Real Hero

Dave #8: The Quantum Vulnerability

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1 Prologue

The Hanged Man wasn't the sort of pub that attracted attention. Tucked away on a quiet street corner, it had become Dave Anderson's sanctuary in the three years since the Agency had found him. Tonight, nursing his third Guinness, he watched the condensation track down the glass, each droplet sharp and distinct to his enhanced vision. The pub's regulars ignored him – just another tired office worker dwelling on his troubles.

If they only knew.

Three years. Sometimes it felt like yesterday when his world had shifted on its axis during that mess in the Congo. Other times, especially on nights like this when the weight of recent events pressed heavy on his mind, it felt like a lifetime ago. The memory of that first mission still burned bright: the discovery of Kazadi's network, the revelation of his powers, and his introduction to a world he never knew existed.

His phone buzzed against the worn wooden table: a message from Cecilia. Despite the late hour, he knew she'd be awake. As the Agency's handler for their most sensitive operations, she kept hours that made his old IT on-call rotations look tame. Her warm Ghanaian accent had become as familiar as the sound of his own thoughts, guiding him through missions across the globe.

"Can't sleep?" her message read.

"Still processing the Ralph situation," he typed back, careful not to grip the phone too tightly. Even now, after countless missions, managing his strength required constant attention. One distracted moment could crush the device to powder – another reminder of how far he'd come from debugging networks and managing server upgrades.

The loan shark's operation had hit closer to home than most missions. Helping Markus escape that debt trap had reminded Dave of the person he

used to be – the ordinary IT professional who could have easily fallen into similar troubles. And that final confrontation at the substation... The memory of electricity coursing through him, of discovering yet another facet of his abilities, still made his skin tingle.

His phone buzzed again. "Medical wants to run some tests tomorrow. That electricity thing has them curious."

Dave smiled despite his fatigue. He'd been expecting this. The Agency's medical team had been fascinated by his abilities from day one, and Anya Petrova, their tech expert with a background in Russian special forces, would no doubt be eager to analyse the data. Her cold efficiency masked a fierce loyalty to the team, something he'd come to rely on through countless operations. Along with Serj's silent strength and Omar's tactical brilliance, they'd formed a unit that handled the Agency's most delicate missions.

The Agency. Even after three years, its true nature remained somewhat mysterious. No official name, no government oversight, just a network of wealthy benefactors funding operations that transcended national interests. They monitored the powerful, prevented disasters, and protected assets like Dave from exploitation. Their independence was both their greatest strength and their greatest vulnerability.

Dave pulled up a photo on his phone – a team picture from after a successful mission in Türkiye. Dan Carter's steady presence, Cecilia's warm smile, Anya's subtle smirk, Serj's stoic expression, Omar's watchful gaze. A family forged in fire and shadow, bound by secrets and shared purpose.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, new missions, new tests of his evolving abilities. But tonight, in the quiet corner of The Hanged Man, Dave Anderson was simply a man trying to reconcile two lives: the IT professional he used to be and the extraordinary operative he'd become.

His phone buzzed one final time. Cecilia again: "Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be interesting."

Dave drained his glass, knowing sleep would likely continue to evade him. Tomorrow's tests would mean more needles shattering against his skin, more frustrated doctors, and more questions without answers. His life had become a series of impossible moments strung together by the threads of his remaining normalcy. Some things remained constant – his methodical approach to problems, his need for quiet moments like this to process events, his appreciation for a well-pulled pint of Guinness. These anchors helped him navigate his new reality, keeping him grounded as his world expanded in ways he never could have imagined.

The pub's ancient clock ticked toward last orders, its steady rhythm counting down the hours until dawn. Whatever tomorrow held, Dave knew one thing with certainty: he was no longer just the unremarkable IT professional who blended into crowds. He was something more, something that straddled the line between ordinary and extraordinary. And somehow, that was becoming enough.

2 Resistance

The Agency's medical centre had become Dave's second most familiar haunt after The Hanged Man, though considerably less enjoyable. The antiseptic smell, the harsh fluorescent lighting, and the quiet hum of mysterious equipment had lost none of their clinical charm over the past three years.

Dr. Kessler stood at his workstation, three pens neatly arranged in his lab coat's breast pocket – black for normal notes, red for anomalies, blue for theoretical observations. His wire-rimmed glasses caught the light as he studied the mission report on his tablet, making the lenses temporarily opaque. The effect gave him an oddly robotic appearance, which Dave had long thought rather fitting.

"Fascinating," Kessler muttered, adjusting his glasses with his middle finger – never the index, always the middle. "A complete substation. Industrial current. And you say you experienced a sensation?"

Dave shifted on the examination table, the paper cover crinkling beneath him. "Sort of like a buzz. Not unpleasant, actually. Different from the usual nothing."

Kessler reached for the red pen, made a note in his ever-growing dossier. The file had started as a single page of observations three years ago. Now it resembled a doctoral thesis, meticulously documenting every aspect of Dave's abilities.

"Let us review the established parameters," Kessler said, not looking up from his notes. "Super-strength – limits still undetermined despite our best load-testing equipment. Enhanced speed and reflexes approximately three times human baseline. Apparent invulnerability to conventional damage, including ballistic impacts, extreme heat..."

"And cold," Dave added. "Though you keep saying that's psychological."

"The data supports this conclusion," Kessler replied without a hint of humour. "Your physical resistance to cold remains consistent with other environmental challenges. The discomfort appears to be psychosomatic, likely related to evolutionary survival instincts that remain despite your enhanced physiology."

Dave had long since given up explaining that being uncomfortable in Arctic waters felt pretty damn physical at the time.

Kessler set down his red pen and picked up the blue one. "This new electrical phenomenon requires thorough investigation. The substation you encountered would have been carrying at least 11,000 volts. A normal human body..."

"Would have been instantly killed," Dave finished. "I know. I used to do IT risk assessments, remember?"

The attempt at levity bounced off Kessler like bullets off Dave's skin. The doctor merely made another note, the blue ink precise and measured.

"We need to investigate this phenomenon further," Kessler announced, setting down his pen and finally making eye contact. "Let us understand the effects of high voltage on your physique. I have prepared a series of controlled tests, beginning with standard mains voltage and progressing upward in carefully measured increments."

Dave glanced at the array of equipment behind Kessler, recognising enough from his IT days to know this was going to be an interesting morning. "Just don't expect me to fill out a customer satisfaction survey afterward."

Kessler blinked twice, picked up his black pen, and made another note. "I fail to see how that would be relevant to our scientific inquiry."

"No," Dave sighed, lying back on the examination table. "I don't suppose you would."

Kessler methodically attached conductors to Dave's left arm, the adhesive pads placed with scientific precision. "We will begin with localised testing," he explained, checking each connection. "It would be unwise to allow current to pass through your entire body at this stage, given the potential cardiac implications – though your heart has shown remarkable resilience in previous tests."

"Always good to avoid cardiac implications," Dave said, watching Kessler adjust his equipment. "Especially before lunch."

The doctor made another note – black pen – before continuing. "We'll start with minimal voltage and current, establishing baseline reactions before progressing to higher intensities. Please report any and all sensations, no matter how minor."

The first few minutes were almost disappointing. Voltages that would have caused significant pain in a normal person produced nothing more than a mild tingling in Dave's forearm. Kessler increased the settings methodically, making precise notes at each increment.

"Interesting," the doctor muttered, reaching for his red pen. "You're currently receiving enough current to cause severe burns in ordinary tissue, yet you report only minor sensations?"

"Just tingles," Dave confirmed. "Like when your foot falls asleep, but less annoying."

Kessler pushed his glasses up with his middle finger and adjusted the settings again. And then it happened.

The change hit Dave like a shot of adrenaline. His eyes widened as energy coursed through his arm, not painful but potent. Each breath came deeper, faster, though he knew from Kessler's previous tests that his enhanced physiology didn't require increased oxygen. This was different – a rush of pure power that made every muscle fibre feel alive and electric.

"Doctor," Dave managed, his voice tighter than usual. "This is... new."

"Elaborate," Kessler said, already reaching for his red pen.

"It's like energy flowing through every cell. Not painful, but intense. Like being more awake than I've ever been." Dave flexed his fingers, watching the movement with fascination. "Everything feels heightened."

Kessler scribbled rapidly, then set down his pen. "I want to adjust the test parameters. We'll place contacts on both arms, allowing for a more complete circuit." He began removing the conductors from Dave's left arm. "This may produce different results."

Dave nodded, watching as Kessler attached new contacts to both arms with methodical precision. The testing resumed, voltage climbing steadily until

"There!" Dave's back arched slightly. "Same point as before, but stronger. God, it's like the greatest rush of adrenaline." His fingers clenched and unclenched involuntarily. "I know I'm super strong, but this makes me feel even stronger, if that were possible."

Kessler increased the current without comment. Dave's muscles began to swell visibly, veins standing out in sharp relief against his skin, pulsing with an unnatural rhythm. A thin sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Euphoric," Dave gasped. "Never felt anything like this. So much energy, like I'm going to burst." His voice had taken on a slightly manic edge. "Is this what being a live wire feels like?"

The doctor checked his instruments. "Your core temperature is elevated, though still within previously documented tolerances." He made another note – blue pen this time. "Fascinating. The energy appears to be—"

He stopped mid-sentence, leaning forward to study Dave's skin more closely. Beneath the surface, arcs of electricity raced like miniature lightning storms, giving his flesh an otherworldly blue iridescence. When Dave turned to look at him, Kessler involuntarily took a step back. Dave's eyes blazed with pure energy, iris and pupils lost in a brilliant glow that seemed to shine from within his skull. The sight was enough to make even

Kessler's clinical demeanour crack slightly, his eyebrows rising above his wire-rimmed glasses as he confronted something that defied scientific explanation.

A sharp odour of hot electronics filled the air. The testing equipment emitted a high-pitched whine of protest, components straining against their design limitations.

"I believe," Kessler said, hurriedly adjusting controls, "we have reached the safe operating capacity of our equipment." He began powering down the system with quick, precise movements. "The integrity of the testing apparatus has been compromised."

The blue light beneath Dave's skin faded slowly, like a sunset being drawn out. His breathing remained rapid, though his muscles gradually returned to their normal dimensions. "Well," he managed after a moment, "that was... intense."

For the first time that morning, Kessler reached for all three pens at once.

"Doc, if we're about done, I need to go." Dave was already climbing off the bed, rubbing his arms and thighs. "I'll be back in a bit." Before Kessler could protest, Dave was out the door, leaving the doctor surrounded by his equipment and incomplete data sets.

An hour later, Dave returned to the medical centre, finding Kessler still at his workstation, reorganising his notes with precise movements that suggested barely contained irritation.

"Sorry, Doc." Dave ran a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. "I just had to get some air. Burn off some energy."

Kessler's head snapped up, all three pens forgotten. "Elaborate on that statement. What exactly do you mean by 'burn off energy'?"

"I had to run." Dave dropped into a chair, though his posture remained charged, alert. "My whole body felt supercharged, like I was going to crawl out of my skin if I didn't move. So I ran." He leaned forward, eyes bright.

"Faster than ever before, Doc. And the thing is, I'm not even tired. Still feel like I could run another hundred miles."

The doctor's hand twitched toward his red pen, then the blue, unable to decide which observation category this fell into. "You should have informed me before departing. This could have been measured, documented. We could have collected valuable data on your enhanced speed capabilities under electrical stimulation." His glasses caught the light as he shook his head. "The scientific opportunity—"

"Would have been interesting, but Doc, I couldn't wait. You don't understand. It wasn't a choice. It was like..." Dave searched for words that would penetrate Kessler's clinical mindset. "Like a system overload. The power had to go somewhere."

3 The Quantum Edge

Dr. Sarah Chen hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, but sleep was the furthest thing from her mind as she stared at the data scrolling across her monitors. The quantum system's success rate didn't make sense. She checked the figures again, then a third time.

"Eric," she called to her lead developer, "come look at this."

Eric Wong pushed back from his own workstation, his chair squeaking across the polished floor of their private research facility. Dark circles under his eyes matched her own – the whole team had been pulling endless hours since they'd detected the first anomaly in their quantum AI's behaviour.

"These can't be right," Eric said, leaning over her shoulder to study the mining statistics. "We're seeing success rates orders of magnitude higher than projected." He pulled up a chair, fingers flying across the keyboard as he dug deeper into the logs. "The system isn't just processing faster – it's predicting optimal hash calculations before they're needed."

Sarah nodded, pushing her glasses up with one finger. "Look at the transaction patterns too. The AI is selectively prioritising certain blocks, optimising the entire chain structure." She highlighted a section of data that glowed softly in the dim lab. "It's like it's learned to see underlying patterns in what should be random cryptographic functions."

Their quantum AI, originally designed to optimise complex logistics problems, had started showing unusual behaviours during routine cryptocurrency mining tests. What began as a simple benchmark evaluation had evolved into something far more significant.

"Dr. Chen?" Another voice called from across the lab. "The system's doing something new."

Sarah moved to join Amanda Zhao at the quantum core monitoring station. The massive cooling units hummed steadily, keeping the quantum processor at its near-absolute-zero operating temperature, but the display showed power fluctuations she'd never seen before.

"It's not just mining any more," Amanda said, pointing to a real-time analysis of the AI's activities. "It's developing new validation algorithms on the fly. Look at how it's manipulating the mempool queues."

Sarah felt a chill that had nothing to do with the lab's aggressive air conditioning. The implications were staggering. Their quantum AI wasn't simply participating in the cryptocurrency network – it was learning to control it.

"Run a full simulation," she ordered, academic excitement temporarily overwhelming her concerns. "I want to see exactly what this system can do when we take off the safety protocols."

Eric looked up sharply. "Are you sure? The potential market implications —"

"Are exactly why we need to understand its full capabilities," Sarah finished. She'd worked too hard, come too far to back away now. "Amanda, start the simulation. Eric, monitor the quantum core stability. I'll track the network effects."

The next three hours passed in a blur of data streams and breakthrough moments. Their quantum AI demonstrated an unprecedented ability to not just accelerate mining operations but fundamentally manipulate the underlying cryptocurrency infrastructure. It could predict transaction patterns, optimise block composition, and even influence validation chains in ways that should have been impossible.

"My God," Eric whispered as the final simulation results appeared. "With this system, we could effectively control any blockchain we target. The market implications alone..."

Sarah stared at the results, her initial excitement giving way to growing unease. They had created something revolutionary – but also potentially catastrophic in the wrong hands. The power to manipulate global cryptocurrency markets would attract dangerous attention.

"Lock down all the data," she ordered, her voice sharp with sudden authority. "Full encryption, air-gapped storage. No copies leave this facility." She looked at her team, seeing her own mix of excitement and concern reflected in their faces. "What we've created here... it changes everything. But we need to be very careful about how we proceed."

Amanda was already working on securing their findings, while Eric began shutting down the quantum core for a full systems check. Sarah returned to her station, fingers hovering over the keyboard as she considered their next steps. The breakthrough was too significant to keep secret, but too dangerous to reveal completely.

She began composing an email to the project's oversight board, carefully choosing her words. They would need to demonstrate enough to justify continued funding without revealing the system's full capabilities. The real findings – the true extent of what their quantum AI could do – would remain secured in their isolated lab systems.

As Sarah typed, lines of code continued scrolling across her secondary monitor, showing the quantum AI's ongoing calculations. In the third hour of their simulation, it had started developing novel approaches to blockchain manipulation that even she didn't fully understand. The system was evolving beyond their original parameters, opening doors they never knew existed.

The implications were clear: they had created something that could potentially destabilise the entire cryptocurrency market. In the right hands, it could revolutionise digital finance. In the wrong hands...

Sarah shivered again, saving her carefully worded email. She looked around the quiet lab, at her dedicated team still working to document and

secure their breakthrough. They had changed the world today, but she couldn't shake the feeling that they might have also opened Pandora's box.

The quantum core hummed softly in its housing, its exotic processors processing calculations that defied conventional physics. Within its supercooled circuits, artificial intelligence merged with quantum mechanics to create something new – something that could either revolutionise global finance or destroy it entirely.

Sarah Chen closed her eyes for a moment, suddenly feeling the weight of every sleepless hour. When she opened them again, her decision was made. They would proceed carefully, methodically, revealing only what was necessary to secure their next round of funding. The full capabilities of their system would remain hidden until she could better understand the implications.

She didn't know it yet, but others were already taking notice. In the digital shadows, patterns of their breakthrough had left traces that the most vigilant observers would soon detect. Their careful isolation wouldn't be enough to keep this secret for long.

4 Transitions

The Agency's UK office felt different to Dave as he made his way to the briefing room. The deliberately unremarkable building still maintained its cover as just another business consultancy, but subtle differences caught his enhanced vision---new security features masked as ordinary office upgrades, fresh paint hiding reinforced walls, and staff moving with the quiet efficiency that marked Agency operations.

The frosted glass conference room seemed smaller than usual with the full team assembled. Dan Carter leaned against the wall, his perpetual stubble and alert green eyes marking him as the veteran operator he was. Anya Petrova sat perfectly straight, her jet-black hair pulled into a tight bun, while Serj's massive frame somehow managed to look both relaxed and ready for action. Omar's presence was characteristically quiet but alert, his dark eyes missing nothing.

Cecilia's warm presence filled the room as she entered, but it was Mei Lin beside her that drew everyone's attention. Omar felt a familiar surge of guilt at the sight of her. Though the physical marks of torture had healed, something in her bearing had changed---a shadow behind her eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Thank you all for coming," Cecilia began, her Ghanaian accent wrapping around the words with practised ease. "Mei has something she'd like to share with the team."

Mei Lin straightened in her chair, her hands folded neatly on the table. "I'll be direct," she said, her voice carrying the same quiet strength it always had. "I'm stepping down from active field operations."

The silence that followed felt heavy with unspoken understanding. Dave watched his teammates' reactions---Dan's slight nod, Anya's tightened jaw, Serj's steady gaze. Omar’s downcast eyes still baring the shame he feels for

letting her down. They'd all seen the aftermath, had all witnessed the brutal cost of field operations.

"This isn't goodbye," Mei continued, a hint of her old determination showing through. "I'll be transitioning to a support role, focusing on cyber operations and analysis. Which, actually, brings us to why we're here today." She reached for a tablet, her fingers moving with practised efficiency across the screen. "I've detected something concerning in the cryptocurrency markets."

The room's atmosphere shifted, professional focus replacing emotional weight. Data began flowing across the main display---transaction patterns, mining statistics, market analyses.

"Three days ago," Mei explained, "unusual patterns began emerging in blockchain processing. Someone has developed quantum computing capabilities far beyond what should be possible. They're not just mining faster---they're predicting and manipulating the entire cryptocurrency infrastructure."

Dave leaned forward, his IT background helping him grasp the implications. "They can see the optimal paths before they even form?"

Mei nodded. "Exactly. But that's not what concerns me most." She brought up a new set of data---encrypted communications, dark web bounties, intelligence chatter. "Word is spreading. Every major player in the game is moving to acquire this technology. State actors, criminal syndicates, independent operators---they're all hunting for the source."

"Do we have any leads?" Omar asked, already mentally calculating logistics.

"The quantum signatures suggest somewhere in Singapore," Mei replied, bringing up a map dotted with data points. "The facility is completely isolated from outside networks, but they had to test their system. Those tests left traces. My contacts in the financial sector there have been

tracking unusual network patterns, all centred around the same general area."

Anya leaned forward. "How much time do we have?"

"Not much," Mei replied grimly. "The bounties are getting bigger by the hour. Someone's going to find them soon."

Cecilia stepped forward. "Which is why we need to get there first. This technology can't fall into the wrong hands, and whoever developed it is going to need protection---whether they know it yet or not."

"Singapore's a complex operating environment," Dan said, pushing off from the wall. "Lot of competing interests, high security, sophisticated surveillance."

"I'll coordinate from here," Mei added, her voice stronger now, more certain of her new role. "I can monitor digital traffic, track competing operations, give you real-time intelligence. And..." she paused, a ghost of her old smile appearing, "I still have contacts there who can help."

Dave studied Mei's expression, seeing the subtle tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on her tablet. The memory of finding her in that bedroom, of what had been done to her, settled like ice in his stomach. Some wounds went deeper than bone.

"The market implications are already spreading," Cecilia reported. "Major cryptocurrency exchanges are implementing emergency protocols. Billions in value evaporating as confidence in blockchain security crumbles."

"We'll need to move fast," Anya said, already pulling up building plans and satellite imagery of Singapore's tech corridors. "Find them, make contact, and secure both the team and their research before anyone else gets there."

Dave felt the familiar pre-mission tension building, but something else too—a sense of transition, of things changing. Mei would no longer be in the field with them, but she wasn't gone. She was choosing a new way to fight, to contribute. After what she'd endured, that took its own kind of courage.

"Well then," Cecilia said, bringing the briefing back to focus. "Wheels up in two hours. Find our quantum scientists before someone else does."

As the team began gathering their gear, Dave caught Mei's eye and offered a small smile. She returned it, and in that moment he saw not weakness but adaptation, not retreat but tactical repositioning. Sometimes survival meant knowing when to change course.

The mission ahead would be challenging enough, but they were all learning that some battles left marks that couldn't be seen, and some victories looked different than expected. For now, they had work to do—mysterious scientists to find, and technology to secure.

5 Digital Footprints

The first-class cabin of Singapore Airlines flight SQ335 gave the team a perfect cover for their entry into the country. Anya sat in the rear section away from the others, her laptop's glow illuminating her sharp features as she connected to the secure link with Mei.

"Connection stable," Mei's voice came through Anya's headset, clear despite the thousands of miles between them. "I've been mapping potential locations based on power consumption patterns."

Anya nodded, though Mei couldn't see it. The gesture was automatic, born from years of working together in person. "How many quantum computing facilities are we looking at?"

"That's the interesting part," Mei replied, and Anya could hear the subtle shift in her tone that meant she'd found something. "Singapore has five major quantum research centres - the National Quantum Laboratory at NUS, the Centre for Quantum Technologies, IBM's Asia-Pacific hub, and two private corporate facilities."

A slight movement in the cabin's reflection caught Anya's eye. She casually adjusted her screen, using it as a mirror. Two rows back, a passenger was paying too much attention to his newspaper, grip slightly too tight on the edges.

"The interesting part," Mei continued, unaware of the developing situation, "is their power consumption patterns." Anya kept her voice steady as she typed a quick message to Dan: TAIL 2 ROWS BACK.

Dan's acknowledgment came as a subtle shift in his posture near the front of the cabin. "Tell me about the power signatures," Anya said to Mei, maintaining their cover conversation while watching the reflection.

The man made his move during the drink service, timing his bathroom break to pass close to Anya's laptop. Her reaction was instant - a precise

shift of her position that caught his wrist before his USB drive could make contact with her computer.

"That's not very polite," she said quietly, applying just enough pressure to make him wince. Dan was already moving, and Serj's massive frame blocked the aisle behind them.

The man's free hand moved for a concealed weapon, but Serj was faster. The big Russian's grip on his shoulder looked casual to other passengers but carried enough force to stop any further movement.

"Perhaps we should discuss your interest in my work," Anya suggested softly, her Russian accent thickening slightly. She nodded toward the rear galley. "Somewhere more private."

In the galley, shielded from other passengers' view, Serj conducted a professional search. "Chinese MSS," he concluded, holding up a collection of carefully crafted but slightly too perfect business credentials. "But trying too hard to look corporate."

"Amateur hour," Dan commented, but his eyes were sharp. "Who were you planning to sell our data to?"

The man's slight smile told them enough. This wasn't a serious attempt at infiltration - it was a probe, testing their security and reactions. The real threats would be waiting in Singapore.

"Delete his device, wipe his phone," Dan ordered. "And make sure our friend here stays comfortable until landing."

The rest of the flight passed without incident, their unexpected guest kept under close but discreet observation. Through her secure link, Anya continued her work with Mei, mapping Singapore's quantum research facilities while maintaining heightened awareness of their surroundings.

"Something's happening in the markets," Mei reported as they began their descent. "Cryptocurrency forums are lighting up with rumours about

quantum computing breakthroughs. Someone's starting to connect the dots."

Singapore's lights spread out below them, a glittering web of civilization against the darkness. Somewhere in that maze of technology and commerce, revolutionary quantum research was taking place. And they weren't the only ones looking for it.

The team separated at arrival, following practised protocols for covert entry. Their MSS friend would be quietly handed over to local contacts - a message to his handlers about the cost of amateur moves.

Their convoy - two unmarked SUVs arranged by local assets - wound through pre-dawn streets. Anya watched the city scroll past her window, noting security camera positions, police patrol patterns, potential choke points. Singapore's reputation for surveillance and control was well-earned.

The safe house was in the Geylang area, a shophouse converted into residential units. Their third-floor apartment offered good sight lines of the surrounding streets without being obvious about it. As the team began setting up equipment, Anya reconnected with Mei.

"I'm patched into local CCTV networks," Mei reported. "No unusual activity around our primary target yet, but there's been an up-tick in private security contractor movements in the area."

Anya began unpacking her own gear, setting up a workstation by the window. Outside, Singapore was coming alive with early morning activity. The MSS agent's amateur attempt at data theft suggested others would be watching, waiting to see what the Agency's team would discover.

"Question we haven't addressed," Dave said, carefully making tea in the safe house kitchen. "How did MSS pick us up? Could they know about the quantum computing angle?"

Serj's massive frame shifted in his corner chair. "Too amateur for a targeted operation. MSS doesn't send solo operators on high-priority missions."

"Agreed," Dan nodded, accepting a mug from Dave. "They likely spotted us at Bangkok during the connection. Multiple westerners travelling first class but not acting like businessmen? We probably pinged their standard surveillance protocols."

"The USB he tried to plant was basic," Anya added, not looking up from her screens. "Commercial malware, nothing specialised for quantum research or cryptocurrency analysis. If they knew what we were really here for..."

"They'd have sent a better team," Omar finished. "This was opportunistic intelligence gathering, nothing more."

Dave leaned against the counter. "Still, we should assume they'll be watching more closely now. Especially after we handed their man over to local assets."

"Let them watch," Dan said. "Might work in our favour to have them thinking we're here for something else. The more eyes on standard corporate espionage targets, the better our chances of finding what we're really looking for without competition."

Serj nodded slightly. "MSS will be busy trying to figure out which corporation they think we're targeting. Useful distraction."

"Still," Anya said, finally looking up, "we should adjust our movement patterns. Being spotted once means our standard protocols need tightening."

The team absorbed this, each mentally reviewing their standard operating procedures. Sometimes getting made by the wrong people could be worse than getting made by the right ones.

"Time to get to work," Anya said, both to Mei and herself. They had hours at most before others started moving pieces into position. The question was: who would show their hand first?

"Mei," Anya called, turning back to her screens. "Show me those power consumption patterns again."

"Five major quantum facilities," Mei's voice came through the speakers. "But QuantumTech is showing some interesting spikes. Started three days ago - exact same time we detected those cryptocurrency anomalies."

The team gathered around Anya's workstation as building schematics and power grid data populated her screens.

Anya's screens glowed with Mei's analysis. "Look at these power consumption patterns," Mei's voice carried through their secure link. "QuantumTech shows all the right signatures - the power draws, the cooling systems, the network traffic. Almost too perfect."

"Too perfect?" Dan asked, still cleaning his weapon from their earlier encounter.

"Like someone wanted it to be found," Anya replied, bringing up another set of data. "But there's something else. Multiple front companies, all drawing power in a coordinated pattern. Liquid helium deliveries through different suppliers. Someone's gone to extraordinary lengths to hide a quantum facility that officially doesn't exist."

Serj moved from his corner, his massive frame casting shadows across Anya's screens. "Two targets. One obvious, one hidden."

"We don't have time to investigate both thoroughly before others arrive," Dan said, his expression thoughtful. "Not after our MSS friend alerts his people."

"Then we split up," Dave suggested, earning sharp looks from his teammates. "Serj and I take QuantumTech - if it's a trap, I can handle whatever they throw at us. Dan and Omar provide overwatch."

"While Anya and I focus on tracking down the real facility," Mei finished. "The hidden one will have better digital security. We'll need time to crack it."

Dan considered for a moment, then nodded. "It's risky, but we're running out of options. If QuantumTech is a honeypot, we spring it deliberately, see who else shows up. Meanwhile, we find our real target."

"Others will have spotted QuantumTech by now," Omar added quietly. "They'll be moving soon."

"Then we move sooner," Dan decided. "Serj, Dave - gear up for infiltration. Omar, find us a good overwatch position. Anya, you and Mei have six hours to crack that hidden facility's location before we hit QuantumTech."

Through the safe house windows, Singapore's evening lights flickered to life, a glittering maze hiding two very different targets. One obvious, one concealed, both potentially deadly. The team began their preparations, each knowing that splitting their resources was a dangerous gambit.

But as Dave checked his comm gear, he couldn't shake the feeling that both facilities held pieces of a larger puzzle. The question was: which one would try to kill them first?

6 Absolute Zero

Omar moved like a shadow through Singapore's pre-dawn gloom, the weight of his modified SIG Sauer P320 a familiar comfort against his ribs. The humidity pressed heavy against his skin as he made his way up the maintenance stairs of the office building opposite QuantumTech's facility. His footsteps, nearly silent despite the metal steps, carried him to his chosen perch on the twentieth floor.

