

## "The Case of the Double Dragon"

"It was a day like any other except it was different. The sun came up and sat high in the sky, except there were heavy storm clouds and none of us saw it all day. Rain blasted the sides and metallic roof of the Banzai Institute - Northwest, a deliberate and annoyingly loud drumming that drove average people bonkers. Except, we were not average people. We were Blue Blaze Irregulars!"

"Um - you know Bobby, that could use some work."

Bobby Mulholland turned from the dictation machine that sat on his desk beside the rain-blasted picture window of the main office suite in the institute. Shadows of the water cascading down the outside glass played across the dimly lit

rooms. He peered into the gloom and saw a tall, curvaceous figure just inside the front doors. He reached for a lamp switch as the German-accented woman smiled into his presence.

"Best stick to filing, and finishing your thesis."

Bobby switched on the lamp. The gloom was dispelled a little but the rain played on behind him. Bobby smiled as he stood up and set the dictation machine aside.

Miss Ilse Rhineland strode across the suite, long legs wrapped in knee-high white leather boots, scarlet Armani microfiber trench coat swirling around a Rikko Machete silver jumpsuit, both tugging at her legendary figure as she swept over to kiss him on the cheek. Rain transfer! He wiped at the moisture, blushed as the once and future supermodel and chief institute financier gave him one of her million dollar (literally) smiles, shrugged out of her coat. She threw it aside on a newspaper-strewn leather couch, nodded to the storm waves crashing below the cliff on which the institute building was abruptly perched.

"Someday we're going to go straight into the sea, you know."

"Nah, Miss R, Stormy made sure the new foundation was bolted into the bedrock. Earthquake proof! I've seen the plans myself. Couldn't have asked for a safer structure and the rock layering here is -"

"Please, honey, *no geology*, I just flew in from Bangkok!"

He couldn't resist: "Are your arms tired?"

"No, why?"

Ilse plopped down into a designer office chair, stifled a yawn while the young man merely chuckled.

"What are you up to alone in the dark? Please tell me it's not a *boy thing*."

"Well, I was just narrating our last adventure. Getting started, anyhoo."

She fixed him with her icy stare, those trademark electric blue eyes only slightly dimmed by her exhaustion. His heart skipped a beat.

"I *am* the institute historian, right? I mean, Stormy said \_"

She rolled her beautiful eyes and licked her perfect pink lips. She would always be the most beautiful woman he ever saw, even on his wedding night, something he would never tell his future bride, if he ever found one.

"Where's my worse half, anyway? I told him when I'd be back. Had to take a damn *Uber* from SeaTac. The guy spoke broken English and even worse Spanish. Curse me for being a natural at all languages!"

Miss Rhineland pulled herself up and waggled a long, ring-encrusted finger at his chest. She was tall, one of the tallest

models in the world, but he was still Gargantua at six-seven.  
She smiled softly.

"Oh well, I'm too tired to argue. And I can never stay mad at you, Bobby Short!"

She giggled at her pet name for him and looked upstairs.  
"I'm exiting to the loft, sir, and should be down in time for breakfast."

"Uh - Miss R - that's fifteen hours from now."

"Exactly," she yawned, million dollar legs carrying her swiftly up the stairs to the loft. "If my wayward man-child makes it home, show him to the sofa bed!"

He heard the upstairs airlock door vacuum-shut softly.  
Bobby sighed.

"I don't ask for her approval -"

He turned back to the dictation machine and the storm raging outside.

"I only ask she quit treating me like her little brother.  
*Scheisse!*"

Stormy Seveca, Banzai Institute - Northwest founder and "executive director emeritus" - struggled in his bonds. The goon squad from the White Indian Tribe Motorcycle Club had tied him to the rotting timbers beneath the old boardwalk. Cold wind lashed at his face and naked legs - damn those scoundrels for

stealing his favorite safari parachute pants - and the rain whipped about him in a stinging mix of sea spray and winter fury. He was a mere mile from home, secreted beneath the abandoned boardwalk at the edge of the Pacific, but the odds of anyone venturing down here and finding him alive were absolute zero. That's what the heavily muscled and tattooed boys from WITMoC planned. The sea waves and gale force winds would take him with nothing left behind but his vehement curses echoing in the storm.

Really, it was his own fault. How could he fall for such a simple trick? The text message from "Bobby" - a nicely manufactured bit of hacking, for sure - and the hurrying back from the information science seminar at Spokane University into the steroidal arms of this second-rate street gang. He was fairly certain these Pelican Bay alums were in the employ of Hanoi Xan, if the ancient Vietnamese was still alive - or one of his surviving surrogates. Hadn't Buckaroo assured everyone the ancient evil was dead? Did it matter now, stuck like a barnacle to the decaying underbelly of the old waterfront? He stared through the force of the storm, spit water, shivered and cursed some more. He was too smart and too resourceful to end up as seagull buffet. Stormy twisted around painfully, affecting the "prancing mantis" pose from the yoga lessons he took with his beloved Ilse. Oh how she would chide him for this! And in High

German! Frigid waves thundered and crashed around him as he forced first one skinny white leg and then another back threw the ropes. Moments later he tumbled completely over and splashed down into the shallow water of the onrushing tide.

"Take that, you dastards in cheap biker leather!" he shouted as he scrambled up the sandy bank and hurried for the warmth of the neighborhood Denny's on the road above.

Miss Rhineland simply shook her head and clucked her tongue at him. Stormy still shivered, wrapped in the electric blanket and sipping at the chicken dumpling broth that swirled in the souvenir Banzai Institute cup held by pale, unsteady hands. Down in the main room, Bobby talked furiously into the telephone, updating the Seattle F.B.I. Miss R. glanced down from the loft, then sealed the airlock door with a quick play of her long red fingernails on the control panel. She plunked down on the bed next to her man, tugged her silk kimono tight around her body. A glistening tear ruined the perfect pale symmetry of her face - just for an instant. She leaned in and sniffed, kissed his bald pate again.

"Oh baby, sweet life, shortcake, I thought you were *kaput*."

"Yeah," Stormy sighed, "that Denny's coffee is ghastly."

Ilse held his face in her warm, lotion-soft hands.

"When are you going to learn that everyone is out to get us?"

"And I thought *I* was paranoid."

Stormy set the half-empty mug of broth on the head of the golden lion beside the bed, took her in his arms. He shivered as she sobbed gently onto his naked shoulder.

"I don't want to lose you," she sniffed. "*Never forever!*"

Now he smiled and nodded. "It was stupid of me to think it was over. We put a few of his henchmen in jail and we think we're safe. I should have known he was up to something. The chatter was furious before I left. Encoded all over the internet: revenge was in the works."

Miss R nodded. Now she kissed him more passionately - a signal he long knew - and rolled off the bed.

"Why don't we take another hot shower."

"I already took one, dear."

"I said *we*, Stormy."

Ilse arched a blond eyebrow, turned and moved toward the bath, her black silk kimono slipping slowly off as she went.

Stormy stared at his disgruntled reflection in the faux wood top of the conference table in the Seattle F.B.I. headquarters the next morning. He looked up and around at the gaggle of boys and girls in their similarly short hair and even more similar dull dark suits. Wouldn't Ilse and her half dozen makeup and hair *artistes* like to do an extreme makeover with these people. Nah, they'd just charge it off to the taxpayer. For his part, he imagined all of them wearing clown outfits and giant shoes. It didn't help.

"Are you suggesting the U.S. government use me as bait? I'm not going back under that old boardwalk again. Unless it's summer and I'm making out with my Bavarian honey."

Some of the guys sneered. The ladies looked uncomfortable. Good. They were picturing the short, bald, middle-aged ex-presidential aide with the tall, gorgeous European supermodel. One of the guys actually blushed and looked away. Stormy shook his freshly shaved head.

"Where were you when I needed help at the airport? There were a hundred people standing around, TSA and regular security, and a half dozen White Indian Tribe biker studs grab me and hustle me into a van at the curb. Shall we time warp back so you can actually contribute?"

The local bureau's Assistant Director leaned forward, unimpressed - and angry.



"Mr. Seveca, we have warned you time and again that there are certain criminal elements in the metro Seattle area that would like nothing better than to see you and yours - er - no longer among the breathing. Yet, on a consistent basis you continue your - what do you call them - *investigations*."

The bureau A.D. flipped through a file folder, sneered.

"I believe you once publicly connected this gang to the *Kennedy assassination*?"

Stormy blinked at the man.

"It's a theory in progress"

Some of the agents giggled.

"It was their parents, not these same kids!"

The bureau A.D. shut the folder.

"The White Indian Tribe Motorcycle Club has been around a long time, but I do not believe they pass their memberships down via inheritance, Mr. Seveca."

Most of the guys and girls suppressed outright laughter. Stormy got to his feet.

"Laugh while you can, but out there right now evil is hard at work!"

"Then stay home, sir. Where it's warm."

Stormy moved to the door, his own face flushed. One of his new contacts was ajar. He cursed under his breath for agreeing to give up his bifocals, worked at it with his finger, turning

back to the table for a moment. With his half-blurred vision he thought he saw one of the female agents tugging at her hose under the table. He kneeled to pretend to look for his contact on the carpet.

