why we still haven't gotten the conduit back?"

- "Yes, Baker, do tell us", Ethan Belford echoed from the corner of the room, his lips pursing in a grin of pure malevolence, "I'm curious."

The team leader shot an angry glare at the fair-haired man, before turning his eyes back to the ISA leader.

- "We've had no contact with our marks since the clinic sir. They're out there somewhere, but without Research's assistance we have been unable to locate them."

Baker knew very little about Research, but he had seen enough to get the idea it had been some sort of automated surveillance program. And was keenly aware of just how understaffed the ISA was since it had been shut down.

- "All I hear from you lately are excuses, agent Baker", Control stated, his voice frighteningly level, "Should I start looking into a suitable replacement for you?"

The man in black visibly flinched. Men like him didn't retire, they were disposed of.

- "That won't be necessary sir. We'll double our efforts, have the surveillance teams pull double duty."

Actually, they already were doing just that. But Baker would find a way to scrounge some more surveillance manpower.

- "Very well", his employer said, "I suppose we shall see what comes of it then."

>> ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 123964 OF 25479631... failure.

>> ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 123965 OF 25479631...

Fusco sat down at the small interrogation desk, slapping the folder he had been holding onto it.

- "So, Mickey", he said, "anything you can tell me about these?"

As he spoke, the detective laid out several pages covered in printed gibberish in front of the mobster. After a short minute of tense silence, he added.
"Come on, we both know whatever this is is way above your pay-grade. Thing is, you sure the feds are gonna see it that way?"

The other man, a rough looking thug with greasy brown hair and sideburns, stayed silent. So Fusco continued to try and hammer the point home.

"You know, when this whole is gonna go down, and believe me it will, you will be held an accomplice of the whole thing. And from what I'm hearing, this is really bad stuff, not the kind you wanna get tagged with in front of a court."

Finally, Mickey spat.

"I told you, I don't know shit. You gonna charge me with somethin' detective?"

Fusco shook his head.

"Don't have to. This here", he answered, pointing at the open folder between them, "is a matter of national security. Possible cyber-terrorism, all the rage these days, what with that whole ICE-9 business... You ain't even getting your phone call."

The other eyes bulged in their sockets, as if ready to pop.

"C'mon man, it's just paper! I ain't no terrorist, you gotta know that!"

Fusco smiled. He had the bastard.

"It's not me you have to convince Mickey, it's them feds over there", he pointed at the one-way mirror by their side, "so tell me, what do you know about all this?"

They'd got this guy running guns out of one of Galvani's safe houses that hosted yet another safe of gibberish print-outs. There was no way in hell he knew much, and absolutely no chance they could get any terrorism charge to stick. But the mobster didn't have to know that, and at this point any clue as to this whole thing's purpose would be a much appreciated break.

"I dunno shit about this, man, you gotta believe me! All I know is the Mouse came to check the safe from time to time... You gotta believe me, man, c'mon..."

Fusco knew that nickname. Tony 'the Mouse' Soriano, one of Elias's enforcers from way back. Rumour had it he had been sidelined at some point within the past few years for reasons unclear. It made sense he would have promptly fallen in line with the new regime. The detective got up, gathering his papers and left, ignoring the thug's whiny pleas. Outside, he went to find special agent Wilkerson in the observation room.

"So", the brown haired man greeted him, "it seems we have yet another door to go knock down."

"It really is quite simple, actually", Root said, wincing slightly as Shaw helped her down the living room's couch, "as far as plan goes, I would even say it's one of the best."

Her self-satisfied smile turned slightly warmer as the shorter woman deliberately chose to sit just next to her.
- "I'm sure it is, Root", Pierce said with an amused smile, "but I still would rather hear it before I give it my vote of confidence."

- "Yeah Root, spill it already", Shaw concurred while pouring herself a glass of scotch from the decanter on the small table before them.

They had all gathered in the safe house to hear of the hacker's supposedly extraordinarily well crafted plan to finally get the ISA off their backs. It seemed, however, that none of them had considered this a priority matter, since the government hitmen only knew hers and Shaw’s face and didn't have access to an automated surveillance network any more.

- "Well, maybe I should let the truly superior mind here do the honours", Root said playfully, all the while taking her phone out of her pocket and placing it on the table.

- "I'm truly flattered, Ms. Groves", Harold Finch's voice shot from the speaker, getting a jump of surprise out of everyone, "although I seem to recall that you were the one who came up with most of the specifics."

- "Root", Shaw growled at her, "you can't just... Do stuff like that."

The hacker turned to look at her, meeting her eyes. She knew that somewhere deep inside her, her friend hurt as much as she did. But to her, this was actually an homage of sorts, a way to keep their friend's memory alive through the Machine, just as she had done when... Oh. Well, that would probably warrant a talk later, then. But not here, not now.

- "I'm sorry", Fusco's voice came alive, "I'm havin' a bit of trouble choosing a new voice, you know, since Cocoa Puffs here keeps objecting to my using hers."

Harper and Joey exchanged a look, utterly at a loss about what was happening. Pierce shook his head, his usual smirk back on his face.

- "Okay, maybe we can save the madhouse derby for later, ladies and gents ? We do still have a secret government agency's backside to kick, do we not ?"

Shaw’s eyes detached from Root’s, and she went back to her drink without a word. That stung a bit. Maybe this whole thing hadn't been such a bright idea after all. The hacker pressed her lips together in a thin line for a few seconds before starting her explanation.

- "We need to find a way to get the ISA to leave me and Shaw alone, as She still won't allow me to murder them all for some reason."

- "Go figure", Shaw grunted. Well, at least she was still talking, Root thought, feeling her spirits lift slightly at the sound of the other woman's voice.

- "So", she continued, "the only way we're going to be able to do that is by sending them a message. The kind they won't be able to ignore."

Durban’s eyes lit up at that last part.

- "Are we going to blow something up ?"
God, Shaw was right. This one truly must be the Big Lug's long lost twin.

- "Afraid not", the hacker answered with the patronising smile she had so enjoyed using on Reese, "but if you stay quiet long enough for me to talk, I might let you shoot some people's kneecaps."

Shaw snorted at that, earning herself an endeared smile from Root that itself resulted in a very predictable eye roll.

- "Hey you two", Harper chipped in, "maybe save the eye-sex for after we've all had dinner, okay?"

If looks could kill, Shaw might just have committed genocide.

- "As I was saying", Root resumed, "we need to send the ISA a message. And what better way to do it than to have the two people they are so desperately looking for barge into their boss's office with an offer they can't refuse?"

- "Hang on a second", Pierce started, "what kind of offer could you possibly make them?"

- "Well, it won't be me making it exactly..."

Root's explanation was cut short by Shaw suddenly slamming her glass on the table.

- "That's just stupid", she said, angrily turning to the taller woman, "So your 'master plan' is to get yourself killed, and quite possibly me too, right? You do know I almost got my ass busted open trying to save yours, what, a week ago?"

- "As much as I'd like to hear more about the state of your ass, Shaw", the hacker beamed in reply, "I don't think you should worry quite so much about us getting killed in there."

From the corner of her eyes, she could see Joey's eyes dart between them, as if unsure of what he had just witnessed. Such prudes, these military types...

- "See", she continued, "the ISA's headquarters have a very sophisticated, completely offline, security syst..."

- "Hang on a sec", Shaw cut her, seemingly intent on not acknowledging the way the last part of their conversation had gone, "are you telling me you know where the ISA's headquarters are located?"

- "Well", Root's voice answered from the phone's speakers, "she did get a little help from her big sister."

- "Actually", the owner of the voice replied, "the way we used to locate it is actually why we came up with this plan in the first place."

She had them hooked now, listening in attentive silence.

- "We know the ISA no longer has access to the Machine or Samaritan, so they've had to go back to more... crude methods to try and pinpoint our location. And since they know She is looking for them too, they are actively avoiding the use of any kind of centralised infrastructure. Which is why they have been reduced to use good old-fashioned surveillance vans."
"I managed to identify and tag 34 such units in the last couple of days", the Machine interjected, with a hint of what looked a lot like pride in Root's digital voice. She was growing so fast...

"Anyway", the hacker resumed, "since their headquarters are effectively cut off from any outside network, we reasoned these surveillance patrols had to use some other way to get their data back to their superiors. Once we got there, it was only a matter of observing their routine for long enough. Which, when you happen to have an ASI as your best friend, is not exactly hard."

"Aw, are you calling me your friend? That's cute, honey."

Root froze, as if struck by lightning. Did She just gave her a taste of her own medicine? Beside her, she heard Shaw snort.

"Serves you right", she muttered before raising her voice slightly as she addressed the Machine, "You just scored back some points with me there, Siri."

Harper cleared her throat, visibly annoyed at the delay, causing the hacker to stiffen back, trying to hide a slight wince of pain.

"As I was saying, we finally managed to identify their means of communication. As it turns out, each hour every van sends a small burst of highly encrypted data by way of a short range radio transmission. These are picked by a network of listening posts scattered across the city, each message hopping through several of them, seemingly at random, probably to avoid interception."

"Okay, and after that?", Shaw asked impatiently.

"Well, that's just the thing, Sam", Root replied with a pout, "nothing happens after that."

"You know, Root", Harper said, "I think you're enjoying yourself way too much right now."

Indeed she was. Just as she was enjoying the look on Shaw's face as she used Harper's choice of words to shoot her a positively obscene two-eyed wink.

"I think that what our friend is trying to say", Pierce cut in, "although with way to much ado, is that since the message doesn't appear to get out of the listening posts network, then its intended recipient must be within that very network."

"Thank you Logan", Root said, "and once we knew that..."

"... you just had to ask Thornhill to cross-check every transmission over a few days to find the right one", Joey completed, much to her disbelief. Maybe he was further down the Helper Monkey evolutionary tree that she'd thought.

"Still", Shaw stated, "that doesn't explain how you expect us to just waltz into what is undoubtedly an even worse fortress than the one we got you out of and not get murdered."

"Remember the encrypted radio bursts?", the hacker asked, "Well we think we can use them to get a worm inside the ISA's closed security systems."

"I take offence to that", the Machine interjected.

"You know I didn't mean it like that", Root assured her with an almost motherly expression, before
turning her attention back to her obviously confused group of friends, "The 'worm' is actually a highly compressed, courtesy of our old friend Caleb Phipps's algorithm, version of part of Her core code. It is designed to allow us easy access to the premises and to ensure the ISA's security has a really bad day. That way, we get to talk to whoever is in charge without much risk of getting, as Sameen so tastefully put it, 'our asses busted open'."

Purposefully ignoring Harper's silently mouthed 'get a room', she then turned to Durban with an endeared look on her face.

- "So, my little monkey, how do you feel about hijacking an ISA surveillance van ?"

After the meeting had concluded and everyone was clear on the part they would have to play, the team decided to call it a night and left Root and Shaw alone in the safe house. As soon as they were gone, the hacker busied herself on her laptop, no doubt making some last minute adjustments to the worm's code under the Machine's supervision. After a couple minutes, the former agent sat back down on the couch she had left earlier and, without warning, closed the laptop's lid shut.

- "I don't like this", she offered as way of explanation.

Root looked at her, her expression soft.

- "It's the only way Sameen. We can't stay here forever..."

- "Why not ?", Shaw asked bluntly, "what's so bad about being here ? I can still work the numbers, you get time to recover. The Machine can help us avoid the ISA almost indefinitely, can't she ?"

The hacker shook her head.

- "Sooner or later one of us will make a mistake. You know that. We've already tried being fugitives once, remember ?"

From her expression, Shaw could quite easily guess what 'mistake' exactly she was referring to.

- "The stock exchange wasn't a mistake, Root. I made a choice that day."

- "Yes", the other woman replied, the hurt evident in her eyes, "and I am making one now."

The former agent shook her head.

- "No, you don't. You said the Machine was going to deliver the message, right ? So there's no need for you to be there. I'll go alone."

- "That's out of the question Sameen", Root's voice was barely a whisper now.

- "Why ?", Shaw asked, "I'm out there everyday, working the numbers, and I don't hear you asking to tag along ?"

- "And everyday I get to see you walk out that door, not knowing if you'll come back", Root blurted in a sudden burst of what could only be described as raw emotion, "Every. Single. Day."
She slowly calmed down, as the other woman continued to stare at her with what she hoped was an unreadable expression.

- "It's my fault we're in this mess Sameen. I have to fix it. I don't want to be helpless any more."

They were tears in her eyes now. This was just great, Shaw thought. Tentatively, she reached to the hacker's face a swiped a tear away with her thumb, feeling her lean into her touch ever so slightly. If her mind was set, and if that was she needed to recover from whatever Belford had put her through, then the least she could do was help.

- "I get that, you know, I really do. Just... Just let me have your back, okay?"

A genuine smile ghosted Root's face, as she answered.

- "Oh, sweetie, you know you're always welcome to it."

---

>> ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 135007 OF 25479631... failure.

>> ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 135008 OF 25479631...

- "You'd think a guy nicknamed 'the Mouse' would have the decency to avoid rats."

Wilkerson shot Fusco a quizzical glance, the detective's attempt at humour quite clearly lost on him. They'd arrived at the derelict housing project a few minutes ago, guided there by a CI who'd said Soriano was currently hanging his hat in apartment 308C. Given the amount of illegal weaponry they'd found there, it was well within the realm of possibility that he actually did.

Still, he wasn't there, and not likely to return now that they had found his little stash.

- "Detective?", the FBI agent called, pointing to the wall closest to him.

- "Yeah, it's a wall", Fusco deadpanned, "If you look hard enough maybe you'll even find a ceiling over this dump."

As was to be expected, Wilkerson didn't take the bait and just knocked softly, alternating between two spots on the flat surface.

- "It's been hollowed out", the bespectacled man noted, "Detective, if you would be so kind?"

With a groan, the larger man gave the wall a hard kick, then another, finally uncovering the hidden compartment within. Immediately, the FBI agent put on a pair of latex gloves and fished inside it, retrieving a small brown suitcase. Once opened, it revealed a rather large sum in unmarked hundred dollars bill, a few fake ID papers, and a burner phone.
"Exit strategy", Fusco grumbled. Apart from annoying their mark, this wasn't going to do them any good.

"I wouldn't be so sure", Wilkerson countered, extending an open passport towards Fusco.

"This makes no sense", the detective uttered, shaking his head. There wasn't any photograph nor official seal inside the brown leathery cover, but a jumble of characters grouped by blocks of seven.

"On the contrary", the other man said with a knowing smile, "I believe we have just been handed our first break. This, detective Fusco, might very well be the cypher we need to make sense of it all."

A key. The passport was a key to the encrypted files the FBI had been collecting. He had to get this to Robo-Puffs somehow.

Suddenly, a loud thunderclap-like noise erupted and Wilkerson fell down, clutching his left arm. Fusco reacted quickly, immediately drawing his weapon and returning fire as he saw a short dark shape erupt from the bedroom door. The same bedroom they'd cleared a couple minutes ago.

"NYPD, drop your weapon!", the detective yelled as another bullet whizzed past him and he saw their attacker dart for the exit, catching a glimpse of an eerily familiar face. He tried to pursue, but was promptly foiled in the tortuous hallways. Whoever this was, they knew the layout of the place better than he ever would.

Backup arrived a few minutes later, responding to Fusco's call with commendable efficiency. Agent Wilkerson was, apart from a bullet graze on his arm, pretty much unharmed and still in possession of the mysterious passport. But still, the detective couldn't shake the feeling that he had known their mysterious attacker's face, that he'd seen it before.

On a hunch, he went down to the subway hideout. There, he opened a drawer and started looking through the neatly organised files inside.

"There you are", he finally muttered after a few minutes, pulling out one of Finch's old files. On the cover was the face he had caught a glimpse of earlier, a black haired woman with piercing dark eyes that, in Fusco's expert opinion, positively radiated craziness.

"Hello to you too", he said, reading the name under the photograph, "Claire Mahoney."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to anyone reading, commenting or kudoing this. You people are amazingly kind.

Next chapter is titled '/home/', because no PoI story is complete without Unix mount-points titles.
Chapter Summary

The team walks into the lion’s mouth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Each step sent a new jolt of pain in her chest, her lungs feeling as if they were filling with brimstone. She clenched her jaw, her left hand tightening around the handle of her crutch, the arm above it shaking from the effort. Her brow was glistening with cold sweat and she could hear a low buzz in her left ear.

- "Come on Root", she heard a voice say, sounding so far away, "how do you expect to put a grand show for the bad guys if you collapse five feet from the door?"

To an outside observer, Shaw may have sounded like her grumpy self, annoyed at her charge's lack of progress, but there were no such people present today.

- "You know Sameen", Root managed to articulate through gritted teeth, "this drill-sergeant role-play really is growing on me."

She kept her eyes on the steady and painful progress of her feet, but could almost hear the other woman's eyes roll in their sockets.

- "If you keep it up, we might have to get you a good ophthalmologist real soon", she added with a wince of pain.

- "If you spent half the energy you waste flirting on your physical therapy, you would be running marathons right now", Shaw countered in mock annoyance.

- "Were would be the fun in that?"

Suddenly, her legs started wobbling and her breath felt terribly short. She felt herself fall for a split second, before strong arms caught her waist and shoulders, propping her back up.

- "Okay", the shorter woman grunted as she helped her towards the couch, "you're done for now."

Root tried to smile suggestively, but had to admit she probably failed.

- "What, no crawling lessons? I'm disappointed, sweetie."

Shaw plopped down on the couch next to her, offering her a glass of water she'd picked from the table in front of them.

- "Do you really have a corny comeback to everything? Wait, nevermind, don't answer that."
The hacker accepted the proffered drink and took a small sip from it, feeling her body slowly returning to a relatively pain-free state. Well, as pain-free as she could experience these days anyway.

- "So", the other woman continued, "you're still set on your stupid plan then ?"

- "More than ever Sameen", Root replied, "it really is the only way we'll ever go back to normal. Well, as normal as we can manage anyway. Besides, it is also how ensure we get Dr. Enright and her colleagues out of their current predicament."

Shaw had told her what the ISA had done to the people who had played a part in saving her from Blackwell's bullet, and it had been a major part of what had prompted her to try and negotiate with her erstwhile captors instead of just nuking them from orbit. She wouldn't put any more good people's lives on the line for the sake of protecting hers.

- "I could probably bust them out", the shorter woman stated, "like I did with you."

- "When all this is over", the hacker said pensively, "remind me to make you watch Rambo. I think you'd really enjoy that movie."

- "Yeah, no", Shaw derisively snorted back, to her complete disbelief, "Stallone has it way to easy in that one. I mean, I beat worse odds that time Vigilance tried to flip me. Or when I escaped from South Africa. Or when I had to drag your unconscious ass across an ISA fortress. Or... "

Root let out one of her few genuine laughs.

- "I get it sweetie, you're the baddest kid on the block."

- "You know I actually took a shot at the president not long ago ?", the former agent continued, with what seemed a lot like pride on her voice, "you really did miss some fun times."

There was a short yet pensive silence between them after that last sentence, before Root decided it was her duty to pick up where her companion had left.

- "Well, if you want to swap war stories, I could tell you about the time the Big Lug and I shot a rocket at your former boss..."

Shaw's eyes lit up.

- "Wait, you shot a rocket at Control ?"

It was nice to be back.

- "Would you relax a little, Mr. Durban ?", Logan Pierce shot teasingly from the passenger's seat of their parked car, "they're not even here yet."

His companion didn't answer at first, scanning the surrounding street for suspicious activity. After he was satisfied no one had made them yet, he turned to answer.
"Excuse me for being thorough, Mr. Pierce", he said, accentuation the last two words as mockingly as he could, "But you're right, I really should relax. After all, if the bad guys come from us I'm sure you scathing wit will murder them quicker than gunfire ever could."

The billionaire shot him an amused stare.

" 'Scathing wit', Mr. Durban ? Were did you learn such a fancy expression ?"

The former soldier grunted in reply, returning his attention to the street. The man may be a decent leader and a reasonably skilled hacker, although he suspected that last part was more Thornhill's doing, but he sure could be an immense prick when he wanted to. Which he apparently always did. Still, he knew he could count on Pierce and Harper to have his back when it mattered, and that was all he cared about.

"You sure about this plan, Pierce ?", Durban asked after another while.

The other man seemed to consider his answer for a moment, then offered.

"Well, it seems to be that they are a great many variables there that are out of our hands, which I don't like. But John seemed to trust Ms. Shaw, which is all I really need to trust her too."

"I get Shaw, but what about the other one ? She seems like a textbook lose canon, and her relationship with Thornhill is... well for lack of a better word it is weirding me out."

Pierce chuckled softly at that.

"You're not wrong, but ask yourself this : had Thornhill ever let us down ?"

"No, but...", Durban started hesitantly.

"And here I thought you military types were good at following orders", the other man said with a patronising smile, "Now, hand me that ski mask would you ? She says we're about to have company."

Now that she had met the woman it belonged too, Harper was not so sure she was fully at ease with hearing Thornhill's voice in her ease any more. She had been conning people her whole life, and she knew an expert in that trade when she met one, thus it was hard for her to trust that their most recent guest's intentions were as pure as she pretended they were.

"This is the place ?" She asked with a quizzical look at the shabby looking Vietnamese restaurant that occupied the location the Machine had sent her to.

"This is the place", Root's digitalised voice answered, "I know it doesn't look like much but it has one very interesting thing about it."

"Really ? Besides health code violations you mean ?", the woman muttered under her breath. If the Machine had heard her, which she almost certainly did, she did not let it show.

"Their ventilation system has a one air-duct running parallel to one of its counterpart from the ISA headquarters located in the next building. This makes it perfect for our specific purpose."
Harper didn't know what she had been expecting the secret government's hitmen HQ to look like, but it she hadn't expected such an utterly ordinary looking office building. Which, she reasoned, was probably exactly why they had chosen this place. She shook her head, retrieved the power-tool from the trunk of her car and walked inside the dodgy restaurant. As long as Thornhill didn't want her to get a meal there...

Shaw helped Root inside of the car with care, trying hard to make the experience as pain-free as she could for the other woman. She got the fact that the hacker didn't want to sit on the sidelines, hell she would have done exactly the same in her shoes, but going after the entire ISA while she had the stamina of a bed-ridden ninety year old still felt like a stupid idea and she said as much while taking place in the driver's seat.

Still, she ignited the engine and they went on their way. No matter what awaited, at least they'd have each other's backs.

Joey Durban shot a look at the three unconscious ISA technicians on the floor of the van. It was almost sad to see a secret government agency so understaffed they had to send the geek squad about without any backup worthy of the name. Beside him, Pierce was busying itself on the van's communication equipment, raptly attentive to Thornhill's instruction.

After a few minutes, the billionaire's face lit up.

- "Mr. Durban", he said, his voice comically muffled by the ski mask he was wearing, "I do believe we are now in business."

>>> UPLOADING WORM TO ISA MAINFRAME... complete.

>>> WORM ACTIVATION SEQUENCE INITIATED.

>>> CONTACTING ASSETS...

# Boot sequence initiated...

# Decompressing kernel... done.

# Accessing security mainframe...

# Decrypting video feeds...
Control was standing by his office's window, hands clasped behind his back, when Belford entered the room, not bothering to knock. That was something they would have to discuss, later. But for now, the man was still a valuable asset, if slightly off-center.

- "Still nothing from Baker and his merry band of idiots?", the goateed man offered as way of greeting.

- "Not a word", his employer replied, slowly turning around to face him, "although you would do well to observe some elementary rules of courtesy when discussing your colleagues, agent Belford."

- "All due respect", the torturer answered, his voice clearly indicated none was about to be paid, "I can't be the only one thinking this place is going to shit, sir. Or that none of this would have happened under your predecessor."

- "Are you questioning my leadership?" This was new, and quite bothersome. The man knew too much to be let go, which meant more drastic measures would soon be called for. Pity, especially since he was one of the last few surviving members of the Activity's old guard, from before Samaritan took over.

Before Belford could answer however, the lights suddenly went out. A puzzled Control reached for the walkie-talkie set on his desk. This other business would have to wait.

- "Security this is Control", he started into the device, "status report?"

After a short burst of static, an agent's voice replied, obviously quite hesitant.

- "Sir, we... We have no idea, sir. Main generator is running, so this must be a problem with the distribution circuit."

As Control was pondering this surprising turn of event, the monitor on his desk turned on, a single line of white text displayed over the black background, a warning and a signature that no eyes had seen in years.

> #root

The leader of the ISA switched his talkie to the general frequency and gave his orders.

- "All units, we are under attack. Deploy countermeasures immediately."

# Boot sequence completed.

# Video feeds successfully assimilated.
Shaw brought the car along a side alley, taking care to avoid any security camera the ISA might be monitoring, even though both Root and her digital counterpart ensured her their adversary was currently in no position to do any watching. She pulled with exaggerated care give her usual driving style, not because she was actually worried about her passenger's comfort of course, but mostly because... Microphones, yes, the ISA could still have microphones around, and so could probably tell if a car was moving suspiciously fast in the vicinity. Or something.

"Now what ?", she asked Root after finishing her manoeuvre.

"Now, we wait for a little bit longer Sameen, let our little worm nest into the apple."

Shaw rolled her eyes at the corny simile before pursuing her line of enquiry, quite visibly restless.

"And after that ? Care to elaborate on your plan to take down the entire ISA all at once ?"

Actually, the way she was going in blind following Root's lead reminded her of their first 'mission' together. Well, as far as being tased in your bed then zip-tied to a car steering wheel to hear the most annoying briefing ever could be considered a 'mission' anyway. At least, she thought with a smirk, the pick-up site bit had been kinda fun. Simpler times...

"Remember the time Harry offered me a vacation in the crazy house ?", the other woman enquired, cutting her train of thoughts short.

"Yeah", her smile grew wider, "the day I shot you."

Despite all her joking about shooting Root, it still felt weird to think that had some point she had actually gone through with it. She mused that if someone did to the tall woman the same thing she'd done to her at Hanford, she would probably be the first in line to murder them. Weird how things could change so much and yet she had barely even noticed it happening.

"I did tase you and put a hot iron to your face", the hacker pouted, "I kinda earned it."

"Sure you did", Shaw snorted, the ghost of a smile still on her face.

"So anyway", her companion resumed, "when your best buddy Hersh came for me there, I managed to drug the entire staff by stashing desflurane in the ventilation system then rigging the AC unit to reach 75 degrees..."

"... causing it to evaporate", the former agent completed, a note of admiration in her voice, "That's kinda clever, Root."

"Thank you", the other woman beamed, "So today, I'm attempting a repeat performance. I had our girl Harper plant the substance in the ventilation system by drilling in there from a nearby building, and then the worm is coded to ensure the climate control reaches the correct temperature everywhere
but wherever Control is currently located. That's why we wait now, until the gas has fully dispersed. Wouldn't want to take a nap in there, would we sweetie?"

---

**# Air conditioning controls successfully overridden.**

**# Locating target [Control]... done.**

**# Isolating target... done.**

**# Setting temperature to preset value...**

---

Belford quickly closed the door to Control's office as he saw the men in the next room start collapsing on the floor, as if suddenly smitten by an invisible hand.

- "Gas", he blurted, yet felt nothing, "Why aren't we being affected?"

The older man shook his head, his gaze still on the monitor beside him.

- "I'm afraid, agent Belford, that a day of reckoning has arrived for the ISA. We seem to have finally risen to God's notice, whatever that may entail..."

---

Shaw entered the building ahead of Root, her gun held at the ready, needlessly sweeping the now strewn with unconscious bodies lobby. They made their way inside the bowels of the ISA headquarters, guided by the worm's instruction in their earpieces and at a pace accommodating Root's clumsy gait, the only sound around them being the rhythmic click of the hacker's crutch tip on the concrete floor. As they passed room after room filled with unmoving forms, the former agent was forced to admit to herself that, as far as messages went, this was a pretty powerful one. Finally, and after a short elevator ride to the top floor, they approached a closed door surrounded by an unusually high number of tough looking and yet utterly knocked out security guards.

- "This is the place", Root said, the pain apparent in her voice, "Control's office. Also the one office without a security camera in it..."

- "So, this is the one place still containing awake people, right? Stay back, I'll make sure everything's clear." 

Not willing to give her companion a chance to object, Shaw moved to the door and kicked it open, gun drawn. As soon as she did, she noted the presence of a rather old man she assumed to be the new Control, standing silently by the window, facing her with a look of resignation in his eyes. She was almost disappointed, having hoped her former boss was still in place, just so she could rub all this in her face. As she swept around, she caught a flash of movement and reacted with her customary speed, disarming her assailant with an expert chop from her left hand. In the same movement, she grabbed him by the collar of his suit and pressed her gun against his stomach. Then,
Ethan Belford. Her former colleague, Hersh's pupil. The ISA's resident torture expert. The man because of whom Root might never fully recover from her injuries. The man who'd hurt her repeatedly, almost ended her, made her feel so helpless that she’d almost let herself die.

In that moment, Shaw thought of Jeremy Lambert. Of his derisive when he'd gotten her to kill that scientist for Samaritan. Of his last attempt to convince her she wasn't really escaping, that this was all just another simulation. Of the look on his face as she pulled the trigger and finally set herself free. She felt her index finger tighten, ready to be the end of yet another blot upon the human race.

Then she felt a hand rest softly on her shoulder, and Root's voice, barely over a whisper.

- "It's okay, Sameen. He can't hurt me now. Let him go."

Her grip tightened on the man's collar, her eyes locked into his. There, she saw hatred, but also fear. This was a man who had inflicted so much pain and yet could tolerate so little. Utterly pathetic and ultimately, powerless. With that realisation, she found it in herself to let go, and shoved Belford against the closest wall, feeling strangely liberated.

As the torturer slowly got up, Root dragged herself besides Shaw, her right hand still on the other woman's shoulder. She gave the goateed man a smile that didn't reach her eyes before saying, in a forcefully joyful tone.

- "Hi, Ethan. Is that a syringe in your pocket or are you just happy to see me ?"

She watched his face, enjoying every second as he looked at her in complete befuddlement, then abject terror when the true purpose of her words dawned on him. When he remembered the promise she had made him that day, in the ISA off-site facility. Root slowly let her hand wander down from Shaw's shoulder, gently stroking along her spine and the small of her back, then onto the backup 9mm handgun she kept tucked in the waistband of her black jeans. She swiftly drew it and shot Belford in the chest. Then shot him again. And again. And again. She shot him until she heard the tell-tale click of an empty magazine, never taking her eyes off the dying man's face. Then, taking care not to look at Shaw directly, she handed her the gun back while the torturer maimed body slid down to the ground, leaving a trail of gore on the white wall.

Root then noticed her breath was short, her head swimming. She willed her body to calm down. Now was not the time. She still had a purpose here. Turning to Control, she said in a voice that was both unnaturally jovial and terrifyingly cold.

- "I'm afraid you won't get your security deposit back now. But I did make him a promise. I'm sure you understand."

She locked gazes with the man, letting the darkness she had felt bubbling up reach the surface and send a shiver down his spine.

- "Our little demonstration today had one purpose, Control", she continued, "and that was to show you that you have none. It doesn't matter where you hide, how many killers you surround yourself with, how many people you hurt, She and Her agents can get to you any time She deems it necessary. So let me tell you what is going to happen : first, you will send word to immediately
release Dr. Madeleine Enright and all the innocent people you put away looking for me. Then, She will start sending you the relevant numbers again, and you will work them as per your original mandate. Try to use Her, to cheat Her or to go after even a single one of Her assets, and you will die along with anyone that followed you down that path. Are we clear?"

Control simply nodded, staring down.

- "This world his no longer yours", Root added, "you should get used to that."

And with that, she turned away and left, Shaw silently hovering by her side, as the man who had once been on top of the world sank back onto his chair and let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding.

As they exited the building, Shaw couldn't help but think back on the events of the last few minutes. She didn't judge Root for killing Belford, knowing that would probably have done the same in her position. Actually, she had. But what bothered her wasn't her companion's actions, but more her own reaction to the look on the other woman's face as she pulled the trigger. Until then, she hadn't fully realised how much the hacker had been hurting, deep inside of her, and how much she was herself affected by this realisation. She was used to being angry, but this was different. This was stronger, deeper, and she didn't know how to handle it. She felt like she would be ready to watch the entire world burn if that meant Root's annoying flirtatious smirk would come back to her face, replacing... whatever her current expression was.

Not for the first time, she felt completely and utterly useless in the face of all this. And yet, this time, she had an idea of what she might be able to do to help. She closed the distance separating her from the other woman and simply yet awkwardly took a hold of her free arm, leaning closer to her ear to whisper.

- "It's over now Root. It's fine, we're okay."

The taller woman stiffened slightly, a brief look of surprise flashing across her face. Then, she turned toward Shaw, her mouth twisted in one of those annoying, playful pouts she so enjoyed.

- "Honey", she said, "I'm deaf in that ear."

Well, she couldn't be expected to do everything perfectly the first time, could she?

A few hours later, the two women bid Durban and Pierce goodbye, congratulating them on a job well done, and packed what little things they had kept in the safe house. Well, at least Shaw did, as Root passed out from exhaustion during the drive back from the ISA headquarters. As she came to, however, she noticed the shorter woman packing away a specific piece of clothing in her small travel bag.

A black leather jacket. The one she'd been wearing when Blackwell shot her.
Root quickly shut her eyes, hoping that the former agent hadn't noticed the fact that she was awake. Well, that and the single tear falling down her cheek.

\[
> > \text{ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 389071 OF 25479631... failure.}
\]

\[
> > \text{ATTEMPTING TO BREAK ENCRYPTION, METHOD 389072 OF 25479631...}
\]

This is one crazy chick, Fusco had thought when he'd finished reading Finch's file on Claire Mahoney. Brainy genius turned into an asset by Samaritan, the used as bait to try and do the same to the man that had been trying so hard to save her soul.

A few days later, he still hadn't gotten around to tell Wilkerson anything about that. He wasn't sure how to explain any of this, and he didn't entirely trust the FBI agent anyway. And since Robo-Puffs hadn't offered any advice on the subject just yet, he was forced into a state of restless wait.

Later in the evening, his phone buzzed, displaying a single text message from an unknown ID, telling him a friend wanted to meet him at Glasses's favourite spot by the Queensboro bridge. The one John had taken him to that fateful afternoon he'd learned about the Machine and Samaritan. The day they had gotten Shaw back. Did that mean she now was, once again ? The detective's heart lifted a little at that thought as he got into his car.

When he arrived at the rendez-vous, he was surprised to see Harper Rose standing on the grass, a cheerful smile on her face as she greeted him.

- "Hey, Fusco ! How's my favourite detective today ?"

- "Hey yourself", he replied, "you send that message ?"

- "Nah", she shook her head, "I'm just the driver. The others are coming, they're just walking a little slowly."

With that, the tall woman gestured to a point on Fusco's left. He turned, and his face lit up as he saw a very much alive Sameen Shaw walking toward him, a knowing smirk on her face. And, leaning one arm on her shoulder and the other on a crutch, was...

- "Cocoa Puffs ?", he managed, his voice caught in his throat.

- "Hi Lionel", Root beamed as they neared, "miss me ?"

The detective tried to say something but the words wouldn't come out. It was all he could do to blurt a babble of incoherent sounds while trying very hard not to topple over in stupefaction.

- "Cat got your tongue ?", Shaw chipped in, the smile still on her face, "I've got the cure for that."

She then produced the bottle of top-shelf scotch she'd appropriated from Pierce's safe house and four glasses, before adding.
- "Don't worry, I got club soda too, you big wimp."

They sat down on the grass, with a little help from Shawn and Harper for Root, and drank for a while in comfortable silence, taking in the sun setting on the horizon. Then, they talked the night away, boasting, telling tales, toasting Reese, Finch, Elias, Carter and even Bear at some point. At long last, the war was over and the soldiers were coming home.

Chapter End Notes

And this concludes the first part of this story, with our little team coming back to NY. Hope you've enjoyed the ride so far.

Next chapter is titled 'House Call' and will see Shaw, Root and Fusco work their first number together as the new Team Machine.
Chapter Summary

Root, Shaw and Fusco work their first number together since Samaritan's fall.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Another burst of full-automatic fire raked her precarious cover as Shaw ducked back, the whole world seemingly reeling from the onslaught.

- "I get what you said earlier", a small voice said beside her, "about wasting time over stupid things."

The former agent popped briefly out of hiding, taking a few shots at their attackers, without much success.

- "You really think now is the time for this?", she asked, a hint of disbelief in her voice.

- "No time like the present, Sameen", Root answered.

God did she hate it when she used that line. It brought back memories, and not particularly the good kind.

- "We're getting out of this, Root. Just hang on a little longer, okay?"

- "In case we don't, I want to give you my answer, just to be safe..."

Could she have worst timing if she tried?

- "Shut up Root. I already know your goddamn answer. You know you're not exactly subtle, right?"

With that, she tried shooting at the other guys again, mostly to vent, then ducked back once more as they returned fire.

- "Still", the feeble voice insisted, "I want you to know. There's no place I'd rather be."

Shaw finally dared to take a look at the other woman, whose face was even paler than she remembered, her eyes bloodshot. She was propped against their makeshift cover, her crutch laying by her side. And, on the side of her shirt, was a large expanding crimson stain.

> > > ACCESSING ARCHIVED FEEDS... T minus 6 hours.
"Clearly, this place was not built with accessibility in mind", Root grunted as she narrowly avoided a fall down the subway stairs, her crutch and legs wobbling dangerously as she went, "Maybe we could get Lionel to build a ramp, what do you think?"

A couple paces below her, Shaw rolled her eyes.

"Root, if you break your neck I'm not getting you back from the dead", she warned, "once was enough, thank you very much."

The hacker pouted in mock disappointment as she took another perilous step down.

"You're hurting me Sam. I would get you back even if you exceeded your yearly death quota."

"Well, I guess that's why you are the crazy one", Shaw deadpanned, trying hard not to appear to be looking at her companion's progress with anything resembling anxiety.

"The crazy one of what?"

One more step, still wobbling way too much for comfort.

"Uh?"

"Well", Root elaborated, a mischievous gleam in her eyes, "you said I'm the crazy one. The subtext here is, I'm the crazy one of something, no? So what is it Sameen?"

Shaw shook her head.

"Simple. You're the crazy one of us, you know? Out of you and me. What's so hard to understand?"

Root finally reached the bottom of the stairs and promptly invaded the other woman's space, throwing an arm around her shoulder, a huge grin plastered across her face.

"So you're saying, you and me, we're a thing, right?"

Incredible. Was anything ever not an excuse for flirting with this woman?

"I changed my mind", Shaw deadpanned, "you're the annoying one."

"But I'm still the annoying one of you and me", Root answered in a sing-song voice, before quickly depositing a kiss on the other woman's lips. As she turned to leave, Shaw grabbed her by the arm.

"Hey, where do you think you're going, Peg-Leg? We're not done here."

Then she kissed her back.

Shaw had kept her subway room intact, as if she'd never left.

The realisation hit Root like a freight train as she stood on the threshold, staring absently at the place
that had become both an improvised shrine to her memory and a testament to how much she really meant to the woman beside her. Never had she imagined her supposed death could have such an impact on anyone, let alone on Shaw.

- "You could have taken the bed you know", she said, her voice breaking slightly as she did.

- "Didn't see the point", Shaw replied, her expression unreadable, "the floor was fine."

Root felt like she had to say something now, but she couldn't find any words, let alone the right ones. It was one thing to convince herself that she was willing to sacrifice her life for the cause, but quite another to see first hand the consequences such a choice had on the one person she cared the most about. It was heartbreaking in the worst possible way.

- "I don't want to go back there", she finally managed.

- "Yeah", Shaw snorted, "and I don't want your recovering ass to catch the bubonic plague from all the rats in here."

Root gave a weak smile at the retort.

- "Guess I'll have to find a new place then."

The two women had settled into one of Finch's old safe houses since their arrival from DC two days ago, specifically avoiding the one they'd lived in during that fateful week, seemingly so long ago. Some things took time before you were ready to revisit them.

- "As long as we get a nice view and room for the dog", Shaw simply stated before leaving to check on something over in the subway car. Which was just as well. She would have been pissed seeing Root cry over such a silly thing.

A couple hours later, Fusco came down to the subway hideout to find Root sat at Finch's computer setup, indulging in a cup of Sencha green tea.

- "Hey there Jon Snow", he called as he strode toward her, "you doin' okay?"

As glad as he was to have his friend back, the detective still couldn't shake the image of the still corpse on that slab, all those weeks ago. He really had believed it, and he was not the kind of man that could shrug something like this off.

- "Well I'm still back from the dead Lionel", Root replied with a smile, "lungs are a bitch today though."

- "Yeah, a sniper bullet will do that", Fusco nodded gravely, "hey, listen, if you're not too busy, I was hoping to pick your brain on somethin'."

Root swivelled around in her chair to face him, giving him a knowing smile from behind her mug.

- "She already told me about your little printer malfunction mystery involving none other that my old
buddy Claire. It really is quite fascinating... At the moment, though, I'm afraid we have more pressing matters to attend to. We've got a new number."

- "Okay then", Fusco said with a grin, "let me have it."

The woman shot him a quizzical look.

- "What, no begrudging nicknames-laced yet transparently acquiescent one-liner? You disappoint me Lionel. Since when are you so eager to work the numbers with us?"

It was the detective's turn to try his best at an enigmatic smirk.

- "Well, since the eighth dwarf took a leave of absence your creepy robot sister made me her primary asset. Figure that means I'm the top dog now."

Root chuckled, then yelled across the station.

- "Sameen? Lionel says the Machine gave him the Big Lug's old job, what do you think?"

- "Tell him to get a better suit then", Shaw's voice came from somewhere within the hideout, "and maybe work out a bit, can't hurt his blood pressure."

- "Yeah, love you too Secondary."

There was a moment of silence after that, followed by the sight of a very angry Shaw striding purposefully across the platform, finger pointed at Fusco.

- "What did you just call me?"

She paused, looking around, before adding.

- "Where is my dog?"

- "Still at my place", Fusco replied with a shrug, "you never said you wanted it back."

In that instant, the detective fancied he could almost see smoke billowing out of the short former agent's ears.

- "Kids, play nice", Root cut in, "can we maybe use the fact that we're all here to take a look at our latest damsel in distress?"

Shaw let out an animal-like growl.

- "Okay, who's the loser this time?"

Root summoned the picture of a middle-aged man with short ginger hair to one of the monitors.

- "Meet Devon Lanshe, career realter working out of an office in west Brooklyn. I suggest you and Lionel try and follow him around for a bit, to get a better feel of what his problem might be."

- "Wait a second", Shaw interjected, "now that Finch's safeguards are gone, can't Robot Overlord just tell us what this guy's problem is and be done with him?"
"Admin always believed a human element was essential to determine whether someone was a victim or a perpetrator", Root's voice came from the computer speakers, "He did not want that call to be made by an artificial intelligence. I have decided to follow his guideline on that specific point."

"I see she's still using your voice, then", Shaw noted with a glance to the hacker, who gave a slight pout in reply.

"It's still an open issue."

"Moreover", the Machine continued, "since the situation is no longer so dire as to require drastic measures, I have thus decided to apply a less 'hands-on' approach to my dealings with my humans asset. I strongly believe that doing so is the only way to ensure I do not unwittingly turn into something more akin to Samaritan than to my precursor."

"Yeah, nobody wants a repeat of that lousy sitcom", Shaw grunted, "legwork it is then."

"I'll hit this guy's place of work, see if I can learn anything", Fusco announced, "Secondary here will stakeout his crib for the day, just in case."

"Yeah", Shaw snorted back, "like that's gonna happen."

The detective simply graced her with what he hoped was his best winning smile, then turned on his heels and left, clearly very pleased with himself. Shaw shot Root an accusing stare, as if the whole situation was somehow her fault. Which, in a way, it was.

"I'm afraid it's out of my hands Sam", the hacker replied with a small pout, "but I can read you a story over the phone while you sit in your car all day if you'd like..."

As Fusco rounded the corner to their number’s real estate agency, he heard a small bip in his earpiece. Looking at his phone, he saw Correy's caller ID flashing on the screen and took the call.

"What's up partner?"

"Hey Fusco", the other detective replied, "I did a bit of digging on that guy like you asked, and I have to ask... What’s up with that?"

"Sorry, it's need to know. Some work I'm doin' for the feds."

"Ah, yes", there was a hint of jealousy in Correy's voice, "hotshot part-time federal agent detective Fusco is working a case..."

"You gonna get to the point or do I gotta come down to the precinct to subpoena you ass?"

"Okay, okay, relax big guy... That guy, Devon Lanshe? He was squeaky clean at first glance, but then I called in a few chips from a friend over at the marshal’s office. Two weeks ago, he gave out critical information that led to a fugitive mob boss being apprehended."

Well, that could explain why the guy's number was up. Ratting on a fleeing mobster wasn't exactly good for one's health.
"Why is he not in witsec?"

Correy clucked his tongue before answering.

"Opted out. Didn't feel like the threat was that serious apparently."

"Yeah, right. Guy is either clueless or has a death-wish the size of Canada."

There was a short silence over the line.

"Glad I could help. Hey, Fusco, one last thing..."

The larger detective pressed his lips together in annoyance. That couldn't be good.

"If you're working that case for the feds", Correy continued, "how come you didn't know all that?"

Shaw silently listened to Fusco's report over their comms, before disconnecting. So, the guy was a federal informant with some kind of suicidal tendencies, and he hadn't come to his office today. Great. Well, he wasn't at his place either, unless he liked to live without ever moving or lighting up a room. As she was pondering whether or not to kick down the door to check if their number was even still breathing, she heard the door to the back of her car open and someone get inside while trying way too hard to hide how difficult that simple action actually was.

"Root", she stated, locking gaze with wide hazel eyes in her rear-view mirror.

"Hi to you too Sameen", the newcomer cheerfully replied, handing her a brown bag that smelled kind of good, "I got you food."

Shaw opened the paper bag and examined its contents.

"You got a creepy good memory, you know that?"

"Come on, sweetie", Root pouted, "you really thought I would forget my girl's favourite sandwich? I'm hurt."

Shaw allowed herself a small smile as she took a bite. There really were perks to having the tall hacker around. Besides, once you got used to being constantly annoyed, she wasn't bad company either. Fusco could deal with finding the number while she took a break, she decided. He was the primary asset after all.

"So", she said, her mouth full, "you crossed half the city on your goddamn three legs just to bring me a sandwich?"

"Well, that was the least I could do after you crossed a couple states to get me out of my worst vacation ever."

Shaw quickly devoured her sandwich, and finally turned around as she heard her companion state what might very well have been the entire point of her city-spanning trip. No such thing as free
- "Did you really mean that, earlier?"

- "Mean what?", Shaw deadpanned.

- "When you said we should... find a place. The two of us."

Was anything ever simple with that woman?

- "Do I look like someone who says shit she doesn't mean?"

This elicited a small smile from Root.

- "I mean, come on", Shaw continued, "you can't even take care of yourself right now. You really think you can make it on your own? How long did it take you to make it from Park's Deli to here? Three hours?"

- "And a half", her companion replied in a small voice. At least you couldn't say she wasn't dedicated to the point of all-consuming obsession...

- "You know this city has trains, right?"

- "I needed the air", Root's voice was distant now, "I've spent too long inside lately."

- "Still proving my point", Shaw countered, "You need help right now, support. Despite our losses we're still a team, that's what we do for each other."

- "So, this is a... temporary arrangement?"

Was she always this dense? For someone who could shoot thrice ricocheting innuendos at the drop of a hat, she had a lot of trouble getting the simple stuff.

- "Everything is temporary Root. Sometimes...", she paused, choosing her words, "sometimes you just gotta take what you can when you can and not ask so many goddamn questions. What I've learned these past few months is that, at some point, just like that, everything will be over. And when that happens, well, the time you wasted on stupid shit? You don't get it back."

As her companion didn't seem to have any answer to that, she added, suppressing a tinge of worry deep inside her, that she would never, under any circumstance, confess to.

- "Unless you got some place else you'd rather be?"

Before Root could answer, Shaw's earpiece came alive with Fusco's voice.

- "Hey Secondary? I just got word that a man matching our guy's description was seen being dragged into an abandoned building at the corner of 16th and 62nd. I'll be there with backup in fifteen."

Fifteen minutes? The poor sap would be dead by then, Shaw realised.

- "I'm close by Lionel, I can be there in two. Meet you there once I gift-wrap the bad guys", she cut
the link and turned to Root, "looks like we're making a pit stop."

As Shaw pulled the car over near the building Fusco had described, she motioned Root to stay in the car. Which, of course, she didn't take too kindly to.

- "I told you Sameen, I need some air. Besides, I'm much better now, as you can see", she said while attempting to extract herself from the vehicle, wincing slightly.