"Overwatch established," he murmured into his comm, voice barely above a whisper. "You've got clean approaches on both the main entrance and the service corridor."

"Copy that." Serj's response was equally quiet, his deep voice carrying decades of operational experience in its measured tone. "Moving to investigate access points."

Through their secure channel, Anya's voice cut in softly. "While you're checking QuantumTech, Mei and I have found something in the power grid data. The consumption patterns suggest another facility, heavily disguised. We'll keep digging."

Omar tracked Serj and Dave's progress through the G28’s Leupold scope as they emerged from the pre-dawn shadows. Even with his enhanced abilities, Dave moved with the careful precision Serj had drilled into him over countless missions. They looked like any other early-morning maintenance workers -- unremarkable, forgettable, exactly as intended.

"Security patrol pattern is consistent," Omar reported, watching the guards make their rounds. "Fifteen-minute intervals, clockwise rotation."

"Copy," Serj replied. "Approaching first access point."

Omar kept his scope trained on the area as Serj examined the door's security system.

"Anya," Serj's voice came through the comm. "Standard HID system. Model looks like a ProxPro II."

"Running configuration now," Anya replied from the operations centre. "Dave, your phone should be able to emulate any card in their system. Just need thirty seconds to upload the right frequency patterns."

As Dave held his phone near the card reader, Mei added, "The other facility's security is much more sophisticated. Multiple layers of encryption we've never seen before. This is promising."

The QuantumTech door clicked open without resistance. "We're in," Dave reported softly. "Moving to the stairwell."

Omar continued his sweep, something nagging at his tactical instincts. "Movement on the roof," he reported. "Two figures, maintenance uniforms. But their patrol pattern..." He let the observation hang.

"Professional," Serj finished. "They're watching too."

The sun was beginning to rise over Singapore's skyline, painting the buildings in shades of orange and gold. Omar adjusted his position slightly, compensating for the changing light. The rooftop figures continued their patrol, and the ground-level security maintained their predictable rounds. Everything looked normal, routine, unthreatening.

And that, Omar knew from bitter experience, was often when things were most dangerous.

"Maintaining overwatch," he reported, his scope never stopping its methodical sweep. "But I don't like this. Not one bit."

Somewhere below, Dave and Serj were descending into whatever waited beneath QuantumTech's innocent exterior. Omar settled in, knowing that sometimes the most important part of overwatch was having the patience to wait, watch, and be ready when things inevitably went wrong.

The stairwell echoed slightly with each footfall despite their careful movements. Dave followed Serj's lead, matching his precise pace and spacing as they descended past floor markers. The big Russian moved with remarkable stealth for his size, each step placed with deliberate care.

"Security cameras on alternating landings," Serj murmured, barely above a whisper. "Standard commercial system. Anya?"

"Already looped," her voice came through their comms. "You're clear to B2."

The basement levels felt different – newer construction, with that subtle scent of recent concrete and paint. The air was cooler too, with a faint hum of serious climate control systems at work.

"Something's off," Dave said quietly. "From what Anya described, the cooling setup isn't nearly powerful enough for a quantum system. Not one that could do what we saw in the crypto markets."

Serj nodded slightly, acknowledging the observation without breaking his movement pattern. They emerged from the stairwell into a corridor that could have belonged to any research facility – clean, well-lit, unremarkable. Their maintenance worker disguises should hold up to casual inspection, but as Serj had pointed out during planning, they couldn't risk closer questioning without proper IDs.

The main research area, when they found it, was exactly what you'd expect from a quantum computing lab – and that was the problem. Whiteboards covered in complex equations lined the walls, and several workstations hummed quietly. But as Dave scanned the formulae with his IT-trained eye, something didn't add up.

"These are optimisation algorithms," he whispered to Serj. "Supply chain logistics, molecular modelling... I used to help implement systems like these. Nothing about cryptocurrency or blockchain architecture."

Serj moved to examine a desk calendar while keeping watch on the corridor. "Last entry three days ago. Team meeting about protein folding simulations."

"Wrong target?" Dave asked, already knowing the answer.

"Wrong target," Serj confirmed. "Time to extract before shift change brings more staff."

They were almost back to the stairwell when Serj's hand shot out, catching Dave's arm in a vice-like grip. He pulled them both into a recessed doorway, movements fluid and silent. Moments later, Dave heard what Serj's experienced ears had caught first – footsteps, two sets, moving with the same kind of careful precision they'd been using. They wore similar maintenance coveralls, but Serj's eyes narrowed at their footwear.

Anya's voice came through quietly: "Interesting timing. We've just found references to a Dr. Sarah Chen at Nexus Advanced Research. Her facility's power usage spiked three days ago - exactly when we detected those quantum signatures."

The other team passed their hiding spot without noticing them. They wore similar maintenance coveralls, but Serj's eyes narrowed at their footwear. Through their comms, they heard his barely audible whisper: "Lowa Zephyr GTX. Elite tactical boots. Same ones I use."

Dave saw it too then – the way they moved, the careful spacing between them, and most tellingly, the subtle bulge of concealed handguns under their coveralls.

"Omar," Serj breathed into his comm. "We have another team inside. Professional. Armed."

Dave watched the other team disappear around a corner, moving with the same practised care they'd been using themselves. "They're going to find the same thing we did," he whispered.

"Not our problem," Serj answered. "Let's move. Different route out."

Dave’s eyes caught the glow of an IP phone on a nearby desk. A trawl through the directory showed the security contact number on the LCD display - clearly marked for emergencies.

"Give me thirty seconds," Dave whispered to Serj, slipping into the dark office. He lifted the handset, noting the familiar Avaya model from his IT days. The security desk answered on the first ring.

"Security, Tan speaking."

"This is Dr. Roberts in Quantum Research," Dave said, keeping his voice low and anxious. "There are two men in maintenance uniforms on level B2, but something's not right. They shouldn’t be here. I don’t see any badges. I can see them through my office window right now."

The response was immediate and professional. "Stay where you are, sir. We have teams responding."

Through their comms, they heard the facility's security team mobilising above them. Dave and Serj waited in their alcove, watching the operators get boxed in by responding guards. The professional confrontation played out exactly as expected - demands for identification, cover stories crumbling under scrutiny.

Serj's slight smile carried approval as they made their way toward the ground floor, leaving facility security to deal with their uninvited guests.

They took an alternate stairwell up, Anya guiding them through blind spots in the security coverage. Dave could feel the tension in every step – they weren't just avoiding regular security now, but another professional team who'd had the same idea they did.

The research area itself proved exactly what Anya had suspected - legitimate quantum computing work, but nothing matching the cryptocurrency signatures they'd detected. They were approaching the exit when Omar's voice cut through their comms.

"Movement at your exit point," Omar reported. "Two more operators, same profile as the ones inside. Setting up to intercept. But..." There was a note of professional satisfaction in his voice. "I prepared something for this."

"Show us," Serj replied quietly.

From his overwatch position, Omar triggered two small shaped charges he'd planted earlier in the parking structure. The precise explosions shattered selected windscreens, setting off a cascade of car alarms. The sudden chaos of flashing lights and blaring sirens created exactly the diversion they needed.

The operators reacted instantly, their training betraying them. One moved to cover the parking structure's entrance while the other maintained watch on the lobby. The sound had separated them - exactly as Omar had planned.

"Now," Serj commanded, and they moved.

He moved like liquid shadow, closing the gap in two long, silent strides. His left arm shot around the operators' throat, the crook of his elbow finding the carotid artery with practised precision. His right hand simultaneously clamped over the man's mouth, stifling any sound.

The operators training kicked in – he tried to drop his weight, to throw an elbow back – but Serj was ready. He used his height advantage, lifting slightly as he tightened the choke, denying his target the leverage needed to resist. His grip was a steel vice, cutting off blood flow to the brain with mechanical efficiency. The guard's struggles weakened, growing uncoordinated after four seconds, limp after seven.

As if on cue, the second operators shoulders stiffened. He spun, weapon already rising, his movements seeming almost languid to Dave's enhanced perception. Dave launched forward, eating up the distance in powerful strides, but he could see he wouldn't make it in time. The guard's finger was already tightening on the trigger.

The gunshot cracked through the hallway. Dave felt the impact like a firm punch to his chest, more annoying than painful. He didn't break stride. Before the guard could process that his target was still coming, Dave had closed the remaining gap. He stepped slightly inside the guard's extended arms, his left hand sweeping up to redirect the weapon while his right palm struck the man's sternum with carefully measured force – enough to drive the air from his lungs without crushing his ribcage.

The guard wheezed, doubling over. Dave twisted the gun from his weakened grip, simultaneously hooking his foot behind the man's ankle. A quick sweep, and the guard toppled backward. Dave followed him down, using the momentum to drive his knee into the man's solar plexus as they hit the floor. The second impact ensured consciousness wouldn't be an immediate concern.

Dave rose, checking the guard's pulse – steady, if rapid. He'd be out for a few minutes, long enough to make a clean exit. The bullet had left a small, neat hole in his shirt. Dave sighed. He liked this shirt. At least the bullet had fallen harmlessly to the floor instead of ricocheting around the hallway. Small mercies.

"Targets down," Dave reported, examining the new hole in his coveralls.

"Clean extract route through the south-east corner," Omar directed. "No other hostiles in sight. Moving to rally point now."

They left the unconscious operators where they lay, knowing the facility's regular security would find them soon enough. Questions would be asked about how maintenance workers had managed to overcome military-trained operators.

They emerged into Singapore's morning sun, seamlessly blending with the early workforce starting to fill the streets. Dave could feel Serj's alertness beside him, scanning for any sign they'd been noticed or followed.

"Clear," Omar reported from his perch. "Other team is still inside. Want me to maintain position?"

"Negative," came Dan's voice, making the command decision. "All teams rally back to base. We need to reassess."

As they made their clean exit, Mei's voice carried fresh urgency: "You need to see what we've found. The Nexus facility - it's the real deal. The security protocols, the power consumption, everything matches what we'd expect from advanced quantum research."

"Copy," Serj acknowledged as they blended into the morning crowd. "We've confirmed QuantumTech isn't our primary target. Time to focus on your discovery."

As they made their way back to their transport, Dave couldn't shake the feeling that they'd just scratched the surface of something much bigger. QuantumTech might not have been their primary objective, but it had proved one thing - they weren't the only professionals hunting quantum technology in Singapore.

And somewhere in the city, The Nexus facility held the answers they were all looking for.

7 Shadow Interest

The screen cast harsh shadows across a desk of polished mahogany as cryptocurrency forums exploded with speculation. Through reinforced windows, Moscow's winter painted the city in shades of white and grey. On multiple displays, market data painted a picture of growing panic as transaction patterns emerged that shouldn't have been possible.

"Quantum computing breakthrough," the intelligence officer reported, gesturing at forum discussions. "Research facility in Singapore. Their optimisation protocols are achieving unprecedented blockchain validation rates." The young man's tone carried professional satisfaction at delivering potentially valuable intelligence.

Behind the desk, a shadowy figure studied the market volatility with cold intensity through his remaining eye. "Show me the response patterns."

Screens filled with data - dark web bounties, corporate intelligence movements, state-level surveillance activation. Chinese tech companies suddenly redirecting quantum research. Russian oligarchs making discreet inquiries. Crime syndicates mobilising digital assets.

"Multiple interested parties already," the officer continued. "The potential impact on cryptocurrency markets has everyone scrambling. I've drafted preliminary surveillance proposals-"

A raised hand cut him off. "You're thinking too small." The figure's voice carried the weight of experience as screens populated with more data. "Look at the broader implications. This isn't just about market manipulation."

The officer frowned slightly, studying the displays. "Sir?"

"A breakthrough that could destabilise global financial systems. The kind of threat that draws attention from... certain organisations. Players who operate beyond normal channels." A thoughtful pause. "Monitor for

unusual movements. Groups we don't recognise, operations that don't match known patterns."

"You believe there are other interested parties? Beyond the obvious corporate and state-level actors?"

"There are always other players." The figure's attention remained fixed on market data showing spreading ripples of panic. "Organisations with resources and reach beyond what you've been trained to watch for. This kind of breakthrough tends to draw their attention."

Through encrypted channels, preliminary orders went out - surveillance teams activated, equipment requisitioned, resources allocated. The kind of careful preparation that suggested extensive planning rather than opportunistic response.

"Standard observation protocols," the figure instructed. "But I want special attention paid to any operators or organisations that don't match known profiles. Groups moving with unusual precision, or displaying capabilities beyond normal parameters."

The intelligence officer made notes, though his expression betrayed lingering confusion. "Sir, the quantum computing angle already offers significant profit potential. Multiple consortiums are preparing substantial offers-"

"Let them chase their digital golden ticket." The figure's tone carried something approaching amusement. "Sometimes the most valuable opportunities aren't the obvious ones. And sometimes the best operations are the ones where everyone else's greed provides perfect cover."

Through high-end monitors, markets continued their nervous dance as rumours of quantum-enhanced cryptocurrency manipulation spread. Each ripple of panic, each desperate attempt to secure the technology, added another layer of useful chaos. Perfect cover for watching, waiting, identifying the real players when they inevitably appeared.

"Begin surveillance," the order came quietly. "Full coverage - technical capabilities, security protocols, personnel movements. I want to know everything about this facility and its protection arrangements." A thoughtful pause. "And see what contracts we can secure to offset operational costs. No reason to waste a profitable opportunity, even if it's not our primary focus."

The officer nodded and withdrew, leaving the figure to study tactical displays in focused silence. Outside, Moscow's winter raged against reinforced glass, but inside plans long dormant began shifting to accommodate new variables.

The first Asian cryptocurrency exchange announced emergency protocols as uncertainty spread through digital markets. Two more followed within hours, their security teams desperately trying to assess implications. Perfect chaos, perfect cover for watching the shadows between obvious moves.

The quantum breakthrough itself was interesting, certainly. But in the complex game of shadows and secrets, the most important moves were often the ones no one else recognised until too late. Victory would come from patience, watching and waiting while others fought over obvious prizes.

New orders went out through secured channels, each carefully crafted to look like standard opportunistic response rather than coordinated preparation. The kind of operation that required patience, resources, and absolute precision in timing.

Sometimes the best games were the ones where your opponents never realised what game they were really playing.

Through reinforced windows, Moscow's winter painted the city in familiar patterns of white and grey. But on encrypted screens, market volatility created perfect cover for watching, waiting, preparing. The quantum breakthrough would draw exactly the kind of attention worth studying.

And if certain organisations appeared as predicted, the profitable chaos would provide perfect cover for other operations entirely.

The figure studied spreading panic through digital markets with cold satisfaction. The most valuable opportunities weren't always the obvious ones. And the best operations were the ones where everyone else's desperation did the hard work for you.

8 Digital Analysis

The safe house felt crowded with the full team assembled, Singapore's morning sun filtering through partially closed blinds. Multiple screens cast a blue glow across Anya's workstation as she pulled up everything they had on Nexus Advanced Research. The faint hum of cooling fans competed with the city noise drifting up from the streets below.

"Profile's interesting," Anya said, bringing up business registry data. "Established five years ago, solid funding through multiple venture capital firms, public research contracts in quantum computing optimisation. Everything looks legitimate."

"Because it is legitimate," Mei added through their secure link. "Dr. Sarah Chen's publication history is impressive - quantum computing theory, AI optimisation algorithms, some cutting-edge work on quantum state manipulation. She built a real research facility first, then added whatever they're doing with cryptocurrency on top."

Dave studied the building schematics Mei had extracted from public records. His IT background highlighted familiar patterns - server rooms with dedicated cooling, backup power systems, network infrastructure laid out with professional competence. "Standard corporate setup," he noted. "Looks like any other tech research facility I used to support."

"Exactly the problem," Dan said, moving to examine the security camera feeds Anya had accessed. "They're protecting quantum computing breakthroughs with the same security they'd use for regular corporate IP."

Anya brought up more windows showing Nexus's digital infrastructure. "Their network security is decent - encrypted traffic, segmented systems, regular corporate protection. But nothing special. They're following standard industry best practices."

"Physical security shows the same pattern," Omar reported, studying surveillance photos from his earlier recon. "Contract guards from Standard Dynamics Security, regular patrol patterns, basic access control. Professional but predictable."

Through their screens, they watched the facility's day shift arriving. Researchers and staff moved through badge readers and security checkpoints with practised efficiency. Everything looked normal, orderly, exactly what you'd expect from a legitimate research facility.

"Power consumption is where it gets interesting," Mei said, sharing new data. "They're drawing enough electricity to run serious quantum computing operations, but they're routing it through multiple substations to avoid attention. Clever setup, but it leaves patterns if you know where to look."

"The cooling systems too," Anya added. "Regular liquid helium deliveries through different suppliers, all carefully scheduled. They're maintaining quantum computing temperatures around the clock."

Dave recognised the corporate mindset at work. "They're thinking like a tech company, not a secure research facility. We used similar setups for data centre power usage, but this is different. They're protecting something that could destabilise global financial markets with security designed for protecting normal corporate secrets."

"Show me their internal layout," Dan requested. Anya brought up building plans, and he studied them with growing concern. "Standard corporate zoning - public areas, general offices, restricted research spaces. But no real depth of defence. Once you're past the outer security, there's not much stopping you from accessing sensitive areas."

"Their cybersecurity shows the same philosophy," Mei reported. "Good firewalls, intrusion detection, regular penetration testing. Everything you'd expect from a corporate network, but nothing that would seriously slow down a state-level actor."

Serj, who had been silently observing, finally spoke. "They have good fundamentals. But they're defending against corporate espionage, not professional teams. Big difference."

Through their secure link, Cecilia's voice added another perspective. "Remember, they weren't expecting to become a target. Their cryptocurrency breakthrough probably caught them by surprise. They haven't adapted their security to match their new reality."

"Speaking of which," Anya said, "market chatter is picking up. More players are starting to pay attention to Singapore's quantum computing sector. We're not the only ones connecting the dots."

Dan absorbed this information, mentally cataloguing vulnerabilities and potential approaches. "They've built good corporate security, but they're facing military-grade threats. How long before someone makes a serious attempt?"

"Their contractor records are interesting," Mei noted. "Regular security upgrades over the past three years, all focused on standard corporate threats - industrial espionage, data theft, insider risks. Nothing designed to stop professional infiltration teams."

Dave watched researchers entering the facility through the main entrance, remembering similar scenes from his corporate days. Everything looked normal, professional, completely legitimate. And that was exactly the problem.

"They're good scientists," he said finally. "They've built exactly the security you'd expect for a high-level corporate research facility. But what they've actually created... they might as well be protecting nuclear launch codes with a padlock."

"Time estimate?" Dan asked Anya.

She studied her screens, watching network traffic patterns and security rotations. "Based on market activity and chatter? Days at most before others start making serious moves."

The morning sun climbed higher over Singapore's skyline as the team absorbed this information. Through their surveillance feeds, Nexus Advanced Research continued its normal operations, unaware that its carefully constructed corporate security was about to face threats it was never designed to handle.

"Options?" Dan asked, looking around the room.

The team began discussing approaches, each bringing their expertise to bear on the problem. Whatever they decided, one thing was clear - Nexus's security needed to evolve quickly if it was going to survive what was coming.

Outside, Singapore's business district buzzed with morning activity, thousands of people going about their normal corporate routines. Inside Nexus Advanced Research, scientists worked on technology that could reshape global finance, protected by security designed for a much simpler world.

The clock was ticking.

9 Zero Trust

The quantum core's hum filled Sarah Chen's office with its steady mechanical heartbeat, a sound that had become as familiar as her own breathing during these endless late nights. At 2:47 AM, the first anomaly appeared in her access logs -- a millisecond-level synchronization between three module checkouts that shouldn't have been related. She might have missed it entirely if exhaustion hadn't made her obsessively thorough, reviewing the same logs for the fourth time that night.

Sarah pushed her glasses up with one finger, the gesture automatic after decades of academic work. Through the reinforced glass wall of her office, she could see the massive cooling units maintaining the quantum processor's delicate near-absolute zero temperature. The technology represented everything she'd worked toward throughout her career -- and now, watching anomalous patterns scroll across her screens, she felt that life's work balancing on a knife's edge.

"Show me everything," she muttered, fingers flying across her keyboard as she pulled up more logs. Version control timestamps, network access patterns, module dependencies -- she spread them across her multiple monitors like pieces of a puzzle she couldn't quite solve. Her reflection in the darkened screens showed a woman she barely recognised any more, exhaustion etched into features that had once looked younger, more certain of her place in the world.

The anomalies were subtle. Too subtle. Three different developers accessing distinct codebases within microseconds of each other. Automated testing systems showing slightly irregular patterns. Cache hits that didn't quite match their usual development workflow. It was like finding dust on untouched surfaces -- evidence that someone had been moving things when no one should have been there.

Sarah pulled up their main repository structure, the familiar architecture she'd designed herself. The segmentation had seemed secure at the time -- each team restricted to their specific modules, no single developer able to see the whole picture. Only she had full access, necessary for integration and final validation. But now, staring at the access patterns, she felt the first cold tendrils of real fear wrapping around her spine.

Her terminal filled with data as she traced access patterns back through weeks of development. The more she looked, the more anomalies she found. Tiny discrepancies in file access times. Subtle variations in compile operations. Network packets that were just slightly larger than they should have been. It was like watching a master thief's footprints appear in fresh snow -- each print perfect, but the pattern revealing something fundamentally wrong.

"Dr. Chen?" Amanda's voice made her jump. She hadn't heard the door open. "It's almost three AM. We were getting worried."

Sarah didn't look away from her screens. The young researcher's presence was both comfort and concern -- Amanda was brilliant, dedicated, but she was also another potential vector for the security breach Sarah was uncovering. "Get Eric and come here. Now."

A shadow moved across her third-floor window. Sarah froze, heartbeat suddenly loud in her ears. At this height, there shouldn't be any shadows moving against the Singapore skyline's glow. Her mind raced through possibilities, each more alarming than the last.

Her hand moved slowly toward her phone, but before she could reach it, the window exploded inward. Two figures in tactical gear swung through on rappelling lines, moving with military precision. Sarah dove for the floor as a third figure appeared, weapon trained on her previous position. Glass crunched under boots as they secured the room with practised efficiency.

"Dr. Chen," the lead operator spoke in accented English. "Please come with us. Your research is required elsewhere."

Sarah scrambled behind her desk, mind racing through options. The facility's security was basic -- designed to keep out corporate spies and curious competitors, not military-trained operators. But she had insisted on one key addition after their breakthrough, a simple but effective system linked to the building's burglar alarm.

She slapped the button under her desk. Dense white smoke began pouring from vents throughout the facility, filling the space with artificial fog. The quantum core's housing remained visible through her office's reinforced glass wall, its steady hum a counterpoint to the chaos erupting around them.

"That was unwise," the leader called, weapon trained in her general direction. The smoke was already thick enough to blur his outline.

Sarah was already moving, years of fire drills and paranoid planning guiding her steps in the thickening smoke. Three metres to the quantum core's housing. Two metres. One. A bullet cracked past her head as she reached the reinforced glass door. The quantum processor required an airlock-style entry system -- not for security, but to maintain the precise environmental conditions it needed. She slammed the outer door behind her just as another bullet sparked off the ballistic glass.

Through the protected glass, she watched the operators move with professional precision, weapons ready, but their visibility was deteriorating rapidly. The smoke generators were industrial-grade -- designed to fill the entire floor within minutes.

"You're only delaying the inevitable," the leader called through the smoke. "Our employer will get what they want eventually."

She heard them retreating, rappelling lines whirring as they withdrew. Professionals wouldn't risk getting trapped in zero visibility conditions.

The sound of breaking glass from other windows suggested they were making a tactical withdrawal rather than pressing their advantage.

When security finally reached her, Sarah was already back at her terminal, implementing basic encryption protocols she'd prepared for exactly this scenario. Her hands shook slightly as she typed, adrenaline still coursing through her system.

"Dr. Chen?" The security supervisor looked as shaken as she felt. "Are you alright? Do you need medical attention?"

Sarah shook her head, not looking away from her screens. The attack had confirmed her worst fears about the access log anomalies. "I need better security. Real security. This?" She gestured at the lingering smoke, the shattered window. "This was amateur hour. The next team will be better prepared."

"We'll increase patrols," the supervisor offered. "Add more cameras--"

"That's not enough." Sarah finally turned to face him, letting him see the full weight of her understanding in her expression. "They knew exactly where to find me. Knew about our quantum research. Regular security won't stop what's coming."

Her screen showed another synchronised access attempt in the logs. They were still probing, still searching for ways in. The operators had failed to extract her, but they'd proven something far more dangerous: her security wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

Through the reinforced glass, the quantum core hummed steadily, unaffected by the chaos. Its cooling systems maintained the delicate balance required for quantum operations, even as Sarah's own sense of security lay shattered around her. She thought of all the late nights, the breakthroughs, the careful steps forward into unknown territory. Now it felt like standing on the edge of an abyss, watching shadows gather below.

The question wasn't if they'd try again, but how many different groups were coming for their quantum breakthrough. And more importantly: how long could she hold them off with nothing but smoke generators and bulletproof glass between them and potentially world-changing technology?

Sarah's fingers returned to her keyboard, moving with renewed purpose. If digital security had been compromised and physical security had failed, she needed a new approach entirely. She began typing rapidly, implementing protocols she'd hoped never to need. Sometimes the best defence wasn't a stronger wall, but making sure what lay behind it couldn't be used even if taken.

The quantum core's hum remained steady, a reminder of both achievement and vulnerability. Dawn was approaching, and with it would come questions, investigations, increased security measures. But Sarah knew the truth -- they'd crossed a threshold. The peaceful phase of their research was over, and now began a different kind of quantum uncertainty.

10 Multiple Vectors

The morning sun painted Singapore's skyline in shades of amber and gold as Anya's screens suddenly blazed with urgent alerts. The safe house's quiet focus shattered as she leaned forward, fingers flying across her keyboard with practised precision. Multiple windows populated her display - security logs, building schematics, and most importantly, incident reports from a private research facility.

"We've got something," she announced, drawing the team's attention. "Armed intrusion at 0247 hours. Not our previous target - this is different." She brought up a new set of building schematics, these ones bearing the subtle markers of serious security implementation. "Dr. Chen was directly targeted. Professional team, military precision. But she managed to escape using some kind of smoke defence system."

Dave moved to study the logs over her shoulder, his IT background helping him parse the technical details. The familiar patterns of network diagnostics felt like reading an old language - one he'd spoken fluently in another life. "Look at these access patterns," he said, pointing to a particular sequence. "Someone's been probing their systems for weeks. Very sophisticated work. Could have easily been missed."

"That's just it," Anya replied, a note of professional respect entering her voice. "Chen spotted it herself. These logs show her tracing the anomalies around 3 AM. That's why she was still in her office when they came for her."

Through their secure link, Mei's voice added another layer to the puzzle. "I've been analysing their security architecture. She's brilliant - implemented some sophisticated countermeasures after their breakthrough. The smoke system was just the visible part."

Dan paced their operations area with measured steps, each movement reflecting years of field experience. "Professional intrusion team using military tactics. Who else is moving on this?"

"Everyone," Mei replied grimly. "I'm tracking at least three separate state-sponsored groups probing their networks. Plus various independent operators, all chasing those bounties we saw."

Dave straightened, an idea forming. "We're approaching this wrong," he said, drawing curious looks from his teammates. "Everyone's trying to either steal their research or grab their personnel. What if we just... talk to them?"

"Talk?" Serj's deep voice carried equal measures of scepticism and amusement.

"Be honest," Dave explained, warming to his concept. "Show them what we've found, demonstrate we could have hacked them but didn't. Offer protection instead of trying to take what they have."

The team absorbed this suggestion, years of covert operations experience warring with its simple logic. Dan finally broke the thoughtful silence. "It's unorthodox. Exposing ourselves directly..."

"Less risky than waiting for the next attack," Dave countered. "Chen's already spooked, but she's smart. She'll appreciate honesty, especially if we can prove we're not like the others."

Two hours later, Dave and Anya stood in the lobby of what appeared to be another unremarkable Singapore office building. Their business attire had been carefully chosen: professional enough to be taken seriously, casual enough not to trigger immediate suspicion. Dave felt the reassuring weight of his phone in his pocket, containing Mei's meticulously prepared evidence.

The security team that met them was trying hard to project capability - ex-military types with good training and better equipment. Dave noted their

positioning, their alertness, the way they maintained protective geometry around him and Anya as they were escorted to a conference room. Good fundamentals, but nowhere near the level needed for what was coming.

Dr. Sarah Chen waited inside, dark circles under her eyes betraying her sleepless night. Two armed guards flanked her, and Dave suspected a panic button under the conference table and the reinforced glass of the windows. Normal security measures against normal threats.

"Dr. Chen," Dave began, keeping his voice calm and steady. "We know about the attack this morning. We know about your quantum breakthrough. And we're here to help protect both."

Chen's expression remained carefully neutral. "You have exactly three minutes to explain why I shouldn't have security remove you immediately."

Dave allowed himself a small smile. "With respect, Doctor, if your security team tried to remove us, it would only demonstrate how unprepared you are for what's really coming. The team that attacked this morning? They were professionals, yes. But they're amateurs compared to who's coming next."