"Mr. Seveca, I believe you know the way out," intoned the Assistant Director as the boys and girls stood to leave. Stormy caught sight of a slender but shapely calf and the strangely familiar tattoo upon it. The female agent hurried past him and exited into the hall. Stormy stood and looked after her as the A.D. stepped to his side. "Or do I have to escort you myself?"

"No," Stormy smiled, "I'll show myself out."

He hurried away down the hall, remembering exactly where in the South Seas he'd seen that kind of double dragon tattoo.

"Double dragon? Are you sure?" asked Bobby Mulholland as his boss settled into the chair behind the wide glass desk.

"That means Hanoi Xan."

Stormy Seveca ran short, slender fingers over his bald head and smiled. He turned the oversized office chair away from the towering figure of his intern so he could stare out at the waves breaking against the cliffs of the Olympic Peninsula.

"Bobby, something stinks in Denmark, and Denmark has moved to downtown Seattle!"

"Oh my god -" intoned Miss Ilse Rhineland in her throaty German contralto, sweeping up beside the desk in an authentic reindeer cape, "if he's slaughtering der Shakespeare he has a plot brewing!"

The tall, leggy Bavarian supermodel leaned in to wrap her long pale arms around the small bald man in the giant chair. Her long blond braids dangled over the man's gleaming pate.

"Does this mean we are preparing to enter the maw of the beast? Will you take me and Bobby along so we can keep you secure from danger, *sweetheart*?"

Stormy sniffed and Ilse laughed. She kissed him on the cheek and raised her perfectly manicured blond eyebrows at their young grad student.

"Gas up the Calvin-mobile, Robin, it's clobbering time!"

Bobby smiled and hurried away to the garage. Stormy sighed at his better half.

"Would you please not call it that."

They started toward the loft to get their battle gear.

"But that old Saab does look like Calvin Klein!"

"I'm sending you back to the runways of Berlin."

"You wouldn't dare! I'm your chief investor. And not before we show up the feds, dear."

Stuck in traffic on the Puyallup River Bridge, Miss R. wrinkled her elvish, upturned nose at the pungent fumes from the rear exhaust of the car.

"Get your elbow back in the window, Bobby, I simply can't take it any longer!" she implored, hitting the automated controls. The windows slid up, sealing out the fryer grease odor. "Biodiesel indeed! Whose brilliant idea was that? Oh yes, my beloved - *who doesn't even drive.*"

Stormy ignored the ferocious stare of his Amazonian companion, glanced to Bobby in the rear seat. The young man was struggling with custom made body armor.

"Don't fight it, son, just go with the gear. Breathe normally."

"Boss, the straps are digging into my flesh."

"Xan will do far worse if he catches you, Bobby. Now, we have a ways to go before we reach the city. Do we need to go over the plan again?"

Ilse snorted from behind the wheel. "What plan? We're going to watch for that traitorous female and follow her after she leaves work."

"My dearest, we don't know the level of her involvement with the League, so we must be cautious. True, she just happened to be in the meeting where I was called on the carpet -"

"Yeah, what a coincidence." Miss R. snorted again. "Oh Stormy, I can *still* smell the french fries."

Stormy ignored her and smiled at Bobby.

"What are you getting on the trusty Mole?"

Bobby sighed and quit adjusting the gear under his BDU jacket. He put the chunky homemade laptop across his knees and punched up results.

"We're deep inside F.B.I. personal records. That code B.B.I. Loki sent us worked real fine."

"She's the best hacker around," said Stormy with a wink.

Miss R. exhaled and flicked her braids while making an illegal lane change as the traffic got going again.

"Of course, the fact she is young, Danish and exceptionally pretty has nothing to do with it. *Vikings*."

She glanced from her driving to see they were bent to the screen.

"Oh no," claimed the boys in unison.

"More Vikings -?"

Bobby leaned to the little glowing screen. "Sorry, no, Miss R. Her name is Kendra DeSoto, age thirty, transferred from Quantico last year. This is her first tour as field agent. Originally from Los Angeles."

"Interesting, that. They kept her in Washington since training?"

"Looks like it, boss. Yeah, almost six years without leaving the base."

"So? They had her training other people," offered Ilse as she gunned the engine and hurried them up I-5.

"Maybe. Maybe not, my sweet Sunday strudel. She could have been ordered by the League to remain where she was."

Bobby squinted at the screen.

"Look here, it says she runs the 'special crimes unit.'"

Stormy leaned over the seat as Bobby held the Mole up. Stormy smiled and twisted back around. He sneered through the windshield as rain drops started to scatter across it.

"Special crimes, indeed."

Seattle was the usual gray rainy mess. Miss R. parked the Saab on a side street downtown and the three got out, pulling on their trench coats. Bobby secured the Mole in the trunk while Stormy handed each of them a mini machine pistol. They hid them under the oversized coats and buttoned up.

"Alright, folks. We take up our positions and wait."

Stormy checked his Swiss Army watch.

"Shouldn't be too long. These folks are definitely eight-to-fivers."

They split off toward the federal building. Stormy called to his bespectacled intern and braided lady love.

"I-code on the go-phones."

The two nodded. They all disappeared in the murk and rain.

Five fifteen p.m. The flow of federal employees out the heavily guarded front doors had slowed to a trickle. Stormy watched from a mostly deserted outdoor cafe across the street, sipping at his second mug of steaming cocoa. The go-phone buzzed in his pocket. He reached in and tapped it gently. He pressed the earpiece with a finger of the other hand. Bobby spoke to him in the Institute code he invented. His mind translated quickly:

"Boss, she just exited the back. With two men in suits. Probable superiors. They're heading for the last car left in the lot. Following. Out."

Stormy jumped to his feet. The cocoa spilled across the table. He threw some bills past the mess and hurried up the street.

He met Miss R. coming from another direction. She nodded to tell him she had heard the message. They cut across the street as the rain picked up. Now it was pouring. They came around the side of the building as a black limo sped away across the federal building parking lot.

"Don't worry, boss," cried Bobby as he ran up to meet them. "I got a clear shot with my sucky gun. Planted the GPS dart right on their rear bumper."

Stormy slapped the tall intern on the back. Rainwater scattered everywhere.

"Didn't I tell you gargantua would make us proud?" he shouted to Miss R. as they turned back up the street.

Ilse flashed a sexy smile at Bobby. "Nice work, cowboy!"

The Saab's turbo diesel engine roared as they cut through the storm and started up 15th Avenue. Bobby leaned to the Mole in the backseat.

"Boss, looks like they're heading for the park."

"Kind of late for a picnic, eh Stormy?"

Stormy nodded at Miss R. as she expertly piloted the car through the storm.

"It's raining like no tomorrow. Discovery Park will be deserted. Perfect place for a rendezvous."

"So, you think these other guys are in on it?"

Stormy sneered.

"It depends what 'it' is, Bobby."

Night had fallen. The Saab's brights punched through the gloom as they pulled into the visitor parking lot. They could see a government-issued sedan sitting off to one side. It seemed to be empty. Miss R. pulled their car over and cut the engine. With a flick of her Bavarian braids she looked back to Bobby.



"Anything?"

"No movement for ten minutes."

"Whatcha' think, honey?"

Stormy shrugged at his lady. "Let's make like boy scouts and be prepared."

Ilse smiled brightly. "This girl scout is always prepared!"

They got out of the car, unbuttoned their coats and held their machine pistols close.

"Stay with the Saab, Bobby, we don't want our only escape route cut off. Miss R. and I will poke around a bit."

The rain had slacked off. Bobby leaned on the steering wheel and sighed. He glanced to the glowing clock in the panel. His boss and Miss R. had been gone for fifteen minutes. They had looked the other car over and then vanished into the woods. Nothing on the go-phone. It was past time to check in, but he didn't want to be a nervous ninny. He drummed his long fingers on the wheel. He peered through the fogged windows at the empty parking lot. Did something small and dark move out there? He gripped his gun and prepared to throw open the door. Loud thud on the roof of the Saab. Instinctively, he rolled over the seat into the back. THOK THOK THOK. The roof was punctured just above the front driver's seat. Again and again. Now he could see stars

in the clearing sky. He threw open the back door and rolled onto the wet pavement. He leaped into a squatting position and squeezed off two loud bursts. The small, black figure tried to stand on top of the car. It held a nail gun up, then coughed and collapsed backwards out of sight. Bobby sneaked slowly around the rear of the car. He saw the crumpled form of his would-be assassin twitch and lay still. He heard running footsteps. He whirled in a crouch, prepared to fire again. Stormy and Miss R. held up their hands.

"Easy, Bobby," cried his boss, machine pistol at the ready. "You okay?"

He grunted and nodded to the shape on the ground. Stormy approached it warily while Miss R. checked Bobby over and glanced around.

"Gut-?" she inquired of her man.

Stormy simply shook his head and stood up from where he was kneeling.

"You have to see this to believe it."

Bobby and Miss R. stepped over. She inhaled sharply. Bobby shook his head.

"Have you ever encountered anything like this?" the intern croaked.

Stormy looked around the vast, empty parking lot and smiled.

"In an Edgar Poe tale."