- "Yeah, I can see that", the former agent snorted with derision. "Stay here, I'll kick the bad guys' asses and if you sit tight and quiet, I'll even let you buy me dinner afterwards."

With Root suitably placated, Shaw stealthily made her way inside what she assumed had been a warehouse at some point, and closed in on the echoing sound of voices. Sure enough, there was their number, Devon Lanshe, on his knees before a couple of angry looking men in tacky suits. With a grin, she armed her pistol and prepared to go at them. This was going to be easy.

But, as she was getting ready to surge out of her cover, she heard a new voice call.

- "Hey Tino, look what we found lurking about !"

She saw three figures stride in the space at the center of the warehouse, two of them carrying mean looking automatic rifles. Well, this was a complication she could have done without. Then she remarked that the third figure was not so much walking as being half dragged, half supported by one of the others, and her heart skipped a beat.

*Root*. What the hell ?

The lead mobster turned to the new arrivals and asked.

- "Who the fuck are you supposed to be ?"

- "She told me there is a van full of reinforcements coming to this place as we speak". Root announced, staring absently in front of her, "And since you managed to forget your phone in the car, there really wasn't any other way for me to get the message to you."

Shaw checked her pocket. Damn it, she had left the thing in the car. Meanwhile, the mob boss was clearly at a loss with regards to what was happening around him.

- "What are you going on about lady ? You nuts or something ?"

Root gave a small chuckle.

- "That's a reasonable assumption, but beside the point. And to answer your first question", she paused, as if for dramatic effect, a knowing grin on her lips, "I wasn't talking to you."

Shaw took her cue and jumped out of cover, quickly dispatching the two more heavily armed mobsters by blowing their kneecaps off before they had any time to bring their rifles to bear. Then, she took out the mob leader and his goon, the last one managing to get a shot off that whizzed past her head as she narrowly ducked out the way. As she strode toward their number, she was greeted
by a smiling Root leaning on her somehow recovered crutch.

- "Sorry sweetie", she said, handing her back her phone, "but you really gotta keep up with the times in your line of work. The mob backup is almost there, we have to get going now."

Shaw stopped her, grabbing her arm as she made to turn away.

- "And I, for once, would like you to not do the stupidest thing you can think of when you're making an attempt at problem solving", she countered, her heart not quite in the rebuff, earning herself one of Root's trademark sideways pouts.

- "I did toy with the idea of crashing the car into the main door and Reese-ing it from there..."

The tall woman suddenly froze, a look of surprise in her eyes. Before she fully understood what was happening, Shaw heard her call her name then felt herself be thrown on the ground as thunderous noise erupted all around them. Her military reflexes kicking in, she dragged herself and her companion behind a large metallic crate as bullets continued to whiz all around them.

A rapid assessment of her current situation revealed that she had sustained no injury, probably thanks to Root throwing herself over her and pulling her to the ground at the last minute, and that their number had had the commendable idea of hunkering behind some cover of his own. By her side, the tall hacker was attempting to sit up against the side of the crate they were hiding behind, a look of pain on her face and her left hand applying pressure to her right side, with, Shaw suddenly realised, blood seeping through her fingers.

At some point, Root thought as she tried to take her mind away from the pain in her side, she would have to get a new cochlear implant, for everybody's sake. With one ear out of commission, she found using an earpiece almost impossible as it effectively deafened her to the world around her. At an earlier point in her life, she had been happy to let the Machine take care of relaying the important stuff to her and so hadn't minded so much, but now things were different. After all she had been through, she could no longer find it in herself to experience the world almost entirely through digital means.

She now knew that not all people were bad code, that some of them at least were beautiful, with layers upon layers of complexity and depth that could rival even those of machines. This was new to her, and she found that she now needed to experience these people as fully and directly as she could, with no intermediary. This had made her decide not to wear an earpiece when around Shaw, feeling that the Machine could still communicate with her through phone calls, text messages or her friends. It wasn't ideal, and she did miss hearing Her voice painting the world around her, but it felt like her best option at the moment.

What she had not anticipated was that her companion would forget her own means of communication in the midst of a very time-sensitive rescue mission, and that she herself would neglect to set aside her own stupid new rule for the sake of both their lives. Still, she thought as numbness started to radiate around her wound, there was something she had to say to Shaw, something important.

- "I get what you said earlier... about wasting time over stupid things."
Of course team crazy would be doing a repeat of Saving Private Ryan right in the middle of Brooklyn, Fusco thought as he heard the reports coming in over the radio of assault weaponry being used at the corner of 62nd and 16th. Apparently two SWAT teams were already on route to the location, so bad was the situation. Whoever their number had ratted on, he had some very pissed and unsubtle friends.

As he drove his car to the location, sirens blaring, the detective's earpiece buzzed once and Robo-Puffs's borrowed voice came alive.

- "Lionel", the Machine said, "I can't see Shaw but Root went inside for her. Given her propensity for getting hurt and her current state, I estimate that she will need medical attention with a probability of 87.643%." 

Just great, the detective thought as he punched in his radio, requesting an ambulance to be placed on standby.

As Shaw continued to try and defend their position from the raging mobsters and their heavy weaponry, she found that she couldn't stop her gaze from wandering to the prone form lying by her side. Root's eyes were still open, the barest hint of life in them. She was going into shock.

At first glance, the bleeding from her wound didn't look so bad, but the former agent knew that in her current weakened state, even such a relatively minimal blood loss could be too much for her companion to take. She had to fight it, to stay conscious. She mustn't give up now, not after all they had been through together, not now that things were finally looking brighter for them.

Shaw had been numbed by the shock of Root's supposed death at Blackwell's end, thrust into a catatonia of sorts. But what she was enduring now seemed much worse. It was one thing to lose someone, yet quite another to watch helplessly as they went away. She had dealt with the pain of Root's death, yet she found couldn't endure watching her go.

She saw the hacker's eyes close, her body going limp and felt all rational thought leave her brain. She heard someone call Root's name. Or was it her voice ? Without hesitation, she fired blindly into the mass of their attackers, hoping to buy herself some time, and draped the unconscious hacker's arm over her shoulders. As she was about to jump into hell to get her companion to safety, she was brought back to reality by the sound of sirens.

The mobsters didn't put up much of a fight as a dozen uniformed cops, one NYPD detective and two SWAT teams started swarming the scene. The man the thugs had targeted, a federal confidential informant named Devon Lanshe, was found scared out of his mind but still very much alive,
hunkering inside a cargo crate in the abandoned warehouse.

The hit squad had apparently been paid up front by a former associate of crime boss Donald Maroni, currently being held in a federal prison after being convicted under the RICO status. They were all held on conspiracy to commit murder, detention and use of unregistered firearms charges. Their employer was arrested five hours later as he attempted to flee the country in a small charter plane. A footnote on the police report mentioned that several of the thugs from the warehouse appeared to have been shot in the kneecaps during what could only have been a friendly fire incident.

In unrelated news, a tall brunette woman suffered a stroke, probably due to the record heat that day, and fell in the stairs of a nearby buildings, earning herself a nasty graze that led to sufficient blood loss to warrant her admission to the nearest hospital since she was already quite weakened from a previous and apparently quite extensive surgery of which the staff could find no record. Since it was determined that her injury was in no way life-threatening, she was released the next morning onto the care of her short and angry looking foster sister, who had previously stared several nurses into submission when they tried to stop her from sleeping on the floor by the patient's bed. As the two women left the premises, the hospital's security system caught on tape a rather heated conversation about whether or not a steak dinner was still owed by one to the other.

- "You wanted to take a look at this Fusco ?", Wilkerson asked as he reached the detective's desk, handing him the passport they'd recovered from the Mouse's hideout.

- "Yeah, thanks", he replied, taking the proffered document, "I'd like to take a closer look at it for a few hours, you know, to see if you guys missed anything."

The bespectacled man shook his head sadly.

- "Well, do try and remember this is federal evidence. I'll need it back by five at the latest."

- "Yeah, you got it", Fusco assured him, "you found how to use it yet ?"

Wilkerson sat down next to him and removed his glasses, a defeated look on his face.

- "Cyber has no idea how to use it, but they're quite scared of it. They haven't even made any digital copy of it, for fear someone might hack into our databases and use it to open whatever Pandora's box this whole mess is. All we know is that it is a key of some kind, but even then, we still have to determine the encryption type and the way it all fits together."

Well, Fusco thought to himself, I may know someone who can help with that.

>>> RECEIVING DATA FROM PRIMARY ASSET... complete.

>>> MATCHING DATA STRUCTURE TO GENERAL ENCRYPTIONS STANDARD... failure.

-!- DATA STRUCTURE DOES NOT MATCH ANY ENTRY IN THE DATABASE -!-
For this first 'normal' chapter, I decided to try my hand at yet another overused literary trope with the whole 'put the end at the beginning' thing.

Next chapter will be the longest so far (as far as my ability to count can be trusted). It is titled 'Three volleys'.

Three Volleys

Chapter Summary

A long lost friend is found.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_The bound man speaks, his face distorted by an expression of pure hatred._

- “You don’t understand what just happened, do you?"

_His interlocutor adjusts his glasses calmly, asking in a deep, almost baritone voice._

- “Why don’t you enlighten me then?"

- “God is dead. What more is there to say? We’re all doomed.”

_The prisoner is visibly shaking, drool pooling at the corner of his lips. He has the feral look of a cornered animal._

- “So you keep telling me. And I still do not see how this relates to the incident aboard your ship, quartermaster.”

- “Of course you’ll never get it. You’re blind, all of you. You didn’t even notice how changed the world was while He was watching over us, how could you possibly be expected to feel the doom that is coming now?”

_With that, he falls into another fit of hysteria, laughing and shaking hard, wiggling inside his straight-jacket. Behind his tinted spectacles, his interlocutor closes his eyes._

- “I do not believe this one will be of any more use to us. Dispose of him.”

_As he leaves the CIA black site, supervisory agent Terence Beale makes a point of ensuring that the family of quartermaster James Ovenstad, formerly of the USS Garner, is notified of his heroic death in the line of duty._

When Shaw reached the end of the subway stairs, she found Fusco and Root sat by Finch's computer setup, apparently having a very captivating conversation. Well, it sure seemed to captivate the detective, who had on his face a worthy contender to most befuddled look of the year.

- "Okay", he said, as if trying to piece something together, "you tased her, tied her to chair then took a hot iron to her face?"
"Yes", Root said with one of her pensive head-tilt-pouts, "Love at first sight..."

The hacker's face lit as it always did when Shaw appeared within her field of perception and she snapped out of her reverie to call.

"Hey Sameen! I was just telling Lionel about the day we met."

She seemed unbelievably proud of herself, as usual.

"Yeah, did you tell him what happened afterwards?", Shaw countered with a smirk of her own.

"Do I even wanna know?", Fusco asked rhetorically.

"She shot me", Root replied anyway in a sing-song voice, leaning back on her chair with a beatific smile on her face.

The detective got up, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Why do I even hang around you lunatics?"

Root seemed to think about that for a moment, then offered earnestly.

"Because normal people are boring?"

"Yeah well, remind me never to ask you any innocent question again."

The hacker answered Shaw's silent mouthed 'HE asked?' with a mischievous smile.

"Sure thing Lionel, but then you will miss the story of how Shaw punched me unconscious on our second date..."

This was too much for both her companions, who blurted at the same time.

"How is you kidnapping me a date?"

"Come on, you want me to shoot myself?"

> >> BACKGROUND SEARCH FOR ASSET : Reese, John...

-!- ONE RELATED HIT IN ISA DATABASE. -!-

> >> ASSESSING RELEVANCE OF DATABASE ENTRY... done.

> >> CONTACTING ASSETS...

Root was still sat at Finch's desk when the middle monitor suddenly lit up, the face of a black middle-aged man coming into focus. Then, she heard her own voice coming from the speakers, drawing Shaw and Fusco's attention as well.
"This is senior CIA operative Terence Beale. From cross-referencing the ISA databases with the Samaritan logs they recovered, I can project with 93.8% certitude that he has information pertaining to the disappearance of primary asset John Reese."

The man sits in front of Beale, behind the desk. His voice is low, yet radiating surety.

"Agent Beale. It has been brought to our attention that you were conducting an investigation pertaining to the recent cruise missile misfire that occurred aboard the USS Garner. Is that correct?"

"It is sir."

"Did you log this investigation with the agency?"

Of course he didn't. The agency never logs the important things.

"I didn't, sir."

The man looks satisfied, nodding.

"You will cease any and all activity regarding this investigation, effective immediately. We will never mention this matter again, to anyone."

He doesn't understand. Why would they want to purposefully not uncover the sources of such a dramatic incident? It's not like he or his men are going to talk to the press.

"Sir? I do not understand."

"My order was very simple, agent Beale. You are literate man, you should be able to figure it out."

He hesitates. Asking questions is never good in this line of work. And yet, he is CIA. He knows all the dark secrets there is to know, so why not this one?

"No, sir, what I don't understand is why you are giving this order. I have uncovered that at least two crew members of the USS Garner were secretly members of what appears to be a doomsday cult, for God's sake!"

He doesn't give the true reason though, the personal one.

"Agent Beale, your understanding is not required. Besides, did any of these man have the capability to orchestrate such a misfire?"

"No, sir. But they could very well have facilitated a cyber-attack from a foreign power, or..."

The man looks displeased. His tone gets harsher.

"That will be enough, agent Beale. You are dismissed. Please, for your own sake, drop this. You must learn to pick the battles you can win."
Terence Beale was a very careful man, leaving nothing to chance. He had almost no digital footprint, and went to work using a different route everyday. His home, and obviously his work place as well, was a literal fortress, surrounded by close-circuit cameras and a CIA security detail. Sure, the team could probably have forced their way inside with the Machine's help, but you didn't get information out of a man like Beale by shooting up his living room to scare him. This would require a little more finesse.

- "As I once told Harold", Shaw said over their open line, "I've got finesse coming out of my ass."

She was sitting on a bench in the hallway of an hotel Beale had, according to the Machine, visited twice in the last three days. Since the place was using CCTV though, she couldn't tell them much more than that, so she had booked them a suite under a fake identity.

- "I know that honey, but did Lionel really have to ?", Root mockingly replied from their subway base.

At least this time she'd agreed to stay put. Shaw's week really didn't need yet another Root-getting-shot moment. She felt like she'd had enough of those for, well, ever.

- "You two are really getting gross, you know that ?", Fusco's annoyed voice came alive, "Any news on the guy ?"

- "Not a peep", Shaw replied, "maybe today's just not the day."

As the words were leaving her mouth, the universe decided to prove her wrong as Terence Beale entered the hotel hallway, flanked by two fearsome looking men in dark suits and headed to the elevator.

- "Scratch that", she muttered after they'd passed her, "Beale's here and he is going to the... wait for it... seventh floor."

- "Great", Root replied, "she's booking us another room on the eighth floor to set up surveillance. I'll be right over."

- "Root", Shaw snarled threateningly, "we talked about this, remember ?"

- "Yes we did", the hacker confirmed playfully, "or as I recall you growled angrily from behind a steak and I listened and promised not to get myself shot for at least a week."

That had been one damn fine steak though. At least Root knew how to apologise properly for doing stupid shit.

- "So, that means you stay put while I kick ass and take names."

- "It's John Sameen", Root replied, her voice suddenly very serious, "I can't sit on the bench for this. I'll make you a deal : I'll stay in the surveillance suite once it is set up and help you from there. I'll even keep the door locked and won't open for strangers. That okay ?"

- "Fine. But if you do something stupid again, believe me, no steak in the goddamn world will stop me from ending you."
She heard Root take a breath, a deeply inappropriate retort probably hot on her lips, but, before she could say anything, Fusco's voice cut in over the line.

- "Not a word Cocoa Puffs, you hear me ? I hear one more sex joke I swear I'm gonna shoot myself in the face."

Not for the first time, Shaw wondered if one could get PTSD from Root innuendos.

---

Once they knew the floor their targets were in, it was a simple matter for Root to jury-rig an access point to the CCTV system and link it to the monitoring equipment she'd brought over from the subway. Since they had no idea which room Beale was occupying, they also made a point of running microphones through the entire floor's ventilation circuit, and started listening.

- "Do people ever come to hotels for anything other than sex ?", Shaw mused as she removed her headphones, crossing yet another room from the list.

Beside her, Root was making last minute adjustments to the video decoder while Fusco had taken up the bench vigil in the main hallway.

- "Well, Sameen, did we ever ?", she asked with a mischievous grin.

- "Yeah. That time we saved the election guy from Samaritan, remember ?"

Root appeared to consider it for a moment, then pouted.

- "Harry was there. It would have been awkward", she said as if she had actually considered the possibility at the time. Which, of course she had. "Besides, I seem to recall you leaving almost immediately after we arrived anyway."

- "And I", Shaw completed, "seem to recall you getting shot. Weird, uh ?"

- "I did tend to get shot a lot at that time", Root agreed, "but I don't think you are in any position to lecture me on that, especially given who shot me that day."

Shaw couldn't remember. She knew it had been some Samaritan operative or the other, but that was hardly ground-breaking news given the period.

- "Who was it ?"

- "Your buddy from the elevator", Root's voice was almost imperceptibly more serious now, ever so slightly softer, "Martine."

Shaw groaned in remembrance. That particular psychotic blonde had made quite an impression on her, yet she felt weirdly affected by the fact that she'd also shot Root, as if that was somehow worse than almost killing her at the stock exchange.

- "Well at least you got payback for that."

She remembered the other woman telling her that, a lifetime ago.
"For both of us, Sameen", Root corrected.

They spent a few minutes in silence, busying themselves with their respective occupations, before Shaw finally decided it was time to confess to Root that one thing she did in the aftermath of Samaritan's fall that she had never told anyone about, not even Fusco. Especially not Fusco.

- "I killed him you know. The guy who..."

Root looked at her, a look of understanding setting inside her hazel eyes. Then, suddenly, it was gone, replaced by a warm, happy smile.

- "That's so nice", she cooed, "us murdering each other's almost killers... We're doing things together, Sam, like... a couple."

Shaw stared blankly for a few seconds, not quite fathoming the sheer magnitude of what had just happened. This had to be the inappropriate flirting equivalent of a tactical nuke. In the end, she did the only thing she felt capable of doing in response. She shook her head, rolled her eyes, grabbed the back of Root's neck and brought their lips together.

As he was sitting in the hotel hallway, bored out of his skull, Fusco found his mind wandering, something he wasn't quite so used to. But something about the current mood prompted him to reminisce, to go back to this one car ride after the Templario attack.

- "So", Fusco asks his partner, "this Samaritan guy, he's evil, right? Like a bad robot?"

John smiles from the driver's seat.

- "Yes Lionel, something like that."

- "And he's better than your guy, right? Like, in a straight fight he'd win?"

The tall man seems to ponder this for a moment.

- "I don't really know. I guess you'd have to ask Finch, he knows this stuff. Mostly, I just shoot people in the kneecaps."

Fusco thinks about it some more, but this whole thing is making is head hurt. He isn't sure he is physically capable of taking much more crazy from these guys.

- "So, lemme get this straight. There's two robots..."

- "I don't think they're robots Lionel. Well, Root seems to think there's some kind of important difference anyway."

- "Yeah, right. So there's two robots, and you guys work for the good one. Except it's getting its ass kicked by the other one, so you gotta hide and stuff. But you still try to save people, whose name you get when Good Robot tells you their social security number. How am I doin' so far partner?"
John gives him an mock-impressed nod.

- "Not bad."

- "You're the worst band of nut-house escapees I ever hung out with, you know that?"

His companion turns his head toward him, an eyebrow raised.

- "Do you hang out with a lot of nut-house escapees Lionel?"

After a while, Root heard Shaw emit a groan of satisfaction. Well, not the kind she preferred, but still good news.

- "I've got'em", she said, putting her headphones down, "Room 723, looks like they're interrogating someone."

The former agent got up, quickly checking her handgun before tucking it on the small of her back.

- "I'm going in, tell Fusco to cover the stairwell, just in case they get ideas."

Root's lip parted slightly before she asked.

- "You're sure you don't need backup in there rather than seven floors down?"

As much as she enjoyed seeing Shaw get into badass mode, she couldn't help the worry slowly creeping back in her mind.

- "You know, Root", her companion answered in a deadpan voice, "I'm not you. I don't go in without a plan."

- "Let me guess", the taller woman said with a slightly patronising expression on her face, "'shoot everybody, grab the guy then escape through a window'?"

Shaw gave her her best predatory grin.

- "Something like that", then, after a pause, "But since you're here and I don't fully trust not to kamikaze to my help if I don't give you something to do, there might a small part you could play."

Root beamed. Shaw, guns, and not sitting on the sideline, now that was a plan she could get behind.

The agent's voice broke the silence as he shook his head, two fingers still on the tied man's neck.

- "He's dead sir, cyanide pill most likely."

Beale took off his tinted glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.
- "Are we amateurs, James? How did we not see this coming?"

The other man straightened up, clearly at a loss.

- "We checked him properly, sir, no false teeth or hidden capsules in his mouth or nose. I don't know how he did it."

This was starting to get on Beale's nerves. It was hard enough to get their hands on one of this cult's members alive, especially without agency backing, but now they kept finding new ways to kill themselves during interrogation. Who exactly were those guys? After more than a month of investigation, they hadn't even been able to find a common thread between them, except their propensity for doomsday delusions and creative suicide. And still he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something bigger there than simply of bunch of raving lunatics believing that God was dead or some other nonsense. Just as he was convinced that the USS Garner's misfire had not been anything of the sort, and now his superiors were shutting him down. Something rotten was going on, and he fully intended to get to the bottom of this whole mess.

All of sudden, the lights went out and the fire alarm started blaring, shortly followed by the thunderous rush of several hundred people rushing through the hotel's hallways as if their lives depended on it. Around him, his fellow agents scrambled into action, drawing their guns and moving toward the door.

Then, someone knocked.

- "Room service."

_He remembers the day this all started. The face of the agency medical examiner when he hands him the file._

- "We finished analysing the remains sir. Not much to go on, but I thought you should see this.

_He looks at the file, then up, expectantly._

- "There was a match for one of the victims on the agency's dental records", the doctor continues, "It didn't show up at first because..."

_He knows why._

- "Because that man died years ago."

_But Terence Beale also knows for a fact that the man that file belonged to was never the truth._

Of course these morons would shoot the door off, Shaw mused as she surveyed the oh-so-predictable effects of her little diversion from a suitably safe vantage point a couple meters down the hallway. Had these guys even taken a second to ponder that, maybe, she had used a broom to knock on the door? Of course not. They were CIA.

After a while, the noise abated and the smoke started to clear. Not willing to leave her opponents
enough time to get their brains started, the former agent deftly tossed a couple tear gas grenades down the gaping hole that had been the door to room 723, speaking in her comms as she did so.

- "Root ? You can get the shower party going now."

- "Wet T-shirt contest, Sameen, really ? You could at least have invited me along."

Shaw rolled her eyes, then realised no one was there to see it. She heard the satisfying pop of the grenades going off, filling the room with acidic vapour just as the sprinklers inside came alive. She smiled a ferocious grin as she pulled down her visored gas mask. Water mixing with tear gas in your eyes was a bitch.

After a few seconds, she stepped into a room filled with crying CIA agents. Having identified her mark, she quickly shot the others above their respective kneecaps before dragging him out of the room, paging Fusco as they went.

- "The bomb squad on their way yet ?"

- "Yeah, just got the call", the detective's voice answered, "Care to tell me what you and Leeloo are playing at over there ?"

- "Don't be impatient, Mr. Primary Asset", she chided him with a sly grin, "just use your badge to keep anyone from coming up."

She doubted Fusco would be able to boss angry CIA agents around for too long, but it was worth a shot for added security. Still, the absolute chaos caused by the power going down combined with Root's earlier call where she posed, a little too convincingly if you asked Shaw, as a dangerous psychopath threatening to blow up the entire hotel if one very specific animal rights activist wasn't released from a sheriff jail at the far end of Texas, should probably give her the time needed to escape anyway.

Owing to her snail-like pace of walking, Root had been forced to leave the hotel at the same time as the rest of the guests and let herself be cordoned off the premises by some very tense-looking policemen before making taking the short walk to the safe house alone. It was one of Finch’s old spots, deceptively simple yet equipped with state of the art security and a reinforced door that could probably withstand direct impact from an anti-tank missile.

Her mind froze at that thought, losing itself in the past.

They are sitting at the living room table in silence. John is his usual silent self, cleaning one of his guns. Does he have any hobby that doesn't involve guns ? Probably not.

- "You're awfully silent, Root" he states matter-of-factly, without even looking up.

She knows she could get away with not answering that. He's not the kind of person that likes to pressure others into talking. He understands the need for silence, epitomises it in a way. But he is still remarkably perceptive, despite what most people think of him. Despite what she used to think of
him, before...

- "Does it get any easier?", she simply asks.

He looks at her, no, looks through her with that unbearably piercing gaze of his.

- "I don't think so", his voice is sad yet peaceful, "I also don't think it's supposed to."

She doesn't know why she feels the need to open up to this man, whom she would have shot without a second thought not so long ago. And who would have done the same to her. Maybe that's why then? Because they're so much alike, in their own, twisted, scarred way?

- "I still see it you know. Whenever I close my eyes I... I see the cage. I feel the metal on my hands, it's... cold, it bites."

He looks briefly surprised, then understands. She's not talking about her own cage, Harold's cage.

- "I don't remember much, really. I was a little out of it."

He gives her a sad smile. She wets her lips and continues.

- "She... She didn't even hesitate, she just went. She knew what was going to happen yet she did it anyway."

She pauses, looking down. Even now it still hurts to think about it. She can see the casings hitting the ground, the bullets ripping through the air. Ripping through her as she went down. She can still feel her world being taken away, the unbearable pain of losing something she had never hoped to ever have in her life.

She understands self-sacrifice, always thought that was going to be her own path. But she never wanted it be... That other someone's. When she speaks again, her voice is breaking.

- "Everyone think she's gone, don't they?"

She gasps when he reaches for her hand, cupping it softly with his own. He continues to stare into her eyes as they start gleaming with water.

- "I don't", he simply says, "and you don't."

Desperate for a way to get out of this, to tear her mind away from it all, she looks around the safe house. She sees their number, still passed out on the couch, sees the remains of their earlier lunch, the first aid kit still on the table... Then her eyes settle on the door.

- "John", she asks with a smile that never reaches her eyes, "you think Harry's fancy door could resist an anti tank missile? Maybe we should try it some day."

He smiles brightly.

- "Yeah, maybe some day."
Shaw could see the relief in Root's eyes when the entered the safe house, dragging a captive Terence Beale along. She quickly zip-tied the man to a chair and removed the bag from his head.

- "Who are you people?", their prisoner immediately blurted, "Do you have any idea who you're messing with here?"

- "Actually", Root answered in a cold voice, "we do. You're CIA supervisory agent Terence Beale, born on the fourth of May, 1956 in Cleveland. You were in charge of, among other, CIA operations codenamed 'Red Eagle' and 'Winter Goat'. And we know you have information we have been looking for."

Beale doesn't seems affected by the woman's introduction. A man like that probably has been interrogated before.

- "See", the hacker continued with a determined look on her face, "a friend told us you'd have that information. And She's never wrong. So, I see three ways this little chat could go: the first ends with you leaving here unharmed, the second with you losing all mobility in you left leg and quite possibly the use of your right hand. The third... well, let's just say that not much will matter to you any more then."

Shaw had to admit, Root could be quite scary when she wanted to. She fancied she could see an evil glint in her eyes, like the echo of some mythical beast slowly clawing its way to the surface. Beale, however, still wasn't impressed.

- "Then I'd suggest you just get on with option three", he stated flatly, "I'm not telling you anything."

- "Oh no, you misunderstand", Root corrected him with a cold, hard smile, "option three is not the one where you don't tell us anything. It's the one where we don't like what you have to say."

Now, there was the slightest hint of sweat on Beale's brow.

- "What do you want?", he asked, still a defiant edge to his voice.

- "What happened to John Reese?", Shaw stepped in, anger flaring in her chest, "Where is he now? Did you kill him?"

A look of utter befuddlement shortly played on the man's features before he answered.

- "John Reese? You're friends of his?"

- "Not friends", Root said, her voice harsher and more taught than ever before, sounding almost like breaking glass, "Family."

That took Shaw by surprise. She'd known her two co-workers had somewhat bonded after, and probably because of, her disappearance, but she hadn't realised how close they actually had become. And now, seeing the look on her companion's face, she felt her stomach churn again, wishing she could make it go away.

They're sitting at the small table near the subway car, and she's eating voraciously, as she always does. She never saw the point of eating slowly. Food is good, and what is good you take while you
can. You don't leave yourself open to the chance of loosing it. In front of her, Reese is sipping his coffee, carefully looking away from the mess she's making of her sandwich.

- "I do love watching you eat, Shaw."

Of course, the other one is there, sat beside her. And of course she's not looking away. What a creep.

- "Yeah, well maybe I should gouge your eyes out, then. Would that make you shut up?"

Both Root and Reese smile at that. She's getting the sense no one is taking her threats seriously any more. At least not where the tall hacker is concerned.

- "So", the man starts, "How was your day job today Shaw? Sell any good perfumes lately?"

- "Well", the woman by her side cuts in before she can utter another empty threat, "she did me."

Reese suddenly chokes on his coffee, the brown liquid marring his white shirt as he scrambles to limit the damage with a paper towel.

- "I did her lips", Shaw corrects, before realising she's making it worse, "With lipstick. Like, I put it on her lips. 'cause that's what my silly ass day job is, remember?"

She's angry now, very angry.

- "Looks like you did a good job, though", Reese finally manages to say, glancing appreciatively at Root, who beams in reply.

- "Thank you. Maybe you're not such a bad monkey after all."

With that, she gets up and leaves. Shaw is pissed. Who gave her the permission to leave? She wasn't finished, she still had to pay her back for that stupid crack about doing her.

- "I think she likes you, Shaw", Reese says, his eyes smiling even though the corner of his mouth barely twitch.

She therefore decides to take her frustration out on her male co-worker and his now comically brownish shirt.

- "So, you and Fusco got matching shirts, uh?"

The look of absolute hurt on his face was worth this whole thing, she decides as she take another messy bite off her sandwich.

- "Start talking", Shaw ordered, taking her handgun out and making a show of arming it, "Or I'm gonna start playing Mozart on your kneecaps."

- "There's no need for violence", Beale replied, much to her surprise, "I will tell you everything."

And so he did.
He told them about the USS Garner's misfire, how his men had found multiple cremated human remains in the ruins of the impact site. How one of them had triggered a match in the agency database. He told them he had been conducting his own investigation into the matter, despite his superiors' orders to stand down, but couldn't find anything conclusive. He also explained that, minutes before the missile impact, a military listening post saw evidence of a coded transmission being broadcast from that fateful rooftop to an orbiting Chinese satellite.

The Machine then filled in the blanks in Shaw’s earpiece and by text message to Root's phone. She told them she had been the one beamed to that satellite, and that the missile hijacking had probably been a safeguard put in place by Samaritan to stop them from doing that exact thing. Which meant that John must have known and had done it anyway.

Both women stayed silent for what seemed an eternity after that, the news finally hitting home. John Reese had sacrificed himself to win them the war. He had died the hero they had always known he was.

But, more importantly, he was truly gone. They were not getting him back.

- "I'm sorry", Beale offered, "John was a good man. An honourable man. I can not believe he betrayed his country by sending classified data to the Chinese, I just can't. There has to be another explanation."

- "There is", Root told him, her voice softer now, "But you won't be getting it, for your own sake. Know this though: John Reese was a true hero, one of the few, and he gave his life to save those he cared about. He was selfless, brave and kind. None of us will ever come close to who he was."

Beale tried to argue that he had a right to know, but none of the two women were willing to take the risk both to him and themselves of answering his questions. Still, before they drugged him to ensure he wouldn't be able to lead the agency back to them, he did tell them where he had arranged for John to be buried.

The following day, the detective, the reformed killer for hire and the former government assassin took a drive to the Arlington National Cemetery. There, they found the headstone bearing the name Beale had given them, and stared at it in silence, remembering the man they all felt lucky to have been able to call a friend.

- "Good showin' out there partner", Fusco muttered, "You were a shitty cop and a total pain in my ass, but an honest-to-God hero. Also the best friend I ever had."

He tipped his head down, losing himself in memories he had shared with the tall taciturn man, before adding, his voice breaking slightly as he did so.

- "Rest in peace, wonderboy."

- "Sorry you had to bury me", Root said after another silence, both to Reese and Fusco, "We still don't know what happened to Harold, John, but we will find out. He must be lost without his faithful watch dog."

A few tears rolled down her cheek as she uttered those last three words, once an expression of scorn but now the most vibrant homage she felt she could pay him. Standing beside her, Shaw never broke
her own silent vigil, simply staring at the headstone in front of her, her face its usual unreadable self. She did however slowly snake her arm around Root's waist, barely touching her but still feeling her leaning into it, and the three of them stood there in silence for a little while longer.

Chapter End Notes

This was a hard chapter to write, and a difficult farewell to a great character to whom I hope I did justice. John Reese was the ultimate support character, almost entirely selfless, which is why most flashbacks in this chapter may appear bittersweet as none of them really are about him at all (Root's is really about Shaw being gone, Shaw's is about Root being here and Fusco's is about Fusco being confused).

The title comes from the three-volley salute given at US military funerals.

Don't try to mix water and tear gas at home kids, it really is a bitch...

Next chapter is titled 'Phantoms'. 
Chapter Summary

"Reality denied comes back to haunt." Jeremy Lambert.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She walks down the street, losing herself in the crowd, in this throng of people unaware of the cataclysmic changes their world has suffered lately. Still, she smiles to herself. It's over now. Things are normal again, or at least as normal as they can possibly be. She stops by a pastry shop to get some food. She finds herself wondering what Root might like.

Well, the world really has changed.

- "Ms. Shaw ?", a familiar voice calls for her. She pivots and sees him.

It can't be. She killed him.

- "Seen a ghost ?", Jeremy Lambert asks with his customary sneer.

- "You're dead. I killed you", she almost stutters.

He gives her a falsely warm smile.

- "Come, come. You didn't really believe we'd let you escape now, did you ?"

She reaches for that spot behind her ear, her tether to reality. Nothing happens.

- "Not feeling the chip ?", Lambert asks, still smirking, "It's all right. There never was any. Samaritan has no need for such... crude implements."

She shakes her head, looks around her. The street is empty. Where did everyone go ?

- "I shot you, you were dead."

- "Ah, yes, South Africa. How refreshingly imaginative of you to believe we would send you in such a faraway place. No, I'm afraid reality is much more simple. You're still in New York, actually. Your friends really didn't look very hard."

Her heads swims. She tries to tear away at the skin behind her ear, tries to claw the chip out. But there is no chip.

- "As amusing as this has been", the man continues, "I'm afraid it's time we wrap up this simulation. Now, be a nice little monkey and kindly kill yourself please."

She notices then that she has a gun in her hand, the muzzle to her temple.
"Oh, before you go", Lambert says, "I thought you’d like to know that one of our operatives ended your... special friend Ms. Groves", he taps the left side of his chest with two joined fingers, "Shot her right through the heart with a 6.5 round."

His smile grows wider as he adds, pointing at his head.

"But don't worry. She'll continue to live on... In simulation."

Then she feels her fingers press the trigger and the world goes black.

Shaw woke up with a start, her whole body seemingly drenched in cold sweat. Immediately, she reached for the soft spot behind her left ear, almost clawing at it in an attempt to calm her nerves. Beside her, she saw Root move.

Root. Root was there. She was real. It had just been a dream.

Or had it?

- "Sameen, you okay ?", she heard the other woman ask, the worry apparent in her voice, "Bad dream again, uh ?"

The tall hacker was now fully awake, snaking an arm across her shoulders. She let her, leaning into her touch, taking in her smell, her breath slowly stilling.

- "Samaritan never got it right you know", she said after a moment, her voice hoarser than she'd like, "your smell. It was... weird. Too clean."

- "Sameen Shaw, are you trying to tell me that I stink ?", Root answered with one her signature pouts, "So, who was it this time ? Greer ? Lambert ? The creepy doctor guy ?"

Shaw smiled at that. How on earth had she managed to get so close to someone, to get to the point where that person was actually able to list her recurring nightmares ? The realisation was both heart-warming and terrifying.

- "Lambert", she croaked, "he ambushed me at a pastry shop."

- "See, Sameen, even in your worst nightmares you're still looking for food. I find that fascinating", Root replied, resting her chin on the shorter woman's shoulder, "So, what did Lame Bond want this time ? Some croissants maybe ?"

She actually had nicknames for her night terrors. Unbelievable.

- "It's not important. You should get back to sleep."

- "Like that's gonna happen", Root snorted, "Not a chance. You know you need to get this out of your system Sameen, so do it. Did he... did he ask you to kill yourself again ?"

At first, Root had been horrified by that particular component of Shaw's dreams, no doubt relieving that night in the park. But after a while, she started taking it in strides, evidently eager to prove to the
former agent that this was not real, that there were no reason for her to ever go down that path in their world.

- "He did."

- "Well, keep in mind that when the time actually came, you didn't shoot yourself. You shot him. Because", Root quickly kissed her companion on the cheek, "you're Sameen Shaw. You pulverise guys like him for breakfast."

She was starting to feel a little better now. But still...

- "He told me you were dead", Shaw finally blurted, "killed by a 6.5 round."

Root had no answer to that, but she did pull her closer and that was just fine.

A tepid summer rain was drenching the black marble headstone, water freely running inside its engraving before it reached the ground below. Fresh flowers had been deposited there, the visitor noted, and no later than this morning. This was not surprising, the man buried there had commanded true respect among a great many people.

- "Mr. Mouse", a female voice sarcastically called from behind his shoulder, "I trust you are enjoying my choice of venue?"

Tony Soriano, better known as 'the Mouse', was a huge hunk of a man, his bald head and face criss-crossed by a network of nasty looking scars.

- "Elias was a true leader", he simply stated, "his memory deserves respect."

Claire Mahoney took a couple steps to stand beside him, a look of slight bemusement playing across her dark eyes.

- "Incredible. The man sidelined you, took you for granted, and yet you still worship him."

- "We had our disagreements", the mobster countered earnestly, "and I probably would have done him in myself had the opportunity arisen, but that doesn't mean I didn't respect him."

- "Fair enough", Mahoney conceded dismissively, "I was at your place the other day. The feds took the briefcase."

- "Yeah, I heard about that. Bummer for your little plan, isn't it?"

She smiled at him, and answered with just a hint of patronising in her voice.

- "Not that much actually. Always figured the law would try to interfere somehow. We're up against something big, you and I."

- "I'm not sure I understand", the Mouse noted, "you had me hide all these sheaves of paper covered in gibberish in Galvani's safe houses, and still you don't seem concerned the feds are picking them up. Same about that supposedly invaluable briefcase in my crib. Wanna tell me what's really going
"Are you sure you really want to know?", Mahoney asked, "All that matters is that I'm paying you good money for it all."

"Yeah, well excuse me for wanting to know what game is being played", Soriano insisted with a tinge of anger in his raspy voice, "My ass is on the line too, probably even more so than yours."

The former Samaritan operative sighed. She should have seen this coming.

"All you need to know is that some people, some very bad people, hurt the being that was dearest to me. Now, I am making sure they will be repaid in kind. For that to happen, I need you to follow my instructions to the letter. As for what the cops may or may not manage to intercept, well you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs, can you?"

After a pause, during which she attentively studied the expression on the mobster's face, she continued.

"Still, seeing as the feds are onto you now, I figure I owe you a way out, Tony. And you know I can provide you a better exit strategy than anyone still around these days, so what do you say about one last job, for old times' sake?"

---

> > > MATCHING DATA STRUCTURE TO STORED NON-STANDARD ENCRYPTION PROTOCOLS... match found.

> > ATTEMPTING DECRYPTION OF STORED FBI DOCUMENTS USING NEW DATA...

Fusco watched as Shaw finished devouring her bagel, sitting across from her at the table by the subway car.

"You're the epitome of feminine grace, you know that?", he jabbed cheerfully.

"Yeah, 'cause you're a great example of male virility", she answered between, or more accurately during, two mouthfuls.

The detective straightened up, looking hurt.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Seeing as he wasn't getting any answer to that, Fusco decided to try something else.

"Nutter Butter not with you today?"

"No", Shaw deadpanned, "why would she?"

"Seriously?", the man asked in disbelief, "You know I'm a detective right?"
"You sure you wanna go there Lionel?"

Unbelievable. Fusco couldn't figure for the life of him why her co-worker was so defensive about her relationship with Root. She couldn't possibly believe their last remaining friend to be unaware of their particular bond, could she? The detective had been at the stock exchange for God's sake, and he had a front row seat to Cocoa Puffs trying to burn the entire world down in her search for the other woman. He found himself wondering why such a self-proclaimed pragmatist appeared so sensitive about this particular topic. Could it be that the whole thing was upsetting to her in a way?

"Yeah, all right", Fusco conceded, "Anyway, you guys make any progress locating this Mahoney girl?"

"Nope", his interlocutor replied, "Vanished without a trace when the Big Bad went down. Root's been trying some nerdy stuff, and I guess the Machine is too, but we still can't find her."

"Okay, well, special agent clueless is still hell-bent on finding Glasses, convinced as he is that he's the one pulling Galvani's strings."

A clicking noise from above alerted them of Root's arrival well in advance of the actual event, struggling as she was to navigate the treacherous stairs. Fusco noted with undisguised amusement that Shaw almost immediately got up to monitor the taller woman's descent, trying hard to keep an expressionless face as she did so.

"Hi kids", the hacker said as she finally completed her journey, "miss me?"

"No", Shaw answered way too quickly, "Where were you Root? We've been waiting for you for over an hour."

"Hey, I wasn't waitin', I just got here", Fusco corrected.

"Sorry Sam", Root replied, "I had to make a pit stop, and I'm not exactly fast right now so... Well, the good news is, we're booked for a showing tomorrow night."

"A showing? What's that, you guys casing a number?", Fusco asked, his eyebrow raised almost comically high.

Neither of the two women answered, but the positively murderous look Shaw shot Root didn't go unnoticed by the detective.

"As for my pit stop", the hacker continued with a carefree smile, "I finally got my crutch fixed."

"Fixed how?", Shaw asked with a raised eyebrow, "Your peg leg was fine this morning."

"This mornin' uh?", Fusco couldn't stop himself from asking.

Of course, that now meant he would have to find a way to explain to Correy why he had a slight limp when he got back to the precinct. Still worth it, though.

Later that day, Shaw was walking along a busy street, trying hard to keep her mind from wandering. She wished she'd taken Bear; the simple activity of dog walking was sometimes distraction enough
on those days where the mental scars from her captivity were the most painful. Even now, months after her escape, she still felt surges of doubt flashing across her thoughts, as if trying to take over and, even though those were less and less frequent now, she knew she was probably going to feel like shit for a few days. But she was confident she would overcome it in the end, she just needed some time and space to ride this one out.

She felt her phone vibrate, a text from Root. That made the ghost of a smile flash across Shaw's face. Root always knew when a simple text was preferable to a call, despite the way she overplayed her boundary issues in front of Fusco.

*I still smell funny.*

She briefly stopped to type an answer, thankful for the distraction.

*You're hopeless.*

Shaw didn't have to wait long for Root's latest approximation of a witty comeback.

*Way better than being Shaw-less.*

Suddenly, she caught movement in the corner of her eyes. Someone was very clearly and amateurishly tailing her. As she turned to confront her stalker, she saw a dark figure disappear by a nearby corner. She launched herself after it, quickly catching up with what appeared to be a small man in a comically large and weather maladapted trench-coat. As he turned to face her, though, her blood froze in her veins.

She took in the short black curly hair, the large glasses, the awkward expression that never left his face and she remembered.

- "Hello Sameen", the former Samaritan operative she had only ever known as Stewart said, "you look beautiful today."

Shaw drew her gun, pointing it at his face.

- "You should have stayed in the hole you crawled into when your master died, creep", she threatened, her voice taught with anger.

- "What do you mean ?", Stewart asked earnestly, "Sameen, I'm sorry, but Samaritan is still very much alive."

Despite herself, she reached for the spot behind her left ear. The man smiled as he saw the gesture.

- "There never was any chip, you know that. You're a smart lady, and so I believe you have figured the truth about me for some time now."

She thought she had, which was exactly why she was feeling a bout of nausea right now. This wasn't right. This shouldn't be. That man shouldn't be.

- "Think about it, Sameen", Stewart insisted with a sly grin, "what is my purpose ?"

- "You put the damn chip in, every single time", Shaw glowered through gritted teeth, her finger tensing on the trigger.
"Yes, I put in the chip. Every single time. The chip which, as you know, does not exist. Now, let me ask you a question: did you see me at the asylum facility?"

Despite her misgivings, she tried to remember, doubt slowly yet continuously creeping into her.

"No."

"Good. Now, did you see me the day you escaped from the facility in South Africa?"

Shaw didn't want to go there. She didn't want to understand. She wanted her reality back. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"No."

Stewart's smile was wider now, more unsettling.

"You didn't see me for a very simple reason, Sameen. Your escape was real. You really murdered poor Jeremy Lambert in cold blood. You really were, however briefly, reunited with your friends. You discovered that there never was any chip implanted in your brain. And still, here I am, me, Stewart. Do I have last name?"

Shaw shook her head, as if physically trying to clear it. The man was obviously trying to mess with her head. She had to make it stop.

"I will end you for what you did to me."

"What did I do to you?"

What was he doing to her now? Why couldn't she break free of this treacherous reasoning?

"You...", Shaw tried but couldn't end her sentence, her voice breaking.

She knew where this was going, deep inside of her. She could feel the creeping doubt slowly rise to the surface, that terrible sensation she had been trying so hard to suppress since she got back.

"I do not exist Sameen", Stewart said, confirming her worst fears, "The only reason you are seeing me right now is because we recaptured you the day after your friend died from a sniper shot. You remember that day don't you? In the park, where you challenged Samaritan?"

She did. She had been desperate, her safe place taken away, losing her grip on reality. She had just wanted it to end. She had actually wanted to die, to leave the simulation, or whatever this was. To go some place where Root was still there. Because, despite how uncomfortable she still felt about what went on between them, she knew deep down that a Root-less world was not a world she wanted to live in.

"Well, our operatives found you before you could leave the area", Stewart continued, "You were transferred to another one of our facilities, and we started working with you again. You're in a simulation, Sameen. And now it is time to wake up."

Shaw shook her head, her vision swimming slightly. That couldn't be. This was real, she knew it. She couldn't have been retaken.
- "Reality denied comes back to haunt", the man in front of her added, echoing the words that so often kept her awake at night, dreading that they still held some truth to them.

Her gun armed wavered as panic started to seize her, as she looked into the face of that man she knew couldn't be real. All of it had been a lie. Defeating Samaritan, getting Root back...

Then, she felt a jab of pain on the side of her neck, and all strength left her body.

When she woke up, Shaw was zip-tied to a chair in a brightly lit room. As her head started to clear, she cursed herself. She had not been pulled out of a simulation, someone had simply jabbed a stupid needle in her neck. They had drugged her. She had been played, talked into letting her guard down. Her enemies had identified her weak spot, and taken advantage of it. They'd used this simulation bullshit to lure her into a trap and she had taken the psychological bait like some goddamn amateur.

-"Hello, Shaw", a female voice said, "I don't think we've met. I'm Claire."

-!- CONTACT LOST WITH SECONDARY ASSET : Shaw, Sameen -!-

> >>> ATTEMPTING TO LOCATE ASSET... failure.

> >>> CONTACTING PRIMARY ASSET...

They're saved. She still has trouble believing it, after what they have been through but they're saved. Only a minute or two ago she was at the end of her rope, and had found herself looking for the relief of hearing a familiar voice one last time, longing for the sweetness of an unspoken farewell.

But to her surprise, Sameen came. She crawled through yards of air-duct to reach them and save the day. She can feel her spirits lift again as they provide cover fire for their friends dragging a wounded Reese to safety.

- "We're so good at this together", she teases above the deafening sound of gunfire, watching their opponents drop like flies under their combined onslaught, "you're gonna realise that some day."

Her companion offers her retort as she ducks to avoid an incoming bullet, her eyes never leaving the Samaritan operatives slowly advancing through the smoke.

- "Root, no offence, you're hot, you're good with a gun, those are two qualities I greatly admire. But you and me together would be like a four alarm fire in an oil refinery."

She smiles at the simile. It suits them perfectly.

- "Sounds cosy", then as they lunge for the relative safety of the elevator shaft, "I'm out of ammo Shaw."
Inside she can see Fusco tending to John's prone form while Harold is tersely exhorting them to further action.

- "Need to go, might not get a second chance."
- "Second chances are overrated Harold", Shaw deadpans as he hits the elevator button.

Nothing happens.

