

BLA 2: The Artful Caper



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Forward

Hello! Read this first, please!

This is a sequel to BLA: The Landmark Caper... and just like its predecessor, this is not a normal story.

The story contains intentional “bad writing” mistakes, so that you can enjoy it on two different levels:

1. **You can still enjoy it as a “normal” (albeit zany) story.** In fact, I used the same process of planning, outlining, proofreading, revising, etc. that I’d use to write a “serious” story. The only difference is that along the way, I deliberately worked “bad writing” elements into it.
2. **You can also enjoy it as a study in bad writing.** Basically, the mistakes are part of the fun! And to ensure that you don’t miss out on anything, I’ve used footnotes to explain the “bad writing” elements. This ensures that you’re always in on the joke.

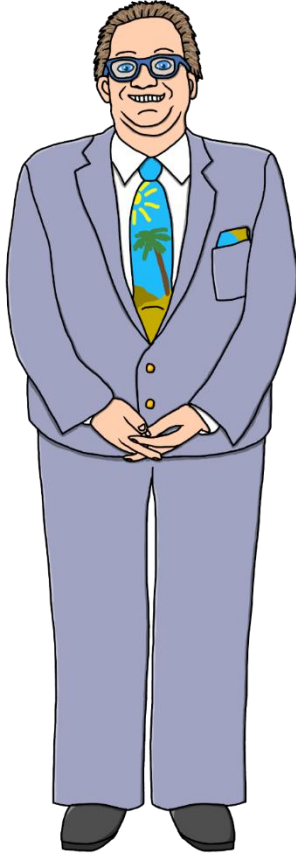
I hope that makes things entertaining. If you insist on skipping the “bad writing” footnotes for some reason, that’s up to you... but for the love of goodness, *don’t believe anything this story says about science, history, safety, or reality in general!*

Anyway, that’s enough exposition. Buckle up, and prepare for a zany ride through a world of mysterious art thefts, absurd metaphors, and explosive potatoes!

The Bush League Agency

The Bush League Agency, or “BLA”, is an underfunded government agency which defends against low-level threats (i.e., villains who *aren’t* trying to conquer or destroy the world).

Arthur Chalmers



Height: 183cm (6'0")
BLA Role: Director

Arthur is the benevolent head of the organization. His calm, steady outlook keeps his group effective. Arthur is quick to commend, and slow to criticize... but he still expects his team to follow due process.

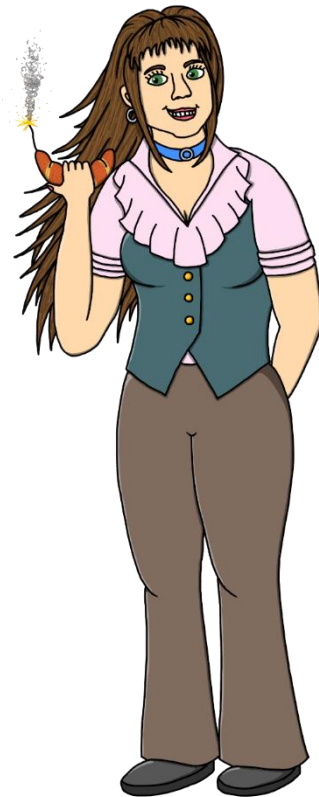
Guy Stafford



Height: 168cm (5'6")
BLA Role: Field Agent

Guy is the BLA's newest recruit (and this story's main hero). He possesses a rare combination of tactical thinking and lightning-quick decisiveness. Guy is quickly winning the trust of his team... especially Amy, his girlfriend.

Amy Fields



Height: 173cm (5'8")
BLA Role: Field Agent

Amy is a bubbly, impulsive agent and a bit of a space cadet. She also has an alarming enthusiasm for explosives... but her loyalty, keen observation skills, and sheer spunk have won many a mission. Amy never gives up!

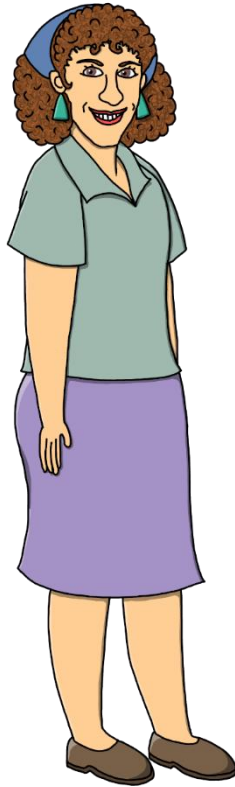
Grant Keeler



Height: 177cm (5'10")
BLA Role: Gadgeteer

Grant is the gadget expert. He's responsible for outfitting the agents with cutting-edge gadgets and weapons for their missions. However, his technical focus and slight OCD make him a poor choice for field work... which suits Grant just fine.

Thelma Bradford



Height: 165cm (5'5")
BLA Role: Secretary+

Thelma serves as a secretary, janitor, and helper with a dozen odd jobs around the office. Everyone strives to be more professional when Thelma's around... although she does have to quit at 3:00 pm to pick up her kids from school.

The Felonistas

The Felonistas are an emerging criminal group. They specialize in art theft, but they may have a more significant agenda than simply stealing paintings.

Milieu



Height: 161cm (5'3")
Felonista Role: Mastermind

Milieu is the Felonista's zealous mastermind and leader. She's a gifted classical artist with a superiority complex. Milieu will stop at nothing to advance her group's master plan.

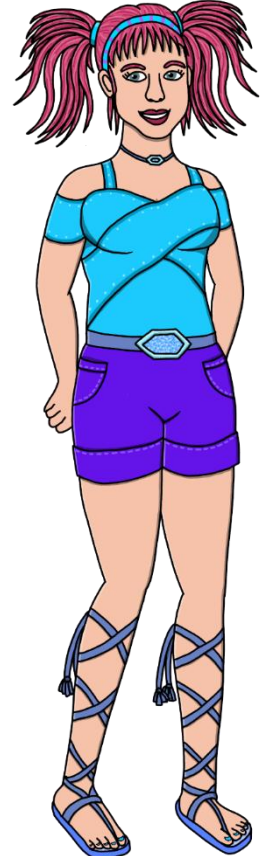
Niche



Height: 176cm (5'9")
Felonista Role: Supervillain

Niche is a fearsome enforcer with a flair for the dramatic. She appreciates comic book art, but what she really wants is fame and fandom. There's a common misconception that Niche is the Felonista's leader, which amuses her and irritates Milieu.

Cyan



Height: 186cm (6'1")
Felonista Role: Prankster

Cyan is a ditzy abstract artist with a fondness for pranks. She's been friends with Milieu ever since their college days. Cyan is fiercely loyal to the Felonistas, although it's unclear whether she understands that their group is breaking the law.

Supporting Cast

These characters are significant to the story, but they don't belong to the BLA or the Felonistas.

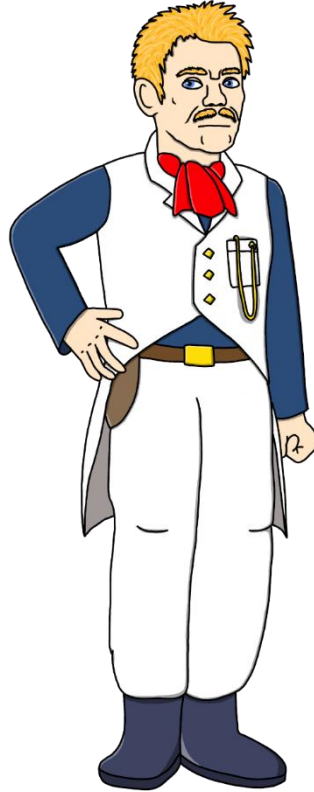
Bethany Blake



Height: 183cm (6'0")
(Amy's Roommate)

Bethany Blake is Amy's roommate. She abandoned a lucrative but stressful corporate career to pursue video game competitions full-time. Bethany is highly intelligent and sweet-natured, but she's also disorganized and slightly lazy.

Charles Bly



Height: 171cm (5'7")
(Shady Art Collector)

Charles Bly is a dishonest art enthusiast who's not above making shady deals to enhance his collection. He's been a suspect in several art thefts, but no one's ever pinned anything on him.

