

The room's walls were a sterile white, interrupted only by a single door. The lights were harsh and bright. From the ceiling, nozzles sprayed a constant fine mist of caustic lye. In the centre sat a young woman. Her skin had the pallor that comes from lack of sunlight, and her hair was a straggly mess of dark green. Tattered clothing hung from her slender body. The lye didn't seem to bother her, although her skin did smoke slightly as the mist touched it.

It was lunch time. With no clock and no window to indicate the passage of time, the woman, whose name was Syd Hunter, had taken to marking days by meal times. It was also the only human contact she had these days - although contact was a strong word when one party came in dressed in a hazmat suit and never spoke.

The room was a prison; one much harsher than Syd's crimes really deserved. A few high profile bank robberies, not much violence, only a few injuries. But then, this prison had little to do with the crime, and everything to do with the criminal, who was better known outside these walls by the alternate soubriquet of Acid.

The door opened, and the usual suited figure appeared, but instead of the usual tray of food, there was just a voice. "Get up. You've got a visitor."

The room's walls were a sterile white, but unlike the room she'd been imprisoned in, this one contained a table, two chairs, a plate of cucumber sandwiches and small cakes, and a man. A dark haired man with a sensible haircut and a well tailored suit. He put down a sandwich and spoke.

"Good afternoon, Miss Hunter. My name is Mr Lithgow. Would I be right in thinking that you are rather bored in this establishment?"

"Spectacularly bored." Acid's voice was flat and emotionless.

"Then I wonder if I might be able to persuade you...I am putting together a team to deal with a rather delicate matter. Your particularly unique skills might be of value. Ahem, excuse me." He burped, and reached into his pocket for a packet of antacids. "The cucumber sandwiches, you know." He popped a tablet in his mouth and chewed.

Acid stared hungrily at the packet.

"Would you like one?"

"...Yes."

"Well. Perhaps we might be able to arrange for a regular supply. If you were to join my team, that is."

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The prison yard was surrounded by giant fences, and lined with soldiers. In the middle stood the prisoner.

“Go!” The army sergeant barked out the order, and every soldier immediately fell upon the prisoner. Soon he was invisible under a writhing mass of heavy sweat soaked bodies. The dogpile lasted all of ten seconds, however, before there came a bellow of fury and every soldier was sent flying backwards and the prisoner, whose name was Steve Smith, staggered back to his feet.

“Again!” The soldiers rushed Steve, bearing him to the ground once again, but this time the pile lasted barely six seconds.

“Enough!”

This time it wasn't the sergeant who spoke, but a smartly dressed man who had appeared beside him.

Half an hour later when the injured had been cleared away, Mr Lithgow finally sat down opposite Steve.

“Mr Smith - or is it Private X? How good to meet you at last. Your reputation precedes you.”

A grunt was his only reply.

“I wonder if you would like to do something about said reputation? It is rather a pity, after all, to go from being a decorated soldier to...well, this.”

Another grunt, but this time tinged with curiosity.

“I am putting together a team...”

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The prison was about as low security as it was possible to be while still technically being a prison. It didn't need high walls or trained guards to keep prisoners in. Not when the prisoner was there of his own free will.

“Vitruvius. Also known as Arthur Hall, previously of the League. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr Lithgow, and I have a proposal for you. Although, of course, you already know how this conversation is going to end.”

“Yes. But we still have to have it.”

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The prison was dark, damp and a long way from England. To the inmates, an English prison would be a welcome luxury. There was no electricity. No lights. No running water. It had been a long and bumpy drive in a Landrover to get there, and Mr Lithgow held his nose as he entered.

The prisoner was dragged in in manacles, a small slight woman, body and ragged clothing both filthy. Mr Lithgow took a deep breath and immediately regretted it.

“Miss Stark. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mr Lithgow, and I have a job for you. I would say I’m a friend of your parents, but I don’t believe that would get me a particularly warm welcome. Shall we say instead that I’m aware of your parents?”

Alexa Stark had never bothered to adopt an alternate name. This prison might be a hellhole but it was one she might have been able to deal with if only it had had wifi. But then, ensuring that she was well out of reach of any kind of connection to the internet was the whole reason she’d been thrown into this place in the first place.

“I’m listening...”

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Vitruvius was the first to arrive at the rendezvous point - a private office at Wembley Stadium. After all, he would have known if anyone was going to get there before him. With the huge crowds arriving for the Coldplay concert he was able to arrive without attracting much interest.