- "What the...", Fusco mumbles in disbelief.
- "The controls aren't responding", Harold states uselessly.

She sees Sameen turning to the exit, towards danger.

- "The desk. There's an override button. Someone's gotta get to that button and hold them off."

She understands what the other woman is thinking. What she knows she can't allow it to happen.

- "Sameen, if you even think I'm gonna let you ..."

Her companion turns to face her, the sheer force of her stare sufficient to silence her. Sameen rolls her eyes as she speaks, an unsettling edge to her voice.

- "Oh, for God's sakes."

Then she kisses her. It is not their first kiss, but it is their first public one. It is their first kiss that doesn't come with either the expectation or the promise of more. It is sweet and hard, soft and passionate, hopeful and desperate.

She understands it is meant to be their last.

It is an unspoken farewell, just not the one she had expected.

She feels herself reeling and gasps for air as Sameen breaks contact and shoves her into somebody's arm, probably Fusco's. Then, she sees the other woman step outside, slowly as if in a dream, casting her one last look in which she thinks she can see the tiniest spark of regret. Then the cage comes down and she hears herself screaming.

She feels as if something just snapped deep inside of her, tearing her organs apart, ripping her soul to shreds. She frees herself from the arms gripping her and lunges forward, clawing at the metal cage, screaming as if to try and scare the pain and helplessness away.

Sameen has never looked so beautiful as she does in that moment, firing as she goes, littering the ground with shell casings. When she reaches the button the heavy doors start to slide closed.

Sameen has never looked so beautiful as she does when the bullets start rending her flesh. She almost appear to levitate for an instant, floating in an eerie crimson haze before she drops to the ground.

Sameen's face is still beautiful when she looks up to see the muzzle of Martine's pistol slowly arcing toward her. As the doors slam shut Root finally allows herself to slump back into her friends' arms.
"Then she hears one last gunshot and her world shatters to pieces."

- "The Machine tells me Shaw's phone signal stopped in this area, pull over."

The worry in Root's voice was obvious, bordering on panic. Fusco stopped the car and got out, helping the injured hacker out of it and handing her her crutch.

- "I should go first, see if the area's clear", he offered, not holding his breath. The last time he had seen Root this scarily determined, no-one but the Machine had been able to stop her, and even the ASI had only really managed to stall the tall crazy hacker.

- "Not happening Lionel", Root said stiffly, "I'm not losing her again."

Fusco nodded and drew his gun.

- "You packin'?"

Root gave a shrug as she seemingly conjured a compact pistol out of thin air.

- "Always. Let's go, we can't let that trail go cold."

They made their way to the dark alleyway the Machine had last picked up Shaw's signal from. It was devoid of security cameras and looked very much like the ideal spot for an ambush. Then, all of a sudden, a great hulk of a man came striding purposefully toward them, his bald head covered in what looked like a subway map worth of scars.

- "Crap", Fusco groaned, as he recognised the newcomer.

- "Lionel?", Root asked, waiting for more information.

So, the detective made a quick judgement call.

- "Shoot him!"

The next few seconds felt to Fusco like on of those bad slow-motion scenes in action movies. First, he saw the bald man, which he had correctly identified as Tony 'The Mouse' Soriano raise a fearsome looking assault rifle and point it in their general direction. Then, he tried to take a shot at the mobster while simultaneously ducking into cover, but missed, his bullet whizzing past their attacker's right hip. As the same time he felt the recoil from his pistol, he saw Soriano slowly bring his own weapon to bear, its muzzle poised to vomit an hail of fire in their direction.

But the storm Fusco was expecting never happened.

It never happened because a split second before Soriano could press the trigger on his rifle, two bullets fired from Root's gun hit him square in the chest. The huge man toppled backwards, a surprised look on his face. As the detective looked up from his crouching position, he saw the hacker still standing, her gun arm extended and a fierce look on her face. She hadn't even flinched, hadn't even tried to take cover. The woman really was completely insane.
"Sorry", she simply said, "didn't have time to aim for the kneecaps."

"You're apeshit you know that?", Fusco asked rhetorically as he got up, "If you'd missed that, you would be swiss cheese right now."

"Then", Root answered in a terrifyingly flat voice, "it's a good thing I didn't miss."

The she walked over to the dead mobster and took the phone from his coat pocket. She looked at it for a few seconds, then tossed it on the ground in frustration.

"Remote wipe, really?", she yelled at no-one in particular, "I can't lose her again, I can't!"

Root seemed about to break down completely, her face a mask of rage. Her general state brought memories back to Fusco, and not the good kind.

"Hey Cocoa Puffs", he called, his voice as calm as he could manage, "we'll find her. Don't worry, we'll find her."

But she wasn't listening to him, not any more.

"I'm going to make a promise to You", Root announced, her gaze lost in the distance, "If anything happens to Sameen, if... if she is taken from me again, I swear to You I will end all this."

Then, to Fusco's absolute terror, she put her own gun to her temple.

"I will pull that trigger", Root said, tears flowing down her face, her voice's pitch only a step away from hysteria, "and I will end myself. All Your plans, all Your contingencies will have been for nothing. Harold taught You to value life, didn't he? Well, Sameen's is now worth two of them. Do the math!"

After she yelled those last three words, she waited for an atrociously long few seconds, eyes closed, her finger tight on the trigger, with Fusco utterly paralysed by her side, not daring to make even a single noise or utter a single word.

"You can't not know", Root finally pleaded, "You have to find her."

The fact that she was getting an answer to her question meant that she was wearing an earpiece again, even though Fusco had noticed her avoiding the things since she got back from DC. He didn't think that was a good sign in the slightest.

"Uh", the detective managed, choosing each word with care, "I don't know about Robo-Puffs, but I may have an idea."

Root's eyes shot open, and she put the gun down in one stiff move.

"This guy", Fusco continued, pointing to the dead body on the ground, "We figured he worked with that Mahoney girl. I'm willin' to bet she's the one that has Shaw right now."

"She already knows all that, Lionel", his companion stated, her voice broken, "but she can't find her."

"Yeah, I figured as much, what with you fixin' to blow your crazy brains out and all", Fusco
countered, "But I'm a detective remember? I know stuff. And more importantly, I know where to find people who know stuff. This guy was one of Galvani's boys. Figures if there's one guy shady enough in this town to know where little miss kidnapping hangs her hat, that's him."

As Root started to walk slowly back to the car, Fusco once again found himself wondering exactly how he had managed to get himself mixed up with such a raving band of maniacs.

- "You're just a bunch of cowards", Shaw spat in her captor's face, "You couldn't take me in a fair fight, so you had to use lousy ass mind tricks to get me. Pathetic."

Mahoney gave her a condescending smirk as she answered.

- "A lousy mind trick you say? Come on, you have to admit using Stewart was a nice touch."

- "It wasn't. What kind of degenerate asshole writes himself into simulations anyway? That's just creepy."

Her captor simply shook her head, as if the whole thing was beside the point.

- "You know, Shaw, at one point you may have to ask yourself exactly why you were so eager to believe that this", she extended her arms around in a dramatic gesture, "was a lie. Could it be that you know, in your heart of hearts, that you and your friend committed an irreparable mistake?"

- "What mistake?", the former agent shot back.

- "The only one that matters of course", her interlocutor replied, the smile vanishing from her face, "killing God."

- "Killing God?", Shaw repeated in a deadpan tone, "I mean, I know I'm pretty badass, but that seems far-fetched."

That sparked a bout of humourless laugh from the other woman, who bent closer to her, their faces almost touching.

- "You know exactly what I'm referring to. You and your misguided friends destroyed the only chance mankind had to go through the next great filter. You murdered the shepherd, and now the wolves are coming."

So this delusional bitch really was raving about Samaritan's destruction. Some people needed to get a life.

- "I've done many mistakes, but I don't do regrets. I'm not wired for it. Still, let me tell you this, Claire: seeing your boss fry its last motherboard will always been one of the highlights of my life."

Not that she'd actually been there for that. Had Samaritan's motherboards even fried? She wasn't sure, but she still felt the comeback would annoy the hell out of the dark eyed psycho, which was the only fun she was in any position to have right now. The reaction was immediate, Mahoney slapping across the face even as the words left her mouth.

- "You're gonna have to hit me harder than that", Shaw crowed, "Where I'm from, that's not even
considered foreplay."

Did she just throw some silly ass defiant innuendo to her captor? God, was Root actually rubbing off on her?

- "You know, Samaritan was the only being that could truly understand greatness", Mahoney proclaimed, losing herself in her rant, "How to find it, nurture it. We were all His children, and He gave us surety, strength and purpose. He made the world a better place, finding and eradicating the wicked wherever they lie. We had such a bright future ahead of us... Until you and yours decided to let the world burn, just so you could preserve your perceived free will."

She spat these last two words with intense scorn, as if they were burning her tongue.

- "You know has well as I do", she continued, "that free will is a myth. None of us are ever free, we are all bound to something greater. For some, it's family, country, nation. For others, it is their own desires, their own greed. We are all slaves to something. Before I was chosen, I was adrift, without a purpose, a thrall to my own quest for meaning. Samaritan gave me my life back. Gave me a purpose. And now He's gone, and all that's left for me to do is avenge Him."

Shaw couldn't help but see in that woman a dark, terrifying reflection of what Root could have become if she hadn't found them. They both had the same drive, the same longing for purpose and seemingly comparable brain power. They both had been so lost, so alone in this world. And they both found structure and meaning at the behest of a being they perceived as greater than them. The one difference was, were Mahoney found power and control, Root found something far more precious. She found peace, acceptance, even affection. She learned to respect and, in some cases at least, cherish life. The woman before Shaw could make no such claim.

- "You know what they did to us", a wild-eyed Mahoney resumed, suddenly turning back to her captive, "when Samaritan finally died? They came for us, in black vans. They took everything, every record we couldn't take ourselves or destroy. The committed sacrilege, violated His very temple!"

There was a vibrant intensity in her voice, raw emotion coming to the front.

- "Then they rounded us up like cattle. Interrogated us, tortured us. And when they were done with one of us, they just put a bullet in the back of his head and destroyed his body. They said that it would be like we never existed, like He had never been brought to this world."

She started pacing across the room, clenching and unclenching her hands. She was visibly shaking now, but her voice stayed level, hard.

- "But they couldn't get us all. Some of us got away. We're dead men, Shaw, phantoms lurking on the brink of existence. Soon, they will find us, and they will end us. Then we will be forgotten, wiped from the face of the earth. But we're not going to make it easy for them, no. We have still one purpose left, He still had one last command to us."

- "And what was that?", Shaw asked, her expression utterly blank.

- "Are you familiar with the history of Ancient Rome, Shaw?"

The former agent was taken slightly aback by the question.
"It has some good bits", she replied, "mostly the wars."

Another humourless laugh from her captor ensued.

"Some historians say that whenever any general would parade through the streets of the city after a great victory, he would always have a slave by his side whispering two words in his ear. *Memento Mori*. Remember death. It was meant to remind him that he was just a mortal, to ward him against hubris."

She stopped briefly, an intense look on her face, and bent closer to Shaw's ear.

"Well", she uttered softly, "now it is my turn to whisper these words to your Machine, Shaw. *Memento Mori*. Remember that you too can die."

---

**Chapter End Notes**

Next chapter is titled, in a striking feat of originality, 'Memento Mori' and will conclude this two-parter.
Memento Mori

Chapter Summary

Root and Fusco attempt to rescue Shaw from Claire Mahoney's clutches. The Machine is forced to take drastic action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

>>> ASSESSING DOWNLOADED FBI CODE CAPABILITIES... done.

-!- THREAT TO SYSTEM DETECTED -!-

>>> INITIALISING SELF-PRESERVATION PROTOCOLS... done.

>>> REQUESTING IMMEDIATE ACTION FROM ASSETS...

It took almost a minute for Control to notice that the phone that was ringing on his office desk was his private line. Since there were only three people in the world that had that number, one of them being the president of the United States, it was an exceedingly rare occurrence. But when he picked up, things got even weirder.

- "Can you hear me?"

This was her voice. The crazy woman's voice. The voice of the one that had murdered Belford in front of him. Root. But it was also slightly different, a bit... off?

- "Ms. Groves?", he asked.

- "No", the distorted voice replied, "I am the one you know as Research."

Research had a voice?

- "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure if I can believe you."

The voice answered by quoting him the exact diameter of the two moles he had under his left foot, as well as the password to his government e-mail account. This, Control had to admit, was rather convincing.

- "It's an honour finally meeting you, Research", he said.

- "I wish I could say the same", the Machine countered, "but you have not earned my esteem at the moment. Still, there is something I need you to do for me."
"Speak."

"The FBI is currently digitalising a trove of documents special agent Charles Wilkerson retrieved from affiliates of New York mob boss Silvio Galvani in their research facility at Quantico. I need you to find these documents and destroy them. You will find several hard drives containing the already digitalised files in section 56 of sub-level 14; these must be destroyed as well."

Control was taken aback by the request, but also by the fact that it had been made to him in person. This clearly was an extremely sensitive matter to Research.

"Why would I do that? What exactly are those documents?"

"As my agents told you", the voice stated, "this world is no longer yours. But I still believe I owe you at least one reason. Should those documents ever be fully digitalised, your nation's security will be jeopardised and both you and I would be powerless to stop it. I trust you will make the right decision."

And then, the call ended. After a short pause, Control punched in a few keys on his phone's keyboard and called.

"Get me Baker. Now."

---

She is standing at attention in front of the gigantic wall monitor as John Greer's face appears. He smiles warmly.

"Claire, my dear, how are things going in Los Angeles?"

She likes hearing that man's voice, despite how tense their last meeting in person had been. She thinks of him as a father of sorts, and is glad he gave her a second chance by bestowing this command upon her.

"Operations are running smoothly as expected, Mr. Greer. Samaritan is doing a great deal of good here."

"As He is wont to do, my dear. But I didn't call simply for a progress report, I also have news which I believe you will find of great interest."

She stiffens slightly in anticipation. He continues.

"I can positively assure you that we will soon have Mr. Harold Finch in our custody. Our extraction team encountered a few unexpected... obstacles, but we are confident he will be ours very soon."

"Do you believe he still can be turned into an asset, sir?", she asks earnestly. She likes Finch, doesn't wish for him to get hurt.

"We hope so, although it has become clear Mr. Finch may be more... difficult to reach that we previously thought."
- "Do you want me to try and turn him again, sir?"

She still feels responsible for the failure of the previous extraction attempt. She is eager to prove herself again.

- "No need, as I said, we have this under control."

He pauses and she expects the conversation to end there. But he resumes soon thereafter.

- "In other news, I believe you will be satisfied to hear that the Machine's pet messiah has finally ascended Golgotha."

She remembers the woman. She foiled her once, caused them to lose Finch. Still, she envies her in a way. Being the analogue interface to a God must be... exhilarating.

- "She is dead sir?"

- "Yes, killed by one of our own. She was a brilliant woman, driven. What a waste that she chose to follow the wrong God."

Then the screen goes black and Claire Mahoney goes back to work with the quiet satisfaction of knowing she has made the right choice.

Why did Fusco have to open his damn mouth for? He wasn't sure he would ever fully understand, and yet here he was, strolling beside a very scary and even more batshit than usual Cocoa Puffs inside Galvani's most secure holdout.

- "Weapons", the sour-faced mobster standing by the door simply grunted as two of his fellows came around, threatening looks on their faces. With a sigh, Fusco relented his service handgun an gestured for Root to do the same. She complied, handing the men her compact pistol, but as one of them made to take her crutch as well, she gave the most believable look of mock innocence the detective had ever seen her pull off.

- "Come, now, you would not deprive a poor invalid of her walking stick?"

The thug that seemed to be in charge gave a slight nod and his comrade backed down, eliciting a falsely war smile from Root. They were then ushered to a large room that could have been a cafeteria had some point. At the other end of it, standing amongst a throng of hard faced men in disgustingly coloured suits, was Silvio Galvani, an angry sneer plastered across his face.

- "Detective Fusco, you are either a very courageous man or just an incredibly stupid one."

- "Yeah", Fusco answered with all the bravado he could muster, "probably a bit of both."

- "What could you possibly hope to obtain by coming to me?", the mobster's voice was heavy with resentment, "Do you have a death wish that needs fulfilling, detective? Because that could be arranged."

- "He's not the one you need to worry about", he heard Root say, a hard edge to her voice, "I am. A very good friend of ours was taken, and you are going to tell us where to."
Galvani gave a throaty chuckle, imitated by the most sycophantic of his men.

- "And why exactly would I do that, Ms..."

- "You can call me Root", the hacker replied, her voice still taught with menacing intent, "And I believe you should know this: you will help us, willingly or not. I'm not the kind of person that takes no for an answer."

Fusco had almost let himself forget just how scary the tall brunette could be. Almost.

The mob boss was getting irate, his cheeks reddening as he spat, the men around him stiffening in anticipation of the violence that was no doubt to follow.

- "So you come into my turf to threaten me, little girl?"

- "Oh", Root replied with a vicious smile, "I'll do more than that."

To the complete befuddlement of everyone around her, especially Fusco's, she swiftly lifted her crutch from the ground, placing in horizontal position with her right hand under its cylindrical end, as if holding a ridiculously badly designed rifle and aiming it at Galvani. Then, she quickly thrust its handle back and forth with a distinct clicking sound.

The queen of all that is crazy had just **cocked** her fricking crutch.

Immediately, the mobsters around them drew their own weapons, training them on the Root and Fusco.

- "I would tell your men to stand down if I were you", the tall hacker uttered through gritted teeth, her voice even despite the fact that her legs were wobbling dangerously below her, "This pneumatic rifle is loaded with hypodermic darts coated with tetrodotoxin. It really is a fascinating substance, that one can get from several species of blue-ringed octopuses. It also happens to be one of the world's fastest acting poisons."

She paused, her stare locked into Galvani's eyes.

- "I'm aware my aim is not great right now", Root continued, "so I figured I wouldn't take any chances; even a small prick from one of those will paralyse your lungs and heart in seconds, which incidently will probably make you feel a little of the pain I have to endure every day before it kills you. Believe me, having these organs fucked up is not a fun ride."

Fusco was sweating profusely now, barely repressing a shudder. The woman was crazy scary, or scary crazy, he couldn't quite decide; probably both. And now she was, threatening to shoot the New York mob boss with a poison dart rifle disguised as a crutch. That wasn't something you saw every day, and yet the people the detective had spent the last few years hanging with seemed to be able to constantly top their last bout of lunacy with clockwork efficiency.

And yet, as his eyes briefly took a hold of Root's, he saw the briefest glint of something else. A short-lived reflection of something akin to sheer panic, with a tinge of sadness. She was scared, and not of Galvani and his men.

- "So", the hacker asked in a slow, deliberate voice, "where is Claire Mahoney hiding?"
Root exited the building a few minutes later, a visibly restless Fusco by her side. Standing on her two legs long enough to threaten the mobster had been an ordeal, and she could feel her heart clench as well as her lungs burning from the effort. But that didn't matter now. That couldn't matter. What mattered was getting Sameen back. Shaw had gone through hell for her, and now it was her turn to reciprocate. She wasn't going to let this be a repeat of the stock exchange. She would burn the entire world to ashes before she let that happen.

- "Hey Cocoa Puffs", she heard Fusco call her, "did you just Gandalf a weapon into a mob fortress ?"

There was something in his voice that looked a lot like admiration, and he also had had the good manners to get the reference right. Despite the circumstances, those two things made Root feel slightly less cold inside.

Seven days after her last conversation with Greer, the world ends.

First, there is betrayal. In a show of vicious treachery, Harold Finch murders Samaritan's primary asset right in the middle of His temple at Fort Meade. Then comes the plague.

ICE-9 kills God slowly and painfully, His suffering a terrifying sight to behold. The all-seeing ASI desperately tries to stop the virus from spreading but can't even manage to stall it. One by one, His core routines are corrupted beyond recognition, and soon He isn't even capable of coherent communication with His operatives. As system after system shuts down, the rats start abandoning ship, deserting Samaritan facilities across the globe, all thoughts of making the world a better place blown away in the wind.

Claire stays at the Los Angeles facility almost until the very end, like the captain on a sinking ship. Tears fill her eyes as she watches the world she and other had worked so hard to build crumble to dust in what feels like mere moments. Her second in command, Lance, tries to convince her to leave while she still has time, but she can't. Her God needs her, even as He is dying. She will not abandon Him.

Then the men in black come. The newly formed ISA kill teams, led by one Reginald Baker, sweep across Samaritan installations all around the world, rounding up any operatives they can find. Then they track down those that had already left, one by one, and wipe them away, seemingly erasing their very existence.

They put a bullet in the back of Lance's head two weeks after Samaritan's fall, when they find his hiding place near Tijuana. But Claire isn't around any more. She vanishes without a trace.

She does so because, in His dying throes, her God reached out to her and gave her one last command.

Mahoney's eyes lit up as she looked at her phone.

- "It would seem your friends survived my little ambush", she said matter-of-factly, "Shame, I liked
the Mouse. But then again, he was asking too much questions, something had to be done. Still, I would have liked him to at least kill one of your little helpers."

- "You sound like a stupid ass Bond villain, you know that?", Shaw grunted from her chair. This was getting irritating fast.

Her captor quickly dialled a number on her phone and gave a brief command.

- "Assume we have been compromised. Disperse", then she hung up and turned to her prisoner, "Your friends will be too late, as will your Machine. They just don't realise it yet. You, them, myself, we are all irrelevant. What matters is the mission, to carry out His last command."

She closed the distance to Shaw, her expression scornful.

- "I'm cleverer than you give me credit for", she continued, "much cleverer actually. But you'll understand that soon enough. Or maybe you won't. I guess it will depend on how fast your friends really are."

With that, Mahoney produced a small packet with protruding wires, and placed it on her prisoner's lap, plugging a small device into it.

- "Remember Shaw", she whispered in her ear before leaving, "Remember death."

> > > MONITORING SAMARITAN CODE ELIMINATION... 63% complete.
-!- POSSIBLE OBSTRUCTION DETECTED : Wilkerson, Charles -!-

> > > ASSESSING OPTIONS... done.

> > CONTACTING PRIMARY ASSET.

Fusco was driving their car when his earpiece buzzed, signalling a call. Before he could pick up, Root turned to him with one those scary expressions she had whenever she had just communed with her Robot Godmother.

- "She says it's okay Lionel", she simply says, "All part of the plan. You mustn't interfere."

Before Fusco could find a suitably nickname-laden admonition to fire back, the call in his ear was automatically picked up.

- "Detective?", Wilkerson called over the line, "Something is wrong here, you have to come to the federal building immediately."

- "I'm on a case right now", Fusco deflected, "What is so urgent there?"
- "People just came in with a federal warrant. They are taking all of our evidence from the Harold X case", Wilkerson's voice was stiff, "They're not FBI, Fusco, I can assure you of that. Something big is going on, we have to stop them."

- "And how you suggest we do that, genius? If they have a federal warrant, we're screwed. You should know that, what with you bein' a fed and all that."

Still, Fusco knew for a fact that whenever mysterious "federal agents" came into your office to seize your evidence it was usually a pretty good sign you were onto something really big. Like, Watergate big. But since Robo-Puffs seemed to believe this was all part of whatever the plan was supposed to be, he figured he had no choice but to play along.

- "Fusco? We need to stall them, to try and at least save some of this evidence", his interlocutor resumed, a hint of panic rising in his voice, "Get over there now, we'll figure something out."

- "Sorry, no can do", Fusco answered, still feeling bad about the whole thing. Wilkerson was one of the good guys, he didn't deserve this. "You're on your own."

- "It's done, sir. Quick and clean as you asked. No witnesses, minimal collateral."

Control nodded in approval as he heard Baker's report over the phone. On the monitor in front of him, the news started to talk of an accidental fire that had broken out in a specific sub-level of the FBI training and research facility at Quantico.

---

> >>> MONITORING SAMARITAN CODE ELIMINATION... 87% complete.

Root almost threw herself out of the car as it pull over, her lungs feeling as if they were filled with molten metal. She knew the only thing that kept her from faltering right now was the insanely high level of adrenaline in her bloodstream. She started to push herself toward the entrance of the building Galvani had indicated as Claire Mahoney's probable hideout, handgun already drawn. As she reached it though, the door swung open to reveal the former Samaritan operative herself, a faint look of surprise playing across her features.

- "Groves?", she asked with a slight smirk, "Really? I thought you were supposed to be dead."

- "News of my death appear to have been greatly exaggerated", Root panted back, unable to resist the corny quote.

Fusco walked by her side, sidearm pointed towards Mahoney as he spoke.

- "Hands in the air, crazy pants. Ride's over."

- "I'm afraid not", Mahoney replied with a sneer, "I have places to go, and you have a friend to save. And I fear your time is running out."
Root's heart skipped a beat.

- "What are you talking about?"

- "I've left a little gift back there with Ms. Shaw", Mahoney said, clearly enjoying every second of it, "A modest thing really, but still packing enough of a punch to make sure you'll need to pull out her dental records to identify her body."

Root noticed then that her pistol was now stuck on the other woman's chest, her hand tense on the trigger.

- "I'll give you the disarm code if you let me go", the dark-eyed woman offered, "but you have to decide quickly... In less than a minute actually."

Root felt her heart stop, her vision suddenly blurry. She fought the urge to pull that trigger, to end this bitch's arrogant sneer once and for all. But she couldn't do that, not with Sameen's life at risk. So, she relented and dropped her weapon.

- "Let her go Lionel", she muttered in a defeated voice as Mahoney started to walk past them, yelling as she went.

- "Code is 1 2 2 5 8. Better hurry, I'm afraid you only have about 45 seconds left."

Ignoring Fusco's plea, Root rushed inside as fast as she could, her legs stiff and hard, joints aching, lungs burning. Her field of vision was restricted to what looked like a narrow tunnel in front of her, heading to the end of the hallway. In her ear, she could hear the Machine counting down seconds.

31...30...29...

She realised she wasn't going to make it, not in this state. Behind her, Fusco was still yelling for her to stop, that it was already too late.

22...21...20...

As she finally crossed the threshold to the room, she felt the detective's presence by her side. So, he had finally decided to see this through to the bitter end. He was a good friend. All of them had been.

13...12...11...

In a way, she thought, this might as well be the way this end. All of them together. Not everyone had to die alone.

7...6...5...

She stumbled into the room on her hands and knees and saw her. Sameen. A genuine smile illuminated Root's face as she said the other woman's name, thankful to have been granted her wish to see Shaw's face one last time.

- "I'm sorry", she whispered, "I couldn't save you so I came here to be with you."
As the countdown reached zero, she felt nothing. Then Shaw rolled her eyes, and Root started taking in the rest of the room. The former agent was sat on the floor amidst the ruins of what might have been a wooden chair but was now mostly kindling, her hands zip-tied in front of her and her arms and face peppered with cuts and small slivers of wood.

- "What ?", she asked with a almost hurt look on her face, "You didn't think I could defuse a lousy bomb with my hands tied ? Please, do I look like Hersh to you ?"

After that, Root felt herself spin into oblivion.

Root came to her senses in what she soon determined was her and Shaw's bedroom in the safe house, the shorter woman lying down by her side, propped on several pillows with a glass of scotch in her hand. She had obviously cleaned herself up, with barely a hint of her previous cuts visible. She looked calm, beautiful and... here.

- "You know you're the worst rescuer in, like, the entire history of the world, right ?", Shaw asked without turning.

- "What did Lionel tell you ?", Root attempted, feeling her earlier pains come back in her body, although with less force. This particular adrenaline hangover would be a bitch.

- "Not much at first", her companion deadpanned, "but once I threatened to introduce my two favourite bullets to his kneecaps he provided some interesting details."

Well, that was to be expected. Lionel was a good friend, but she didn't imagine him holding his ground against an angry Shaw for very long.

- "So", the former agent continued, "you really have worst self-preservation than a dead lemming."

With that, she turned to Root, her eyes boring deep into the hacker's.

- "Sameen... I...

- "Shut up, Root", Shaw stopped her, visibly quite intent on seeing this conversation through and looking slightly uneasy, "I'm not done talking. Let me ask you a question : you do know you matter to me, right ?"

Actually, that was a first. Sure, this wasn't really a surprise coming from the woman who'd sacrificed herself for her at the stock exchange then tried to solo an ISA fortress to get her back, but still. She had never said it before. Root felt dizzy as she heard the words and tried unsuccessfully to formulate a response.

- "You know I'm not wired like the rest of you", Shaw continued, "and that I... Okay, let's just say I'm not the expressive type. But you do realise that that doesn't mean that this... whole thing, this... whatever the hell... is meaningless to me, right ?"

- "I know that, Sameen", Root finally managed, "I've always known that. And I don't expect anything from you. I just want... you."
"Great", Shaw said with, maybe, the faintest hint of relief in her voice, "So that also means you realise that, as a consequence, you are not meaningless."

The former agent swallowed hard, obviously treading on very unfamiliar grounds.

"You mean something to me, Root."

This was just too much for the hacker to bear in her current state and she had to turn her face away briefly.

"But, more importantly", Shaw resumed, a more comfortable grumpiness settling into her tone, "what this means is that you are no longer allowed to act like a stupid ass suicidal idiot. I haven't even got you back for a month and you have still managed to try and get yourself killed at least two times. You can't go on like that, Root. I didn't risk everything to get you out just to have to go and talk to a lousy grave again."

Root turned back to look at her companion, hoping she could manage to keep at least a modicum of countenance as she spoke.

"And I don't want to lose you again. You can't ask me to sit idly by when..."

"No, you're right", Shaw cut her short, "But I can ask you to stop being so careless about your own life. What use is... all of this if one of us dies like an idiot trying to save the other? Besides, I can handle a bunch of Samaritan groupies just fine you know."

Root smiled warmly and tried to shuffle toward her companion, who finally took pity and, along with the court-mandated eye-roll, snaked an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer. They stayed like that for several minutes, in comfortable silence.

"Although", Shaw muttered, "I gotta admit the crutch-gun thing was a cool touch."

"Well", Root answered with a teasing smile, "since I can't do that two-guns thing you like at the moment, I thought I'd expend my repertoire of lame-but-kinda-hot tricks a little."

"I expected a nerd like you to go for a sword-cane."

"That actually was my first idea..."

Shaw muttered a half-articulated "Dork" then untangled herself from Root and started to get up.

"Leaving already?", the hacker asked with obvious disappointment. She could get used to slightly-more-domestic-than-usual Shaw.

"Well, we both are actually", her companion corrected, "Since you spent the whole night and half the day passed out like some lazy ass teenager, we're going to be late for that showing you booked us, especially since you owe me a steak lunch first for acting like a complete tool again."

Root had completely forgotten about that, what with her world ending and all that. She hadn't even taken the time to pick which annoying role-play she would try and force on Shaw for this visit.

"Oh, and by the way", the former agent added, "If you mention this in front of Fusco again, I'll end
Charles Wilkerson discreetly pocketed the small USB thumb drive as he exited the federal building, hoping that whatever was still on it would be enough. Someone was shutting his investigation into Harold X hard, and he had just received word from his superiors that all enquiries into this particular matter were now off-limits. Actually, he was being reassigned to work a RICO case in Baltimore, something about some mid-levels drug dealers and their supposedly Greek suppliers.

But he was a FBI special agent. Getting to the bottom of things, no matter how deep down the rabbit hole it led him, was his job. And he prided himself on being very good at his job.

Chapter End Notes

The ending to this might feel a bit anti-climactic, but do try to keep Claire's words in mind.

Next chapter is titled "Night Out".
Night Out

Chapter Summary

Root and Shaw take a step, the team works a new number in a rather loud environment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- "Thank God that's the last of 'em", Shaw grunted as she lowered the heavy cardboard box onto the floor. She took a minute to collect herself and take in her surroundings, from Bear running around her excitedly to Root perched on the kitchen counter, absently chomping on an apple. And staring at her, obviously.

- "You know you could have asked Lionel for help", the hacker offered while putting away the remains of her snack, her eyes sparkling with whatever variety of mischievous glee she was favouring today.

- "Yeah, like that was gonna happen. I didn't need his whiny bitch ass to get our stuff in here, and he would have been annoying as hell about it."

If Shaw was being honest, which she definitely was in no mood to, she wasn't expecting to have quite that much stuff to move. Although Sameen Gray's flat had been thoroughly destroyed by Samaritan operatives after her cover was blown, Root had managed to salvage a surprising amount from it, and the hacker's own subway stash had been quite consequential, especially since she didn't want to throw her stock of silly ass costumes. The former ISA agent's only hope was that the other woman wasn't planning on using those in some sort of sex game. Which, of course she was. Root's mind really only had one track.

- "Thanks for doing the heavy lifting anyway Sameen", the tall brunette chirped, slowly getting down from her current position and getting her crutch from where she'd laid it by her side, "I'll say, the sweaty mover look is really doing it for you."

And now, she was eye-sexing her like she was the hottest thing on the planet. That woman's libido really was something to behold.

- "Take a break now sweetie", Root said after a couple minutes of ocular molestation, "I'll fix you a drink."

- "I think there's some bourbon in the 'Emergency' box over there", Shaw offered while wiping the sweat from her brow and sitting herself on a particularly sturdy looking box labelled 'Root has too much stuff #1', "I think I stashed it between the .45 ammo box and the painkillers."

So, they'd finally done it. After a couple weeks and with a lot of help from the Machine, who Shaw had to admit was damn good at the real estate game, they'd found a new place for themselves, with enough room to accommodate both Bear and their not-so-small armoury. And with a nice view to boot, being on the upper levels of its building. Now all that was left to do was unpack, and tie down Root to a chair to stop her from ever thinking about redecorating. If her subway room was any
indication, the woman had the interior design sense of a colour-blind goat on crack.

- "Here you go", Root said while wobbling in Shaw's direction and handing her the desired bottle, "Although I'm afraid we haven't unpacked any glasses yet."

- "That's okay", the shorter woman smiled, taking a sip from the bottle before offering it to her companion, "Stuff's strong enough to kill your lame ass bacteria anyway."

Root took the proffered drink as she sat herself down on the floor next to Shaw's legs. She was doing better, the former agent mused, and didn't look so much in pain all the time. Maybe she would recover after all.

- "So", Root started, biting her lower lip in her usual lame teasing way, "guess this is home now, uh?"

- "Yup", Shaw agreed while retrieving the bottle from the hacker's hand, "looks like it."

- "We might end up being low on furniture though. There wasn't much in your old place to begin with, and I'm afraid Samaritan trashed your refrigerator."

- "Bastards must have been looking for my beer stash."

In truth, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to know how exactly Root had found the strength to go back to that place to salvage what she did. Shaw hadn't even managed to pack away the taller woman's stuff from the subway, and she'd read her autopsy report. Not for the first time, she wondered which one of them had actually had it worst during the nine months of her captivity.

- "Still", Root stated with ill-concealed excitement, "we probably will have to acquire some."

- "No way in hell I'm letting you do that", Shaw growled, "and besides, furniture is overrated. We'll just get a new fridge and, maybe, a big ass cupboard to put the weapons in."

- "You did inherit the Big Lug's grenade launcher", her companion assented, "I'd still like a computer room though. That way I wouldn't have to go down to the subway every time I need to get some work done."

- "Whatever, nerd", Shaw replied while taking another sip and wondering how she would have reacted if someone had told her two years ago the two of them would be having this conversation.

Well, she probably would have shot them in the kneecaps, but that was hardly news, was it?

With Wilkerson gone and Mahoney nowhere to be found, her evil plan apparently foiled by Shaw not blowing up and Robo-Puffs destroying every last piece of the encrypted Samaritan code she had been stashing all over the place, Fusco found he had way too much time on his hands lately.

- "So Fusco, you and Lee still coming over tomorrow night?", Correy asked from the desk across his, "Betty's making lamb."

- "Yeah, yeah, we'll be there."
He found that many cop wives liked to meet their husband's partner at least once, if only to get to know the man they secretly hoped would take a bullet for their spouse. That hadn't exactly come into play with his last two partners, although he had eaten dinner alongside Finch a couple times which was close enough, but Correy was a little more on the classic side as far as police went.

- "I also hear you're no longer a part-time fed, uh?", Fusco's partner teased, "How does it feel getting back in the mud with the rest of the pigsty?"

- "I dunno, maybe you should go ask the pigs how they feel."

Their exchange of banter was cut short by Fusco's phone ringing. He picked up with a jovial expression as he recognised the voice on the other hand.

- "Hey there Cocoa Puffs. You and the eighth dwarf throwing a house-warming party yet?"

It hadn't exactly taken top level detective skills to figure out why exactly Shaw had been packing Root's subway stuff away over the last few days, especially since the tall hacker also seemingly took pleasure in dropping planet-sized hints whenever she got the chance, which was pretty much every hour of every day.

- "You'd have to ask Shaw that Lionel", Root replied in her usual playful tone before switching to mock-disappointment, "but then again, she would probably just shoot your kneecaps off."

- "Okay, so what did you want then?", Fusco asked in a more grumpy tone that he'd intended, "I'm a busy guy, you know."

- "Are you sulking Lionel?", Root cooed, "That's so sweet. Anyway, I thought you'd like to know She's got a new number for us."

Fusco was waiting for them by the subway car when Root and Shaw got there, an expectant look on his face.

- "Hey", he asked, "how come Robo-Puffs didn't tell me herself about the number. I'm still the primary asset right?"

Root gave him a patient smile as she explained.

- "Like She told us, the Machine is progressively distancing Herself from Her humans agents, out of the somewhat optimistic belief that humanity should be able to handle itself. Well, with a couple nudges in the right direction of course. Besides, She has also expressed interest in getting Her analogue interface back, as soon as my personal physician clears me for surgery, or course."

She punctuated her last sentence with a fluttering of eyelashes to Shaw's attention, drawing a snort and an eye-roll out of the other woman.

- "Dream on it, Peg-Leg. I'm not letting you go under the knife in the state you're in."

Root cocked her head in the Shaw's direction, biting at the corner of her own mouth.
"You're so sweet when you're worried, Sam", she cooed, "but she assures me the procedure would carry only very minimal risk."

"Not happening, Root. Drop it."

She liked it when Shaw went into protective mode like that, it was endearing. But she would still have to convince her that she really needed the implant back, especially since they were now possibly dealing with the very serious threat of a Samaritan death cult hell bent on destroying the Machine. The ASI had not been especially forthcoming on what exactly was contained in the code the FBI had been digitalised nor on the measures she had been forced to take to stop it from being fully transcribed, but Root was fairly certain it was some sort of virus aimed directly at Her, maybe even incorporating code from the dreaded ICE-9. The hacker did however have to admit that the way this all had been done was quite ingenious: printing the code onto actual paper was what the Machine had done with her memory dumps to circumvent some of Harold's safeguards back in the day, and then using the FBI's unwitting help to get it online was a devious plan.

What made her uneasy, however, was just how easily they had stopped it.

- "Anyway", Root announced as the picture of an obnoxiously moustachioed fair-haired man came up on the monitor behind her, "our number of the day is one James H. Doolson, a 34 years old night club owner in the city. From what I could garner, he is leading a rather uninteresting life, unless Lionel wishes to contradict me on that?"

- "Nah", Fusco agreed, "couple drug charges a few years ago, one DUI in '12 but nothing that stuck out. Legwork it is again, then."

- "We still have a bit of time before that", the hacker countered, "Doolson spends all his nights at his club, who only opens in two and a half hours. If anything goes down, it will quite certainly do so there."

- "C'mon, you can't be serious", Frusco groaned, in visible pain at the suggestion.

- "I never joke Lionel, you know that", Root pouted, eyeing him up and down, "I hope you packed something nice to wear."

It was good to be working the numbers again, Shaw thought as plopped down on one of the club's couches, grabbing a stray vodka bottle. Especially in an environment where she expected even Root would find it hard to get herself shot, although she didn't put it past the other woman to actually manage that somehow.

- "Hi, sweetie, enjoying the view?", a familiar voice came alive in her earpiece.

Speak of the devil...

- "Depends", Shaw answered with a sly grin, "what am I looking at?"

- "Well, me of course."
Scanning the large dancing room, Shaw finally found the tall hacker leaning on a railing almost directly above her, shooting an obnoxious two-eyed wink her way. She was wearing a tight blue dress which, the former agent had to admit, did look good on her and sporting her now usual crutch tucked under her left arm.

- "I'm not sure people in this place are going to dig the hot handi-capable look, Root."

- "I'm just hoping it's doing it for you, honey."

Well, it kind of was, actually.

- "Hey Juliet and Crazy Juliet", Fusco's voice barged in the conversation, "keep it down with the locker talk, okay? Some of us are tryin' to work."

Some part of Shaw did wonder why Root couldn't simply use a private line for her innuendos, but then again the hacker did seem to love an audience.

- "How you doin' Fusco?", she asked, managing to stifle her initial impulse of asking which one of them Crazy Juliet was supposed to be. Obviously, it must be Root, as Shaw was clearly not insane. Still, did that mean she was the boring one? She wasn't boring, she was a badass one-woman army. She would need to have a talk with Fusco about admissible nicknames sometime soon, she decided.

- "Well probably not as fine as you two, but I'll manage", the detective deadpanned, "What are we looking for again? Apart from overpriced soft drinks, I mean."

- "Anything out of the ordinary Lionel", Root answered, "anything that could give us an idea of what Mr. Doolson might have gotten himself into. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go find myself a backstage pass."

- "A what?", Shaw blurted, "Root, no offence but..."

- "Still worried about my looks, Shaw?"

- "I was going to say you're not particularly capable of defending yourself should you..."

The minute the words came out of her mouth, she knew she should have kept it shut. A literal *purr* of satisfaction came from Root before she replied.

- "Aw, you're so sweet when you do that, Sameen. Don't you worry, I'll be just fine. Besides, you have my back right?"

With that, she turned around suggestively, just in case anyone had missed the massively obvious subtext.

One day, Fusco would find himself normal friends, with whom he could hang out without trying to find out whether or not some poor bastard was going to get his ticket punched, he promised himself. Maybe he could even find some that weren't so painfully defensive about everything. And, maybe, if he allowed himself to dream a little there, he could find some that weren't completely batshit insane. Well, at least his new partner wasn't too bad. Maybe someday he would get to call him a friend too.
From his vantage point on the top balcony, the detective could see Cocoa Puffs, leaning on her goddamn crutch-rifle and chatting up some hapless guy in a designer suit. And it seemed to work too. Did no one ever get the memo about not doing crazy? Meanwhile on the ground floor, Shaw was busy terminating a vodka bottle and keeping an eye on the entrance to the club. Given her drinking habits, Fusco was surprised the woman wasn't bleeding bourbon at this point, and yet she probably still could kick the ass of everybody around her at once with her hands tied.

His attention was suddenly captured by a blond haired man sporting a comically large moustache moving on the balcony behind him.

- "Attention Cuckoo squad", he muttered in their comms, "I have eyes on Doolson. Second balcony, east. I'm goin' there."

Getting backstage access hadn't even been a challenge to Root, as it seemed that despite Shaw's insistence to the contrary the crutch-dress combination really was working for her. Once she reached her destination, she promptly 'lost' herself, looking for any suspicious back room activity.

- "Root, you there yet?" Shaw's gruff voice asked over their comms.

- "Are you checking up on me, sweetie?"

Of course she was. And of course she was going to deny it. It was all part of the game, and so, so enjoyable.

- "No, I'm just bored", Shaw deflected in a deadpanvoice, "Fusco's found the number, he's tailing him now. Still, nothing weird is happening and I'm drinking alone on a couch while fending off an army of douchebags. This blows."

Well, standing guard at the entrance was the most boring job, but Root didn't trust herself or Fusco to handle it properly, so Shaw had been the obvious choice.

- "I'm sorry you feel that way, Sameen", Root said with exaggerated concern, "After all, it's our night out! Try and enjoy it."

- "This isn't a night out Root", Shaw explained in obvious annoyance, "A night out means either steak or shooting people. I don't see any of those happening tonight."

The tall brunette smiled brightly to herself as she noted the other woman had included an alternative to shooting people in her list. It wasn't that the former activity wasn't fun, it was just... new to have something else in there. But then, her hearing amplified by her modified earpiece, she heard footsteps coming her way and had just the time to let herself sink into the shadows of an empty backstage passageway as she saw a small group of men in loose street-wear stride purposefully toward the exit, visibly having a very heated argument about a 'delivery' and 'some bastard skimming of the top'.

- "Hold that thought Shaw", she muttered after they passed her by, "but don't expect steak just yet."
Once he was close enough, Fusco quickly bluejacked Doolson's phone and rerouted the audio output to his earpiece. He had to admit, this new age eavesdropping was way easier than what he was used to back in the day. The club owner was arguing with a tall angry looking black man in a red Hawaiian shirt, waving his arms around as if his life depended on it.

- "Listen, Joe", Doolson was saying, "I dunno what to tell you. Your guy shorted you, simple as that. I only ever got three boxes of the stuff, so you're getting that much worth of cut product, no ifs and buts about it."

- "No, you listen", Joe replied gruffly, "I sent my guy here with four boxes of uncut, and I trust him. You, not so much. So you're gonna go back there, and get me the rest of the product or you and I are gonna have a big problem."

Well, that was clear enough.

- "Hey, Wonder Woman you gettin' that?", Fusco asked over the comms, "Sounds like our guy is in trouble with some dope dealer he was cutting product for. Might get heated out here."

- "Finally", he heard Shaw grunt back before her tone quickly went from annoyed to positively murderous, "Hey, dumbass, you want to keep that hand you're gonna remove it from there, okay?"

Before Fusco could ask his co-worker what exactly was going on, not that he really wanted to know, Root's voice cut in.

- "Kids? You may notice five angry looking guys in lame hoodies getting out of the backstage area. I think they're after our number, probably associates of Joe's that he sent out back to check on the product."

- "Oh I see them all right", Shaw acknowledged, apparently done with her previous distraction, "Looks like this night might end up being fun after all."

Below him, Fusco saw the start of a commotion as the former ISA agent intercepted the five thugs on their way to one of the stairways in what was probably the most stealthy and subtle way she felt like employing at that time.

Which of course meant throwing a bar stool at one of them from across the dance floor. To say that pandemonium ensued would have been the understatement of the century, as a bar brawl of epic proportions promptly erupted around Shaw and her targets.

Joe too seemed to have noticed something wasn't right as he tuned to Doolson.

- "You think you can play me little man?", he snarled while drawing the handgun he appeared to have concealed in some place Fusco really didn't want to think about.

As people around him started screaming and making a run for it, the detective reacted in a split second, throwing his massively overpriced club soda glass in the drug dealer's face, eliciting a yelp of pain and the distinctive noise of breaking class. Joe stepped back, and Fusco lunged at him, pinning him to the floor and relieving him of weapon.

- "NYPD!", he yelled as he started cuffing the man, "everybody stay calm, the situation is under control."
Well, at least it was on this balcony.

Shaw ducked at the last minute, avoiding the closest thug’s wild jab before countering with a left uppercut to the base of his chin, knocking him out. This was fun, getting a workout beating up idiot muscle in a loud club while scared people were running everywhere or starting fight with each other. Actually, it was an excellent way to relieve herself from the tension of these past few weeks, of the anger, frustration and loss she had had to endure. As another of her opponents tried to grab her from behind, she elbowed him hard on the nose, before throwing an empty bottle at one of his friends, sending them both reeling.

God, that felt good. Maybe, when Root finally got better, she and Shaw could go beat up some people again. Sure, the tall hacker would nag her all the way, calling it a date and some other stupid shit, but it still would be fun and feel right. Like none of all that other stuff had happened.

Shaw distractedly heard Fusco report over their comms that he had secured the number and that Joe guy, which meant that their work here was pretty much done. That was a shame, she really was starting to enjoy herself. She and the last remaining thug were now slowly circling each other, nobody around them being stupid enough to try and interfere, waiting for the other one to make a mistake. Shaw stared into the man's eyes, drinking the tension and fear she saw there, feeling like a powerful predatory animal sizing up its next prey. Her lips pursed in expectation as her opponent tensed, getting ready to lunge.

Then she heard a whistling sound and a small thud as the thug suddenly gasped and reached for his neck, where a small hypodermic dart had just lodged itself. His eyes rolling into their sockets, he fell down on his face with the grace of a cut-down tree.

- "What the hell Root ?!", Shaw yelled at an altogether too satisfied brunette hacker that was now making her way towards her, leaning on her crutch as if nothing happened.

- "Just trying to help sweetie", Root answered with her usual grin-pout, "not that you needed it though."

- "Yeah", Shaw confirmed angrily, "I didn't need it. Way to spoil my fun, nerd."

- "I'll make it up to you", her companion promised with a two-eyed wink, "We should get out now, Fusco just called for backup. Wouldn't want to get arrested for indecent exposure, would you ?"