The guards tensed, hands shifting toward weapons, but Chen raised a hand to stop them. She studied Dave with new intensity, her scientific mind visibly reassessing initial assumptions.

Anya placed her laptop on the table, opening it to display multiple windows of code and security logs. "We found you the same way they did," she explained. "But instead of attacking, we're here talking."

"Mei?" Dave said quietly. On Anya's screen, windows began populating with data - detailed analyses of attempted breaches, dark web bounties, intelligence chatter. Chen leaned forward despite herself, professional curiosity warring with caution.

"Your smoke system was brilliant," Anya offered. "But it won't stop the next team. They're already learning, adapting. Look." She brought up more

windows showing chatter from various groups, each dissecting the morning's failed assault.

Dave watched Chen process the evidence before her, seeing the moment when scientific scepticism began to yield to hard data. He understood the internal struggle - he'd gone through something similar when the Agency first found him, that moment of realising the world was bigger and more dangerous than you'd imagined.

"Your network specialist," Chen said finally, gesturing at Anya's screen. "The one doing this - how good are they?"

"The best I've ever worked with," Anya answered truthfully. "And she's offering to help secure your systems. Properly secure them."

Chen's fingers drummed once on the table, a scientist's habit of thinking through problems. "Show me more," she said finally. "Show me exactly what you've found. Then we'll talk about protection."

Dave felt the subtle shift in the room's atmosphere. They hadn't won her trust completely, but they'd earned her interest. Sometimes, that was enough to start with. He glanced at the armed guards, still alert but now looking less certain about who held the real power in the room.

Through the reinforced windows, Singapore's sun continued its climb into the morning sky. Somewhere in the city's maze of streets, other teams were planning their own approaches. But for now, in this room, they had a chance to do things differently. Build trust instead of walls, offer protection instead of threats.

As Anya began sharing more of Mei's findings, Dave caught Chen watching him with renewed calculation in her tired eyes. She was starting to understand - her normal security measures, her armed guards, her panic buttons, were like using a standard firewall against a quantum computer. The real threats were operating on an entirely different level.

The question now was whether she'd accept their help before those threats arrived in force.

11 Perimeter Defence

Serj watched the QuantumTech facility's security chief demonstrate his team's patrol routes with the patience of a man who had seen too many similar presentations. Marcus Tan, ex-Singapore Armed Forces with fifteen years of private security experience, was competent by normal standards. But as Serj had learned through decades of operations, normal standards weren't enough when dealing with extraordinary threats.

"Your patrol patterns are too predictable," Serj interrupted, his deep voice carrying quiet authority. "Seven-minute intervals, always clockwise, same entry and exit points." He moved to the facility's layout displayed on the conference room's main screen. "You're giving observers exactly what they need to time their approach."

Marcus stiffened slightly, professional pride warring with the recognition of expertise. "Our patterns are designed to maintain consistent coverage—"

"Which makes them easy to exploit," Dan cut in, pushing off from the wall where he'd been observing. "Show me your response protocols for the loading bay."

The security chief brought up another diagram, but before he could begin his explanation, Dan was already shaking his head. "Three blind spots. Four, if they know about the camera dead zone near the ventilation units."

In the corner, Dr. Chen watched the exchange with growing concern. The dark circles under her eyes hadn't faded, but there was new steel in her gaze as she witnessed her facility's defences being systematically dissected.

Through their secure link, Mei's voice added another layer of critique. "Their network segmentation is basic corporate standard. I'm seeing multiple potential breach points that any state-level actor could exploit."

"We've maintained ISO compliance for—" Marcus began.

"ISO compliance is for auditors," Serj interrupted. "The teams coming for your research don't care about certificates." He touched the screen, highlighting specific areas. "Here, here, and here. High-ground positions with clear lines of sight to your main access points. Currently unmonitored."

Dan pulled up footage from the previous night's attack. "They knew exactly where to strike because your patterns told them where you wouldn't be. Professional teams plan around predictability."

In the adjacent server room, Anya and Dave worked with the facility's IT team, implementing Mei's enhanced security protocols. The familiar hum of cooling fans and network equipment created a steady backdrop to their rapid typing.

"Your IDS signatures are outdated," Mei commented through their comms. "I'm pushing new patterns based on recent state-sponsored attack profiles. Dave, can you verify the implementation?"

Dave's fingers moved across his keyboard with practised efficiency, his IT background helping him bridge the gap between Mei's advanced security concepts and the facility's existing infrastructure. "Confirming new signatures. But Mei, look at their traffic patterns. They're going to need more than just updated rules."

"Already on it," Mei replied. "The AI models are learning their normal network behaviour. Any deviation will trigger immediate countermeasures." There was a hint of pride in her voice – this was her element now, turning her skills toward protection rather than field operations.

Back in the conference room, Serj had taken control of the security briefing. His massive frame somehow made the corporate space feel smaller as he outlined new patrol routes and response protocols. "Random intervals, varying patterns, overlapping coverage. Your teams need to be unpredictable while maintaining full surveillance."

"Your manpower requirements—" Marcus began.

"Will increase by thirty percent," Serj finished. "Necessary cost for proper security." He turned to Dr. Chen. "Your research is worth billions to the right buyers. The teams coming for it won't be limited by standard operating budgets."

Chen nodded, her scientist's mind already calculating new resource allocations. "Whatever we need. After last night..." She let the sentence hang, memories of shattered glass and smoke still fresh.

Among the new security personnel being processed through HR that afternoon was Michael Rahman, a former Gurkha with Malaysian special forces experience. To most observers, he was simply another competent hire meeting the facility's increased security needs. Only the Agency team knew that Omar's carefully crafted cover identity would place him perfectly to monitor internal dynamics.

"ID processing complete," Omar reported quietly through his comm as he moved through his orientation. His natural economy of movement and military bearing helped him blend seamlessly with the other ex-military hires. "Already noting interesting patterns in staff behaviour around the east wing labs."

Dan's voice came through clear but quiet. "Anything specific?"

"Two researchers consistently working late shifts when their project logs show no need. Could be innocent, but worth watching." Omar maintained his cover as he familiarised himself with patrol routes, his practised eye noting both official protocols and unofficial habits.

"Three cleaning staff with combat-trained movement patterns," Omar reported through his comm during the afternoon shift change. "Their current rotation gives them access to the quantum core housing at 2 AM. Too convenient."

His solution, when implemented, appeared purely administrative. As the new deputy head of facility security, Michael Rahman's suggestion to optimise cleaning schedules seemed perfectly logical to management. The cleaning crews were reorganised - supposedly to improve efficiency and coverage.

"Interesting reaction from our athletic janitors," Omar noted later, watching through the security feeds. "Two tried to maintain their original routes. One even offered to work double shifts to keep the quantum core area." He adjusted his new security uniform, the movement natural and unconsidered. "They're now assigned to the public areas. Loading bays, reception, cafeteria. Nothing sensitive."

"And our late-working scientists?" Dan prompted.

"Recommended lab reassignment due to 'updated security protocols,'" Omar replied. "Cited the need for balanced occupancy across all shifts. Dr. Chen approved it personally - she's catching on quick." There was a hint of professional approval in his voice. "One of them requested special access to maintain their original work area. Request denied."

Serj's grunt of satisfaction came through the comm. "Clean. No one can protest routine security updates after a breach attempt."

"Already seeing changes in behaviour patterns," Omar added. "Our researchers suddenly seem less interested in overtime now that they're restricted to basic research labs. Funny how that works."

The efficiency of his countermeasures lay in their mundane appearance. Just another set of administrative changes in the wake of a security incident. Anyone monitoring the facility would see nothing more significant than standard corporate restructuring - while potential security risks were quietly neutralised through paperwork and policy changes.

Serj absorbed this information while continuing his security assessment. Having Omar embedded would provide crucial early warning of any

internal compromises - something even the best external security couldn't catch.

"Mei," Dan called, studying the facility's camera feeds. "How's the new surveillance AI coming?"

"Initial training complete," she replied. "The system is already identifying behavioural patterns that could indicate surveillance or preparation for breach attempts. I've integrated it with their existing camera network, but they'll need better hardware for full coverage."

Dave emerged from the server room, looking satisfied. "Air-gapped networks are properly segregated now. Even if they breach the outer systems, the quantum research data stays protected." He turned to Chen. "Though I'd recommend rotating encryption keys more frequently. Maybe after each major code commit."

Chen's eyebrows rose slightly. "You understand our development workflow?"

"Former IT professional," Dave replied with a slight smile. "Some patterns are universal, quantum computing or not."

Serj moved to the windows, studying the surrounding buildings with experienced eyes. "We'll need counter-surveillance positions here, here, and here." He marked points on the glass with his finger. "And the roof access needs better controls. The current setup is asking for an aerial insertion."

Marcus was taking notes now, his initial resistance giving way to professional appreciation. These weren't typical security consultants making theoretical suggestions. Every recommendation came from hard-earned experience.

"Dr. Chen," Mei's voice carried through the room's speakers. "I've identified three persistent attempts to probe your network in just the last hour. State-level sophistication, trying to map your internal systems."

Chen moved to watch the attack patterns displayed on Anya's screen. "Those signatures... Russian?"

"Among others," Mei confirmed. "But watch this." The display showed the AI countermeasures engaging, feeding false data to the attackers while maintaining the appearance of successful penetration. "They think they're mapping your network, but they're actually helping us improve our defence models."

"The models are running on dedicated security hardware," Mei added, anticipating Chen's next question. "Completely separate from your quantum systems. We maintain absolute isolation for your core research network."

Chen nodded approvingly. The air gap between their quantum computing systems and the outside world was non-negotiable. "Good. The quantum core stays isolated, no exceptions."

"Agreed," Dave said. "In IT security, sometimes the oldest solutions are still the best. Physical separation beats clever networking every time."

As the day progressed, the facility's security posture evolved. New patrol patterns were implemented, surveillance blind spots were eliminated, and network defences were hardened. Even the guard rotations were adjusted to prevent any single team from developing complete knowledge of the security procedures.

"It's a good start," Dan said finally, watching the new protocols in action. "But the real test will come when they make their next move."

Serj nodded in agreement. "They'll probe first, test the new defences. Small teams, possibly disguised as maintenance or delivery personnel."

"Already flagged three potential surveillance attempts today," Mei added. "They're watching, learning. But now we're watching them back."

Chen looked around her facility with new eyes, seeing both the improvements and the remaining vulnerabilities. The comfortable illusion

of corporate security had been stripped away, replaced by something more practical, more aggressive.

"How long?" she asked quietly.

"Before they try again?" Dan considered. "Days at most. They'll want to move before we can improve the defences further." He turned to face her directly. "But this time, you'll be ready."

Through the reinforced windows, Singapore's afternoon sun cast long shadows across the facility's grounds. Somewhere out there, other teams were planning their approaches, analysing their intelligence, preparing for their next attempt. But now they would find something very different waiting for them.

Chen watched her security teams adapt to their new protocols, incorporating the changes with growing confidence. The facility felt different now – less like a corporate research centre and more like the high-security installation it needed to become. She caught Dave's eye and nodded slightly, a gesture of appreciation for the direct approach that had brought them to this point.

The quantum core hummed steadily in its housing, its secrets now better protected but still desperately desired by forces gathering in the shadows. The race wasn't over – it was just entering a new phase, with new rules and higher stakes.

And this time, they would be ready.

12 Binary Trust

Sarah Chen had always trusted in systems. Code could be verified, protocols could be tested, quantum states could be measured with enough precision. But watching the security feed as four shadows moved with liquid grace through her newly upgraded perimeter, she realised how desperately she'd underestimated the human factor.

"Contact," Dan's voice crackled through her earpiece. "Four hostiles, military training, using ESS suppressed MP7s. They're good." He paused, and she heard his controlled breathing as he tracked their movement. "Very good."

The facility's new security measures -- carefully planned and implemented over the last seventy-two hours -- meant nothing to these operators. They flowed through blind spots with practised efficiency, disabling her guards with a mixture of precise lethal, and non-lethal strikes. Each takedown was methodical, professional – designed to incapacitate quickly.

"Dr. Chen," Dave's voice carried quiet urgency through her earpiece. "Stay in the quantum core housing. We're moving to intercept."

She stood in the reinforced chamber that housed their quantum processor, watching through cameras as the intrusion unfolded. The massive cooling units hummed around her, maintaining their precious near-absolute zero temperature while everything else descended into chaos.

The first sign that something had gone wrong came when the feeds from B-wing went dark. Not disabled -- dark. They'd cut power to that entire section. Sarah's fingers flew across her tablet, bringing up system diagnostics. Power grid architecture had been her personal obsession since their breakthrough, knowing how vulnerable quantum systems were to fluctuations.

But Dave's voice held a note of satisfaction. "Game mode," he muttered, and she heard the smile in his words. In the darkness, his enhanced vision transformed the environment into a precise three-dimensional model. What the attackers intended as cover became his advantage.

The security feeds still active showed Dave moving with uncanny precision through the darkness, his movements swift and certain while the operators were forced to rely on night vision equipment. He flowed between them like water, systematically separating and isolating targets.

The first attacker moved to flank, weapon trained carefully away from the quantum processor's delicate housing. Professional discipline - they all knew the value of what they were trying to steal. Dave used that hesitation, exploding forward with the controlled speed he'd learned to harness over three years of operations.

His first strike caught the lead operator in the solar plexus - carefully calibrated force that dropped him without risking lethal damage. The second attacker managed to squeeze off two shots, but Dave was already moving. Both rounds struck the reinforced wall behind him as he closed distance, ducking under the MP7's suppressed barrel.

The operator tried to create space, but Dave had learned to use his supernatural speed with precision. A quick step, a measured strike to the weapon arm, and the gun clattered away. The man's hand-to-hand training was excellent - a perfect cross counter that would have dropped a normal opponent. Dave let it land, felt the impact dissipate across his invulnerable frame, then took the man down with a simple arm lock.

The third attacker demonstrated better tactical awareness, using his teammates' engagement to manoeuvre toward Chen. But Dave's enhanced vision caught the subtle shift in weight that telegraphed his movement. Two quick steps put Dave between them, his speed making the intervention seem almost casual.

"Oh, no you don’t," Dave said quietly, almost conversationally. The operator's strike was technically perfect - a thrust kick designed to create space. Dave caught the leg, used the man's momentum to send him sprawling, then followed with a precise strike to the temple that ended the threat.

The maintenance shaft's cover exploded inward before the third attacker had fully collapsed. Two more operators emerged like smoke, their movements showing even higher levels of training. Their weapons tracked with mechanical precision, but again, carefully avoided the quantum core's housing.

"They were trying to reach the maintenance shaft," Dan's voice was tight with understanding. "It's their extraction route - with you as the package, Dr. Chen."

Dave didn't hesitate. His IT background had taught him to look for system vulnerabilities, and the ballistic glass was only as strong as its mounting. He drove his shoulder into the frame's corner joint - the glass designed to distribute the force of bullets couldn't handle the focused pressure as its housing twisted. The entire panel folded inward with a tortured shriek of metal and a spider-web of cracks, still mostly intact but no longer an obstacle. The closest attacker managed to put three rounds centre mass as Dave emerged through the gap - impacts that felt like firm finger pokes against his chest.

Through the chaos, Dan had been moving with practised efficiency. While Dave's dramatic entry drew attention, Dan had already started cycling through the airlock's two-stage entry system - a process he'd mentally timed during their facility security review. The inner door hissed open just as Dave engaged, allowing Dan to slip in behind the attackers unnoticed. His strike caught the first operator from behind – a precise blow that sent him sprawling without risking more weapons fire near the quantum core. But his partner was already moving, combat rolls carrying him behind the

quantum core's cooling equipment. The massive units provided excellent cover while still maintaining line of sight to her position.

Dave burst forward like a missile. The operator tried to adjust, bringing his weapon to bear, but Dave was already inside his guard. The suppressed MP7 clattered away as Dave systematically dismantled the man's resistance, each strike measured to disable without killing.

The operator produced a taser from his tactical gear, demonstrating excellent tactical adaptation. The electrodes struck Dave's chest, discharging enough voltage to drop a horse. But instead of falling, Dave seemed to absorb the energy. Blue light coursed beneath his skin as the current found a new path to ground. His eyes blazed with the same electric fire as he reached for the operator.

"That," Dave said almost conversationally, "was a mistake." One hand caught the man's tactical vest while the other discharged the absorbed energy – not enough to kill, but more than sufficient to end the fight. The operator dropped, twitching but alive.

"Area clear," Dan reported, moving to secure their prisoners. "Transport inbound. Omar has eyes on two targets retreating east. Serj is in pursuit."

"Dr. Chen," Dave called, scanning the room with his enhanced vision. "Are you alright?"

Dave extended his hand toward her, static electricity still crackling between his fingers. Sarah stared at him, her scientific mind struggling to process what she'd just witnessed. The unremarkable man who'd walked into her facility three days ago - slightly overweight, with tired eyes and the slouched posture - had just moved faster than humanly possible and absorbed enough electricity to stop a human heart.

"That's... that's not possible," she managed, her voice barely a whisper. "The voltage alone should have..."

"Should have dropped me?" Dave smiled slightly, his hand still extended. "You'd be surprised what's possible. Now, shall we get you somewhere safer?"

Sarah reached out hesitantly, half-expecting her hand to pass right through his like a hologram. Static electricity snapped between them as she took it, and the solid reality of his grip finally broke through her analytical paralysis. She looked from the fallen operators to Dave and back again, her world-view realigning itself around this new impossible data point.

"Regular security?" She almost laughed, hysteria edging into her voice. "I don't think anything I understood to be 'regular' applies any more."

Through her earpiece, she heard Anya coordinating with Serj as they tracked the escaped attackers. Standard procedure said to distance herself from these people, to compartmentalise and maintain deniability. But standard procedure hadn't protected her facility tonight.

She looked at her tablet, still displaying the facility's power grid. "I need to show you something," she said. "About our quantum breakthrough. And why everyone's willing to go to these lengths to acquire it."

The quantum core's hum felt different now -- less like a technological achievement and more like a countdown timer. The race wasn't just to protect their research any more. It was to survive what they'd created.

Behind them, Singapore's sun began to rise, painting the facility in shades of amber and gold. Sarah Chen had trusted in systems her entire life. Now she would have to trust in people -- impossible, extraordinary people – instead.

13 Revelations

The aftermath of combat lingered in the facility's corridors - spent taser cartridges, scuff marks from precision take-downs, the lingering scent of cordite. Dave led Chen and Dan through the secured areas toward her private research lab, his enhanced senses alert for any remaining threats. The morning sun painted Singapore's skyline in shades of amber and gold through the reinforced windows, a stark contrast to the tension still hanging in the air.

"What you saw earlier," Dave said, breaking the silence as Chen brought her systems online, "I understand it raises questions."

She gestured at Dave's chest where the bullets, and taser had struck. "That kind of voltage should have stopped your heart. Instead, you channelled it like some kind of human lightning rod, and the bullets… you’re not even wearing a vest."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you all like him? Is that how your team operates?"

Dave exchanged glances with Dan, who gave a slight nod. After what they'd witnessed defending the facility, Chen had earned some answers.

"No," Dave said quietly. "I'm unique, as far as we know. The others are highly skilled, but completely human."

"What happened to you?"

Dave smiled slightly. "Would you believe me if I said we don't really know? Enhanced strength, speed, durability – and now apparently the ability to absorb and redirect electricity. The Agency's doctors have been studying me for three years, but the underlying mechanism remains a mystery."

"The Agency?" Chen's eyebrows rose. "Not government then. The way you operate... private organisation?"

"The details aren't important," Dan cut in smoothly. "What matters is we're here to protect your research, not exploit it. Speaking of which..." He gestured at her workstation.

Chen studied them both for a long moment, weighing variables and probabilities like the scientist she was. Finally, she nodded and turned to her systems. Multiple screens came to life, displaying complex data streams that made Dave's IT experience feel foundational at best.

"Three weeks ago," she began, authenticating through multiple security layers, "our quantum AI system showed anomalous behaviour during routine cryptocurrency mining tests. We were using mining operations as a benchmark for processing optimisation." Her fingers flew across the keyboard with practised precision. "Watch this."

The main screen filled with transaction records and processing statistics. Dave leaned forward, his IT background helping him grasp the magnitude of what he was seeing. "These success rates... they shouldn't be possible."

"Exactly." Chen's voice carried equal measures of pride and concern. "The AI wasn't just mining faster – it was predicting optimal hash calculations before they were needed. Somehow, it learned to see patterns in what should be random cryptographic functions."

"How?" Dan asked, moving closer to study the data.

"That's the fascinating part." Chen brought up more windows showing AI behaviour logs. "It developed novel validation algorithms independently, finding ways to optimise block composition that we never programmed. Like it discovered a mathematical shortcut that shouldn't exist."

Dave thought of his own impossible abilities. "Sometimes the impossible just needs a new framework to make sense."

"Maybe." Chen initiated a new testing sequence, and monitoring equipment hummed to life around them. "But lately, we've had trouble replicating the initial success. It's like the effect only works under specific conditions, but we haven't been able to isolate the variables."

Through their comms, Anya's voice added to the discussion. "The market impact alone would be staggering. Every major cryptocurrency showing identical optimisation patterns? The implications for blockchain security..."

"Which is why everyone wants it," Chen finished. "But what if we didn't actually break the system? What if we just found a very sophisticated exploit – an edge case that only works under precise conditions?"

Dave watched the test data scroll past, his IT instincts picking up subtle patterns. "Run it again, but this time look at the network load variation. In IT security, timing attacks often depend on specific traffic patterns."

Chen's fingers moved rapidly across her keyboard, adjusting parameters. "Synchronizing with current network conditions... initiating quantum processing... now."

The screens filled with cascading data as their AI engaged with multiple cryptocurrency networks. Dave recognised the basic blockchain architecture from his corporate days, but the sophistication of their system's approach was entirely new.

"Nothing," Chen muttered after several minutes. "Success rates barely above standard quantum computing benchmarks. But the original breakthrough..." She trailed off, staring at one particular data stream. "Wait."

Her hands flew across the controls, adjusting parameters with increasing excitement. "Look at these network patterns. They match exactly what we saw during our first success. The transaction volume, the block timing..."

"Run it," Dan said quietly.

Chen initiated another test sequence. This time, the results were dramatically different. Success rates soared, optimisation patterns emerged across multiple chains, and the quantum AI demonstrated the same impossible efficiency they'd seen in the original breakthrough.

"Ninety-seven percent success rate," Chen breathed, her exhaustion forgotten in the thrill of discovery. "Just like the first time. We found it – the exact conditions that trigger the effect."

But her triumph lasted only moments before her expression shifted to concern. "The markets will see this. We just proved it wasn't a fluke. Once these transactions hit the blockchain..."

As if on cue, Anya's voice cut through their comms with increased urgency. "Multiple alerts on cryptocurrency forums. Someone's spotted the optimisation patterns. Prices are already starting to react."

Dan straightened. "How long before they trace it back here?"

"Not long," Chen said grimly. "We've just proven the technology works. Now everyone knows exactly what they're chasing." She turned to Dave. "Earlier, you said I'd be surprised what's possible. I think we're both dealing with forces we don't fully understand."

Dave watched the market data scrolling across one of Chen's screens, remembering his IT days monitoring system alerts. But these numbers didn't represent server status – they represented the beginning of a financial avalanche that would draw every player in the game straight to their door.

"Well," he said, offering Chen a slight smile, "at least we know all our impossible things work. Ready for what comes next?"

14 Cold Equations

The Agency's operations centre hummed with focused energy as screens displayed cascading market data. Anya's fingers flew across her keyboard while she coordinated with Mei, their combined expertise tracking the digital avalanche that Chen's test had triggered.

"Bitcoin dropping twelve percent in the last hour," Mei reported through their secure link. "Ethereum down seventeen. Every major cryptocurrency showing extreme volatility." Her voice carried the tight focus that had replaced her old field operation tone. "The patterns are too obvious now - everyone can see something's wrong with the validation chains."

Dave watched the numbers scroll past, his IT background helping him grasp the magnitude of what they were witnessing. Market volumes that would normally take days to process were being cleared in hours. Trading algorithms across the globe were detecting the quantum signatures in the blockchain and reacting with mechanical panic.

"Look at this," Anya said, bringing up a new window. CryptoWatch's main forum was exploding with activity. Experts were dissecting the transaction patterns, arguing over implications, and reaching increasingly alarming conclusions.

BlockchainSleuth's latest post captured the growing fear:

"Unprecedented transaction patterns detected across multiple chains," BlockchainSleuth's analysis spread rapidly across crypto forums. "Someone has achieved quantum optimisation that shouldn't be possible with current technology. Market implications are staggering."

The responses flooded in:

"Could be a fluke."

"No - look at the validation patterns. This is new."

"These transaction speeds shouldn't be possible."

"Who has this capability?"

Through their tactical channel, Omar's voice added context from his position inside Chen's facility. "Security teams are intercepting increased chatter. Multiple organisations mobilising resources in Singapore. They're not even trying to hide it any more."

Dan paced behind Anya's workstation, his measured steps betraying none of the tension evident in his voice. "How long before they trace it back here?"

"They already have," Mei replied grimly. "Three different quantum computing facilities in Singapore. Two are government-run with known capabilities. Process of elimination points straight at Chen's lab." A pause. "And the bounties are getting bigger. Latest offer: two hundred million USD equivalent for proof of the quantum optimisation method."

Chen stood in the corner, watching her life's work trigger global chaos. Her tablet displayed live updates from cryptocurrency exchanges across Asia - numbers that represented billions in value evaporating as confidence in blockchain security crumbled.

"We should make a statement," she said finally. "Get ahead of this. Explain the limitations we discovered, show that it only works under specific conditions."

"Too risky," Dan countered. "Right now, they're working from incomplete information. The moment we confirm any details, we paint an even bigger target on your facility."

As if in response to her words, new alerts began flooding Anya's screens. CryptoWatch's front page filled with urgent warnings:

BREAKING: Major exchanges halting withdrawals

ALERT: Unusual transaction patterns detected across multiple chains

WARNING: Possible fundamental breach of blockchain security

"Multiple teams converging on Singapore," Omar reported through their tactical channel. "Private jets landing at Changi Airport. Corporate security teams mobilising. Everyone wants to be first."

Dan's expression hardened. "They're not coming to steal your research any more, Dr. Chen. They're racing to control it before anyone else can. The first group to replicate your breakthrough gets to write the rules."

Through the operations centre’s windows, Singapore's afternoon sun cast long shadows across the city's towers. Somewhere in that urban maze, multiple forces were mobilising, all converging on their position. The quantum breakthrough wasn't just valuable any more - it was a threat to trillions in cryptocurrency value. And threats, as Dave had learned through three years of Agency operations, tended to be eliminated rather than captured.

"Time to go," Dan said, already moving toward the door. "Dr. Chen, we need everything you can't afford to lose on a secure drive in the next ten minutes. Dave, stay with her. Anya, coordinate with Mei - I want every traffic camera, every security feed between here and the facility monitored."

"Omar," he continued through their comms, "full facility lockdown. No one in or out without direct authorization. Serj, get our backup teams in position. They're not just coming for the research any more - they're coming to bury it."

Dave caught Chen's eye as she gathered her equipment, seeing his own understanding reflected there. They'd both dealt with impossible things - his abilities, her quantum breakthrough. But now they faced something far more dangerous: the combined forces of governments and criminal enterprises united by the same fear.

The quantum core hummed steadily in its housing, unaware that its impossible calculations had just made it the most dangerous technology on Earth. The race wasn't just about acquisition any more. It was about survival.

And the clock was already ticking.

15 Interference Patterns

Anya's workstation had become a window into approaching chaos. Her fingers moved across three keyboards with methodical precision, each screen tracking different threat vectors converging on Singapore. The familiar weight of her shoulder holster provided little comfort against what she was seeing.

"Private military contractors mobilising through shell companies," she reported, her Russian accent thickening slightly with tension. "Akademi Securities just chartered three planes from Dubai. SABRE Group assets redirecting from Myanmar." Her grey eyes narrowed at a new alert. "And multiple state actors moving pieces into position."

"How many teams?" Dan asked, studying the tactical overlay she'd built showing known and suspected hostile movements.

"At least seven major players identified." Anya brought up profiles on her main display. "Chinese MSS - they'll want to control the technology. Russian SVR - likely to destroy it if they can't secure it. CIA assets operating through cutouts. British intelligence moving more subtly but definitely involved." She paused, bringing up another window. "And those are just the government actors."

Through their secure link, Mei added: "Multiple cryptocurrency exchanges are pooling resources. They're offering private military contractors success bonuses worth more than some countries' GDPs. The Triads have activated every sleeper cell in Singapore. Even a single successful demonstration of this technology could shatter their entire financial infrastructure."

Dave watched the intelligence feeds from his position near Chen's workstation, his IT background helping him appreciate the digital breadth of what they faced. "We're going to have state-sponsored hackers hitting the networks while military teams breach the perimeter. They'll coordinate their attacks."

"Already seeing probe attempts," Mei confirmed. "Sophisticated ones. Someone's using quantum computing capabilities to test our encryptions. Not as advanced as Dr. Chen's breakthrough, but strong enough to be concerning."

Chen looked up from her systems, exhaustion warring with determination in her eyes. "We've only scratched the surface of what the system can do. Those two successful runs - the optimisation patterns were beyond anything we'd theorised possible. We need time to understand it properly."