Suddenly, the trees nearby began to quake. The ground trembled. The trees bent and loosed a torrent of rainwater. A horrendous explosion of air shook the car as they huddled against it. Something dark, sleek and shiny rose from behind the frenzied canopy. The heavy aircraft lifted into the clearing skies and roared off away up Puget Sound. Stormy leaped atop the Saab and attempted to get a glimpse. He dropped back to the ground beside the others as the noise faded into the night.

"Tornado?" offered Bobby.

"Flying saucer?" asked Miss R.

"Both - and neither. Some kind of stealth craft.

Rendezvous, indeed."

Now they turned their attention back to the thing on the ground. Stormy pulled a mini-Mag from his pocket and kneeled. He aimed the light at the crumpled form.

"*Mein gott*," muttered Miss R.

"Well, one thing's for sure, he's part of the gang."

Stormy nodded to the dead orangutan, nail gun still gripped in its gnarled hand. On one side of the dead ape's face was the double dragon tattoo.

The F.B.I. Assistant Bureau Director - Seattle looked over his steepled fingers at Stormy from behind the massive steel desk in his office.

"You really expect me to believe any of this?"

"We know what we saw last night. Your agents left the city on a top secret aircraft in a most suspicious manner. I have multiple witnesses, *Ted*."

"Don't be overly familiar with me. You come in here and accuse not one, not two, but *three* of my agents of being involved with a likely defunct worldwide organized crime syndicate -"

"I never said -"

"That's *enough*, Mr. Seveca."

The bureau A.D. sighed heavily and turned in his chair to stare out an immense picture window at the morning skyline. The rain had cleared and the sun flooded the city with a soft, yellow light.

"The vehicle left in the park is signed out on an undercover case. The agent in charge is one of our best. Nothing further to say." The A.D. turned in his chair to shake his head at Stormy. "How long have I put up with your elaborate conspiracy theories, your ridiculous "crime fighting" efforts? My god, you're nothing more than an overqualified, librarian -"

Stormy flushed and leaped to his feet.

"I worked for the president! I have four degrees and expertise in a wide variety of information science specialties. My work is known and respected across the globe -"

"Like I said, enough."

The bureau A.D. stood and jabbed a finger at the red-faced bald man opposite him.

"I have tolerated your interference in this district only because of your connections with Dr. Banzai, but I think we both know that connection is fairly well severed at this stage. We have pulled your insolent ass out of the fire on more than one occasion, mainly for raising the ire of local thugs and rednecks. Mr. Seveca, this is the end of the road. I am withdrawing your privileges. No more building passes, access to our database, and so forth. Is this clear?"

Stormy glared back. Finally, he unclipped the plastic F.B.I. ID from his coat and tossed it on the desk.

"You have more than a few bad apples in your barrel, *Ted*. I suggest you do something about it before it's too late."

Miss Ilse Rhineland and Bobby Mulholland watched the two husky F.B.I. agents escort their beloved leader from the front of the federal building. Stormy smiled thinly as he walked over to join his crew beside the Saab.

"Just as I thought. Ted isn't involved. His indignation was real enough."

Miss R. crossed her long arms and sighed. "So, what now, darling?"

"I know you're spoiling for a shower -"

"Why would you assume that, Uri Geller? We only spent the entire night crawling around in that muddy park looking for - What were we looking for?"

"Now you sound like poor Ted, my dear." Stormy reached up to kiss her pale but dirty cheek. "And quit pouting. We'll check into the Paris Hilton and get cleaned up."

"And have a nap? You know you get grumpy when you don't get enough 'sleep,' Sherlock."

Stormy smiled and turned to Bobby.

"Sorry, kid, you get to go home and do research. Find everything you can on that airship, whatever it was. Scan the local military bases, call up possible flight routes, hack traffic control tapes, the usual. Too much work for the poor Mole. Need the Univacs at home."

Bobby shrugged in his mud-spattered trench coat, too worn out to protest. He nodded to the roof damage from the ape's nail gun attack.

"We better get this in the shop. The Franzoni Boys will do her justice. We can walk over to the rented garage from there and break out the backup wheels."

"At least someone's thinking clearly. Stormy didn't even mention *breakfast*," snapped Ilse.

"I assumed my precious would want room service."

"You ass-umed incorrectly. I want Burger Mansion. It's only a block from the backup garage."

"All right!" agreed Bobby.

Stormy sighed, brushed flecks of earth off his own coat.

"Fine. Fine. We eat first, get the Saab to the Franzonis, send Bobby home in the lorry and check Miss R. into the Hilton. Anything else?"

Special Agent Vera Chang tugged on her miniskirt and brushed the lapels of her too-tight suit top. She undid one more button on her white silk blouse and ran her tongue over her brightly painted lips. She smiled tightly into the restaurant restroom mirror. So much for "undercover." She was display meat, right off the butcher's block. That's all she meant to these guys. Well, all the better to keep them in check. Short of sleeping with both, and that thought made her shiver. She hadn't come all the way through Quantico and her secret stint in the

justice department's "Division 9" to sell her soul - or any other precious part of her - to the first traitors that came along. Especially not in Vancouver. Not even her own country. Ferreting out these bad seeds had taken long enough. Justice had finally traced the source of their suspicions to the Seattle field office and Vera/Kendra was sent merrily on her way to root them out - and destroy them. Division 9 followed their own rules. Division 9 ignored troublesome details like the Constitution.

Growing up in Chinatown, she hadn't bothered to play by the rules much herself. Saved from the Southwest Street Tigers gang by a local cop, she ended up with a foster family that actually seemed to care she existed. Then college and the academy. Some turn around for the girl once known on the mean streets of San Francisco as "Princess Nasty."

Vera allowed herself a little laugh and blew a kiss into the mirror. She patted her heavy S&W pistol packed under her tight coat and assumed the "Agent Kendra Desoto" look the boys admired so much: pouty purse of her thick red lips, empty, bright-eyed expression, slight bend to her torso so they could get an eyeful of what the gods had given her in abundance. Now she cackled with impunity - pure Princess Nasty - and exited the rest room with visions of dead traitors dancing in her head.



Miss R. fled the hotel room shower and patted at her long blond braids with a cotton towel. Stormy was sprawled across the king-sized bed in the executive suite. He looked up from watching a *Star Trek* rerun on the large-screen television.

"You clean up real good. Most of the time."

She snarled and plopped onto the bed. Captain Kirk cavorted across the TV screen.

"So, my freshly shaved sweetie, have you concocted an especially devious plan?"

"I had plenty of time." Stormy checked his precision SAS watch. "Forty-seven minutes. Close to a record. I was in and out in five."

"You cheated! Electric razor on your scalp! I can see the stubble."

"No time for a closer job, mein strudel, we have too much work to do."

Stormy leaped from the bed and vanquished Bobby's vintage Salma Hayek screensaver from the Mole. He tapped away on the keys. Ilse played with her braids and pouted.

"I thought we were going to take a nap. Take a *nap*, Stormy. That's code for -"

"I know, my Wagnerian goddess. The devious plan will not allow it. Take a look. Bobby's already back at the barn working away. Think he got cleaned up first?"

She snorted and tumbled across the bed to scissor her long legs around his torso. Now he fell back against her naked body. She nibbled at his ear.

"Bobby got fed. And we gave him the keys to a tank. That's all a boy needs. Unless he has a girl. We need to find him a girl. I believe the poor boy is still a virgin!"

Stormy kissed his beloved's wrist. She sighed, knowing what that meant. He gently eased from her grip and returned to the Mole. Ilse sighed loudly, climbed into bed.

"Wake me when the bad guys are all in prison. *Gut nacht.*"

Stormy ignored her. He put on the headset with mike and keyed into the real-time connection with the institute. Bobby's drawn face appeared in a quarter of the screen.

"Yeah, boss?"

"How's it going? I got your specs for the Aurora and Project Delta."

"Can barely hear you, boss."

"Miss R. is taking her beauty sleep."

"Oh. Like she needs it. Yeah, my guess is Delta. The Aurora operates out of Nellis. Delta reportedly is based at Port Angeles."

"Eagle Island, to be exact. Highly secret. Discovered it by accident when I was chasing the Elegant Submariner down from the Aleutians. He scuttled stolen North Korean boat near there."

"Been meaning to get to more of the old cases, boss."

"Tell you later, kid. It was quite a ride. We should regroup back at the institute. I need special equipment to track this wiley craft. And Miss R. can call in the air cavalry."

Even on the flickering, pixilated live image, Stormy could see Bobby brighten.

"Choppers -?"

Stormy laughed, glanced back to his beloved to be sure she hadn't awakened.

"At least one jet helicopter, anyway. Call Bryce Aviation and tell them Miss R. is in trouble. That's the code for 'get your butts in gear.' Tell them ten tonight. We want cover of darkness."

"Destination, boss?"

"Eagle Island Nature Sanctuary. Call it a 'birding expedition.'"

Bobby smiled. "Maybe they'll let me pilot again. Hey boss - When can I expect you guys back here? More rain's on the way."

Stormy looked to his lovely Bavarian honey gently snoring amid the sheets.

"Uh - give us some time. I need to take a nap."