Agent ???



Height: 173cm (5'8")
(MLA Liaison)

This agent is a liaison from the newly formed MLA. He's been given considerable authority over the BLA... which is unfortunate, because he's kind of a jerk. As of yet, nobody's been able to catch his name.

Part 1: Art Attacks

Prologue

Pierre struggled with the bulky photocopier, forcing it inch by inch onto the battered dolly¹. With a muffled *whump*, he finally forced the photocopier squarely onto the wheeled platform. Breathing a sigh of relief, he began wheeling the dolly out of the stuffy room.

As Pierre glumly pushed the dolly down the hall, he reflected that his internship at the Louvre museum wasn't everything he'd expected. The job opening had promised opportunities to conduct tours and meet local talent. Instead, he was spending all his time moving office equipment from one wing of the building to another.

Pierre noticed that one of the dolly's wheels was pulling left. Grunting with annoyance, he forced the dolly back on track. However, he overcorrected and nearly ran it into another employee. He looked up with chagrin: it was his manager, Amy².

Amy raised an eyebrow disapprovingly. "In a hurry this morning, Mr. Dubois?", she asked dryly³.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Valerius!" replied Pierre earnestly, "I didn't see you!"

"Clearly not," replied Amy loftily, "If you want to continue working here, you should tread more carefully in the future."

Frustration welled up in Pierre, but he kept his temper in check. "I understand, ma'am! It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," intoned Amy, as she turned to walk away. Calling behind her, she added, "And pick up the pace, will you?"

Secure in the knowledge that no one was watching, Pierre rolled his eyes. Amy was an insufferable snob, but Pierre knew that she was transferring to another museum by the end of the month... and then she'd be someone else's problem. He just had to survive the next couple of weeks.

Pierre resumed pushing his burden, steering the dolly toward the elevator. As he got closer, however, he noticed that someone had taped a sign to the elevator's door. "Aw, not today..." he muttered pleadingly. Unfortunately, the sign's hastily scrawled handwriting confirmed his fears: "Elevator out of service, please use stairs".

"Easy for you to say," Pierre growled, "You aren't lugging a ten-ton photocopier down to the lobby offices." He resumed pushing the dolly down the hall, this time heading for the stairwell door. Upon reaching the door, he used his body to hold it open as he carefully eased the dolly into the stairwell. As he began approaching the stairs, however, disaster struck!

¹ In other words, a wheeled platform with a handle. One source insists that this is actually called a "trolley"... but that word makes me think of old musicals and Great Britain, which isn't what I'm trying to convey here.

² This isn't Amy Fields from the BLA... it's Amy Valerius, a snobby manager who works at the Louvre. I only gave her the same first name to confuse you. :)

³ In French. Both characters speak French, so please mentally translate their dialogue as you read it. Thanks!

The dolly's stubborn wheel abruptly snapped off, tilting the base forward. The photocopier began sliding down toward the first flight of stairs. Pierre jerked to attention and grabbed for the photocopier as quickly as he could... but it was too late.

With a tremendous din, the doomed office equipment bounced down the concrete stairwell, shedding mechanical parts along the way. It smacked into the stairway's railing at full speed, and finally came to rest on its battered side. A tense silence descended upon the stairwell: the railing was bent out of shape, and the photocopier was completely totaled.



Pierre regarded the wreckage spread out before him and grimaced. "I'm so fired⁵."

⁴ How was Pierre planning to get the photocopier down those stairs, anyway?

⁵ You're probably wondering how this ties into the story's main plot. Don't worry: I'll call it out when it happens.

Chapter 1: The Cilantro Brothers Disappoint the BLA

Guy checked his watch: the digital display read 8:42am. Amy would be here any minute now. As Guy waited, he relaxed against the back of a bench and took in the view.

It was Monday morning, so most of the people in Central Park were tourists. Guy watched as a family of four approached the Cyclone, one of New York's most well-known roller coasters⁶. The father was apparently trying to convince his kids to go on the Cyclone, but the youngest one wasn't interested. After a brief exchange, the father shrugged dramatically. He scooped up the youngest child, and the family resumed walking through the park.

"Cute kid," commented Amy, who'd approached Guy while his attention was diverted. "But I don't think the dad realized he's too short for the roller coaster. Or that the roller coaster is closed today."

Guy jumped in surprise, feeling slightly foolish. Amy smiled at him mischievously. "Trying to hone your observation skills again? You know, even the best surveillance won't help if someone sneaks up on you."

"I'm still working on it," replied Guy mildly, "Ready to head out?"

Amy grinned. "You bet! I've been looking forward to this all weekend! Except for the parts when I was sleeping or doing something else, of course."

Guy smiled from ear to ear. When he'd first met Amy, her zany mannerisms had caught him off-guard... but they'd grown on him quickly, and now he couldn't imagine what life had been like without them. Amy noticed Guy's fond gaze. "Miss me?" she asked brightly.

Guy took Amy's hand with a smile⁷, and the two began walking toward the secret base of the BLA, or "Bush League Agency". Ever since they'd started dating, Guy and Amy met at Central Park on their way to work, and then walked together the rest of the way. However, today was special: they might finally get a chance to take down the Cilantro Brothers.

It had started as a string of local grocery thefts, 3 weeks after the BLA's victory over Crimex. The thefts soon came to the attention of Arthur, the BLA's director... and since the BLA specialized in investigating low-level threats, this crime spree seemed like it was right in their wheelhouse⁸.

The first thing the BLA realized was that the grocery thefts only targeted herbs and garnishes. Acting on a hunch, Guy and Amy began to quietly investigate the garnish black market in New York⁹. After a week of investigating, they identified the ringleaders: a renegade group of ex-cashiers known as the Cilantro

⁶ Although it's anyone's guess as to how Guy observed this... because the Cyclone is located in Coney Island, not Central Park.

⁷ This means the smile was on Guy's *face*, not on Amy's hand. Presumably.

⁸ Like most sequels, I'm attempting to re-establish the main facts from the previous story during the first chapter. It would've been more fun to dump it all into a giant "as you know" line from Guy or Amy, but I already made an "as you know" joke in the previous story... and I try to avoid repeating my jokes too often. That might seem like a strange decision, since these stories are *supposed* to showcase bad writing, but there's a fine line between "running gag" and "stale punchline".

⁹ I'm pretty sure this isn't a thing.

Brothers. Late last Friday, they'd discovered the Cilantro Brothers' hideout... and this morning, if everything went well, they could finally attempt a raid¹⁰.

"What do you suppose the Cilantro Brothers are up to, anyway?" asked Amy curiously. "I mean, what do they want with all that basil and watercress and stuff? Do they have a crippling vitamin deficiency? Or maybe they're planning to open an underground deli, and they've already stolen a huge truckload of buns and meat!"

Guy took Amy's fanciful suggestions in stride: they were surprisingly useful for driving the creative process and finding unexpected patterns... even if the real answer ended up being fairly mundane. Guy looked thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe they're trying to drive up local prices."

"Yeah, but why?" pursued Amy.

"Money, I guess," mused Guy, "They must stand to profit from this, although I'm not sure how."

Amy considered that. "Then again... not every crime is about money. Maybe they're trying to make a statement or something."

"A statement?" asked Guy curiously, "Like what?"

Amy shrugged. "That depends on what kind of bee is stuck in their bonnet. 'Grocers unfair to garnishes!' 'Better prices for herbs!' 'Treat parsley with respect!' Something like that."

Guy chuckled. "It's hard to imagine anyone getting worked up about parsley. Maybe the Cilantro Brothers are just angry at the grocery stores, and they're trying to inconvenience them."

"But in that case, why are they only taking herbs and garnishes?" queried Amy.

Guy shrugged. "You've got me there. Hopefully we'll capture them today, and then we can ask them ourselves."

By now, Guy and Amy had arrived at the public records orifice¹¹ which concealed the BLA's base. They entered through the back door, walked down a musty hallway, and then turned a corner. In front of them was a row of decommissioned vending machines. Guy carefully tugged at the front panel of the right-most vending machine: it swung out on hinges, revealing a hidden doorway which led to a stone staircase¹². Back in the Prohibition era, these stairs had led to a prominent speakeasy called the Muddled Badger. Today, however, it was the secret headquarters of the BLA.