Private X took the rear entrance, using the pass that Mr Lithgow had given him. One of the security guards gave him an odd smile as he passed, but otherwise nobody paid him any attention.

Acid hadn’t been able to get her old coat back, and had had to settle for a cheaper alternative. “Nice Acid cosplay,” someone had remarked as she made her way into Wembley Stadium. So people remembered her. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

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The computer invited them, in large friendly letters, to Click Here. Alexa ignored it. Mr Lithgow had assured her she would be able to learn all about him when she got home, and it was time to put that to the test. The computer responded to her touch and to her mind, and soon she had a substantial dossier on Mr Lithgow, detailing his service record, post military career and other details. All exemplary. All respectable. All fictional.

Ahh well. Time to Click Here.

A Powerpoint presentation opened, displaying a logo of a spiral galaxy within a brain. It detailed the recent activities of an organization called NOOS. The NOOS app was a

program designed to utilise unused cycles on people's smartphones to run a distributed botnet, in a similar way to programs like SETI@Home. All respectable enough, except for one little blip in the data. A statistical anomaly. Something that could easily be nothing, but all the same curious. People with the NOOS app on their phone were showing higher than normal rates of memory loss, erratic behaviour and other signs of brain degeneration.

The presentation ended with a video of Mr Lithgow, talking directly to camera.

"If at all possible, we would like this handled covertly. NOOS is a substantial donor to the current ruling party, and we do not want to cause undue upset. Officially you represent no organisation and no responsibility will be taken for your actions."

The familiar violin riff of Viva La Vida could be heard in the background. The team needed a plan. And the first step was to be somewhere else.

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McDonalds was a little crowded, but nobody was paying any attention to the slightly unusual looking group, and more importantly, it had free wifi. Alexa immediately dived in. The NOOS app wasn't hard to find. Plenty of people connected nearby. Her mind spoke to the machine - and the machine spoke back. Innocuous at first, just learning, sharing information. But then it turned its gaze directly on Alexa.

*Acquiring asset. Acquiring asset. Acquiring asset.*

No.

*Acquiring asset. Acquiring...*

NO.

The fake ID as a security guard for the concert had served her well to this point, and would serve her just a little bit longer. As tendrils reached out from the NOOS app towards her she pushed it away from her, and the tendrils passed straight through, wrapping around the fake ID instead. Absorbing it. Consuming it.

Alexa fled back into the real world.

Vitruvius couldn't in good conscience do much about the mission without finding out what the consequences might be if he didn't. He looked forward, searching through a maze of possibilities to find the result of inaction, six months from now.

The London he saw was unrecognisable. Narrow spires, strange bubble like buildings - or were they buildings at all? No cars. No wildlife. No humans. He began searching closer to the present, trying to find the point at which it all went wrong, and the way that it could be stopped. If only he had looked just a few minutes into the future, he might have seen the

explosion in time to do something about it. Instead it was only the sudden sensation of hairs standing up on the back of his neck and a glance towards the windows that warned him.

“Duck,” he yelled at the others, flinging himself to the floor. Glass windows shattered as a rocket launcher sent its deadly payload into the restaurant, almost grazing Alexa as it went past before exploding.

*Target acquired.*

Private X was back on his feet in a moment, hurling himself bodily towards the man with the rocket launcher, wrestling the weapon from his hands before moving on to his companion, relieving him of his assault rifle before relieving both of them of their lives.

*Have to save them.*

Vitruvius scanned futures. So many customers. So many hospital beds, so many anxious grieving relatives. And all through it the painful knowledge: you’ve only got time to save one.

He chose. He and the one person he could save went out through the drive through window, just in time to avoid the fireball of burning chip fat blossoming from the fryers.

*Screw this.*

Acid liked Alexa. They’d done a bank job together, some years ago, with Alexa disabling all the electronics and Acid making short work of the physical defenses. The rest of the customers could burn for all she cared, but with this new job clearly requiring Alexa’s technical expertise, Acid didn’t want to lose her. She unleashed a burst of acid that blasted a hole in the back wall of the building, and grabbing Alexa by the hand she ran for her life.

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While mobile phones are generally regarded as the best way for a separated party to regroup in 21st century London, a precog who can find out where people are going to be is also pretty effective. The four of them met up in St James’ Park, as far away from any kind of electronic surveillance as possible, to discuss their next move. Between Vitruvius’s vision of the future and Alexa’s encounter with the NOOS app, the best move seemed to be locating the NOOS datacentre. While the app might be running on a million different smartphones, taking out the central nervous system should be enough to at least slow it down.