Bobby got in and out of the shower so fast he left tiny puddles wherever he went crisscrossing the vast spaces of the institute building. Finally, damp towel wrapped around his head and stubble of a goatee growing in so that he looked like some ancient eastern sage (or at least the cable TV version of one), he plopped into the chair before his precious control center screen and rapidly tapped the keys. The Univacs were already humming. Now they burped and spat out a final plot solution to the probable flight paths of the mysterious stealth aircraft. Bobby reached for the paper issuing from the revitalized dot matrix printer when he noticed a shadow at one of the far windows. It vanished. He swallowed hard.

Lightning flashed suddenly. Thunder rumbled overhead, reverberating in the old warehouse's steel roof. Bobby crept across the main floor barefoot to the security center, checked all the outside cameras. Funny. Two of them had stopped working. Or gone black, anyway. Now he opened a drawer of the desk, glancing around the dark room, but his fingers groped in vain. The spare Glock was missing. He cursed under his breath. He'd sent it to Rangely Range to be professionally cleaned and they were late as usual getting it back. His own pistol was sitting on the seat of the lorry outside.

More lightning and then the rain started. He backed slowly to the steps to the second floor loft. There was a loud thump

above. Someone had gained entry through the Treehouse. The boss would be pissed. The intruders would pass right through the bedroom. The boss would definitely be put out. Especially if he found Bobby dead. Stormy hated cleaning up messes. Bobby hurried back to the security desk. He lifted the receiver and pressed their own special code for the county sheriff: 1 - 1 - 9. It also happened to be Miss R's birthdate. Well, month and day: the year of her glorious arrival on planet Earth remained a mystery wrapped in an enigma. He set the phone back down and tip-toed across the floor. He slipped in his own wet mess and plopped onto the hardwood. He heard the airlock door pop open upstairs. Two black shapes hurried to the main floor. He only had time to look up at them.

Stormy and Miss R. rushed back home in a rented hybrid. She just smiled and hummed "Ninety-nine Red Balloons" in German from where she piloted the car. Stormy rolled his eyes at the rain.

"Thanks for the afternoon delight, honey," she purred, gently easing the car into a tight turn off the interstate. "That will hold me for a few hours."

"It better, my Saxon queen, 'cause Stormy's got some nasty work up ahead."

"Maybe you should call in more than the choppers. Maybe you should call back east."

Stormy scowled at the rain-spattered windshield.

"I'll drown in a sea of coyote spray before I ask for the good doctor's help."

Now Ilse scowled. "Good gods, baldy, where do you come up with this stuff?"

"Long months in the vast American desert, my Black Forest dumpling. Ah - I long for those early years."

"That was before you met me! How dare you long for anything but yours truly!"

Now they both laughed and he reached for her free hand. They pulled up to a traffic light just a mile from the institute. Thunder rumbled not far off.

"I think it's time we told Bobby," the boss said quietly. Miss R. stared at him wide-eyed.

"Stormy!"

"I'm serious. It's time he knew."

Miss R. returned her attention and both hands to the road. She urged the rental car through the rain.

"I - I don't know."

"Come on, Ilse, he's like a son to me. To both of us. Right?"

After a while she nodded. Stormy leaned over and kissed her perfect ear.

"Hey now, soldier! No funny business while Mrs. Seveca is driving!"

He smiled again. "See, it's not so bad to say it."

She snorted and they continued on with a tangible warmth in the car. Now through the blurry windshield a bright light appeared directly ahead. Stormy sat up straight.

"Where are we? Past Bleaker's Tavern yet?"

"*Mein gott* -"

Miss R. hit the brakes and the hybrid slid to a stop. Flashing strobe lights had popped into view over a rise in the road. Cops and road workers in storm suits hurried around behind a roadblock. One of the deputies strode over, flashlight bouncing in the evening gloom. Ilse powered down the window.

"Evening, ma'am. Hey, it's Miss Rhineland!"

"Deputy Marshall? Didn't recognize you in the rubber suit. What's going on?"

"You folks heading home?"

Stormy leaned over, practically into his wife's lap.

"What's up, Wilbur?"

"Hey Stormy. Well, we got a situation. Couple of trees toppled onto the road ahead. Near your property, actually."

Stormy grumbled and got out of the car on his side, pulling on his trench coat. The rain was letting up slightly, so he could see past the roadblock.

"Ridiculous, deputy. Never happened in all the years we've lived out here."

"Regardless, sir, it did. No way to get through until the crews cut it apart."

Stormy narrowed his gaze and moved to duck under the barrier. The deputy called after him but he ignored the kid. Stormy hurried past the crews up the road. He reached the downed trees, looked them over quickly, then gazed up the road. The deputy hurried to his side.

"What is it, sir?"

"These were *blown over*, but not by the wind. Look at the trees over there by the institute road. Same damage. So, unless there was a tornado -"

Stormy whirled around and jogged back to the car. He got inside and slammed the door.

"What is it, honey?"

"Go around the roadblock. We need to get home. *Fast*."

Miss R. flew into action. With years of amateur racing and *autobahn* experience, she shifted gears, backed up, shifted gears again, spun the car in the gravel and out onto the muddy side of the road. She gunned the engine and drove straight up the gulley as police sirens echoed from behind. Stormy got on his go-phone and dialed the institute. No answer.



Strangely, the answering machine was also off. This was bad. He urged on his significant other. She put the car back on the road. The hybrid started to whine. Stormy squeezed her wrist.

"Let's take the shortcut, Ilse."

Miss R. braked and the car slid onto the side of the road. They got out quickly. Ilse and her man checked their weapons as they ran into the woods.

Stormy stopped beside a big redwood and bit his lip. The rain was picking up again and it was difficult to see in the darkening landscape. The eastern side of the Northwest Institute was a blur of shadows directly ahead. No sign of life. Miss R. stepped up beside him, eyes wide and bright.

"Doesn't look good, Stormy," she whispered.

He nodded and checked his machine pistol again. He looked to his lady, wet pate gleaming.

"Bobby's in trouble. Okay, we secure the lorry first. It's parked around front. I got a glimpse from the path. That way we have an escape route. We'll circle around from here."

Miss R. nodded quickly as they started toward the side of the building, weapons held at the ready. They reached the wall, slid along it toward the front. Stormy glanced into each window as they passed.

"Can't see a damn thing," he hissed as they made the front of the building. They looked around the corner. Nothing moved in the semidarkness. "Cover me, darlin'."

Stormy pressed his gun to his shoulder and ran to the side of the lorry. Miss R. swung her weapon back and forth, covering the front yard. Stormy signaled with one hand that he was "okay." He opened the passenger door and climbed into the lorry. Now he bent out and signaled for Ilse to come over. He watched the building as she ran to the big truck and slid onto the seat beside him.

"Now what," she breathed, spitting rainwater onto the dash.

He nodded into the back of the truck

"Time to break out Little Mo. Thank god we converted it to run silent."

The inside of the institute's main building was dark and quiet. Not even the emergency lights were working. The side hallway was empty. Now the night vision camera telescoped around a corner and probed the main room. Nothing and no one in sight.

"Wait a sec'," urged Stormy, leaning toward the view screen of the computer in his lap. He toggled the robot's controls. The camera lens switched to a close up of the wet floor. There were many boot prints in the mess on the hardwood. "Lots of feet in

there, all right. Crap. There's Bobby's big bare footprints, too. They must have caught him napping -"

Police sirens wailed nearby. Stormy jerked his head up.

"Oafs! I told them to stay clear for fifteen minutes!"

Miss R. popped open the door and held her weapon ready.

"The time for creeping is over. Now it's clobberin' time!"

Stormy was forced to agree. He set the computer aside and grabbed his gun. They leaped down from the lorry and ran straight for the side entrance.

Stormy kicked in the partly open door. He and his lady eased down the hallway, weapons held ahead. They quickly searched around. Stormy held Ilse back as she discovered the mess on the stairs to the loft.

"I'm going to crucify someone!" she screamed to the otherwise empty building. That was followed by a stream of curses in Low German.

As sheriff's deputies arrived and fanned out across the property, Stormy checked the upstairs. He returned downstairs slowly, saw Deputy Marshall beside a fuming Miss R.

"They got in through the old skylight in the Treehouse."

"I told you to seal that thing up! Oh, poor Bobby ...."

"I know. I know ...."

He moved to hug his lady. She spat curses over his wet shoulder. Stormy looked to the deputy.

"Whoever broke in here kidnapped our intern, Robert Mulholland. Miss Rhineland will give you his particulars for an APB."

"What are you going to do -?" she protested.

"Dearest, I'm going to check the databases for intrusion."

"Why take him?" she whined, more angry and upset than he'd ever seen. Tears streamed down her perfect face.

Stormy looked around the place. Except for the wet mess on the floors, nothing seemed out of place. This was not good.

"Well, Ilse darling, I'd say it's about leverage."

He reached out to squeeze her quivering hand. Now he hurried to the main computer console and tapped in the monthly code. Nothing. The screen was black. He crouched and checked over the guts of the machines. He shouted and the young deputy hurried over.

"Stormy -?" the young man inquired.

The short, bald man with the gun straightened and bared his teeth.

"They fried the brains on this thing. No doubt all the rest, too."

He kicked the console with his heavy boot.

"Nothing but useless junk now!"

He moved to the security desk. This screen was active. A GPS homing blip strobed off and on. Funny, why would Bobby do that,

he wondered. He froze for a moment. Then he turned to look at the men searching the place.