Grinning, Guy gestured toward the stairs in a gentlemanly manner. "After you, Amy."

* * * * *

Guy reached the bottom of the stairs and surveyed the common area of the Muddled Badger approvingly. Thelma, the BLA's secretary-of-all-trades, had done wonders with this place in the weeks

¹⁰ Apparently, the BLA decided that enjoying their weekend was more important than immediately raiding the hideout. And if the enemy was only stealing garnishes, then I'm not sure I blame them.

¹¹ That's probably supposed to say "office", not "orifice".

¹² In the previous story, they activated the secret staircase by tugging one of the books on a row of bookcases. I guess the BLA could've changed the mechanism between stories... but if they did, it's never explained.

since they'd occupied the hidden speakeasy. The bar had been converted into the main reception desk. The alcoves had been converted into small office spaces, including a conference room, a workshop/operations room for Grant, the BLA's gadgeteer, and an office for Arthur, the BLA's director¹³. The common room was mostly unchanged, although the tables and chairs had been moved to one side so that the room's center was uncluttered. The large bin of potatoes and the abandoned kegs of beer had been left in place, to the delight of the BLA's employees¹⁴.

Amy entered the room behind Guy¹⁵, and called out a cheerful greeting to her coworkers. "Morning, everyone! Who's ready to kick some Cilantro Brothers butt? Figuratively speaking, of course... unless they resist capture, in which case we'll do what we must!"

Amy had been expecting a general cheer, and perhaps a mild eye roll from Grant. To her surprise, however, nobody replied. Arthur cleared his throat awkwardly.

Guy quickly surveyed the room, and realized that everyone was looking glum. "Okay, what's the bad news?" he asked warily, "Have we been evicted? Did someone die? Is my fly down¹⁶? Don't keep us in suspense!"

The glum expression on Arthur's face softened a little, and he managed a dry chuckle. "Nobody's dead, Guy," Arthur assured him, "And we couldn't possibly be evicted... even the public records office upstairs doesn't know that we're down here¹⁷."

"Then why does everyone look like we're attending a funeral?!" demanded Amy.

Arthur sighed. "We've been pulled off the case. Apparently, the Cilantro Brothers escalated to a full-blown world domination attempt over the weekend, and that puts them squarely outside our jurisdiction. They're someone else's responsibility now."

"But we've already been investigating for an entire week!" protested Guy, "Can't we at least tag along with whoever takes over the case?"

"You know that's impossible, Guy," Thelma gently reminded him, "The whole point of the BLA is to deal with low-level threats, so that the big dogs can focus on all the gloomy 'world-ending menace' cases. The Cilantro Brothers fell outside our jurisdiction the moment they attempted global domination."

¹³ Actually, in the original version of this paragraph, Grant's workshop was partitioned out of the main room... but then I forgot I'd written that, and I treated the workshop like a completely separate room for rest of the story. It just seemed simpler to change it here, in one place.

¹⁴ As noted in the previous story, any leftover potatoes and beer from the Prohibition era would be disgusting at best, and toxic at worst. But let's pretend that everything's still delicious!

¹⁵ Which is curious, because in the previous scene, Guy invited Amy to enter before he did.

¹⁶ In that order of importance?

¹⁷ This can't be absolutely true, because the previous story established that Arthur's cousin runs the public records office. And the cousin definitely knows that the BLA is down there, because he helped Arthur to splice a cable into the Muddled Badger!



"I don't believe this," said Guy disgustedly, "The Cilantro Brothers were *grocery thieves*! How could they possibly escalate from stealing herbs to endangering the entire planet in just one weekend!?"

"Yeah," Amy chimed in, "What are they threatening to do? Season everyone to death?"

Wordlessly, Thelma walked over to Guy and handed him a report. Guy reluctantly took it from her and began scanning its contents. After a few minutes, he handed it back with an air of acceptance. "Actually, that's a pretty good explanation. No wonder they were so focused on herbs¹⁸!"

Thelma shrugged philosophically. "Never underestimate a garnish."

Amy kicked over a nearby wastebasket in frustration. "I can't stand overambitious villains! They take all the fun out of everything. Is it too much to ask for a bad guy who actually *values* smalltime crimes and public mischief!?"

"Hey, I know exactly how you feel," replied Thelma soothingly, "But the criminal underworld is going through a pretentious phase right now. Sooner or later, they'll get tired of world domination and doomsday schemes... and then we'll see a lot more of those 'underdog criminal with a clever plan' types again!"

"Exactly," Arthur agreed, "I know things have been a little dry ever since we took down Crimex, but don't worry... something new will turn up soon!"

"I suppose," Amy sighed, "But what are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

"I'm growing a beard," announced Grant. An awkward silence followed, and Grant defensively added, "Well, I am¹⁹!"

"Anyway, there's no point in sulking about this," added Arthur, "Amy, Guy.... why don't you spend the morning scouting the neighborhood for new leads?"

¹⁸ No, you don't get to know what the report said. It's classified. :)

¹⁹ At last, Grant's character gets some growth! (rim shot)

Amy brightened up. "Yeah... I heard there's a new art exhibit at the Met! It's supposed to be themed around explosions. Let's go, Guy!"

Arthur frowned as Amy dashed for the door. "That's not really what I..." he began, but she was already gone. Guy shrugged at Arthur sheepishly, and then he ran to catch up with Amy.

Arthur shook his head. "I was giving them an assignment, not a lazy morning off work."

"Well," mused Thelma, "Who's to say that they won't unearth some amazing new crime lead at the Met?"

"At a museum?" chortled Arthur, "Not likely²⁰."

* * * * *

Charles Bly sat patiently in the back of his limousine, which was parked near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His aristocratic clothes gave him a pretentious yet ruthless appearance.

For the fourth time in as many minutes, Charles pulled out a pair of binoculars and scanned the crowds near the Met for unusual activity. He wasn't really expecting trouble... but there was a lot riding on today's events, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

He held a walkie-talkie up to his mouth. "Everything looks clear on this end," he confirmed.

"Everything *looks* clear, or everything *is* clear?" demanded a pedantic female voice on the other end.

Charles rolled his eyes. This woman seemed to go out of her way to be frustrating, but he needed her help... at least for now. "Everything *is* clear," he amended, doing his best to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "Nobody's onto us, Milieu."

"Good," Milieu replied over the walkie-talkie, "I'd hate for our mission to be disrupted by some *inopportune bolide*²¹."

"Yeah, I hate bolides too," replied Charles dryly, "Especially inopportune ones."

Curious in spite of himself, Charles reached for his cellphone and began typing the word "bolide" into a search engine²². He carefully read the definition, then added with a grin: "They'll burn you every time."

"In other words, you looked up 'bolide' on the Internet," retorted Milieu over the walkie-talkie.

Charles scowled, but didn't hazard a reply. He resumed watching the Met's entrance through his binoculars. Suddenly, two people at the door caught his attention. Could it be... yes, there was no mistaking it: Guy and Amy, two known BLA agents!

Charles activated his walkie-talkie again. "Milieu... it looks like we have a couple of inconvenient bolides, after all."

²⁰ I guess Arthur hasn't watched many heist movies.

²¹ In other words, an inconveniently timed fireball or meteor. For no particular reason, all of Milieu's idioms are random phrases taken out of context from a translation of [Around the Moon](#), a novel by Jules Verne. Don't tell him!

²² If Charles has a cellphone, then why is he communicating over a walkie-talkie? I mean, it's not 1992 anymore.

"I said *inopportune* bolides," replied Milieu crisply.

"Yeah, whatever," said Charles impatiently, unable to hide his annoyance this time, "You aren't going to believe who it is..."

Chapter 2: A Day at the Museum

Guy and Amy had spent an enjoyable morning touring through the Met. Unfortunately, they hadn't found anything which could lead to a new case, and now it was almost noon²³. The museum's halls were busy and slightly loud, but Guy and Amy could still hear each other without too much trouble.

"I think it's safe to say that nothing shady is happening here," observed Guy, "I guess we should head back to the BLA."