What they needed was a safe base, a chance to clean up and a secure computer, and Vitruvius knew where he could find all three. There was just one drawback.

Jessica DuMonde had once been known as Lightning, the fastest thing on two legs and one of the League’s most popular heroes. She and Vitruvius had dated for a while, but that had fallen apart after the car accident. The accident that Vitruvius, the League’s very own

precog, had failed to prevent. The fastest thing on two legs was now a paraplegic, living in a wheelchair adapted apartment, still serving the League but solely in a support role. The last person she ever wanted to see on her entry camera was Vitruvius. Showing up with two notorious supervillains and the unstable result of a super soldier experiment was just the icing on the cake.

“Look, all we need is a safe base and a secure computer. And I’ve seen what happens if we fail.” Vitruvius was still smarting from the slap on the face she’d greeted with him. She might have lost the use of her legs, but her arms were still fast, and with the series of handholds bolted around the flat she could be at the door and punching a visitor in the time it took to say hello.

Acid gave her a smile. “I can descale your toilet for you.”

Jessica sighed. He had a point. There was no way he’d be here if he had any other options. “And it’s my birthday. Did you bring me a present?”

“He’s got you a new pair of running shoes.” Private X smirked.

“You. Out.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with the NOOS app,” Jessica argued, once things had calmed down again and she’d adjusted to the idea of having a house full of bank robbers. She rolled her chair over to the desk and pushed a button that raised the screen up from where it had been concealed. “Look, it’s running on the League’s computers. It’s not...”

Sometimes being a successful precog just meant knowing when to use it. Vitruvius watched in horror as the immediate future showed Jessica, eyes sparkling an unnatural blue, turn round and thrust a knife into Acid, snap Alexa’s neck and finally turn on him. His own life he would have gladly given up to Jessica. He owed her, after all. But he couldn’t say the same for Acid and Alexa, and without them the world was doomed. He did the only thing he could. He grabbed the handles of her chair and pushed her out of the window.

Private X stood outside the apartment building, thinking how nice it would be to be having a smoke, when he was interrupted by the crashing sound of Jessica and her chair smashing into the roof of the car next to him. He glanced upwards, but when she wasn’t followed by any of the team he nodded to himself and continued his quiet contemplation.

Upstairs, Vitruvius was dreading the team’s response. He needn’t have. Acid shrugged, and went off to rifle through Jessica’s medicine cabinet, returning shortly taking a swig from a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. Alexa made use of the now vacant computer, and soon had a lead for them to follow up. Rebecca Cade.

Jessica’s wheelchair-adapted motor scooter might have been a practical way for a disabled person to get around London, but it was slightly less practical for four people, one of whom was around twice the size of a normal person, to get around in. Nevertheless it was all they

had, and it was certainly faster than walking to the Shard. At least at 2am there weren't quite so many people around to see them.

"So here's the plan," said Private X at the handlebars. "We go in through the front doors, I gun down all the security guards and then we fight our way into Rebecca Cade's office."

"This is supposed to be a covert op," Acid pointed out, hanging onto Private X's back. "Smashing our way in through the front doors isn't exactly inconspicuous. So here's what we do. We head for the back doors. Look for the delivery entrance where the clean laundry goes in for the executive washrooms. We get in that way. Unseen."

But the delivery area was not as empty as it should have been. There were several lorries and a whole team of people unloading barrels, all of them labelled with warning signs indicating their hazardous contents.

Time for plan C: the executive lift. Vitruvius searched through futures until he saw someone entering the code to get in. The lift took them at high speed to the upper floors of the Shard.

The doors opened on near darkness. Only a few emergency exit lights provided illumination, but it was enough to show them the way. Private X grabbed a waste bin and wedged it in the lift doors to prevent them closing, then went around pushing the call buttons on the other lifts so that anyone responding from outside would have to use the stairs. Finally he took up a position in cover where he could guard the entrance to the stairwell.

"You've got two minutes and eleven seconds before they get here," Vitruvius told him, then lead the others into the central office.

The room was circular, and lined from floor to ceiling with monitors. On every screen was a face. The face of someone using their smartphone with the NOOS app. And in the centre of the room sat Rebecca Cade.

"So this is who they've sent to stop me," she said with a smile. "I'm afraid you're too late. This project is far too important to be stopped. Soon the smart matter will be complete."

"But your app is causing brain degeneration in its users!"