"Deputy -"

"Yes, sir?"

*"Get - these - people - out of here!"*

Stormy grabbed Miss R. by the arm and she knew to run. They hurried across the main floor and down the side hallway. Deputies rushed up behind them and they all exited into the yard. They followed Stormy to the trees.

"What is it, Stormy?" shouted Miss R. over the rain.

They arrived at the tree line just as the air quaked and the earth heaved. A tremendous CRASH was followed by a vibrating shockwave. Police scattered to the wet ground. Stormy held Miss R. tight against the quivering trunk of a redwood tree. They both cried out as the Northwest Institute collapsed in on itself. The dim rumble was not thunder but mighty timbers colliding with one another in the wreck and ruin. The last wall caved in. Electrical fires flared in the steaming ruin. Deputy Marshall got back to his feet, face ashen, called for help on his radio. He looked to Stormy.

"What in blazes was that?"

Stormy and Miss Jones watched the fire gain control despite the rain.

There was nothing that could be done. Tears streamed down Ilsa's pale face as she saw their refuge of years go up in flames.

Finally, Stormy turned aside from the burning building.

*"Everyone accounted for?"*

The deputy glanced to his men and nodded.

"Good. Good."

The deputy stepped over, still shaking, rain in his wide bright eyes.

"Stormy -?"

The destroyed institute's founder and executive director "emeritus" simply sneered.

"Sound Form Tactical Strike. Probably from a device offshore. Or somewhere above. The intruders set the target."

Stormy gritted his teeth. Anger overwhelmed him. He lifted his gun and fired short bursts from the machine pistol into the threatening sky. Now he screamed to the heavens.

*"Bring back Bobby, you bastards!"*

Thunder rumbled overhead, as if the old gods were laughing.

F.B.I. Special Agent Vera Chang posing as traitor agent/terrorist Kendra DeSoto grimaced as she watched the young man kidnapped from the Banzai Institute - Northwest dragged up the stairs onto the flight deck of the "borrowed" stealth aircraft. He was deposited their uncereemoniously by two hired

goons. The goons laughed and returned below deck. Moments later the outside cabin door unsealed and slid aside. Wind blew into the ship. A dark figure wrapped in a long cape - Darth Vader with a smoking jacket and tobacco pipe - swept inside and plopped into the pilot's chair. The hooded head angled toward the frightened captive. A crewman secured the outside door and also disappeared below. A short, wicked laugh issued from within the dark hood.

"So, here we have one of Stormy's brightest," the hooded man cackled with a slight Russian accent, "another unpaid intern helpless without his high technology. Well, we know how that feels. For many years we suffered in practical silence, inmates of our prison in exile, slowly rebuilding what we once had. Now, the stars are aligned again, and the time is ripe for revenge!"

Vera rolled her eyes as the man threw back the hood. Gleaming wet hair, black as night, capped a large, pale visage. Thin lips pulled tight into a nasty grin. Large, steel-grey eyes were pinpoint flashlight bulbs. The effect was of a badly painted Halloween mask. The man once known as the "Elegant Submariner" turned his attention to the traitor agent.

"Agent DeSoto, get what you can out of him. We'll be lifting off shortly. I just want to see the look on the bald man's face when the TV news cameras move in."

The submariner cackled again, tossed his cloak aside on the floor and turned in the chair to run gloved fingers over the control board of the aircraft. Wind buffeted the landed vehicle. The storm was picking up out here on the edge of the world.

Vera/Kendra left her chair and kneeled before the boy. The kid swallowed hard.

"What's your name, intern?"

"B-Bobby Mulholland."

"You want to keep living tonight?"

"Th-that would be nice. Only -"

"Only what?" she sneered.

"You can all kiss my royal ass."

Vera growled and slapped him across the face. The submariner whipped around in his chair.

"Take the kid below!" he shouted at DeSoto, "I'm trying to intercept a comm satellite here!"

Vera grabbed the young man and dragged him down the steps. She pulled him away down a side corridor out of earshot. She glanced back to the bridge. The interior door slammed shut. She sighed, smiled at Bobby.

"Okay, listen up -" she whispered, pulling a pocket knife from her jacket and thumbing it open. "We need to get you caught up in thirty seconds."



Vera cut the boy's bonds and whispered a short explanation of her entire operation into his ear. He continued to shiver from the wet and cold, but nodded in the right places. Now he stood up and ran in place a little. She glanced up and down the corridor.

"The Russian's goons will be back shortly. Your capture has pushed my schedule a bit, but the whole operation comes to taking back this ship and putting Captain Nemo on ice."

"I thought he was dead," whispered Bobby as she led him toward the back of the aircraft. "Didn't Stormy watch him go down with his sub years ago?"

"Down but not out, I'm afraid."

"And how did they get this aircraft?"

"Russian mob infiltrated the military. Blackmail. Bribes. Drugs. Putin's old buddies practically own Port Angeles."

She opened a hatchway and they moved into the cargo hold. She switched on a mini-Mag and they looked around the mostly empty space.

"There it is!"

Vera moved quickly to the covered equipment lashed to the deck near the back wall. The room lurched. They tumbled against the side wall.

"We're taking off!" she breathed as they sank to the floor and held on.

"He must have seen something disturbing on the evening news!"

"Where are we going, agent?"

"Back to the island, I suppose. Only been there once. Pretty place. Lots of birds."

He nodded to the equipment under the tarp.

"What's under there?"

"You're the scientist, kid. Let's take a look -"

Lights came on in the cargo hold. Two goons with guns drawn stood beside the open hatch. The Russian stepped inside, flicked ash from his smoking jacket and puffed on his Calabash pipe.

"She took the bait just as I thought. See, my friends, I told you she was one bad apple!"

The men advanced. Vera whipped around from a sitting position, lashing with one leg as she pivoted. One man went down, gun clattering across the deck, then the other. She finished them off with quick punches to the throat. Bobby sprang into action. He made sure the Russian didn't flee through the door. The hatchway slammed shut. Vera pushed the barrel of her own HK pistol into the villain's ghostly face.

"Game over, captain."

He merely smiled. The aircraft lurched to one side. All three of them tumbled against the wall. The Russian knocked the gun from her grasp and twisted her into his arms. He pressed his wrist against her carotid. Bobby held his ground.

"Got to love that autopilot! Banks just when you need it. Now, boy, stay back. I can cut off her blood flow easily and she'd be dead in fifteen seconds."

Bobby didn't move a muscle. The goons on the floor started to revive. The Russian spat at both of them.

"Get off your arses and take control here!" he shouted.

The men moved slowly but took Vera and Bobby in hand. The Russian straightened his jacket and retrieved his pipe from the floor.

"Tie them up real good, boys. They get front row seats for the big show."

The Russian smoothed his night-black hair with one hand, opened the hatch and hurried back to the bridge. One of the men punched Vera in the stomach and she buckled to her knees.

"Strip her naked. She probably got all kinds of secret agent toys taped to her body."

The other goon handcuffed Bobby to an interior strut on one wall and the two men went to work stripping and searching the half-conscious agent. Bobby looked aside, red-faced.

Stormy stared into the cockpit view screen of the state-of-the-art Starling jet helicopter. Nothing real here, only a wide virtual representation of the landscape ahead. While the Bryce Aviation pilot, a red haired and freckle-faced Aussie amazon

named McQueen, focused on what she was seeing in her own v-goggles, Stormy checked the various pockets of his tactical survival suit and checked that all his weapons were locked and loaded. McQueen glanced over.

"Got enough firepower there, mate?"

Stormy nodded and set his Brigadier Rocket Rifle against the outside door.

Miss R. landed in her hired chopper atop the federal building in downtown Seattle. Special Agent Manuel Ortega hurried over with an umbrella. They marched toward the stairs.

"Where's the assistant director?" she asked hurriedly.

"Sorry, ma'am. So many irregularities lately -"

"What do you mean? He got canned?" She managed a short laugh. "Who's in charge of this op, then?"

A slender, dark shadow emerged from the entrance to the rooftop stairwell. As the chopper lifted away behind them, wind buffeted the building. A trench coat whipped in the gust. A kind smile appeared and a familiar face melted from the shadows.

"*Mein gott ....*" breathed Miss R.

"Nice to see you again, Ilse. Sorry it's under such trying circumstances."

Dr. Buckaroo Banzai moved forward and took her in his arms.

They hugged briefly. Tears streamed down Ilse's pale cheeks.

"I had thought the rift was too great," she whispered.

He smiled tightly.

"Comradeship knows no chasms. Let me guess. Stormy went on ahead of us, as usual?"

She nodded as they went inside and started downstairs.

"That's okay. I think we'll manage to catch up. Perfect Tommy is bringing a Harrier over as we speak. You don't mind if the boys handle this one?"

Miss R. laughed in spite of the situation.

"*Herr doktor*, just get the real boy back. I have to get on the videophone with the insurers and see to continuity."

They stopped in the entrance to a top floor hallway. Banzai looked to the agent.

"See to it Miss Rhineland has everything she needs."

"Yes, doctor."

Now Banzai turned with a reassuring smile to Ilse.

"Wish us luck, *liebchen*. And don't worry. I feel the gods are on our side tonight."