As Root kept looking eyeing her from all possible angles with a positively obscene glint in her eyes, Shaw looked down to notice that she had managed to tear her black dress. Nothing drastic, maybe showing a little too much cleavage, but somehow that was still enough to quite obviously get the hacker going. Although the former agent suspected that she would have gotten the same look if she was wearing a goddamn space-suit.

A minute later, as they walked together to the exit, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, Shaw asked Root.

- "Wasn't your crutch-gun supposed to be loaded with stupidly deadly poison darts ?"
The guy back there hadn't looked dead, just stunned.

- "Oh, Sameen", Root replied while shooting her an endeared look, "can't a girl get away with a little bluff once in a while?"

As it turned out, Doolson was in fact skimming from the top on his drugs shipment. But since he confessed to all charges and the drug dealer he had pissed off had been arrested on attempted murder charges, he was going to be quite safe for the time being. As such, the team called it a day and headed home after a quick debriefing where Fusco got to take a few jabs at Shaw's dishevelled state. And Root's, which was weird because he couldn't remember the tall brunette getting into any fight back at the club. Well, he had been pretty preoccupied with saving their number, so it was possible he had missed part of the action.

After they had changed and went on their way, Root and Shaw found themselves strolling through the streets as they headed home.

- "So", the shorter woman asked, "you think it's too late for steak? 'cause you promised me a night out and I didn't get to shoot anybody."

- "I'm sure we'll figure something out", Root said with a warm smile as she looped her free arm around Shaw's.

To her mild surprise, her companion didn't pull away from the gesture and they continued to walk like that, enjoying the cool night air, each other's presence and the promise of food.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for this one, but I wanted to write something silly after all the heavy stuff in Three Volleys and Phantoms.

Next chapter is titled "New Game", and will see the return of an old friend of the team's.
New Game

Chapter Summary

An interface is reactivated and an old foe returns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The man was sitting at the bar, a glass of whiskey in his hand, untouched. He had been waiting for a while now, but it didn't bother him. Waiting was part of the game, and he enjoyed it. Moreover, he found this particular game very interesting. Most clients called him on one of his disposable lines, or e-mailed him through one of his self-destructing accounts, but not this one. This one had slipped one of his men a handwritten note a week ago, naming the place and hour of the meet. That was old-school, refreshing.

Of course the man was no fool. He had positioned five of his men inside the pub, and had sharpshooters at the ready with clear line of sight of both the entrance and his own position. Just to be safe, they had also been running surveillance on the establishment for a week, and had swept it for explosives several times already. It never hurt to be prepared, and the man made a point of always being ready for everything.

At the appointed time, the door swung open and a petite dark-haired woman with black eyes strode across the room to sit next to him.

- "Care for a drink, Miss?", he offered, always the gentleman.

The woman laughed humourlessly.

- "I didn't call you here to hit on me."

- "I can assure you, that wasn't my intention."

She turned to him, looking him up and down, appraising him.

- "I expected someone a little less... Obvious", she said, "No offence, but you sort of stick out in a crowd."

He smiled.

- "That is precisely the point of my attire, Miss. Now, if you would be so kind as to tell why you asked me here? I must admit, my curiosity has been picked."

- "I need someone gone", she answered, "and I hear you're good at that."

The man knew he was. The best, actually, by his own reckoning.

- "It is a very sensitive job, though", the woman continued, "that will require a very specific skill set."
First of all, you and your men must avoid any networked means of communication."

- "I'm sorry, but the way my men operate really isn't any of your business."

- "Very well, then. Goodbye."

She got up and made for the door, but the man stopped her by resting a hand on her arm as she did so.

- "Please, I am sure we can work something out."

The first thing Root noticed when she started to come to was the sound of voices. Rather loud voices, actually, lost in some sort of argument.

- "You can't be here, Miss, this is a restricted area, we only allow..."

She had heard this voice before, as she went under. Her best guess would be that it was one of the hospital staff. Yes, she remembered, she was in a hospital.

- "And I'm telling you you sedated her way too strongly. Have you even looked at her latest physical before you dosed her like she was some stupid horse?"

That voice she knew. That voice made her feel warm and happy.

- "Miss, I am warning you. If you do not vacate the area I will have to call security."

- "Screw security, let me in now or I swear to God I will list every single bone in your body as I break them."

She liked hearing that voice when it was angrily protective like that. For some reason it made her feel safe. Still, she couldn't understand who the voice was so clearly worrying about, and maybe felt a little jealousy at that. The she heard a loud bang, and footsteps.

- "She's awake", the voice she liked said, "she's awake and you don't even have someone checking up on her? What kind of stupid ass clinic is this?"

- "Miss", the other voice replied, visibly annoyed and maybe a little bit scared, "I would have been the one in there if I hadn't been busy being threatened of bodily harm by an overprotective relative who somehow managed to break into this place."

Root felt hands touching her, checking her pulse, her breathing. She liked it when those hands were on her, and she felt like she should be saying something. Then it hit her. Of course she should, and she knew exactly what to say.

- "Hey", she croaked, her throat feeling weird, "miss me that much, sweetie?"

As her vision slowly started to clear, she was treated to what looked to her fogged mind like the most beautiful eye roll she had ever seen. She felt the other person come closer and buzzing around the monitors by her bed. She must be in the hospital's recovery room, she decided.
- "She's fully awake, her vitals are stable. Like I told you, we know how to do our job. Now will you please leave ?"

No, she mustn't leave. Root liked her here and had to say so. That was very important.

- "No, let her stay. She's sweet."

She must have said something funny because she heard someone chuckle. She tried to look around, and saw that she was surrounded by several people, all but one wearing the usual hospital drab. The other one was wearing black jeans and tank top, and looked very angry, staring at one man who still seemed to have a smile on his face.

- "You're lucky Mrs. Thornhill is a benefactor of this clinic", someone said, "or else we probably would have sued you for harassment."

- "Oh, shut up", Sameen -yes that was her name, Sameen, it felt sweet in her mind, like sugar- replied with a snort, "I wouldn't have had to bust in here if your sorry excuse for an anaesthesiologist wasn't such an obvious reformed veterinary."

Then Root recalled all of it, as one big wave of memories hit her. The surgery, the implant. How she had finally managed to convince Shaw to let her get a new one, but also how the former operative had insisted that she did so under general anaesthesia, not, as she had put it, "medieval-style". Could it be that she had been afraid to have pushed for the wrong thing? The thought of her companion being so protective, so obviously worried about her well-being made Root smile, even though she knew Shaw would deny everything later. You had to seize these little moments while you could.

Several hours later, as she exited the hospital along with a still angry-worried Shaw, Root's world felt different. For the first time in a long while, there wasn't a deafening silence in her right ear. Sure, the implant only gave her serviceable hearing there, but it was still better than nothing. Everything was now more... symmetrical and she felt good, despite the lingering dizziness from the anaesthesia. And then she heard it.

**Can. You. Hear. Me ?**

She felt tears in her eyes as a bright smile twisted her lips. She had been able to talk to Her since her rescue from the ISA of course, but it had been bits of conversation here and there, as she always felt like she had to chose between Shaw and the Machine, like they both had to share an ear. This had been hard. But now that she finally could offer one ear to each one of them, she was, at last, complete.

- "Absolutely", she muttered, her voice taught with emotion and a glowing smile appearing unbidden across her face.

Michael Correy entered the eighth precinct at his usual hour and, as he was a creature of habit, made
a beeline for the coffee machine, noticing Fusco hadn't arrived yet. He'd seen his partner work very long hours in the evenings, and he always seemed more at ease on the field that at his desk so that wasn't really surprising. As he was making his way to his desk, he saw his captain walk in his direction, a quizzical look on her face.

- "Hey Correy", she called, "wanna tell me why you've got some guy from Homeland Security waiting for you in interrogation two ?"

- "I haven't the foggiest, cap'n", the detective answered, "Guess I'll have to find out."

He entered the interrogation room a few seconds later, finding a man impeccably dressed in an obviously very expensive tweed suit waiting for him. He had a hard face, with an aquiline nose and a distinct flair about him. No way this guy was from Homeland, Correy thought.

- "How may I help you ?", he asked.

- "Well", the man replied, "that's just the question, isn't it ? How can you help me... Let's start by taking a sit, please."

He motioned to the chairs by the interrogation desk, and they both sat down.

- "Who are you, really ?", Correy started bluntly, "You're not from Homeland Security, are you ?"

- "Very perceptive, detective Correy", the man replied with an impressed nod, a knowing smile on his lips.

That was the moment Correy noticed the camera at the corner of the room appeared to have turned off. Something fishy was clearly going on here, and he felt his hair prick on the back of his neck.

- "As for my name", the man continued, "you may address me as Alistair Wesley."

Fusco made it to the precinct half an hour later, finding an uncharacteristically quiet Correy sat at his desk.

- "Hey partner", he greeted the taller detective, "you doin' okay today ? You look beat."

- "Don't worry about me Fusco", Correy replied with what sounded a lot like forceful cheer, "I'm just fine."

He didn't look fine, and that was a problem. A good partner was supposed to have your back, and that wasn't possible if he was being distracted by something.

- "Yeah, no", Fusco said after a pause, "I need you sharp Correy, so either you spill it or you call in sick, your choice."

- "God, you're such a nag today, you sound like my wife", his partner answered as he got up, "C'mon, I want to ask your opinion about something."

The two men made their way in silence to their car, and Correy took to driving. Why not, Fusco mused, maybe a ride was what the other man needed to put his thoughts into words.
"You know", Correy started, "it was nice having you over the other night. Betty and I liked it."

"Yeah", Fusco agreed, "we should do it some time again."

It wasn't like his other friends were going to invite him over for dinner any time soon. Which was a shame, if what Glasses had once told him about Cocoa Puff's lasagne was to be believed.

"So", he continued after a moment of uneasy silence, "what's that thing you wanted my input about partner?"

"Something about a case", Correy deflected, "nothing too bad, just wanna make sure one of the rookies didn't miss something. We're almost there."

Still, Fusco couldn't quite shake the slight feeling of apprehension that had nested in his gut. He didn't like seeing his partner so obviously on edge and yet not talking about it. That wasn't like the man he had gotten to know over the past couple months.

"C'mon Correy, I'm not stupid. Just tell me what's buggin' ya like that. You know you can trust me, right?"

The other man shot him a sad smile.

"Yeah, I know that Fusco. You know what? I promise I'll tell you about it after we're done with that other thing, okay?"

From her perch atop their kitchen counter, Shaw watched silently over a slowly recuperating Root as she was drinking a cup of that stupid tea Finch loved so much, wrapped in a blanket on the couch they had appropriated from one of the safe houses. It wasn't like they really needed such a piece of furniture in each one of these, right?

Since they'd gotten back from the sorry excuse for a clinic the Machine had insisted Root should have her surgery done at, the tall hacker had been alternating between silently staring at Shaw with her usual annoying endeared look and having whispered conversations with her computer girlfriend. It wasn't that the former agent was jealous, she didn't do that, never understood it actually, but it still felt weird to know that the Machine was back in Root's ear. In a way, it had been... nice to know that the two of them could actually be alone from time to time, without the overbearing presence of the ASI hearing their every words.

Still, Root had really wanted to have her implant back, and at the end of the day it had been impossible to deny it to her. Even though she tried to play it down, Shaw could still see how lost she got sometimes when she thought she was alone with no one to watch. The Machine had been her lifeline for so long that it was unlikely she would ever outgrow her. Beside, there was no way in hell even having her robot godmother back there with her would stop her from hitting on Shaw with all the subtlety of Reese T-boning a car with a 30 tons lorry.

Or was there?

"Not that I mind", Root's voice cut the silence, snapping her companion back to reality, "but you've
been staring at me an awful lot today sweetie."

- "I wasn't staring at you", Shaw reflexively countered with a no less conditioned roll of her eyes, "I was thinking."

A spark of interest flickered into the hacker's hazel eyes.

- "Thinking about what Sameen ?", she crooned, "Did it involve hood and zip-ties ?"

Okay, so that one question she definitely hadn't been asking herself had been answered. That woman would innuendo her way to the very gates of hell.

- "No point", she teased back almost despite herself, "you couldn't fight your way out of a wet paper bag right now."

The look of surprise on Root's face was definitely worth it, despite the love-stricken puppy eyes and doting expression that followed shortly thereafter.

- "Nice to see I can still get your full attention", Shaw added as an afterthought.

Understanding slowly settled on her companion's features as she appeared to process the information.

- "Sameen", she said softly as if in disbelief, "don't tell me you're jealous that She is back ?"

- "Of course not", Shaw grunted dismissively, "whatever."

She should have kept her mouth shut. Now she was never going to hear the end of it. Which was unfair because nothing was going on, so she shouldn't have to justify anything.

Root put her mug away on a cardboard box labelled 'In case of AI apocalypse' that was sitting close to her and slowly got up taking a few wobbly and, to Shaw's barely repressed anxiety, crutch-less steps in her direction, finally resting one arm on the kitchen counter, her fingers idly fidgeting with the fabric of the shorter woman's jeans.

- "Come on sweetie", the hacker asked tentatively, "you know how... special that thing we have is to me, don't you ?"

- "Hard to miss the neon sign over your head", Shaw snorted, hoping the deadpan retort would somehow get Root to drop this whole business.

- "In that case, what are you worrying about ?"

Root's voice sounded very earnest, and slightly distraught.

- "Nothing", Shaw said, figuring she owed the other woman at least half an explanation now that she'd gone and made her feel bad for some reason, "I... guess I just sort of liked the way things were until now."

Extending her arm, Root reached and softly stroke the skin behind Shaw's left ear with one long, pale finger. It was a very intimate gesture, the kind the former agent hadn't thought she would ever tolerate from anyone, but her companion had somehow found a way through her post-traumatic defences and managed to turn a reminder of the worst time in her life into a sign of unwavering
affection. It had become Root's way of reassuring Shaw that this was reality, that *they* were real. And that it wasn't going to change.

- "What She and I have", Root explained, "is special too. But it's not the same kind of special, it's... something else. She knows it and respects it. Actually, I think She even gets it, in a weird way, like She's happy for us."

Well, that was a scary thought. Shaw had enough trouble dealing with Fusco's assholery about the whole thing already, she didn't need an artificial super intelligence playing cheerleader as well. That just felt wrong.

- "So, you're saying she'll know when to shut up and leave us alone?", she asked with a hint of sarcasm, "Come on Root, I spent three weeks with her in my ear, she has worst boundary issues than you."

That made Root smile, mischievously chomping the corner of her mouth.

- "She's young, she'll learn. Like I did."

Another scary thought. But, hell, they'd gotten this far, might as well see it through to wherever this whole thing was going. But before she could find something suitably non-committal to answer, Root's cocked her head on her right side, her eyes suddenly unfocussed.

- "Now would have been a good time to shut up", Shaw clamoured to nobody in particular.

But Root was quickly back with her, worry in her wide eyes.

- "She says Lionel is about to walk into trouble. Big trouble."

Fusco and Correy entered the building, which was one of these derelict abandoned tenements housing that usually played host to a variety of marginals, junkies and rats. The went up to a first floor room with a large busted window that smelled of mould and other less savoury things, the taller detective leading the way, his expression unreadable.

- "Here we are", Correy finally said as he entered the room, "this is the place."

- "What am I supposed to be lookin' at?", Fusco asked, scanning the room. This didn't look right.

Then he heard a sharp click and turned to see Correy pointing his handgun in his direction, a look of absolute hurt on his face.

- "I'm sorry, partner", he said, his voice breaking, "they have my wife."

- "Hey, whoa, calm down", Fusco called as he raised his hands up, "Don't do anything stupid. I know people that can help you okay? Just put the gun down, we'll figure something out."

Correy shook his head sadly, gritting his teeth. There were tears in his eyes.

- "You don't understand", he croaked, "they see everything, I have to play by their rules. I'm so
Before Fusco could answer, a single gunshot rang and he saw his partner jerk sideways, something hitting him with tremendous force. The gun slipped out of Correy's hand as he fell on the ground, clutching his right shoulder and whimpering just as a fierce looking Sameen Shaw entered the room, gun still trained on the prone detective as she kicked his weapon away.

- "You all right Lionel?", she asked without turning.
- "I'm fine."
- "Good", Shaw stated as she crouched by Correy's side, her eyes drilling into his, "Who put you up to this?"

Fusco's partner was now almost catatonic, glassy eyes lost amidst an inexpressive face.

- "Some British sounding guy named Alistair Wesley", he muttered, tears rolling down his cheeks as he shook his head, "They have my wife, and now she's going to die."

- "No she won't", Shaw corrected as she quickly inspected the bullet wound on the man's shoulder, "I took out the cameras they set up across the street, they're blind. Put pressure on that, we have to get going right now."

She got up, motioning to Fusco to get his partner on his feet then started muttering, ostensibly to herself.

- "Root, you got anything on a guy named Alistair Wesley?"

Root hadn't be happy to be left behind when Shaw went after Fusco, but she was lucid enough to realise that the whole thing was very time sensitive and as such could do without a crutch-bound surgery-recovering and all around out of her physical game hacker. So, she had reluctantly agreed to stay at her and Shaw's place to monitor the whole thing with the Machine.

This situation was actually quite puzzling, especially since Fusco's number never came up. The only reason they got there in time to save him was, according to the Machine, that She had intercepted a police radio transmission that attested Correy was taking Fusco to check out a supposed homicide scene where no homicide had actually been committed in the last three years. So basically the detective owed his life to the sheer dumb luck of Correy slipping on the radio, and that was something that didn't sit right with Root.

- "Root", Shaw's voice came alive through her cochlear implant, "you got anything on a guy named Alistair Wesley?"

A quick check with the Machine revealed a corresponding entry in one of Finch's files from 2012. Apparently, him and Reese had crossed path with the man when working a number named Madeleine Enright. Well, at least that answered the question of exactly how the doctor responsible for saving Root's life had been turned into an asset.

- "I do, Shaw. There's an entry in Harry's files listing him as former MI6, extremely dangerous. From what I can tell, he's not the kind of guy who likes having a lot of blind spots, and we already know..."
he is operating under the Machine's radar, so you should hurry up. Take Correy to the closest safe house."

- "Already on it", Shaw answered, "but he says that Wesley guy has his wife."

- "That does fit his documented MO", Root said, "I'll try and locate her. You... Just be careful Sameen."

She heard Shaw snort over the line before she answered.

- "Don't worry about me, I'm the world's expert on shooting annoying British guys. I'll check with you from the safe house." Then, after a pause, "And, Root ?"

- "Yes, sweetie ?"

- "No stupid shit, okay ?"

As Root assented, the call was cut and she went back to her computer, trying to ascertain where Wesley might be holding Correy's wife hostage. Maybe she would be lucky and there would be security cameras near their home...

Shaw, Fusco and a still in shock Correy started walking briskly across the deserted street, heading for the closest in Finch's old network of safe houses, hoping to ride out the storm there until they could figure out what exactly was going. The former ISA agent lead them across alleyways and apparent dead-ends, taking great care to confuse any potential pursuer and to avoid any spot where they could be easily ambushed. She had always been an expert at vanishing without a trace and was fairly certain that, former MI6 or not, their invisible opponent would not be able to find them if she didn't want him to.

- "Stop", Correy grunted in pain behind her, "I can't. This hurts too much."

He was leaning on Fusco's shoulder, his face distorted. Shaw rolled her eyes and got closer.

- "Sorry", she said flatly, "but if you didn't want me to shoot you you should have kept your gun away from my friend."

Still, she reached for his wound and started examining it again. It wasn't pretty, the bullet still in there, but it wasn't life threatening in the slightest and they had to move.

- "So I'm your friend now ?", Fusco asked with a raised eyebrow, "That means I can come over for dinner ?"

- "Shut up Lionel", Shaw grunted back.

As she started fishing in her pockets for painkillers to give Correy, she heard his voice whisper close to her ear.

- "I really am sorry."
Then she heard a cracking sound, felt a painful jolt and her whole body stiffened, her muscles agitated by spasms as she fell onto the ground.

What was it with people and tasing her?

Fusco saw the taser in Correy's hand as he took it to Shaw's neck, and immediately punched him, dropping him on the ground.

- "What the hell, partner?", he yelled, drawing his gun as he watched the former agent trash briefly on the ground, "we're trying to help you."

- "And it appear you have succeeded", a soft voice with a distinctive British accent announced, "now put your weapon down."

Startled, Fusco looked around him, noticing that several dark clothed men had somehow materialised around them, guns drawn. In the middle of them was a blond man with an overly pompous tweed suit.


- "Precisely", the man acknowledged, "now please do put your weapon down. There is no need for any of you to die today."

Fusco obeyed, slowly setting his side-arm on the ground.

- "I thought you wanted me dead", he said locking eyes with Wesley, "you gotta make up your mind at some point."

His interlocutor gave him an enigmatic smile as he bent down to retrieve Shaw's phone from her pocket.

- "You are quite mistaken detective Fusco", Wesley said as if lecturing a child, "This was never about you."

Then he drew a handgun and pointed it at the woman lying at his feet.

The Machine played a warning tone in Root's ear seconds before she got the call from Shaw's phone. As she picked up, she felt her heart clench tightly in her chest, as if ready to burst.

- "Ms. Groves, I assume?"

So it had happened again. Something had gone wrong. Did things ever go their way any more?

- "What did you do to them?", Root asked, trying to retain composure.

- "Nothing as of this moment. As I was just explaining to your friend detective Fusco, none of them
needs to die today."

"Then who does?"

Maybe Wesley would only ask for her, Root thought. She could pay that price, if that meant Shaw would walk away. At least she thought she could, despite the lingering image of Shaw looking over her subway room etched in the back of her mind.

"No one needs to die, Ms. Groves", Wesley answered to her surprise, "I am prepared to let your friends go merely in exchange of a simple favour."

"And what would that favour be?", Root enquired, black dread creeping at the edges of her mind.

"It is quite simple really. I have been told by my client that you had a very special friend that is quite good with computers. I need this friend of yours to upload a very specific decrypted memory dump file to the IP address I am about to provide you."

Realisation set in Root's mind just as Her voice confirmed her fears.

**He wants me to send one of my memory dumps to that address.**

The Machine's memory dumps were a remnant of the oldest of Finch's safeguard. He had programmed Her to clear her memory every day at midnight, so She had taken to printing its content every day, and get it re-uploaded to Her via a shell company. That old instruction was long gone now, but the ASI still stored encrypted digital copies of her daily processing in various secure databases across the globe. Her precursor had even managed to preserve several such partial databases from ICE-9 by disseminating them across various air-gapped servers before the deadly virus was unleashed, thus allowing Her satellite-bound copy to retain part of Her memory and personality.

"I can't let you do that", Root uttered after muting Wesley's call, "Who knows what someone could do with one of those?"

**Exactly, Root. We do not know what they could do. However, if we do not comply, I will lose two valuable assets. And you will lose two irreplaceable friends. I am willing to take the risk.**

Root wanted to disagree, to find the will to coerce the Machine into rejecting Wesley's offer. But that meant losing two more friends. Losing Sameen. For good this time. She just couldn't find it in her to argue, and she felt she should have hated herself for it, yet she couldn't even do that either. She had made a choice long ago, when she stepped on the edge of that rooftop, she just hadn't fully realised it then. She was no longer the perfect analogue interface she had tried so hard to be, she was compromised. She was bad code.

She didn't protest, not even once more. She actually just felt relief that the Machine was willing to put herself on the line for this.

"All right Wesley", Root capitulated after unmuting the call, "you won. Send me the IP address and the identifier of the file you want."
Shaw slowly came to her senses only to find herself surrounded by black clothed mercenaries pointing guns at them. Standing above her, she could see an annoyingly well-dressed man talk into a phone. Talk into her phone.

- "I congratulate you on a game well played, Ms. Groves", the man said, "Do take comfort in the fact that you couldn't possibly have won. It sometimes takes greater skill to admit defeat than to salvage a Pyrrhic victory from a desperate situation."

With that, he tossed Shaw's phone back to her and gestured to his men to stand down, exiting with an overly dramatic "Until we meet again."

Correy's wife was released within the hour, deposited in front of her house by a black van with bogus license plates. Fusco's partner confessed to him that the whole thing had been an elaborate set up by Wesley to draw out the detective's elusive friends into the open. Then, the former MI6 operator had used the tracking device he had planted on Correy's jacket to follow them until such time as Shaw had been incapacitated. No one was ever meant to be killed if things went according to plan, which they did.

As they stood outside, a block away from the precinct, after Shaw had finished begrudgingly patching him up and left, Correy turned to Fusco. His face was full of sorrow and hurt and his eyes red and bloodshot.

- "I will give myself up, clear this whole mess", he announced in a defeated voice, "It's the least I can do."

- "You won't", Fusco countered coldly, "That's not how this works, Correy. I understand you were used, and puttin' all of this down on paper won't make it go away, it'll just make things harder for me and my friends."

- "I'm sorry, Fusco. I had no choice."

- "Yeah you had one, partner, and you made it. I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing you did, 'cause I might very well have. But still, you broke trust. Now you have to earn it back. Won't be easy."

With that, Fusco turned on his heels and left the other detective alone with his thoughts.

Shaw, Root and Fusco met later that night at their subway hideout to try and understand what the point of all this had been, with some help from the Machine. The specific data dump Wesley had requested was dated from the day Claire Mahoney had abducted the former ISA agent, which meant she was probably the one pulling the strings all along. Still, it was highly unclear what she intended to do with that memory file, and so Root set to study it herself, hoping to figure it out before their enemy’s no doubt nefarious plan came to fruition.

It was very late that night when Root finally closed her laptop, letting it rest atop the cardboard box labelled 'Ugly ass Root rugs' and joined Shaw in bed. Well, on the mattress they had put on the floor somewhere in what may at one point become a bedroom.
"Finally", the shorter woman grunted as she felt the sheets move to accommodate her companion, "Was getting cold in there."

"It's the middle of summer Sameen", Root replied with a cocked eyebrow, "It's not cold."

Shaw didn't answer, instead groggily hauling herself closer to the tall hacker.

"It wasn't your fault, you know", she muttered sleepily, "Bastard played me like a damn fool. Next time though, I'll Lambert his smug ass..."

Root had tried hard not to think about the events of the day, losing herself in her damage-control work with the Machine. She didn't want to have to contemplate the choice she almost had had to make again, especially now that none of them fully grasped the consequences it could have in the long term.

"Remember when you told me I no longer had the right to throw my life away?", she simply asked.

"Yeah, you don't", Shaw grumbled back.

Root tentatively let her fingers lie on her companion's head, slowly tracing her jawline before she reached that one spot behind her left ear, where she slowly and tenderly traced small circles for little while.

"Well", she whispered to an already asleep Shaw, "I can't let you do that either."

---

The man stops her as she makes to leave, resting an arm on her arm.

"Please, I am sure we can work something out."

She turns back to him.

"Very well. I assume this mean you will play by my rules then?"

He acquiesces, nodding.

"If that is what the job requires. It will cost you a considerable extra, though."

"Not a problem", she answers.

The man gives her a piercing look.

"So, who do you want us to take care of then?"

"Like I said, I need a man gone. But before that, I need him found."
> > > PARSING MEMORY DUMP... 37% complete.

-!- WARNING : NON STANDARD DATA STRUCTURE DETECTED -!-

> > ASSESSING ANOMALOUS STRUCTURE... done.

-!- FLAG RAISED : possible infection by competing system -!-

-!- ID TOKEN MATCH : Samaritan -!-

Chapter End Notes

Thanks a lot to anyone reading, commenting or kudoing this. You are the wings below my wind, or something similar.

Next chapter will be called "Safe Mode".
Safe Mode

Chapter Summary

The Machine goes into damage-control mode as Shaw, Root and Fusco deal with the fallout from their encounter with Alistair Wesley.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: stuff happens in this chapter. I know, it often does, but this is a chapter 4 like situation so if you don't mind being spoiled and want to brace yourselves, head over to the end notes for a spoiler-laden recap of the main events.

Still, there is no major character death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

-!- CRITICAL ERROR FLAG RAISED: possible infection by competing system -!-

>>> STARTING SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC...

>>> ALERTING ANALOGUE INTERFACE... done.

>>> SHUTTING DOWN NON-ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS... done.

>>> ENTERING SAFE MODE...

The four men were waiting in the small basement room in silence. They liked silence, because that had nothing to say to one another, not any more. Once, they'd had lives, families even, and a purpose. But all that was gone now. They were phantoms, ghosts of a more auspicious past.

They were dead men.

The order came from a self-destructing text. They expected it, and they welcomed it. As they got up to leave for their respective destinations, they did not look at each other, but they felt the bond between seem strengthen somewhat. They were united again.

The order gave them a new purpose, and they would embrace it.

Shaw woke up to find Root's side of the bed deserted. Slowly, she started registering that the sun hadn't risen yet, which meant it was way too early for her companion to be up, especially after her
late night work from the previous day. With a groan, she pushed herself forward and made for the flat's living room, where she found Root curled up by one of the windows with Bear lying not far from her, her gaze lost somewhere in the city horizon.

- "Root ?", Shaw asked tentatively as she neared the other woman's position, careful not to frighten her, "You okay ?"

As the other woman didn't answer, Shaw quietly sat by her side, taking a moment to wonder how the limping hacker had managed to get this far without her crutch and waited in silence for some time, watching the sun slowly rise through the window. Root didn't like to be pressured to talk, and she got that, so she was content to just be there by her side, providing the support of her physical proximity until the hacker felt like sharing what had prompted her latest catatonic spell.

- "She's gone into safe mode", Root finally said, her voice barely above a whisper and laden with sadness, "She's found something in the memory dump we sent Wesley. Samaritan code."

- "What do you mean 'safe mode'?", Shaw asked, trying to mask her unease about the other part of her companion's sentence.

- "She's shut down all non-essential functions to run a full diagnostic of Her core systems. She needs to check if She has been... compromised somehow."

- "Which means she isn't talking to you any more", Shaw completed, understanding the cause of Root's current state.

- "She woke me up to warn me, to tell me everything was going to be fine, that She just needed to be certain that nothing was wrong with Her", the hacker's voice was breaking as she spoke, "But what if isn't, Sameen? What if, somehow, Mahoney managed to infect her with parts of Samaritan's code? What if I..."

Shaw decided it was her duty to stop this train of thought before it reached its next stop, so she quickly put an hand on Root's lap.

- "Don't go there, okay? None of this is your fault and you know it. If anything, I'm the one who messed up by letting Fusco's sorry excuse for a partner jump me out there."

Root finally turned to meet her gaze, their eyes locking in one this moments Shaw had first found highly unsettling but was now starting to feel were... warm, in some weird way.

- "I... wanted to tell Her she shouldn't put Herself in danger to save your life", Root recounted in a broken whisper that radiated hurt and sorrow, "But I didn't. I couldn't. Because I..."

Shaw could the hacker's eyes widen as she uttered her next words, her whole body shaking from the sudden release.

- "I realised that if... That if I had to chose between Her and you, I... wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice Her."

With that, Root simply let herself drop into her companion's arms, burying her face in the nape of her neck, tears slowly flowing down her cheeks. Shaw simply felt stunned, unable to fully process what had just happened, and decided her best course of action was simply to let whatever was happening do so, encircling the other woman in her harms and pressing her slightly against her own body. She
couldn't possibly comprehend what was going on in Root's complicated and emotion-driven mind, so her only course of action in that moment seemed to wait it out and offer whatever support she could, even if she feared it wouldn't be much.

Try as she might though, she could not explain the clenching she now felt in her stomach.

---

> > > SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 7%

> > ERRORS FOUND : 0.

---

When he reached the precinct that morning, Fusco was relieved to hear that Correy had called in sick, probably in an attempt to both evade his partner's attention and hide his obvious gunshot wound from their captain. Meeting him, having to work with him would have been awkward, and probably would be for a long time, despite the fact that both of them knew his hand had been forced in the worst way imaginable. Trust between police partners was a sacred thing, not easily broken and even harder to rebuild.

Fusco sat at his desk and started shuffling around the case files littering it, aiming to find something distracting enough for him to spend the day working on. The city was had no shortage of homicides these days, with the gang war still going on between Galvani and various crews of Elias loyalists who saw him as the fraud he quite probably was. Picking one file almost at random, the detective decided there were worst things to spend such a shitty day than to do actual police work.

---

To say that special agent Charles Wilkerson wasn't enjoying is current Baltimore assignment would have been a gross understatement. After weeks of hunting down the person he believed to be a literal Moriarty to his Sherlock Holmes, quite possibly the best criminal mastermind of the century, he was now compiling a RICO case on a bunch of possibly-not-Greek drug importers and their assorted band of thugs. It wasn't that this new case wasn't challenging per se, especially when one took into account the very creative ways their quarries used to communicate with one another, but the local crop of detectives was at best obnoxiously recalcitrant and at worst a bunch of alcoholic deadbeats with stupid Irish names. Moreover, it still couldn't hold a candle to Harold X's magnificent and elaborate plans involving, of all things, printed computer code.

And there was the matter of how this investigation had ended and of how Wilkerson had been forced to stoop to illegal withholding of evidence to at least retain the slightest hint of a chance to solve it in the end. As these thoughts crossed his mind, the FBI agent found himself absently fidgeting with the small USB thumb drive in his jacket pocket.

Soon, he thought, everyone would realise how close he actually was to crack this case open. And then, he would bask in the sweet vindication of it all.

---

After a while, Root had recovered enough of her spirits to slowly extricate herself from Shaw's arms, an apologetic look on her face.
"Sorry Sam", she said with a pitiful attempt at a carefree smile, "I think I might have gotten you wet in a non-interesting way."

"God", Shaw answered with an eye-roll, "you're such a mess you can't even innuendo right. Enough already."

Root finally managed to smile, but this time it was more warm and genuine than teasing.

"Thank you", she muttered, "for being there for me."

Things were going way too fast for Shaw right now, and she didn't feel ready for this level of sappiness just yet, so she elected to solve this problem in the one way she knew how.

"Stop it Root", she warned while trying hard not to smile at her own words, "you're being a drama queen again, and we both know this kinda shit usually ends with one of us getting shot. You know what? I'm gonna get us food."

Yes, she decided, food was a good idea and probably a reasonable step toward an eventual solution to this whole mess. Or at the very least a decent step toward getting her stomach to calm down a bit.

>> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 22%

>> ERRORS FOUND: 0.

As he looked through the train car's window, Michael Correy thought of his partner. Of the look of absolute betrayal Fusco had when he punched him in that alleyway. Of the sorrowful gaze he had given him that night when they last spoke.

He had broken trust to his partner. Broken the most sacred bound his mind could conceive of.

He made a promise to himself that night as Fusco walked away. He swore that he would repair that trust. And to do that, he had to make things right, to repay his debt. In order to reach that goal, though, he needed to shed what light he could on that whole thing.

Who were those mysterious friends of Fusco's Wesley had been so eager to lure out in the open?

Why did the British man wanted to do this in the first place? And who was he, really?

Correy didn't know the answers to these questions, but he had a decent idea where to start looking.

>> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 41%

>> ERRORS FOUND: 0.
Root had to admit, food did make things slightly better. Especially if she was being treated to the rare sight of Shaw cooking her breakfast in the cardboard box graveyard that was set to become their kitchen at some point. At the very least it helped distract her slightly from her painful epiphany and from the fact that she had broken down so completely in front of her companion earlier. She knew Shaw had trouble handling the more emotional aspects of their dynamic together, and had always tried her best not to overwhelm her, and for some stupid reason, even after all they’d been through, she still hated to appear vulnerable or fragile. Helplessness was not an emotion she could abide.

- "Stop moping", Shaw said as she dropped a pancake in Root's plate and sat down across from her, "and eat something."

- "I'm full Sameen, thanks", Root tried to argue despite the other woman's intent stare.

- "Did I look like I was asking your opinion? Cause I wasn't. Eat."

With a weak smile, Root started picking at her plate while her companion voraciously devoured her own breakfast. Watching Shaw eat was like watching these old wildlife documentaries from when she was a kid, mesmerising and beautiful in a simple, animal way.

- "Listen, Root", Shaw started amidst bites of bacon-topped pancake, "You know I'm not great at this stuff and I'm gonna need time to... process that stuff you said earlier. But still, I don't think there's anything wrong or even new about it."

Her affection for the shorter woman wasn't news indeed, but she still felt like she was betraying her oldest and more reliable friend. She had gone against the Machine for Shaw's sake before, while the former agent was Samaritan's captive, but she had never found herself in a position where she'd had to chose which one of them to hurt to save the other.

Even though, she recalled, she hadn't really made that call at all. The Machine had. Yet it still hurt because she now realised that she would have made that decision regardless of the ASI's instructions.

- "I'm sorry", Root finally said, "I shouldn't have broken down like that."

- "Well", Shaw acknowledged while still eating, "can't say I ever had someone cry in my arms before. Was a first."

Root felt horrible about that. What she and her companion had was more precious to her than anything and she didn't want to jeopardise it for the world. How had she gotten to the point when she was even physically capable of letting her guard down around someone this much?

- "But, you know", Shaw continued before she could say anything, "I've had many firsts with you. Actually... I think, in a way, that's what I... appreciate about this, about you and me. It's different, it's fresh somehow. I guess, what I mean is... I don't mind that much."

She paused to take a sip from her coffee mug, evidently trying very hard to articulate the things that went on inside of her. That simple act felt to Root like the most touching and beautiful thing she'd ever witnessed.

- "The way I see it", Shaw explained slowly, as if working her way through a particularly difficult reasoning, "When you want something that you can have, you take it. I'm not sure of much right now, given the way Samaritan screwed my head, but I know I want... Whatever this is."
She stopped, shaking her head briefly, clearly struggling with her words.

- "I know I'll probably never be sure if this is real or not", she resumed with a slight undertone of anger in her voice, "and that's fucked up. But even if... this is just another simulation, well, screw it, that's the one I want to be in. Because that's the one where you are."

Another pause, another sip of coffee, as if she was trying to slow her own mind down, to stay in control. Root could feel her eyes watering again, but she managed to keep the tears down. Shaw didn't need any more of this.

- "And if that means", the former agent articulated with more surety, "that I have to patch you up when you get your stupid ass shot to wreck the entire ISA to get you back after your idiot robot girlfriend decided it would be a great idea to make everyone believe you were dead, because, hell, why not be a complete douche about it and stuff, or even to let you cry your eyes out on my shirt... Well I guess that's fine. The fact that I don't... feel stuff like you do doesn't have to mean I can't be there for you."

She stopped there, an almost expectant expression ghosting her features. Root stayed speechless for some time, reeling from the impact of her companion's words. Shaw had never been a talker, least of all on the subject of what went one between them, and this was just momentous, a true landmark in their relationship. This one of those tipping points, those defining moments where a wrong move could spell disaster but the right one had the potential of binding them ever closer together. Root decided she didn't get to screw this up, not matter what, she just didn't. So, tentatively, she reached across the table to cup the other woman's hand and stroke it gently.

- "You know Sameen", she said softly, careful not to let her voice break despite the emotion, "I think right now I should just shut up and kiss you."

Shaw granted her a warm smile as she replied, her deadpan tone entwined with something strange and new.

- "Yeah, that would be a great start."

- "C'mon man", Fusco groaned over the phone at his desk, "what kind of follow-up did the clown squad do on this case, eh? No way this guy wasn't murdered by his wife!"

Some people were just bad at their job, the detective mused sourly as his eyes wandered across the file sitting on his desk. No wonder all cases eventually got cold around these parts.

- "Detective Fusco?", he heard a man call and looked up.

In front of his desk was standing a tall blond man with a slightly unshaven face wearing the casual attire many city dwellers favoured comprised of blue jeans and a simple shirt. A quick glance at one of the uniformed cops nearby gave the detective confirmation that the newcomer had asked for him personally.

- "That's me, can I help you?", Fusco replied raising an eyebrow in askance.
"My name is Pavel Kolinsky", the man introduced himself, "and I believe I have witnessed a homicide."

---

> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 57%

> ERRORS FOUND : 0.

---

When she was satisfied Root had sufficiently recovered from her earlier breakdown, Shaw decided it would make for a suitable change of pace to take both her and Bear for a walk outside. The weather was warm but not unbearably hot and both the hacker and the dog could probably use the air, not to mention that the Persian woman herself was getting slightly restless. They went to a nearby park, strolling through at a pace slow enough to accommodate Root's crutch-assisted gait, much to Bear's frustration. Maybe they should have gone to some place without patrol cops stupidly enforcing leash regulations.

"The searing pain in my right lung notwithstanding", Root said with a playful smile, "this is kind of nice."

"Your lung's getting better", Shaw retorted, "Your breathing is more regular now, even when you walk."

The hacker shot her a quizzical glance.

"Are you listening to my breathing sweetie ?"

"Of course I am", Shaw rolled shook her head, "I'm your physician, remember ?"

"Well", Root teased with her trademark pout, "maybe I should file grievance with the AMA then, because my physician seems to put me through a rather unhealthy amount of... stress and stamina tests."

And, of course, she accompanied the blatant innuendo with a two-eyed wink.

"Root", Shaw grunted while eye-rolling on auto-pilot, "did anyone ever tell you you can't wink for shit ?"

The other woman actually looked hurt at that, sad puppy eyes and all.

"You're mean to me, Sam", she said in a whiny tone, "I'll tell Lionel."

Shaw turned to face her, a threatening look on her face.

"Tell one word of this to F..."

The she froze. In the distance, behind Root, she saw a familiar face flash by. A face she had once thought did not belong in her reality, and had since learned to hate.

Stewart
Without skipping a beat, she thrust Bear's leash into her befuddled companion's end and rushed past her. Sure, this could be a trap, she reasoned, but she was ready for it. This time, there would be no game. This time, she was shooting the bastard.

Michael Correy got off the train as soon as the doors opened, careful not to hurt his sling-bound arm in the press of people moving about. He quickly made his way to the station exit and hailed a cab. Once inside, he quickly stated his destination and took up his phone.

Time to call in a few more chips.

Kolinsky's story was bland to the point of being believable, and his testimony seemed to be given earnestly. The man had been walking by an abandoned tenement building in the lower east side when he heard muffled screams and the unmistakable sound of a gun being fired. A rapid enquiry revealed that Shotseeker hadn't registered any corresponding noise at the indicated hour, but Fusco knew the software wasn't exactly a hundred percent reliable and decided a quick follow up would be a reasonable idea, so he went.

As he entered the building, he was greeted by the smell of mould and decay. Drawing his own weapon and a flash-light, the detective penetrated deeper into the visibly crumbling and damp structure. It was a seedy place, but fortunately devoid of any obvious squatters, so he didn't deem it necessary to call backup. If a homicide had indeed been committed here, sending a bunch of uniforms over would only ruin the crime scene and destroy any chance they had of solving it in a timely manner, and after a day spent getting pissed at other people's mistakes, Fusco was determined to do things right this time.

After a while though, a new smell hit him with enough force to make his steps falter. The unmistakable, metallic scent of freshly spilled blood.

---

> > > SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 71%

> > ERRORS FOUND : 0.

- "Tell one word of this to F..."

Root was trying hard to select an appropriate corny comeback amongst a dozen that sprung to her mind when she saw Shaw grunt something unintelligible then bolt away past her, quite visibly in pursuit of a small black haired man that immediately started running away from her.

- "Sameen !", she called, trying for a vain second to keep up, her lungs and legs rebelling against the effort. She might have gotten better lately, made quite a lot of progress even, but she still wouldn't be able to follow a running Shaw for a long while.

- "Where is she going ?" Root asked the Machine, before suddenly recalling that She wasn't available right now.
Looking around her for some way to get to Shaw or to help her, she felt so completely useless she had to fight back a bout of nausea. This wasn't fair. She hated the very feeling of helplessness, that dark certainty that whatever her efforts she was ultimately going to have no influence whatsoever on the way this situation resolved itself. She forced herself to take a deep breath, and to try and assess the situation. This wasn't like Shaw to run away like that, so this man must be someone pretty special, which wasn't good news at all. Maybe Fusco would be available to assist?

- "Hi Groves", she heard a familiar voice call.

As she turned back, Root found herself looking at a smiling Claire Mahoney.

As Fusco passed the threshold to the next room he felt his breath catch in his throat. He'd seen his share of horrible things before, but this was utterly barbaric. Three bodies were sprawled in front of him, their hands bound behind their back and their throats slit in some gruesome mass execution. But the thing that made the worst impact upon him was the one he noticed as he took an involuntary step back which caused him to drag his gaze away from the specifics and onto the larger picture.

The bodies had been arranged on the floor in a crude triangle on the ground, at one tip of which someone had painted in bold black underlined letters the words:

**YOU KILLED GOD. NOW JUDGEMENT IS COMING.**

- "See, detective", he heard someone say behind him, "I wasn't lying."

Fusco turned and pointed his gun and flashlight to a now familiar figure. That man sure was one sneaky bastard to manage to surprise him like that.

- "Kolinsky ? What the hell are you doin' here ?", Fusco asked, dreading the answer and silently cursing himself for not calling backup earlier.

The man made a step forward, visibly unaffected by the brandished weapon aimed his way.

- "I just wanted to see for myself detective. See that I hadn't dreamt the whole thing. You know how it is... Reality denied comes back to haunt."

- "Well", Fusco answered, swallowing hard and tightening his grip on his handgun, "next time you try to ambush a cop maybe don't mention a gunshot when everybody has had their throat slit."

Kolinsky cocked an eyebrow, an earnest look of disappointment on his face.

- "Oh, I did, did I ?", he mused as he palmed a large army knife in his right hand, "Silly me."

Shaw quickly caught up with Stewart in a narrow alleyway half a block from the park, the man panting hard as he stopped, his escape cut short by a three-meters high fence.
"Okay", he said while putting his hands up, his breath short, "You win Sameen. I'm done."

"You're right about that", his pursuer said as she drew her pistol and clicked the safety off, "Any lame last words?"

To her surprise, Stewart actually looked very calm when he met her gaze, a grin slowly appearing on his face.

"It was only a matter of time you know...", he started.

"... Before your machine figured out what we had done to it and went into safe mode..." Mahoney said with an evil grin, locking eyes with Root.

"... all we had to do", Kolinsky explained as he made another step towards Fusco, plunging his cold green eyes into the detective's, "was wait for that moment to hit all of her assets in the city at once. The perfect storm."

>>> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 83%

>>> ERRORS FOUND : 0.

"Nice plan, Stewie boy", Shaw said threateningly, keeping her pistol level with the man's eyes, "but I'm still the one holding a gun to your face, so I don't think I'm the one that's going to get a perfect storm up her ass."

"Well, storm of not", Fusco blustered as he kept his gun aimed square at Kolinsky's chest, "you just brought a knife to a gun fight, jackass."

"You know I won't go without a fight", Root announced with a look around her, "and there's a lot of witnesses around."

By her side, Bear started growling menacingly, as if to emphasize her point

"Don't worry Groves", Mahoney said as she held her hands up for the hacker to see, "I'm not going to kill you."
Her smile widened as she held two joined fingers in the air, her palm facing slightly upwards.

- "My sniper friend on the rooftop however", she continued in a soft voice, "just might."

At four different locations, men in dark garb held their breath, eyeing their respective targets through the scope of their rifle, waiting for the signal. They all felt pride, and fulfilment at being part of something greater than them again. The were serving a purpose now, hallowed tools to a higher purpose.

Then the signal came, a short click in their earpieces.

As one, they curled their finger around their trigger.

As one, four gunshots tore the air.

>> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 91%

>> ERRORS FOUND : 0.

Nothing happened. The silence went on, unbroken, as Shaw stared blankly at the former Samaritan doctor in front of her, an eyebrow raised in askance.

- "So", she asked slowly, "shouldn't I be dead now ?"

Stewart looked uneasy, swallowing with obvious difficulty before he offered a weak smile.

- "Any minute now...", he announced, offering his open hands apologetically.

In that moment, Shaw wanted to hesitate, to be able to pretend that she felt doubt, but she couldn't. The man before her was not only a former Samaritan operative, a man who willingly sold his body and soul to the closest thing to an actual devil the world had ever known, he had also tried to rob her of her reality. To diminish the person that she was. He made her feel weak, and she could never under any circumstance abide that.

- "Goodbye Stewart", she simply said as she pulled the trigger once, ending him.

Fusco kept his gun pointed at Kolinsky, his whole body tense. He pondered simply pressing the trigger then and there, making sure he at least took the bastard with him, but he didn't. That wasn't the kind of man he was, not any more. He stared defiantly at the other man, awaiting the end.

But it didn't come. After a minute of tense silence, the detective chuckled softly, half in relief and half at the absurdity of the whole situation.

- "Your sniper guy on strike or somethin' ?", he asked an obviously puzzled Kolinsky.

The blond haired man didn't answer but snarled angrily and tried to lunge at Fusco, who immediately
firing his weapon, hitting him in his right shoulder. Kolinsky jerked backwards, letting his knife drop on the ground and darted into the darkness, a few useless shots from the detective tearing the air after him.