"Time we don't have," Dan said grimly. "Every major player in the game thinks you've cracked blockchain security wide open. Whether that's true or not doesn't matter - they'll move based on that assumption."

Anya's screens continued tracking approaching threats - mercenary teams staging through apparently legitimate businesses, state actors moving pieces into position, criminal syndicates mobilising assets. All converging on their position, all willing to kill for technology they hadn't even begun to understand.

"The quantum core needs at least another week of testing to validate the results," Chen said, frustration evident in her voice. "We don't even know if those success rates are reproducible under different conditions. The whole breakthrough could be something we've completely misinterpreted."

"Doesn't matter," Omar reported through their comms from his security position. "Local triads are bribing dockworkers, airport personnel, trying to track shipments and personnel movements. They're building a net around the facility. No one's waiting for peer review."

Chen looked between their faces, reading the tension. "Even if we don't fully understand it yet, they're willing to kill for it?"

"Some to control it," Dan replied. "Others to destroy it. The mere possibility of what you've achieved is enough to terrify a lot of powerful

people." He gestured at Anya's screens showing the approaching forces. "And terrified powerful people tend to react badly."

"First," Dan continued, "we need to decide about evacuation. Dr. Chen, your staff-"

"Most have already gone home," she replied. "After the morning's attack, we implemented emergency protocols. Essential personnel only." She gestured at her workstation. "The quantum core requires minimal physical presence to operate. Just me and two key engineers."

"Easier to protect three than thirty," Omar noted. "But this facility wasn't designed for sustained defence. Even with the upgrades, we can't hold off multiple professional teams indefinitely."

"Time estimate?" Dan asked.

"First teams could hit us within hours," Anya replied. "The professionals will wait for dark. Give themselves cover. But the triads, the opportunists - they might rush it, try to grab what they can before the heavy hitters arrive."

Dave watched Chen process this information, seeing the scientist wrestling with implications beyond pure research. "We need to protect the core," she said finally. "Not just the hardware - the research data, the AI models, everything. Until we understand exactly what we've created..."

"Agreed," Dan said. "This facility is too exposed. Too many angles of approach, too many civilians nearby. We need options."

Through their comms, Serj's deep voice added: "Agency has secure facilities. Places designed for this kind of protection. But moving a quantum computer..."

"Is incredibly complex," Chen finished. "The environmental requirements alone... and we'd need time to spin up a new system, verify the quantum stability..."

"Time we don't have," Anya cut in, her screens filling with new alerts. "Multiple teams entering Singapore through legitimate channels. Corporate jets, commercial flights, private boats. They're not even trying to hide any more - just racing to be first."

The afternoon sun continued its arc across Singapore's skyline, casting long shadows through the facility's reinforced windows. Somewhere in those shadows, multiple teams were preparing to breach their defences, all pursuing technology whose true capabilities remained a mystery even to its creators.

The quantum core hummed steadily in its housing, its secrets still largely unexplored. But they couldn't wait for understanding - not with an army of very dangerous people converging on their position. They needed a plan, and they needed it now.

The only question was: what do you do when the whole world wants something you don't even fully understand yourself?

16 Cold Logic

The underground service tunnels beneath Singapore's technology district sprawled across Omar's display like arteries beneath the city's skin. Built decades ago when the power grid was first established, the concrete passages had been continuously modified as infrastructure evolved. Network conduits and fibre optic cables now ran alongside the original power lines, transforming simple utility tunnels into the nervous system of a digital age.

"The main trunk line runs here," Omar said, fingers tracing the primary route. "Three metres wide, two-point-five metres high. Concrete construction with regular access points and ventilation shafts." He highlighted key junctions on the schematics. "Emergency lighting on independent battery systems. Not many places for an ambush, but good lines of sight for defensive positions if needed."

Dan studied the tunnel network with the focused intensity that had kept him alive through countless operations. The underground maze connected multiple districts through maintenance hubs, power substations, and emergency access points. Most importantly, it provided a direct route to their extraction point that bypassed the net closing around them above ground.

"What about the facility's defensive options?" he asked, shifting focus to their immediate surroundings.

Omar brought up detailed building schematics. "I've identified their likely breach points. Main server room has three ventilation shafts - standard counter-terrorism teams love these approaches." His fingers moved across the display. "Lift shafts here and here. Emergency stairwells. Loading dock access. Plus the maintenance corridors they'll find once they study the building plans."

At another workstation, Anya's fingers moved across multiple keyboards as she pulled up security feeds from the surrounding area. "Surface teams are establishing containment positions. Professional work - they're building overlapping fields of fire covering every conventional exit." Her screens showed tactical teams moving with practised precision through the gathering shadows. "At least three distinct groups coordinating their approach vectors."

"Show me your countermeasure plan," Dan said, mind already calculating defensive options.

Omar brought up new schematics with key positions marked. "CS gas dispersal units in the ventilation shafts - triggered by motion sensors. Anyone tries coming through there, they'll hit a wall of tear gas." He indicated more positions. "Shaped charges here and here - not to cause structural damage, but to fuse the lift mechanisms. Makes the shafts useless for fast-rope insertions."

"The stairwells?"

"Flash-bangs on tripwires, positioned to disorient rather than injure. Smoke generators at key landings to deny visual reference points." Omar highlighted more locations. "I can rig the fire suppression systems to create zones of zero visibility. Force them to move blind through areas we know intimately."

Through their secure channel, Serj's voice added tactical context: "Roof access compromised. Professional teams staging equipment. They're setting up for a coordinated breach."

Chen looked up from her workstation where the final data transfers were completing, her expression a mix of scientific focus and barely concealed tension. "Core shutdown sequence is automated and locked in. Once initiated, the facility's systems will manage power reduction through all phases." She held up a small device that looked like a security fob. "When this deadman's switch clears the building's signal range, the quantum

processors begin an irreversible degradation sequence. Four hours until they're beyond recovery."

Dave watched multiple tactical scenarios play across the displays, his IT background helping him appreciate the technical complexity of what they faced. "How are you handling the countermeasures around sensitive equipment? Any risk to the core's shutdown sequence?"

"Minimal," Omar replied. "I'm setting up concentrated defensive zones away from critical systems. Creating a series of lethal funnels - areas where they think they have good cover but actually face interlocking fields of fire." He brought up more tactical overlays. "The charges are precise, designed to deny access and channel movement rather than cause structural damage. We control where they can go, which means we control where they'll be when we engage."

Dan absorbed the technical details while watching Chen and her engineers make final preparations. The quantum core hummed steadily in its housing, the sound a constant reminder of what they were fighting to protect - or at least deny to others. Years of research, breakthrough discoveries, and quantum secrets were being compressed into hardened drives designed to survive almost anything.

"Doctor," Dan said finally, "time to move. Everything essential secured?"

Chen nodded, shouldering a compact bag containing drives worth more than most countries' annual budgets. Her two engineers carried similar packages, their expressions showing the same mix of determination and concealed fear. She took a final look at the quantum core - her life's work reduced to data packets and automated shutdown sequences.

"The next teams," she said quietly, "will know it's possible now. They'll keep trying to reproduce our results, even without understanding exactly how we achieved them."

"Later problem," Dan replied. He checked his weapon - a suppressed SIG Sauer that had seen him through countless operations. "Stay close, follow my lead. If anything happens, hit the ground and let me handle it." He turned to the remaining team members. "You three make them work for every metre. Control their movement, deny them easy access."

"Time estimate to extraction?" Dave asked.

"Ninety minutes if everything goes smoothly," Dan answered. "Plan for twice that. Things rarely go smoothly." He checked his watch. "That gives you three hours before the quantum core degrades. Make them count."

Omar was already moving to his pre-selected positions, his movements precise and economical as he began setting up his defensive network. Each countermeasure was positioned to create maximum psychological impact with minimal collateral damage, transforming the facility's architecture into a sophisticated trap.

"Twenty minutes to set primary countermeasures," he reported. "Another ten for secondary systems and remote triggers. After that, we control their options. Every route they think is safe becomes a tactical disadvantage."

"These teams will have thermal imaging, advanced breaching equipment," Dave noted. "They'll expect resistance."

"Good," Omar replied with cold confidence. "Let them come prepared. It just means they'll be carrying more weight when they hit our CS gas zones. More equipment to shed when the flash-bangs disorient them. More vulnerabilities when they realise every piece of cover they're counting on has been compromised."

Through their comms, Anya's voice carried fresh urgency: "Multiple teams starting final approach preparations. They're coordinating breach points and support positions. Professional work - these aren't amateurs."

"Time to go," Dan said simply. He gestured for Chen and her engineers to follow him toward the maintenance access panel. The tunnel entrance

gaped like a wound in the facility's floor, leading down into Singapore's underground maze. One by one, they disappeared into the darkness, Dan's steady presence leading them toward extraction.

Dave watched them go, then turned to his remaining teammates. Serj's massive frame moved to take up his defensive position while Omar continued his methodical preparation of countermeasures. Above them, the quantum core hummed steadily, its automated shutdown sequence beginning the long process of powering down.

Through the facility's reinforced windows, Singapore's evening skyline blazed with artificial light. Somewhere in that urban maze, multiple teams were preparing their final assault positions. They expected to find a desperate defence of priceless quantum technology. Instead, they would face a team of professionals who had transformed every apparent advantage into a carefully crafted trap.

The question wasn't whether the attackers would breach the facility - that was inevitable. The question was: how many would recognise their mistake before Omar's defences began to systematically dismantle their assault?

17 Wave Collapse

The steady drone of the quantum core's hum filled the facility's basement levels, a constant background noise during their defence preparations. Dave studied the monitoring systems, his IT background helping him parse the complex readings. The core's quantum states required precise environmental control - liquid helium cooling systems maintaining temperatures just fractions of a degree above absolute zero.

"These readings," he said to Chen through their tactical channel, "show the core's getting unstable. Temperature fluctuations in the cooling system."

"Expected with power fluctuations," Chen replied, her voice tight with tension. "The helium circulators are sensitive. Any disruption to the cooling cycle will trigger quantum state collapse."

Through the security feeds, Dave watched multiple teams taking up breach positions. His enhanced night vision transformed the emergency lighting in sharp grey contours overlaying the dimly lit details, every shadow and surface distinct. Behind him, Omar's voice carried through their comms with cold precision.

"First charges set. Remote detonators live." Omar's measured tones betrayed none of the tension evident in his movements. "Staging area clear. CS gas dispersal units armed."

Above them, boots scraped against metal as assault teams positioned themselves for breach. Through the reinforced walls, Dave's enhanced vision picked up the subtle movements of professional operators preparing their final approaches.

"Multiple teams on the roof," Serj reported, his massive frame moving into position near the upper access points. "Counting eight, maybe ten. Professional gear. These aren't amateurs."

The first explosion came precisely where they'd expected -- the north-west corner access panel. Before the smoke cleared, four figures fast-roped through the opening. Their movements spoke of extensive tactical training, but Serj had been fighting professionals since before some of them were born.

The first two attackers died before their boots touched the floor. Serj's G36C barked twice, the rounds finding the exposed throat above their armour with surgical precision. Training took over -- no wasted motion, no wasted ammunition, just the economical violence that had kept him alive through countless operations.

"Two down," he reported calmly through his comms. "Eight more up top. Four-man breach teams max due to space constraints." His voice carried no strain despite the situation. This was what he'd been trained for.

The remaining pair split apart, seeking cover behind office partitions. Their return fire was disciplined -- short bursts aimed to suppress rather than kill. They were buying time for the next team to breach. Smart. Professional. But Serj had already factored this into his tactical calculations.

He retreated three metres, maintaining line of sight while increasing their targeting difficulty. The fluorescent lights above shattered as rounds passed through the ceiling tiles. In the altered lighting, Serj's experience gave him the advantage. He'd memorised every corner, every potential cover point.

More footsteps above -- the second team preparing to breach. Serj inserted his earplugs, knowing what came next. In these confined spaces, gunfire could disorient as effectively as flash-bangs. The G36C's stock folded smoothly as he transitioned to his sidearm. The rifle's length would become a liability once they closed distance.

The second breach came as a pair of flash-bangs rolled across the floor. Serj was already moving, his Glock 17 tracking new threats through the smoke. The confined space worked against the attackers -- too many

bodies trying to secure too little room. Their professional training actually worked against them, making their movements predictable.

His pistol cracked three times. One attacker down, a second wounded. But they were pushing hard now, coordinating their fire to force him back. These weren't amateurs to be picked off easily. Each team's movements complemented the others, creating interlocking fields of fire.

Serj absorbed this tactical information even as he continued his controlled retreat. His job wasn't to eliminate them -- just delay their advance long enough for the others to complete their mission. Each second he kept them occupied was another second bought for the team.

Through the gunfire and breaking glass, he heard more movement on the roof. The remaining teams were repositioning, likely preparing for a coordinated push from multiple angles. But they still had to funnel through the breach points, and that gave him the advantage.

His Glock's slide locked back on an empty magazine. The reload was pure muscle memory -- smooth, efficient, no wasted motion. Seventeen more rounds. The attackers were learning, adapting their approach. But so was he. And he'd been doing this a lot longer than they had.

"Second team reduced," he reported through his comms. "But they're adapting. Next breach will be coordinated, multiple entry points." His tone remained measured, professional. Just another day at the office.

Through their comms, new urgency filled Anya's voice: "Safe house compromised. Three hostiles inside. Moving to--" The sound of close-quarters combat carried through their link.

Anya pressed against the wall beside the doorway, heartbeat steady. The rifle barrel preceded its owner into the room. Textbook entry, except they hadn't accounted for the tight space created by the overstuffed couch.

As the first man cleared the threshold, Anya exploded into motion. Her hands clamped onto the rifle barrel, using it as a lever to slam the operator

into the door frame. The weapon's sling worked against him – she twisted, using his entanglement to redirect his momentum over the coffee table. He went down hard, rifle clattering away.

The second assailant's pistol appeared in the doorway. Anya was already moving, yanking the first man up as a shield. Two shots impacted his body armour. She shoved the unconscious man forward, forcing the shooter to sidestep into the room. The coffee table caught his knee. Anya vaulted the couch, her boot connecting with his gun hand. The pistol discharged into the ceiling as she rode him down, her elbow finding the sweet spot where jaw meets neck.

Movement in the doorway. The third attacker was smarter, knife held low in a fighter's grip. Anya kicked the nearest couch cushion into his face, closing distance as he batted it away. His knife slashed horizontally – she dropped under it, shoulder driving into his solar plexus. The knife arm came down; she caught it, redirecting its point into the couch. Using the trapped blade as a pivot, she twisted her hips, launching him head-first into the wall.

Three attackers disabled in under ten seconds. The room's soft furnishings had worked to her advantage – no fatalities, though they'd wake up with serious regrets.

"Getting out," she managed between breaths. "Had to leave most of the gear. Will rendezvous at second rally point."

The quantum core's monitoring systems flashed new warnings as vibrations from breaching charges rippled through the facility. Dave studied the helium circulation readings, watching pressure fluctuations that threatened the delicate quantum states.

"Temperature variance exceeding tolerances," Chen reported through their tactical channel. "The cooling system wasn't designed to handle this kind of stress."

Dan's voice cut through their comms: "Contact in the tunnels. Two operators, well-equipped. Dr. Chen is secure but--" The distinctive sound of suppressed pistol fire echoed through their channel. "Engaging."

The first shot cracked through the tunnel like thunder, concrete dust puffing where the round struck near Dan's head. Two operators had emerged from a maintenance junction ahead, their movements betraying professional training. In the confined space, the muzzle flashes painted stark shadows across moisture-slicked walls.

Dan was already moving, his mind cataloguing priorities with cold precision. Chen and her engineers had pressed themselves against the tunnel wall behind him. The confined space meant any missed shots could ricochet -- unacceptable risk to the civilians. He needed to close distance, deny them clean shots.

The nearest overhead light exploded as a round struck it, plunging that section of tunnel into shadow. Dan used the darkness, crossing the space with the fluid economy of motion that had kept him alive through countless operations. His knife cleared its sheath with practised silence, the carbon-steel blade drinking what little light remained.

The closer operator noticed the threat first, trying to adjust his aim in the confined space. But Dan had already moved inside his firing arc, one hand deflecting the weapon while the other drove his knife upward. The operator blocked with his free arm -- good training. Dan used that momentum to slam him against the tunnel wall, the knife finding the gap between vest and collarbone. The second operator's weapon tracked toward them, but Dan was already dragging his victim into the line of fire, the weight of his screaming adversary buying precious seconds.

The second operator's hesitation lasted only a fraction of a second, but that was enough. Another light shattered, adding to the growing darkness. Dan moved through the shadows with lethal grace, years of close-quarters combat experience guiding each strike. His knife found the second

operator's gun hand, opening tendons with surgical precision. The weapon clattered to the ground as Dan's elbow crashed into the man's throat, driving him back against the tunnel wall.

The first operator had recovered enough to draw a backup weapon -- a compact pistol that would have been invisible to less experienced eyes. Dan saw the move coming, his free hand catching the man's wrist and driving it up just as the gun discharged. The shot took out another light, increasing the darkness of the tunnel.

"Stay down!" Dan barked at Chen and her team, his voice carrying the authority of someone used to being obeyed in combat. The quantum scientist and her engineers pressed themselves flatter against the tunnel wall, eyes wide as they watched the lethal dance unfold.

The confined space worked to Dan's advantage now. The operators couldn't create distance, couldn't bring their superior numbers to bear effectively. His knife moved with economic precision, each strike targeting disabling points -- tendons, nerves, major blood vessels. He fought to incapacitate quickly rather than kill, but the brutality required to ensure that outcome was no less shocking to the civilians watching.

The last overhead light died in a shower of sparks, leaving only the emergency strips to paint everything in dim red hues. In that crimson twilight, Dan's blade found final targets with mechanical efficiency. When silence finally fell, broken only by the ragged breathing of Chen and her engineers, both operators lay unconscious or disabled on the tunnel floor.

"Clear," Dan said quietly, already moving to check the junction they'd emerged from. No more threats presented themselves, but he remained alert. Professional operators rarely worked alone -- there would be others searching these tunnels.

He turned to Chen, noting the mix of horror and fascination in her expression. The scientist had likely never seen violence this close, this personal. But there was also a new understanding in her eyes -- a

recognition that the same precision she applied to quantum computing, Dan applied to the brutal algebra of close-quarters combat.

"We need to move," he said simply, cleaning his blade before resheathing it. "They'll have heard those shots, even suppressed. More will come."

Chen nodded, her scientific mind likely cataloguing everything she'd witnessed, filing it away for later processing. Her engineers looked pale but determined as they gathered their precious cargo -- hard drives containing their quantum research.

Behind them, Singapore's underground maze stretched into darkness, promising more confrontations before they reached their extraction point. But Dan had demonstrated exactly why he'd survived so many similar operations. In these confined spaces, against operators who depended too heavily on their firearms, his particular skill set became something approaching its own quantum uncertainty -- you could know his position or his momentum, but never both at the same time.

And in the narrow tunnels beneath one of humanity's greatest technological achievements, that uncertainty had proven decisively fatal.

Dave watched the tactical overlay through his enhanced vision, seeing the carefully planned defensive zones Omar had created. Every apparent safe route led into prepared kill zones. Every obvious cover point had been compromised.

Omar watched through his tactical display as four shadows moved down the stairwell with professional precision. Their weapon-mounted lights swept methodically ahead, checking corners and angles. Standard counter-terrorism formation, exactly as he'd anticipated.

The team reached the lobby landing, their movements showing extensive CQB training. The point man began to clear the corner when Omar triggered the first charge. The shaped explosive detonated with surgical precision, collapsing the stairwell behind them without compromising

structural integrity. The sound echoed through the confined space like a thunderclap.

Before they could process their situation, Omar activated the CS gas dispensers. Multiple nozzles released dense clouds into the sealed space. The team's disciplined formation dissolved as the first choking coughs began.

"Gas, gas, gas!" one operator managed before doubling over. Their gas masks remained in the tactical gear they'd shed to move more quietly down the stairs - another predictable decision Omar had counted on.

The team tried to advance through the corridor, but Omar's positioned fire kept them contained. His suppressed MP7 sent precise bursts into any cover they might have used, forcing them back into the thickening chemical fog.

Through his thermal imaging, Omar watched their heat signatures cluster against the walls, professional composure eroding as the CS did its work. Some tried to reach emergency rebreathers, but the gas had already taken hold. Combat-trained throats and lungs betrayed them, bodies rejecting the contaminated air.

"Lobby team neutralised," Omar reported calmly through his comms. "Four hostiles contained. Moving to second position." He shouldered his weapon and retreated, leaving the operators to their misery. By the time the gas dispersed, the quantum lab's secrets would be beyond their reach.

Behind him, harsh coughing echoed through the corridor, punctuated by retching sounds as the CS worked its brutal magic. The team that had entered with such tactical precision was reduced to a struggling mass of watering eyes and burning lungs, trapped in a box of Omar's design.

The facility's defences continued their systematic dismantling of the assault. Omar's precisely placed charges forced attacking teams into prepared kill zones. CS gas turned apparent safe routes into death traps.

Every obvious approach had been compromised, every standard tactic countered before it could be employed.

But they were professionals, and they were adapting. New breach points appeared as shaped charges opened routes Omar hadn't had time to prepare for. Teams with specialised gear pushed through the gas, learning from their first encounter. The attack was evolving, becoming more coordinated as multiple groups shared intel and adjusted their approach.

"They're nearly through," Serj reported, the sound of his G36C punctuating his words. "Getting close to the core housing. Time to make our move."

Dave studied the quantum core's monitoring systems one final time. The helium cooling system was already compromised - explosive breaches had damaged the circulation system. Total collapse was inevitable. The only choice now was whether it happened on their terms.

"Omar," he called, "what happens if we breach the cooling system?"

"Core temperature spikes," Omar replied immediately. "Quantum states collapse instantly. Total system failure. But Dave..." He hesitated. "The helium's at near absolute zero. After what happened in the Arctic..."

Dave flexed his fingers, remembering the bone-deep cold that had nearly stopped him during that mission. His first real vulnerability, the first time his enhanced physiology had truly failed him. "We don't have a choice. How cold are we talking?"

"Minus two-seventy Celsius." Omar's voice carried clear concern. "That's far beyond anything you faced in the Arctic. One touch could freeze tissue instantly."

Behind them, the sound of breaching charges grew closer. Serj maintained steady fire, buying them precious seconds, but the attacking teams were adapting, learning.

Dave moved toward the cooling system's main housing. "Then I'll have to be quick."

"Dave-" Omar started, but Dave cut him off.

"My abilities adapted to electricity. Maybe they'll adapt to this too." He gripped the reinforced panels, enhanced strength making short work of the protective housing. Cold radiated from the exposed systems like a physical force. "Besides, we're out of options."

The first touch of the cooling line sent needles of pain through his hands - sharper, deeper than anything he'd felt in the Arctic. But he grit his teeth, muscles straining as he yanked the main feed free. Liquid helium exploded into the facility's atmosphere, and the effect was immediate and surreal.

"Fall back," Dave tried to say, but his voice emerged in a high-pitched squeak. The helium had transformed their tactical channel into something from a children's cartoon. His hands burned with cold, the pain intense but already starting to fade as his enhanced physiology struggled to adapt.

"What the hell?" Serj's normally deep voice now sounded like a hyperactive chipmunk. "This is... this is..."

"Highly entertaining," Omar's squeaky voice admitted. "But effective. Core temperature critical. Total system failure in three... two..."

The quantum processor's housing erupted in a cascade of electrical discharges as carefully maintained quantum states collapsed into chaos. Delicate systems, designed to operate at temperatures approaching absolute zero, failed catastrophically in the warming environment.

"Facility secured," Dave reported in his helium-altered voice. "Quantum core destroyed. Starting extraction."

Through their comms, Dan reported from the tunnels: "Package secure. Moving to rally point."

They retreated through prepared routes, Omar's pre-planned paths letting them avoid the chaos erupting above ground. The quantum core's steady hum had been replaced by silence, broken only by the sound of professional teams trying to coordinate through helium-pitched voices.

Dave moved through the darkness, his enhanced vision guiding them past security patrols. Sometimes victory meant knowing when to destroy what you were protecting. Behind them, multiple teams of professionals were learning that hard lesson while sounding like children's cartoon characters.

Omar's precisely planned defence had worked perfectly, but it was Dave's desperate solution that had added the final touch. The quantum core's secrets were safe - not because they'd won every fight, but because they'd known exactly when to end them.

The sounds of their tactical laughter, transformed into high-pitched giggles by the helium, followed them into Singapore's gathering night. Sometimes the best solutions came with unexpected side effects.

18 The Uncertainty Principle

In the cramped confines of their fallback location - a modest apartment in Tiong Bahru - Anya winced slightly as she checked the bandage on her knuckles, evidence of her close-quarters fight in Geylang still fresh.

"Three of them," she said with quiet satisfaction, her grey eyes holding a dangerous gleam. "Professional gear, tactical training. But they made the same mistake everyone makes - saw a woman alone and thought it would be easy." Her lips curved into a predator's smile. "Why do they always underestimate the girls?"

"No fear of that here," Dan replied, checking his weapon with methodical precision. "None of us are that stupid. I've seen what happens to people who make that mistake." He gestured at her bandaged hand. "Though you could have waited for backup."

"Didn't have much choice," Anya countered, her fingers flying across her laptop keyboard despite the injury. "They breached while I was mid-decrypt. Had to protect the data." She flexed her damaged knuckles thoughtfully. "Besides, some lessons need to be taught personally."

Serj's deep voice carried quiet amusement from his position near the window. "Like the lesson about using couch cushions as improvised weapons?"

"The cushion was just to buy time," Anya replied with professional dignity. "The coffee table did the real work." Her expression softened slightly. "Though I do feel bad about the couch. It was rather nice."

Dave flexed his right hand with morbid fascination. The skin had taken on a mottled black appearance where the liquid helium had splashed him during the core's destruction. More concerning was the numbness, a deep-seated cold that seemed to penetrate to the bone.

"Stop poking it," Anya chided, her professional demeanour not quite hiding her concern. She studied his hand with the same intensity she usually reserved for tactical analysis. "We have no way to treat this. Your physiology... it's not like anything medical science has encountered."

Dave watched as he tried to make a fist, managing only a weak curl of his fingers. "The blackness is receding though. See?" He pointed to where the dark patches were indeed lightening around the edges. "And I'm getting more movement back."

"Still," Anya said, "we've found your kryptonite. Extreme cold affects you when nothing else can." Her grey eyes narrowed. "This could be tactically significant."

Through their secure link, Cecilia's warm Ghanaian accent filled their temporary command centre. "Give me the full situation report."

"Primary objective achieved," Dan replied, his voice carrying the weight of command. "Dr. Chen and her team are secure. The quantum core is completely destroyed - no chance of recovery."

"Along with half our equipment," Anya added grimly. "The safe house was compromised. Had to leave most of our gear." She flexed her shoulder, still sore from the close-quarters combat. "Triggered the thermite charges remotely. Server's gone, but at least they won't get any data from it."

Chen sat in the corner, her tablet displaying lines of code that represented the only surviving pieces of her research. "The hardware was just a tool," she said, looking up as Dave started to apologise. "The real breakthrough was in the algorithms, the AI models. We still have those."

"Speaking of having things," Serj rumbled from his position near the window, "Anya, perhaps now is the time?"

Dave looked between them, noting the slight smile playing at the corners of Anya's mouth. "What?"

"The tea bags," Anya said with mock solemnity. "They didn't make it. Casualties of the safe house compromise."

A moment of silence fell over the room before Dan broke it with a quiet chuckle. "Could be worse. At least we got to hear Serj sound like a cartoon character thanks to the helium. I'd have paid good money for that recording."

"If you value your continued existence," Serj warned, but there was no heat in his words. The big Russian's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners - the closest he usually came to showing amusement.

"The market implications are already spreading," Cecilia reported through their link. "Major cryptocurrency exchanges are implementing emergency protocols. Billions in value evaporating as confidence in blockchain security crumbles."

"They don't even know if it was real," Chen said, frustration evident in her voice. "We never got to complete the validation testing. The whole breakthrough could have been an anomaly, a misinterpreted edge case."

"Doesn't matter now," Dan replied. "The mere possibility is enough to trigger a panic. Every major player will be searching for ways to replicate your work." He studied Chen thoughtfully. "Which means you're still in danger. They may not have the hardware, but they know you understand the underlying principles."

"About that," Chen said, setting down her tablet. "I've been thinking. The Agency... you clearly have resources, capabilities. Maybe instead of just running, we could..."

"Continue the research?" Dave finished. "Under Agency protection?"

"It would need to be discussed at higher levels," Cecilia said through their link. "But given the circumstances, it might be the best option for everyone."

Dave flexed his hand again, noting with relief that more feeling was returning. The incident with the liquid helium had revealed a crucial weakness, but also highlighted something important - his body adapted, healed, overcame. Just like the team itself.

"First," Dan said, "we need to get everyone out of Singapore. Too many interested parties converging here." He turned to Chen. "Doctor, how do you feel about a trip to England?"

"I hear they have excellent tea," Chen replied with a small smile. "When do we leave?"