He started down the stairs to the street. Ilse called after him.

"Is it Xan?" she queried.

Dr. Banzai hesitated slightly.

"Not this time," he called back. Then he was gone, a shadow among shadows below.

Miss R. turned to the young agent.

"How can he be so sure?"

The agent opened the door for her.

"Xan is dead, ma'am. Has been for years."

The storm howled as the stolen stealth aircraft swooped in low over the wildlife sanctuary center on the far end of Eagle Island. It landed heavily in a clearing between the trees. The belly hatchway opened and a flight of stairs unfolded to the ground. The Russian bounded down the steps and hurried around to the cargo hatch.

"Get the gear inside and install it according to instructions! I have my own work to do!"

Now he turned and sprinted for the main building. Two goons pushed and prodded Bobby down the underbelly stairs. He fell to the ground and languished in the mud. They kicked him viciously, pulled him to his feet. He looked back up the stairs.

"The woman -?"

One of them laughed and spit rain.

"She's cozy enough where she is. Someone has to go down with the ship!"

The British-engineered and U.S. Marine Corps upgraded Harrier aircraft lifted away from the downtown Seattle plaza. The strobing lights of police cars faded away in the rain below. Dr. Banzai turned in the navigator's seat to look back at the federal building. He imagined he saw the tall, elegant figure of Miss Rhineland limned by reflected light in one of the top floor windows.

"Course laid in and set, Buckaroo," purred Perfect Tommy through the headset intercom, gloved hands on the controls of the borrowed jet. "My jarhead buddies are red-faced with envy. Who woulda' thunk ol' 'two month Tommy' would be flying this beauty one day?"

Dr. Banzai smiled tightly.

"'Two month,' Tommy?"

Tommy laughed as the jet banked and headed north by northwest.

"I only lasted two months in Navy Seals training, boss. They bounced me for inviting a couple of Chargers cheerleaders back to the base for cocktails."

Dr. Banzai shook his helmeted head.

"I don't think you ever told me that one."

"Surely you jest, boss. I know I did."

"I don't remember it. Just that your brief stint in the Corps was in your file."

Tommy shrugged and focused on the weather ahead.

"After all these years, it's amazing. Something we didn't know about each other!"

Dr. Banzai smiled wistfully. Now he checked the map of Eagle Island in his lap.

"Hiding in plain sight, so to speak, at the other end of an island owned by the government. Right where they developed this thing years ago. Takes some *cajones*, all right. The stealth craft won't be easy to spot. But I'm sure Stormy will clue us in."

"He's not expecting us, is he, boss?"

"Not exactly. But he knows with absolute certainty that Miss Ilse will send in the cavalry."

Tommy let loose with a war whoop that reverberated in the cockpit.

"The cavalry's on the way!"

The Harrier thundered through the stormy night.

The Starling jet helicopter plunged through dense fog and dove headlong between a cleft in the cliffs of Eagle Island. Rain lashed the outside of the cockpit as the Aussie pilot clenched her teeth and focused on the heads-up display wrapped around her freckled face, fighting to maintain control. Stormy raised his eyebrows at her as the craft took one last drop



toward the beach. Finally, McQueen let out a little cackle (not un-Ilse-like) and settled them only a little roughly on the watery gravel. She tore off her virtual headset and beamed at her passenger. Stormy grabbed the Brigadier rifle.

"Couldn't have done it better myself. In fact, couldn't have done it at all!"

The woman laughed again with a toss of her thick red hair as Stormy grabbed the rocket rifle and threw open the door. He jumped onto the beach, flipped down his night vision goggles. The pilot gave a thumbs-up as Stormy shut the door and backed away. The chopped rose up into the storm and vanished in the fog. Stormy jogged for the trees.

The Russian smiled wickedly from behind the old control center console. Bobby struggled in his bonds on the cold concrete floor.

"In a few minutes we will ignite a massive explosive on the ocean floor. Got to love the Ukraine and their willingness to sell a sample of their small cache of tactical nukes. The northwest coast of America will be shattered asunder, Seattle and Vancouver immediately destroyed, and then another super wave will be unleashed west and south! Goodbye San Francisco and Los Angeles! Sayonara Tokyo!"

The Russian/Submariner laughed again, pushed a last few buttons and disappeared out the door. Bobby sank to the floor as he heard the outside lock click shut.

The Harrier banked one last time and split the storm as it swooped in low over the island. Dr. Buckaroo Banzai jabbed a gloved finger at the canopy glass.

"The abandoned airstrip! Land there, Tommy!"

"Roger, boss," returned Perfect Tommy over the intercom from the pilot's seat. "Just hope no one left an old washing machine on the runway!"

The Harrier glided down from the clouds. Tommy let loose another war whoop as the jet's landing gear tires slapped the wet asphalt of the old airfield. He expertly slowed the plane into a taxi with a minimum of jostling. Banzai slapped his comrade's shoulder as they wheeled to a stop. Rain pelted the outside of the canopy.

"Break out the Superstunners, Tommy. This one calls for stealth."

Stormy pressed against the side of the old building and watched the two guards huddle just inside the doorway out of the rain. One lit up a cigarette. Stormy stepped out and dropped each of them with a sleepy dart.

He pocketed the nonlethal pistol and shrugged the Brigadier into his hands. He squashed the cigarette into the ground with his boot.

"Don't you know those are bad for you?" he whispered, kneeling to search their pockets for keys.

Vera Chang awoke naked in the stealth aircraft's pilot chair. She was strapped into it with thick belts of gaffer tape. They meant for her to see whatever was coming out the cockpit windows. All she could see was darkness. Then a brief flash of light in the storm. A flare lit up the whole area around the old buildings. A guard ran out, shotgun in hand. A slender form leaped from nowhere and kicked the gun aside. Vera struggled in her bonds as she watched the men battle hand-to-hand. Suddenly she was turned around in her chair. She stared into the eyes of a legend.

"Agent Vera Chang, I presume?"

"Buckaroo Banzai!"

"That's me. A bit chilly?"

"Tad."

"Here -"

He cut her bonds quickly with a commando knife. Then he slipped out of his institute logo jacket and climbed out of his coveralls, handed the latter over and turned away. She dressed

quickly, zipping up the front of the suit. He smiled at her in his tight thermal under suit. He slipped back into the jacket and zipped it to his neck.

"Sorry. At my age, can't risk catching cold."

"Doctor Banzai, you never looked better."

A brief hesitation and then they hugged. She stepped away as he handed over a spare pistol.

"Didn't think you remembered, doc."

"I'm proud of all my graduates. I follow their careers, naturally."

"Naturally. Your man out there?"

They looked through the windshield. Perfect Tommy finished off the guard with a final punch and turned to give a thumbs-up to the cockpit. Banzai nodded.

"Yeah, he still gets a bit excited in the field. Thermal imaging showed only a few people about so he fired the flare. I would have preferred a stealthier approach."

"Well, since it's all gone to hell, let's kick some ass!"

"Couldn't have put it better myself," Buckaroo breathed as they sprinted for the landing ramp.

Stormy kicked in the door to the outbuilding and leaped inside, rifle ready. Bobby fairly shouted with joy. Stormy hurried over and cut him loose.

"The Russian's about to blow the plate boundary!"

"The who? The what? Slow down, Bobby!"

"They have a nuke. They're going to make a massive tsunami!"

"Well - this is far worse than I thought."

Bobby started for the control console. He collapsed on the ground.

"Boss, my legs!"

"Just stay put. You need to recover."

Stormy ran to the console.

"Christ, Bobby, this is all Greek to me!"

Bobby struggled to his feet on sleepy legs. Stormy helped the kid over.

"Oh boy -"

"What is it?"

"We have less than ten minutes."

Stormy glanced around the place.

"That nuke's got to be close by."

Bobby looked around at the maps on the walls. He lurched over to one.

"Boss, this island's right on the plate boundary!"

"Bobby, I'm no geologist, but I bet this island's got a few secrets."

Now they both went to work sorting through the papers and maps in the room.

"Bobby, look at this. When the military was here, they drilled more than a few wells. They've all been marked."

"This one's highlighted! Why leave this here -?"

Stormy grabbed the map and helped Bobby toward the door.

"Because in a few minutes there won't be anything left!"

The Russian hurried down the old dock to the mini-sub that rocked and rolled in the storm surge. He glanced back to the lights and commotion at the power plant and merely smiled. Now he glanced skyward as the storm began to clear and threw back the hood of his raincoat. A sudden gust tore away his hair and it flew off into the storm.

Perfect Tommy met two men as they came out of the control room. He levelled his Superstunner at them, then smiled and slapped Stormy's wet back.

"Nice to see you again, baldy! How the hell have you been?"

"No time to catch up, Tommy. We have to find a nuke."

"Nuke?" cried Buckaroo Banzai as he ran over with Agent Chang. "Way out here? How much time?"

"Minutes, maybe," spit Stormy as they stared at one another.

"My Gods!" uttered Tommy.

"Divine assistance would be dandy, but I'm afraid we're on our own," intoned the good doctor, glancing around. "Stormy, you have an idea -"

"Right here, doc."

They gathered around the marked map.

"Again, why here?" asked the doctor.

"To trigger a super-quake and a tsunami," explained Bobby.