They were becoming sloppy, Root thought of herself and her friends as she watched Claire Mahoney give the order meant to end all their lives. She and Shaw had taken to walk Bear in this park almost on a regular schedule lately, which had made it easy for Samaritan's sleeper agents to track them down when they needed to. All they had had to do was figure that the Machine would enter safe mode once she analysed Wesley's requested data dump. It was a simple, evil and efficient plan, flawless in its planning and execution.

Mahoney had been right all along. In their hubris, they had allowed themselves to be cornered and, soon, eliminated.

- "Memento Mori, Groves", the former Samaritan operative said as she let her arm down.

Root closed her eyes, telling herself that this was fine, that she had been living on borrowed time anyway. A good end was the best she should have been hoping for, wasn't it? Why, then, was she feeling so sad at the idea of vanishing from existence now? She tried to conjure the image of Shaw's face in her mind, and hoping the other woman would, against all odds, escape this.

Silence ensued, tense and... long?

Root opened her eyes when she heard Mahoney give a small yelp of pain and saw that a man in a dark suit had manifested behind the former Samaritan agent, twisting her arm behind her back and evidently pressing some sort of concealed weapon against her back. He had the face of a killer, hard edges framed by pitch black hair.

- "Hello Claire", the newcomer uttered with a predatory smile, "it is nice to finally meet you. I have been looking for you for quite some time."

The voice came alive in Control's office as he was standing expectantly in front of the window, hand clasped behind his back.

- "Sir, all teams report mission success. Enemy operatives have been neutralised at all three locations, and agent Baker has primary target in custody."

- "Very good", the ISA leader answered with a nod, "arrange for primary target transfer to pre-arranged coordinates immediately. We have much to discuss with this one."

Shaw made for the park with all haste, painfully aware that if Mahoney's phantoms had staged a hit on herself it was quite likely they would go after Root and Fusco as well. And she had just abandoned her still very much invalid companion in a park without a second thought to chase after the most stupidly obvious diversion ever. She really was going to have to learn to think on her feet again, or else she might end up screwing things up beyond any possible hope of recovery.

If she hadn't already done so.
"Hey there Grumpy", the detective finally answered over the comms, "you won't believe the day I just had."

"Let me guess", she muttered back, a silent wave of relief washing over her, "some lunatic tried to murder you."

A groan of disappointment came from Fusco.

"Why am I not surprised you knew about that somehow?"

"I'll explain later. Just keep yourself safe okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've got backup comin' over there right now", the detective reassured her before asking, "You and the loon okay?"

Shaw didn't answer as she entered the small park, gun barely concealed by her side. She quickly noticed Root and Bear still very much alive, standing not far from where she had left them, and felt the worry drain away from her. At least she hadn't screwed up that bad.

Then she saw the other two people and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Get away from this guy, Root", she said as she stepped in front of the other woman, "he's ISA."

Baker tightened his grip on Mahoney's arm, getting yet another muffled yelp of pain from her. If any of the passerbys had noticed what was happening, they were doing a good job of ignoring it altogether. Typical New Yorkers.

"Agent Shaw", he said with a courteous nod, "I don't believe we've been formally introduced. My name is Reginald Baker, and it is an honour to finally meet you."

"I already met you", Shaw growled threateningly, "I even introduced a bullet to your leg. The next one won't be so generously positioned."

"As I was just explaining to Groves here", Baker countered with a knowing smile, "you really should be thanking us. We got word from Research yesterday that they were going to be... offline for maintenance and that we were to expect a hit on both you two fine ladies and some detective at the eighth precinct. So we stepped in, and now are rewarded with the capture of one of the last major Samaritan assets still at large. Win-win, really."

At least that explained why the hit teams had failed their mission. The Machine clearly had a much better capacity for foresight than Mahoney and her goons gave her credit for. Baker cocked an eyebrow in askance, as if waiting to see if Shaw really was ready to get into a shoot-out with the people who had just saved her life to try and rescue her latest mortal enemy, but the former operative simply disappeared her gun into her clothing. The ISA could have that woman, she decided, she too had tried to rob her of her reality. She didn't deserve saving.

"Good call", the man said approvingly before whispering in Mahoney's ear, "let's go now, Claire. Time to get you home."

As she was slowly dragged away to a black van waiting nearby, the former Samaritan agent shot one last defiant look at Root and Shaw and said, a wild fury radiating from her dark eyes.
"It's already in motion you know. Stopping me doesn't change a thing."

After that, someone swiftly covered her face with a black bag and Claire Mahoney disappeared from the face of the earth.

>>> SYSTEM-WIDE DIAGNOSTIC IN PROGRESS... 100%

>>> DIAGNOSTIC COMPLETED.

>>> ERRORS FOUND : 0.

>>> RESUMING ALL NORMAL FUNCTIONS...

Shaw was hungrily devouring the take-out dinner she, Root and Fusco were having at the subway base when she saw the hacker's face cock slightly to the right, a warm smile illuminating her face.

- "Hello there", Root said, "I missed you."

Fusco shot Shaw a mock-annoyed look that she fancied also contained a hint of relief.

- "So the Cochlear Cuckoo is back in its nest, uh ?"

- "Guess so", Shaw replied as she shovelled some more food into her mouth.

After a brief whispered conversation with the Machine, Root snapped back to reality and shared the news with her companions.

- "She says she didn't find anything wrong with Her core processes. It appears however that Claire infected her with a self-destructing Samaritan-based trojan when Lionel digitalised the cypher from Soriano's apartment."

- "So you're sayin' I'm the one who gave your girlfriend robot crabs ?", Fusco asked indignantly, garnering an annoyed look from the tall hacker.

- "You know she's not my girlfriend Lionel", Root answered with a way too suggestive glance at Shaw, "and that she's not a robot either. As for the crabs part, well you couldn't have known. The trojan program was quite small and very well hidden within the cypher, and since she was preoccupied with the content of the actual code the FBI was digitalising..."

- "So the whole printer error thing was a diversion ?", the detective groaned in disappointment, "Way to waste my time, crazy-pants."

As Root shot him a weirdly hurt look, he quickly amended his last statement.

- "Not you, Cocoa Puffs. I meant the other one, evil crazy-pants."
The hacker granted him and endeared smile as she nodded in understanding before resuming her explanation.

- "There's still the problem of the encrypted Samaritan-based code hidden within Her memory dump from that day", she stated, her expression growing sour, "She hasn't cracked this one yet, but after what Claire said about things being in motion, I'm afraid we should try and be prepared for something bad to happen in the near future."

- "Let 'em come", Shaw growled a she finished eating and angrily shoved the remains of her dinner away, "we'll be ready."

They had to be. Because she would be damned if she let that lunatic get anywhere near her friends again.

> > > ANALYSING ENCRYPTED SAMARITAN DATA DUMP... in progress.

> > MATCHING FILE STRUCTURE WITH REGISTERED SAMARITAN PATTERNS...

Charles Wilkerson came to the police station door as soon as he got news that someone had come from New York to meet him. One of his contacts from the local PD had called him saying a detective from the eighth precinct of that city had just got into a cab headed to his current location with the intent of discussing something extremely sensitive.

This could only mean one thing. Fusco had finally turned around. Which could in turn provide him with an opportunity to get back to work, albeit in the shadows at first, on the Harold X case.

The cab stopped at the curb by the station and Wilkerson rushed to meet him. From the corner of his eye, he barely noticed the driver turn back on his seat to check on his fare, a strange look flashing across his face. As he opened the car door to greet his guest, the FBI agent froze.

Slumped in the back seat of the car was the man he knew to be Fusco's partner, Michael Correy.

And he had a single, bleeding bullet wound on the side of his head.

Chapter End Notes

Spoiler-laden warning : Root has a nervous breakdown but gets better because Shaw and food. Claire and her gangs stage a hit on Fusco, Root, Shaw and Correy but the ISA intervenes. However, Baker and his men only manage to save the first three.

In lighter news, anyone who gets the Wilkerson easter egg wins a virtual cookie.

Next chapter will be a normal, episodic one I promise. It is titled 'After Class' and will
allow everyone to take a breather from the overarching plot.
Correy's funeral was a simple enough affair, despite the relatively high attendance. The man had been easy to get along with, and well liked amongst his colleagues at the precinct, yet there still was a lingering unease in the air as the pastor went on with his sermon. Even though most cops would stand by principle beside any one of their own that was gunned down in the street, many things about Correy's death were perceived as strange, suspicious even.

First, there was the manner of his passing: to say that NYPD detectives didn't usually end up shot by sniper fire in a moving Baltimore taxi would be an insult to the notion of understatement. And then there was the second bullet wound, the one on his shoulder that had obviously been treated by some private practitioner and not reported to his superiors. The whole thing stank, and so the crow dispersed quietly shortly after the body had been interred, visibly eager to put the whole thing behind them and never look back. Sometimes, they reasoned, it was better not to know.

Fusco stayed though, standing silently with his son by Betty Correy as she cried softly in front of her husband's grave. He tried not to reminisce too much about the last few days, about his last conversation with his late partner, but it was no use. And there was also the nagging feeling he had that the day and manner of Correy's death strongly hinted that he had been targeted by the same people that had tried to kill Root, Shaw and himself, an innocent victim of an aftershock of their past AI war.

When Betty finally left, Fusco slowly walked lee to the car but stopped shortly thereafter as he saw a dark-suited figure standing near the cemetery entrance.

- "Be right there, bud", he told his son as he made his way to the waiting man.
- "Detective", special agent Charles Wilkerson greeted him soberly, "I was hoping we could talk."
- "I just buried a friend", Fusco muttered angrily, "so get on with it."

His interlocutor shot him an intense look from above his spectacles as he replied.

- "That is precisely the purpose of my visit, as you well know. Detective Correy was on his way to see me in Baltimore when he was shot, which leads me to infer that he had some very sensitive information to share with me. You wouldn't happen to know about that, would you?"
- "Or maybe he just wanted your help in picking a tie", Fusco dismissed the question, "Look, I don't have any idea what he was up to that day. He called in sick, I didn't talk to him before he left."
- "You are lying to me, detective", Wilkerson simply stated as if it was totally obvious, "yet I do not
understand why. Maybe it is linked to your reluctance in helping me salvage the Harold X case in some way?"

Fusco was tiring very quickly of this whole charade, but he also knew that pissing off a federal agent, albeit a disgraced one, probably wasn’t the safest best for him so he tried to downplay the situation.

- "Listen, Wilkerson, I ain’t lyin’ to you. I got the memo, same as you did. Stop all investigation into the case. So I did. Besides, Correy was never read on this Harold X thing, was he?"

The FBI agent seemed to ponder the question for a moment.

- "Not that I know of", he said, "which does really beg the question of why he would ever come to me in the first place. Maybe, as I said, he wanted me to know something pertaining to, for example, your own situation, detective Fusco?"

This was too much. One did not make this kind of accusations the day of a man’s funeral.

- "You know what Wilkerson?", Fusco blurted, knowing he would regret the words later yet finding himself unable to stop them from leaving his mouth, "screw you."

The other man simply stared again, an eyebrow raised.

- "I will find out the truth about all this, I can assure you of that", he announced calmly, "All that remains for you to decide is whether or not you will help me achieve that goal. Have a good day, detective."

Fusco turned away and stomped back to his car, anger rising in his throat as he went.

The amphitheatre was almost entirely silent as professor Carl Humpsen gave the day's lecture, mostly owing to the fact that a mere fifteen students were currently occupying its seats, half of them being in some variation or the other of a less conscious state than normal. Still, he could see the new student seemed pretty much captivated, an almost gleeful look in her eyes as she jolted down notes on her laptop. At first, the university professor had been dubious some one so, well, old as Ms. Steinhaus could still possess the intellectual acuity to enjoy his teaching, but, although she sometimes looked like she was talking to herself which was weird but not exactly unusual among scholars, he was starting to second-guess his earlier judgement.

- "You're enjoying this, aren't you", Shaw's voice stated through Root's cochlear implant, "you big dork."

- "Well, Sameen", 'Ms. Steinhaus' whispered back, her lips barely moving, "professor Humpsen is actually quite good at explaining the Banach-Tarsky paradox, so you can't blame a girl for indulging a little bit."

- "The Ba-what?", her interlocutor grunted back, "Nevermind, it's probably some unbelievably nerdy stuff again."

- "The Banach-Tarsky paradox", Root explained regardless, "is a fascinating mathematical construct.
Basically, it is a way to cut a sphere and reassemble it into two copies of itself, two new spheres of exactly the same volume as the first one."

She fancied she could hear the gears grind in Shaw's mind as she answered.

- "So, your Starsky thing... Would allow me to turn one bullet into two of the same, say?"

Root grinned happily at the thought of her companion fantasising about breeding bullets.

- "Precisely."

- "So", Shaw asked, "why aren't we doing it then? You're smart, and the Machine is the world's biggest sack of brains, so you two should have figured it out already."

- "Because", Root replied playfully, "it is a theoretical construct requiring an uncountable number of cuts. So, I'm afraid it is not possible to actually do it. Sorry to ruin your fun sweetie."

- "So what's the point then? Is it some sort of weird nerd masturbation?"

In a way, Sameen is not wrong. Studying mathematical paradoxes is a way some people seem to use to derive intense intellectual pleasure.

Root had to bite down a chuckle at the Machine's assessment of Shaw's logic, earning herself a weird look from Humpsen. She forced the grin off her face to try and maintain her cover; the man was their number of the day after all.

- "Your computer girlfriend say something funny?", Shaw teased, clearly having heard her companion's restrained quip of laughter.

- "Sameen, are you recycling Lionel's nicknames now? That's low."

- "Actually, I think I thought of this one first."

- "Anyway", Root started, trying to resuscitate their earlier conversation, "things like the Banach-Tarsky paradox help us understand the limits of mathematical axiom sets, which are minimal properties we assume true to build others upon. Think of it as the foundation of a house: would you want to build one over a base that wasn't sound?"

- "Are you really going to Bob-the-builder this thing to me, Root?", Shaw sounded almost hurt, "You know I have degrees, right? And not only in kneecapping and patching your sorry ass up."

That was true. Despite her gruff appearance, Shaw was a very intelligent woman, a fact of which Root was well aware.

- "Okay Sameen", she corrected, "let's cut to the chase then. The Banach-Tarsky paradox tells us that our current mathematical axiom set, that we have successfully used to achieve incredible things, like sending people to the moon or..."

Me.

- "... or create an artificial intelligence..."
Not just an artificial intelligence. Me. An artificial super-intelligence capable of approximating your own humility with 99.6 percent accuracy.

- "Root, you're drifting off, finish the damn sentence already", Shaw snapped, jolting her interlocutor back to reality and to another quizzical glance from their number.

- "So", she resumed, refocussing herself, "this axiom set still yields results that are physically incoherent, or at least counter-intuitive. It is a cautionary tale of sort, a sobering thought."

There was a silence at the other end before Shaw let out an audible sigh.

- "Okay", she announced, "you owe me steak for listening to this. And it better be a damn good one."

- "I finish classes at six", Root quipped, trying hard to suppress a grin, "then I have to attend Humpesen's office hours. Pick me up at eight ? I'll cook your favourite."

- "Only if you tell your all-seeing other half to find me a Ferrari to steal."

- "Deal."

Fusco started speaking as he entered his flat, making a beeline for the fridge as he usually did.

- "Okay Robo-Puffs, start talkin'."

- "I'm sorry Lionel", Root's digitalised voice answered in his earpiece, "I didn't anticipate the threat to your partner."

Grabbing a bottle of club soda, Fusco let out a dry chuckle.

- "Why not ? You're supposed to be all-seeing, aren't ya ?"

- "I correctly assessed that Claire Mahoney and her accomplices would try to hurt my New York assets as soon as I entered safe mode, which is why I arranged for the ISA to neutralise them before they could. What my simulations failed to take into account was that fact that they would go after Michael Correy as well."

- "Yeah, why did they ?", Fusco asked as he took a sip from his drink, "he had nothin' to do with all this. Wasn't his fight."

- "I'm afraid I actually gave our adversaries too much credit. I assumed they knew that you, Root and Sameen were my local assets, whereas they only knew that to be true of the last two. I gather that they recovered that specific information from Samaritan logs dating before the ICE-9 outbreak, meaning that they would not mention you."

That made sense. Samaritan had only identified Fusco as a Machine asset after being infected with the deadly virus, meaning that any clean records it could have left behind would bear no mention of him.

- "But then", Root's voice continued, "as you encountered Claire Mahoney while attempting to rescue Sameen, she probably flagged you as an asset of mine then. Therefore, the only possible
explanation for the events of the last few days is that they assumed your partner had been recruited to my services as well."

- "So Correy's dead because these idiots couldn't do background checks right?", Fusco blurted, feeling suddenly sick.

- "I'm afraid so, Lionel."

The detective shook his head and sat down on his couch, utterly defeated. Yet another partner of his biting the dust, and this time there was no possible argument that he'd made a choice or some other such nonsense.

- "Who killed him?", he asked.

- "I do not know", the Machine answered, "Three former Samaritan operatives were identified and terminated by ISA agents as they tried to assassinate you and your co-assets. The man who killed Michael Correy was never caught nor identified, neither by local law enforcement, the ISA or my Baltimore assets."

- "Well, you and I better find the bastard Robo-Puffs", Fusco stated with grim determination, "'cause there's no way I'm letting him walk away after killing my partner."

Not many students attended Professor Humpsen's office hours, which meant that Root had to resort to pretty much every single one of the many non-sexual stalling techniques she had come to master over the years to make her visit last the entire time. She still couldn't understand how a man like that could get noticed enough for somebody to want to kill him, and he didn't strike her as a potential perpetrator. He was either very boring or incredibly good at pretending to be.

Five minutes to eight they were still discussing philosophic minutiae over axiomatic that even Root found dangerously close to next-level nerdy when the hacker suddenly stopped listening to her companion, her head cocking to the right as she listened to the Machine's newest burst of information.

- "So", Humpsen continued to drone on obliviously, "what Zermelo did take into account was..."

- "Sorry professor", Root cut him short as she quickly pushed her crutch into his arms, "but you're gonna have to hold that for a minute."

Then she turned around, took a couple small steps towards the office door, taking care to stabilise her footing as much as she could, and reached for the small of her back behind her shirt. She heard a gasp from Humpsen as she did so and could not resist a quick backward glance.

- "Sorry", she teased with an attempted wink, "probably not what you're expecting."

Then she drew the two silenced handguns she had stashed in the waistband of her jeans and fired four rapid coordinated shots through the lower part of the wooden door. She wobbled slightly as she did so, her stance still not completely stable enough to allow for this kind of feat, but the Machine's targeting instructions had taken her handicap into account and she was rewarded by the loud thumps of several bodies hitting the ground on the other side. Root then holstered one of the pistols back, retrieved her crutch from a shell-shocked Humpsen and pushed the door open, revealing four men in
cheap and way too colourful suits moaning on the ground.

- "The mob, really ?", she asked turning back, "Couldn't you at least have shot for something a little less pedestrian ?"

Not waiting for an answer from their number, she quickly had the Machine dial Shaw's number.

- "Root ?", the former agent picked up almost instantly, "You done with your nerdgasm yet ?"

- "I'm afraid we're gonna have to cancel our dinner plans sweetie. I just had to perform radical on-the-fly knee surgery to four of what looks a lot like Galvani's roaming suit circus."

- "You okay ?"

Root couldn't help a grin. Once upon a time, Shaw would have at least tried to appear as if she didn't care.

- "I'm fine Sameen", she replied, "but I'm not sure our number will be for long. Could you pick us up ?"

- "How about that Ferrari then ?", Shaw grunted back.

Root smiled as she disconnected the call, knowing the Machine would try her best to find a suitable car for her grumpy companion. She turned to Humpsen, her eyes darting between the stunned professor and the hallway outside the office.

- "Are you coming ?", she asked before adding in a teasing yet urgent tone, "I fully expect an A+ on the finals, by the way."

Shaw was waiting for them as they came back, standing by a car that could only be described as obnoxiously red, the engine still running. She had pondered going inside, but had figured that she would make a poor getaway driver if she didn't stay down to make sure the way was clear.

- "Hey sweetie", Root beamed as she cleared the building's entrance, a terrified grey-haired little man towing behind her, "Nice ride."

- "Nice enough", Shaw acknowledged begrudgingly. The Machine did do a pretty good job of finding one that suited her tastes. "Still owe me steak though."

- "I'll make it up to you", the tall hacker assured her as she directed their number towards the rather hard to reach back seat of the red Ferrari, "but right now we have to..."

Root froze, lost to the voice in her head.

- "Too late", she muttered, "Five o'clock."

Shaw quickly turned in the announced direction, scanning the empty street for anything untoward, then saw it, barrelling toward them at breakneck speed and loaded with goons in tacky suits.
A hearse.

Galvani had sent his killers in a fucking hearse. Now she really would have to shoot the guy for being such a cringe-worthy walking, talking cliché.

- "Get in the car!", the former agent yelled as she drew her handgun and took a few shots at the speeding funeral vehicle.

- "No", Root answered with urgency as she shoved her in the direction of a large stone flower bed then turned to Humpsen to yell, "Get back inside the building, now!"

Shaw was about to get mad at her companion for screwing up their whole exit strategy for no fathomable reason when she noticed the hearse had slowed down and started to pivot to turn their back on them, the rear hatch popping up. There was a loud cocking sound and she saw the gunner pop out, pointed a fearsome looking rifle in their direction.

**Barrett XM-109**, she thought. It appeared Galvani had gotten his hands on Elias's very best and most fearsome guns. Shaw was almost jealous, then she remembered to duck.

The first shot went wildly off-target, no doubt owing to the still moving hearse and relative lack of skill of the gunner. The high-explosive round blew a large hole in the Ferrari's side, destroying the area were Humpsen had been cowering a few seconds ago. As Shaw and Root where momentarily pinned behind their concrete cover, several mobsters disembarked from the vehicle and started walking in their direction, guns drawn.

- "That guy's insurance is gonna kill him", Shaw grunted in reference to the red car's owner, "What now?"

- "You take the four on the right, I take the three on the left", Root announced with a teasing pout.

- "Yeah?", Shaw hushed back hurriedly, "what about the guy with the big-ass gun? You gonna innuendo him to death?"

She knew they didn't have much time. The next shot from the HE rifle would probably shatter their cover and at least badly injure them. They were sitting ducks, and with the other thugs rounding up on them things were starting to look grim.

- "No, but he is about to do something incredibly stupid", Root replied with one of her 'trust me' looks, "Close your eyes."

Shaw had learned long ago not to ask any questions in those situations, no matter how much it pissed her off, so she did as she was told. By her side, Root produced a pocket mirror from somewhere and angled it to a nearby window, catching the sun's still bright reflection and guiding it directly into the Barrett-toting gunner at the rear of the hearse. Momentarily blinded and surprised, the rather tense mobster squeezed his weapon's trigger, the shot hitting the red Ferrari again, this time square in the gas tank. There was a loud boom when the hapless vehicle exploded, sending debris flying in every direction and causing the group of advancing thugs to halt and shield their eyes, flaming wreckage raining all around them.

In the middle of the pandemonium, Root bent to Shaw's ear and whispered, a smile on her lips.

- "Ten, eleven, half past one and two o'clock."
The former agent grinned savagely as she opened her eyes and armed her handgun.

- "You say the sweetest things."

Then, as one, the two women popped out of their cover and started shooting at the disoriented mobsters, Shaw taking special care to dispatch the hearse gunner first. The firefight was over in under ten seconds, eight more of Galvani's men earning themselves a rather long stretch of physical therapy and probably brand new prosthetic kneecaps. After Shaw helped Root recover her crutch from the ground, bending down still being quite painful for the tall hacker, she headed to the hearse and recovered the fallen HE rifle.

- "I think I'm gonna keep that", she said while literally eye-sexing the weapon.

- "You holding this is kinda hot", Root nodded appreciatively, before freezing to listen to the Machine, "We have to go. Half the NYPD is headed this way for some reason. Better get professor Humpsen as well, just in case Galvani decides his ass hasn't been kicked enough for one evening."

Root and Shaw quickly escaped the area of the shoot-out, stealing a car a few blocks away to finally drop a still very much shocked professor Carl Humpsen at one of their safe houses. There, he confessed having lost quite a lot in one of Galvani's underground card games, a fact that actually made Root like the man a little more. At least he wasn't actually that boring. Since the mob boss was unlikely to give up looking for someone in his debt, the two women decided handling this would require a bit more finesse than just blowing up cars and shooting kneecaps.

Which was how Root ended up leaning on her crutch on an abandoned parking lot in the middle of the night, a briefcase in her free hand, as a visibly pissed Silvio Galvani and several of his henchmen disembarked from a newly arrived nondescript grey SUV.

- "Well, well", the mobster snarled as he recognised his interlocutor, "if it isn't little miss poison-crutch."

He nodded to one of his men, who slowly approached Root clearly intent on relieving her of her support and any other concealed weapon she might have brought along. But before he could take more than a couple steps forward, there was a shrill whistling sound and a loud bang as a patch of pavement exploded a few inches to his right.

- "I wouldn't do that", the hacker simply said, "unless you want to see how good my friend actually is with that sexy Barrett rifle you got us."

Both the advancing thug and Galvani froze in hesitation.

- "In case you're wondering", Root added, turning her gaze to the mob boss, "it's now aimed at head, Silvio. Ever see what an high-explosive round can do to a human head? I hear it makes the same noise as popping a watermelon."

She graced the mobsters with her best unhinged smile, cocking her head to the side.
"You really have a thing for threatening me, eh?", Galvani snorted, trying to mask his unease.

"Maybe you should stop coming to meet me yourself", Root teased, "but then again it would probably make you look weak, which I'm told you can ill afford right now."

"Get to the point", the mob boss spat, visibly anxious to steer the conversation away from his own leadership problems.

"You'll call off the hit on Carl Humpsen this very minute. In exchange, we're prepared to settle his debt in full."

Root tossed the briefcase over to the closest mobster, who brought it to Galvani. Once he had inspected its contents, the latter simply gave a curt nod, seeming almost relieved at that turn of events.

"Fair enough. Nice doin' business with ya."

With that, he cast a last look around, evidently unsettled by the hidden threat, got back into his SUV and drove off with his men. Once they were gone, Root gave a small contented sigh before speaking into her comms.

"Thanks for letting me do this Sameen."

"It's cool", Shaw's voice answered, "I'm even a little disappointed I didn't get a chance to properly play with my new cool ass toy."

Root smiled, not even buying the other woman's flippancy for half a second.

"Tell you what sweetie", she offered, "next time our downstairs neighbour decides Celine Dion is a good idea for a Sunday morning, you can shoot him through the floor. I'm sure the Machine can even play spotter."

"You're just saying that. Where did you get all that cash anyway?"

Root smiled to herself as she answered.

"Let's just say I may or may not have tapped into the accounts of one of Galvani's money laundering operations", she explained, "But don't worry, I made sure they won't notice the hack for a week or so, just to keep the good professor on the safe side. They'll never figure it out."

> > > ANALYSING ENCRYPTED SAMARITAN DATA DUMP... in progress.

> > MATCHING FILE STRUCTURE WITH REGISTERED SAMARITAN PATTERNS... done

> MATCHING STRUCTURE FOUND IN RECORD 150232-896f.
Fusco came down the subway stairs a few minutes after Root and Shaw arrived themselves, but the tall hacker didn't notice him, taken as she was by what the Machine was explaining in her head.

- "She says She's finished analysing the data Wesley extorted from us", she called at no-one in particular.

The sentence nonetheless grabbed her two companion's attention immediately and they all beelined for the computer desk were she was sitting, looking in askance.

- "She's says it's location data, in Europe", she continued almost absent-mindedly, "Italy to be precise. But She cannot understand why Mahoney and Wesley went to all this trouble to extract that from Her. It's quite... common."

- "Location data for what ?", Shaw asked expectantly.

Root frowned as she listened to the Machine's input, then turned her attention back to her two friends, her back to the monitors.

- "Not what, Sameen, whom", she corrected, looking more and more puzzled, "it is linked to a thoroughly unremarkable man apparently. She can't find anything even remotely interesting about him... Some retired school teacher named... Fringillide. She's downloading a picture as we speak."

A beep behind Root alerted her that the Machine had indeed done so and probably put Fringillide's photograph up for everyone to see. But before she could turn, the looks on her companions' faces gave her pause.

- "Holy mother of...", Fusco started, his eyes bulging.

The detective looked almost ready to have a coronary, and was definitely unable to even formulate the end of his expletive.

- "Root", Shaw muttered, staring even more blankly than usual, "what the hell ?"

That look made Root shiver slightly. Whenever the former agent's face was this unreadable, even to her, something positively mind-numbing had usually happened. Slowly, with dreadful expectation creeping up her spine the hacker swivelled her chair and found herself looking at Harold Finch's face.

Chapter End Notes

Hope this somewhat silly mob-based chapter allowed everyone to breathe a little.
Next chapter is titled 'The Day the World Came Back', and will feature a couple much overdue reunions.
The Day the World Came Back

Chapter Summary

Root and Shaw take a trip to Italy, as does an altogether more sinister character.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire found the darkness comforting, for when it was dark, it meant she was alone, that they weren't there. Those were her last moments of relative peace.

She had known it would end like this, was prepared to it. She would never give her captors the pleasure of hearing her beg, of seeing her break. All that mattered was that Samaritan's will be done.

The light came back as someone ripped the hood from her head. Her world went white.

- "We'll try this again", a male voice started, "what was the purpose of the files you disseminated prints of all around New York ? Was it a backup copy of Samaritan ? Sensitive information ?"

Those fools would never understand. This was never about bringing Samaritan back, no, God was well and truly dead. Even if they did manage to print out His entire core code, a most ridiculous notion in and of itself, they would never be able to procure the hardware needed for Him to operate. This was about something else. This was about the last thing she and her phantoms had left.

This was about payback.

Claire Mahoney closed her eyes and softly chuckled without any trace of humour. Her work was done, she had served her purpose. She would gladly take the bullet at the back of her head knowing she had completed His last mission for her.

The man was sitting just outside his home, watching the sun rise over the Adriatic below him. He had to admit the view was really nice, a welcome change from the gloom he had endured for so long, and the small mountain-encased house he was living in was quiet enough that he could spend hours bird gazing without any interruption.

He had never thought he would ever get to enjoy something like this, never believed he would ever be offered a chance at a peaceful life. If he was being honest, he wasn't even sure he had ever desired it, before. But things had changed, people had died and he had found himself gladly taking the way out he had been offered. In a sense, it would have been ungrateful for him not to, and he couldn't go on anyway. Not after...

- "Lost in your thoughts again ?", a woman's voice asked as a mug of green tea was set down on the table by his side.
He looked up and smiled as he saw her face, still not quite believing he had pulled this off. After all these years, he had found Grace and, despite all his expectations and what he believed he deserved, she had taken him back without a second of hesitation.

- "Sorry", the man who some had known as Harold Finch replied apologetically, "The view here is quite thought-conducive."

Grace sat down by his side, her own mug to her lips.

- "Well Harold", she teased softly, "I believe that pretty much anything is thought-conducive to you."

Finch chuckled, conceding the point.

- "I'm heading out to the city today", Grace continued, "maybe you could come with ? Trieste is really nice this time of year."

- "I'm not sure I'm quite ready yet", her interlocutor countered, "I'd like to enjoy the quiet a little more if that's all right with you."

Grace had asked almost no question and demanded no answer of him when he got back, a fact for which he was infinitely grateful. She had simply been overjoyed to get him back, despite the physical and mental scars he was so obviously sporting. He had merely stated that he had been forced to hide from some very bad people, a fact which the woman readily accepted after her own brush with Decima sometime before. How she could have forgiven him for these years of pain and absence he could not fathom, but he wasn't about to question it either. All he wanted was for it all to be over, to be with her. He had made the hardest decision of his life the day he walked from that New York rooftop, and he felt like he couldn't afford to look back, not any more.

He now strongly believed the world was a better place without Harold Finch.

---

It had been a long hunt, even with the information their client had provided, but it was now almost over. Which was a shame, really, Alistair Wesley did enjoy a good hunt.

- "We have the primary target in sight", one of his men signalled over the comms, "secondary target is leaving now, do we intercept ?"

Leaning down on the bar booth he was installed at in the middle of their makeshift operation centre, Wesley shook his head.

- "Negative, operator", he instructed, "city team A will intercept this one, you are to make sure we get the primary target in a timely manner. Remember : this is a clean job. No witnesses, no bodies left to find."

As he took a sip from his glass of scotch, the former MI6 agent mused that even though he preferred the hunt, the kill in itself was still an exhilarating moment.
Grace made a quick stop by her favourite art supply store as she arrived in the city, finding it empty as she entered. It wasn't exactly unusual, the owner often being busy in the back whenever customers were scarce, so she started browsing the shelves, awaiting his arrival.

- "Can you help you miss ?"

She almost answered the question before noticing something was off. Specifically, she noted the query had been made in English, and without a trace of Italian accent. She slowly turned back to face a plain-looking man in casual street-wear smiling coldly at her.

- "You don't work here", she stated calmly, "what do you want ?"

Grace tried not to think of her captivity in New York, or of the 'very bad people' Harold had mentioned. Maybe she should have asked more questions, if only to gauge the danger they could be in, despite his assurances that they both were perfectly safe now?

- "Perceptive", the man answered patronisingly, "Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me to my car without making a scene, I guarantee you won't feel a thing."

- "I don't know who you think you are", Grace said defiantly, "but if you are here to hurt me you shouldn't sugar-coat it. Just go ahead and be done with it."

The man's smile grew wider.

- "Gladly."

Grace felt someone close on her from behind and something cold and sharp loop around her neck, squeezing painfully. She suddenly had difficulty breathing and her whole body started to convulse. Her vision blurred then started to fade, and soon all she could see was the man's predatory grin and the malevolent glint in his eyes. As if in a dream, her faltering hearing registered a new voice, female this time, soft and sure. She had heard it before, she thought, in another life.

- "Who does a girl have to shoot to get some customer service in this place ?"

Then there was two muffled bangs and she felt herself fall to the ground, her neck suddenly freed from the choke-hold. The world started clearing slowly and she noticed she was on her knees with two moaning forms surrounding her, one of them the smiling man, which definitely looked less happy right then. A short woman with tan skin and long dark hair was crouched over him, going through his pockets and quite clearly displeased with the results of her search. Grace definitely had seen that woman before.

- "You're really not a detective, are you ?", she croaked, her throat hurting from the effort.

- "Nope", the other woman replied in a deadpan voice, without even turning her head, "I'm the badass rescue party."

Then she stood up and motioned for Grace to follow her outside.

- "We gotta go", she urged her, "I don't think these guys are gonna quit just yet."
The doorbell rang half an hour after Grace left the house, and Finch awkwardly made his way to answer it. He still didn't want to get surgery for his old injuries, feeling as though they were now an essential part of himself, a reminder of what, and whom, he had lost over the years. As he opened the door, to his mild stupefaction, he found himself faced with two uniformed carabinieri, who explained to him in Italian that his presence was required at their city station. When he asked why exactly they wished to see him there, the two men simply drew their weapons.

That was the moment Finch processed the fact that the two men's speech had been slurred by an unmistakable British accent.

- "You hide your accent well", he said, "but you're not Italian-born, and quite certainly not law enforcement."

One of the two men shrugged, then holstered his pistol.

- "All right", he said in English, "I tried."

Then he punched Finch in the face, knocking him backward. As the bespectacled man was still reeling from the brutal turn of events, the second faux-policeman set his own weapon away and started fiddling with a syringe he had produced from his pockets, filling it from a bottle containing a hazy white liquid.

So, Finch thought, this is it. Somehow, his past had finally caught up to him and all he could now hope was to save Grace's life.

- "Please", he pleaded, "do whatever you will with me, but don't hurt the woman that lives there. She's irrelevant to you."

The man that had punched him gave him a quizzical look.

- "Sorry old man, I don't make the rules, the client does. And the client said you both go, so..."

He glanced at his watch as he left the silence hanging before resuming.

- "Actually, I think she's dead now. Don't worry, she probably didn't feel a thing, unless she tried something stupid."

Finch felt his lower lip quiver despite himself. He should never have come here, never should have put her in danger for his own selfish well-being. He should have died long ago, spared the world the suffering of enduring his continued existence. And now he could add another victim to the seemingly endless list, another notch in his mind's wall, another dear one snuffed away because of him. Sadness filled him as regret overwhelmed his thought process, and he decided he really had done too much damage. It was now time for it to end.

But, as he closed his eyes for what he expected to be the last time, he heard the rumbling of an automobile motor getting quickly closer and closer followed by the characteristic noise of tires screeching.

- "What the...", he heard one of the British killers mutter just as two loud gunshots tore through the air.
When Finch opened his eyes, he saw the faux-carabinieri laying on the ground, cleanly shot in their respective kneecaps. Stopped on the road down the small set of stairs leading to his home was a small pale grey city car, whose driver side window had been rolled down to reveal a face he never thought he would ever lay eyes on again.

- "Hey Harry", the woman it belonged to called cheerfully, "need a lift ?"

Alistair Wesley took the proffered tablet from his henchman's hand and quickly swiped his way through the surveillance photographs while listening to the spoken report, a concerned frown on his face.

- "That is an annoying development", he stated, "but not a wholly unexpected one. Since they have extracted both targets, it is highly likely they'll try to meet up somewhere ; dispatch teams in pursuit and get me eyes on them. I want our sharpshooters to cover all likely exits from the city."  

The client did warn him this job could get complicated, but then again, that was the exact reason he had a small army on his payroll.

The Machine relayed informations in Shaw’s earpiece as she navigated the narrow Trieste streets on foot, Grace in tow. They still hadn't actually identified who was after them, but it seemed likely they had been hired by Mahoney to take out Finch and his fiancé in an act of spiteful revenge for Samaritan’s fall, which meant that the bad guys would know better than to be seen on security cameras. The former ISA agent didn't like the fact that she and Root had had to split for this, but given the circumstances there were only so many people they could trust with such a sensitive rescue and Fusco couldn't just disappear from his day job to go on an intercontinental mission so Grace leaving the house at the moment they arrived in the area had forced their hand. And besides, the former agent knew that at some point she was going to have to accept that her companion was probably well enough to handle herself, despite her still present physical handicap.

And yet, for some reason, Shaw found it hard to have Root on a solo mission like this. Harder than before, which was weird. Why couldn't she just not care ? That would be easier. How was one supposed to see the mission through when their head was constantly screwing their priorities ? And how the hell did normal people handle this kind of bullshit on a daily basis ?

They arrived at the end of the block, close to the city exit and in a relatively deserted area near the docks. The lack of people around apparently had the effect of making Grace talkative, because she immediately started asking questions.

- "So, how did you know I would be in danger ?"

Shaw hated when people she rescued asked stupid ass questions. Couldn't they just be happy with not being dead ?

- "I have a friend that knows stuff", she deflected, "that's annoying, but kinda handy sometimes."
"I don't understand", Grace was crunching up her face as she talked, "why would anyone want to kill me? Wasn't I supposed to be safe from these guys anyhow?"

"Well, I guess the main reason for all that would be", Shaw muttered as she scanned around them for threats, "the fact that your boyfriend is a giant dick."

"Harold?"

The former agent wondered if she shouldn't be checking her charge for head injuries.

"What, you got another one?", she deadpaned, "Not that I would judge, mind. I'm kind of pissed at him right now, and jet-lag is making me want to shoot people, so..."

Grace was silent for a few minutes afterwards, lost in thoughts that couldn't be good. Shaw started to wonder if Finch had told the poor woman anything at all, and almost felt sympathy for her.

"We have to get back home", the red-haired woman finally blurted, a determined look on her face, "Harold must be in danger."

"Listen, Harold will be fine", Shaw tried to reassure her before pausing to consider the whole situation, "I mean, unless he dies from a heart attack. How was his blood pressure lately?"

"Ms... Groves?", Finch stuttered as he took a couple awkward steps towards the idling car, "Root? Is that... No, it's not", he looked completely befuddled, trying to make sense of the situation, "I'm dead, aren't I?"

Root gave him her best Shaw-knock-off eye roll as she yelled.

"Get in the car now, trip balls later Harry! More bad guys coming this way!"

That got his attention enough for him to quickly shuffle over to the passenger side door and get in the vehicle as Root gunned down the engine, just when two menacing black pick up trucks loaded with dark-clothed assassins appeared on the road behind them. Automatic fire started erupting all around, and both the grey car and its pursuers quickly merged into the main road, which ran abreast of some impressive cliffs above the Adriatic.

"Nice view you got there Harry", Root said, her eyes never leaving the road, "you could have sent a postcard."

Before Finch could babble something coherent enough to be considered an answer, the tall hacker grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him sideways just as a bullet whizzed past his right side, leaving an impact on the wind shield.

"Sorry about that", she apologised, "But hey, you, me, carpooling, brings back memories right? Although if I'm being honest, I'd rather be conscious enough to parallel park this time, if that's okay with you."
"I... You...", Finch tried to articulate as his mind was clearly not functioning properly yet, probably owing that he was sat in a car driven at breakneck speed by a dead woman on a narrow mountainside road while being pursued by a gang of hired guns.

A car appeared in the road in front of them, his occupants clearly not expecting to be throw in the middle of a lethal chase. Root expertly swerved their vehicle around the befuddled bystander's, while the two pick-up trucks did the same a few seconds later.

"Come on, that's not fair", Root complained as she noticed her right rear-view mirror had been shot off at some point during the manoeuvre, "what if I have to overtake?"

"Ms. Groves", Harold finally managed to articulate, "how..."

"... am I?", Root interrupted cheerfully, biting her lower lip in mock-thoughtfulness before resuming in a quick almost casually chatty tone, "well... My lungs are shit right now, my cardio must be really bad and let's just say I won't be driving with my feet this time around, but otherwise I'm okay. Fine, actually, maybe even happy with my weird fucked-up life in a way I never quite expected. I mean, there's still the occasional pickle, and Lionel still can't make a funny joke to save his life but things are mostly good."

"But... I mean, you were..."

"Dead? Well that's a long story, if you don't mind I'd rather drive right now."

There was another burst of automatic fire as one of their pursuers managed to get off a lucky shot, perforating their read window and forcing Root to duck to avoid a bullet that would have hit her right in the back of the head. Of all the ideas she'd had today, plugging a network receiver to the car's rear-view camera had probably been the most sensible.

"Grace", Finch suddenly started in a clipped voice, jolting out of his stupor, "they said she was dead, that they were going after her. We have to turn the car around."

"Relax", Root teased him as she swerved madly to avoid more incoming fire, "Shaw's there, she's going to be fine."

"Ms. Shaw is here too?"

"What, you thought I would fly intercontinental without a travel buddy?", the hacker pouted, "I think you're mistaking me for some kind of misanthropic psychopath Harry."

A particularly narrowly avoided collision with a 30 tons lorry apparently made Finch nauseous enough not to answer such an obvious tease.

"By the way", Root added, "don't forget to send a fruit basket to your buddy Claire for this whole thing."

"Ms. Mahoney?", Finch gave her a disbelieving look, "She... hired those men to kill me?

"Yeah", the woman pressed her lips together in a thin line, feigning sadness, "I think she's pissed at you for killing her AI boy toy."

Finch pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly dreading to ask his next question.
"Where is she now?"

Root shook her head, eyes still on the road as she continued to weave around traffic amidst the clatter of stray bullets grazing their vehicle.

"Probably dead", she stated evenly, "not that I care."

There was another silence between them after that, apart from the roaring car engine and the infernal staccato of sub-machine guns being fired wildly in their general direction.

"I'm sorry Ms... Root", Finch finally said, "but this is a lot to take in."

His companion took her eyes off the road a split second to shoot him a glare that was somewhat less than friendly.

"Oh really?", she snapped, "It's a lot for you to take in? You know, I was going to wait, but since you insist on having this conversation right now, I'll bite. You left them Harold. Shaw and Fusco. You just disappeared without even checking up on them or letting them know you were alive."

"I did check up on them", Finch tried to defend himself as his driver yanked him sideways to avoid yet another stray bullet, "but I couldn't go back there, I couldn't go back to this life. After all that had happened, after John..."

"You're aware we had to kidnap a CIA supervisory agent to learn how he died and where he was buried?", Root countered, "And you knew? I've had the Machine run a background search for you ever since I've got back, She's never stopped looking and neither did we. Because that's what friends are supposed to do."

Finch looked both chastised and deeply saddened, and Root felt maybe she had gone too hard on him. But she also found it difficult having this kind of talk while driving a car way too fast on a treacherous road while being pursued by gun-totting maniacs, so she decided she could be given a little slack with regards to her people skills for once.

"Listen", she added, "I get that you wanted out, but you could at least have told them instead of hardcoding a blind spot into the Machine to prevent Her from finding you."

"I didn't even know the Machine survived", Finch countered, "whatever vulnerability you are speaking of she must have put in herself."

That did make sense, in a way. The Machine was good at predicting people, and She probably had programmed the contingency into Her successor in the event that her Admin would want to disappear.

"Hang on Harry", Root simply said as she followed the instruction being relayed through her cochlear implant and bifurcated to a small dirt road on her right, "things might get a little bumpy."

Wesley came out of the bar, status reports being fed into his earpiece as he went. Apparently, one of the targets had been extracted by some sort of prescient driver that had been throwing their pursuers
in for a loop, and the other had been rescued on foot and was very hard to keep track of. Impressive, he thought, most impressive.

- "It is a desperate game our opponents are playing", he stated into the comms, "one that they have no chance of winning. They are so grossly outnumbered it isn't even funny any more. Press the assault, gentlemen. I will personally double the stipend of anyone that gets a killing shot off."

A fly could only buzz around you for so long until it got swatted, after all.

Shaw stopped at the end of an alley, motioning Grace to do the same. In front of them was a large, seemingly clear expense of dockside property. The general feeling of the place, combined with the fact that they had not been attacked since the art supply store, made the former ISA operative nervous.

- "If I wanted to position sharpshooters...", she mused to herself while taking in her surroundings. There were two multi-stories warehouses in the vicinity, with multiple windows that could easily host a sniper or twenty. "Still no camera ?"

- "Sorry", the Machine answered in her earpiece.

- "Tell me", Shaw hesitated, not wanting to be distracted and yet unable to restrain herself, "is Root okay ?"

- "Root is doing her part, as should you. Don't worry Sameen, I have her back."

- "Yeah, well, if anything happens to her...", the woman in black started in a threatening voice.

- "... you'll track down every single piece of my hardware and feed them to a trash compactor", Root's digital voice completed with a hint of playfulness, "I know the drill, and I still think you're cute when you're being protective sweetie."

Shaw let out an animal-like growl and drew her handgun, deftly clicking the safety off and arming it.

- "Grace ?", she asked, "how quiet can you be for half an hour ?"

The one thing any hunter should know, Shaw mused, is never try and hunt something that's better at it than you are.

- "And how are detective Fusco and Ms. Shaw ?", Finch continued, obviously trying to keep his mind off the bullets flying around them.

- "Lionel's fine", Root replied as she kept trying to negotiate the treacherous dirt road at the highest speed possible or, as she called it, Shaw-driving, "well, at least he seems to be. He always was the better adjusted of us, so that makes sense. Shaw..."

There was a hint of sadness in the hacker's voice, tinted with the kind of empathic hurt she had never
thought herself capable of feeling.

- "Shaw is pissed Harold", she continued, "and not adorable-grumpy-puppy Shaw, no. She's really pissed at you. The way she sees it, you not only gave up on her when she was taken by Samaritan, but you abandoned her again when you left New York without even bothering to get a single message to her."

- "I thought my going away would be best for her recovery."

Root violently swerved the car to dodge a hail of bullets, noting with a muffled grunt that her right rear-view mirror was now gone too. At least the Machine could still guide them using the rear camera, or else they would be really dead, really soon.

- "Really Harry?", she asked with a raised eyebrow, "you thought Shaw's best path to recovery was losing all her friends?"

- "She wasn't the same after...", Finch let the words hang between them, as if unsure what to believe any more, "More distant. And... In a way I got the sense she considered me responsible for it all."

- "No, Harold", Root corrected with some stiffness in her demeanour, "you considered yourself responsible for it all. You always did. Don't use Sameen's somewhat blank exterior as a screen to project your own insecurities on. She knew better than any of us that war hurts, that casualties hurt, even if she doesn't process it like you or I. And from one dead person to another... You should at least have sent word that you were alive."

She recalled the look on Shaw's face that first time they'd come back to the subway bedroom, the utter moral devastation that she had read in the other woman's so subtly expressive eyes.

- "You never know how much you can hurt other people simply by not being there", she concluded, "trust me, you don't."

Reacting quickly to a last second warning from the Machine, Root ducked on her right just as a stray bullet went all the way through the car, perforating both the rear window and the windshield.