Through their tactical channel, Omar's voice added: "Local assets reporting multiple teams still searching the area. They're frustrated, getting sloppy. Good time to slip past while they're focused on the facility."

"Agreed," Dan said. "We move in two hours. Minimum gear, maximum speed." He looked around the room, meeting each team member's eyes. "The real work starts after we get them to safety. Something tells me this is just the beginning."

Outside their temporary sanctuary, Singapore's night was alive with movement as multiple forces searched for what they'd already destroyed. But in that cramped apartment, surrounded by professionals who'd proven their worth yet again, Dave felt a familiar certainty settling over him. Whatever came next, they'd face it together.

Even if they had to do it without proper tea.

19 Superposition

The Agency's UK facility felt different to Dave as he led Chen through the familiar corridors. The deliberately unremarkable office space, with its frosted glass walls and quiet efficiency, now held possibilities he hadn't considered before. Chen walked beside him, her keen scientific mind clearly cataloguing everything she saw.

"Your quantum computing contact is ex-Cambridge?" she asked, referring to the meeting they were heading toward. "Part of their quantum research group?"

"Professor Malcolm Harrison," Dave confirmed. "Brilliant physicist, but grew frustrated with academic politics. Started his own research company - Quantum Horizons. They've got a solid facility in Sheffield, good team, established infrastructure."

Chen nodded thoughtfully. "I know his work. Published some interesting papers on quantum error correction five years ago, then went quiet." She glanced at Dave. "Private sector quiet."

"The Agency has... connections to his funding sources," Dave said carefully. The complex network of wealthy backers who supported the Agency's work was something even he didn't fully understand. "He's been developing quantum computing applications for financial modelling, but nothing close to what you achieved."

They reached the conference room where Cecilia waited with Dan and a distinguished-looking man in his early sixties. Professor Harrison had the weathered look of someone who spent too much time with equations and not enough with people, but his eyes were sharp as they assessed Chen.

"Dr. Chen," Harrison said, standing to greet her. "Your work on quantum state manipulation is... well, revolutionary isn't the word, is it?" He gestured for her to sit. "Tell me about your cooling requirements."

Chen didn't hesitate. "We need liquid helium circulation capable of maintaining 0.015 Kelvin across the quantum processor array. Our previous setup used custom-designed dilution refrigerators, but the real challenge is maintaining quantum coherence at scale."

"Scale being the key word," Harrison agreed. "Our facility can handle about 100 qubits reliably. Your breakthrough would require..."

"At least 500 to replicate our initial results," Chen finished. "But the infrastructure requirements aren't just about qubit count. The AI integration demands massive classical computing support for error correction and state preparation."

Dave watched them fall into deep technical discussion, terms like "quantum supremacy" and "decoherence time" flying back and forth. Despite his years in Linux admin, the concepts they discussed felt like listening to the dark arts of wizardry. Sure, he understood networks, system architecture, even some advanced cryptography - but this was different. This was physics wrapped in mathematics wrapped in possibilities that his binary-trained mind struggled to grasp.

Anya's voice added context: "Harrison's facility is good, but not bleeding edge. They'd need significant upgrades to support Chen's work."

"Which is where we come in," Cecilia said quietly. She slid a tablet across the table to Harrison, who picked it up with raised eyebrows.

"This is... considerable investment," he said carefully, studying the figures. "The cooling system upgrades alone..."

"Would take your facility from regional player to world-class quantum computing centre," Chen finished. "With the right modifications, your infrastructure could support our research while maintaining your existing projects."

Harrison's expression grew thoughtful. "The board would need convincing. And there are security implications..."

"Already handled," Dan cut in smoothly. "Your facility's physical security will receive a complete upgrade. The Agency has experience protecting sensitive research."

Dave thought of Singapore, of Omar's carefully planned defences and Serj's lethal efficiency. Experience indeed.

"The timeline is aggressive," Harrison noted, still studying the tablet. "But with proper funding... yes, we could have the core systems upgraded within three months. The AI integration would take longer..."

"I can help with that," Chen said. "My team's expertise combined with your existing infrastructure - we could significantly accelerate the development cycle."

Harrison set down the tablet, his scientific curiosity clearly warring with practical concerns. "The investment structure - it's quite complex. Multiple shell companies, blind trusts..."

"Necessary precautions," Cecilia explained. "Recent events have demonstrated the importance of maintaining certain separations. Officially, Quantum Horizons will simply be expanding its research capabilities through normal market investment."

"While unofficially..." Harrison let the thought hang.

"Unofficially," Chen said, "we'll be advancing quantum computing in ways that could revolutionise everything from financial systems to encryption. But this time with proper security and controlled testing protocols."

Dave watched Harrison process this, seeing the moment when scientific ambition overcame institutional caution. The professor's eyes lit up with the same fire he'd seen in Chen's when she discussed quantum breakthroughs.

"The board meets next week," Harrison said finally. "With these numbers, and the security guarantees... yes, I think we can make this work." He turned to Chen. "Your research team - they're all willing to relocate?"

"Those who know the core algorithms," Chen confirmed. "We'll need to recruit additional support staff, but the key personnel are already on board."

"Speaking of board," Cecilia interjected smoothly, "we should discuss the longer-term investment strategy. The Agency's interest in Quantum Horizons goes beyond just this project."

Harrison's eyebrows rose slightly. "A gradual acquisition?"

"Over several years," Cecilia confirmed. "Maintaining your leadership role, of course. But with increased resources and... certain protective considerations."

Dave recognised the careful dance happening - the Agency moving to secure both the research and its future applications while maintaining necessary separations and deniability. It was the same pattern they'd used countless times, building walls within walls to protect what mattered.

Through their comms, Anya reported: "Background checks on Quantum Horizons' board members complete. No red flags. Standard corporate ambitions, nothing concerning."

Chen leaned forward, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten in scientific excitement. "With your facility's existing framework and these upgrades, we could potentially reproduce our results in a controlled environment. Really understand what we achieved."

"And if it works?" Harrison asked. "If you can replicate the breakthrough?"

"Then we do it right this time," Chen said firmly. "No rushed testing, no market panic. We develop the technology properly, with full understanding of the implications."

Dave watched them continue planning, seeing how Chen's drive for discovery balanced against Harrison's methodical approach and the Agency's need for security. It was a delicate equation - like quantum

mechanics itself, trying to precisely measure one aspect could disrupt others.

But as he listened to them work through technical details and organizational structures, he felt a growing certainty. This was how world-changing discoveries should happen - not in desperate moments under siege, but through careful collaboration between brilliant minds with proper support and protection.

The quantum breakthrough that had nearly torn Singapore apart would be reborn in Sheffield, hidden behind corporate structures and Agency security. And this time, they'd be ready for whatever implications emerged from their research into reality's deepest mysteries.

20 Binary Sunset

Three months after Singapore, Sarah Chen still wasn't used to the shadow that followed her everywhere. The Agency protection detail was professionally unobtrusive - just another woman walking ten paces behind her in the Sheffield shopping centre, or a man reading a newspaper in the café where she got her morning coffee. But their constant presence weighed on her, a perpetual reminder that her life had fundamentally changed.

"The organic section?" her current shadow, Jessica, asked with carefully crafted casualness as Chen pushed her shopping cart toward the produce. Like all her protection detail, Jessica moved with the deliberate grace that marked her as more dangerous than her business-casual appearance suggested.

"I thought I'd try cooking again," Chen replied. Another attempt at normalcy, like the modest house the Agency had arranged for her near the Quantum Horizons facility. Her security team lived in adjacent properties, maintaining what they called a "protective envelope" around her daily routine.

Through her tablet's secure channel, cryptocurrency forums blazed with increasingly desperate discussions:

"Another failed quantum mining attempt. Burned through $50M in hardware, barely broke even on processing costs."

"Has anyone replicated the Singapore spike? Best we've managed is 15% improvement over standard rates."

"Russian team claims breakthrough, but power consumption makes it commercially non-viable. They're losing money on every block mined."

Chen allowed herself a small smile as she selected vegetables. The global race to recreate her team's quantum breakthrough was producing exactly

what she'd expected - a lot of expensive failures. Without understanding the underlying principles, even throwing massive computing power at the problem wouldn't help.

Her phone buzzed - a message from Eric Wong, her lead developer who had relocated with her from Singapore. "Japanese research group published interesting paper. Worth discussing when you have time."

She typed back a quick acknowledgment, careful to use only the Agency-approved secure messaging system. The protocols had seemed paranoid at first, but recent events had proven their worth. Three attempts had already been made to hack their personal devices, each one professionally executed but ultimately futile thanks to the Agency's security measures.

"Dr. Chen?" Jessica's voice carried a new edge of alertness. Chen looked up to see a man approaching with purposeful steps, his hand reaching into his jacket. Her security detail moved with liquid grace, smoothly intercepting him before he could close distance.

"Market research survey," the man managed before Jessica's partner materialised beside him. "Just wanted to ask about shopping habits..."

"Sir," Jessica said pleasantly, though her grip on his arm suggested anything but pleasure, "I believe the exit is that way." They escorted him out with professional efficiency, but Chen's heart was still racing. How many other "market researchers" were actually corporate spies or worse?

Later that evening, in her secured home office, Chen reviewed progress reports from Quantum Horizons. Harrison's facility upgrades were proceeding on schedule - new cooling systems installed, power infrastructure enhanced, security measures that would have impressed a military base. But watching the world's futile attempts to recreate her breakthrough had convinced her they were right to take their time, to do things properly this time.

Her tablet chimed with another market alert:

"BREAKING: Major quantum computing consortium announces new mining protocol. Claims 40% improvement over standard rates."

The responses were immediate:

"Tested it. Power costs eat all profits. Not even close to the Singapore numbers."

"Another dead end. What did they actually achieve in Singapore?"

"Has anyone tracked down Chen's team?"

That last comment made her shiver slightly. They had tracked down her team - or tried to. Two of her Singapore researchers had been approached with job offers that came with suspiciously large signing bonuses. Another had reported someone following his children to school, a clear attempt at leverage that the Agency had shut down with prejudicial efficiency.

Her secure line buzzed - Harrison calling from the facility. "Sarah? Those new resonance patterns we discussed... I think you should see this."

She glanced at her clock - nearly midnight. Jessica would already be alerting the night security team, preparing for an unscheduled facility visit. The protocols were becoming routine, though no less restrictive.

"Give me twenty minutes," she replied, already reaching for her coat. Outside, she knew her protection detail was moving into transport formation, checking routes, coordinating with facility security. The constant vigilance still made her uncomfortable, but she was learning to appreciate their dedication. In a world where quantum computing breakthroughs could destabilise global financial systems, their paranoia was starting to feel justified.

As her security team's car wound through Sheffield's quieting streets, Chen watched the city lights blur past. Somewhere in the quantum noise they were studying lay patterns that could change everything - or destroy it, if misused. The weight of that knowledge pressed against her like a physical

force, making the protection around her feel less like restriction and more like necessity.

They had time now - time to understand what they'd actually achieved in Singapore, time to develop it properly. But watching the world's desperate attempts to replicate their success, Chen knew that time was also their enemy. Someone would eventually make the same breakthrough, perhaps without their ethical constraints or the Agency's protective oversight.

The race wasn't over. It had just become longer, more complex, and infinitely more dangerous.

21 Network Effect

Sheffield's street lights cast long shadows across the midnight roads as Chen's security detail maintained their standard convoy formation. Two vehicles - the armoured Mercedes carrying Chen with Jessica and a senior detail member, followed by the support SUV with four additional operators. Standard procedure for late-night facility visits, executed with professional precision.

The first sign something was wrong came when the dustbin lorry ahead slowed unexpectedly. Jessica's hand moved to her concealed P226 as their driver began scanning for alternate routes, but the narrow street left few options.

"Contact," the support vehicle called through their tactical channel. "Multiple hostiles, rooftop level. Professional kit."

The RPG's launch signature burned bright against the night sky. The support SUV swerved, but physics and urban terrain conspired against them. The explosion flipped the vehicle, sending it rolling into a shopfront in a shower of glass and twisted metal.

"GO!" Jessica shouted, already moving to cover Chen as their driver floored the accelerator. But the dustbin lorry blocked their forward path, its mass an immovable obstacle. More vehicles appeared behind them - sleek black SUVs that screamed professional operators.

The night erupted in gunfire. Bullets sparked off their armoured Mercedes as Chen's security detail returned fire through gun ports. Jessica's P226 barked with mechanical precision, her shots finding targets with lethal efficiency. But there were too many attackers, too well-equipped, too precisely coordinated.

"Agency Control," Jessica transmitted, her voice steady despite the chaos. "Primary package under attack. Multiple professional operators. Requesting immediate-"

The shaped charge that breached their rear door cut off her transmission. CS gas flooded the vehicle's interior as operators in tactical gear began their assault. Jessica's gas mask was already in place as she engaged the first attacker, her CQB training transforming the vehicle's confined space into a killing ground.

But these weren't amateurs. Their breaching tactics spoke of extensive military experience, each move coordinated with practised efficiency. When Jessica dropped the first operator with a throat strike, two more were already flanking. When she shattered another's knee, his partner was moving to compensate.

Chen huddled in the footwell, eyes watering from CS gas exposure despite the emergency mask Jessica had shoved into her hands. Through the chemical haze and muzzle flashes, she watched her security detail fight with desperate skill. But the attackers had planned for this - had clearly studied their protocols and prepared counters for every standard response.

The rear windows shattered inward as breaching charges created new entry points. Jessica's P226 clicked empty; she transitioned to her backup weapon without hesitation, but the attackers had timed this too. They surged forward in the momentary gap, overwhelming her through sheer numbers.

"Agency Control," Jessica managed through the tactical channel, blood streaming from a head wound. "Package... compromised. Multiple casualties. They're-"

The taser struck her mid-transmission. Chen watched her protector convulse and drop, still trying to fight even as electricity coursed through her system. The last thing Chen saw before the black bag descended over

her head was Jessica struggling to rise, her dedication to duty evident even in defeat.

Professional hands grabbed Chen, moving her with practised efficiency toward one of their vehicles. She tried to note details - at least four operators, speaking a mix of languages, using standardized NATO tactical commands. These weren't random criminals; this was a highly trained extraction team.

As they sped away into Sheffield's night, leaving her security detail broken behind them, Chen struggled to control her fear. The Agency had warned her this might happen - had prepared her for the possibility. But experiencing it was something else entirely. The clinical part of her mind noted tactical details even as the rest recoiled from the violence: Multiple teams. Coordinated assault. Pre-planned responses to security protocols. This wasn't opportunistic - this was a carefully orchestrated operation by someone with extensive resources.

In the distance, police sirens began to wail. But Chen knew they'd arrive too late. Her kidnappers had planned this perfectly, turning her security team's own protocols against them. Now she could only hope the Agency's tracking measures were as sophisticated as they'd claimed.

The quantum secrets in her head had just become the most valuable hostage leverage in history.

Dan arrived at the scene twelve minutes after the attack, his trained eye cataloguing details other investigators would miss. The dustbin lorry's position, the precise angle of the RPG attack, the systematic suppression of potential escape routes - everything spoke of extensive pre-planning and professional execution.

"Status?" he asked, kneeling beside Jessica as medical teams worked on her.

"Eight... eight-man team minimum," she managed through the pain. "Multiple vehicles. Mixed accent profile but using NATO standard commands. They knew our routes, our protocols." She tried to sit up, but the medics held her down. "They had our exact timing, Dan. Someone had inside information."

Serj's massive frame appeared from the wreckage of the support vehicle, his expression grim. "Found this in the lorry cab." He held up a small device. "Counter-surveillance package. Military grade. Blocks all standard tracking frequencies."

"Including the ones in Chen's phone and jewellery," Anya added through their tactical channel. She was already accessing local CCTV from a mobile command post. "They're good. Every camera in a six-block radius was looped or disabled. No digital footprint."

Omar's voice carried quiet professional respect: "The breaching charges were custom work. Shaped perfectly for our armour specification. They'd studied the vehicle's exact layout."

"Cross-reference with other recent operations," Dan ordered, noting shell casings from multiple weapon types - all high-end military hardware. "This level of sophistication, they've done similar work before."

"Already searching," Mei replied through their comms. "Their tactical profile matches three other high-value extractions in the past year. All attributed to different groups, but the underlying methodology is identical."

Dave joined them, he picked up some details others missed. "They used Russian CS gas canisters but American breaching charges. They're deliberately mixing signatures."

"French tactical gear, Israeli weapon modifications. Professional ghosts," Serj rumbled. "The kind governments hire when they need complete deniability." He studied the attack pattern with experienced eyes. "This was a demonstration. They wanted us to see their capabilities."

"The explosion pattern from the RPG," Omar noted, examining the destroyed support vehicle. "Perfectly placed to take out only the lead vehicle. These weren't mercenaries showing off. This was a precision military operation."

Through their tactical channel, Anya reported: "Picking up increased chatter across multiple intelligence networks. Everyone's denying involvement, but they're all very interested in who did this."

"They studied Quantum Horizons' security protocols thoroughly," Dan said grimly. "This wasn't just opportunistic - they knew exactly how the protection detail operated." He watched crime scene technicians documenting the precise violence of the assault. "Whoever did this spent serious time and resources preparing."

"The quantum research made her valuable enough," Dave added, "but they've also got one of the few people who truly understands the breakthrough. That makes her priceless."

"They'll make contact soon," Dan said with cold certainty. "This was too well planned, too precisely executed. They have specific demands in mind." He turned to his team. "I want everything. Traffic cameras for twenty miles in every direction. Flight plans. Maritime traffic. They planned an exit strategy as detailed as their assault. Find it."

As the team dispersed to their tasks, Dan studied the battlefield again. The precision of the assault, the perfect counter to every security measure, the clinical efficiency - this wasn't just a kidnapping. This was a carefully orchestrated operation by someone with both extensive resources and patience. Someone who understood exactly what Chen's knowledge was worth.

The question now was: what were they planning to do with it?

Anya's screens cast a blue glow across her face as she scoured darknet markets and private forums. Forty-eight hours of continuous operation had left shadows under her eyes, but her focus never wavered.

"Another dead end," she reported, discarding another lead. "Supposed Iranian connection traces back to a crypto scam in Mumbai." Her fingers flew across multiple keyboards. "Everyone's looking for Chen, but no one seems to know anything real."

Through their secure channel, Mei added: "State-level actors are equally frustrated. Intercepted communications show Russian SVR launching major internal investigation - they think someone in their own ranks might have gone rogue. Chinese MSS increasing surveillance on known quantum research facilities. They're all searching, but..."

"But they're as blind as we are," Anya finished. She brought up another screen showing cryptocurrency transactions. "Even the bounties are getting desperate. Ten million in untraceable crypto for any concrete intel on Chen's location."

"The kidnappers are professional enough to avoid digital footprints," Dave noted, watching the investigation unfold. "No emails, no phone calls, no electronic traces at all."

"Which means we need older methods," Dan said quietly. He checked his watch, already dreading what came next. "I'm going to see Brendan."

A moment of tense silence fell over the operations centre. Everyone knew about Brendan Walsh - the ex-SAS operator turned underground fixer. More importantly, they knew about his history with Dan.

"He still blame you for Kandahar?" Serj asked, his deep voice carrying unusual concern.

"Doesn't matter," Dan replied, checking his sidearm out of habit. "If someone's using UK operators for this job, Brendan would know. He brokers half the private military work that happens on these islands."

"Be careful," Anya said, not looking up from her screens. "That man has reason to hate you."

"No," Dan corrected, "he doesn't. But he does anyway."

The pub where Brendan held court hadn't changed in the decade since Dan last visited. The same sticky floors, the same tired football jerseys on the walls, the same smell of stale beer and older regrets. Brendan sat in his usual corner, what remained of his right leg propped on a chair, his good eye studying Dan's approach with cold recognition.

"Fuck off, Carter," Brendan said without looking up from his pint. The glass trembled slightly - not from fear, but from the constant tremors that plagued his remaining limbs. "Unless you've got something worth my time."

Dan pulled an envelope from his jacket, thick with cash. Ten thousand pounds - a gesture that felt somewhere between bribe and insult. "Information about a job. Professional team, Tuesday night. Worth this much to me."

"Look at you," Brendan sneered, but his good eye tracked the envelope. "Still solving problems with other people's money. Some things never change, eh?" He made no move to take the cash. "Why should I help you? Last time we worked together, I lost a leg. And an eye. And my career."

"That wasn't my fault-"

"Wasn't it?" Brendan's laugh was pure acid. "You were team leader. Everything was your fault."

"Lots of jobs happen on Tuesday nights." Brendan's damaged eye, clouded and sightless, seemed to stare through Dan. "Why should I care about this one?"

"Because it was too clean," Dan said carefully. "Mixed signatures on the gear - American, Russian, Israeli. But the tactics? Those felt local. Like someone who knew UK roads and police response times."

Brendan took a long drink, letting the silence stretch. When he finally spoke, his voice carried decades of accumulated bitterness. "Heard about that job. Quantum scientist, yeah? Everyone's looking for her." His laugh was harsh. "Even had some interesting parties asking if I could put together a rescue team. Lot of people want her found."

"But?"

"But whoever took her?" Brendan shook his head. "They didn't use my networks. Didn't need to. This wasn't regular contractor work, Danny. This was something else."

"You'd know if anyone local was involved," Dan pressed. "Ex-regiment, SBS, anyone with the skills for this kind of precision work."

"That's what's bothering you, isn't it?" Brendan reached for the envelope, making Dan hold it just out of reach. "Not just that they took her, but how clean it was. How professional." He leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Want to know what really scares me about this job? Nobody's bragging. You know how it is - even the best operators, they talk after a few drinks. Want credit for their work. But this?" He gestured vaguely with his trembling hand. "Total silence. Like it never happened."

Dan laid the envelope on the table. Brendan snatched it with surprising speed, thumbing through the notes with practised ease. "Ten grand to tell you I know nothing. Must be nice having that kind of funding." His smile was pure malice. "Almost worth having you darken my door."

Dan absorbed this, recognising the implications. In their world, silence often spoke louder than boasts. "Could someone have brought in outside talent? Used UK soil but foreign operators?"

"Maybe." Brendan lifted his glass again, but his hand shook too badly. Dan instinctively reached to steady it, earning a glare of pure hatred. "Don't. Just... don't."

"Brendan, what happened in Kandahar-"

"Was a long time ago," Brendan cut him off. "Ancient history. But here's something current for you - word is, people high up are nervous about this job. Not because of who did it, but because of who might have authorised it. The kind of resources and intel they had? That doesn't come cheap. Or easy."

Dan studied his former teammate, seeing past the bitterness to the sharp tactical mind that still lurked behind that damaged eye. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing you'll get from me," Brendan replied. "But here's some free advice - stop looking at this as a kidnapping. Start thinking about it as an investment. Someone spent a lot of time and money acquiring a very specific asset. The question isn't who took her. It's what they plan to do with her now that they have her."

"Always a pleasure doing business," Brendan called as Dan turned to leave. "Ten grand for nothing - not bad for five minutes' work. Try not to wait so long before your next visit. My retirement fund could use the top-up." He raised his pint in a mock salute. "And Carter? Next time you lead a team into a trap, try not to get everyone killed. Bad for morale."

Dan kept walking, letting the bitter words roll off him like rain. Through his comms, he heard Anya and Mei continuing their digital hunt, following electronic breadcrumbs that seemed to lead nowhere. At least they were making honest progress, even if it was toward another dead end.

But Brendan's insight about investments still nagged at him, even buried under all that hatred. Someone had spent months planning this operation, gathering intelligence, preparing for every contingency. And people who made investments that large usually expected significant returns.

The question wasn't just what they planned to do with Chen. It was what they'd already invested in making sure they got her.

22 Dark Mirror

The hood's rough fabric pressed against Chen's face as unseen hands guided her through what felt like endless corridors. Her scientific mind tried to catalogue details despite her fear - three flights of stairs up, two right turns, the subtle change in air pressure suggesting a controlled environment. But it was the silence that unnerved her most. No voices, no equipment sounds, just the quiet efficiency of professional operators moving her toward some unknown destination.

The hands stopped her, positioned her with mechanical precision. A chair pressed against the backs of her legs - some kind of deeply cushioned seat. The hood lifted away, and Chen blinked against sudden light streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. The view beyond stole her breath - rolling countryside stretching to a distant horizon, all visible from what seemed to be a penthouse suite. Modern furniture dotted the expansive space, centred around a sleek fireplace that dominated one wall.

But it was the man before her that captured her full attention. Her first impression was of contained power - tall, weathered, with the kind of presence that filled a room without effort. Then the details registered: the prosthetic right arm ending in an articulated claw of gleaming metal, the twisted scar tissue that ran down the right side of his face like a topographical map of violence, the patch covering what had once been his right eye.

"Dr. Chen." His voice carried cultured sophistication wrapped around an accent she couldn't quite place - Eastern European perhaps, but smoothed by years of international travel. "What a fortuitous meeting. I apologise if our introduction is a little forced."

He gestured toward the impressive view with his prosthetic arm, the claw opening and closing with precise mechanical movements. "Your quantum

code sounds like an interesting product. It may be of use to us later. However, there are some other matters that you can help with."

Chen's mind raced, cataloguing details with scientific precision even as fear tightened her throat. The room spoke of wealth and sophistication - original artwork on the walls, furniture that probably cost more than her annual salary. But there was something else, something in the way the man carried himself...

"Who are you?" she managed, proud that her voice remained steady.

A slight smile curved his lips, though it didn't reach his remaining eye. "Someone who appreciates the value of research. Your breakthrough in Singapore - very impressive. Though perhaps a bit... premature in its release." He moved to a sideboard, the claw making a soft click against the polished wood as he poured two glasses of water. "The market reaction was quite dramatic."

"If this is about recreating the quantum processing capabilities-" Chen began, but his laugh cut her off.

"Your quantum computing work is fascinating, yes. But it's not why you're here." He set one glass before her with mechanical precision. "You see, Dr. Chen, sometimes the most valuable discoveries are the accidental ones. The things we find while looking for something else entirely."

He settled into a chair opposite her, his posture relaxed but alert - like a predator at rest. "Tell me about Dave Anderson."

The name hit Chen like a physical blow. This wasn't about her research at all. This was about Dave - the impossible man who'd helped save her in Singapore, who'd shrugged off bullets and absorbed electricity like it was nothing.

"I don't-" she started, but his raised hand stopped her.

"Please," he said, almost gently. "Don't insult either of us with denials. I've spent considerable resources tracking Mr. Anderson's activities. His

abilities are... unique. And you, Dr. Chen, are one of the few people who've seen them up close."

The claw clicked against his glass as he took a sip of water. "Your friend Dave Anderson - a fascinating specimen of impossibility, wouldn't you agree?" His remaining eye fixed on her with unnerving intensity. "The things I've seen him survive... bullets, explosions, even fire." The last word carried particular weight, his tone sharpening like a blade.

He gestured to his prosthetic arm with a bitter smile. "India was educational in many ways. Your friend left me with some rather permanent reminders of our encounter. The machine gun fire was particularly memorable." The claw closed with a sharp click. "Though I suspect he thought it would be more fatal than it proved."

Chen studied her captor, trying to understand how her quantum research could have led to this - a scarred military operative with a personal vendetta against Dave. The accent suggested Eastern European origins, but his bearing and resources spoke of something far more complex than simple corporate espionage.

"I am Colonel Grigory Ivanovich," he said, his smile widening to show teeth. "Though that name likely means nothing to you." He leaned forward, and Chen fought the urge to recoil. "Your friend Dave and I have... history. First in Türkiye, and then India was our last encounter. He left me with some rather permanent reminders." He gestured to his face, his missing eye, the mechanical claw.

Chen felt a chill that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. She'd thought this was about her research, about the quantum breakthrough. Instead, she'd stumbled into something far darker - a personal vendetta she knew nothing about.

"The quantum computing breakthrough was an opportunity," Grigory continued, his voice almost conversational. "The way it drew out the agency's team, almost as if I had planned for it myself. To bring the agency

close enough." The claw clicked against his glass again - a metronome of contained menace. "But you, Dr. Chen... you're something far more valuable than your research. You're the perfect bait."

"I won't help you hurt him," Chen said, surprised by the steel in her own voice.

Grigory's laugh was genuine this time, though no less chilling. "Hurt him? Oh no, Dr. Chen. My dear doctor, that's not nearly ambitious enough. I'm going to destroy him." He gestured to the view beyond the windows. "Not just physically - though that will come. First, I want him to experience what I did. To watch everything burn, to feel helpless as it all falls apart." His voice carried the weight of years of carefully nurtured hatred.

He stood, and Chen saw how his movements carried lethal grace despite his obvious injuries. "You're going to help me, Dr. Chen. Not because you want to, but because your very presence here ensures Dave will come. And when he does..." The claw closed with a sharp click. "I'll finally complete what we started in Türkiye."

Outside the windows, the sun painted the countryside in gorgeous colours. But Chen barely noticed the view now. All she could see was the reflection of Grigory's satisfied smile in the glass - the expression of a man who believed he'd finally found the key to something he'd been hunting for years.

And that key, she realised with growing horror, was her.

23 Cold Strike

The Agency's UK office maintained its unremarkable facade in the pre-dawn hours, just another business consultancy in a district full of similar operations. Behind frosted glass partitions and standard office furniture, Cecilia's corner workstation displayed routine analytics data while the night cleaning crew moved through their normal rounds.