Rebecca nodded. "An unfortunate side effect. But it was necessary. I needed the additional processing power. The human brain is a remarkable computer. And don't even bother thinking about trying to stop me. As you're about to realise, we have you thoroughly out maneuvered."

From the sprinkler nozzles in the ceiling came a hiss and a fine spray. Not the usual fire suppressant water deluge, but something Acid recognised at once. Caustic lye. Her prison had been full of it to keep her neutralised and stop her hurting anyone. NOOS had been prepared for the possibility of her showing up here.

How dare they. *How dare they.* Acid threw herself bodily at Rebecca Cade, legs wrapping around her to pin her arms to her side and wrapping her hands around her throat. The lye rained down on Acid's back, but her front - and Rebecca - were both shielded.

"Shall I hurt her," she hissed to Vitruvius in a voice full of suppressed rage.

Vitruvius hesitated. He was supposed to be a hero. A good guy. And here he was, about to give a supervillain permission to inflict a hideous torture upon...upon the woman who was going to destroy the world if they didn't stop her.

"Yes. Do it."

Acid didn't hesitate. She pressed her palm up against Rebecca's cheek and let loose her power, a ghastly grin on her face as the flesh began to burn and melt. Rebecca began to scream.

Just the distraction Alexa needed. She dived into the network, seeking out the source and the means to destroy it.

*Acquiring target. Acquiring target. Acquiring target.*

No.

*Acquiring target. Acquiring target. Acquiring target.*

NO.

*Target acquired.*

In the office, messages flashed up. *Processing at 100%. Processing at 200%. Processing at 400%. Processing at 800%. Processing at 1600%. Processing complete. Smart matter synthesizing.* Rebecca's screams died away as her body jolted a few times and then went still as the blue sparkle faded from her eyes. Acid spat curses, then jumped away to get out of the rain of lye. Vitruvius could only watch helplessly as the images on the screens started changing until every one of them showed the face of Rebecca Cade.

A shout from Private X and a rattle of gunfire told them that time was up. Security had made it up the stairs. And every one of them had sparkling blue eyes.

*Smart matter. Rebecca is going to use it to make herself a new body. She'll be able to do anything. She'll be a god.*

*Why shouldn't I be a god?*

*I could finally give my parents what they deserve if I was a god.*



Alexa was part of the system now. She only had to take control of it. And the only thing that was in her way was Rebecca.

*I will control the system.*

*No.*

*I am stronger.*

*No.*

*I will be a god.*

*No.*

*I am Alexa.*

*I am Rebecca.*

*I am Alexa.*

*I am Rebecca.*

*Alexa.*

*Rebecca.*

*ALEXA.*

The screens changed again, with some of Rebecca's faces turning into Alexa's. Some of the attacking security guards paused, swayed briefly, then blinked to reveal eyes of glittering orange.

"Don't shoot the orange ones!" Vitruvius tried to get Private X's attention. But with the rage descending upon him, Private X was beyond control.

"Alexa's beating her," Acid said as more screens changed to show Alexa's face. "But if she takes control..."

Vitruvius was already looking into the futures, seeing what Alexa would do with the smart matter body. Nothing too bad to begin with, but power corrupts - and absolute power corrupts absolutely. "We have to stop her. The control centre - it's at the bottom of the tower."

Private X had gunned down every single security guard and picked up more ammo and a few grenades, and was calming down again. He scooped up Alexa's unconscious body and looked for the fastest route down. The stairs would take forever, even without having to

climb over a mountain of bodies. The computer controlled lifts sounded like asking for trouble.

With a splintering crash they jumped through the Shard's glass windows and onto a window cleaner's cradle, in which they abseiled to the ground at breakneck speed. The control room was easy enough to find, surrounded by more guards who were swiftly gunned down by Private X.

How to stop it? How to stop it? Vitruvius desperately searched possible futures. Acid looked around for the main power conduit. She soon found it - blocked by yet more guards. Private X carved her a path through them and she leapt through to blast the cables with all the acid she could muster. Clouds of toxic gases rose up from the wreckage while Private X pulled the pins on a handful of grenades and hurled them into the heart of the machinery.

With a descending hum the machines began shutting down. Vitruvius anxiously watched the orange glitter in Alexa's eyes as it faded away.

"We should leave," Acid said firmly. Parts of the floor were starting to sag. "Now, at a brisk pace, through the front door."

They did. Perhaps their walk was a little more brisk than the one normally adopted by people in movies walking away from an exploding building. And Acid did look back at it as it began to collapse.

"We were supposed to be being covert."