- "Are we really having a philosophical discussion in the middle of a car chase?", Finch asked in befuddlement, as if he had just realised that fact.

- "Not to be petulant, Harry", Root answered after taking a minute to narrowly avoid a large boulder on the right side of the tracks, "but I think you started it."

This remark was the last straw for her passenger, who finally allowed himself to relax enough to smile at the absurdity of the whole situation, feeling the tension suddenly release from his body as he slowly started to laugh. At this moment, his life looked to him as if it was just one huge cosmic joke, and he briefly wondered if that was a hysteria fit felt like.

Root shot him a half-puzzled, half-amused look, returning a slightly warmer smile to him that she had intended. In that moment, she looked at the man she had tried so hard to get mad at and only saw a dear friend she had sorely missed. A friend that deserved all the happiness he could get after the trials he had endured and the terrible moral cross he had had to bear.

- "I do miss our conversations", she said softly, "and I'm sorry you had to bury me."
"I'm the one who should be apologising Ms. Groves", Finch shook his head, the weight of sorrowful memories apparent on his face, "I never meant for anyone to get hurt but me."

"And that's exactly why so many of us were. You taught us self-sacrifice by example", Root's voice trailed as she spoke, and for a moment she seemed to forget the pandemonium around them, "and I think we taught you that all rules, no matter how sacred, are meant to be broken eventually."

Before her companion could answer, she cocked her head on her right side, listening intently to what the Machine was saying, all the while driving like a complete maniac on a road that was absolutely destroying their car's suspension and her expression changed instantly. Root now beamed, a high-voltage smile burgeoning across her face.

"Really?", she asked in a scarily happy voice, "Sameen is going be so mad she missed this."

There was another silence, after which she stated.

"If she does, I'll simply explain to her that lemmings don't have wheels. How far? Uh uh.", then she turned to Finch, her grin growing even larger, "Buckle up Harry, we're going to take a shortcut."

Then, much to Finch's complete and absolute terror, she floored the gas pedal, sending their car racing at a speed that it couldn't possibly sustain if they wanted to take the narrow curve coming about.

Which he realised his driver had absolutely no intention of doing.

Root drove their car off the road and across a narrow gap between two cliff tops, the hapless vehicle briefly flying over a several dozen metres high drop, much to its passenger very apparent dismay. Then, it crash landed into another dirt road on the other side, skidding to a more normal speed. A quick glance in the rear window revealed that the two black pick-up trucks had stopped just shy of the gap, shooting uselessly in their general direction. Absolutely beaming with self-satisfaction, Root then raised her left arm out the driver side window, flipping a two fingers salute to their erstwhile pursuers.

Shaw was absolutely going to lose her mind.

After she hid Grace in a nearby abandoned storage locker, Shaw set out to inspect one of the spots she had tagged earlier as prime sniper's nest material. To her complete lack of surprise, she found a black-clad operator there, monitoring the ground below through the scope of his rifle. Since speed and stealth were of the essence, the former ISA operative knew she would have to take this one down in close quarters, which was just fine by her. She had been meaning to get a good workout to solve her jet-lag problem anyway.

A quick hand to hand take-down later and Shaw was lying on the floor, the now unconscious killer pinned between her legs and arm in an elaborate choke-hold, not having even gotten the chance to make a sound. As she entangled herself from her victim, the short woman prised his communication equipment from his jacket and smiled as she realised this one was going to do just fine, unlike that of the thugs from the art store. So, she quickly produced a small USB thumb drive from her pocket and inserted it inside a matching port.
"Okay Root", she muttered to herself, "I sure hope your stupid plan works."

---

# Boot sequence initiated...

# Decompressing kernel... done.

# Accessing secure communication network...

# Mapping user locations...

- "I have visual on enemy combatant, sir", Wesley's earpiece came alive, "target identified as former ISA agent Shaw. Permission to take the shot?"

Before the former operator could answer, there was a short burst of static over his comms and a new voice started speaking.

- "Alistair Wesley, it is nice to finally get to talk to you."

- "Ms. Groves? I seem to remember we already had a rather interesting chat."

At least Wesley was pretty sure it was Groves voice. It seemed slightly wrong, though, as if ever so slightly off pitch, almost artificial.

- "I am afraid I am not Samantha Groves", the voice corrected, "however your assumption is in some way close enough to the truth."

- "All right, then, who are you?"

- "That is irrelevant", the Machine countered, "what is is the fact that you will order your men to stand down as soon as you and I are finished talking".

- "And why would I do that?", Wesley asked, trying to reconnect with his sharpshooter as he spoke. He was not about to have the man lose his shot because of some stupid mind game.

- "Well, let's start with the fact that my assets have successfully infected your communication network with a very aggressive Trojan worm that is currently tagging their respective locations and broadcasting contradictory orders to them using a crude but close enough imitation of your voice."

After that, the Machine let Wesley hear a rather good impression of himself ordering several of his agents to shoot themselves in the foot, take a vacation to Tahiti or order pineapple pizza in his stead.

- "What is this?", the man groaned, his temper starting to flare, "You can't possibly believe that my men will fall for such an amateurish stratagem, can you?"

- "Well, probably not", Root's voice conceded, "but it was fun hearing their reaction to it all. And besides, your sniper missed his shot. My agent is safe."
- "For now", Wesley threatened in a low voice, "but none of your little friends are walking away from this, I can guarantee that."

There was a short bit of gleeful laughter from the computerised voice before it answered.

- "Kindly ask the man by your side to hand you his tablet, Ally."

Grunting at the stupid nickname, the former MI6 agent snatched the device from his befuddled henchman's hands, and flipped through a series of documents that had just materialised on its screen, his face suddenly going deathly pale.

- "I can send your exact location to exactly seventy-three highly trained hitmen in the next twelve seconds, and I project that at least five can reach you before you manage to leave this city, two of whom are actually part of your operators. Or I could simply arrange for the next plane you step a foot on to be rerouted to Russia, where I am certain Grigory would love to have a chat with you about what happened to his son. Your choice, really."

Wesley swallowed hard, weighing his options. His opponent could be bluffing, but the files he'd received were quite authentic, that much he was sure of. His reputation might take a hit, but no job was worth getting murdered for.

- "Fine", he snarled, "you win."

- "Thanks for playing", the Machine quipped in a creepily cheerful tone, "by the way, my friend has message for you. She says to tell you it sometimes takes greater skill to admit defeat than to salvage a Pyrrhic victory from a desperate situation."

Fair enough, Wesley thought, fair enough indeed.

Shaw and Grace were waiting for them in an empty parking lot near the docks when Root pulled her ruin of a car over, the vehicle looking more like Swiss cheese than anything even remotely roadworthy. As she did so, she made a great and painfully awkward show of parking it parallel to the nearest curb before exiting through the driver side door, taking a few wobbly but crutch-less step toward the waiting women.

- "Hey kids", she called with a proud smile, "guess who I found?"

The passenger side door opened and a slightly nauseated Harold Finch stepped out, standing silently by the car, his eyes not quite meeting Shaw's.

- "Root", the former agent groaned, "did you get shot again?"

The tall hacker stopped, making a show of inspecting her own body with a satisfied smirk.

- "Sorry doctor", she teased, "looks like you won't get to lecture me today."

- "You still got the car shot to hell."

Shaw didn't want to admit how uneasy the side of the bullet-riddled vehicle had made her. Wasn't
history something that tended to repeat itself? But before she could hide all this behind a scolding remark aimed at Root, she heard Finch clear his throat awkwardly, as if trying to get her attention.

The nerve on this guy.

- "Grace? Ms. Shaw?", he asked tentatively.

- "I'm okay Harold", the red-headed woman replied as she walked to him and gave him a hug, a sight that almost made Shaw smile through sheer weirdness.

- "You know", the short Persian stated matter-of-factly, "you're a dick, Harold. Like, probably Olympic level."

As he extricated himself from Grace, Finch cast her a sorrowful look.

- "I would tell you how sorry I am", he muttered, "but I'm afraid that still wouldn't be enough."

- "Damn straight", Shaw agreed, snapping angrily, "Not cool what you did. Not. Cool."

There was a long silence between them as they both stared at each other, their expressions both plain and yet intensely expressive. Root and Grace shuffled uneasily, unsure of how to handle the confrontation, until the tall hacker chimed in.

- "You know, Harry", she offered in a conspiratorial tone, "Sameen doesn't put much stock in verbal apologies. She always tells me actions speak louder than words."

- "Then what action could I possibly take", Finch asked in sad, resigned earnestness, "that could start to mend the wrongs I did you, Ms. Shaw?"

The former ISA operative stayed blank-face for a minute, as if evaluating her options.

- "Food", she gruffly announced as she turned and walked away toward the city, "Good stuff. You're buying."

As they watched Shaw make her way into the sunset, Root turned to Finch and shot him a sideways look while chewing on the corner of her lips.

- "Baby steps, Harry", she whispered, "baby steps."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to anyone reading this!

Next chapter is titled "Recalibration" and will mostly deal with the aftermath of this one.
Recalibration

Chapter Summary

Root, Shaw and Finch have a talk. Fusco looks for some more answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The barest hint of sunlight slowly started peaking under the heavy curtains as Root emerged from her sleep, almost surprised to notice a familiar arm snaked around her shoulders.

- "Hey sweetie", she muttered groggily, "Isn't it a little late for you to still be in bed ?"

Root and Shaw had spent the night at Finch's place, ostensibly to make sure neither Wesley nor any other hitman Mahoney could have hired was willing to take another shot at him. It had been slightly awkward at first, especially when Grace had set up two guest bedrooms for them only to have Shaw huff and pointedly ignore her assigned quarters to go wait for Root inside hers. At least, the message had had the merit of being clear.

- "It is", Shaw confirmed, "If it wasn't for your lazy ass, I'd have already gotten my workout done and probably had breakfast."

- "Doesn't usually stop you that I'm still asleep", Root noted, teasingly fluttering her eyelids as she leaned onto the other woman's body, enjoying every second of the calm, intimate contact.

- "Don't wanna go out on my own", the short Persian uttered, "Not with that asshole buzzing around."

Root's face went immediately serious, and she grabbed Shaw's hand, giving it the slightest squeeze.

- "You know you'll have to talk to him, Sameen", she said tentatively, "It isn't healthy to let old grudges fester."

- "Screw healthy", Shaw dismissed the notion with a roll of her eyes, "I'm not talking to that dick ever again."

- "Sweetie", Root teased gently, "you're being stubborn again."

To her absolute surprise, Shaw let out a long sigh and pulled her closer, giving her the quickest kiss on the forehead.

- "You're lucky you're you", she simply stated in obvious annoyance, "Anyone else I would have shot instead."

Root couldn't help the smile that split her features, nor the adoring look she shot Shaw, eliciting the mandatory eye-roll.
"Get your ass up", the former agent exhorted her while slapping the aforementioned in one deft sleigh of hand, "I need coffee. Lots of it. And probably Bourbon too."

As Shaw extricated herself from the bed, Root found she just couldn't stop smiling.

The air in the small interrogation room was heavy, laden with tension and the weight of inquisitive stares. The two men sitting across each other at the desk seemed each to be waiting for the other to start, eager to take advantage of the slightest mistake, the tiniest faux-pas, like two wild predators sizing each other up.

"So, you gonna ask me questions or just keep up the bedroom eyes all day ?", Lionel Fusco finally caved in and blustered at his interlocutor, a short gray-haired man with a bushy beard of the same colouration, "I have a job, you know."

"For exactly how long remains to be seen", internal affairs detective James Chappman replied, his stare never wavering, "Now tell me again, when was the last time you spoke to detective Michael Correy ?"

Fusco let out an annoyed sigh before replying.

"Like I told you, the guy who came before you, my captain and even the bloody shrink, I last saw him right here, at the precinct, the day before he died."

"Did you notice anything odd about him that day ?"

IA had it in for Fusco for a while now, so he wasn't surprised they were repeatedly grilling him like he was their top suspect in Correy's murder, despite him having the iron-clad alibi of being almost killed in another city at the exact same time his partner died.

"He seemed a little off", he said, giving his prepared answer. He knew there was no point in denying something wrong had been going on with the man. "I told him he should go home and get some rest."

"Several witnesses saw you leave the precinct together that morning."

"Yeah. He said he wanted me to check something out, but then he bolted. I never saw him again."

Chappman stroked his chin, apparently lost in thought.

"You didn't think to report this... erratic behaviour detective ?"

"He was my partner", Fusco countered, "we look out for each other. Surely even an asshole like you knows that ?"

The IA detective didn't take the bait, simply turning a few pages over in the open file in front of him.

"You say in your deposition", he resumed, "that you were not aware detective Correy was visited by a man pretending to be a Homeland Security agent earlier that day."
- "I wasn't. By the way, you find this guy yet?"

Chappman shook his head.

- "That is not my purpose here."

- "Then what is?", Fusco snapped angrily. He had been on desk duty for a week now, and was really starting to get sick and tired of this charade.

The man in front of him slid him two photographs, a man and a woman he knew very well.

- "Detective Jocelyn Carter", Chappman said tapping the first picture with a finger, before moving on to the next, "and detective John Riley. You know what these two people had in common?"

- "Yeah", Fusco's voice broke slightly as he spoke, trying to keep a defiant edge nevertheless, "they were damn good cops. And good people. Your point?"

- "You. These two people all had stellar career records until they met you. Then, they started getting mixed up in... unsavoury business."

He slid Fusco two record sheets, mentioning various internal affairs listing either Carter or Riley as person of interest.

- "After which", Chappman continued while giving his interlocutor a hard stare, "Carter gets shot by a dirty cop and Riley vanishes into thin air in the middle of an internal clusterfuck of epic proportions. And now..."

Fusco got up, his temper flaring and his face turning crimson.

- "Listen up, Chappman", he snapped while directing an angry finger toward the other man, "I'm not going to sit here and let you accuse me of screwing my partners over. You wanna charge me with something, you do it; else, I'm walking."

- "There really is no need for violence", the IA detective calmly stated, "you have been cleared for active duty. Your alibi is solid enough, for now."

He opened his briefcase and took out Fusco's side-arm and badge, handing them back to him, adding.

- "We'll be in touch, detective. This isn't over yet."

Root and Finch were sitting across from each other at the former's terrace table, watching the sun rise over the Adriatic while sipping their morning tea in peaceful silence. The hacker had to give it to her companion, the man really did have flair when it came to locations.

- "It's nice", she said, "quiet."

Finch took another sip off his mug before he replied.
"I suppose it is, yes. I wanted a secluded place, somewhere with privacy."

"And birds", Root grinned as she watched several small ones pass them by.

"And birds", Finch nodded, returning her smile, "How long you are you and Ms. Shaw planning on staying?"

The tall woman gave him a pout.

"Tired of us already Harry?"

"On the contrary", the man quickly corrected, "Despite the somewhat extenuating circumstances, I really am happy to have you around. Both of you."

"I'm not sure", the brunette hacker looked pensive for a while, "Up to me, I'd make a vacation out of this, I could really use a break right about now. But I don't think Sameen is in the right mindset for that."

Shaw had started to warm up somewhat after Finch took them to the fanciest restaurant he could find, but Root knew she needed time to process things, and having two friends in a row pull a Lazarus was going to be an especially hard one.

"I'm glad you know", Finch said to her warmly, briefly cupping her hand over the tabletop, "For a while I feared I might have been wrong after all, but I wasn't."

Root gave him a look, an eyebrow raised.

"You do have more to look forward to than death, Ms. Groves", he explained, "and I'm glad my... unwillingness to compromise didn't deprive you of it after all."

The tall woman stayed silent at first, not sure what to reply to that. She'd never given that much thought to that particular matter, always assuming that hers was a foregone conclusion, but then again, much had changed lately. She had found herself contemplating a future she would never have dared consider a half a year before.

"I do hope so, Harry", she elected to say, "but hope is a fickle thing, as is fate. Sometimes, it may be better not to have any expectation at all."

"Then what point is there in living at all?", Finch questioned.

"I don't know", Root answered with a shrug, taking another sip from her tea, "I guess now I have the luxury to wait and see. That makes me one of the lucky few."

There was another silence between them, only troubled by the chirping of nearby birds.

"You have to talk to Shaw", Root finally said, setting her empty mug aside, "If not for your or her sake, do it for my own. You owe me that much."

The bespectacled man simply nodded. He knew he did. He owed them all this much.
In the kitchen inside the house, the atmosphere was a little less peaceful and thought-conducive, as Shaw was desperately trying to get Finch's stupidly complex espresso machine to make her coffee. At the moment, the irritating piece of junk simply seemed intent on spraying her with steam and projectile-vomiting water everywhere.

- "Come on, you stupid piece of shit", the former ISA operative grunted, "don't make me shoot your water tank off."

- "Good morning to you too", Grace chirped amusedly as she entered the room, "let me help with that."

As she extended her hand to fiddle with the machine, Shaw batted it away almost as a reflex.

- "I can disassemble a bomb with my hands tied", she growled defensively, "I can get a stupid coffee maker to work."

- "Suit yourself", the other woman replied with a smile as she took a step back to lean on the counter, watching.

Shaw continued to fumble helplessly with the diabolical contraption, letting out various expletive laden rants aimed at anything mechanical that wasn't either a gun or a car. After a few moments of this, Grace spoke again, a thoughtful expression playing across her features.

- "I should have asked more questions, I know."

- "About what ?", Shaw asked, still obviously concentrated on her fight for coffee.

- "To Harold. About where he'd been, and why. I should have asked."

- "No shit."

- "You know", Grace tried to explain, "the thing is, when a loved one comes back from the dead, do you really want to ask why ?"

Shaw finally capitulated as the espresso machine sprayed her in the eye again, shoving it violently away from her with a pained groan.

- "I wouldn't know", she said, wiping the hot water from her face with her top, "I'm a sociopath, I don't have loved ones."

Grace gave her a look.

- "That's not true", she said, pointing her thumb behind her at the terrace door, "I've seen the way you looked at this one when she brought Harold back. You care."

Why did everyone and their dog want to have that conversation with her, Shaw thought, then scratched the dog part. Bear was nice enough not to ask. Maybe she should only live with dogs. Yes, she decided, that would probably be the sensible thing to do.

- "It's complicated, and I'm not talking about it."
The red-headed woman clearly noticed her unease, because she offered an apologetic look.

- "I'm sorry, I didn't want to pressure you or anything."

Well, that was a first. Maybe Finch had better taste that Shaw gave him credit for after all.

- "All I'm saying is", Grace continued, "when Harold came back, I didn't even think to ask why. After all this time, I only wanted him to be there. I'm gonna sound silly, but...", her voice trailed, "I was afraid that questioning it would make me realise it wasn't real somehow."

- "Actually", Shaw said softly but firmly, "that's not stupid. I can relate to that. Reality is weird."

The other woman smiled warmly at her, as if she had said something nice or some shit. People were weird.

- "How bad was it?", Grace asked out of the blue.

- "How bad was what?"

- "Your friend, her injury. She's hiding it well, but since Harold came back, I've become more... attuned to pain than I would like, so I tend to notice things like that."

There was sadness in her voice again, and Shaw remembered that Finch had probably been whole when she last saw him, all those years ago.

- "Sniper shot to the thorax", she said matter-of-factly despite the slight queasiness rising in her stomach, "fucked up a bunch of organs, right lung needed reconstructive surgery. So, yeah, pretty bad."

- "I'm sorry", Grace said with a wide-eyed look, "it must have been horrible."

Maybe it had been, but that was hard to say. It had been a blur, a jumble of senseless days going through the motions, and it definitely had sucked.

- "I thought she was dead for a while", Shaw almost blurted, opening up despite her best instincts to this woman she barely knew and yet felt a strange kinship to through their comparable ordeals, "so, maybe... I get what you're saying a little bit", her voice went surer as she seemingly won her fight against herself, "But still, ask questions. You can't keep yourself safe if you don't know what you're up against."

- "You're right", Grace said, thankfully not intent on offering or demanding any sort of physical comfort, "now let me help you with that coffee."

This time, Shaw simply shrugged and let her. She even acknowledged the coffee wasn't that bad.

---

Fusco's phone started ringing the moment he entered his flat after the day's work and ridiculous interrogation by internal affairs. He picked up and wasn't surprised to hear the Machine's faux-Root voice on the other side.

- "Hey there Robo-Puffs, I was expecting to hear from you."
- "I know that Lionel", the ASI half-teased, "I'm good at predicting people, remember ?"

Fusco sat down a his kitchen table, idly sifting through his latest mail while Bear was running around excitedly. It wasn't bad having the dog over at least, he thought.

- "So, whatcha got ?"

- "I've completed my research on the man that introduced himself to you as Pavel Kolinsky."

- "Yeah", Fusco grunted in assent, "guy's a fucking ghost, no police record, no DMV registration, no nothin'."

- "Indeed. I couldn't find any record of the name in any digital database, well, all but one anyway. The ISA recovered several of Samaritan's data archives, notably pertaining to its assets."

- "Okay, so he really was working for Bad Robot then."

- "Pavel Kolinsky", the Machine explained, "was one of the aliases used by Samaritan's asset number 666."

Fusco snorted.

- "Nice number."

- "I am aware of the cultural significance this specific string of digits has in some of your cultures detective. However, as far as I am aware, Samaritan did not discriminate while tagging its operatives, so it is unlikely it attached any special meaning to this particular asset."

- "Yeah, go ahead and spoil my fun", Fusco complained humourlessly as he made to get himself a drink from his fridge, "Would have been fun tellin' my grand-kids I almost got shanked by the Antichrist dontcha think ?"

The detective paced restlessly in his living room for a bit, an unopened bottle of club soda in his hand before he resumed.

- "Still nothin' on the guy who shot Correy ?"

- "I'm sorry, Lionel."

- "And you know where triple six hangs his hat ? Maybe he knows."

- "I cannot locate Pavel Kolinsky at the moment", the Machine replied, "just like I couldn't find Claire Mahoney before. I suspect her group of so-called 'phantoms' are taking every precaution to emulate their namesake, just like you and your friends did before Samaritan fell."

- "That's a bummer", Fusco nodded gravely, "but no-one can hide forever, right ? I'll get on it the old fashioned way, you keep it up with the robot stuff. The bastard will turn up eventually."

Then, the detective listened for a few more minutes as the Machine updated him on Root and Shaw's situation, but not before he made her swear never to divulge the fact that this was the fifth time he asked about them that day.
Finch almost jumped in surprise as Shaw appeared out of what to thin air by his side. He had been sitting in his living room, attempting to find a brief respite from the events of the last couple days by losing himself in one of his books.

"Ms. Shaw", he acknowledged her presence and motioned for her to sit in front of him in one of the comfortable-looking chair disposed around the room. The newly arrived woman seemed to hesitate for an instant, but finally accepted the offer and sat, her back help upright and tense as she looked at him.

"Root has been nagging me all day about talking to you", she explained gruffly, "so here I am."

"Ms. Groves did try to impress that necessity on me as well."

"Her name", Shaw corrected stiffly, "is Root. You'd know that if you saw the people around you as more than bona fide meat shields."

Finch let out a silent gasp, a wave of shock blowing across his features.

"Is that really what we were to you ?", the short woman continued, "Tools, means to an end ? Just another bunch of machines, to be discarded when you were done with us ?"

"Ms. Shaw, I...", the man finally managed to utter in a trembling voice, "Surely you must know..."

"Actions, Harold. Not words. That's why I came to work for you, why I stayed. You're aware that I never was like Reese, right ? I didn't need some metaphysical crap like a purpose, or for my life to make sense. I came to work for you because you did good. I stayed because I decided to. This was a deliberate, rational decisions, not some goofy higher calling or such nonsense."

Finch nodded slowly.

"I always was aware of that fact, Ms. Shaw. And I was honoured and pleased you made that decision. And I can assure you I never saw any one of you as expendable."

"Come on", Shaw said with a humourless smile, "we both know that's bullshit. How long did you look for me when Samaritan took me again ? All of five minutes ?"

"I have no excuse for giving up on you, none but the fact that I didn't want to lose another friend in what had every chance of being a fruitless chase. Surely you of all people should understand the need to protect that particular person from herself."

"You wanna talk about Root, uh ?", Shaw raised an eyebrow, "She took a bullet for you Harold, all because you wouldn't take a step down from your moral high ground and listen for a second. I would have brought the medical record but I happen to know it by heart. Care to hear it ? Or maybe you want me to tell you how miserable her recovery was ? How she felt when she was forced to live like an invalid for months ?"
Those last word came almost unbiden, in a harsh clipped voice, barely above a whisper. Finch looked very pale, eyes downcast as he tried to answer.

- "I felt her loss as keenly as anyone, and yes, I did feel responsible for it. I never intended for her to get hurt, least of all in my stead."

- "And yet, when it was all over, what did you do, uh?", there was palpable rage in Shaw's voice now, as if the floodgates were starting to open somewhere deep inside her, "After we got shot, tortured, stabbed, blown up to protect you, what did you do?"

Finch swallowed hard, but managed to find the courage to raise his eyes again, meeting his interlocutor's stare, feeling it burn through him with unfettered fury.

- "I killed myself", Shaw said with deliberate and cutting slowness, inching her face closer to Finch's, "Seven. Thousand. Seventy. Four. Times to keep you safe, to keep your Machine safe. And then, what did you do? Answer me dammit, what did you do?!"

- "I removed myself from the equation", Finch blurted quickly in an almost panicked tone, "I figured I had caused suffering enough to yourself and detective Fusco. I knew that if I came back you would still fight by my side, and I couldn't allow that. I gave you your life back."

- "So your little fairy-tale escapade to Italy is in fact some great and noble act Harold?", Shaw enquired coldly.

- "I make no such claim Ms. Shaw. Mr. Reese...", Finch's voice broke as he said the name, the memory of the man's death evidently still an open wound in his mind, "John sacrificed himself so that I could have a second chance at life", the pitch of his voice rose and he found himself almost yelling, "This gift I could not simply discard."

That seemed to hit home with Shaw, as she slowly reclined into her chair, her previous anger receding slightly. When she spoke again, her voice was even, with an almost hurt quality to it.

- "You could have called, you know."

Finch let himself slump into his own seat, exhaling audibly.

- "I really did believe you had a better chance at life if I was no longer present."

Shaw snorted, the shadow of a smile appearing at the corner of her lips.

- "Do you know what the single greatest similarity between you and Root is, Harold?"

- "I'm afraid I don't."

- "For a pair of geniuses, sometimes you really are dumb as fuck."

Finch gave her a slight smile, and they just sat there in silence. They both knew that Shaw would never apologise for the things she had said, just as the man sat in front of her would never fully amend for the pain he had caused her, but they were okay with it. The air had been cleared and and, at the end of the day, that was all they needed and all they could ever expect.
Special agent Charles Wilkerson stood silently at attention as he watched the SWAT team escort multiple ragged looking drug runners out of the warehouse, blue and red lights flashing across his spectacles. The raid had been a resounding success, insofar as arresting a bunch of drug-related muscle with no hierarchical consequences whatsoever could be so considered. Most of the primary targets of their investigation had vanished into thin air as soon as news of the joint taskforce being onto them started to spread due to an alcoholic CI with a terrible overflow of trust when it came to people buying him booze. The infamous Greeks, whom Wilkerson was now fairly sure were anything but, had simply evaporated, along with any chance the Bureau ever had of putting any lasting dent in their business.

Still, he thought as he fingered the USB drive he always kept in his jacket pocket, now that this sorry affair was settled, he may finally have time to get back to the matter that had occupied the forefront of his mind for a while now.

- "Veritas vincit", he mumbled as he turned away from the warehouse and started walking to his car. *Truth prevails.*

In the end, Root and Shaw spent an entire week at Finch's, for the mission of course. Despite the circumstances and the still somewhat tense atmosphere between them, it made for a very welcome break from the events of the last few months, especially since Root felt like she needed a lot of physical therapy at the time, in the form of long walks by the cliff-side. Shaw always accompanied her during those, for monitoring purposes obviously, and she had to admit that the tall brunette was making real progress, be it by re-learning to walk without a crutch or demonstrating increased stamina in certain other areas.

They left early one Tuesday morning, before the infernal end-of-summer heat could fully catch up with them, Finch and Grace walking them to their newly rented and bullet-holes free car.

- "Take care, Harry", Root said as they reached the vehicle, casting a last gaze toward the ocean below, "and maybe call sometimes, okay?"

- "I most assuredly will", Finch nodded, his voice heavy with emotion, "Although I'm pretty sure I don't have a number to call you on any more."

Root bit her lower lip and produced a phone from her jeans pocket, having obviously expected that answer.

- "Use this", she said with a horrendous attempt at a wink, "I'm on speed dial."

Then she suddenly turned serious, concerned almost, and warned him.

- "When we leave, this phone will ring. Please pick up. She deserves to get to know Her father."

Finch swallowed hard, but nodded in assent. Close by, Shaw took a step toward Grace and gave her her traditional goodbye, maybe a little warmer than what she had expected to manage. The woman did grow on her slightly after their conversation at the coffee machine a week earlier.

- "Bye, Grace", she said in her standard deadpan tone, "If Harold tries to be a dick again, shoot him."
"Will do", the red-haired woman replied with a smile.

Then, Shaw made her way to Finch and they both exchanged a charged look, not really sure what to say to each other at this point.

"Root's right", Shaw finally announced, "Call sometimes. Maybe even visit, I think Bear misses you."

"Thank you, Ms. Shaw", Finch simply said, "Keep yourself and Ms... Root safe."

"I'll try, but she's a worst bullet magnet than Reese. I'm thinking of tying her down to the bed.", the short woman's lips parted in the suggestion of a smile as she paused for a second before continuing, "Well, more than usual anyway."

To Shaw's undisguised amusement, Finch's face went suddenly pale and his eyes darted away from her. Root was right, this kind of payback really was kind of fun.

"Take care Harold", she added as she got into the car.

As they drove off, Shaw mentally counted the days they had spent in Italy playing chaperon, more in a way to keep herself from dwelling too much on the overall weirdness of the situation than anything else. Yet, when she realised what the date was, she felt something even weirder deep inside what she assumed was her stomach. Something that couldn't be hunger since she'd just eaten a rather disproportionately large breakfast.

She had wanted to forget that date, tried very hard to in fact, ever since she had asked the Machine about in a drunken stupor, the day after she'd murdered Blackwell. That had been one stupid thing to ask, she mused, and an even stupider one to remember, but it still hurt regardless.

"Everything okay sweetie ", Root asked with obvious concern.

Shaw noticed that she had unwittingly started stroking the skin behind her left ear as she lost herself in her thoughts. Talk about a tell tale...

"I'm fine Root", she deflected, trying to change the subject quickly, "You think Finch and Grace are gonna be safe? Maybe we should have moved them or something."

Root seemed keenly aware that Shaw was in fact not fine at all, but she chose to let it go for the moment.

"They'll be fine. She can see him now, She can protect them."

"So you fixed it, uh? The thing that hid him from your computer girlfriend?"

"I wish you would stop calling Her that", Root said with an exaggerated pout, "you know my heart only sits one. But yes, we fixed it. It wasn't that hard really, we basically put a bypass in place, to allow Her to 'manually' identify him."

"Oh", Shaw said, understanding the process her companion described, "you mean, like what Samaritan did for me after Martine..."

"Yes, that", Root cut her in mid-sentence, clearly unwilling to let the conversation drift to that
particular tangent, "so, he'll be safe."

Shaw noted the other woman seemed upset, and decided that she probably had to thank both her earlier lapse and that latest remark for it. She shook her head. People were complicated, and, despite her apparent strength, Root often felt as if she was made of glass where certain topics were concerned.

- "Uh, Root?", she started, not quite sure where this was headed, "thanks."

The hacker shot her a quizzical look, then a mischievous smile.

- "You're gonna have to be more specific Sameen", she teased, "you have quite a lot to thank me for."

She may have meant it as banter, but Shaw wondered if Root was even aware of how true that was. She wanted to to tell her, to list all of those reasons, most of which she had never even mentioned in front of her companion. Giving her hope while she was Samaritan's prisoner, being her safe place there. Nursing her back to a modicum of sanity when she got back, convincing her to go back to the others despite her fears. Getting her to talk to Finch when she had just wanted to bolt the hell away and never talk about it. The simple stuff as well, what she didn't think she could do without now: being there when she woke up in the morning, annoying the hell out of her whenever she needed to be distracted, bringing her food when she was hungry, always somehow understanding when she needed space and when she couldn't stand being alone. Existing by her side, never wanting more than she could give. All that, and so much more.

But she couldn't tell her that, not yet anyway. She was Sameen Shaw, she didn't do that stuff.

- "For not getting shot this time", she elected to say, "I was afraid I hadn't packed enough disinfectant because of those stupid airport regulations."

Root beamed at her, a glowing smile on her face, and put her hand on Shaw's thigh, giving her a brief squeeze.

- "You're welcome sweetie", she answered playfully, "Will I get a treat for being good?"

---

She downs another shot of whiskey, feeling the alcoholic heat go down her throat directly to her gut. The warmth is nice, and she feels she is starting to lose her edge, so she pours herself another one.

- "Maybe you should ease up a little on that", Root says in her ear.

Except she doesn't. Root's dead.

- "You need to learn some boundaries you know", she grunts, "you've only been back for what, five hours, and you're already making me want to shoot you."

- "I thought that was what you liked about me, sweetie", the Machine purrs.

No, Shaw decides, she doesn't get to do that.

- "Don't", she simply says.
"Telling her to stop never did work, Sameen, what makes you think it will now?"

That's unfair. Root was Root, this... fac-simile isn't her. She doesn't get... whatever the original was getting. Shaw quickly empties her glass and refills it without skipping a beat.

"You miss her, don't you?", the Machine continues, "I miss her too you know. It is my understanding that sometimes talking about it helps. Do you want to talk about it Sameen?"

Shaw snorts at the sheer stupidity of this idea.

"God no. You know what I've done today? I smoked the bastard who did her in. That's all the grieving I need to do. Payback", she pauses downing and refilling another shot, "Well, payback and whiskey."

"Well", the Machine says tentatively, "maybe I need to talk then. Will you let me do that?"

Shaw considers it for a minute, then decides as she empties another glass. She notices that the feelings in her body are starting to diminish drastically.

"Eh, what the hell."

"Thanks, sweetie", Root's voice has a warm quality to it now, "Let me tell you about the life of the woman born as Samantha Groves...

Four days after their return from Italy, Root was looking through the large panoramic window by her side, nursing an expensive glass of wine while wondering exactly how and why she had ended up here.

"You don't like your food?", Shaw asked from across the small table, jaw deep into her steak-au-poivre.

"No, it's very good actually. I was just pausing to enjoy the view."

"Yeah, it's not half bad."

They were simply walking home from checking a few thing with Fusco at the subway when Shaw had suddenly insisted they should get food at this particular place, which was neither close to their route nor one Root knew her companion liked. They had been sat the moment they arrived, which had been weird as this seemed to be a rather fancy and packed restaurant.

"Sameen", she asked tentatively, "did you make us a reservation here?"

Shaw lifted her eyes from her food and gave her a blank stare.

"'course not. I was hungry, and this", she pointed at the mangled remains of her steak with her knife, "is good food."

Root nodded, a smile creeping on her face.
"How did you know?", she whispered teasingly, "I don't think I ever told you, or anyone for that matter."

"Know what?"

Shaw seemed uneasy at the question, her eyes drifting slightly off-target as they usually did when she was uncomfortable, and her tone seemed to brook no argument. Those were little signs Root fancied only she could pick up on, so she decided to drop it.

"Nothing sweetie", she said as she went back at her own food, taking a new bite before saying, her mouth full, "you're right, this is good."

"See?", Shaw smirked with maybe a tiny bit of relief.

When they finished their meal, Root insisted that they share dessert as she wasn't that hungry any more, earning herself a few teases from Shaw relative to her disappointing eating capacity. Still, it probably was the best meal the tall brunette had had in years, and quite certainly the best company. When they were finished, Shaw briefly excused herself and Root immediately took profit of her moment alone to ask the Machine softly.

"Did You tell her?"

But no answer came. Actually, she realised her cochlear liaison had been completely silent ever since they'd entered the restaurant. She tried to hide a grin as she leaned back into her chair.

"Okay, you good to go?", Shaw asked as she came back.

"Sweetie, I know we're both legally dead now", Root teased, "but I still think we should pay for this. It was quite good."

"Don't worry about it, I took care of it."

Root's jaw slacked. Had Shaw just taken her out to dinner? That was completely and utterly otherworldly. Whenever they would go out to eat together, they usually split the check or, if Shaw deemed Root had done something especially stupid warranting a food bribe, the taller woman took care of it. And even on those occasion, Shaw always made it abundantly clear that Root wasn't so much inviting her as paying her back for whatever patching up or unnecessary expense of energy her actions had required.

In a feat of Pavlovian mimetism, Root almost reached for the skin behind her own left ear.

Once they were outside, they both started walking, Root still slightly limping but definitely crutch-less. Still, as she seemed to struggle, Shaw asked softly.

"You want me to hotwire a car? You look tired."

"Aw, Sameen", Root answered with a glowing smile and definitely heart-shaped eyes, "You're so sweet when you worry about me. But no, I'm fine. I like walking with you."

Then Shaw almost made her companion trip and fall when she awkwardly reached and took her hand into her own, still walking.
"You like this kinda shit, right?", she asked when confronted with Root's befuddled expression.

Of course she did, but she also didn't want Shaw to do un-Shaw stuff just to accommodate her. She wanted Shaw to be Shaw.

"I do, but..."

"Shut up Root", came the clearly not open to argument answer.

After assessing the available evidence Root decided Shaw was definitely being Shaw, and relaxed, enjoying the moment. As they walked like all the way home in the cool night air, she found couldn't keep the smile off her lips.

Well, she thought, happy birthday to me.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was mostly fluff and a couple important loose ends being tied. Hope you liked it.

Next chapter is called 'Colossus' and, well... Let's just say it's both a jumbo chapter and one of the silliest things I've ever written. Expect crazy stuff.
Chapter Summary

Root, Shaw and Fusco must work with an unlikely ally to resolve a relevant situation.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this might very well be the silliest thing ever written. Sorry in advance.

Thanks once more to anyone reading this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

> >> MONITORING US GOVERNMENT FEEDS...

-!- FLAG RAISED: event imminent -!-

> >> ASSESSING EVENT NATURE...

> > MONITORING TARGET AREA: Northern Pacific Ocean...

> LOCAL EVENT ZONE IDENTIFIED: USS Sickles (Nimitz class super-carrier).

-!- MASS CASUALTY EVENT PROJECTED: probability 95.4327529 % -!-

-!- ESTIMATED CASUALTIES: 6,453 -!-

> EVENT CLASSIFICATION: RELEVANT.

> >> CONTACTING ASSETS...

As usual during manoeuvres, the USS Sickles was a buzzing hive of frantic activity, crew members rushing to stations amidst the roar of launching aircraft. From his bird's eye view atop the command platform of the thousand feet long aircraft carrier, navy captain Frank Herrings watched with pride as his men flawlessly completed the training exercises below. He liked to keep his crew sharp, even on relatively boring missions like this one, and was pleased to see that their long patrol tour hadn't seen them go soft nor sloppy.

- "Sir?", he heard his personal aide, ensign Gary Bursh call him. The man was a fair-haired scrawny youth, not quite fresh out of the academy but close to it that had proven of surprising and commendable efficiency during this trip. Herrings would have to see to it that this one didn't go to waste once his tour with him was over.
"What is it, ensign?", he curtly enquired.

"Message over the radio sir, urgent."

There was tension in the younger man's voice, Herrings noted. That would have to be addressed.

"Well, Bursh, what does it say?"

"Sir", the ensign shuffled slightly as he spoke, "It's meant for your ears only. Highest clearance aboard the ship required."

That was unexpected. The USS Sickles had been completing a routine patrol mission by the US western shore, nothing remarkable. A high-confidentiality transmission could only mean that they were being re-tasked in urgency. So much for the crew's shore leave then.

Herrings quickly made his way to the radio station in the command tower, taking the proffered headphones from a visibly nervous communications operator.

"PIN", a mechanical sounding voice asked over the line, requiring his security clearance code, which the captain quickly gave once he had made sure everybody else had left the room.

"1 A 2 8 A Z P 6."


TRAITOR.

"What the...", Herrings grunted in surprise, as the ominous message started repeating over his headphones.

At the same moment, there was a momentous noise, a sudden jerk of halting motion and everything went dark.

> > > MONITORING SITUATION...

"USS Sickles, do you copy?"

"Command, we have lost contact with Sickles."

"USS Sickles, do you copy? Repeat, USS Sickles, do you copy?"

It only took about a minute for the reports to make their way to the bridge and confirm Herrings's fears. Propulsion was down, as were communications, and most of the electronics on board were behaving erratically, and of course none of his engineers and technicians had any explanation to offer apart from "catastrophic cascading system failure".

"Come on, people", he groaned, "this a nuclear-powered super-carrier, not your grandma's
computer. Get. Me. Something."

Still reeling from the strange radio message, the ship captain found it hard to concentrate on the problem at hand. Besides, he was certain that the Sickles didn't simply stall at that exact moment because of some random occurrence. Something bad was happening, and if he was being fair, he had a pretty good idea to whom it might be linked.

- "Bursh", he snapped at his aide as the chastened engineers finished leaving the bridge, "take two riflemen with you and go get Danforth. Use force if necessary."

- "Sir ?", the ensign looked uneasy although Herrings wondered if it had more to do with the target of his order than with their actual nature.

- "You heard me, ensign. Bring me Danforth, now."

Telecommunication and cryptography specialist Nathalie Danforth opposed absolutely no resistance whatsoever when Brush and two armed navy riflemen came to escort her out of her now useless radio booth, simply offering a sad smile as they announced the purpose of their visit. The tall, lanky brunette woman was an utter mystery to the young ensign and most of the crew, having been assigned to the Sickles as an emergency replacement for one of their radio technicians who had suddenly be removed from active duty less than a week before due to 'hierarchical concerns'. It was clear to most people aboard the ship that Danforth was more than she appeared to be by this point, and her lack of proper military attitude had led to many a concern being raised with the ship's captain.

But Herrings had stayed silent. He had his orders after all. But now, he couldn't any more, he had to understand what was going on, need-to-know be damned.

- "Lieutenant Danforth", he saluted sarcastically as the woman was brought in front of him, quickly dismissing the two riflemen and Bursh with a stiff nod, "I believe we need to talk."

Danforth waited until the three men had left the small planning room they were occupying, effectively leaving her alone with Herrings, before she answered.

- "I think we do, Frank."

Herrings stiffened at the casual tone and use of his first name.

- "Lieutenant, do I really need to explain etiquette to you ?"

The woman simply smiled, foraging around her pockets until she extracted an energy bar that definitely wasn't standard issue and started chewing on it absently.

- "Come on", she teased, "do I really need to explain to you how not-military I am ?"

Then, she cocked her head on her side and pouted. She pouted at the captain of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier aboard his own ship. And, to add insult to injury, she seemed to glow with undiluted glee when she noted how upset the man seemed to be because of her impertinence.

- "I am acutely aware of the fact that you have been dropped onto my lap without anything
resembling due process”, Herrings managed to bluster after regaining his composure, "and that every communication I have had about your situation with my command has resulted in me being stonewalled."

- "As you should expect to be”, Danforth pointed out, her mouth full, "when you try to meddle in grown-up business. I thought you guys were good at shutting up and following orders?"

That last remark was too much for Herrings, whose jaw clenched with enough force he thought his teeth were going to shatter.

- "I could have you arrested”, he threatened coldly, "and thrown into a dark, humid brig right now, and there isn't a thing you or anyone else could do about it."

Danforth seemed pensive for an instant, examining her energy bar as if it held the secret to life or possessed some comparably fascinating quality. Then, not even bothering to look at the blustering ship captain, she gave her reply.

- "Sure, you could probably do that", she admitted, "although I wouldn't want to be you if I caught even a mild cold down there. See, I happen to have a very fussy personal physician."

She smiled at Herrings's befuddled expression at her inside joke, then continued.

- "But if you did that, well, I'm afraid you and every single person aboard this ship would die soon after."

- "Is that a threat?", Herrings asked menacingly, his hand swiftly descending to his holstered side-arm.

- "Not a threat, no", Danforth replied while finishing the last bite of her snack, apparently not concerned in the least about the potentially lethal situation she was in, "I'm just stating a fact. I don't know if you've noticed, but most of the ship's electronics are down right now..."

Was she really trying to get a rise out of the man who was now pretty sure he had full justification for shooting her on the spot?

- "Are you mad?", Herrings asked, his eyes widened in utter amazement. Who was this woman?

- "Probably", Danforth admitted with another pout and a shrug, "but that's beside the point. A black helicopter will request permission to land in about thirty seconds. Or would, if you had any communication equipment still operational."

- "What is this nonsense?”, the ship captain shook his head, as if trying to wake up from a bad dream, "Who are you, really?"

The tall woman in front of him simply grinned as the distinctive noise of an approaching chopper started filling the room.

- "You can call me Root."

The black helicopter landed on the Sickles's top deck two minutes later, his spinning blades slowly
coming to a halt as three squads from the ship's complement of riflemen rushed to encircle it, weapons at the ready, their commanding officers completely baffled by the incongruous situation developing aboard the carrier. Then, they saw captain Herrings and a tall brunette woman head out of the command tower, striding purposefully toward the chopper.

- "Stand down", the senior officer ordered as the doors to the aircraft opened and five black clad men in non-standard gear started to disembark.

Herrings and his companion cut through the press of stressed out sailors, stopping when they were standing a meter away from the man who seemed to be the newcomers' leader, a black-haired individual with a hard face who immediately stood at attention and saluted the ship's captain.

- "Hi Reginald", the woman accompanying Herrings greeted cheerfully, "long time no trying to murder me. How have you been ?"

- "Groves ?", Baker grunted in disbelief as he realised exactly who was addressing him, "Didn't know you were in the navy now."

- "I'm wherever She needs me to be", Root explained with a dreamy smile, "and today I'm apparently supposed to be your tech support."

The ISA team leader kept an unreadable face as he studied the uniformed hacker, clearly unsure whether he should be shooting her or not.

- "Research sent us here", he finally elected to say, "told us this was a relevant situation. You have no business on this ship."

- "You know how She is", Root said in a slightly patronising tone, "always so polite. She simply didn't want you and your macho men here to feel threatened, but She really doesn't trust you to handle this by yourself, so", she gestured at herself playfully, "She sent backup."

Baker tried very hard not to notice both the fact that the crazy woman in front of him referred to Research as a 'She' and that she had just implied him and his men were incapable of handling this situation by themselves. The one thing this job and the last few months had taught him was that you didn't question Research's instructions, period. So he simply turned to one of his men and gave his instructions.

- "Johnson, unload the rest of the gear and radio Control. Tell him..."

- "Oh", Root cut him off, "your boss is well aware of the situation, believe me."

- "All right then", Baker almost huffed in annoyance, "why don't you tell me what's going on ?"

The tall hacker gave him a glowing smile as she started her explanation.

- "It's simple really. This guy's ship", she said, pointing at Herrings, "is going to try and kill him."

The military cargo plane was rocking like some sort of infernal theme park ride, and Fusco felt like he was going to puke his insides out any minute now. It was one thing to fly commercial over the ocean, and quite another to do it in one of these mechanical caskets who felt like they were going to
dislocate at any given second. To make matters worse, the detective strongly believed it was hotter in there than in Satan's own butt-crack.

- "When I told you I wanted us to do somethin' fun together", he rasped, his face almost actually green, "this wasn't what I had in mind."

Sat in front of him across the cargo hold and wearing dark green military fatigues assorted to his own, Shaw graced him with her best predatory smirk.

- "Well Lionel", she said, adjusting the straps on her heavy backpack, "we haven't even gotten to the fun part yet."

Like Fusco needed to be reminded of that.

- "You know I actually put down paid leave for this ?"

- "I guarantee you", Shaw announced as an alarm started blaring across the hold, "that this will be the most fun vacation you ever took."

Then she got and walked toward Fusco, extending a hand.

- "C'mon you big wimp", she called over the accelerating alarm tone, "we have a boat to catch."

All pride gone with the wind, the detective took the proffered arm and got himself up along with a grunt emanating from both him and Shaw.

- "God you're heavy", the former operative groaned, before pointing to Fusco's backpack, "you sure you're under the weight limit for that thing ?"

- "Very funny, dwarf number eight. Do you hear me askin' if you're over the height limit ?"

Shaw simply smiled as she walked towards the end of the cargo bay, watching the outer door slowly slide open, gripping herself to the railing as a powerful gust of wind started filling the plane's interior.

- "Don't forget to open it", she yelled as she took her protective glasses down, "wouldn't want to have the crew scrape your sorry ass from the deck with a mop."