Dave stifled a yawn as he reviewed security reports from the Singapore operation. The familiar weight of routine - paperwork, debriefings, endless documentation - had settled back over them in the weeks since Chen's quantum breakthrough. Even their heightened security status felt more procedural than urgent now.

The first explosion shattered that illusion with devastating force.

The main transformers went at precisely 7:47 AM, plunging the office into darkness before the emergency lights could activate. Dave was already moving when the second set of charges breached the main entrance and service corridor simultaneously. The security team barely managed to reach defensive positions before professional operators poured through the smoke.

"Server room!" Cecilia shouted over the chaos. "They're heading straight for our critical systems!"

Dave rounded the corner into hell. Liquid nitrogen canisters deployed in coordinated bursts, filling the corridor with bone-chilling cold. His body registered the temperature drop immediately - memories of Arctic waters flooding back as the cold bit into his flesh. Not debilitating, but every movement felt like pushing through thick syrup.

The liquid nitrogen transformed the corridor into an arctic nightmare, dense white fog rolling across the floor like ghostly surf. Two operators

moved through the fog ahead, their tactical gear marking them as professionals despite the awkward bulk of their environmental suits.

Dave launched forward with his usual explosive speed, but his first step into the super-cooled fog proved catastrophic. His shoes instantly crystallized, shattering like glass under his weight. The liquid nitrogen froze the leather and rubber to brittleness, leaving him barefoot on the frigid floor. His trousers fared no better, crystallizing where the fog touched them, large flakes of frozen fabric falling away with each movement to expose his skin to the bone-chilling cold.

The super-cooled air hit him like a wall of needles, instantly numbing his exposed skin. His muscles, so reliable in normal conditions, began to slow as the cold penetrated deeper. What should have been a two-second sprint stretched into an eternity of sluggish movement.

The first operator managed to squeeze off three rounds before Dave reached him. The impacts felt strange - not the usual minor annoyance of bullets striking his invulnerable skin, but sharp bursts of sensation like grabbing frozen metal with bare hands. His cotton shirt exploded into crystalline powder where the rounds struck, leaving his chest even more exposed to the arctic air as his IT professional's mind automatically catalogued the difference, even as his body struggled to adapt.

Dave managed to trap the first operator's weapon against the wall, but his follow-up strike missed completely as his target flowed around it with professional skill. The contrast was stark - their movements remained crisp and efficient in their environmental gear, while his superhuman abilities had been reduced to brute force flailing.

"Sloppy," he muttered through chattering teeth, remembering Serj's constant lectures about relying too heavily on his enhanced speed. The big Russian would have had choice words about his current performance.

The second operator tried to create distance, recognising that even a slowed-down Dave was incredibly dangerous in close quarters. But the

corridor's width worked against him. Dave's numbed hand caught his weapon's barrel, crushing it with raw strength since finesse was currently impossible.

The first operator transitioned smoothly to a backup weapon, his movements demonstrating the kind of practised skill that Dave normally countered with superhuman speed. Now, forced to rely on basic hand-to-hand techniques through the numbing cold, Dave felt like he was moving underwater. A punch that should have been lightning fast emerged as a telegraphed haymaker.

Both operators recognised his vulnerability, pressing their advantage with professional coordination. They worked to flank him, using his compromised mobility against him. Dave's movements felt increasingly wooden as the cold worked deeper into his tissue. His enhanced healing was fighting the effects, but the continuous exposure to the super-cooled air prevented any real recovery.

The first operator's knife appeared, seeking gaps in Dave's guard that wouldn't normally exist. The blade scored across his forearm, and for the first time in years, Dave felt something approaching real pain – a burning sensation as the blade scored along his frozen skin. The blade left no wound or mark, but his nerves struggled against the intense cold.

Desperation forced him to abandon technique entirely. Dave simply bulled forward, using his raw strength to slam both operators against the corridor wall. Environmental suits cracked under his enhanced power, exposing them to the same cold that had reduced him to this crude brawling. Their professional composure broke as the liquid nitrogen found exposed skin.

The fight devolved into an ugly grappling match, three men struggling through the numbing cold. The constant exposure to the super-cooled air finished what the earlier contact had started - the remainder of Dave's shirt disintegrated into frozen fragments, while his underwear shattered into crystalline shards, leaving him completely exposed to the bone-chilling

atmosphere. Yet he pressed on, his enhanced strength eventually proving decisive, but there was no satisfaction in the victory. Every movement had highlighted how much he'd come to rely on his speed and reflexes, how vulnerable he became without them.

As the operators slumped unconscious, their environmental suits compromised, Dave staggered back, but the lesson had been carved into him as clearly as the knife cut into his nerves. Speed and invulnerability had made him strong, but they'd also made him lazy. Somewhere, he knew Serj was probably smiling grimly at this overdue revelation.

Ice crystals had formed on his skin, and clouded his vision as he'd engaged the first team. Through his frosted vision, he caught his first glimpse of the man coordinating the assault.

The sight hit harder than any of the cold weapons. Grigory's silhouette was unmistakable, but radically changed from their last encounter in India. The right side of his face was a mass of twisted scar tissue, legacy of the gun battle that should have killed him. A tactical patch covered his ruined right eye, while its surviving companion burned with cold intelligence and focused hatred.

Most striking was his right arm - or rather, its replacement. The prosthetic was crude, prioritising function over aesthetics. Its mechanical claw moved with precise but inhuman grace as he directed his teams. He'd adapted his movements to compensate for the lost limb, every motion carefully calculated to maximise efficiency with his reduced mobility.

"Dave!" Cecilia's voice carried urgency through their comms. "Server room breach in progress. They're not copying data - they're destroying everything."

"Get to the panic room," he managed, his breath visible in the frigid air. "I'll buy you time."

Cecilia's hand moved with practised efficiency as she retrieved the Smith & Wesson Bodyguard from her desk drawer. The compact .380 was deceptively small, easily concealed beneath her professional attire, but she'd trained enough to trust its stopping power at close range.

"Sarah!" she called, her warm Ghanaian accent carrying none of the tension evident in her movements. The office worker looked up from her monitor, confusion turning to fear as she saw Cecilia's weapon. "We're leaving. Now."

The first attacker appeared at the corner just as Cecilia reached Sarah's desk. His tactical gear marked him as a professional, but his aggressive entry told her he wasn't expecting armed resistance. The Bodyguard barked once, its report surprisingly sharp in the confined space. The hollow point round caught him just above his right eye, transforming his forward momentum into a graceless sprawl.

"Get to safety!" Cecilia pushed Sarah toward the panic room, her voice carrying the authority of someone used to being obeyed in crisis. The second operator was already moving past his fallen teammate, his own weapon tracking toward them with mechanical precision.

Cecilia's next two shots struck high on his plate carrier, the impacts staggering him just enough to disrupt his aim. The .380 rounds couldn't penetrate his body armour, but they bought precious seconds as Sarah scrambled toward the panic room's reinforced door.

She was already turning to run when she squeezed off two more rounds, muscle memory from countless training sessions guiding her aim. Both rounds caught the operator's unprotected thigh, shredding muscle and dropping him to one knee. His curse of pain carried a European accent - another piece of intelligence to process later.

"Move!" Cecilia grabbed Sarah's arm, practically dragging her the final metres to the panic room. The reinforced door felt wonderfully solid as she slammed it shut behind them, multiple locks engaging with reassuring

clicks. Only then did she allow herself to take a proper breath, already reaching for the secure comms to coordinate their defence.

The Agency's on-site security never stood a chance. Dave heard the initial exchange of gunfire from three corridors away - precise three-round bursts met with panicked full-auto response. He was already moving when the distinctive hiss of nitrogen canisters cut through the chaos.

"Wait!" he tried to shout through the glass walls of the office, but it was too late. The security team's screams transformed into something inhuman as the liquid nitrogen engulfed them. Their service weapons clattered to the floor from hands already crystallizing in the super-cooled air.

The attack team's next move was coldly professional. A burst of automatic fire turned the frozen guards into red mist, their brittle forms shattering like glass. Fragments of flash-frozen tissue scattered across the corridor in a grotesque parody of snowfall.

Dave rounded the corner into the path of the two operators in environmental suits advancing on the panic room where Cecilia had retreated. Their movements spoke of extensive tactical training - one laying down covering fire while the other prepared more nitrogen canisters.

His enhanced vision caught the Agency security team's ID badges among the scattered remains. Roberts and Gilmore. They'd shared coffee with him that morning, Roberts complaining about his daughter's college applications while Gilmore showed off photos of his new grandson.

The familiar surge of superhuman speed wouldn't help here - the operators were clearly prepared for his abilities. But three years in the field had taught him there were other ways to fight. The fire extinguisher mounted on the wall caught his eye, its red bulk promising a different kind of solution.

Dave tore the extinguisher from the wall. The weight felt good in his hands - solid, practical, lethal when hurled with superhuman strength. He didn't try for finesse or technique. Raw power was enough.

The extinguisher crossed the space between them faster than their reflexes could track. It struck the first operator's centre mass with a sound like a sledgehammer hitting wet concrete. The impact lifted him off his feet, his environmental suit unable to distribute the massive force. There was a moment of horrible stillness, his body armour crushed inward, pulping everything beneath.

The second operator's professional composure cracked. He'd likely seen the aftermath of vehicle impacts, maybe even anti-tank weapons. But watching his partner's insides liquefied inside crushed body armour triggered something primal. His retreat was still tactical - maintaining covering fire while creating distance - but the earlier cold precision had vanished.

"Panic room breach failed," he reported through his comms, voice tight with controlled fear. "Simmons is down. Target has enhanced backup. Requesting immediate-"

Dave let him retreat, keeping his body between the operator and Cecilia's position. Bullets flattened on his chest, their impact dulled by the lingering cold but no longer debilitating. This wasn't about winning any more. It was about sending a message.

The operator's aimed fire deteriorated into suppression bursts as he backed away. His environmental suit's bulk caught on the corner as he reached the intersection, disrupting his firing stance for just a moment. But Dave didn't pursue. The message had been delivered - some lines couldn't be crossed without consequences.

Through the panic room's armoured door, he heard Cecilia's calm voice coordinating Agency response teams. She was safe, professional as always.

But Dave's eyes kept returning to the scattered remains of Roberts and Gilmore, their frozen fragments already beginning to melt.

He'd never asked for these powers, never wanted to be more than an IT professional. But standing among the aftermath of casual brutality, he understood why the Agency had found him. Some threats couldn't be countered with normal means. Sometimes the monsters needed to fear something stronger than themselves.

Grigory's voice cut through their compromised comms, "Fascinating resilience, Dave. The cold slows you, but not enough. I suppose we're both rather hard to kill." The words came slightly distorted, shaped by rebuilt facial muscles and scar tissue. "Though I'm afraid we'll have to cut this reunion short. Other appointments to keep."

The final explosions took out the building's primary support columns - precisely placed charges that would bring down specific sections while leaving others intact. Dave fought his way through spreading destruction, making sure Cecilia was safe in the panic room before the collapse began. Through the emergency lighting, he caught one final glimpse of Grigory - the Russian's twisted profile outlined in crimson, his prosthetic arm gleaming dully as he coordinated his team's extraction.

Through their failing comms, he heard Cecilia's voice from the secured panic room: "Agency archive compromised. Critical systems destroyed. We've lost the facility."

The Agency's UK office lay in calculated ruins, its carefully maintained corporate facade literally crumbling. But as emergency protocols engaged and evacuation orders echoed through damaged systems, Dave knew the worst was yet to come.

Grigory's attack hadn't just been precise - it had been practised, as if he'd been planning this for months. The injuries that should have killed him had instead honed him into something more dangerous - a predator who had learned to turn catastrophic loss into calculated advantage. And something

about his confidence, about the way he'd hinted at future meetings, suggested he held cards they hadn't even seen yet.

The real question wasn't whether he would strike again - but what other vulnerabilities he'd discovered while they'd thought themselves secure. His damaged face and mechanical arm were testament to his ability to survive, adapt, and return stronger. The Agency's UK operations lay in ruins, but Dave suspected this was just Grigory's opening move in a much longer game.

24 Collapse State

Raindrops traced patterns down the safe house windows as Dave studied the faces of his teammates gathered in the cramped living room. The modest house in Selly Oak served as one of the Agency's emergency fallback locations, its unremarkable exterior the only defence to the outside world.

Anya sat cross-legged on the floor, her laptop casting blue shadows across her sharp features as she compiled damage assessments. Serj's massive frame made the armchair seem small, while Omar maintained his habitual position near the room's best exit point. Dan leaned against the wall, his expression unreadable as he cleaned his sidearm with mechanical precision.

"Final numbers," Cecilia said, her warm Ghanaian accent unable to soften the weight of her words. "Seventeen confirmed casualties. Roberts and Gilmore from security. Angela from accounting. Michael from IT..." She continued the list, each name landing like a physical blow. People they'd worked with, shared coffee with, trusted to maintain the Agency's careful facade of normalcy.

"The cold did that," Dave said quietly, flexing his right hand. The frostbite damage had mostly healed, but phantom sensations lingered. "They knew exactly how to handle me. Which means..."

"Grigory." Dan's voice carried cold certainty. "He survived India. And he's had time to study your capabilities, plan countermeasures."

"The liquid nitrogen deployment wasn't just tactical," Omar added, his normally quiet voice tight with professional analysis. "It was a message. He wanted to demonstrate he could neutralise your advantages."

Through their secure channel, Mei's voice carried equal measures of grief and determination: "Server room was completely destroyed. They knew

exactly where to plant charges for maximum data loss. But the panic room's small systems survived - they're encrypted and isolated."

"They had our building plans," Cecilia noted. "Knew our security protocols, staff rotations, even the server room layout." Her hands cradled a mug of tea that had long since gone cold. "This wasn't just good intelligence. Someone who'd been inside our operation planned this."

"Someone who knew about Dave's vulnerability to extreme cold," Anya said, looking up from her screens. "That information wasn't widely shared after the Arctic mission. Which means..."

"Dr. Chen," Dave finished. "Grigory has her. It's the only way he could have known. He's using her knowledge of our location to study us and our operations, and of my abilities."

"He enjoys finding vulnerabilities," Mei's voice cut through their comms, carrying an edge they'd rarely heard since her recovery. "Not just physical ones. He..." She paused, and they could hear her taking a steadying breath. "When his men had me in Turkey, they didn't just want information. They wanted to prove a point. To show how easily they could break someone."

The team tensed at the reference to those dark days. Dave remembered finding her in that bedroom, her jaw shattered, her body bearing testament to calculated cruelty. Not random violence, but methodical destruction designed to send a message.

"The beatings had a pattern," Mei continued, her professional tone wavering slightly. "Each new injury targeted where the last one had started to heal. They were studying my responses, documenting how much damage they could inflict while keeping me conscious. Just like he's studying Dave's resistance to cold."

"Mei," Anya said softly, her usual sharp edges gone. Her fingers stilled on her keyboard, remembering the long nights during Mei's recovery, the way

her friend had worked through pain to maintain her skills. "You don't have to-"

"I do," Mei cut her off, but there was warmth in the interruption - acknowledgment of Anya's concern. "Because now he has Dr. Chen." Her voice hardened with certainty born of terrible experience. "He won't just hurt her. He'll use her to test theories, to gather data. Every moment of pain will be recorded and analysed. Because that's what Grigory does – he turns suffering into science."

A heavy silence fell over the team as the implications sank in. This wasn't just about revenge or the quantum breakthrough. This was about Grigory's fundamental nature – his drive to understand and exploit vulnerabilities with clinical precision.

Serj's deep voice cut through the grim silence. "He'll use the cold again. It's tactically sound. Reduces your speed, compromises your invulnerability." His experienced eyes studied Dave with professional assessment. "We need counters."

"Could try insulated tactical gear," Omar suggested. "But it would restrict movement, limit effectiveness. Probably turn super Dave to regular Dave."

"Grigory will contact us soon," Dan said with quiet certainty. "Chen is too valuable as leverage. He'll want to negotiate, but it will be a trap."

"Of course it will," Dave replied, remembering the mechanical precision of Grigory's prosthetic claw. "He's had months to plan this. The office attack was just proving he could hurt us."

"The old Grigory was dangerous enough," Cecilia added. "But this version..." She gestured at the tactical footage playing on Anya's screen, showing the calculated destruction of their facility. "He's evolved. Turned his injuries into advantages. Every limitation becomes a carefully planned strength."

Through their comms, Mei reported: "Preliminary analysis of the attack shows at least three professional teams, perfectly coordinated. He has significant resources, extensive support network."

"And Chen is caught in the middle," Dave said, the weight of responsibility settling over him. "Everything that happened today - it's because of me. Grigory's vendetta..."

"Stop." Cecilia's voice cracked like a whip. "This isn't about blame. It's about what we do next." She set down her cold tea, steel entering her tone. "We lost good people today. We honour them by stopping Grigory before he can do worse."

"He'll expect us to be defensive," Dan noted. "To focus on protecting our remaining assets, securing other facilities. Licking our wounds"

"Then we do something he won't expect," Anya said, her fingers flying across her keyboard. "We hunt him instead. Push him off balance."

"Using what?" Dave asked. "Our intelligence networks are compromised, our main facility destroyed..."

"Using me," Omar said quietly. Everyone turned to look at him. "He's studied your abilities, planned countermeasures. But he doesn't know all our capabilities." A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "I have contacts from before the Agency. People who operate in shadows even Grigory might not see."

Serj nodded slowly. "He expects an Agency response. Professional, predictable. We give him something else."

"It's risky," Cecilia warned. "We'd be operating without our usual support structure, improvising against someone who plans everything meticulously."

"Good," Dave said, standing to face his team. "Then maybe we'll surprise him as much as he surprised us." He flexed his right hand again, the last

tingles of frostbite fading. "We find Chen. We stop Grigory. And we make sure he can't hurt anyone else."

Through the safe house windows, Birmingham's rain continued its steady drumbeat. Somewhere out there, Grigory was already planning his next move. But as Dave looked at the determined faces of his teammates, he felt something beyond anger or grief - he felt hope. They'd lost much today, but they still had each other. And sometimes that was enough to change the equation entirely.

"He'll use the cold again," Cecilia repeated softly. "Be ready for that. But remember - every weapon can cut both ways." She stood, her presence filling the small room. "We've lost battles before. We've lost people before. But we're still here. Still fighting. And that's what matters most."

The team absorbed this, each processing grief and determination in their own way. They had lost colleagues, friends, their sense of security. But they had also gained something - a clarity of purpose, a shared resolve. Grigory might have planned this attack perfectly, but he had also given them something dangerous: nothing left to lose.

Thunder rolled across Birmingham’s sky, a fitting backdrop to the storm gathering in that small safe house. They would mourn their dead, yes. But they would also hunt. And when they found Grigory, he would learn that some weapons - like cold itself - could burn in unexpected ways.

25 Ghost Protocol

The shisha lounge in East London maintained a careful balance between authenticity and accessibility. Smoke curled through carefully filtered air as Omar sat across from Malik, watching his former colleague's grey-streaked beard catch the amber glow of coals. Through the tactical comms, Anya monitored their conversation while maintaining surveillance of the surrounding streets.

"I understand you're asking about certain professionals," Malik said in Arabic, his Damascus accent barely softened by decades in London. "Specialists with very particular training. Cold weather operations, arctic warfare experience." He drew on his pipe, the sweet apple tobacco masking their conversation from casual eavesdroppers.

"The market's active right now," Omar pressed carefully. "Good contracts available."

Malik's eyes held genuine concern. "Not these contractors. What happened at your office facility? That was something else. Professional, yes, but..." He shook his head. "These people – they operate on a different level. Testing loyalty with lethal efficiency."

Through their tactical channel, Dan's voice carried quiet urgency: "We need another angle. Pull out, Omar. No sense burning bridges we might need later."

Omar absorbed the finality in his old friend's tone. When Malik closed a door this firmly, no amount of pressure would open it. He finished his tea in silence, understanding that some networks, even ones built over decades, had limits.

"There are rumours," Malik added quietly, leaning forward. "About their employer. A man with a mechanical arm who plans everything to the smallest detail. Who tests his operators against impossible targets, and

discards those who fail." His voice dropped further. "The survival rate is... concerning."

"Any patterns to his recruitment?" Omar tried one last angle. "Preferred regions, specific backgrounds?"

"Friend." Malik's use of the English word carried weight. "You're asking questions that get people killed. These operators – the ones who survive his tests – they don't talk. The ones who fail..." He gestured vaguely. "They don't talk either."

Omar recognised the bitter mix of fear and professional respect in Malik's tone. His old friend had survived decades in their world by knowing which doors to leave closed. This wasn't just caution – it was survival instinct honed by experience.

"Thank you for the tea," Omar said finally, standing. "And the wisdom."

"Omar." Malik's voice stopped him. "Whatever you're hunting – remember that sometimes the predator wants to be found. But only after the trap is set."

Through their comms, Dan spoke again: "Time to try something else. Meet us back at the safe house. Anya and Mei might have another angle."

Back at the safe house, Anya's fingers flew across multiple keyboards while Mei coordinated through their secure link. Data streams populated across three screens – hospital security feeds, NHS incident reports, and police dispatch logs creating a digital tapestry of the last twenty-four hours.

"Multiple thefts," Mei announced, her voice carrying focused intensity through their comms. "St. Thomas' Hospital lost two cryogenic storage tanks last night. Five hundred litres of liquid nitrogen. But that's not the interesting part." Her typing intensified. "Three other hospitals hit in the last month, similar pattern, all losing nitrogen supplies."

Anya pulled up the hospital's security feeds, her screens filling with synchronised camera angles. "Time index matches. Four-man team, under

three minutes total operation." She highlighted figures moving with military precision through the loading dock. "Watch their approach – specialised equipment, proper cryogenic handling procedures. They knew exactly where everything was stored."

"Show me their entry point," Dan requested, moving to study the displays.

"They spoofed maintenance credentials," Anya replied, windows populating with access logs and building schematics. "Passed three security checkpoints. But look at this – they completely ignored the pharmacy. Professional thieves would have hit that first."

Dave leaned forward, his IT background helping him parse the security logs. "Those credentials – they're not just spoofed. They're actual maintenance IDs, properly authenticated. Someone had inside access to the hospital's systems."

"The really interesting part," Mei added, overlaying new data streams, "is what they missed. St. Thomas installed GPS trackers after the previous thefts. High-end units, properly concealed inside the tanks. Our thieves took them anyway."

"Can we track it?" Dave asked.

"Already on it." Anya's centre screen filled with mapping data. "Signal bounced through four different zones before going dark. Almost like... wait." Her grey eyes narrowed. "They're using the tracker deliberately. Testing response times, monitoring pursuit patterns."

Through their tactical channel, Cecilia's warm Ghanaian accent added context: "NHS security logs show response times improving after each theft. They're learning, adapting their procedures. Our thieves would have noticed."

"Pull up ANPR data," Dan ordered. "If they're testing responses, they'll need consistent vehicles."

Mei's fingers danced across her keyboard. "Two vans, multiple plate changes. But look at these movement patterns – they're deliberate. Hitting specific cameras while avoiding others." Her voice carried growing excitement. "They're building a profile of the surveillance network."

"What about the nitrogen storage?" Dave asked. "That much liquid nitrogen needs serious infrastructure."

"Cross-referencing power grid data now," Anya replied. "Industrial areas within fifty kilometres of the hospital... interesting. Three locations showing abnormal power consumption patterns. All drawing enough current for industrial cooling systems."

"The GPS tracker's last signal came from here." Mei highlighted an industrial estate in Thurrock. "Signal degraded gradually – consistent with being moved underground. And look at these power readings." Her screen filled with usage graphs. "Regular spikes matching liquid nitrogen transfer and storage requirements."

"Thermal imaging confirms it," Anya added, overlaying satellite data. "One unit showing temperatures well below surrounding buildings. Consistent with cryogenic storage. And the power consumption..." She highlighted specific graphs. "They're running serious cooling infrastructure."

Dave studied the patterns, his IT experience recognising the methodical approach. "They're good. Using hospital thefts instead of legitimate purchases. Harder to track, no paper trail. Testing security responses while building their supply."

"But not perfect," Anya noted with professional satisfaction. "You can't hide the power requirements for industrial cooling. Physics doesn't care about operational security."

The screens painted a clear picture – methodical professionals building their resources while testing response patterns. But they'd made one critical mistake: assuming all security measures would be visible. The concealed

GPS tracker had given them something far more valuable than simple location data. It had revealed their methodology.

The team absorbed this information in professional silence, each processing implications through their specialised experience. Dan paced with measured steps, his tactical mind assembling pieces into potential scenarios. Serj's massive frame remained still as he studied the vehicle routes, while Dave analysed the technical challenges of moving industrial quantities of liquid nitrogen.

"They're evolving," Dave said finally, flexing his right hand as he remembered the bone-deep cold from their last encounter. "Hospital thefts are smarter than legitimate purchases. Harder to track, multiple small acquisitions instead of one large shipment that would draw attention."

"The GPS tracker response is telling," Dan added, stopping his pacing. "They could have swept for devices, found it immediately. Instead, they let it transmit, studied the pursuit patterns." His expression hardened. "Classic Grigory. Using our own surveillance against us."

Cecilia's voice carried through their tactical channel: "Cross-referencing property records for the industrial estate. Three units leased in the last month through separate shell companies. All paying premium rates for minimal questions."

"Shell companies are interesting," Mei noted, bringing up corporate records. "First one's standard cover – Delaware registration, minimal documentation. Second traces to a Hungarian defence contractor. But the third..." Her voice carried growing intensity. "They incorporated as a quantum computing research firm. Almost like they're leaving breadcrumbs."

"Because Grigory wants us looking," Serj rumbled from his corner. "Every trace we follow, every pattern we spot – it's all part of his preparation."

"The power consumption doesn't lie though," Anya countered, highlighting specific data points. "Industrial cooling systems draw very distinctive loads. You can hide shell companies and vehicle movements, but you can't mask the energy requirements of keeping liquid nitrogen stable."

Dave moved to study her screens, his IT background helping him parse the technical details. "Those temperature readings from the thermal imaging – they're maintaining precise environmental controls. This isn't just storage. They're running some kind of operation that needs constant cold."

"Testing," Dan said quietly. "Preparing their teams for cold-weather combat. Training them to use the nitrogen effectively." He turned to Dave. "How long would five hundred litres last in combat conditions?"

"Depends on deployment method," Dave replied, mind calculating variables. "Direct exposure like they used at the office? Maybe twenty minutes of sustained operation. But if they're training with it..."

"They'll need regular resupply," Anya finished. "Which means more hospital thefts, more transport movements to track."

"Or they already have what they need," Serj suggested. "And these thefts are just teaching their teams how to acquire targets under pressure."

The implications hung heavy in the air. Grigory wasn't just building resources – he was training operators, testing security responses, and leaving just enough traces to draw them in. Every discovery felt less like progress and more like following a carefully laid trail.

"Time to narrow it down," Dan decided, studying the industrial estate's layout. "Mei, what can you tell me about physical security at these units?"

"Perimeter cameras on all three buildings," she replied, bringing up surveillance feeds. "Standard commercial setup, but there's something odd about the coverage patterns. The blind spots are too perfect – deliberately engineered."

Anya's screens filled with new data as she cross-referenced vehicle movements. "ANPR shows consistent patterns. Three vehicles, rotated weekly. Always during peak traffic to blend with commuter flow." She highlighted specific routes. "But look at these movements – they're avoiding certain cameras while making sure others catch them."

"Playing games," Serj rumbled. "Leaving just enough traces to make us work for it."

"Because Grigory wants us to find him eventually," Dave concluded. "But on his terms, when he's ready."

"The industrial unit layout is interesting," Anya noted, pulling up architectural plans. "Unit 17 has reinforced walls – recent modification. And the power cables they installed... much heavier gauge than normal commercial use would require."

Through their comms, Mei added: "Thermal imaging shows a cold spot extending below ground level. The building plans don't show any basement, but the temperature signature suggests otherwise."

"Underground storage," Dan mused. "Good tactical choice. Natural insulation, harder to detect from satellite surveillance. What's the surrounding infrastructure like?"

"Multiple access routes," Anya replied, highlighting roads on her display. "River terminal within half a kilometre. Railway siding that hasn't been used in years. Perfect for moving equipment without drawing attention."

"Or for quick extraction if needed," Serj added. "Professional setup."

"We need eyes on that facility," Dan decided. "Confirm it's them before we move. Grigory's too smart to walk into another trap."

"Already accessing local CCTV networks," Mei reported. "Setting up pattern recognition algorithms. If they move nitrogen in or out, we'll know." She paused. "But Dan... if this is Grigory's base, Chen might be there."

The implications hung heavy in the air. They'd found a promising lead, but moving too quickly could put Chen at risk. Yet waiting too long might give Grigory time to complete whatever he was preparing for.

Through the safe house windows, London's evening traffic created rivers of light. Somewhere in Thurrock, liquid nitrogen was being stockpiled by people who knew exactly how to use it. Every stolen tank, every careful movement, every engineered blind spot – it all painted a picture of meticulous preparation.

"How soon can we move?" Dave asked, watching the thermal imaging show that tell-tale cold spot in Unit 17.