"But why come back here? Risk his life? If it is the Submariner, I mean?"

Stormy shrugged at Buckaroo.

"Good question, doc. I don't know. That's been bothering me. But we don't have the time!"

"Tommy, take Agent Chang and secure that stealth craft. It's the bad guys only way off this rock."

"Gotcha', boss!"

The two ran off. Buckaroo blinked at the other two in the rain.

"Of course, he is a submariner."

"There's an old pier not far from here," offered Stormy.

"This doesn't make sense. There were only a few guards. That expensive aircraft sitting over there."

Bobby looked around. "They needed to install something! Maybe the trigger -?"

Buckaroo sighed. "I'm as close to a nuclear physicist as we have. None of this jibes. Wish Hikita-san was here, rest his soul. But I'm sure he too would be puzzled."

"Come on -" insisted Bobby.

Stormy and Buckaroo ran after the grad student. They reached another outbuilding and peered into the windows.

"Something inside there." said Stormy.

Buckaroo nodded. "Allow me, gentlemen -"

He aimed his 21st Century weapon at the door. There was a howl and the door burst to pieces.

"Microwave?" guessed Stormy.

"Sorry. Proprietary equipment."

Stormy smiled and they hurried inside.

Perfect Tommy settled into the flight chair of the Delta and ran his fingers over the controls.

"Sweet ride!"

"Won't matter when it's incinerated with the rest of us."

Tommy turned in the chair to face Agent Chang.



"The boss will pull us through. Been this close to death many times. He always does."

"It's like someone wanted us here."

"Sure bet the Submariner hoped we'd all show. Part of his nefarious plan."

"It worked."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Awkward."

"Yes, it is, Tommy."

"Was gonna' write you a few times. Didn't think it appropriate."

"Good idea. My ex-husband and all."

"What happened?"

"Work widow."

Tommy nodded. He turned in his chair to look out the window.

"Maybe we should get airborne."

"You can fly this thing?"

"Sure. Why not? I can fly just about anything."

"Buckaroo said 'secure.'"

"No more secure than in the air. Unless they got heat-seeking missiles. Strap yourself in!"

Stormy and Buckaroo furrowed their brows. Bobby kneeled before the equipment and gaped.

"Well?" insisted both men. The grad student turned and held up his hands.

"It's a pile of junk. Just an old seismometer and some weather gear. Running on a car battery."

Stormy marched over, looked around, kicked the heap of electronics.

"Thinking what I'm thinking?"

"The 'nuke' was to keep us here. It's a ruse, old friend. A trap. Just for us."

In the belly of the mini-sub a hundred meters beneath the surface of the Pacific, the slender figure stripped out of her disguise. The smoking jacket, slacks and expensive shoes had already been cast off. Now two small, pale knees guided the control stick as the natural blonde removed the last of her makeup: faux eyebrows, latex cheeks and all. Now she breathed a sigh of relief, took the stick in one hand. She wiped perspiration off her scarred brow, glanced at a half-disfigured reflection in the bubble porthole. She cursed and took up the radio mike in her free hand. Pain went up her arm as she gripped it in a gnarled fist.

"Confident of your confusion, gentlemen?" came the feminine voice from a speaker within the pile of junk. Stormy, Buckaroo and Bobby turned from the open door to look back into the dark building. "No sense keeping you in the dark any longer. No reason to wander all over the island searching for something - *that isn't there.*"

Stormy gritted his teeth. Buckaroo blanched.

"That's right, old friends -"

The blonde bent to the porthole of the mini-sub and laughed into the mike. The pain seared the twisted and wrinkled side of her face. She bit her petulant lower lip.

"*Remember me.* This is the last voice you will hear before you lose all that is dear to you ...."

Stormy and Buckaroo grabbed Bobby and leaped from the building. They collapsed into the mud outside, kicked and tumbled away from the building. The outbuilding exploded, erupting into flame. Laughter issued from the burning wreckage.

"Did you make it? Of course you did. It's playtime, after all ..."

The woman at the mini-sub controls laughed again and reached for another remote control switch. "Better get running -

"

Stormy, Buckaroo and Bobby sprinted for the trees. The control room exploded behind them. They were tossed like dolls into tangled ferns. More raucous laughter, from a speaker hidden in the trees.

"Careful, boys, I've saved the best for last."

Stormy and Buckaroo looked through the green canopy as the stealth aircraft hovered high over the burning building. It started to ease toward them through the clearing sky.

"No-" whispered Buckaroo.

The night quaked, roared, and the stars flared like a fireball. The men hugged the earth as flaming debris scattered over the island. Fire reigned. Only the wet undergrowth saved them. A burning tree crashed to the ground nearby. The smell of jet fuel singed their nostrils.

As the deafening din of the explosion subsided in their ringing ears, they could just hear the impossible sound of a woman's laughter.

"*Wasn't that pretty?*" she exclaimed before the scorched speaker shorted out.

Miss Ilse Rhineland let the radio mike slip from her quivering fingers. The Coast Guard officer retrieved it from the

floor, helped her into a chair. He bent to the radio in the Port Angeles station comm. center.

"Say again, captain?"

"The whole end of the island is in flames," shouted the rescue vessel's commander over the radio. "We'll get in close and search for survivors."

"Roger that," croaked the young officer as he looked at Miss R.

A slow, icy tear worked its way down her perfectly pale cheek.

Stormy and Bobby got to their feet. Buckaroo was standing amid the seared brush and blackened tree trunks staring into the clearing. A heap of twisted, flaming fuselage had landed fifty meters away. They thought they heard him whisper an impossibility before he set the proprietary weapon aside and pulled out his Navy Colts.

"Th-there's only one way out of here now."

Buckaroo Banzai broke into a run.

By the time Stormy and Bobby reached the old pier, they found Buckaroo down on his knees staring out at the dark, subsiding sea.

"He's gone. She's gone. The curtain has finally fallen."

Stormy looked away from the great man and saw the outline of a vessel coming into the small harbor. He pulled a flare from his belt and shot it into the air. The ship sounded it's air horn. He knelt beside his old friend.

"The cavalry is here, doc."

"Oh no, Stormy. The cavalry was here and is now gone. I can still hear him hollering forth like John Wayne. Only there is no one left to save him. Not even me. Not me ...."

Buckaroo Banzai shuddered.

"We lost heroes today ..."

The Coast Guard cutter broke through the icy waves on its way back to Port Angeles. Wrapped in a thermal blanket and sipping hot coffee from an old mug, Bobby watched as military choppers hurried toward the far end of the island. He turned from the galley porthole and stared at an old man crumpled in a chair in the corner. Stormy walked in with a satellite phone and handed it to Bobby.

"Miss R. wants to hear your voice. She doesn't quite believe you're okay."

Bobby almost smiled as he left with the phone. Stormy took a chair and looked at his old friend. Finally, the old man looked up from the floor. Banzai smoothed back his gray-flecked hair with a trembling hand, shook his head.

"Should have known, Stormy. Should have known."

"Yeah. Well. None of us is clairvoyant, right, doc?"

He leaned to grip the good doctor's shoulder. It seemed too lean, too hollow. Buckaroo held his wrist.

"What do we know?"

"The Marines half the island was wired. We weren't meant to escape. But the rain got to some of the circuits and detonators. Strangely enough, the long-range forecast hadn't predicted this particular storm."

"So - she was foiled in that at least. We're - still here."

Buckaroo let go of Stormy and struggled to his feet.

"I need to call a few people ..."

He started out of the room. Stormy stood in his way.

"You keep saying 'she.'"

"You heard the voice."

"She who -?"

Buckaroo stared past him.

"I think it's best you let us handle this. I'll - keep in touch."

Stormy took the great man's wrist this time.

"Hold on, doc -"

Buckaroo faced down his old friend.

"Stormy, let me go."

"We lost our home, all our things, years of records and research. They burned it to the ground. We have a stake."

Buckaroo's gray eyes narrowed.

"A supermodel, a kid genius and an ex-bureaucrat?"

Stormy merely stared back. Buckaroo narrowed his gaze.

"I'm calling in every strike team we've got for this. She won't get away from me!"

Buckaroo started from the room.

"Because you let her get away once before -?"

Buckaroo stopped short. Stormy stared at his back. Bobby hurried into the galley.

"Excuse me, guys, but they got something on radar!"

On the darkened command deck of the cutter, Captain Garcia nodded to the three men as they entered.

"Bearing due west, six nautical miles. Looks like a cargo ship or tanker of some sort. Just sitting out there. We thought she was riding out the storm, but there's no answer to our hails. Just radio silence."

The mini-sub surfaced beside the old Ukrainian freighter. Crewmen hurried down the sides to secure the sub with cables. Moments later, a crane lifted the sub from the waves and it swung toward the open cargo hatch on the main deck.



The Starling jet helicopter hovered over the cutter flight deck. Stormy held the rope ladder as Buckaroo clambered up. Then he followed, Brigadier rocket rifle bouncing against his back. Inside, as the pilot maneuvered the chopper away across the open sea, Stormy watched Buckaroo check the Navy Colt pistols.

"This is between you and me, old friend," intoned the surgeon, death in his voice. "No one else knows. Ever."

Stormy simply nodded.

The freighter's captain stared aghast at his employer.