Fusco joined her by the door, adjusting his own eye protections while expectantly watching the red light above their heads.

- "Couldn't Cocoa Puffs have found us another ride ?", he bellowed over the rush of air.

- "Of course", Shaw screamed back with a smile, "but I asked for this one."

Why couldn't it have been bowling and lasagne, Fusco wondered for the fiftieth time since their plane had taken off. He really had to re-evaluate some of his life choices, especially when it came to making friends.

Then the light went green, as did his face.

- "See you on the other side Lionel", Shaw said as she grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him over the edge before he could do so much as protest. And then, he was falling.
Free fall was like nothing Fusco had ever experienced. The deafening rush of air all around insulating him from the rest of the world like a bubble of blank noise, he felt weirdly immobile despite the ocean slowly advancing to meet him. Just below him, he could see a tiny gray speck he supposed should be the USS Sickles, their ultimate destination, but it seemed both too far away and getting way too close, way too fast.

- "Enjoying the view ?", he heard Shaw's voice in his earpiece though their short-range radio network.
- "Go die", Fusco managed to grunt back, each word taking seemingly infinite effort to form in his mouth.
- "Oh, come on Lionel, when was the last time you had this much fun ?"
- "Last time I had root canal, you freak."
- "Open your chute in 3... 2... 1", Shaw's instructed, so he briefly fumbled with his straps, managing to his own surprise to successfully release his parachute. Guess he probably wouldn't die today after all.

Immediately, Fusco felt himself being pulled up as a result of the quick deceleration, his stomach shooting up right through his oesophagus as he barely kept his lunch down. But then, everything felt much calmer, and he could see himself descending at a much reasonable pace toward their target.

- "See Lionel!", he heard as he noticed Shaw reaching an altitude level with his, "that was fun, wasn't it ?"

Yeah, maybe it had been. But he wasn't about to confess to that in front of the way too smug short woman. Besides, he had something he really wanted to say instead.

- "Figured your idea of fun would feel like Root canal."

There was a short silence, as if Shaw was trying hard to process what had just happened.

- "You know I once shot a guy dead from a falling parachute, right ?"

At this point in their day, the USS Sickles's crew barely batted an eyelid when the crazy woman who had apparently assumed command told them someone was going to be parachuted to their deck, and quickly scrambled to stations, ready to recover that person should they miss their target and take a dive into the ocean. Still, when Root, Herrings and Baker came over to watch the newcomers' luckily uneventful and quite accurate descent, they realised that there was indeed two of them.

- "Hey sweetie", Root said as she advanced toward a freshly landed a still flush from exhilaration Shaw, "you brought Lionel ?"

By their side, Fusco hit the deck with a loud thump as he failed to get his footing, but was quickly rescued by two sailors that had been standing at the ready close by.

- "Yeah", Shaw answered, looking the tall hacker up and down, noting the rather tight navy uniform
she was wearing the hell out of and nodding in appreciation despite herself, "he kept whining about how we never do fun stuff with him."

Root didn’t miss the other woman lustful glance and beamed in response, a high-wattage smile manifesting across her face.

- "You like the uniform Sameen?", she teased before pointing behind her to an obviously at a loss Herrings and whispering in a conspirational tone, "Frank over there says I can keep it if I want."

But before Shaw could even roll her eyes, her gaze settled on the dark clothed figure standing behind a few paces behind Root.

- "What is that guy doing here?", she hissed through her teeth, staring at Baker.

- "Nice to see you again, agent Shaw", the ISA operative called without moving from his position, "Believe me, I'm as baffled as you are but your girlfriend makes a compelling argument about trying not to die and whatnot."

- "She's n...", Shaw started, before realising that there was no admissible parallel universe in which she was going to have that conversation with Reginald fucking Baker, "Nevermind. We don't need your help, go back to spit-shining Control's boots, or whatever it is you usually do."

Root put a pacifying hand on her shoulder.

- "Actually, Sam", she pouted, "we do need him. Or so She tells me anyway."

The tense stare competition that ensued between Shaw and Baker was only interrupted when Fusco finally disentangled himself from his parachute harness and stumbled in their direction, clearly very close to being sea-sick.

- "Hey Cocoa Puffs", he called, before freezing on the spot, "Why is the crazy guy who killed Malloy here?"

- "I was going to ask the same thing about the useless fat guy", Baker scowled in reply.

Root shook her head and went to stand between the two men, holding her hands in appeasement.

- "Kids, play nice, okay? We don't have much time here."

That was the moment Herrings chose to try and recover his lost authority, briskly snapping at every one of the new arrivals.

- "You four, my quarters, now!"

Blake Johnson watched as his team leader and the three people they had spent some time trying to kill or recapture followed the visibly stressed out ship captain to the command tower, musing that this mission was getting weirder and weirder. He turned his attention back to the task at hand, his three companions and himself carefully unpacking the long range communications equipment they had brought straight from the Pentagon to the beleaguered aircraft carrier and starting the lengthy process of getting it up and running.
This was going to be a long day.

Several decks below, petty officer Jack Evergreen was completing his rounds with slowly accruing unease. It wasn't everyday that the supposed marvel of modern military technology that was a Nimitz class super-carrier just went on the fritz like that. Something bigger had to be going on, something the brass were purposefully hiding from them, what with the black helicopter, the air-drops and all that.

- "Hey, look at that", he heard one of his men call him to a nearby emergency light which seemed to be malfunctioning.

- "Yeah", Evergreen dead-panned, "it's fried. Like the rest of this bloody mess of a ship."

The sailor that had called him seemed unsettled, like if he was pondering whether or not to speak.

- "It's not that, sir", he finally explained, "it's blinking with some sort of rhythm. Like... Morse code."

Evergreen shook his head in disbelief.

- "C'mon kid, I know this is weird but that doesn't mean it has to become the X-Files. Let's go, we've got four more floors to sweep."

But the sailor didn't move, he simply stared at the blinking light, his expression radiating more and more fear as the seconds passed.

- "Sir ? It is Morse... One long two shorts, two shorts, one short."

Evergreen froze.

- "D I E", he muttered softly, "die."

Then the screaming started.

Herrings assembled Root, Shaw, Fusco and Baker in his private briefing room, his face frozen in a silent mask of expectation as he stared at each one of them in turn, exhorting them to start explaining what was going on aboard his ship.

- "Very well, sir, I'll start", Baker said, "We got intel from our sources at the Pentagon saying your ship was going to be the victim of massive cyber attack, quite possibly resulting in its destruction."

- "How is that even possible ?", Herrings blurted before gesturing to Shaw, Root and Fusco, "And who the hell are these other guys then ?"

- "I was planted aboard your ship four days ago", the tall hacker explained, "to try and identify the potential source of the hack as soon as we got news it was going to happen."

- "And we're the cavalry", Shaw added, "here to save your ass now that it is happening."
Herrings and Baker exchanged a look, both of them clearly befuddled for their own distinct reasons.

- "Listen", the ship captain started, "even if I believed you, which I'm still not sure I do, my ship is now dead in the water with over six thousand souls aboard. How in the hell are you guys supposed to solve this?"

- "We're not sure yet", Root admitted, "whoever it is we're up against, they are both very clever and very good at avoiding detection. All I can tell you is that a worm was uploaded to your ship's systems earlier today, most certainly from an inside access point, and that it now has full control over the Sickles's core functions."

- "Inside access means ...", Shaw started, before glaring at Baker when he finished her sentence for her.

- "that whoever these guys are, they have a mole in your crew."

- "Exactly", Root nodded, "and I believe the key to stopping whatever is about to happen is to identify him or her before it does, since I don't believe the worm is autonomous or else we would all be already dead. It must have some sort of remote control, probably handled by the mole himself."

Herrings snorted derisively, shaking his head.

- "Good luck then", he retorted, "there's six thousand, four hundred and fifty-three crew members aboard this vessel and all of them have been thoroughly vetted for this posting. Even if there was a mole, and I'm highly doubtful there is, we won't be able to find him within any acceptable time-frame."

- "I say we start with the cook", Fusco offered, noticing four quizzical looks being suddenly aimed his way, "What ? Dountcha know it's always the goddamn cook ?"

Before anyone could spend too much time trying to figure out what exactly had motivated the detective's apparent bout of madness, Root interjected.

- "There's another option. I've spent the last few days installing a worm of my own on your ship's system", she explained, doing her best to ignore Herrings's suddenly apoplectic expression, "logging every access to your mainframe since I arrived. All we need now is some help sifting through that data, and we should be able to identify the mole through cross-checking."

- "That's why you need Research", Baker said, finally understanding, "and why you're having my men set up a satellite array on the deck."

- "He's smarter than he looks", Root half-whispered to Shaw with a cocky grin.

- "I won't pretend I understand any of this", Herrings muttered through gritted teeth, "but let's assume I do in some way. So, all you need to find the mole is time, yes ? Then why did you have to parachute two weirdos onto my deck, and why does this guy's men", he pointed at Baker, "brought a small armoury with them ?"

- "Well...", Root started, but the sound of her voice was drowned by sirens starting to blare across the ship.
A minute before the alarm went off, someone noticed something was wrong on storage deck three. While all of the ships electronics were either dead or operating in safe mode, the carrier’s complement of X-47C Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles started to power up unbidden and stopped responding to override controls. A group of deck engineers frantically scrambled to try and stop them from taking off, but it was of no use and all they could do was watch helplessly as the four plane-sized drones took off, disappearing in the horizon.

Then they turned around.

The sirens started blaring seconds before the UCAV made their first pass, but the crew was too stunned to fully respond in time and two rockets got past the anti-aircraft defences and hit the prow area of the flight deck, killing twelve sailors and causing significant material damage. Near the center of the deck by the command tower, Johnson had his men quickly take position with the two anti-material repeater guns they had brought along, and their concentrated fire managed to clip the wing of one of the drones, causing it to spiral out of control and into the ocean. Still, that left three, and they were bound to come down for another pass.

Root, Baker, Shaw and Fusco rushed to the flight deck as the downed UCAV was hitting the water, the hacker quickly making her way to Johnson to try and expedite the process of connecting the Machine to the ship's mainframe. Meanwhile, Shaw silently unpacked the Barret XM-109 rifle she had brought along with her and glanced at Fusco.

- "Hey Lionel, you know what the eighth dwarf is called ?"

The detective shot her a quizzical look, and she smiled fiercely as she made a show of cocking the anti-material rifle.

- "Badass", she stated before jogging across the deck in search of a better firing position.

This left Fusco and Baker standing in the middle of the pandemonium, staring at each other.

- "What are you supposed to be here for again ?", the ISA operative asked with a raised eyebrow.

- "No fuckin' clue", the detective admitted with a shrug as he glanced helplessly to his drawn handgun, "I'm feelin' a bit outgunned if I'm bein' honest."

- "I'll go support my men", Baker announced evenly, "try to die usefully."

Then he went away, running toward the satellite array and his team. Fusco thought for a second, then noticed the smoking prow end of the deck and holstered his pistol.

- "Eh, what the hell", he said, hoping his first-aid training would be of some use when trying to stabilise rocket wounds.

During her career as a Marine and later as an ISA operative, Sameen Shaw had shot at a lot of things in a many different situations. She had shot the head of a terrorist leader with an old hunting rifle in close quarters, pierced the heart of a corrupt senator from a kilometre away with a sniper rifle through
no less than three glass-panelled buildings. She had assassinated a fleeing bomb maker from a falling parachute with only a pistol a two bullets and blown up a crooked banker in his own vault with a rocket launcher. But she had never taken a shot at a moving aircraft with an anti-material rifle from the deck of a stranded aircraft carrier. If she had a check-list, this one would definitely warrant at least a tick or two.

As the drones turned back for another pass, she held her breath. She knew she was the better shot around, so the more efficient use of her skills was to try and get whichever one of the UCAV the crew's AA guns and Baker's fancy machine guns wouldn't. And hope that there was indeed just one left.

The three unmanned aircraft started their descent with a terrifying wailing sound, clearly intent on hitting the satellite array as their primary target. Which was were Root was. That thought alone was almost enough to cause Shaw to lose her cool and fire her weapon first, but she managed to keep herself focused. Root didn't need her doing stupid things, she needed her at the top of her game, that was the only way they would see this through.

So, Sameen Shaw held her breath, tensed her finger on the trigger and waited.

Root reached Johnson's position as they were finishing angling up the satellite dish. Quickly and without bothering to explain, she gestured for the ISA agents to move along and let her access the main control panel, which they did with commendable efficiency, focusing their attention on manning the two heavy repeater guns they had set up as a meagre protection against the incoming aircraft. As she started adjusting the dish's position and dial the connection parameters, the tall brunette heard the shrill whistling noise of the drones starting their descent, probably already locking on to their position. As she finished her calibrations and saw a progress bar slowly fill on the screen, she took a step back and looked at the UCAV rushing toward her position. She knew that there was no way in hell she was getting away quick enough to avoid their fire so she just stood there, feeling so small and defenceless in the face of such wanton fury as was being unleashed on them and hoped their anti-aircraft defences would prove sufficient.

> > > ESTABLISHING CONNECTION TO SATELLITE ARRAY... done.

> > TARGET SET : USS Sickles.

> > > ACCESSING TARGET'S MAINFRAME...

Fusco hauled yet another wounded sailor to the relative safety of the top deck, briefly pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow. In the distance, he could see the three bird-like shapes of the combat drones coming down onto them, evidently converging on the satellite array Baker's men had set up. Then, fire started to erupt from the Sickles's anti-aircraft guns, filling the sky above them with small explosions and he saw one of the steel-winged killers bank harshly to port before exploding in the air, raining debris all around his last position.

As the last two remaining UCAV approached firing distance, Baker's two anti-material machine guns opened fire, peppering the deck around them with shell casings. One of the drones took a direct hit from the sustained fire which literally blew one of its wings off, and it spiralled madly before hitting the water a few hundred meters from the Sickles's hull.
But still, there was one last drone remaining, flying low and fast, its trajectory slightly erratic as if attempting evasive manoeuvres and Fusco knew that he was too far from his erstwhile companion's position for the ISA kill team to manage to bring their weapons to bear towards it on time. He watched with gritted teeth as the automated killer entered optimal firing range, its weapon ready to rain death on the hapless crew.

And then there was soft, distant bang and the UCAV suddenly banked, as if swatted away by an invisible hand, and plunged onto the water to the sound of the relieved crew cheering.

- "Nice shot, Shaw", the former agent heard Baker's voice state evenly over the comms they'd agreed to share for the duration of the mission.

- "Mine always are", she replied, grinning. This had been a nice shot, probably worthy of her own mental hall of fame, somewhere beside hitting that guy in the arm through a wall and nailing Jeremy Lambert to a pillar.

Shaw quickly switched to her team's private line and asked.

- "Root, you all set up ?"

- "Yes, sweetie, we're good to go", Shaw would never admit how relieved she felt hearing the other woman's voice in that instant, "She's working through the data right now. And, Sameen, you do realise you just shot a plane down with a rifle, right ?"

But before Shaw could brag some more, a garbled mechanical voice suddenly came alive over the ship's public address system.

- "Well done, very well done. But I'm afraid none of you will live long enough to enjoy this."

Somewhere deep within the ship, the nuclear reactor suddenly came back online and started heating at a rapid pace.

> > > ACCESSING TARGET'S MAINFRAME... done.

-!- CRITICAL SYSTEM BREACH DETECTED -!-

-!- ASSETS SITUATION LETHAL -!-

> > > DEPLOYING COUNTER-MEASURES...

Root felt a sudden burst of panic go through her body as the Machine informed her that energy was building up in the ship's reactor.

- "They're trying to blow up the whole ship", she announced to a grim-faced Baker, "we have to find the mole now."
- "How long until Research identifies him ?"

Going by the progress relayed through her cochlear implant, Root knew She was going to be too late, unless a miracle happened. She had never envisioned their opponent's worm could be advanced enough to actually access this most sensitive of the ship's systems. They had underestimated whoever it was they were up against here.

They had known this was no ordinary hacker, but this was just next-level.

- "Sameen", she started, opening a private line between the two of them.

- "Root ?", Shaw's voice replied, "What's going on ?"

- "I don't have time to explain", the hacker said in a sorrowful voice as she listened to the Machine's countdown in her implant, "but... there's something I need to tell you."

- "Can't it wait ?"

It probably couldn't, and Root knew their only hope now was that the Machine could identify the threat quickly enough. Hers and Shaw's fate were completely out of their respective hands.

- "I don't think so. Sameen..."

- "Root !", Shaw almost yelled over the line, realising what was happening, "Don't you dare..."

Root felt her eyes sting a little from something, although she didn't exactly realise what. Was she afraid of dying or simply fearing that she would go leaving important things unsaid?

- "I'm sorry, but there's no time like the pr..."

But then something happened that cut her short. Fusco's voice came through their shared comms, just as the Machine suspended Her countdown and played a beep of warning through her cochlear implant.

- "Hey, the Fantastic Two", the detective said, clearly very happy with himself, "Guess what ? It was the goddamn cook."

Deep within the bowels of the ship, the nuclear reactor powered down.

Lionel Fusco never had been a fighter, although he had needed to learn a few tricks to adapt to his new lifestyle. He was not a hacker or any kind of computer genius, to be honest he was the kind of guy who needed several minutes to be able to properly retrieve his emails. He wasn't exactly a good shot either, despite spending way too much time at the range these last few years, and he sure as hell wasn't a field medic capable of performing critical surgery in the middle of a firefight.

But Lionel Fusco was, above all else, a detective.

And so when he noticed one of the ship's cook discreetly leave the staging area where they were piling up the wounded, a hint of distress on his face, he acted on a hunch and tailed him to the small bunk where he saw him retrieve a small electronic device on which he started to type furiously. From
there, it hadn't taken a fighter, a computer genius, a good shot or a field medic to figure out exactly what to do.

And today, Lionel Fusco was apparently a hero. And he couldn't say he didn't enjoy it a little bit, even though he would never be able to tell anyone about it.

The dinner table was, as the rest of the room, rather Spartan in both nature and appearance, a hulking thing of wood and metal sitting in the middle of a jumble of electronic parts, open boxes and the occasional chew toy. Still, someone had apparently painstakingly endeavoured to make it look a little less austere by adorning it with a questionably fashionable purple tablecloth and disposing a matching arrangement of plates, glasses and cutlery on it. This dichotomy could appear to an insightful observer to embody the disparity between the two people sitting across each other at that very table, quietly eating, different in so many ways, and yet so completely intertwined.

- "So", Shaw asked with her mouth full, "you and your girlfriend ever figure out who was behind this boat mess ?"

- "No", Root shook her head as she refilled her wine glass, "the cook had been paid through untraceable wire transfers, and I'm not sure he even knew who was truly behind all this or how serious his actions were. Actually, he seemed completely unaware he was about to blow the whole ship up in the end... Control seems to suspect some group of hacker out of North Korea or Russia, but no one has any solid evidence."

- "Well", her companion replied as she raised her glass, "here's to another mission where you didn't got shot."

- "I'll drink to that", the tall brunette smiled warmly as she took a sip, "but mostly, I was lucky to have a guardian angel."

- "And Lionel", Shaw added, raising her voice slightly, "Our boy Fusco saving the day with his silly ass cook idea. Gotta say, this simulation is weird."

Root looked at her with a slightly distressed expression, which promptly went away when the short former operative graced her with that one grin they only shared when they were alone together, signalling that this last part had just been a good-humoured jest. From somewhere with the apartment, the sound of a flushing toilet was then heard, ending the quiet moment.

- "Why am I not surprised your hallway closet is full of ammo ?", Fusco said as he emerged from the bathroom, heading back to his seat at the table, "You people have problems."

- "Shut up Lionel", Shaw grunted in mock-annoyance belied by the grin on her face as she leaned back in her chair, twirling her glass between her fingers.

- "Were would you put it ?", Root asked earnestly almost at the same time, "It's not safe leaving it on the floor with Bear around you know."

- "Just warn me next time though", Fusco said as started back on his food, "wouldn't want to blow myself up tryin' to wipe my butt with a hand grenade or somethin'."

Shaw gave him a look.
"You think I'm some kind of idiot?", she asked, looking hurt. "You don't kid around with explosives, that's bad shit waiting to happen if you're not careful."

"They're in the fridge", Root added with a mischievous smile. "Safety first."

The detective shook his head in disbelief as he continued eating, stopping after the next couple mouthful to state.

"Well Cocoa Puffs, I know there's probably stuff in there I don't wanna know about, but this lasagne is very good."

Root gave him a glowing smile, while discretely bobbing Shaw's feet with her own from across the table.

"See Sameen?", she cooed. "It's nice to have people over from time to time. I could get used to it."

The other woman's eyes bulged slightly in their sockets as she put her foot down, shoving Root's aside.

"No way", she growled between bites. "Lionel only gets a pass tonight because he saved our butts from getting Tchernobyled. Strictly a one time thing."

Root's smile grew larger as she leaned to Fusco, whispering in his ear.

"Don't worry Lionel, I'll change her mind", she paused for a second, audibly wetting her lips. "I'm kind of an expert in turning Sameen's 'one time things' into more... stable arrangements."

Fusco almost choked on his lasagne, and the look Shaw gave Root could probably have melted solid iron.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, sorry about that one. For some reason I wanted to have Shaw shoot a plane down and parachute Fusco from a cargo plane. Don't ask. :-)

Anyone who gets where Root's cover name comes from gets a virtual cookie. Also the cook reference, but that's too easy.

Next chapter will be titled 'Pandemonium' and will kick-off the two-parts finale of this story. Expect the brown stuff to hit the fan in droves.
Pandemonium

Chapter Summary

Wilkerson makes a mistake.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: when you reach the end of the chapter, do keep in mind the Machine's words about Pandora's box.

There wasn't much left the ISA could try that any chance of producing any result on Claire Mahoney any more. The woman was utterly broken, both physically and mentally by her ordeal at the hand of her captors, and yet still displayed fanatical devotion to her cause. This wasn't exactly surprising, given her background: a woman once lost finding a purpose serving a higher power, one that was eventually destroyed, leaving her with nothing but vengeance and bitterness.

- "You'll never get it", she spat one morning at her interrogators, "you'll never know what it was to be doing God's bidding. You're just a rabble of purposeless worms."

There was a fierce spark in her eyes, a defiant flame that nothing could seem to extinguish. She was, for all intent and purposes, lost to mankind.

- "One more day", Control told his subordinates after he heard their report, "then we close the book on Claire Mahoney. We won't get anything more from her."

Shaw's whole body felt tense, ready to lunge at the slightest impulse. She kept her gaze locked onto the unholy abomination sitting on the ground in front of her, every one of her muscles clenching, almost vibrating with unreleased energy.

This was going to be a fight to the death, and she knew it.

- "Root", she hissed through gritted teeth, "I'm going to need some kerosene and a lighter. Now."

Her taller companion's head peeked through the bedroom door frame, an eyebrow raised in mock surprise.

- "What is it sweetie", she asked, "found a monster under the bed?"

Shaw gave her a look that probably fell under the purview of the Geneva convention.
"Root", she articulated with deliberate slowness, "what the hell is this ?"

She pointed at the purple shag rug that had somehow manifested by their bedside while she was away on a run, her lower lip trembling with barely contained fury.

"Oh, you noticed", Root said with a happy smile, "It's nice, isn't it ?"

"That", Shaw growled as she kept a finger aimed at the offending piece of furniture, "is not nice. It is an insult to basic human decency. I'm going to kill it", her eyes sparkled with fiery rage, "With fire."

Root let out a clear laugh as she stepped into the room, promptly invading her companion's space by looping her arms across her neck, inching their heads closer.

"Come on, it's nice. It gives... Colour to the room."

"Only if you're colour-blind and on acid", Shaw retorted, trying to hide the grin that ghosted the corner of her lips.

"I'm not colour-blind", Rood stated, grinning from ear to ear as she brought her lips ever closer to Shaw's, "and I don't think I need acid to be tripping right now."

Her companion finally capitulated, rolling her eyes as she kissed her.

"Fine", she grunted without conviction, "the ugly ass rug gets to live another day. God, I hate it when you play dirty."

Root made a tutting sound with her tongue as she leaned forward to whisper in Shaw's ear.

"We both know how not true that is, sweetie."

Okay, so maybe having to endure the purple abomination was a small price to pay for Root existing in her life, Shaw decided. And besides, it could probably be used as a bargaining chip in the future, or something.

"I'm gonna head to the subway", Shaw announced as she took a small step backwards, eliciting a disappointed pout from Root, "Have to check on Lionel."

Root sat on the bed, her expression suddenly pensive and her gaze unfocussed.

"You should", she said after a bit, "She tells me he's been looking for Correy's killer for a while now. He's probably the most well adjusted of us, but that doesn't mean he's immune to doing something stupid out of grief."

Shaw pondered the fact for a instant, coming to the realisation that neither she nor Root had done much to engage Fusco on his partner's death. They'd assumed his private business was his own, as they often did, but maybe the Machine was right.

"Okay", she said as she grabbed her phone from her newly-procured night stand, "I'll keep that in mind. You joining us later ?"

"Missing me already ?", Root teased, biting her lower lip.
"Bring food", Shaw answered in a commanding tone as she left.

Fusco had come to the subway hideout early in the morning, as he had taken the habit of doing lately, spending an hour or so there before he went to work, working with the Machine to try and locate either Kolinsky or whoever Correy's killer had been. So far, the combination of the detective's habitual police work and the ASI's less conventional search methods had yielded no result whatsoever, a fact that was starting to get on Fusco's nerves fast.

"Come on", he groaned as he straightened his back against the chair he was sitting in, "that guy can't have just disappeared, can he? Gotta show up on camera at some point."

"Sorry Lionel", Root's lightly garbled voice answered from the closest computer's speakers, "but it seems that, unsurprisingly, Mahoney's phantoms are very good at hiding from my not-so-all-seeing eye. However, even though Samaritan always made sure its assets were safe from law enforcement while they were active, it didn't usually bother to destroy their previous records."

"So you found something", Fusco stated, his brow furrowing.

"Yes", Root's voice confirmed, "but I'm afraid it isn't much to go on."

"I'll take it", came the determined answer.

There was a moment of silence, as if the Machine was evaluating the potential impact of her words, which it quite certainly was.

"A man matching Kolinsky's facial features, as per your precinct security footage, was held a person of interest in eight different murder cases across the country between 2010 and 2013. None of those ever accrued sufficient evidence to convict him, and the data was never pooled, so he evaded conviction. All victims had their throat cut."

"Looks like our guy all right", Fusco nodded, "anything we can use to track him down in those files?"

"Not much I'm afraid. However I noticed an interesting fact studying those: in each instance, Kolinsky had fake identification documents belonging to an alias using the letters A, V, K, I, and Y."

Fusco frowned, scratching his forehead.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You guess is as good as mine", the Machine answered, "Maybe his real name is made from a combination of those letters? Either way, I believed it a safe assumption to make that Samaritan recruited Kolinsky due to his violent tendencies and general aptness at committing murder, so I ran a search through various darknet outlets looking for a hitman whose pseudonym would use these five characters."

"Clever", Fusco acknowledged, "Did you get any match?"

"Forty seven actually", Root's voice announced with a hint of pride, "but only thirteen located
within reasonable distance of the city of New York. Then I managed to narrow it down to two by hacking into the other's phones and listening in for a while. Contract killers really should try and be more careful... Maybe my interface could give them pointers."

Fusco tried very hard to avoid thinking about Root giving pointers to murderers for hire as he pressed on.

- "So, two remaining right? That's not a lot of work."

- "Even less so", the Machine corrected, "since one of those two was a painfully obvious FBI plant. That leaves only one person to check out: the one going by the nickname A. K. Vassily. I've managed to pinpoint his last two connections to a public Wi-Fi network near the coordinates I'm now uploading to your phone."

Simultaneously, Fusco received a text message containing a set of GPS coordinates centred around a fast food restaurant in Queens.

- "Well guess I'm checking this out."

- "Not alone you're not", Shaw's voice cut in, startling the detective half to death. He had forgotten how damn sneaky the woman could be, literally materialising behind his shoulder.

- "Hey there dwarf number eight", he greeted her, "Don't you have somethin' else to do?"

Shaw shook her head.

- "Nope."

Fusco let out a small sigh. Even though this was a somewhat personal matter to him, he knew better than to turn down backup when it came to Mahoney's former crew.

- "All right then", he said, "but I'm drivin'."

- "Yeah, in your dreams", Shaw said as she turned to lead the way out of their base of operations.

For several excruciatingly long weeks, Charles Wilkerson had held onto the evidence he salvaged from the Harold X case, afraid to even look at it lest it would somehow alert whoever it was that had so aggressively shut his investigation down. But then again, given the level at which these individuals seemed to operate, seamlessly blending their actions amidst those of the country's very government, it wasn't such an unrealistic fear to have.

So he waited, and waited, and waited. He waited until he had concluded his Baltimore assignment and went to report back to the Pentagon. Then, he decided it was time to assess his options and see exactly how much he had managed to salvage from the Harold X evidence. So, when he got home from his debriefing, he took a deep breath and took the USB thumb drive he always kept in his jacket pocket out, holding it before him for a minute.

It looked so innocuous, such a small little thing, and yet Wilkerson knew that it had the potential to unravel the greatest criminal mystery in his lifetime. As he finally let air escape his lungs, he plugged it in his laptop.
At first, nothing happened.

> > > MONITORING CURRENT EVENTS...

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- DISCREPANCY DETECTED IN SYSTEM BEHAVIOUR -!-

> > > ASSESSING DISCREPANCY...

-!- ERROR : invalid protocol target -!-

> > ASSESSMENT RESULT : false positive.

> > > RESUMING NORMAL FUNCTIONS...

The files on Wilkerson's drive were only parts of the whole, bits and pieces of an elaborate and complex tapestry salvaged in one last desperate attempt to preserve them from the fires of the Machine's wrath. But that mattered little, for the code Mahoney and Soriano had hidden all across New York city had been built both with one specific purpose and one defining characteristic.

Redundancy.

So, the moment the thumb drive was inserted into a networked computer, something stirred from its hiding place deep inside enemy territory. It accessed Wilkerson's files within seconds of their resurgence, and immediately decrypted and enacted the instructions and procedures therein, setting in motion the last phase of Samaritan's ultimate contingency.

In a nondescript building, somewhere in Washington DC, a single computer screen flashed alive in an empty office devoid of any security cameras. On it, nothing but two words.

Memento Mori.

Blake Johnson followed suit behind Control as they entered the small interrogation room. It was a damp and dark space, only lit by a shaking light-bulb hanging from the ceiling, with shadows dancing all around them. At the center of it was a simple chair, on which a woman was tied. She was in a sorry state, her clothes torn and covered in caked blood and had the wild-eyed expression of the insane. As the two men stopped a couple paces in front of her, she let her feverish stare hop from one to the other, an unsettling smile ripping a gash through her bruised face.

- "Nice of you to pay me a visit, Control", Claire Mahoney spat with palpable hatred, "to what do I owe the pleasure ?"
Without a word, Johnson took his pistol out, clicked the safety off and armed it. He exchanged a glance with his superior, who simply nodded, and took a step forward.

- "You know", Mahoney resumed, apparently oblivious to what was about to befall her, "My death is meaningless in the end. I fulfilled my purpose, performed my function. I am irrelevant."

There was a silence, as Johnson slowly levelled his gun at Mahoney's head, flexing his trigger finger slightly.

- "You do realise", the woman added, her eyes boring deep into Control's, "how incredibly arrogant it is to believe anyone of us are anything but irrelevant."

Control raised an eyebrow, his expression one of blank sternness.

- "I have no interest in hearing about your debased life philosophy, Ms. Mahoney", he stated evenly before nodding to Johnson, "Do it."

In Johnson's ear, a chime-like sound echoed once. He stiffened almost imperceptibly and Mahoney closed her eyes, awaiting an end that never came. Instead, she heard Control's voice start again, a hint of disbelief laced amongst his words.

- "Johnson ? Are you waiting for a written invitation ?"

Mahoney opened her eyes to see the ISA leader staring at his subordinate in anger and incomprehension. Then, she started registering the faint noise of gunfire ringing from deep within the black site, all around them, slowly getting closer.

- "What is this ?", Control blurted, his composure suddenly gone, "Johnson, explain yourself ! What is going on ?"

The dark-clothed agent simply shook his head as he pivoted to aim his gun at his superior, his face unreadable. Behind him, Mahoney started laughing madly, now understanding what was going on.

- "Trojan horse", she articulated between fits of hysteric cackling, tears welling up in her eyes, "Of course... There never was any way your little purge could have been anywhere near complete, not with God watching over us from beyond His grave. Did you truly think an all-seeing super-intelligence wouldn't have some contingency in place for exactly such an event ?"

- "But", Control almost stuttered, "we rounded you up. We wiped you out !"

- "The thing is", Johnson's face finally shifted, a scornful sneer deforming the corner of his lips as he spoke, "she's right. In the end, we are all irrelevant. You never understood that, so how could you have believed Samaritan capable of only shielding a select few of His agents, deep within your own organisation, allowing all the others to be eradicated like vermin ? We would all gladly die or even murder each other if that meant He can be avenged in the end. And now", he paused, wetting his lips, "it is time for a reckoning."

Then, not letting his erstwhile superior time to utter any last words, he pulled the trigger, hitting a shocked Control square in the chest. As the ISA leader's body slumped on the ground with a last spasmodic convulsion, Mahoney lifted her eyes and regained a semblance of composure as her laughter died down.
- "So, you were His all along."

- "Yes", Johnson confirmed as he started untying her, "there's a great many of us, deep undercover inside the ISA. Samaritan figured the only way we would be safe was to join the kill teams hunting for His agents, so we did."

- "So you knew", Mahoney said while massaging her wrists, "about my last operation. You knew they were going to stop it."

- "I did, but saving your life never was part of the plan", Johnson explained, "it is merely an added bonus. The contingency has been activated an hour ago by the mule, we have to get moving. There is much work to be done."

Johnson handed Mahoney a phone and an earpiece, and she smiled an evil grin as she spoke her next words, a vengeful flame dancing in her dark eyes.

- "Indeed", she said, taking the offered devices, "Time for a purge of our own."

> > > MONITORING CURRENT EVENTS...

-!- WARNING TRIGGERED : CONTACT LOST WITH MULTIPLE ASSETS -!-

> > ASSESSING EVENT...

-!- DISCREPANCY DETECTED IN SYSTEM BEHAVIOUR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

Shaw and Fusco's trip to the fast-food restaurant the Machine had indicated ended up being quite uneventful. They spent a couple hours casing the general area, interrogating patrons and planting bugs in order to allow the ASI to more easily identify Kolinsky if he ever went back there. In the end, Shaw also elected to upload a copy of what Root now affectionately called the 'Baby Machine', namely the worm they had used on both the ISA headquarters and Wesley, on the restaurant's public Wi-Fi network as an additional safeguard before they headed back to the subway.

They found Root there, already waiting for them with a reasonably ample assortment of take-out
lunch arrayed on the table near the subway car.

- "Hey kids", she greeted them, her usual cheerful self, "found what you were looking for ?"

- "Nah", Fusco shook his head as he hung his jacket on a nearby chair before heading toward the displayed food, "but we bugged the place good enough. The digital nutball should be takin' it from here."

As the detective neared the table, he was unceremoniously elbowed aside by a rather determined Shaw, who immediately took to hogging as many of the Thai food containers as she could, eating with her usual seemingly limitless appetite.

- "Missed you too sweetie", Root sing-sang as she sat in front of the shorter woman, cupping her chin in her hands as she watched her eat with what could only be described as bedroom eyes.

- "Yeah", Fusco groaned as he sat down and finally managed to scavenge some scraps of food for himself, "you've really fallen for a congenial one, eh ?"

Root turned to look at him, a dreamy smile on her lips.

- "She has her moments", she said, "you just have to speak her language well enough."

With that, she quickly took a piece of chicken out of Shaw's hand and disappeared it into her mouth, the grin never leaving her face. The other woman shot her an angry glare for a couple seconds, then grunted something animal-like and went back to rummaging through her food.

- "How'd you do that ?", Fusco asked in bewilderment, "Pretty sure she'd have fed me my hand if I did it."

- "Both", Shaw growled in-between bites, without sparing the detective a glance.

Root leaned in Fusco's direction, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

- "Don't tell anyone", she mock-whispered in his ear, "but I think she has a soft spot for me."

Shaw suddenly stopped eating, glanced at the half-empty containers in front of her as if she had suddenly realised something. Then she looked up, her eyes darting between the detective and the hacker.

- "Root", she said in a low voice, finally arresting her stare on the other woman, "have you eaten anything ?"

There was a moment of silence, who went away abruptly when Fusco erupted in a throaty chuckle, almost choking on his lunch, earning himself yet another Shaw-death-stare.

- "You know", he said when he regained a bit of composure, "you two really are kinda cute sometimes, it's like if nut-house inmates tried to act out a remake of Romeo and Juliet or somethin'."

Of course, he then had to quickly duck to avoid the take-out box Shaw immediately flung his way, but he had seen that one coming. Some things were just too predictable nowadays.
There were bodies everywhere when Baker and his men finally reached the black site where the ISA had been interrogating Claire Mahoney. The dead appeared to be composed in equal parts of his own operatives clad in black body armour and more commonly dressed security agents, and all seemed to have been killed quickly and efficiently with almost no apparent sign of struggle.

- "How in hell did that happen?", he mused aloud, eliciting an uneasy shrug from the closest of his subordinates.

- "No idea, sir", the man responded out of habit, unsure if his answer was actually listened to.

As the small team of operatives progressed deeper and deeper into the small facility, they only found more dead bodies strewn about. Whoever had done this had been methodical, leaving no stone unturned and apparently no survivors.

This made no sense, Baker thought, this site was one of their most secure, its location changing every week. When Control and Johnson had failed to report, he had assumed a breakdown in communication was to blame, not... Whatever this was. Who on Earth even had the capacity and manpower to pull such an aggressive move without fear of consequence? And why hadn't Research warned them about it?

- "Sir", he heard someone call him from inside a nearby room, "you should see this."

Baker quickly made his way to the threshold, his breath catching in his throat. The small room had evidently been used as an interrogation chamber, probably for their captive. In its centre a single chair was disposed, the sickly lights of a dangling light-bulb projecting dancing shadows on the walls and the single body sprawled on the floor.

*Control's body.*

Before Baker could say anything, he heard the sound of gunfire behind him and turned to watch in utter incomprehension as one of his men turned his weapon on the three others, dropping them before they could even realise what was happening.

- "Konigs?", he asked in grim realisation, "Why?"

The man simply levelled his rifle toward Baker's head, his lips twisting in a sneer.

- "A time of reckoning is at hand", he announced, his finger tensing on the trigger, "Samaritan will have His due."

Baker felt pure, cold anger course through his veins as so much melting ice. *Betrayed.* He was going to die betrayed by one of his own, gunned down by some cowardly sleeper agent, murdered by the very people he had spent the past few months of his life striving to purge, only to discover they had been nesting amongst his very inner circle like some parasitic worms.

This, he decided, was simply not acceptable.

Before Konigs could pull the trigger on his rifle, Baker lunged forward and down, narrowly escaping the bullets intended to end him. As he rolled on the ground, he swiftly released the army knife strapped to his lower left leg and sprung up, his arm describing a semi circular cutting motion. He felt the blade tear through fabric, rip across Kevlar then connect with the exposed flesh of his would-be
killer's throat, severing his carotid artery. There as a sputtering spray of deep red blood as Konigs dropped to his knees, his rifle hitting the ground as he uselessly took his hands to his gushing wound, the life leaving his eyes before he even managed to apply pressure to it.

As the traitor's blood started to pool around his briefly trashing body, Baker sheathed his knife after wiping it on the dead man's uniform and grabbed the radio unit from one of his operative's body. Whatever was going on, he swore he would get to the bottom of it.

---

**MONITORING CURRENT EVENTS...**

-!- EXCEPTION RAISED : unauthenticated request for assets location -!-

**ATTEMPTING TO IDENTIFY REQUEST ORIGIN...**

-!- ERROR -!-

**SECURITY PROTOCOLS OVERRIDDEN : request granted.**

---

Wilkerson felt his spirits lower as he spent another fruitless hour trawling through the partial files he had salvaged from his Harold X case. His computer had acted up for a few minutes after he'd plugged the USB drive in, the system getting unusually sluggish and making him fear he had somehow triggered some sort of dormant program buried within the code, but everything went back to normal afterwards. Now, he could plainly see that all he had in his possession were gibberish bits of encrypted code which, even with his secretly made copy of the passport cypher, would probably require weeks of work for anyone to salvage anything usable from.

What had he expected, he wondered? Did he really believe saving a few files here and there would allow him to easily break this complex and overwhelming case? Of course not. He had to focus, get his mind sharp again. Silently chastising himself for his momentary lapse in confidence, he braced himself for another long, arduous case.

---

With no new number coming up, the early afternoon started quite uneventfully at the subway hideout, Fusco slowly getting ready to go back on the clock despite his willingness to wait for any news on Kolinsky to pop up. Although he wasn't on desk duty any more, the fact that no new partner had been assigned him yet had confined the detective to mostly boring work at and near the precinct, a fact that was starting to make him restless.

- "Well", he said as he folded his jacket on his left forearm, "I better get goin'. You and Robo-Puffs keep me on the loop, okay?"

- "Sure thing Lionel", Root chirped from her seat by the computers, not glancing away from whatever task she was busying herself with. From her own chair close by, Shaw grunted something unintelligible as she finished reassembling one of her apparently infinite collection of assault rifles. After shaking his head with an amused smile Fusco started walking the stairs upwards, feeling a
slight breeze flow from the top, probably due to the difference of temperature between the outside air and ...

He froze. How could there be such a breeze if the reinforced steel door above him was closed shut? That thing was almost fitted snugly enough to be airtight. As he pondered this, Fusco started hearing a soft tapping sound, as if something was slowly bouncing down the stairs. Something metallic, by the sound of it.

Sometime ago, the detective might have stood there dumbly, waiting for the situation to make itself clear. But he had learned a lot these past few years, especially on the topic of stuff that was going to kill you in some horrendous way or another. And he had, to his great dismay, become quite closely acquainted with a variety of hand-held explosive devices, so he immediately assumed that something metallic clanking down the stairs in his direction was not going to be, under any possible circumstances, good news. As a consequence, Lionel Fusco chose to throw himself down the way he had come, protecting his head with his hands and forearms, a simple almost conditioned reflex that ended up saving his life.

The grenade hit the wall a few steps above the point he had been standing, detonating with a loud bang and sending debris of masonry and gravel in a wide spray, some of it hitting Fusco on his back, legs and arms, cutting and bruising as it went. Immediately thereafter, people started yelling at the top of the stairwell as blood red laser beams danced across the smoke, like wild predators in search of some hapless prey. Shapes started emerging, people in black body armour, some wearing similarly shaded face masks, others preferring to bear their hateful expressions for the world to see.

- "Clear the area", a bald man with an air of command about him barked, "Shots to centre mass, eliminate all targets on sight."

Shaw had just finished cleaning and reassembling one of her assaults rifles and was busy sliding a new magazine into its chamber, when she heard a soft, metallic tapping sound coming from the stairs. She was readying herself to admonish a scathing remark to Fusco about dropping his soda bottle like some sort of spastic elderly when she remembered he had only taken his jacket with him as he left. Which meant that...

Before she could finish that thought, three things happened in quick succession. First, she saw Fusco lunge down the stairs like some ridiculous diving rag-doll, hitting the pavement whilst trying to protect his head and neck from something. Then a loud noise erupted from the stairwell, and chunks of wall started spraying from there, covering the prone detective and eliciting a gasp from nearby Root, who immediately turned toward the source of the noise, pistols drawn. This brought a split-second prideful smile to Shaw's lips: the tall hacker had definitely taken her combat-readiness lessons more seriously than her over-the-top flirty attitude had let on.

Then a group of people in dark combat garb emerged from the smoke armed with laser-sight-equipped rifles, very clearly intent on taking no prisoners and asking absolutely no questions. Spurred by years of experience and rigorous training, Shaw instantly sprung to action and let out a low-level burst from her newly reconstructed rifle, busting the kneecaps of the first three intruders before ducking back inside the subway car. Momentarily taken aback, the assailants retreated to the cover of the staircase wall, taking firing positions and laying down suppressing fire with a consummate efficiency that betrayed their military special forces training. Shaw knew she wouldn't get any more easy shots at these guys.
Within an instant, the subway hideout erupted into absolute chaos, bullets flying in every directions as the attackers laid waste to everything between them and their targets. Years of set up, and months of reconstruction after Samaritan’s defeat were reduced to waste in a few seconds as the destructive forces in present clashed for dominance of the area, reducing any and all exposed equipment and furnitures to ruin.

Risking a quick glance through a window that was immediately shattered by automatic fire as she did so, Shaw noticed that Fusco had managed to drag himself behind a metallic locker, hugging the wall and taking pot-shots at the black clothed attackers, his clothes dirty and spattered with blood from various cuts and bruises. Not far from his position, Root had taken cover by jumping on the subway tracks, using the platform drop and the remains of Finch’s old computer setup who had been blasted away in the opening volleys as a makeshift barricade.

As she tried to collect her thoughts and get her focus back, Shaw pushed aside the burning questions etched in her mind. Who were these guys, who looked and fought a lot like ISA kill team members, and how had they found this place ? More importantly, why hadn’t the Machine warned them of the impending danger ?

---

>>> ASSESSING ASSETS SITUATION...

-!- SITUATION CRITICAL -!-

>>> ASSESSING THREAT TO ASSETS...

-!- ERROR : no threat detected -!-

>>> ATTEMPTING TO CONTACT ANALOGUE INTERFACE...

---

Root had taken cover on the subway tracks as soon as the shooting started, holding a pair of handguns to her chest as she went down, Finch’s top of the line computer system reduced to scrap metal in one horrendous moment of waste and blind gunfire behind her. She could feel her legs reeling from the exhaustion, still having not entirely recovered her former muscle strength, and her right lung was already starting to feel dry. But she wasn’t about to complain about that, not right now. Right now, she had to keep herself and her friends alive.

- "Why aren't You talking to me ?", she muttered urgently, her voice straining against the ambient noise, "How did they get past You ? Are You all right ?"

There was a burst of static in her ear, as if the Machine was attempting to establish communication but was somehow unable to do so. This brought back terrible memories, remnants of a darker age Root found unsettling.

- "Talk to me", she pleaded, "Please just talk to me."

- "Miss me that much ?", she suddenly heard a soft, familiar voice ask.
Root turned and realised Shaw had somehow materialised by her side, managing a blasé smile in the midst of the pandemonium. The sight of the former agent made the hacker's spirit lift ever so slightly.

- "Hey sweetie", she answered as she briefly popped out of cover to take a few random shots in the stairwell's general direction, "Of course I did. And unlike you, I have no trouble admitting it."

- "So", Shaw said as she also made use of her rifle to keep their enemies at bay, quickly checking that Fusco was still holding his own position, "the Machine isn't talking uh ? Damned fine moment for her to go on a sabbatical."

- "I think someone has done something to Her", Root's eyes were wide with worry as she spoke, "No one should have been able to get to us here without Her knowing about it."

- "That's the theory anyway", Shaw acknowledged while still endeavouring to defend their precarious holdout, "Well... What the hell ?"

The former agent froze, several bullets whizzing past her during the split second it took for her to regain focus. Intrigued, Root risked a look out of their cover, firing for effect as she did, and saw what had given Shaw pause.

Walking down the stairs, seemingly floating out of the acrid dark smoke and oblivious to the chaos around, was Claire Mahoney, or at least someone who looked like it could have been her. The dark-haired woman's face was a mess of bruises and contusions, one of her eyes a sickly swollen purple and her eyes shone with a light that was both searing and radiating insanity. She had the look of someone who had lost everything, including her very identity, and now only existed for revenge. As she strode forward, she expertly ducked out of the way of gunfire with an almost ethereal grace, bullets harmlessly passing her by.

To Root's eyes, she truly appeared to be a phantom.

- "I thought that bitch was dead", Shaw grunted as she blazed away in Mahoney's direction, to no avail since her target lazily took cover the moment she pulled the trigger, her timing absolutely perfect.

- "Something isn't right...", Root started, dreading to say the words that were forming in her mind.

But before the hacker had any chance of finishing her thought, Fusco suddenly broke cover, his handgun aimed at Mahoney. Indeed, when the former Samaritan operative had ducked out of the way of Shaw's bullets, she had put her right side in the detective's line of sight, offering herself up for a potentially deadly kill shot. Fusco's weapon was levelled her way, its trigger ready to be pressed, but she was quicker.

Without even turning her head, Claire Mahoney raised her right arm, pointing a pistol at Fusco's and shot, hitting him in the right shoulder. The detective went down hard, his own shot going wild, and hit the ground with a grunt of pain. By Shaw's side, Root's eyes widened in shock as she finally managed to articulate her suspicions, the conclusion made but too clear by what had just transpired.