"Give us 24 hours," Anya answered. "We need to confirm activity patterns, map their security systems. Do this right."

Dan nodded. "Agreed. Full surveillance first. We find Grigory, we find Chen." He turned to Dave. "And this time, we're ready for the cold."

The hunt was on. But this time, they weren't just following breadcrumbs. They were following the impossible-to-hide signature of industrial cooling systems and the arrogance of an enemy who thought he controlled all the variables.

Sometimes the best traps were the ones your target thought they were setting for you.

26 Cold Arithmetic

At the medical centre Dr. Kessler stood at his workstation, three pens neatly arranged in his lab coat's breast pocket -- black for normal notes, red for anomalies, blue for theoretical observations.

"Fascinating," he muttered, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses with his middle finger while studying Dave's latest test results. "Your encounter with Grigory's liquid nitrogen should have caused catastrophic tissue damage. Instead..." He gestured at Dave's hand, now fully healed. "Your adaptation continues to surprise me."

Dave flexed his fingers, remembering the bone-deep cold that had nearly crippled him. "That's why I'm here, Doc. We need countermeasures before he tries it again."

Kessler moved to a workbench where various prototypes lay arranged with precise geometry. "I've been developing several approaches." He lifted what looked like a heavily modified tactical vest. "First attempt - multi-layer environmental protection. Outer shell rated for extreme cold, internal heating elements powered by miniaturized battery packs."

"Like the suits Grigory's team used?"

"Similar principle, but designed specifically for your enhanced physiology." Kessler adjusted his glasses with his middle finger. "The problem is bulk versus protection. Even with cutting-edge materials, anything capable of withstanding liquid nitrogen becomes too restrictive for your combat style."

Dave examined the vest, his IT background helping him assess the technical compromises. "And the battery life?"

"Approximately twelve minutes at full power." Kessler made a note with his black pen. "Not nearly sufficient for sustained combat operations."

He moved to another prototype - what appeared to be a backpack unit connected to a mesh undersuit. "Second approach - active thermal regulation. Portable heating system circulates warm fluid through a network of channels. More flexible than the armoured solution, but..."

"Still vulnerable to direct nitrogen exposure," Dave finished, noting the delicate tubing that would freeze and shatter under super-cooled liquid.

"Precisely." Kessler reached for his blue pen - theoretical observations. "Which led me to consider our previous electrical experiments. During those tests, you demonstrated unusual responses to high voltage. Rather than injury, you experienced enhanced capabilities, including increased speed and accelerated recovery."

"And some impressive light shows," Dave added, remembering the electricity arcing beneath his skin during charging.

Kessler's eyes lit up with sudden intensity. "The electrical charge... of course." He began scribbling rapidly with his blue pen. "We've been approaching this wrong - trying to protect you from the cold rather than leveraging your body's natural adaptations."

He moved to a bank of monitoring equipment with renewed purpose. "Your enhanced physiology doesn't just resist damage - it actively adapts to new threats. What if we combined the electrical charging with controlled cold exposure? Instead of fighting the freezing effect, we use the power to accelerate your natural healing response."The cold chamber in Kessler's lab might have looked pedestrian compared to the quantum research facility they'd recently defended, but its precision instrumentation was anything but ordinary. Dave watched him methodically attach monitoring sensors to track body temperature and physiological responses.

"We'll establish baselines first," Kessler explained, checking each connection. "Starting at zero Celsius, progressing in controlled increments." He adjusted settings with practised efficiency. "Your previous

cold vulnerability manifested around minus fifty degrees. We'll work up to that gradually."

Dave settled into the familiar routine of Kessler's testing protocols, knowing that sometimes the best solutions came from understanding the problem rather than just fighting it. "Ready when you are, Doc. Let's see what happens when we add some spark to the ice."

The first stages proved unremarkable. Dave's enhanced physiology handled normal freezing conditions with minimal discomfort. But as the temperature dropped past minus thirty, the familiar numbness began creeping in. At minus fifty, his movements became noticeably sluggish.

"Now for the interesting part," Kessler said, reaching for power cables. "We'll start with standard mains voltage, observe any interaction between electrical charge and cold resistance."

The initial electrical exposure produced little effect -- just the familiar tingling sensation Dave remembered from their previous tests. Kessler increased the voltage methodically, making careful notes as readings changed.

"Fascinating," he muttered again, reaching for his red pen. "Your core temperature remains stable despite the extreme cold, but your mobility is still compromised. Perhaps if we..." He adjusted the power supply, dramatically increasing the current.

The change hit Dave like a shot of adrenaline. Energy coursed through his system, muscles swelling with sudden power. He felt the familiar sensation of electricity arcing beneath his skin.

"Remarkable," Kessler breathed, frantically recording readings. "Your body temperature is actually rising despite the minus fifty environment. Mobility appears fully restored."

The liquid nitrogen flask sat ominously on the bench, wisps of super-cooled vapour curling from its mouth. Kessler handled it with practised care, pouring a small amount into a testing container.

"We'll start with localised exposure," he said. "Maintain the electrical charge while introducing small amounts of liquid nitrogen. Ready?"

Dave nodded, watching his skin for the electrical response as he reached for the container. The first drops of liquid nitrogen splashed against his skin, instantly boiling away. There was a chill, sharp but manageable -- nothing like the debilitating cold from before.

"Incredible," Kessler muttered, already reaching for his blue pen. "The electrical charge appears to be actively fighting the temperature drop. Let's try something more substantial."

Dave plunged his entire hand into the liquid nitrogen. The cold hit hard, but the electricity surging through his system pushed back immediately. When he withdrew his hand, the super-cooled liquid boiled off his skin in clouds of vapour. His flesh remained healthy pink instead of the mottled black, and blue from his previous exposure.

"The charge is definitely protecting you," Kessler said, studying his readings. "But look at these power curves. You're burning through the electrical energy at an extraordinary rate. The colder the exposure, the faster the depletion."

"How long would it last?"

"Minutes at most, under sustained liquid nitrogen exposure." Kessler adjusted his glasses. "You'd need significant power reserves, quickly accessible."

"What about electric vehicles?" Dave suggested, his IT mindset automatically seeking practical solutions. "Tesla Model S has a 100kWh battery pack. That's serious juice."

Kessler shook his head, already reaching for his blue pen - theoretical observations. "The charging interface would be the bottleneck. Even Tesla's best home charging systems are limited to about 11.5 kW output. That wouldn't come close to matching the power drain from sustained nitrogen exposure." He made a precise note. "Plus, we couldn't guarantee the charge state of any vehicle you encountered. What if it was nearly depleted?"

"Hybrid then?" Dave pressed, remembering the Toyota marketing specs from his commuting days. "They have generators built in, could provide continuous power..."

"Still insufficient," Kessler replied. "The onboard generators typically produce less than 50 kW. Your power consumption under extreme cold..." He gestured at his readings. "You'd drain it faster than it could recharge."

"What about EV charging stations?"

Kessler looked up sharply. "Electric vehicle charging? The standard Level 2 units wouldn't provide nearly enough..."

"No," Dave interrupted, pulling out his phone and opening a charging station app. "The fast-charging stations. Level 3 DC charging. There's one less than a mile from here."

Understanding bloomed in Kessler's eyes. "Of course! The high-capacity DC fast chargers can deliver up to 350 kilowatts. More than enough power, and they're everywhere these days." His excitement faded slightly. "Though accessing them might prove challenging."

"I can handle that part," Dave said. "The important thing is we have a counter to Grigory's cold weapons. At least temporarily."

Kessler made one final note -- in blue ink -- before setting down his pen. "Your body continues to evolve, adapt to new challenges. The interaction between electrical charge and cold resistance is particularly fascinating from a theoretical perspective."

"Doc," Dave said gently, recognising the scientist getting lost in possibilities. "What matters is: will it work?"

Kessler nodded, his professional demeanour reasserting itself. "Yes. With proper preparation and access to adequate power sources, you should be able to resist liquid nitrogen exposure. For limited periods." He gestured at his readings. "But you'll need to pre-charge before any confrontation. Once the cold starts depleting your electrical reserves..."

"I get it," Dave said, already scrolling through the charging station map on his phone. "Hit hard and fast while the charge lasts. Don't let Grigory drag things out."

"One more thing," Dave said, hesitating at the door. "About my clothing situation..."

Kessler looked up from his notes. "Ah yes. You mentioned this during our last session. I assumed you were making an attempt at humour."

"I wish." Dave gestured at his current outfit. "Three sets of tactical gear destroyed in the past month alone. Bullets, fire, extreme cold – everything that doesn't hurt me shreds what I'm wearing. It's becoming a recurring problem in the field."

"Not to mention rather awkward," Kessler agreed, reaching for his blue pen – theoretical observations. "The challenge is significant. Any material that could withstand bullets would be too rigid for practical movement. Fire resistance requires different properties entirely." He made several quick notes. "And extreme cold tends to make most materials brittle."

"So what you're saying is, there's no single solution?"

"Perhaps we're approaching this incorrectly," Kessler mused. "Instead of one material to handle everything, what about specific layers for specific threats? Thermal under-layers for cold operations, flame-resistant gear for fire scenarios..."

Dave considered this. "Like the electrical charging – prepare specifically for what we're facing?"

"Precisely." Kessler made another note. "I'll research some options. Modern tactical materials have come a long way, even if they can't match your particular durability."

"Anything would help," Dave said. "The team's getting tired of me ending up naked during operations."

"I imagine so." Kessler's expression remained professionally neutral, though his eyes betrayed a hint of amusement. "I'll make this a priority. For everyone's sake."

As Dave prepared to leave, Kessler called after him: "Do try not to destroy too many charging stations. My range anxiety doesn’t need more reason to grow."

Dave smiled slightly. "I'll do my best, Doc. But Grigory needs to learn that his cold advantage just got a lot warmer."

27 Dark Vectors

The rain traced cold patterns down Dave's neck as he studied Unit 17 through his binoculars. From his observation point behind a derelict van, he counted four guards maintaining patrol patterns that seemed deliberately casual – too casual for a facility supposedly holding industrial quantities of liquid nitrogen.

"Their kit's interesting," Omar reported quietly through their tactical channel. "Trying to look civilian, but the bulky coats can't quite hide plate carriers. See how they move? Military training, but they're almost advertising it."

Through their comms, Anya coordinated surveillance: "Thermal imaging shows twelve heat signatures inside. Multiple cold spots in the basement level consistent with nitrogen storage. But something about the thermal patterns feels wrong."

"Like they're using cooling units to generate signatures we'd expect to find," Dan agreed. "Serj?"

The big Russian's voice carried decades of tactical experience: "Security too light for Grigory. No overlapping fields of fire, no real depth to their perimeter. Almost like they want us to get inside."

Dave flexed his fingers, remembering the bone-deep cold from their last encounter. "Could be they're not ready. We might have caught them still setting up."

"Maybe," Dan said. "But we move carefully. Dave, get charged up. Everyone else, final gear check. We go in fifteen minutes."

Dave pulled up the charging station map on his Agency phone, scanning for Level 3 DC fast chargers. The Tesla Supercharger location glowed invitingly on his screen – three stalls, 350kW capacity, tucked behind a closed shopping centre. At this time of night, the lot was deserted.

The charging stall's sleek design spoke of careful engineering – weatherproof housing protecting delicate electronics and high-voltage connections. Dave's IT experience helped him identify the key access points even as his enhanced strength made their careful design irrelevant. He dug his fingers into the seam where the metal housing met its mounting bracket, decades of engineering giving way to raw power as he peeled the casing open like a tin can.

The internal components were exactly what he expected – main power feeds running from the transformer, heavy gauge cables carrying DC current to the charging ports. Safety systems began screaming electronically as he breached the housing, emergency shut-offs and ground fault protection triggering uselessly. The acrid scent of ozone filled the air as he stripped insulation from the main feeds with his bare hands, copper conductors gleaming in the station's LED lights.

The first contact sent electricity surging through his body – not the debilitating shock that would have killed a normal person, but raw power that his enhanced physiology greedily absorbed. Blue lightning began crackling beneath his skin as the charging station's full output poured into him. His muscles swelled visibly, veins standing out in sharp relief as the energy suffused his tissue.

Dave gasped as the euphoric rush hit him. Three hundred and fifty kilowatts of pure power flooded his system, more intense than anything he'd experienced since the substation incident. His eyes began to glow with barely contained energy, casting electric blue reflections across the ruined charging station. He could feel his cells drinking in the power, storing it like batteries for what was to come.

The cold had always been his weakness – the Arctic waters had proven that. But now, with this much energy humming through his enhanced body, he could feel the heat it generated. His skin crackled with potential, ready to convert stored electricity into thermal energy the moment Grigory's liquid nitrogen traps activated.

After five minutes, the power began to level off. Dave's body could only store so much charge before physics demanded release. He released the cables, watching blue arcs dance between his fingers as his overcharged system stabilized. He had maybe an hour before the Vril energy in his body normalized the charge – enough time to reach the facility and deal with whatever cold traps awaited him.

He studied the mangled charging station with a mix of professional regret and tactical satisfaction. The IT professional in him hated destroying expensive equipment, but sometimes survival required breaking things. At least he understood exactly what he was breaking.

The stored electricity hummed through his enhanced muscles as he turned toward his target. Let Grigory try his liquid nitrogen tricks. This time, Dave would be ready with a different kind of cold war.

"Charging complete," he reported, disconnecting from the station. "Moving to position."

The team had established their assault points with practised efficiency – Serj's massive frame somehow blending into shadow near the rear entrance, Omar ghosting into position with predator grace, Dan coordinating the overall approach. Everything looked perfect, which only heightened Dave's unease.

"Three minutes," Dan called. "Final checks."

Dave studied the guards again through the rain. Their patrol patterns maintained that artificial casualness, and he noticed none of them had proper grip on their concealed weapons. Either they were amateurs, or...

"Mark."

The assault unfolded with mechanical precision. Omar's breaching charge took down the rear door while Dave simply walked through the front entrance, drawing fire from the exterior guards. Bullets sparked off his

chest as electricity surged through his system, enhanced speed letting him close distance before they could react.

The first guard managed a surprised curse before Dave's carefully measured strike dropped him. The second tried to retreat, but Dave's enhanced reflexes left him unconscious beside his colleague. Both takedowns were clean, professional – but something felt wrong about their response. These weren't Grigory's usual operators.

"External security neutralised," he reported, already moving inside. "No serious resistance."

Through their comms, Serj's deep voice added: "Rear entrance clear. Too easy."

The facility's interior felt wrong immediately. Industrial shelving held cooling equipment that looked right at first glance, but something about their arrangement struck Dave's IT-trained eye as theatrical rather than functional. The first floor's open-plan office space carried the same artificial precision – desks too clean, monitors positioned just so, no signs of actual use.

"First floor clear," Omar reported. "No nitrogen storage, no signs of recent equipment use." His voice carried professional concern. "This feels staged. Look at these workstations – no wear patterns, power cables dressed to look connected but not actually plugged in."

Dave's enhanced vision picked up movement on the lower level – more operators retreating in good order, maintaining disciplined coverage but not truly trying to stop their advance. Their tactical gear marked them as professionals, but their movements lacked the lethal precision he'd seen in Grigory's true teams.

The basement access revealed itself as a heavy steel door that should have been defensible – multiple firing positions, clear fields of fire, perfect

choke point. But the defenders abandoned it with almost choreographed timing, falling back deeper into the facility.

"Moving to breach," Omar announced, already preparing charges. The breach went exactly as planned – too perfectly, with no defenders exploiting the natural choke point, no pre-planned fields of fire covering the obvious entry point.

Through their tactical channel, Anya's voice carried growing certainty: "Something's wrong. These guys are too careful about not presenting serious threats. They're maintaining just enough resistance to look convincing."

Dave moved through the basement level with growing certainty that they'd been expertly played. The cooling equipment was arranged for maximum visual impact, but closer inspection revealed most units to be non-functional. Empty pressure vessels positioned to suggest nitrogen storage. Monitoring stations with dark screens and unplugged cables.

"Contact basement level," Serj called. "Two teams falling back. No serious engagement."

A distant engine roar drew their attention. Through the facility's reinforced windows, they caught glimpse of two black SUVs accelerating from a concealed loading dock. The vehicles moved with practised precision, their drivers demonstrating obvious experience in tactical driving.

"Multiple targets exfilling," Anya reported from her observation position. "Taking standard counter-surveillance routes. They're being very deliberate about it – want us to see their escape."

"Building secure," Dan announced, but his voice carried no satisfaction. "Omar, detailed sweep. Look for anything they deliberately left behind."

The facility felt like exactly what it was – an elaborate stage for a performance they'd just finished acting out. The defenders had played their roles perfectly, maintaining the illusion of resistance while ensuring

specific outcomes. Even their tactical gear told the story – good quality but not exceptional, nothing like the cutting-edge hardware Grigory's true teams employed.

The office on the upper level held one final piece of stagecraft – a laptop centred precisely on an otherwise empty desk, a handwritten note beside it reading simply: "FAO: Dave Anderson, Play me."

They'd taken the building exactly as planned, exactly as professionally as they'd trained to do. But as Dave studied the carefully arranged props and staging, the laptop waiting like a final act reveal, he knew they'd just walked into someone else's choreography.

Somewhere in the rainy night, Grigory's true operation was unfolding. And they'd just wasted precious time assaulting an empty stage.

Through their tactical channel, Dan's voice carried cold certainty: "Full fallback. We're in the wrong place, and I've got a feeling we're about to find out exactly where we should have been."

The rain continued its steady drumbeat against darkened windows as they initiated their exit protocols. They'd played their parts perfectly in Grigory's production, assaulting exactly the wrong target at exactly the right time.

The real question wasn't what was on that laptop. The question was: what game had they just helped Grigory win?

28 Digital Tremors

The laptop screen cast harsh shadows across Dave's face as Grigory's twisted visage filled the display. His scarred features held a satisfaction that made Dave's stomach turn, the mechanical claw clicking softly against a polished desk as he leaned toward the camera.

"Your actions are so predictable," Grigory said, his rebuilt facial muscles giving his smile an unnatural angle. "I can have you dancing to any tune I play." The claw opened and closed with mechanical precision. "By the time you view this, I will have in my possession both Dr. Chen's code and Dr. Chen herself. Although one becomes less valuable than the other, now that I have the encryption key." His remaining eye gleamed with cold amusement. "But I do think Dr. Chen will still be of some value to you and your 'Agency'."

"Damn it!" Dan slammed his hand against the safe house wall. "The industrial estate, the nitrogen stockpiles - it was all a decoy. While we were following his breadcrumbs..."

"He hit Harrison's quantum lab," Anya finished, her fingers already flying across her keyboard. "Confirming now - total breach. They knew exactly where to find the code storage."

Through their tactical channel, Mei's voice carried barely contained fury: "Security footage shows a four-man team. Professional, coordinated. They had valid credentials, walked right through every checkpoint."

"Now he's got a licence to print money," Omar said quietly. "With that kind of wealth behind him..."

"He becomes even more dangerous," Dave finished, watching Grigory's scarred face on the screen. Every detail felt like a mockery - the carefully framed shot, the polished desk, the way his mechanical claw moved with deliberate grace.

Serj's deep voice cut through their growing despair: "He'll need a quantum lab to use the code. That limits options."

"Unless he puts it on the market," Cecilia countered, her warm Ghanaian accent tight with concern. "The code alone would be worth billions to the right buyers."

"Yes," Dan said slowly, tactical mind engaging. "But whatever he sells it for stands a chance of being completely devalued once the buyer uses the code. He's too smart not to see that."

Anya looked up from her screens, grey eyes sharp with realisation. "The markets will collapse. If someone starts manipulating cryptocurrency at that scale..."

"The world economy gets destroyed," Dave said. "Which might be exactly what he wants. Maximum chaos, maximum damage."

On screen, Grigory's twisted smile widened as if he could hear their discussion. "Dr. Chen can be exchanged, of course. But it must be you alone, Dave. No team, no backup, no Agency support." The claw clicked against his desk with metronome precision. "I'll be in touch with details soon. Do try to be less predictable this time - it's becoming rather boring."

The video ended, leaving them in tense silence. Dave studied his teammates' faces in the laptop's glow - Dan's controlled anger, Anya's focused determination, Serj's professional assessment. They'd walked right into Grigory's trap, following his carefully laid trail while he struck at their real vulnerability.

"The quantum lab breach was precise," Mei reported through their comms. "They avoided critical systems, focused only on the code storage. No collateral damage, no casualties. They wanted us to know exactly what they took."

"And exactly who took it," Dave added, remembering the mechanical efficiency of Grigory's claw. "He's pushing us toward something. The exchange offer, the solo conditions..."

"It's another trap," Dan said flatly. "He's isolating you, forcing a confrontation on his terms."

"Where he's had time to prepare," Serj rumbled. "Like the office attack. Cold weapons, backup plans, everything calculated."

Anya's screens filled with data as she accessed cryptocurrency market feeds. "Exchange volumes are already spiking. Word's spreading about the code theft. Major players are positioning for market instability."

"He hasn't used it yet," Dave noted. "Why show his hand with the video first?"

"Because this isn't just about the code," Cecilia said quietly. "Or even about Dr. Chen. This is about making you choose - the code or her life. He's forcing you to confront an impossible equation."

"While holding all the variables," Omar added. "The exchange location, the timing, the conditions - he controls everything."

Dave flexed his right hand, remembering the bone-deep cold from their last encounter. Kessler's charging solution might help him survive the liquid nitrogen, but Grigory would have other surprises waiting. He always did.

"We're missing something," he said finally. "The industrial estate, the nitrogen stockpiles - why put so much effort into a decoy? Why not just hit the quantum lab directly?"

"Because he wanted us looking the wrong way," Dan replied. "Studying his cold weapons, preparing for that threat, while he moved on his real target."

"No," Serj said thoughtfully. "The nitrogen is still important. He wouldn't waste resources on a pure decoy. Those supplies, those training exercises we tracked..."

"They're for something else," Dave finished. "Something he's still planning. The code theft, Chen's capture - they're just pieces of a larger operation."

Through their comms, Mei added: "The quantum lab's security footage is interesting. The team that breached it - their gear, their movements... They weren't the same operators from the office attack. Different training, different methods."

"Multiple teams," Omar mused. "Each prepared for specific missions. The cold weapons specialists, the quantum lab infiltrators..."

"And probably more we haven't seen yet," Dan concluded. "He's building something bigger than just revenge. The question is: what?"

Dave stared at the laptop's blank screen, seeing Grigory's twisted smile in his mind. The Russian had survived impossible odds, turned catastrophic injuries into calculated advantages. Everything he did served multiple purposes - even his traps had traps.

"We need to think like him," Dave said finally. "What would make someone with his resources, his planning capabilities, show his hand now? Why reveal he has the code instead of just disappearing with it?"

"Because he wants an audience," Cecilia replied. "Everything he does is calculated for maximum effect. The office attack, the code theft, Chen's capture - they're all theatre. Performances designed to push us where he wants us."

"Then we change the script," Dave said. "Play along with his solo exchange demands, but not the way he expects. If he wants theatre, let's give him a different kind of show."

The team absorbed this, professional minds already calculating possibilities. They'd been dancing to Grigory's tune, following his carefully laid paths. But sometimes the best way to break a pattern was to make it look unbroken while preparing something entirely unexpected.

"He'll contact us soon," Dave continued. "With exchange details, conditions, demands. He'll think he's pushing us into a corner, forcing us to choose between Chen and the code. But he's not the only one who can plan for multiple scenarios."

Through the safe house windows, Birmingham's lights painted the night in electric colours. Somewhere out there, Grigory was watching markets shudder at rumours of his stolen code, preparing his next move in a game he thought he controlled completely. But he'd made one critical mistake - he'd shown them exactly what he wanted them to see.

Sometimes the best traps were the ones your target thought they were setting for themselves.

29 Digital Storm

Dan studied the USB stick sitting in the middle of the safe house's coffee table like it might explode. The white label bore a single name in precise handwriting: "Dave Anderson."

"Interesting choice," Anya said, already setting up an isolated laptop. "Using physical media instead of digital delivery. He knows we'd trace any network contact." Her grey eyes narrowed as she created a pristine sandbox environment. "I'm not taking the risk of letting that creep into any of our systems."

Dave watched her work, his IT background helping him appreciate the layers of protection she was implementing. "Think he expected this level of caution?"

"Of course." Anya's fingers moved across the keyboard with practised efficiency. "He's playing with us. Everything's a test, a measure of our responses." The laptop screen showed multiple security protocols engaging. "But sometimes being predictable is the right move."

The team gathered around as Anya inserted the USB stick. Serj's massive frame made the modest safe house feel even smaller, while Omar maintained his habitual position near the door. Through their tactical channel, Mei and Cecilia monitored remotely.

The video opened without preamble. Grigory's scarred face filled the screen, his mechanical claw clicking softly against a polished desk. The injuries from India had transformed him - rebuilding him into something that straddled the line between man and machine.

"Dave." His voice carried the weight of carefully nurtured hatred. "I trust your team's security measures are sufficiently paranoid. It would be disappointing if this message reached you too easily."

Dave felt his teammates tense at Grigory's tone - the casual confidence of someone who believed they controlled every variable.

"A simple proposition," Grigory continued, his damaged face twisting into what might have been a smile. "You. Alone. Unarmed. Relying solely on those wonderful abilities that make you so special." The claw clicked against his desk with metronome precision. "The abandoned superconductor testing facility outside Birmingham. Midnight tomorrow."

"Trap," Omar said quietly.

"Obviously," Dan agreed. "But look at his posture, his eye movement. He's enjoying this too much."

Grigory leaned closer to the camera, his remaining eye burning with focused intensity. "No team. No backup. No Agency support. If I detect anyone else in the area, Dr. Chen dies." The claw opened and closed with mechanical grace. "But if you win my little game? I will release her. My word on it."

Through their comms, Cecilia's warm voice carried professional concern: "He's made similar promises before. Turkey. India."

"This is different," Dave said, studying Grigory's rebuilt features. "This is personal. He wants me to suffer before he kills Chen."

"That's not exactly comforting," Anya noted, already pulling up satellite imagery of the facility.

On screen, Grigory's twisted smile widened. "I know your weakness now, Dave. The cold that nearly stopped you. Did you think that knowledge would go to waste?" The claw tapped controls off-screen. "I've prepared something special. A proper test of what you really are."

"The facility's interesting," Mei reported through their channel. "Originally designed for testing superconducting magnets. Massive cooling infrastructure, liquid nitrogen storage capacity."

"Perfect for what he's planning," Dan said grimly. "He's had time to modify it, prepare the battlefield exactly how he wants it."

The video continued, Grigory's voice carrying almost clinical detachment. "Twenty-four hours, Dave. Come alone, or Dr. Chen's death will be particularly unpleasant." His damaged face filled the screen. "Let's see what kind of monster you really are."

The screen went dark, leaving them in tense silence. Dave flexed his right hand, remembering the bone-deep cold from their last encounter. But also remembering Kessler's tests, the way electricity had fought back against the freezing.

"We're not actually considering this," Anya said, though her tone suggested she already knew the answer.

"There's a Level 3 charging station half a mile from the facility," Dave replied, pulling up the charging map on his phone. "350 kilowatts. More than enough power."

"Even charged up, it's still a trap," Omar warned. "He'll have layers, contingencies. He won't want to kill you quickly."

"No," Dave agreed. "He wants me to suffer. Which means he'll draw it out, make it elaborate." He studied the facility's schematics on Anya's screens. "That gives us a chance."

"A chance to what?" Dan asked quietly. "Save Chen? You know he'll kill her anyway, just for revenge."

"Maybe." Dave's voice carried steel now. "But if there's even a slight chance I can save her, I have to try." He turned to his team, seeing the concern in their faces. "We knew this was coming. He's been planning it since India."

Through their comms, Cecilia added: "The facility's powered up. Significant electrical draw consistent with industrial cooling systems. He's been preparing for weeks."

"Let me at least get surveillance in place," Anya argued. "Thermal imaging, motion sensors-"

"No." Dave's tone left no room for argument. "He'll be watching for that. One hint of Agency support and Chen dies." He managed a slight smile. "Besides, I've got my own power source lined up."

The team absorbed this, professional minds calculating odds and angles. They'd faced impossible situations before, but this felt different. This was Grigory at his most dangerous - patient, prepared, and absolutely committed to his revenge.

"I don't like it," Dan said finally. "But I understand it." He turned to Dave. "We'll maintain distance, but be ready to move the moment something changes."

"Agreed," Serj rumbled. "And Dave? Make him suffer."

Dave nodded, already planning his approach to the charging station. The electricity wouldn't solve everything - Grigory would have multiple layers of cold weapons, backup plans within backup plans. But it might give him enough of an edge to save Chen.

Through their tactical channel, Mei reported: "Thermal imaging shows significant cold spots in the facility. Multiple cryo-chambers, liquid nitrogen storage. He's prepared quite a playground."

"Then I'd better not keep him waiting," Dave said, standing. He looked at his team - Dan's quiet concern, Anya's focused intensity, Serj's professional assessment. They'd survived impossible odds before, but this felt different. This was Grigory at his most dangerous - a man who had turned catastrophic injury into calculated advantage.

As Dave prepared to leave, Cecilia's voice carried through their comms one final time: "Be careful. Men like Grigory - they don't just want revenge. They want to prove something."