"You want the ship to stay?"

The scarred American blonde smiled back at him.

"You can take your men and abandon ship. This rust bucket is paid up. Collect on the insurance later if you please."

"We could be in international waters by now!"

The American sighed. She pulled her Glock from her shoulder holster and shot him twice. The dead captain's body tumbled down the steps from the control room. She stepped to the open door and shouted at the others in their native tongue:

*"You have exactly two minutes to get over the side!"*

The men ran for the launches.

Miss R. strode quickly across the tarmac toward the Harrier aircraft as it settled back to earth. The Coast Guard officer pursued her as she checked her S&W 9mm and tucked it away in her tight leather cat suit. She met the Marine pilot who climbed down from the open cockpit.

"No you don't!" she shouted, pointing at the plane. "The Banzai Institute owns this aircraft for another four hours. More than enough time to get me out there!"

The pilot looked to the officer as the man arrived, breathless.

"Miss Rhineland, please!"

She dug in her pocket for her credentials. She presented her official Banzai Institute ID. Tangled with it was a Victoria's Secret Fashion Show Backstage Pass.

"Uh, ma'am -"

"Get back in that pilot's seat. We're going for a ride!"

The Starling made a pass over the main deck of the old freighter. Stormy looked down at the mini-sub in the half-open cargo hold.

"The Submariner is on board!"

"So it seems. Come on -"

The Starling swooped low and hovered only a few yards off the deck. Buckaroo leaped, hit the deck and rolled. Stormy

jumped into some netting. The chopper moved off to circle nearby. Suddenly, machine gun fire erupted from the control tower. The Starling turned away into the clearing sky. Buckaroo and Stormy took cover. An all too familiar voice echoed across the main deck from a loudspeaker on the tower:

*"Welcome aboard, boys!"*

Miss R. leaned from the navigator's seat and switched on the headset intercom.

"Can't this bucket of bolts fly any faster! My hubby is in mortal danger! *Vamos!*"

"Ma'am, this whole 'mission' is questionable. So you should just sit tight."

She wriggled in her seat, bit one pale lip.

"Don't worry, lieutenant. I'll cover your ass. I have enough ass for the both of us. Luckily it supports five feet ten inches of angry German."

Machine gun fire raked the deck. Buckaroo turned to Stormy.

"She's in the tower, but I can't get a clear shot. Can you cover me?"

Stormy smiled.

"I can do more than that."

Stormy tumbled across the deck toward some empty containers. Machine gun fire rattled the inside of the huge metal boxes. Stormy pivoted, swung his rifle from his back, aimed and fired. A rocket charge exploded at the doorway of the tower. Half of the roof caved in. Buckaroo burst from hiding and got off a few quick shots. The two men moved forward just under the control room. Dead silence. Stormy signaled to Buckaroo: "is she dead?" Buckaroo signaled back: "was she ever?" Now the sound of light footfalls as someone fled downstairs. Stormy prepared to fire but Buckaroo stayed his hand.

Below deck, eerie predawn light filtered into the gloom. Dust swirled in an empty passageway. Buckaroo eased himself along the wall, Colts held level, eyes narrow.

"It doesn't have to end this way -" he offered in a partly raised voice.

"Yes it does!" came the shout from the end of the passage.

Buckaroo ducked as a quick burst of automatic pistol fire cracked the wall where he'd been standing. He dropped on the floor and fired twice. A door flew open and a slender, masked figure emerged. He hesitated, thought of Tommy, took aim - The figure collapsed against the wall. Buckaroo released a pent-up breath and got to his feet as she slid to the floor. He approached the fallen figure slowly. An arm raised up, but the

machine pistol was empty. The masked woman dropped the useless weapon and tilted back against the wall.

"Tell Stormy - he got me good."

She laughed, an empty gesture. Blood seeped from her side.

"So much work. The Submariner. Him teaching me everything. Taking his money for companionship. Then when he killed so many people - I had no choice, but to lose him among all those ghosts. In his beloved Double Dragon Sea ...."

She held up her arm. The emerald serpent tattoo was upon it, etched into her scar tissue. Buckaroo lurched toward her and ripped a black veil away. A fire-scarred version of Penny Priddy stared back.

"Did you know it was me all along, Buckaroo?" she breathed, bloody foam at her lips.

"You killed Tommy."

She stared past him. "Oh .... I thought it might be Seveca. He always hated me. And he won the day ...."

Buckaroo shook his head slowly. "No winners here ...."

"But don't the good guys always win -?"

"No. You saw to that alright."

"So I'm the bad guy -? The things we learn in the end," she breathed.

Buckaroo took her gun and tossed it down the passageway. He got to his knees, holstered his Colts, opened his jacket and

removed his body armor. She chuckled, blood issuing from her lips and nostrils.

"I could never win, Buckaroo. I couldn't even have you in the end."

He pulled the dying woman close.

"I was yours forever, until we lost you. For some years, after the explosion, I pursued Xan, thinking he responsible. Then we presumed he'd been dead for a long while. That led me to the worst possible conclusion. How could a person so in love leave me like that? I asked myself this question for many sleepless nights. Then I realized, talking to Tommy, that people just leave, of their own accord, when their time in some story is through. His story hadn't ended, however. You closed the book. On us. And now on him."

Penny Priddy's scarred features contorted. Buckaroo remembered it as a smile. She sagged in his arms, stared into oblivion with a blank gaze. He closed her eyes with quivering fingers.

"Sleep with your ancestors ..." he whispered in Japanese.

Stormy stepped across the vast, open deck of the cargo freighter to wave at the Harrier as it hovered overhead in dawn's early light. Miss R. blew him kisses as the jet landed. When he helped her down, she held fast for dear life and seemed

to never stop kissing him. At last, they broke apart, and she glanced around.

"Where's the good doctor?"

Stormy nodded below.

"Saying goodbye to an old friend."

Buckaroo Banzai stood on the open promontory of Eagle Island. He sighed and scattered ashes over the sea. The wind took them away into unknown provinces. He set the empty urn down on the grass and turned to the men and women gathered on the bluff. No one spoke. He stepped down and hugged them each in turn. Reno. Pecos. Paladin. Loki. Even New Jersey, back from refugee camps in the South Sudan. Now he turned to Stormy Seveca and Miss Rhineland. He smiled tightly.

"Don't look so glum. He'd love the view. And with Miss R's help, we're naming the place after him."

"Soon as the bureaucrats finish with the paperwork," Stormy offered, cocking an eyebrow.

Buckaroo laughed and put his arms around his old friend.

"Sorry about that. We all lose it sometimes."

"Some more than others," offered Ilse as she nodded to Stormy and took her turn hugging the good doctor. "Now you enjoy yourself over there, okay?"

Buckaroo raised his iron gray eyebrows.

"I'm retiring to a monastery on Fuji-san."

Miss R. winked. He shrugged and kissed her lightly on the cheek. With a last nod to all of his old comrades he moved off toward the private jet waiting on the old military airstrip. He glanced back with a sudden smile.

"Remember, we have email over there!"

Everyone laughed. Moments later, with a roar and the hot breath of jet engines he was gone, ascending into a sunlit sky.

Miss R. rolled over in the bed of their newly-purchased San Francisco Victorian. She shook Stormy's shoulder.

"Wake up, old man, it's time to get ready."

"Alright. You get the Viagra and I'll do some deep knee bends," he snorted.

She rolled her impossibly beautiful blue eyes.

"Like you would ever need that! The pills, I mean. Come on, we have a plane to catch."

She fled the bed for the shower. Stormy sat straight up.

"Bobby's graduation!"

Ilse leaned out of the bathroom.

"Doctor Bobby at last!"



Downstairs in the breakfast nook, past the unpacked boxes and scattered newspapers, Stormy served up hot coffee and sweet rolls while they listened to the weather report on a satellite channel.

"Gonna' be raining in Seattle, my dear."

Miss Rhineland hurried in still half undressed. She dove for the coffee.

"When is it not?"

"Maybe you should go just like that. Bobby and his several thousand closest friends would be appreciative."

"Hush now, honey. There's breaking news ...."

A grim-faced reporter on the weather channel touched his earpiece as Miss R. turned up the sound on the flat screen TV. She sat down in Stormy's lap and sipped her coffee.

"This just in. A freak tornado has hit Tokyo. No reports of injuries just yet. Still, authorities are unable to explain the unusual occurrence - especially this time of year."

Miss R. turned to her hubby.

"Is that a cruller or are you excited to see me? Again?"

"Actually, it's a hernia."

Miss R. cried out with displeasure. The phone rang and Stormy dumped her onto the nearby boxes.

"Duty calls!"

Stormy moved quickly for the phone while his better half fumed. He slipped the headset over his bald pate and listed intently. Then he turned to his half-naked supermodel bride.

"It's the monastery. They're missing a monk. And he disappeared just *before* the tornado hit!"

Miss R. scrambled to her feet.

"Tokyo, darling -?"

She rushed from the room to dress. She bounced back in.

"Call Bobby Short. He can pick up his sheepskin any old time. Heroes in trouble means we need his help!"

She bounced back out. Stormy smiled into the phone.

"What would I do without that Prussian princess? Yes, operator, get me the Banzai Institute -"

THE END. FOR NOW.