"Yeah, you're probably right," sighed Amy, "It's too bad we didn't find any new leads, though. I'm still bummed out about the whole 'Cilantro Brothers' thing. Seriously, Guy... if we don't crush a criminal organization soon, I'm going to forget how!"

Guy smiled sympathetically. "Like Arthur said, something will turn up. And in the meantime, you got to see the art exhibit on explosions."

Amy brightened up. "Yeah... although I don't think the 'melted metal' series should've been front and center. A twisted chunk of metal isn't an explosion: it's only *aftermath*! Now, if it was my decision, I would've showcased the series by 'Combust Shaun'. I mean, finally... an artist who understands what flying debris actually looks like! Remember the one with the airborne chunks of rebar?"

"Vividly," laughed Guy, "You walked me through the fine points of each painting. Personally, I liked that set where the explosion was crafted to look like something else. You know, plants and insects and stuff²⁴."

"It must be your landscaping background," smiled Amy.

Unexpectedly, Guy jolted a little. "Landscaping? What makes you say that?"

Amy cocked her head. "I don't know... you were trained as a landscape architect, right? I just figured that would make you more interested in plants and insects. Why, did I say something wrong?"

Guy looked embarrassed. "Ah, it's nothing... well no, I guess it's something. But I don't want to talk about it yet. Let's discuss it later, okay²⁵?"

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Huh... that's kind of mysterious. But I trust you. Whatever it is, I'm there for you, always! Unless I'm not around. But even then, you can call me!"

Guy took her hand and smiled. "Thanks, Amy! Me too. C'mon, let's get going."

At that moment, they both became aware of distant shouting. Guy and Amy's eyes met at the same time.

"Should we check it out?" asked Guy.

"Definitely!" confirmed Amy.

²³ Oh... so, Guy and Amy have already been here for a few hours? That's slightly disappointing, because Charles and Milieu are apparently up to something, and they know the BLA agents are here. I guess I was expecting the bad guys to make some sort of move.

²⁴ None of these explosion-centric art exhibits are real. Unfortunately.

²⁵ If you think that Guy's secrecy here is kind of dumb, then just wait until you learn what the secret is!

* * * * *

Guy and Amy followed the shouting through several corridors, until they came to a large, open hall which reeked of fresh paint. At the far end of the room, a woman in a fiery-colored dress and a pink beret was yelling at two workmen. The room's impressive acoustics amplified her angry ranting.

"I don't care what your supplier says," she bellowed, "I specifically told you to use the paint cans with the blue lids! Don't you have ears, you *nonsensical farrago*²⁶!?"

The first workman raised his hands defensively. "Okay lady, whatever you say! We'll get the blue lidded cans out of your truck. But if the museum complains about this, it's on your head." He turned on his heel and walked away in a huff.

"The museum won't complain, because it was their idea!" the woman retorted at the retreating workman's back, "This is the *Met*! We aren't painting the walls with some cheap knockoff brand!"

The second workman sighed, and made a placating gesture at the woman. "Listen, we're sorry for the misunderstanding. But this work order was pretty last-minute, and it didn't say anything about using a specific brand of paint. Usually, the client leaves that up to us."

Now that the first workman had left to fetch the paint, the woman was calming down a little. "It's fine," she assured him, "That's exactly why I'm here... to make sure these little details aren't overlooked. Just finish as soon as you can."

"Roger that," confirmed the second workman, "It's only one wall. We'll be done before the hour's out."

From the opposite end of the room, Guy gently nudged Amy. "Show's over, I guess. Let's go before they realize we were watching them."

Amy nodded silently, and they began retracing their steps to the lobby. "It's funny," mused Amy. "Those workmen are called 'painters', because they've been hired to paint the walls... but that's not the same as an artistic painter."

Guy nodded. "True. There's probably a good joke in there... you know, someone accidentally hires an artistic painter for normal painting, or a normal painter for artistic painting. Which would be worse?"

But Amy was suddenly distracted by some tourists ahead of them. "Wait, Guy... that person's walking too close to the exhibit!"

Guy looked up. By now, they'd almost returned to the lobby: he spied a group of tourists walking past a fashion exhibit on a raised pedestal. Sure enough, one of the men in the group was getting very close to the exhibit, although he was currently looking away from it.

"What if he's planning to steal something?" whispered Amy. Guy stared at the group intently, observing the approaching man like a subversive kazoo²⁷.

²⁶ In other words, a senseless hodgepodge or mix... and apparently, this woman is Milieu. As a result, I'm now *really* confused by the earlier scene with her and Charles. They're up to something shady, right? They know that Guy and Amy are here, right? So, why is Milieu calling so much attention to herself with a public tantrum?

²⁷ Like a *what*? How could this analogy possibly describe the way you watch someone?

With the man's head turned away from the exhibit he was approaching, the result was inevitable. He tripped over the display pedestal and fell to the floor. A surprised gasp echoed throughout the room, but the man tucked and rolled as he landed. He quickly got up and resumed walking down the hall with his group. The other patrons shrugged off the incident, and the room returned to normal.

Amy sighed. "Too bad... I thought he was pulling a sneaky maneuver to steal something from the exhibit. But it looks like he just tripped."

Guy shrugged. "That was a pretty good recovery, though²⁸." His stomach growled. "Want to get some shawarma on the way back to the BLA? We can eat it in the park."

Amy smiled. "Sure, why not?"

* * * * *

When Guy and Amy returned to the BLA that afternoon, they were in for a surprise. Grant came running up to them, already sporting a full beard²⁹. "So, did you see anything unusual at the Met?" he asked excitedly.

Guy shook his head. "No... except for an angry lady arguing about paint. Why?"

Grinning, Grant thrust a newspaper toward Guy and Amy. "Check this out!"

Guy read the headline: "*Starry Night* by Claude Money Stolen from Met Today³⁰".

"No way!" exclaimed Amy. "We were just there... I saw *The Starry Night* with my own eyes, less than two hours ago³¹!"

"Well, then you're among the last people who saw it before it went missing," replied Grant.

"This is perfect!" declared Guy enthusiastically. Then he took a moment to think and backpedaled a little. "Sorry, that came out wrong... obviously, it's bad that someone stole the painting. But we were hoping for leads, right? Maybe we can investigate this theft!"

"Don't get too excited," cautioned Thelma, "Isolated thefts are usually handled by local law enforcement. They don't involve the BLA unless there's an established pattern."

"Normally, that would be true," announced Arthur, as he came out of his office, "But today, it looks like Guy will get exactly what he wants."

"We're on the case!?" Amy asked excitedly.

²⁸ By the way: this incident is actually a personal experience from when my family visited the Met. It has nothing to do with the plot.

²⁹ This isn't how beards work: they take months to grow. Also, the beard isn't the surprise.

³⁰ Wow... where do I even *start* with this one? First of all, it's "Claude Monet", not "Claude Money"... but that's almost a moot point, because *The Starry Night* was actually painted by Vincent Van Gogh. And that painting isn't even kept at the Met: as of 2024, it's kept at the Museum of Modern Art... which is *also* located in New York, so it would've been easy to fix this without impacting the story! Lastly, if the theft occurred today, then it couldn't possibly be reported in today's newspaper. Whew... I think that covers it.

³¹ Sigh... fine. For the story's sake, let's pretend that *The Starry Night* is kept at the Met. We have bigger fish to fry.

"We're on the case," Arthur confirmed with a smile, "I just got off the phone with the MLA: we've been given special permission to start investigating this one immediately. One of their agents is dropping by this afternoon to brief us."

"Wait, the 'MLA'?" asked Grant in confusion, "Is that a new agency? I've never heard of them."

Arthur hesitated, then shrugged. "It's better if I let the agent explain things himself. Suffice to say, we report to them now."

He paused, hesitated again, and resumed in a quieter tone of voice: "And please keep this to yourselves... but I got the impression that this agent might be difficult to work with. So during his visit, be on your best behavior."

Everyone took a moment to digest this information. Their initial enthusiasm had been tempered by a slight sense of unease. Finally, Thelma quipped, "Aren't we always?"