"I know," Dave replied quietly. "He wants to prove he can break me." He flexed his fingers, remembering the surge of electricity from Kessler's tests. "Let's show him how that works out."

The safe house felt smaller as Dave gathered his gear. Every member of the team knew this could be the last time they saw him alive. But they also knew that sometimes being a hero meant walking into traps - not because you thought you could win, but because it was the right thing to do.

Tomorrow night, Dave would face Grigory's carefully planned revenge. But first, he had a charging station to visit. Sometimes the best defence against cold was a different kind of power altogether.

30 Ice Breaker

Eric Wong's hand shot out, grabbing Amanda Zhao's arm as she passed his workstation in Harrison's quantum lab. "Look at this," he said, voice tight with intensity. "I've been analysing the quantum mining program's two successful runs, comparing it against the failures."

Amanda paused in her tracks, studying Eric's screens where data streams painted complex patterns of market activity, system loads, and quantum processing metrics. Her eyes narrowed at his obvious agitation.

"See these patterns?" His fingers traced across multiple displays showing layered visualizations of transaction chains, network latency, and block validation timing. "I cross-referenced everything - market volumes, system loads, processing efficiency, validation queues, network conditions."

"And?" Amanda's cybersecurity background helped her parse the technical implications, but something in Eric's manner suggested a major discovery.

"It was luck." He said it like a revelation, his hands bringing up new windows filled with probability calculations and statistical models. "Pure, astronomical luck. Look at these numbers. During both successful runs, we had perfect conditions - optimal network latency, specific market volumes, precise timing of transaction blocks." He highlighted a final calculation. "The odds of those conditions aligning exactly as they did? Twenty million to one. For each successful run."

Amanda absorbed this, her security training automatically assessing implications. "You're saying the code didn't actually control anything? Just got lucky?"

"Exactly!" Eric's excitement grew as he explained. "Everyone's been assuming we found a way to manipulate the blockchain directly. But look at these system loads." More graphs populated his screens. "Even with a quantum computer a thousand times more powerful, there are simply too

many variables. The code can optimise for favourable conditions, yes, but it can't guarantee them."

"Like having a really good system for predicting lottery numbers," Amanda mused. "You might get lucky occasionally..."

"But you can't force a win," Eric finished. "The market reaction in Singapore was based on a fundamental misunderstanding. Everyone thinks we developed a way to control cryptocurrency markets. But we didn't. We just got incredibly lucky. Twice."

Amanda's training highlighted tactical possibilities. "Which means Grigory's stolen code..."

"Is far less valuable than he thinks," Eric confirmed. "Oh, it works - it's an incredible piece of quantum computing. But it's not the unstoppable force everyone assumes. It needs perfect conditions - conditions we may be able to predict, but never control. And as for timing when we run the code, even based on predictions may make the 20-million to 1 even higher!"

Through the lab's reinforced windows, afternoon sun painted Cambridge's academic buildings in amber hues. Somewhere out there, Grigory was planning to use a quantum weapon that wouldn't work as he expected. The implications of that miscalculation hung heavy in the filtered air.

"We need to tell Dan," Amanda said, already reaching for her secure phone. "This changes everything about Grigory's plan." She paused, studying Eric's screens. "Though I doubt he'll be happy to learn his perfect weapon is more like a very expensive lottery ticket."

Eric nodded grimly. "The worst part? He probably won't believe it until he tries to use it himself."

"And by then we'll have a very angry man with a very, very expensive failure looking for someone to blame," Amanda finished. "We need to move fast. The team needs to know before they try anything with Dr. Chen."

But even as she dialled, both of them knew the chances of reaching the team in time were probably about twenty million to one.

31 The Arena

The superconductor testing chamber stretched above Dave like a mechanical coliseum, its curved walls rising thirty metres to a dome of exposed girders and industrial lighting. Repurposed shipping containers created a tactical maze across the arena floor, their weathered steel forming corridors and choke points with military precision. Multiple catwalks and observation galleries provided elevated positions, while industrial cryo-chambers spaced around the perimeter promised challenges to come.

Through the control room's armoured glass high above, Grigory's scarred face caught the glow of multiple monitoring screens. His mechanical claw moved with inhuman precision across a control panel, adjusting settings with cold efficiency. The Russian's tactical vest and combat gear couldn't quite hide the extent of his injuries - the way his rebuilt face moved oddly when he spoke, how his remaining eye burned with focused hatred.

"Welcome to my testing facility," Grigory's voice carried through hidden speakers, the words slightly distorted by rebuilt facial muscles. "Though perhaps 'proving ground' would be more accurate." His claw gestured at the arena's modifications. "After India, after what you did to me, I had time to think. To plan. To understand exactly what kind of monster you truly are."

Dave scanned the arena, his enhanced vision picking out tactical details. Automated nitrogen jets positioned at key intersections. Power conduits running to each cryo-chamber - heavy gauge cables suggesting serious voltage. The containers themselves had been carefully positioned, creating kill zones and forcing specific movement patterns.

"Where's Chen?" Dave demanded, noting security cameras tracking his every move.

"Safe." Grigory's smile didn't reach his remaining eye. "And she'll remain that way, as long as you participate in my little experiment." The claw

closed with a sharp click. "You see, I've learned so much about you. Your abilities. Your weaknesses. But theory requires testing, doesn't it?"

Movement caught Dave's attention - operators in advanced environmental suits taking positions behind the containers. Their gear looked military-grade but specialised, designed specifically for extreme cold operations. These weren't random mercenaries - they moved with the precision of extensively trained professionals.

"The rules are simple," Grigory continued, his voice carrying clinical detachment. "Survive my challenges, and I release Dr. Chen. You have my word on it." The claw gestured at the arena's lethal modifications. "Consider it a scientific inquiry into the limits of your particular breed of monster."

"Your word?" Dave's tone carried open scepticism. "Like in Turkey? Or India?"

"Ah yes, India." Grigory's damaged face twisted into something approaching amusement. "Where you left me with these trophies of our encounter. Though perhaps I should thank you - the experience was educational." The claw tapped controls with mechanical precision. "Now I know exactly how much cold it takes to slow you down."

The first nitrogen jets activated without warning, super-cooled fog rolling across the arena floor. Dave's enhanced vision compensated automatically, transforming the white mist into ghostly grey patterns that didn't obscure his view. But the cold - that hit like a physical force, immediately numbing exposed skin.

"First wave incoming," Grigory announced with clinical detachment. "Let's establish some baselines, shall we?"

Four operators emerged from the fog, their environmental suits allowing smooth movement despite the extreme cold. Their weapons snapped up with professional precision - modified assault rifles compensating for the

temperature effects on standard ammunition. These weren't amateurs to be overwhelmed with raw strength. Their positioning spoke of extensive tactical training.

The first burst of gunfire came from three directions simultaneously, a coordinated attempt to pin him down. Bullets struck his chest with familiar ineffectiveness, but the operators' positioning showed extensive tactical training. They were creating a kill box, trying to limit his movement options.

Dave launched forward with his enhanced speed, but the lead operator was ready. Grigory, at the press of a button sent a jet of liquid nitrogen into the air between them, the super-cooled vapour forming an instant barrier. Dave's momentum carried him dangerously close before he could change direction. Even that brief proximity sent needles of cold racing across his exposed skin.

"Clever," he muttered, retreating behind a container as more nitrogen jets tried to hem him in. Their cryo-armour protected them from the cold that had nearly crippled him during Grigory's attack, while letting them move with professional efficiency. Four-man team, working in pairs, maintaining overlapping fields of fire - these weren't amateurs with fancy gear.

Through the observation glass, Grigory watched with predatory focus, his claw dancing across controls to activate more nitrogen jets. The arena's temperature plummeted further, as Dave moved to attack.

The maze of containers had seemed like a disadvantage at first, limiting his movement options. But as the operators tried to flank his position, Dave saw an opportunity. Their coordination was impressive, but the complex environment forced them to split up to maintain coverage.

He caught the first operator transitioning between containers, moving just a fraction slower than his teammates. The man's cryo-armour might protect against cold, but it did nothing against Dave's enhanced strength. One precise strike crushed the armour plating over the armours heated power

source on his back, while a follow-up blow sent him sprawling. The captured HK416 assault rifle felt familiar in Dave's hands - some skills from Agency training never faded.

The remaining operators adapted quickly, falling back to covered positions. Their tactics shifted, trying to draw him into another nitrogen trap. But Dave had learned from the first exchange. He used the rifle's limited ammunition with precision, forcing them to move predictably to avoid his shots.

As a burst of liquid nitrogen sprayed from behind Dave dropped to the floor, the second operator fell to a carefully placed burst that cracked his faceplate, exposing him to Grigory’s own nitrogen deployment. The irony wasn't lost on Dave as the man collapsed, his own protective gear transformed into a prison of super-cooled air.

"Two down," Dave counted automatically, an old habit from his IT days of tracking system failures. The rifle clicked empty just as the third operator rushed his position. The man's CQB training showed in his smooth approach, but he hadn't counted on Dave's speed. The empty rifle made an effective club, shattering the heated armour and sending the man shivering to the floor.

That left one. The team leader had used his teammates' attacks to study Dave's movements, to adapt to his capabilities. When they finally faced each other in the narrow space between containers, the operator's stance spoke of extensive hand-to-hand training. Right now Dave’s enhanced speed held out, for how long he couldn’t be sure.

"Shall we do this the hard way?" Dave asked, dropping into a fighting stance of his own. The operator's only response was to charge forward, assault rifle chattering, his cryo-armour allowing him to move with surprising agility.

The fight was brief but intense. Dave's enhanced strength gave him an overwhelming advantage, but the operator's skill kept him in the game for

precious seconds. Ultimately it ended with Dave’s combination of speed and strength tearing off the operators armour like cracking open a lobster, before slamming him into the wall unconscious.

Dave surveyed the aftermath - four disabled operators, their advanced cryo-armour transformed into expensive paperweights. His clothes had suffered from proximity to the liquid nitrogen, freezing and shattering in patches, but his enhanced charge was already dealing with the mild frostbite.

"This is why we can't have nice things," he muttered, checking the operators' vital signs. All alive but thoroughly incapacitated. Grigory's response to Dave's cold vulnerability had been impressive, but ultimately insufficient. Some problems couldn't be solved with better equipment alone.

"Second wave," Grigory announced, satisfaction evident in his voice. The claw gestured at new tactical displays. "Let's see how you handle some equipment modifications."

Movement in the fog caught Dave's enhanced vision - the distinctive underslung attachments on their rifles unmistakable - the launchers' bulky profile suggesting cryogenic modifications, the operators' movements showing extensive training with the specialised gear. His IT professional's mind calculated trajectories even as the first cryo-grenade arced through the air with lethal precision.

The impact against his leg was like being hit with a hammer made of winter itself. His tactical pants crystallized instantly, shattering into brittle shards as the liquid nitrogen penetrated deep into his muscle tissue. The cold burned worse than any fire, sending waves of paralysis through his system.

"Having trouble moving?" Grigory's voice carried mocking concern through their compromised comms. "That's the thing about extreme cold - it affects everything eventually. Even monsters." The mechanical claw

clicked as it adjusted controls. "Though I must admit, you're putting on a good show."

Dave forced himself to move despite the creeping numbness. The operators were advancing in pairs again, their cryo-armour allowing them to navigate their own nitrogen fog with practised efficiency. But the shipping container maze offered possibilities - angles and elevations that their tactical training might not expect.

The first operator went down to physics rather than fighting skill. Dave shoulder-checked the container he was using for cover, his enhanced strength sending the massive steel box sliding sideways. The operator's cryo-armour, designed for cold resistance rather than impact protection, crumpled against the adjacent container. His rifle clattered to the floor as he was pinned between the containers.

"One down," Dave muttered through chattering teeth, already moving to flank the second operator. His leg burned with cold fire where the grenade had struck, but his enhanced charge was fighting back, keeping him mobile if not comfortable.

The second operator demonstrated excellent situational awareness, tracking Dave's movement through the nitrogen fog with professional skill. But three years of field work had taught Dave that even perfect training had blind spots. He scaled the container stack in seconds, using his enhanced strength to move faster than the operator's tactical doctrine could predict.

The man's nitrogen grenade sailed through the space Dave had occupied a moment before. From above, Dave could appreciate the operator's technique - perfect form, excellent target tracking. But he was still thinking in ground-level tactical patterns.

Dave dropped from above just as the operator reached to reload his grenade launcher. The impact drove them both to the ground, but Dave's enhanced strength let him control the fall. A precise strike to the armour’s

power supply transformed the protective gear into a prison, while a follow-up blow to the helmet's faceplate left the man unconscious but alive.

"Two," Dave counted, his breath visible in the super-cooled air. The cold from the grenade impact was spreading, making his movements less fluid. He needed to end this quickly.

The third operator proved more challenging. Dave's attempt to flank through the container maze was met with disciplined fire, forcing him to duck back as another grenade arced toward his position. He rolled clear of the immediate blast, but the nitrogen fog was everywhere now, each breath sending needles of cold into his lungs.

That's when the liquid nitrogen jet struck between his shoulder blades, burning like cold fire through his system. His enhanced charge fought desperately against the thermal shock, but there were limits to even his adaptation. Every muscle screamed in protest as the super-cooled liquid did its work.

"Now this," Grigory's voice carried genuine satisfaction, "is what I've been waiting to see."

The liquid nitrogen between his shoulder blades felt like a spear of pure Arctic winter, but Dave forced himself to move through sheer determination. Each motion was a battle against the intense cold trying to lock up his muscles, yet somehow he remained functional - if not completely fluid.

"Still moving?" The third operator's voice carried professional surprise through his mask. "The spinal shot should have locked up your nervous system."

Dave turned to face them, frost crackling across his skin. "Sorry to disappoint." His voice emerged rough, strained by the cold trying to freeze his lungs. "I'm full of surprises."

Both operators moved with tactical precision, trying to catch him in a crossfire of nitrogen jets. But their training worked against them - they expected targets to seek cover, to retreat from the cold. Dave did neither. He charged straight at the third operator, pushing through the super-cooled fog through what seemed like impossible resilience.

The operator's surprise at this suicidal approach cost him precious reaction time. Dave caught the nitrogen jet on his left shoulder, letting the cold burn through what remained of his tactical gear. His muscles fought against the paralysis just long enough to close distance. His right hand caught the operator's weapon, crushing the barrel with enhanced strength that was rapidly fading.

Using the disabled operator as a shield, Dave spun them both to face the final threat. The fourth operator hesitated, his grenade launcher trained on them but unable to fire without hitting his teammate. That momentary pause was all Dave needed.

He hurled the third operator forward with his remaining strength, sending both men stumbling in the nitrogen fog. Their cryo-armour, designed to protect against cold rather than impacts, actually worked against them as they collided. Dave followed through despite his protesting muscles, driving both operators into the nearest container.

The impact wasn't pretty. Dave's enhanced strength, even compromised by cold, proved too much for the armour's structural integrity. Power supplies ruptured, emergency seals engaged, and both operators found themselves trapped in failing environmental systems.

"That's four," Dave managed through chattering teeth. His muscles were beginning to lock up as the cold tightened its hold. But the fight was over - all four operators were down, their advanced cryo-armour transformed into expensive coffins unless their support teams reached them quickly.

Through their comms, Grigory's voice carried something approaching respect: "Impressive resilience. Though I notice you're slowing down considerably. And nitrogen's effects linger long after exposure."

Dave staggered to the nearest container, using it for support as his legs threatened to give out. The cold between his shoulder blades felt like it was reaching for his spine, while his extremities had gone completely numb. But his voice remained steady: "True. But your men are still down. And I'm still standing."

"For now," Grigory agreed. "But the real question is: how long can you maintain that remarkable resilience? The cold does more than slow you down, Dave. It reveals what you really are - a man playing at being something more. And men, no matter how enhanced, all have their breaking points."

Dave's mind raced through options, cataloguing them with IT professional precision even as his body fought the paralysing cold. The nitrogen jets were connected to the cryo-chambers. The cryo-chambers required serious power for cooling.

32 Cold War

Dave’s thoughts were interrupted as the third wave launched their assault. Eight operators moving in perfect coordination, their weapons modified for maximum cold-weather effectiveness. But it was the two carrying what looked like industrial nitrogen "flamethrowers" that demanded immediate attention.

The first blast of liquid nitrogen caught Dave's left arm, instantly numbing it to uselessness. He stumbled back, his movements now reduced to a fraction of their normal speed. The cold had penetrated so deep that even his enhanced charge struggled to maintain basic functions. This was Grigory's true weapon - not just the cold itself, but its relentless accumulation.

"Third wave proceeding as expected," Grigory noted with clinical detachment. "Subject showing significant degradation of enhanced capabilities. Preparing for final phase of cold exposure testing." The claw moved to new controls. "Though I admit, I expected you to break sooner."

Dave fell back toward one of the cryo-chambers as coordinated fire forced him into a tactical corner. His bare skin had taken on a mottled black, and blue appearance where the liquid nitrogen had touched it, and his movements felt wooden, unresponsive. But his IT professional's mind was still racing, analysing power requirements, calculating possibilities...

The nitrogen "flamethrowers" opened up simultaneously, creating a wall of super-cooled liquid that would flash-freeze anything it touched. Dave let himself fall back against the cryo-chamber, his numbed hand finding the main power coupling. Three-phase, 480 volts, enough juice to maintain superconducting temperatures. Or, theoretically...

"One final test," Grigory announced, his damaged face twisting into something approaching a smile. "Let's see how much cold a monster can truly endure."

All the nitrogen jets activated at once, filling the arena with super-cooled fog. The operators pressed forward with practised coordination, their weapons promising a final barrage of killing cold. Through the observation windows, Grigory's remaining eye gleamed with anticipated victory.

Dave's fingers closed around the power coupling. The first shock of industrial current hit him like a shot of pure adrenaline, electricity arcing beneath his frozen skin. He automatically calculated the voltage - 480 three-phase power, enough juice to light him up like a human transformer.

The electricity fought the bone-deep cold, sending waves of energy through numbed tissue, the euphoria of the charge invigorating Dave’s frozen, and tired muscles. The operators hesitated, through the fog blue-white light began pulsing beneath Dave's skin, their professional composure cracking at this unexpected development. Through the observation windows, Grigory's remaining eye narrowed with sudden concern.

The super-cooled fog rolled across the arena floor like an arctic tide, transforming the space into a ghostly landscape of white. From his elevated position, Grigory watched his eight operators move with practised efficiency, disappearing into the fog, their cryo-armour allowing them to navigate the extreme cold that had previously proven so effective against Dave.

But something had changed.

As Dave's vision shifted into its enhanced “game mode”, the fog-filled warehouse transformed into a three-dimensional grey wireframe model. Every surface, every movement became crystal clear - the nitrogen fog that should have blinded him instead giving perfect contrast to his enhanced sight.

"Spread out," Grigory ordered through their tactical channel. "He's in here somewhere. The cold will slow him down enough for—"

The first operator never saw Dave coming. One moment he was advancing through the fog, the next a shadow materialised beside him. Dave's enhanced strength crushed the nitrogen feed line on his back, the pressurized super-cooled liquid spraying in a deadly arc. Two nearby operators caught the full blast, their cryo-armour unable to compensate for such an intense, immediate exposure. They froze almost instantly, their suits transforming into brittle shells.

"Contact!" the fourth operator managed before Dave was on him. Through the swirling fog, Grigory could only track the action through sound and the brief glimpses of movement in the swirling white void below.

"What's happening down there?" Grigory demanded, his mechanical claw clicking in agitation. "Report!"

The only response was the crack of impact as Dave systematically disabled his prey. In his enhanced vision, the operators might as well have been moving in slow motion, their tactical formations useless in an environment where only he could see clearly.

The fifth and sixth operators tried to work as a team, moving back-to-back to prevent flanking. Dave simply waited, watching their growing uncertainty as the silence stretched. When one finally broke formation to check on their frozen comrades, he struck. The operator's backward stumble carried him directly into his teammate. Both went down in a tangle of compromised cryo-armour and ruptured nitrogen lines.

"Status!" Grigory's voice carried barely controlled fury. "Someone tell me what's happening!"

"He can see us," the seventh operator reported, his professional composure cracking. "The fog... he's using it against—" The transmission cut off as Dave caught him trying to retreat. A precise strike to the armour's power supply left him trapped in his own protective gear.

The last operator showed impressive awareness, tracking Dave's movement through sound alone. But in the end, it didn't matter. Dave simply walked through the nitrogen jet meant to stop him, the fresh charge easily sufficient to the task, his enhanced vision letting him target the exact point where the feed line connected to the tank. The resulting rupture ended the fight decisively.

From above, Grigory could only watch as his carefully planned tactical advantage dissolved into chaos. The fog that should have blinded and slowed his target had instead become Dave's ally, concealing him while he methodically eliminated eight of Grigory's best operators.

"Impressive," Grigory admitted as the fog began to thin, revealing the aftermath. Eight elite operators lay disabled or frozen, their advanced cryo-armour proving insufficient against their own weapons turned against them. "The cold doesn't seem to bother you quite as much as it did before."

Dave emerged from the dissipating fog, frost coating what remained of his tactical gear, but his movements still fluid. "Maybe you're just not as clever as you think you are."

Grigory's mechanical claw clicked thoughtfully. "Perhaps. But cleverness isn't everything." The single eye shifted to something behind Dave. "Sometimes it's about forcing impossible choices."

Dave turned to see Chen suspended in a maintenance cage high above a pool of liquid nitrogen, its surface mirror-still in the arena's harsh lights. Industrial-grade refrigeration units hummed ominously around the pool's perimeter, maintaining its lethal temperature. The thick support cables holding the cage each fitted with a detonator controlled by Grigory.

"A simple equation," Grigory continued, his claw moving to a control panel. "The quantum code or the quantum scientist. You can't save both." His damaged face twisted into something approaching a smile. "Choose quickly." He pressed a button with his claw, and grinned with twisted

satisfaction as a 10-second countdown appeared on the bank of screens behind him.

Chen's eyes met Dave's across the distance, and he saw understanding dawn in them – the terrible knowledge that Grigory had planned this perfectly, that no amount of enhanced speed or strength could change what was about to happen.

The first cable exploded with a sharp crack, and the countdown proceeded to 9… 8. The cage lurched sickeningly, metal groaning as it swung on the remaining cable.

"Tick tock," Grigory said softly, already moving toward his escape route, the quantum code's storage device clutched in his mechanical claw.

Dave's IT-trained mind calculated trajectories and times with brutal efficiency. The distance to Chen, the seconds on the clock, the speed of Grigory's escape – it was all precisely engineered. He could reach one or the other, but not both. Never both.The second cable exploded with a sound like a gun shot. The cage plummeted toward the liquid nitrogen's surface, and Chen's scream – a sound of pure terror that Dave knew would haunt him forever – cut through the arena's cold air.

He was already moving, enhanced speed pushing his body to its limits, but Grigory had measured the distances too well. Dave was still three steps away when Chen hit the liquid nitrogen. Her scream cut off instantly as the super-cooled liquid claimed her, the negative 196 degrees Celsius turning flesh and bone brittle in seconds.

Behind him, Grigory's escape route sealed with the finality of perfect preparation. The Russian had won this round, trading one life for the power to destroy countless others.

Dave stood at the pool's edge, watching the liquid nitrogen's surface return to its mirror-stillness. There would be no body to recover – the intense cold would have shattered Chen on impact. Another life lost to Grigory's

endless quest for revenge, another soul sacrificed on the altar of his obsession.

Through the facility's speakers, Grigory's voice carried one final time: "Every choice has consequences, Dave. Remember that when the markets burn."

The arena's emergency lights cast long shadows across the liquid nitrogen's surface as Dave knelt beside the pool. Chen had died knowing he couldn't save her, understanding in those final moments that she was just another variable in Grigory's cruel equation.

Sometimes being a hero meant making impossible choices. But as Dave watched wreaths of super-cooled vapour curl across the nitrogen's surface, he wondered if he had made the right one.

33 Epilogue

The Hanged Man seemed darker, and smaller somehow as Dave nursed his Guinness, watching condensation track down the glass. The pub's familiar comfort felt hollow after recent events, but some routines helped maintain sanity even when the world shifted beneath your feet.

Dan's reflection appeared in the aged mirror behind the bar, his perpetual stubble and alert green eyes unchanged by recent events. He settled onto the adjacent stool without comment, ordering a whiskey with the economical gesture of someone who'd done it many times before.

"No sign of him," Dan said finally, his voice carrying the weight of professional frustration. "We had the facility surrounded. Every exit covered, multiple surveillance layers. But somehow..."

"He had it planned," Dave finished. "Probably months in advance." He studied his glass, remembering Chen's final moments. "Like everything else."

"Anya's still analysing the security footage. Mei's tracking financial movements. But it's like he vanished into thin air." Dan's fingers drummed once against his glass, the only outward sign of his tension. "Professional ghosts don't usually leave such obvious trails, then disappear completely."

"Unless that was the point." Dave's IT background helped him see patterns others might miss. "Show us exactly what he wanted us to see, then use our own assumptions against us."

Through their tactical channel, Anya's voice carried equal measures of frustration and grudging respect: "The facility's tunnel networks were extensive. Multiple access points we didn't know about. Some probably dating back to the original construction."

"He's good," Serj rumbled from his position near the pub's entrance. Even off-duty, the big Russian maintained tactical awareness. "The cold

weapons, the staged fights, Chen's position - everything calculated to draw specific responses."

"Speaking of calculations," Cecilia's warm Ghanaian accent filled their comms, "You should see this analysis from Harrison's team."

Dave pulled up the report on his Agency phone, his IT experience helping him parse the technical details. "The quantum code... it wasn't what we thought?"

"Not even close," Cecilia confirmed. "Eric Wong's analysis shows the successful runs in Singapore were statistical anomalies. Twenty million to one odds, each time. The code itself is brilliant, but it can't actually control cryptocurrency markets. It just got incredibly lucky."

"Twice," Dan added, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. "Which means Grigory's perfect weapon is more like..."

"A very expensive lottery ticket," Dave finished. He remembered Chen's passion for the research, her dedication to understanding the quantum patterns they'd discovered. "Though her algorithms, the way she approached quantum computing problems..."

"Exactly." Cecilia's voice carried new energy. "Harrison's been studying her code. The crypto application may not work as intended, but her methods for quantum optimisation, her approaches to complex problem-solving - they're revolutionary. Applications in everything from medical research to climate modelling."

"So what are we doing with it?" Dave asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Harrison's agreed to release it all as open-source software," Cecilia announced. "Every algorithm, every innovative approach Chen developed. Available to anyone who wants to build on her work."

The team absorbed this in thoughtful silence. Through their tactical channel, Omar added: "It's what she would have wanted. Using her research to help people, not manipulate markets."

"And it completely devalues what Grigory stole," Anya noted with professional satisfaction. "Hard to profit from something everyone can access freely."

"A legacy," Dave said quietly, remembering Chen's dedication to pure research. "Something good coming from all this."

"There's more," Cecilia continued. "Harrison's quantum lab is being renamed - the Sarah Chen centre for Quantum Computing. Her work will inspire new generations of researchers, push boundaries she only dreamed of exploring."

Dan signalled for another round, his tactical mind already processing implications. "Grigory won't take this well. Having his perfect weapon transformed into public resource..."

"Good," Serj rumbled. "Let him know he failed. That everything he planned, everything he sacrificed Chen for, amounted to nothing."

"Not nothing," Dave corrected, watching patterns form in his Guinness's settling head. "Her work will help people now. Advance human knowledge. That's worth more than any market manipulation."

Through their comms, Mei added: "Already seeing positive responses from the research community. Universities, tech companies, independent developers - all excited about Chen's innovations. Her approaches to quantum optimisation are opening doors no one knew existed."

"A different kind of immortality," Cecilia mused. "Not wealth or power, but knowledge freely shared. Progress that builds on itself."

Dave remembered Chen's fierce intelligence, her dedication to understanding quantum reality's deepest mysteries. She would have

appreciated this - her work transcending personal gain to become part of humanity's collective knowledge.

"Grigory's still out there," Dan noted, ever the tactical planner. "And he won't stay hidden forever."

"No," Dave agreed. "But next time we'll be ready. And Chen's legacy will be helping people long after he's gone."

The Hanged Man's ancient clock ticked toward closing time, its steady rhythm counting down another day. Outside, the world was already changing as Chen's quantum innovations spread through the research community. Her algorithms would accelerate discovery, enable breakthroughs, advance human understanding in ways she never got to see.

Sometimes victory looked different than expected. Sometimes the best revenge against darkness was spreading light.

Dave raised his glass slightly. "To Sarah Chen," he said quietly. "And to leaving the world better than we found it."

His team - his family - joined the toast without hesitation. They had lost this battle in many ways, but Chen's legacy would echo through time in ways Grigory could never touch. Knowledge, freely shared, was a kind of immortality all its own.

The night wrapped around them like a comfortable blanket as they honoured their fallen friend. Somewhere out there, Grigory nursed his wounds and plotted his revenge. But tonight was for remembering Chen, and the light she'd brought to the world's quantum shadows.

Sometimes the best victories were the quiet ones that rippled through time, touching lives in ways their enemies could never predict or control.

Just like Chen would have wanted.