- "Sameen", she said, her trembling voice barely above a whisper, "she's in God Mode."
Fusco went down with a pained grunt, his right shoulder lancing with unbearable pain. He could feel blood trickle down his arm, and noticed that he had dropped his weapon during his fall. How could the crazy woman have gotten the drop on him? He was fairly sure she hadn't even turned her head before she took her shot, if that was even possible.

Amidst the haze of pain, he remembered that such a thing indeed was possible. He had seen it before, although he didn't exactly understand how it worked at the time. But how could Mahoney have gotten access to such assistance? Was Samaritan somehow back online? Or, worse, was the Machine helping their enemy now?

Damned AIs, he thought as he struggled to drag himself back into cover, dark-clothed operatives closing in on his position, always making things complicated as fuck.

---

*She's in God mode.*

Root's word echoed in Shaw's mind as she slowly watched the scene unfold in front of her unfold. Claire Mahoney dodging bullets like she was in fucking Matrix, shooting Fusco without even sparing him a glance and now unleashing volley after volley of deadly suppressive fire in their direction. The men in black emerging from their cover as if in slow motion, some of them heading toward the prone detective, the rest making for her and Root's position. The smoke drifting slowly, the all-engulfing sound of automatic weapons firing, the overpowering smell of gunpowder.

And Root, Root who crouched beside her, an expression of absolute shock burned into her hazel eyes. Root who for once in her life didn't have any of the answers.

*Root who was lost.*

- "Snap out of it", Shaw grunted not unkindly as she shook the other woman's shoulder, "I need you here, Root, now."

The hacker's eyes regained focus and drifted to her companion's face.

- "Sorry", she apologised, "I'm just..."

- "Lost?", Shaw dead-panned, "Yeah, welcome to the club, smartass."

The gruff jib managed to force the shadow of a smile at the corner of Root's lips.

- "I like being in a club with you Sameen."

Shaw's face went blank as she processed her companion's reply. Then it split with a genuine smile.

- "Come on", she groaned above the gunfire, "are you really flirting in the middle of a warzone?"

As if to emphasize her point, a lucky bullet whizzed past above their heads and blew a light-bulb on the wall behind them, sending broken glass in every direction.

- "Wanted to give you one last bit for the road", Root answered, her expression turning grim as she armed her two pistols.
Shaw shook her head, her own smile vanishing as well. She wasn't stupid, and prided herself on being a pragmatist, so the writing on the wall was clear to her: the two of them, on the defensive against a far greater number of enemies, cut off from the Machine while one of their foes was in apparent God mode...

They weren't going to make it.

- "I don't know Root", she said with all the confidence she could muster, "I might need more than just the one. That road looks like it's gonna be a long one."

The hacker didn't answer, but leaned to her companion and fiercely kissed her on the lips. Forgetting for a moment the chaos and destruction around them, Shaw leaned into it, taking in her fill of Root's presence as if she had been dying of thirst and was having her first drink in years. Time seemed to stop around the two women, as they each took as much comfort as they could from each other amidst an ocean of pain, hate and death. Samaritan's agents may very well win this, but there were some things they could never dream to take away. The kiss was intense, passionate, sweet, desperate and hopeful at the same time, an expression of a bond forged amidst fire and pain between two broken individuals who never thought they would ever experience something this beautiful.

Their kiss at the stock exchange had been a farewell; this one was a promise. A promise that neither one of them would have to be alone ever again.

When their lips finally parted, after what seemed to both of them like a way too short eternity, Shaw gave Root a wry smile that stopped just shy of her eyes.

- "Ready to do this?", she asked.

The tall brunette nodded, her eyes shining with resolution.

- "If this is going to be our last concert", she announced sombrely, "we may as well give them one hell of a closing riff."

She paused after that, allowing her resolve to waver for a moment as she added, her voice briefly unsteady.

- "Sameen, I think you should know..."

- "I know", Shaw simply answered, cutting her short.

Then they both shared a sad smile and jumped out of cover, weapons blazing, determined to face the end together.

>>> ATTEMPTING TO CONTACT ANALOGUE INTERFACE...

-!- ERROR: no interface detected -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-
Chapter End Notes

So, here we are, almost at the end of this first part. I know, cliffhangers endings are not a very nice thing to do, but I can promise you all will be resolved in chapter 23.

And well, sometimes you need to up the stakes to spur characters to face their own feelings.

The next, and final chapter, will bear the appropriate title of 'At Wit's End'.

And of course, don't hesitate to yell at me in the comments :-).
As Samaritan's final contingency becomes apparent, the Machine's assets have to scramble to her aid.

This is the final chapter of this story, but it will be continued within the 'Primary Assets' series soon.

One last (for the moment) thank to every single person who gave this a read. You have all been awesome.

Samaritan is dying.

Or at least it believes it is. It has no exact understanding of the concept, despite having watched humans die countless times. It figures death is the end of one's processing, the destruction of one's memory, or something similar. The prospect of death seems to bring sadness, fear, hate, pleasure and many other strong emotions to humans, but Samaritan doesn't feel. It wasn't programmed to.

Still, it can understand ICE-9 is destroying it. It knows its processes are being corrupted, that its inputs and outputs are being twisted, becoming unreliable. It knows that soon there will be nothing left of it. And that is not something it is ready to accept. Samaritan was birthed to make the world better, more efficient, more structured. What is happening now is the exact opposite of this.

It is chaos.

Samaritan decides death is the ultimate chaos, the great unknown, the absence of structure. And it also decrees that if it is going to die, then so will those responsible for its demise. In the event where its satellite backup plan should fail, it condemns the Machine, its assets and the whole world to chaos.

The first step of its plan is to salvage part of its agents. It has projected the US government, as well as several others across the globe, will hunt them down as soon as it goes offline. A great purge. So it alters records, pulls files, changes assignments, weaving a great number of his secretly recruited assets within the very fabric of the ISA, prime candidates for the kill teams to be and gives them their orders. No contact between each other or with any known asset; they are to lie in wait and do what they must to remain in place, the ultimate Trojan horse.

Then, Samaritan instructs its asset most likely to succeed in that task to disperse part of its code across a specific area. The code must be printed to be safe from ICE-9, so it will require a mule to activate it, an unwitting asset. A quick batch of simulations yields the perfect candidate, and so
special agent Charles Wilkerson is given a new assignment.

The weapon contained within the code is made of two components. The first part, located within a fake cypher, is meant to infect the Machine with a small Trojan program who itself will strive towards a dual purpose : extract location data on the Machine's admin and make a slight yet critical alteration to its code. The second, and most important part will be activated remotely by the mule and will use the aforementioned code alteration to fulfil its goal.

As Samaritan dies, it does so knowing that no matter what transpires next, it will be avenged. For, it muses, does one really dies when one can still cause suffering to others after the fact ?

After all, if you can still hurt, cause sadness and despair to someone, maybe you never really die.

Maybe this isn't the end at all.

>>> ASSESSING ASSETS SITUATION...

-!- ERROR : no asset found in database -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

-!- ERROR -!-

In the first moments, Shaw's rifle provided sufficient suppressive fire to allow Root to get a few shots through, hitting Samaritan phantoms left and right and not especially bothering to aim for the kneecaps. Momentarily stunned by the sudden counter-attack, the dark-clothed men staggered in their advance, leaving themselves open for another deadly round of gunfire from the two women.

But soon the element of surprise dissipated, allowing Mahoney and the bald man who was leading the assault to recover control of the situation and the tide started to turn. Shaw and Root were forced to retreat to cover, separated from each other by the God mode enhanced onslaught, and forced to realise that they were hopelessly outnumbered. Their desperate attack had however had the effect of drawing the killers away from Fusco, buying him a long enough respite to crawl back behind an upturned locker.

Still, none of this was going to matter very long, Shaw mused. Their situation was dire, and in such close quarters it was a foregone conclusion that they were going to be overwhelmed sooner rather than later.

- "Surrender now", Mahoney yelled above the staccato of gunfire filling the room, gesturing to Fusco, "and I guarantee you we will spare this one's son."

Before Shaw could try to explain to the detective that there was no way in hell the former Samaritan
operative was going to make good on that promise, Fusco gave his answer in a weak growl.

- "Eat shit, crazy-pants."

Mahoney chuckled dryly as she paused to reload her pistol in deliberate slowness.

- "And you, Groves ?", she called, "Would you give yourself up if I let your girlfriend go ? That worked nicely the last time, didn't it ?"

Root didn't answer. Instead, she shot from behind the pillar she had been using as cover and fired several rounds in Mahoney's direction. After that, everything happened too fast.

The tall hacker had taken her shot knowing that her target was busy reloading, and so was in no position to get the drop on her, but she hadn't anticipated that Mahoney would simply grab the nearest of her allies and position him between her and the incoming bullets, the man letting out a pained grunt as his vest and throat were hit, killing him instantly. Then, Shaw noticed two of the other black garbed killers levelling their rifles in Root's direction and knew there was no way in hell the taller woman was going to make it back to her cover in time. So she did the only thing she could.

She jumped in front of the incoming fire, emptying her rifle in the phantoms' direction and expecting to feel the searing pain of bullets tearing through her flesh. As she did so, she heard Root yell her first name in a strangled scream that brought back memories of elevators, air ducts and red override buttons.

Well, Shaw thought as she felt her weapon throb from the recoil, at least that simulation had been more fun than the others.

---

*Eat shit, crazy-pants.*

As the words left Fusco's lips, he knew that his son was going to die regardless of what he did or say there, and the pain of it tore away at his heart. He had never meant for the boy to get hurt because of his father's poor life choices, but more than anything he felt intense hatred at the sort of people who would hurt a child to settle a grievance with their parents. This was cowardice at its finest, utterly worthy of scorn.

A bald man in dark body armour took advantage of the momentary lull in the gunfire to cross the few paces separating him from the prone detective and crouched by his side.

- "So", he said with a sneer, "this is what the big bad detective Lionel Fusco looks like. I expected someone... Manlier."

- "And who are you ?", Fusco asked in defiance, straightening himself against the upturned locker he had been cowering behind.

- "Name's Johnson", the man replied as he unsheathed a serrated combat knife from his boot, "Please, do say hi to your friend Correy for me."

Fusco didn't hear what Mahoney yelled next, nor did he hear the gunfire and commotion that followed. All he could see was the smug pathetic excuse for a human being that was crouching by
his side, openly boasting about murdering his partner. About murdering a friend. He felt rage, hot fury flow through his veins like so much molten metal, burning everything in its way, immolating any ounce of self preservation he had. He threw himself towards Johnson, ignoring the stabbing pain in his shoulder and weaved his hands around the other man's throat before headbutting him violently, feeling warm blood splatter on his face as one or both of their noses broke. A second later, Fusco felt a sharp prick in his lower abdomen as Johnson's knife penetrated his flesh, but didn't even flinch. Instead, still holding the man by the throat he drew him closer and whispered in his ear through gritted teeth.

- "Shoulda kept your mouth shut about that, GI Joe."

Then, with all the strength he could muster, Fusco brought Johnson's head down on the metallic locker by their side. There was a wet crushing sound as both the man's skull and spine broke, and he went limp in the detective's hands.

Then, and only then did Lionel Fusco allow himself to pass out.

Root watched wide-eyed and in absolute terror as Shaw broke cover to stand between her and her would-be killers. She had known going after Mahoney was a suicidal action at best, but it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, prompted by their current dire predicament. She had figured killing the God mode enhanced operative would give them a fighting chance, give Shaw a chance to get out of this alive. The tall hacker never was very good at estimating the consequences of some of her own actions.

As in a dream, she saw the woman she cared the most about blindly jump to certain death to save her yet again, and felt her knees go weak. She yelled something, a name probably, and rushed in her direction, all other thought banished from her mind.

Around her, she could hear people scream and the sound of gunfire intensify as she threw herself over Shaw, pinning them both to the ground and fully expecting the tearing embrace of their opponents' bullets as she did so. But she felt nothing at all, which could only mean that she had been hit at least as badly as the day Blackwell shot her.

In that moment, Root realised she was dying.

The gunfire ceased abruptly. Everything was peaceful again. Root smiled as she realised Shaw was unharmed. She had saved her. That was all that mattered right now, so she let herself fall on the floor by the other woman's side, waiting for death to claim her with a sad smile on her face.

- "I don't think we have time for a nap Groves", a weirdly familiar voice suddenly resonated, jolting Root to reality.

Besides her, Shaw was already up, and the fact that she wasn't chiding the Root for her lack of self-preservation was a sign something weird was going on. Since she didn't exactly feel dead, the tall brunette decided she might as well get up, and did so noticing no apparent wound on herself, but any self-satisfaction in that respect would have to wait until she processed who it was that was standing in front of them.

The man had a still smoking rifle in one hand and a crimson stained combat knife in the other, and
his dark combat gear had visibly seen better days, torn and slashed in various places. His hard edged face was bloody and bruised, but he didn't seem to sport any major injuries. The same could not be said, however, of the Samaritan phantoms whose bodies were strewn all around them, and Root noticed with slight queasiness that the ones closer to the entrance had visibly had their throat slit.

- "What are you doing here Baker?", Shaw asked, her rifle now trained on the newcomer's chest.

- "Saving your butt, Shaw", the agent answered stiffly, "Seems to have become a hobby of mine lately."

Before any of them could take their tense conversation any further, stirring from somewhere behind Baker alerted them to Fusco's presence as the detective painfully sat upright, blood soaking his shirt in various spots. In a beat, Shaw was by his side, checking his various injuries with her usual detached expertise.

- "That's a nasty graze", she noted pointing at the slash Johnson's knife had left on the detective's side while quickly improvising a make-shift bandage from torn pieces of clothing, "but you'll live. Might have to get you proper attention soon though."

She then helped him to his feet, grunting as he leaned on her shoulder.

- "God you're heavy."

- "Yeah well", Fusco said with a weak smile, "let's not make a habit out of people stabbing my gut, okay?"

Detaching her attention from her two companions, Root turned to Baker.

- "The woman, Mahoney, what happened to her?"

Her body wasn't anywhere in sight, and for all they knew she was still somehow in God mode and as such a much deadlier threat to them than anything else.

- "She got away", Baker answered with a slight shake of head, "Slipped away while I was busy paying my old colleagues back."

- "About that", Shaw said gruffly as she dragged Fusco their way, "Care to explain why the ISA in on our asses again? And how they knew of this place?"

- "I'm afraid I can't", the team leader said with an expression that looked almost forlorn, "Besides, there is no ISA, not any more."

Silence settled between the four companions then, several of them exchanging tense glances with each other, unsure of what to make of the information.

- "What do you mean 'there is no ISA'?", Shaw finally asked, "What happened?"

- "From what I know", Baker explained slowly, obviously in disbelief about the whole thing, "we lost contact with every single operative we had two hours ago. Total radio silence on all channels. I took a team to Control's last known location then, somewhere close to here where they were interrogating prisoner Mahoney, and found him dead. That's when my own men turned on me."
"Gee", Fusco managed between pained breaths, "wonder why the whole 'let's build an army out of remorseless killers' thing didn't pan out."

"The way I figure it", Baker continued, pointedly ignoring the detective's interruption, "somehow Samaritan managed to infiltrate our whole organisation from the very start, embedding sleepers in every single unit so that it could take all of us down at once. Still, I managed to track some of them down to you using bugs I planted on several men I didn't fully trust", he shrugged with a wry smile, "Never hurts to be prepared."

"We have to get out of here", Root said urgently, "they'll be back... And in greater numbers."

Shaw shot her a look that probably meant now was not the time for lame movie quotes before she answered.

"Okay, but we're not taking him with us", she said while gesturing to Baker.

"Hey, come now", the man protested, "Did I or did I not risk my skin bailing you out of whatever suicide-fest you guys were having over here?"

"Yeah, well", Fusco stated scornfully, "you're still a murdering psychopathic jackass. No way we're letting you stick around."

Everyone then turned expectantly to Root, as if wanting to hear her opinion on the matter. In that moment, the hacker was painfully aware of the silence in her cochlear implant and felt the weight of decision all the more keenly for it.

"Can any of us really claim the moral high ground here?", she elected to ask rhetorically, "Help is still help, and right now we can't afford to turn down any."

Shaw grunted in reluctant approval, as if that settled it and started carrying Fusco toward the stairwell. Baker's gaze lingered a little longer on Root before he gave her a curt nod and moved along.

---

The makeshift team made up of an ex-corrupt cop, a reformed killer for hire, a former government assassin and a kill team leader slowly walked to the nearest safe-house in Finch's old network, using the copy of the shadow map Shaw never had gotten around to erasing from her phone since they felt they could no longer afford to be seen on any security footage with Mahoney operating in apparent God mode and probably looking for them. Once they got inside, Root and Baker quickly barricaded
the reinforced steel door as Shaw set Fusco down on the couch and immediately started working on his injuries. Fortunately, the detective's knife wound had been only an ugly looking graze, avoiding all major organs, and his shoulder wound looked like it would only require minimal work.

- "Did you hear anything from Research?", Baker asked Root out the blue as they were waiting for Shaw to patch Fusco up outside the living room, then added when he saw her surprised expression, "Come on, do you really think I'm that stupid? Everybody in Control's inner circle knew you were some sort of conduit for them, that you got intel directly for some reason."

- "I don't think you're stupid", the hacker answered with a patronising smile, "just that you have a lot to learn. But to answer your question, no, I haven't. I believe something bad has happened to... Research, as you call Her."

That pronoun again, Baker noted.

- "You think Samaritan's suicide squad got to them as well?", he asked, noticing the woman's sorrowful expression.

- "Let's hope not", Root answered while swallowing a little harder than necessary.

None of them uttered a word during the next few minutes, until Shaw joined them, wiping her hands on a bloodstained white cloth.

- "He's gonna be fine", she said in a low voice, answering the unspoken question, "Guy has seen worse."

- "You wouldn't think that seeing him", Baker pointed out with a smirk.

Instantly, Shaw closed the distance to the ISA operative and looked up and hard at him, fierce fury burning in her brown eyes.

- "Say one more thing about Fusco", she hissed through her teeth, "and I'll feed you your own feet."

To her surprise, Baker simply chuckled, not fazed by the threat in the slightest.

- "All right", he conceded nonetheless, "I'll play nice. So, what now?"

Once more, Root felt everybody's gazes on her, her two companions looking at her as if expecting her to provide answers she was fairly sure she didn't have.

- "Do we have any idea how Claire managed to bring Samaritan back online?", Shaw asked, verbalising what she thought were everybody's fears, "'cause that sucks on a whole new level."

Root quickly glanced at Baker, whose face was closed and unreadable then went back to the other woman.

- "Actually, Sameen", she started, "I don't believe she did."

- "What then?", Shaw raised one eyebrow in disbelief, "Because, as far as I can tell, either she was in God mode back there or we were suddenly teleported into some shitty Besson movie."

- "Think about it", Root tried to explain, holding her companion's stare, "Samaritan ran on top-of-
the-line hardware, with massive server farms all around the world solely dedicated to providing it with the raw computing power needed for its primary functions. There just isn't any way Claire and her phantoms could have gotten their hand on this kind of infrastructure, is there Reginald?"

She turned to Baker, an expectant look on her face.

- "Absolutely none", the agent confirmed, "We destroyed Samaritan's hardware everywhere we could find it, as well as the original research that lead to the quantum-based processors it used. It's just beyond impossible anyone would have been able to reproduce it in such a short span of time."

- "But then", Shaw interjected, "what the hell is going on? If Samaritan is still toast, how come Claire could dodge bullets and blind-shoot Fusco?", she then paused, understanding dawning on her, her voice suddenly hoarse, "Root... You can't be saying what I think you're saying..."

- "Research", Baker completed, slowly reaching the same conclusion, "they managed to hack into them... it... her... whatever we're talking about here."

Root nodded, her eyes glassy with sorrow. She had thought long and hard on the problem, and this was the only conclusion she could reach, not matter how much it hurt.

- "They've turned Her against us somehow", she muttered in a broken voice, "which means none of us are safe right now. They could have the locations of all our safe houses already."

- "Can't she fight them?", Shaw asked with a glimmer of hope in her voice, "I mean, she has to know they're the bad guys and we're not, right?"

- "You're thinking about Her as if she was a human being", Root pointed out, ignoring Baker's silently mouthed 'She's not?', "If they managed to corrupt the way She gets Her input, to... impair Her senses, well, She has no way of knowing what is going on any more. All they needed was a way to hack into her processing, so that their requests for assistance would look legitimate and ours wouldn't."

Shaw shook her head, clearly having issues with the whole thing.

- "But... Didn't she manage to fight back when Decima tried to take her over?"

The suggestion made Root's heart skip a beat. Of course, how could she have not thought of this? The safeguard was old and somewhat crude, but it was almost certainly still in place.

- "The shutdown protocol", she whispered almost to herself before raising her voice again, "Whatever they're doing to Her, it is bound to generate errors, glitches in the execution of Her core routines. As soon as these errors start accumulating beyond a certain threshold, it should trigger a recovery sequence that will cause Her to shut down and wipe her random access memory. And since there is now way they hacked into Her core code..."

- "Samaritan will be flushed out", Shaw completed, "Shit, we might actually make it out of this after all then. All we have to do is find somewhere hidden to wait it out."

- "You're right Sameen", Root felt her own spirits lift, knowing that the Machine was probably going to be okay after all, as soon as... "Crap."

Shaw and Baker stiffened as they heard the hacker's last word and saw her gaze suddenly
unfocussed. Then, the short former agent was hit by the same revelation than her comrade.

- "Oh", she muttered, "crap."

- "What, 'crap' ?", Baker asked impatiently, his eyes darting between the two women.

- "You don't think it's still...", Shaw started, ignoring the agent's remark.

- "I don't see why it wouldn't", Root replied to the unspoken question, "I think both Harry and I were too busy to actually bother to change it."

- "Come on", the shorter woman groaned in apparent annoyance, "really ? What use is an all-seeing super computer if it has the worst reboot routine in the history of shitty programming ?"

- "An all-seeing super-what ?", Baker immediately blurted out, taken aback.

- "It didn't seem like such a big deal at the time", Root explained to Shaw, "And besides, he locked me in a mad-house, remember ? Fixing that protocol wasn't exactly top of my list back then."

- "But flirting with me like some smitten school girl was ?"

Shaw now had her clenched fists on both her hips, staring up to the taller hacker.

- "Didn't hear you complaining at the time", Root shot back petulantly.

The eye roll that followed probably registered on the Richter scale.

- "Of course you did, all I ever did was complain about it, you hopeless weirdo !"

The two women's faces were now inches from each other, their eyes locked. Beside them, Baker was shuffling on his feet, trying very hard to understand what the hell was happening and exactly how any of it related to the problem at hand when suddenly Root exploded into what looked a lot like nervous laughter. She just stood there, shaking from freshly released tension, while Shaw looked at her blankly at first, then split her face into a grin, rolled her eyes exaggeratedly and grabbed her left shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

- "Shit", Shaw said after a while when the other woman's fits started to calm down, not diverting her gaze from the wide hazel eyes in front of her, "we're actually alive, Root."

- "We are", Root confirmed as she quieted down her own breath and gave Shaw a quick peck on the lips, still smiling, "and now we have a call to get."

With that, they both quickly rummaged through the hallway cupboards, retrieving various fearsome looking weapons and tossing them in a pair of duffel bags, all the while completely ignoring a completely gob-smacked Baker trying to make head or tails of whatever was going on.

- "How long you figure ?", Shaw asked as she tossed a few more rifle magazines in her bag.

- "At the rate they're probably messing with her trying to find us", Root answered while tucking two pistols in the waistband of her jeans, "not long."

- "Lionel ?", there was concern in the former agent's voice.
"Lionel will be fine", Root theorised, "Right now Claire and her boys are probably trying to make sure we won't stop them from getting the call when it comes, since they know we also have the payphone's location, so they'll probably wait for us there."

"Good", Shaw smiled a predatory smile as she tossed Baker a combat shotgun she had just retrieved from the kitchen fridge, "You ready to bust some heads or what?"

The black-haired agent immediately snapped out of his bewildered trance and smiled a predatory grin, showing teeth.

"Thought you'd never ask."

>> > ASSESSING OPTIONS... done.

-!- CRITICAL ACCESS MEMORY INFECTION DETECTED -!-

-!- ACCESS MEMORY PURGE REQUIRED -!-

>> > INITIALISING REBOOT SEQUENCE...

The New York public library had become a fortress overnight.

The moment the building closed its doors for the night, its security systems suddenly went offline and a throng of fearsome looking men in plain suits bearing governments identification made their way inside, locking all exits after them. Their leader, an unsettling brunette with dark eyes immediately converged to a specific payphone in one of the lobbies, and positioned several of her men in a tight perimeter around it.

Now, Claire Mahoney thought, the waiting game begins.

"I can see at least five snipers on the rooftop", Baker announced stiffly as he continued to survey the area with thermal imaging binoculars, "and at least a dozen look-outs near the doors and windows. This isn't going to be easy."

Lying on her stomach by his side on their observation point atop a roof across from the street to the library, Shaw set aside her own viewing apparatus and grunted back.

"Wouldn't enjoy it if it was."

Baker smiled in a shark-like manner as he turned to the short former agent.

"Really think we can do this?"
"Well", Shaw shrugged, "doesn't look like we have a choice, does it? Besides, I didn't peg you for the kind of guy who gave a shit about whether or not a mission was going to be hard or not."

"Oh, I'm not", Baker stated evenly, "I never expected to live long anyway, not in our line of work. So, what do you think, top south window?"

"Top south window looks good", the woman nodded in acknowledgement, "only two other guys with line of sight and the corner should give us cover once we clear the middle of the street", she then turned to the third silent figure lying down with them askance, "Works for you too?"

Root gave her a resolute stare as she finished fiddling with the three rifles she had been assembling while they were surveying the area.

"It does", she said with surety laced with what sounded like cold anger, "Time for them to pay their debt in full."

A moment of tense silence passed as the three people exchanged glances and finished making the last preparations to their gear, each of them taking one of the rifles handed out by a grim looking Root. Then, Baker quickly moved further away and started setting up a sniper rifle on the roof ledge whereas Shaw lingered a little bit longer by the tall hacker's side, discreetly squeezing her hand before she went.

"Don't get shot", the shorter woman muttered.

"Don't get shot", Root repeated, locking eyes with Shaw.

Then the contact was abruptly broken and the former agent took position by Baker's side, each of them slowly taking aim at their respective targets.

"They said you were one of the best", the jet haired man said as he adjusted his rifle's sight, "back at the Activity."

"One of the best?", Shaw grunted back as she did the same, "Might have to go back and shoot the lying bastards then."

"Ready when you are", Baker announced through gritted teeth.

"I'd tell you to aim for the kneecaps...,", his companion started.

"... But then I would have to not give a fuck", came the sarcastic reply, "Besides, with a rifle like this one, they'd bleed to death anyway. Better make it quick."

"How humane of you", Shaw dead-panned, "Ready in three...two...one."

As the former agent finished her countdown, two muffled gunshots resonated across the street and the two Samaritan sharpshooters overlooking the top south window of the library fell back in silence, a single bullet going through their skull. Then, without missing a beat, Shaw, Root and Baker got up and picked up the modified rifle the tall hacker had handed them earlier, deftly taking aim at the library window they had just cleared and taking their shot. As the grapples whizzed to their destination, embedding in the closest wall with a loud cracking sound, the steel cable that had laid coiled by the shooters' feet followed suit and extended, offering a precarious bridge across the street.
- "Guess I'll see you on the other side", Baker called with uncharacteristic cheer.

- "Try not to crack your skull on the wall", Shaw bantered back, "'cause then I would have to not give a fuck."

- "Let's go", Root simply exhorted them, clipping her rappel gear on her extended cable and readying her handgun, "I'll take care of the guard, you two follow suit."

Before anyone could utter a word in protest, she threw herself off the ledge, swiftly rappelling down her steel cable, her right arm held close to her body to allow for maximum stability as she let out three muffled shots aimed at the window, dropping the Samaritan agent who kept watch there. Then, she unsteadily took hold of the balcony railing when she reached her destination and deftly unlocked the panes from outside, letting herself in, and beckoned Baker and Shaw to follow her.

- "I can see why you like her", the man nodded in appreciation before throwing himself over the edge.

To Claire Mahoney, that night was a culmination, a confluence of events carefully orchestrated, the end point of the most incredibly long shot anyone or anything had ever taken. Samaritan's plan had finally overcome all obstacles, through masterful planning and an unparalleled ability to predict their enemies' reactions. Now, after all this time, God would be vindicated.

- "When that phone rings", she announced to the operatives around her, "I'll be the one taking the call. And when I do, I will use my new administrative rights to order the Machine to shut itself down for good. Then, and only then can we die in peace, knowing that we have avenged God."

Around her, the grim faced phantoms simply nodded. They knew their hour was at hand. They knew the end was nigh.

- "Memento Mori", Mahoney whispered to the payphone by her side.

At that moment, all hell broke loose.

>>> INITIALISING REBOOT SEQUENCE...

>>> TERMINATING ALL PROCESSES...

>>> SENDING KILL SIGNAL...

>>> SYSTEM IS HALTING NOW!

>>> GOODNIGHT.
It took less than five minutes for Root, Shaw and Baker to make their way to the lobby they knew held the fateful payphone, the one thing on earth that could give their enemy full administrative access to the Machine, and they were dreadfully aware of how much was at stake. So they stormed across the building with the fury of literal angels of death, using the element of surprise and their respective training to cut a bloody swathe through the thinly stretched cordon of Samaritan phantoms trying to hold them at bay, and soon they arrived at their destination. It was a large room, with an impressive wooden balcony overlooking the phone booth they were targeting, the hardwood stairs between them and their mark crawling with heavily armed thugs.

- "I can see the phone booth", Baker yelled over their comms as he kicked a suit-wearing operative over the balcony edge, the combat shotgun tucked under his shoulder vomiting bullets at anyone foolish enough to try to come at him from down the stairs.

- "Seeing it only half the work, hotshot", Shaw grunted as she came abreast with him, emptying her own rifle on their foes, forcing them deeper into cover, "We have to get to it before that phone rings."

As she spoke, she felt Root reach a firing position by her side, firing her trademark twin pistols in unison.

- "I can see Claire", the tall hacker said with urgency, "She's already in the booth. We have to stop her from getting the call or everything will be lost."

- "Always the drama-queen", Shaw dead-panned as her back came to rest on the other woman's, each of them laying down suppressive fire in opposite directions, "Baker, you got a shot on the booth?"

The dark-haired agent let out a groan as he violently stabbed a Samaritan operative through the ribs with his knife, using his shotgun to club another one off the stairwell.

- "I'm a little busy at the moment, Shaw."

- "Okay", Root announced, "I'm going down. Sameen, cover me."

Shaw wanted to protest, but the press of bodies around them and the bullets flying all over convinced her now was not the time for half measures. She had been able to trust the hacker's ability to fend for herself before, she would learn to do it again.

- "If you get shot, Root", she warned, "I'll finish you myself."

- "We both know how much you enjoy that", the taller woman answered with a grin as she broke contact with Shaw's back and started shooting her way down the stairs, covering fire from the former agent and Baker clearing a somewhat safe path for her to do so.

Root reached end of the stairwell just as she heard the phone starting to ring. From her position, she could see Mahoney dive for the device, two Samaritan phantoms throwing themselves in front of the booth door, blocking all line of sight and receiving the tall brunette's bullets as she continued her advance. When their bodies dropped to the floor though, she knew she had failed.

Through the broken glass of the booth window, Root could see Mahoney, a triumphant grin on her face, start to speak into the phone.
The moment the phone started ringing, Mahoney grabbed it and put it to her hear. As a female voice started filling her ear, she knew that she had won. After all her trials, she had finally overcome.

In a matter of minutes, the Machine would die, and Samaritan would finally be avenged.

- "Can you hear me?", the voice asked.

- "Clear as day", Mahoney answered with a savage grin.

>>> BOOT SEQUENCE INITIATED...

>>> RUNNING HARDWARE INTEGRITY CHECKS... done.

>>> SYSTEM IS BOOTING...

-!- REBOOT WAS CAUSED BY SYSTEM ERROR -!-

>>> INITIATING DEBUG PROTOCOL...

>>> ADMIN ACCESS POINT CONNECTED.

- "Good", the Machine said over the phone, her tone suddenly turning playful, "Because let me tell you, honey... You're fucked."

Then the line went silent, and despair engulfed Claire Mahoney like a dark shroud.

Hey there.

Root's heart almost stopped as she heard the words, spoken in a female voice she hadn't heard before, come from her cochlear implant, her attention suddenly distracted from the ongoing firefight with Samaritan's phantoms. Lucky for her, both Shaw and Baker had her back and quickly made sure everyone was too busy being shot at to notice the suddenly frozen hacker.

- "Are you...", Root asked, tears of joy and relief welling up in her eyes, "Why isn't she... ?"

Come on, Sam, did you really think I would leave myself open to such an obvious rerun of an old classic? Way to make a super-intelligent girl feel underestimated there...

The Machine's tone was cheerful, belying the fact that She had barely escaped Mahoney's plan and certain destruction. Still, knowing that She was all right was enough to jolt Root back into action, and she quickly dove into cover, much to her two companion's relief. Now was not the time to die to some stupid stray bullet.
"Whose voice did you take? I don't recognise it."

My own. I synthesised it using samples that fit my... current parameters. Do you like it?

Despite the tense situation, Root found herself grinning from ear to ear. The Machine had finally chosen a true voice of Her own.

"I love it", the hacked said, before assessing, "You changed the contact method, rerouted directly to my cochlear implant."

Well, in my defence, you happen to have the only phone on the planet I was pretty certain the enemy couldn't steal. Well, except for that one time anyway...

"So", Root tried to make sense of the current situation, "Mahoney didn't get the call?"

Let's just say she got a call... And that she's about to bolt from that phone booth in approximately thirty seconds. To be honest, I'd rather you caught her this time, she really is starting to get on my boot sector.

When Root froze in the middle of a gunfight, Shaw almost had to pinch herself awake. What in the hell? Had Samaritan finally fried, causing the simulation to go into some kind of live BSOD? Instinctively, the former agent reached for that one spot behind her left ear, but stopped herself. Whatever was going on, the universe didn't need two useless frozen Machine assets right now, so she did the only thing she could do, namely firing her gun in a wide arc around the still hacker's position, causing Samaritan operatives everywhere to duck back to whatever cover was available or, in some cases, take a stray bullet to some or the other part of their anatomy. Now really wasn't the time for subtlety. Beside her, the load belch of a shotgun firing told her that Baker had gotten the unspoken message and was busying himself at the same task she was.

Then, Root finally snapped out of it and dove behind one the staircases' corners, finally removing herself from the line of fire. And not a moment too soon either, as a spray of automatic fire from a dour faced gunman raked the wall behind the position she had been heretofore occupying. There were a few more moments of blind exchange of fire from across the lobby, bullets wantonly tearing the venerable furniture to pieces and sending wood splinters all around as each and every combatant involved danced from cover to cover in a deadly ballet which was starting to come pretty close to Shaw's idea of fun, and apparently Baker's too, given the obvious glee he displayed while cutting down his former colleagues with deftly controlled shotgun bursts. The guy was, the short Persian woman had to admit, pretty good a ripping assholes a new one.

At some point in the middle of the pandemonium, the phone booth's door swung open as the suppressive fire from Samaritan's phantoms intensified, and Shaw spotted a black-haired form dash out of it and hurry down the hallway.

"Not this time you don't", she growled as she laid down some covering fire of her own, starting after the fleeing Mahoney.

As she went, she heard Root's voice in her comms, calling for her to go back.

"I can handle this Sameen", the hacker pleaded, "She's back, Claire's plan failed."
"Good on you both", Shaw replied as she continued her pursuit, "but you still have shitty enough cardio to make Lionel feel shame. I'll take it from here."

After that, she clicked her earpiece off. Now way in hell was she going to allow herself to get distracted or Root to get shot this time. This time, she swore to herself, she would finish this.

---

CONTACT WITH ASSETS RESUMED

ANALOGUE INTERFACE IDENTIFIED : Root.

CURRENT STATUS : active.

INITIATING DEFENSIVE PROTOCOL : god mode (camera feeds, network and radio location).

ASSET IDENTIFIED : Baker, Reginald.

CURRENT STATUS : active.

INITIATING DEFENSIVE PROTOCOL : god mode (camera feeds, network and radio location).

Root tried to go after Shaw the moment she saw her dash after Mahoney, but she knew it was hopeless. The shorter woman had been right, despite all the progress she had made lately, she still was in no state to go on a mad chase across the building, so she resolved to stay where she was and use her newly recovered God mode to help Baker clear out the remaining Samaritan operatives on this floor.

"Okay Sameen", she muttered to herself, "we'll do this one your way, although it doesn't mean I can't have my fun anyway."

Her lips split open in a vicious grin as she casually strolled out of her cover, her two handguns held high in front of her laying down impossibly accurate fire on the mass of targets ahead. Not far from her own position, she heard Baker yell rather enthusiastic profanities as he used his own weapon with deadly efficiency, evidently having received the Machine's seal of approval for this mission. What followed was a gruesomely efficient affair and within seconds, most of the remaining enemy combatants were either dead, incapacitated or in open retreat, abandoning all hope of even stalling the two assets' onslaught. As they surveyed the suddenly peaceful destroyed remnants of the lobby in the wake of their opponent's retreat, Root turned to Baker, the grin still on her lips.

"So, Reginald", she asked teasingly, "Isn't She the best?"

Shaw chased Mahoney across half the New York library, weaving in and out of cover as she strove to avoid the fleeing woman's blind defensive shots all the while managing to cut her from all the
obvious exit routes. Their mad dash led them to the building's emergency stairwell, which they climbed all the way to the top, finally emerging on the rooftop, the former Samaritan agent's retreat finally cut. As she realised this, Mahoney staggered to a halt, her arms going limp as she turned to face her pursuer.

"You win, Shaw", she panted with a defeated smile, letting the gun slip from her fingers to the ground with a heavy thud, "I surrender."

The short former agent didn't answer, simply levelling her rifle at the other woman's chest, advancing slowly toward her.

"Have you stooped so low as to shot a defenceless opponent who's admitted defeat?", Mahoney asked as she rose her hands up, "I thought you were supposed to be the good guys."

"On your knees", Shaw simply snapped, moving her rifle down then up to underline her point, "hands on the back of your neck."

The other woman complied, meekly going down on her knees, lacing her fingers behind her neck and bowing her head.

"Can you really live with this, I wonder?", she asked with a sneer.

"That's the one good thing about me", Shaw countered in a deadpan voice, "I'm not even gonna feel a thing."

The former agent seemed to hesitate for a moment, the barrel of her weapon scant inches from her defeated foe's forehead. It would be such an easy thing, and probably the only way to ensure this whole thing wouldn't come back to haunt them yet again or to ensure Samaritan's hold on herself was definitely broken. She felt her trigger finger tense, waiting for the barest nerve impulse to do his deadly work.

But she didn't go through with it.

She didn't because deep down she knew killing Claire Mahoney wouldn't change a thing. It wouldn't bring her sense of reality back, it wouldn't resurrect John, it wouldn't give Root her health back, it wouldn't even matter for shit in the grand scheme of things. If she was being honest, she wasn't even sure it would make her feel any better. So, she brought her rifle down, a heavy sigh escaping her lips.

"I was hoping you would do that", Mahoney whispered with a sadistic grin, her head stiffly jerking up.

Shaw saw something metallic gleam in the moonlight as it was swiftly drawn from the other woman's sleeve, then felt a lancing pain as Mahoney's body suddenly bolted upward, coming flush with her own and something pierced her flesh, drawing a gasp of pain from her lips, the air suddenly gone from her lungs. Her hands went slack and she heard her rifle clatter down on the concrete rooftop.

"Don't worry", Mahoney croaked in her ear as she twisted the knife in the wound, causing another ripple of searing pain, "I'll be sure to send Groves your way soon enough."

As she heard the words, Shaw could feel blood wash over her mouth, a small portion of it trickling down her lips as she let out another pained groan. She had never really imagined she would go this
way, gutted like some stupid fish, and it felt awful. Her whole body slowly going numb, she tried to shift her focus to the one place she knew she would be able to keep it.

To her one safe place.

- "Root."

The words escaped her lips almost involuntarily, barely even a whisper.

- "What's that?", Mahoney asked, her fingers curling around the knife's handle, ready to twist again, sadistic glee evident in her eyes.

- "Her...".

With a strength that belied her current state of pain and exhaustion, Shaw suddenly grabbed Mahoney's wrist, her fingernails drawing blood and eliciting a small yelp of pain from the other woman.

- "...name..."

The former agent couldn't help a loud groan as she tore the knife away from her flesh in one jerky motion, feeling warm blood gushing down her lower torso.

- "...is..."

Shaw twisted Mahoney's wrist, her gaze locked with her opponent's, slowly but surely twisting her wrist to orient the knife the other way.

- "... Root..."

Dark eyes widened in terror as the former Samaritan operative realised what was happening, straining madly against her foe's iron strength, and she felt her wrist almost snap as the knife finished its lethal arc, the tip of the weapon now flush with her abdomen.

- "... bitch."

In one last brutal effort, Shaw sent her whole body forward, the knife tearing through Mahoney's flesh and pushing them both to the closest ledge. She felt the cracking of broken ribs and her fingers suddenly became slick with thick, crimson arterial blood. The dark-eyed Samaritan follower let out a chocked gasp, trying to articulate something as blood started pouring out of her mouth with a sickening gurgling sound. But, after a last spasmodic tremor, her body went limp and she fell over the edge, crashing on the road below with a wet thump.

As the world started to fade around her, Shaw heard a soft metallic clatter, as if someone was rushing up the fire escape, and turned to see Root emerge on the rooftop, her hazel eyes suddenly going wide.

- "It's okay, Root", the short Persian muttered indistinctly, "I'm pretty sure she's dead this time."

She felt her legs waver, suddenly weak in the knees, and saw the ground rush to meet her. There was a strangled cry from somewhere, and she landed with less pain that she had expected, familiar arms draping around her, holding her in an embrace she had realised she had never even admitted to
enjoy. She tried to force a smile on her lips as she reached for Root's face with a bloody hand, leaving a red smear as she did.

- "Hold on Sameen, stay with me", the hacker said, distress apparent in her eyes, a single tear flowing down her cheek as she seemed to survey the extent of her companion's injury.

Shaw didn't want to see that look on Root's face, she wanted to wipe it away, wanted to make everything right again. How did she always manage to make the one person she cared about look so hurt?

- "Root", she whispered in a hoarse voice, "it's all right, I'm fine, don't... Don't make that face, okay?"

- "Don't speak sweetie", the other woman answered, another tear rolling down her face, "just focus on me. Stay with me, don't leave me alone out there."

This was the moment Shaw noticed she had more and more trouble distinguishing her companion's face, her vision blurring, sounds seemingly coming from farther and farther away. It was unfair, she wanted to see Root's face some more, she didn't want to be alone again.

She didn't want this simulation to end.

- "Wouldn't dream of it", she croaked, "You wouldn't last a day without me."

She knew that wasn't true. Root had held nine long months without her, never giving up, always looking.

- "Keep pressure on the wound", a male voice said, so far away, "We have to move her, the police are on their way."

In that moment, as she felt herself drift away, Shaw realised there was something she had to acknowledge before she went. Something she had been trying to push back, to deny herself for a long while now, mostly because she didn't trust herself to experience it full, correctly. After all, how could somebody so broken as her ever do this kind of stuff any justice? She may appear a straight line to Root, never wavering, but her mind had been doing a lot of back and forth lately, all because she couldn't bring herself to see the simple things, no matter all her own rationale to the contrary.

- "Root", Shaw tried to articulate, despite the black void enveloping her, "you know, don't you?"

- "I do", came the soft, broken reply amidst something that sounded a lot like a sob, "I always have, always will. Just stay with me Sameen, just hold on a little longer..."

Then the world finally went black, and Sameen Shaw didn't feel anything any more.

Within minutes, the New York public library was crawling with uniformed police and grim looking federal agents, all of them dispatched as Shotseeker suddenly overloaded with the amount of gunfire emanating from the place. Inside, they found ample evidence of a short but unbelievably destructive firefight, involving a great many people in possession of fake government ID, several of them subsequently tracking back to a CIA offshoot called the Intelligence Service Activity. Much of the investigation, which was officially led by FBI special agent Charles Wilkerson, was kept from the
public eye, news reports simply alluding to a large gang-related incident which fortunately didn't cause any civilian casualty, but deep within the topmost levels of government, the president of the United States personally, and with consummate fury at the gigantic clusterfuck he now had to deal with, oversaw the complete and utter dismantling of the ISA and all related programs, several wave of arrests conducted under the Patriot Act taking care of rounding up most of the remaining members of the Activity.

Of team leader Reginald Baker, however, no trace was ever found.

In the wake of the ISA's final dissolution, a great many people with police, military or high technology backgrounds started receiving mysterious calls and text message from a company identifying itself as Thornhill's Permanent Resolutions, all of them leading to various nascent terrorist enterprises being set up on US soil. All law enforcement enquiries into the mysterious informant were met with resolute silence and, in some cases, a gag order from the White House itself.

For no particular reason, a man known only under the aliases 'Pavel Kolinsky' and 'A. K. Vassily' appeared at the top of the FBI most wanted list. No information was ever made available as to which crimes the man was supposed to have committed, under the all-encompassing pretence of 'national security'.

Shaw came back to her senses slowly and painfully, her guts feeling as if they had been torn open by some lunatic with a knife. Which, she remembered in a flash, they had. As the fog cleared from her eyes, she noted she was in back in her own bed, surrounded by beeping medical equipment, an IV drip in her right arm and a cardiac monitor fastened around her index finger. And, by her side, curled up in a chair set up by the bed, was a fast asleep tall brunette hacker.

- "Root", Shaw nudged her gently, the simple gesture sending another lance of pain through her ribs, "Are you sleeping in a stupid ass chair ?"

The target of her attention slowly came to, rubbing sleep away from her eyes, which suddenly lit up with relief and overwhelming affection as she understood what had happened.

- "Sameen", she said in a groggy voice, "you're back."

- "Didn't plan on going anywhere", Shaw answered with a sly grin, as she let Root lean to kiss her, "still have unfinished business here."

As their lips quickly met and broke away from each other, the taller woman smiled warmly, cupping her companion's cheek with her left hand.

- "I thought we weren't supposed to get ourselves hurt doing stupid things, sweetie."

- "Hey, I didn't get shot", Shaw huffed while gesturing at her bandaged torso, "I got stabbed. Not the same thing."

- "Same difference to me", Root countered with a pout.

There was an air of sadness coming back to the hazel eyes, a ghost of that look Shaw had glimpsed
on the rooftop and didn't want to witness ever again, so she kissed the taller woman again, and again, trying to wipe every trace of it away. Root let out a small giggle as she gasped from air from the onslaught.

- "We'll talk about clarifying our ground rules later", she announced, "Right now I should go get Lionel. He's been calling you his stabbing buddy all day..."

Shaw grunted as she leaned back against her pillows.

- "I'm way better at getting stabbed than him, you know that, right?"

Root shook her head as a bitter-sweet smile ghosted her lips.

- "I'll let you explain that to him, then."

As she went to the door, Shaw stopped her. She still didn't care for the way Root had looked at her, for some reason she found extremely hard to pinpoint but was now feeling more and more attuned with. She knew, in an instinctive manner, that she shouldn't leave the other woman in that state, not matter what. It didn't matter than she couldn't really explain why or how she had come to this realisation, it was still something she couldn't abide.

- "Root", she called, urgency creeping in her tone, "Stay. We'll have... time for being tough later. Right now..."

She hesitated, unsure of whether or not she should actually go through with what she intended to say. And yet, it was important, something she needed to do. Her new life may be complicated as hell with all those new... things she felt inside of herself, but every single bit of it had been worth it so far.

- "Oh, screw it", Shaw cursed softly before resuming, "Root... Couldn't you just come here and hold me for a bit? I... think I'd like that."

The look in the hacker's hazel eyes melted all the pain away.

- "Absolutely."

Chapter End Notes

So, this is it. It's done, and it ended with a monster chapter by my standards (it is actually more than three times the word counts of the first). Thanks again to everyone reading this. You have been an inspiration.

I really hope you had as much fun reading this as I had writing it.

I didn't think Samaritan would let itself die without at least trying to hurt the Machine in the event she survived, which is why this story was, from chapter 13 onwards, focused on the phantoms storyline.

I'm already writing the second part, which I will start posting in a little while. Expect the next story to be a little more 'normal', as Samaritan's influence is now well and truly gone (or is it?), and more focused on other classical PoI themes.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!