* * * * *

Charles Bly waited patiently in an abandoned warehouse. He was always patient when art was at stake: few things meant more to him than the rare paintings which lined the walls of his villa. Of course, he'd have to be more discreet with his latest acquisition... it wouldn't do to have the wrong person see it. Charles Bly smiled coldly. That was fine. A secret treasure could be more rewarding than a flaunted one. Nobody in the entire world knew what had happened to *The Starry Night*, except for him... and his conspirators.

As if on cue³², the warehouse's side door opened, and three women walked in. The first woman was short, athletic, and proud. She wore a fiery-colored dress and a pink beret. The second woman was tall, skinny, and curiously carefree. She was dressed in a bright blue shirt, purple shorts, and roman sandals. The third woman was medium height, stout, and confident. She wore a suit of green and yellow armor which made her look like a comic book supervillain.



³² In fiction, many things happen as if they were on cue. You'd almost think that the story was planned in advance.

Charles addressed the armored woman. "So... did you get the goods?"

She grinned wickedly. "Of course we did, Charles. When you hire the Felonistas, you get results."

Charles clasped his hands excitedly. "Excellent work! Oh, you'll be well-compensated for this, believe me. You lead an excellent team, Niche."

Niche laughed, then gestured at the woman in the fiery-colored skirt³³. "Don't thank me... Milieu is our mastermind! Right, Milieu?"

Milieu scowled. "Exactly."

Charles looked confused. "Oh... so, Milieu comes up with the clever plans, and Niche is the team leader?"

Milieu stomped her foot impatiently. "I'm the leader *and* the mastermind, you *brass zenith*³⁴!"

Charles was taken aback. "My apologies," he amended, "It's just that... well, Niche's armor is very commanding, so I assumed... ah..." He seemed to be at a loss for words, and Milieu's scowl deepened. "Okay, never mind. What do I know, anyway? I'm only an art collector. Let's see the painting."

Without looking back, Milieu snapped her fingers in the direction of the tall woman. "Show him, Cyan."

Cyan eagerly approached Charles with a bulky rectangular parcel in tow³⁵. "You're going to love this," she giggled. With a flourish, she pulled away the wrapping to reveal *The Starry Night* in all its glory.

Charles' eyes glittered. "This is it," he whispered in delight, "I've wanted this one for so long."

He produced a magnifying glass from his pocket and began to carefully inspect the painting. Several minutes passed. Niche started tapping her foot impatiently, but Milieu smugly waited for the verdict.

Finally, Charles returned the magnifying glass to his pocket. He looked back at the Felonistas with renewed respect. "It's perfect!" he marveled, "Not a single flaw!"

"Naturally," replied Milieu self-contentedly, "Our process ensures that it ends up exactly the same way it started³⁶."

"It's our best prank ever!" declared Cyan.

"A perfectly executed art theft, and you call it a *prank*!?" asked Charles incredulously.

Milieu smiled wryly, and gestured in the direction of Cyan. "I don't... but she does. Don't worry about it. Now, let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?"

"Of course," agreed Charles, "Now, about your fee..."

Milieu locked eyes with Charles calmly. "Yes, Charles. What about our fee?"

³³ This should say "fiery-colored *dress*"... a skirt and a dress aren't the same thing. (Source: my wife)

³⁴ In other words, a peak or high point made of brass. It's unclear how this would apply to Charles.

³⁵ This is a very minor point, but the scene never mentioned that Cyan was carrying anything, and the picture didn't show her carrying anything, either. Maybe Cyan pulled the parcel out of thin air, like a cartoon character.

³⁶ Ooh... *that's* a mysterious statement! :)

Charles gestured at the stolen artwork in front of him. "This is magnificent work... but there's two more paintings that I'd simply love to get my hands on. What do you say to half of your fee now... and *double* the fee if you can get me the other two?"

Milieu's eyebrow arched cautiously. "As in, double the fee for all *three* paintings?"

"Of course!" Charles assured her, "Good work like this should be rewarded."

"Hurray!" declared Cyan, "Let's prank those museums! I can't believe we're getting paid to do something this fun³⁷."

But Niche wasn't impressed. "If you have that much money to spare," retorted Niche, "It seems like you could afford to pay us double for the first painting *now*."

Milieu silenced her with a gesture and turned back to Charles. "It's a deal," she replied simply, "Tell us which two paintings you want, and they're as good as yours. But after that, there will be no further negotiations about our work *or* our fee." She glared at him coldly. "Is that understood?"

Charles gulped. "Understood, Milieu. Don't worry... I wouldn't dream of cheating the Felonistas!"

He turned to leave, but then a thought struck him. He turned back to face Milieu. "By the way... there might be some trouble coming your way. I'd be surprised if the BLA wasn't assigned to investigate your art thefts."

"If the BLA shows its face, then we'll deal with them," replied Milieu coolly, "Leave the details to us³⁸."

Charles smiled knowingly. "As you wish. I'll send you the name of the next painting tomorrow."

He turned and left through the side door. As soon as he was gone, Niche marched up to Milieu. "This is a bad idea," she snarled, "I don't trust Charles to hold up his end of the bargain!"

Milieu smiled sardonically. "Don't worry, neither do I. Now let's get going... we have work to do³⁹."

³⁷ I detect a potentially weak link in the Felonistas.

³⁸ Um... the BLA has already shown its face! Guy and Amy were actually *present* at the Met on the day of the theft, and Charles and Milieu know this! Why are they discussing the BLA as though it's a hypothetical problem?

³⁹ Charles didn't pay them before he left, even though he promised half of their fee upfront and insisted that he'd never cheat the Felonistas. But I assume that's just a storytelling goof.

Chapter 3: To Be Candid

At precisely 2pm, the MLA agent appeared at the BLA's doorstep⁴⁰. He wore a dark suit and shades, which made it very difficult to read his facial expressions. His bearing suggested a complete lack of humor and a potential mean streak. He walked briskly into the middle of the room, disinterested in his surroundings.

"Good afternoon," he announced curtly, "I assume this is the BLA's new residence."

No, it's a used car dealership, Thelma thought to herself. But Arthur had warned her about the agent's sense of humor, or lack thereof. So she simply replied, "Yes sir! Welcome to the BLA. May we have your name?"

"I'm the liaison from the MLA, Mrs. Bradford," the agent replied.

With an effort, Thelma choked down the obvious retort: *No, I'm Mrs. Bradford... you're that guy from the MLA*. Out loud, she just said, "Got it. Thanks."

"What's the MLA?" asked Guy politely.

Instead of answering him directly, the agent turned to face Arthur. "I see you haven't briefed them on the MLA, Mr. Chalmers?"

There was a brief silence. The question didn't seem to be rhetorical, so Arthur finally nodded and confirmed: "Yes, sir. As you requested, I've left the explanations up to you."

The agent nodded fractionally. "Very good."

He turned back to Guy. "Well, Mr. Stafford... 'MLA' is an acronym for 'Major League Agency'. It's an umbrella group for all the major agencies: CIA, FBI, NSA, NASCAR⁴¹, and so on."

"Cool!" replied Amy, "Is the BLA included, too?"

The agent snorted with disgust... or perhaps with incredulity. The shades made it hard to guess. "Of course not, Ms. Fields. The BLA is a *minor* organization, not a major one. That's what makes it the BLA. As such, it reports to the MLA. Which means that you all report to me."

"My mistake," muttered Amy quietly. Nothing more was said, but the room had grown tense.

Arthur carefully cleared his throat. "Ah... I believe you're here to discuss our assignment?"

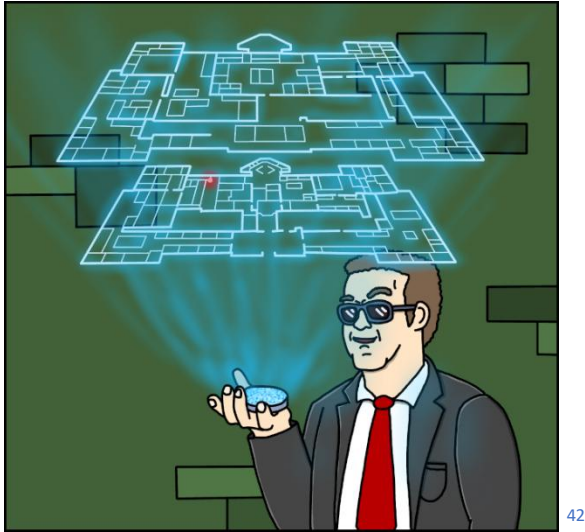
"That's correct, Mr. Chalmers," agreed the agent, without actually looking in Arthur's direction. "We're expediting your involvement on this one, because of its mysterious nature."

The agent reached into his pocket and pulled out a flat, round device. He thumbed a button on its side, and the device hummed to life. Within moments, a large, highly detailed hologram of the Met appeared in the air above the device.

⁴⁰ This means the agent suddenly arrived, and not that he materialized out of thin air. Presumably.

⁴¹ NASCAR isn't a government agency (at least, not to my knowledge). As for the MLA... it basically exists so that I could have a big agency bully the BLA without negatively portraying a specific agency in the real world.

“Hologram technology!” marveled Grant.



The agent permitted himself a thin smile. “MLA funding, Mr. Keeler,” he announced, by way of explanation, “Now, then... this is the Met. As you already know, a significant painting was stolen from here earlier today. But that’s not what worries us.”

The agent thumbed another button, and the hologram of the Met dissolved to show the security feed from an internal camera⁴³. The security feed was focused on the very wall where *The Starry Night* had been hanging just hours ago.

“The camera’s field of view doesn’t move,” Amy observed, “If this painting was under constant surveillance, then why wasn’t the thief caught?”

“An astute question, Ms. Fields,” replied the agent grimly, “Keep watching.”

Everyone continued to watch, unsure what they were looking for. Suddenly, the footage began to grow hazy.

“Someone hacked the camera?” guessed Guy.

“This doesn’t look like a hack,” conjectured Grant, “It looks like something’s optically blocking the camera itself.”

The footage grew increasingly hazy, until it went completely dark. Several seconds passed.

⁴² In case you were wondering... yes, this image is based on a real floor plan of the Met. Aside from some simplifications and minor changes, it’s essentially accurate. However, there’s still one curiosity: the real Met has a café where the holographic map shows a red “ping”. Why did the MLA agent specially mark a restaurant?

⁴³ This is fiction, so it doesn’t bother me that the MLA has hologram technology which doesn’t actually exist in 2024... but it *does* seem frivolous to use it for something as mundane as replaying security footage. Maybe the agent is just showing off.

“Spray paint?” ventured Amy. But then the haze began to reverse itself: over several seconds, the image gradually cleared up. “Never mind,” amended Amy, “I’ve never seen spray paint do *that*. Except in this really vivid dream I had once. Tacos can do that to you.”

“Pipe down, Ms. Fields!” barked the agent gruffly, “If you’d been paying more attention, you might have noticed that the painting’s disappeared.”

It was true. By the time the footage had cleared up, *The Starry Night* had completely disappeared, frame and all.

“So the painting was stolen during the weird... ‘whatever-it-was’ that temporarily blocked the camera,” mused Guy.

“Very observant,” replied the agent wryly. He thumbed his device once more, and the holographic image vanished. “The theft of the painting is worrisome enough, but what really bothers us is the way the thief circumvented a state-of-the-art security system. Whatever they did to that camera, it didn’t leave any traces of foul play, and none of the museum’s other cameras caught anything whatsoever. We’re up against the unknown here... but whatever this is, it represents a potential threat to security in general.”

“That explains why you want us to start investigating right away,” observed Arthur.

“Precisely,” agreed the agent, “We need the BLA to handle this, before it grows into yet another overblown crisis that the *real* agencies have to handle.”

If Arthur took offense at the implied slight, he was smart enough to let it slide. “Understood. Guy, Amy... please revisit the Met first thing tomorrow, and start looking for clues.”

But the agent wasn’t done with them yet. “One more thing,” he added, “You can’t tell anyone at the Met that you’re looking into this. As of now, the BLA has been reclassified as a secret organization⁴⁴.”

Without waiting for a reply, the agent turned to leave. On his way out, he added: “I’ll be evaluating your organization as you investigate, so don’t mess this up.”

The agent left the building, and an anxious silence descended on the BLA’s base. Finally, Amy spoke up. “Did anyone catch that guy’s name? Or are we just calling him ‘agent’?”

“I’ve got a good name for him,” replied Thelma darkly, “But I think I’ll keep it to myself.”

* * * * *

Thelma had left work for the day, to pick up her kids from school. Before heading for her car, however, she’d decided to look for strawberries at a nearby open market. The market was within walking distance of the BLA and Central Park, and she loved finding a good deal⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ This doesn’t make any sense. You can’t just suddenly decide that a publicly known organization is now a secret organization which nobody knows about. And even if you could, *why* is this being done? How does it help the current situation?

⁴⁵ Do any open markets exist near Central Park? I didn’t bother to check, so this entire setting might be bogus.

Thelma finally came across a vendor who offered a wide variety of fruits and berries. As she inspected the strawberries, she was approached from behind by a woman in a fiery-colored dress. “Find anything good?” the woman asked.

Thelma spun around in surprise. “Yes, actually... these strawberries look promising.”

The woman grinned craftily. “There’s a better deal just around the corner. The name’s Milieu... c’mon, I’ll show you⁴⁶.”

Thelma shrugged, then followed Milieu past the other displays to the street corner. Sure enough, there was another vendor selling strawberries. Thelma examined the price tag, and then the actual strawberries: they were in excellent condition, and the price was right.

“Thanks for the tip!” said Thelma with a smile. She paid the vendor and picked up the best-looking strawberry carton on the table.

“Hey, someone has to keep these vendors honest,” laughed Milieu, “Can’t let the criminals get the better of us, right?”

“You said it!” agreed Thelma enthusiastically.

“Speaking of which, did you hear about that art theft at the Met?” asked Milieu, “I heard the thieves got away completely clean!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that!” declared Thelma, “Now that the BLA’s on the case, it’s only a matter of time before they’re brought to justice!”

Milieu’s eyes widened. “No kidding!” she exclaimed, then she looked at Thelma more carefully. “Hey, wait a minute... are *you* with the BLA?”

“I sure am!” grinned Thelma.

“Well, I have a lot of experience with art!” said Milieu earnestly, “Maybe I can help somehow! What do you know about the thieves so far?”

“We know that they used some kind of special trick to disable the cameras and cover their tracks,” explained Thelma, “Our two best agents are combing the Met for clues tomorrow⁴⁷!”

Milieu smiled enigmatically. “Sounds like you already have things well in hand, then. It was nice meeting you, Thelma⁴⁸! We should meet again sometime... I’d love to know how the investigation goes!”

“Sounds good!” agreed Thelma cheerfully, and she began taking the strawberries to her car⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ How did Milieu know that Thelma would be at this exact market, looking for a deal on strawberries?

⁴⁷ Thelma is behaving strangely out of character in this scene. She’s usually pretty sharp, and yet here she’s divulging confidential information to a complete stranger... and what’s worse, she’s doing this immediately after the BLA was reclassified as a secret organization!

⁴⁸ Thelma never actually told Milieu her name.

⁴⁹ By the way... why was this chapter called “To Be Candid”? Does it refer to something specific, or was everyone just generally being candid?

Chapter 4: Blackout!

The next day, Guy and Amy returned to the Met to look for clues.

“We’ll have to play this cool, like we’re normal tourists,” remarked Amy, as they approached the entrance, “We can’t let the Met know that the BLA is investigating⁵⁰.”

“Uh huh,” remarked Guy absently. Amy threw him a quizzical look, and Guy quickly recovered. “Of course! Gotta keep the BLA a secret.”

Amy stopped in her tracks. “Okay Guy... we need to talk. Yesterday, you acted funny when I mentioned landscaping, and today you’re completely distracted. Can’t you tell me what’s going on⁵¹?”

Guy sighed. “Sorry, Amy... this wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. Of course I’ll tell you... but you have to keep it to yourself for now.”

Amy nodded earnestly, so Guy continued. “There’s this landscaping company in town called ‘Priorityscapes’... it’s the same place I was going to apply at before I joined the BLA. Well, they sent me a job offer last week, so now I’m working for both them and the BLA⁵².”

Amy grew worried. “That’s a lot of extra work, Guy. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“It’ll be fine,” Guy assured her, “I just need a little time to get used to it.”

Amy nodded reluctantly while she studied the ground. “What if you can’t manage both jobs? Is the BLA still your top priority?”

Guy smiled knowingly, and took her hand. “I’d choose the BLA over Priorityscapes any day... but my top priority is the person whose hand I’m holding.”

Amy’s smile stretched from ear to ear. “Well, then what are we waiting for? We’ve got a thief to catch!”

Guy and Amy started with the hallway where the painting had been stolen. They carefully searched the carpet, the walls, the display cases, and even the empty frame⁵³. After an hour of careful examination, however, they reluctantly concluded that there was nothing to learn there.

“I guess this hallway’s a bust,” observed Amy, “What else can we try?”

⁵⁰ Then shouldn’t they wear civilian clothes, instead of their BLA uniforms?

⁵¹ This is only the second time that Guy’s reacted strangely, so it might seem like Amy’s jumping the gun here. But seriously... do *you* want to put up with multiple chapters where Guy acts strangely without explaining himself? I sure don’t!

⁵² This entire situation is patently absurd. If the BLA is Guy’s “day job”, then when does he do landscaping? At night? Also, why take a second job at all? Guy doesn’t seem to be short on money. But it gets even stranger: the way Guy tells it, he basically received an unsolicited job offer, and then felt an inexplicable obligation to accept it! Even the landscaping company’s name, “Priorityscapes”, is ridiculous... and I suspect it’s only called that because its purpose in the story is to teach Guy about priorities.

⁵³ It’s anyone’s guess how they accomplished this while acting like normal tourists. Also, the previous chapter clearly indicated that the entire painting had disappeared, “frame and all”. There shouldn’t be an empty frame for them to examine.

"Hmm... the painting was still here when we left," reflected Guy, "So let's retrace our steps from yesterday. Maybe we'll find something that's changed, or out of place."

"Is there anything specific you're hoping to find?" asked Amy curiously.

"I have no idea," Guy admitted, "But if anyone can remember the fine points of a dozen museum rooms from yesterday, it's you."

"That's true," agreed Amy with a smile, "Let's get started."

* * * * *

They spent the next couple of hours revisiting the other exhibits from yesterday. Unfortunately, it didn't help: everything looked exactly the same as it had before. Nothing was missing or out of place, and they didn't learn anything new about the theft. By lunchtime, they were feeling more discouraged than a homesick balloon⁵⁴.

"I think we've covered pretty much everything," admitted Guy, "I have to admit, I'm running out of ideas."

"Maybe we could get lunch here," suggested Amy, "It's almost noon, and we might think of something while we eat. You can't sleuth with an empty stomach. And you shouldn't try. They have terrible observation skills, and they only think about food."

"Agreed," replied Guy with a chuckle.

They began heading for the Met's cafeteria, but Amy suddenly stopped. "Wait, Guy... we still haven't visited every room from yesterday! What about that large, open hall with the angry paint lady?"

Guy looked thoughtful. "It wasn't anywhere near the stolen painting... but sure, we might as well check it out!"

They quickly retraced their steps to the large hall, which still carried the scent of fresh paint. Amy made a beeline for the newly painted wall.

"That's weird," she observed, "Look at this wall! The paint job's been damaged or something."

Guy leaned in for a closer look. The surface of the painted wall was peppered with thousands, possibly millions, of tiny holes. He frowned. "I'm not sure what could cause that. Maybe it happened while the paint was drying?"

Amy grimaced. "Cheap paint, I guess... no wonder that lady was so upset about using the wrong brand."

"Wait, though," objected Guy, "This isn't the wrong brand... this is the paint she insisted the workmen use! She made them bring it in from her truck, remember?"

"Maybe she was trying to cut costs on the job," Amy speculated, "I had a teacher like that in the 3rd grade: she insisted that we use these cheap pencils she'd bought in bulk, and they were terrible! If you weren't careful, they'd snap in half while you were using them... so you'd be left with two wimpy little

⁵⁴ That's a strange analogy. Is the homesick balloon discouraged because it's slowly losing air? Does it miss the people who originally inflated it? I'm not sure what to think!

pencil halves which *never* sharpened correctly! I always wondered why she didn't use the normal pencils from the storeroom, like all the other teachers."

"Perhaps we could investigate someday," smiled Guy, "Unfortunately, I don't see how a badly-painted wall could be related to the art theft."

"Neither do I," Amy admitted. "It's just bugging me, that's all. A weird paint job *and* a stolen painting in the same museum, on the same day? It feels like they should be connected somehow."

"Yeah, I hear what you're saying," replied Guy thoughtfully. He glanced around the room for inspiration, and his eye fell on a discarded scrap of paper near a doorway. "Hey, what's this?" He quickly walked to the scrap of paper and picked it up. Amy was right behind him.

"What's it say?" asked Amy eagerly.

Guy unfolded the paper and presented it to Amy. It was a note that had been torn from a stationery pack, and it simply read, "Warehouse, 11pm. CB⁵⁵".

"That's suspicious," remarked Amy, as she carefully studied the note in Guy's hands, "I wonder who 'CB' is?"

"I have no idea," Guy replied. "But this might be our first clue!"



As Guy and Amy were studying the note, a tall woman wearing a bright blue shirt entered the room from the doorway behind them. She immediately spotted Guy and Amy, came to a startled halt, and then dashed back the way she came.

* * * * *

⁵⁵ Presumably, "CB" stands for "Charles Bly". It's kind of absurd that he'd needlessly sign his initials on a potentially incriminating document. But it's even more absurd that this paper has been sitting out in the open since yesterday, and nobody noticed it... not even a janitor. How convenient for our heroes!

"I still say we wipe out the BLA's agents and be done with it," muttered Niche, "They're too dangerous to leave running around. Crimex underestimated them, and where are *they* now?"

"I'm not underestimating the BLA," explained Milieu patiently, "But if we simply 'wipe out' their agents, the situation will escalate. I'd rather stay one step ahead of them, so that we can win like true artists. That'll keep us in the public's favor when the time comes."

Niche grunted impatiently, and leaned against the concrete walls of the Met's power room⁵⁶. "Have it your way, then... I just hope you know what you're doing."

At that moment, Cyan came bursting into the room. "Guys, it's bad!" she gasped, "The BLA agents found the note!"

Milieu did a facepalm, and Niche grinned. "Are you still feeling one step ahead of them, Milieu?"

Milieu rolled her eyes. "We knew this might happen... and we're ready for it. Niche, get ready to kill the power. And Cyan: from now on, don't drop incriminating notes during a heist, you *fuddling gas*⁵⁷!"

Cyan wilted under Milieu's rebuke. "Sorry, Milieu! I'll try to be more careful. But what are you going to do?"

Milieu smiled grimly. "I'm going to get our note back⁵⁸."

* * * * *

Without warning, every light in the Met went out, plunging Guy and Amy into complete darkness. There was a moment's disorientation, punctuated by the surprised gasp of patrons around the museum. It was followed by uneasy murmurs, as people began to speculate on what was happening.

In the darkness, the Met's PA system rang out⁵⁹. "We have suffered an unexpected power outage. Please remain calm and proceed to the nearest exit."

"Easier said than done," muttered Amy, "I can't see a thing in here."

"Here, take my hand," offered Guy, "I don't want us to get separated in the dark. Just keep your other hand held out, and walk forward slowly. I think I remember where we came from."

Over the next few minutes, they gradually made their way through the pitch-black museum, feeling their way along the walls. In the middle of a long corridor, Guy became aware of approaching footsteps.

"Who's there?" asked Guy. The footsteps sped up, and Guy was suddenly dealt a sharp kick to the stomach. The attack caught him completely off-guard: he lost his grip on Amy's hand and sprawled to the floor, winded. A pained gasp from nearby informed him that Amy had suffered a similar blow. Guy kicked out blindly in the dark, but his leg didn't connect with anything.

⁵⁶ You know... uh, the room where the Met's power comes from! That's how buildings work, isn't it?

⁵⁷ In other words, puzzling gas. Perhaps Milieu meant that Cyan is bafflingly ineffective at her job.

⁵⁸ Wait a darn second! Milieu's known that the BLA was planning to return to the Met since yesterday, when she learned it from Thelma. Why did Milieu wait until now to send Cyan after the dropped note?

⁵⁹ I guess the Met's PA works even when the power's completely out. And shouldn't there be emergency lights?

An angry female voice echoed in the darkness: "This is your first and only warning! Stop investigating the art thefts, or suffer the consequences!" With a supreme effort, Guy gathered himself up and lunged in the direction of the voice. Unfortunately, he missed their attacker and hit the floor with an undignified thud. Rapidly receding footsteps confirmed that the mysterious interloper was already far out of reach.

"Amy," called Guy urgently, "Are you hurt?"

A few paces to his right, he heard Amy cough as she struggled to her feet. "No, just a little winded... I don't know who our new friend is, but she fights dirty⁶⁰!"

"Agreed," Guy replied, "C'mon, let's get out of here before something else happens."

After several more minutes of tracing the walls in complete darkness, they were finally able to make their way back to the main lobby, where rays of daylight were shining in through the Met's exterior doors.

"Finally," breathed Guy, "Some light⁶¹!"

"Well, I'd say we're on the right track," announced Amy, as they made their way outside, "Otherwise, why would that woman bother to attack us?"

"That's true," agreed Guy, and he fished around in his pocket for the note.

Guy froze. His pocket was empty.

"The note!" Guy exclaimed in disgust, "Of all the dirty tricks I've seen, nothing's half as bad as what I could say about this one... and I shouldn't have to⁶²! Our attacker must've stolen it!"

"Technically, they were reclaiming it," replied Amy cheerfully, "It was their note, after all... not ours."

"Well, that's just great," remarked Guy disgustedly, "We investigated for hours, we got attacked in the dark... and now we don't have anything to show for it!"

"Don't worry," replied Amy, with a sly grin, "I already memorized every detail we need from their note! Let's retreat to the BLA... I'll explain more when we get there⁶³."

⁶⁰ Actually, Amy should know exactly who it is: the previous scene made it pretty clear that their attacker was Milieu, and Amy already saw (and heard) Milieu yelling at those workmen yesterday. Amy's usually very good with details, so it doesn't make sense that she failed to recognize Milieu's voice here.

⁶¹ I guess none of the other rooms they travelled through had windows.

⁶² Huh?

⁶³ You have to wonder what the public thought of this: first the Met loses a painting, and then it has a weird blackout the very next day! But this is the last time in the story that Guy and Amy visit the Met, so I guess it doesn't matter anymore.

Chapter 5: An Ultimatum

Guy and Amy returned to the BLA, eager to tell Arthur what had happened. They found him in his office, sifting through papers⁶⁴.

"So, how did it go?" he asked absently, "Did you find any leads at the Met?"

"We found more than leads," replied Amy, "Somebody caused a blackout and then attacked us in the dark! Oh, and they took the clue we'd found, too. And one of the walls had an awful paint job."

"A bad paint job at the Met," mused Arthur, and then he suddenly snapped to attention. "Wait, *what* was that about being attacked in the dark?"

"The entire museum lost power right after we found a suspicious note," explained Guy, "Then somebody attacked us in the dark and stole it."

Guy caught a bemused glance from Amy, and he added: "Although if it was their note, I guess they were just reclaiming it."

Arthur paled. "I wasn't expecting you to be attacked over a simple art theft... it sounds like we've landed in the middle of something dangerous."

Amy shrugged. "Actually, I thought our attacker showed a lot of restraint. They had us dead to rights, and all they did was kick us in the stomach."

"Maybe so, but we can't count on their mercy going forward," replied Arthur decisively, "Please report to Grant right away, and get some equipment⁶⁵."

"Ah, my favorite part of any investigation!" declared Guy, as they walked toward Grant's workshop. "C'mon, Amy... let's see what Grant has for us!"

Amy scowled. "As long as it's not another jetpack."

* * * * *

"You have to try my Mark 4 jetpack!" insisted Grant. "I've really fine-tuned the design this time around... seriously, you'll be unstoppable!"

"Forget it, Grant!" countered Amy, "In case you've forgotten, I have a scar on my knee from landing with your Mark 2 jetpack."

"That was 2 'marks' ago!" protested Grant.

"Your Mark 3 jetpack wasn't much better," Guy pointed out, "It exploded in midair⁶⁶!"

"But I've fixed all of those problems," Grant persisted, "C'mon... wouldn't it be awesome if this became the hallmark of the BLA? Imagine the two of you, heroically swooping out of the air to catch bad guys..."

⁶⁴ This is a charmingly vague depiction of what managers do.

⁶⁵ It's actually strange that they didn't do this earlier. In the previous story, Guy and Amy always got some gizmos and gadgets from Grant before they left on a mission.

⁶⁶ No it didn't! In the previous story, the Mark 3 jetpack was simply too fast to steer safely. It never exploded!

“...then smacking into buildings and breaking our legs on impact,” finished Guy disdainfully.

“Grant, listen to us,” began Amy tactfully, “I know that jetpacks are your pet project. But we’ve field-tested 3 of these things for you, and none of them have worked out! Now, if you field-test the Mark 4 yourself and prove that it’s safe, we’ll consider using it... but until then, no more jetpacks! Is that fair?”

Grant scratched his head for a moment, and then nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

“Great!” said Guy, “So, what do you have for us today?”

Grant walked up to a locker, opened it, and removed a gun-like gadget with an arrow-shaped attachment protruding from the barrel. “Guy, I’ve upgraded your stun gun,” he announced proudly, “The stun bolts can ricochet off walls now... it should be handy if you’re trapped in a tight spot. Just don’t stun yourself.”

Guy accepted the stun gun. “A staple of the BLA’s non-lethal policy,” he observed with a smile, “Is there anything else I should know about it?”

Grant hesitated. “I thought we could come up with cool names for the gadgets. Like, the stun gun could be called the ‘Stunaroo’.”

Guy and Amy exchanged awkward looks. “Okay okay, maybe not,” conceded Grant, “But can we at least call the shots ‘stun bolts’?”

“Works for me,” agreed Guy wryly, “The stun gun fires stun bolts.”



“What about me?” asked Amy, “Do you have anything that explodes?”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got you covered!” replied Grant. He hefted a small backpack from the floor and placed it on a nearby table. Reaching into the backpack, he removed a potato with a metal pin sticking out of it.

Amy’s eyes glittered. “Is that what I think it is?”

⁶⁷ I’m not sure what this picture is doing here. It has nothing to do with the chapter, or for that matter, the story.

"If you think it's an explosive potato, then yes," chuckled Grant, "To arm one, you pull the little pin here. The potato explodes about 15 seconds later. An armed potato can also explode immediately, if it takes a really hard impact. Either way, it's designed to be non-lethal⁶⁸."

"It's perfect!" declared Amy, and she eagerly reached for the backpack of explosive potatoes.

However, Grant held it just out of her reach. "Before I give this to you, Arthur wanted me to remind you: the BLA's reputation is at stake, so be careful with these."

"I have a perfect safety record!" Amy reminded him indignantly. "I've blown up vehicles, fruit stands, and restaurant washrooms... and not *one person* was injured! Not even the fruit stand guy, and I planted *that* bomb about a foot away from him!"

"You aren't helping your case," Grant smirked.

A dreamy look crossed Amy's face. "That was the day I met Guy. I'll never forget the blizzard of airborne fruit when the stand exploded... and then Guy picked up one of the pineapples and handed it to the fruit stand guy. It was priceless!"

"And then we had to pay the vendor a ton of money for destroying his stand," Grant reminded her, "But right now, we *can't* have any collateral damage, because that MLA agent is breathing down our necks! Understood?"

"Okay, fine!" Amy conceded sulkily, "I'll be extra careful with these. I promise!"

Grant solemnly handed her the backpack, which she eagerly snatched out of his hands. "I thought we could call them 'spud busters'," Grant added.

Amy briefly reflected on this. "Works for me!" she agreed cheerfully.

"What about your cloaking devices?" asked Guy. "Those could really come in handy if we end up on a stakeout."

Grant shrugged apologetically. "Sorry Guy, but they were all lost when Crimex destroyed our original base⁶⁹. I've been trying to replicate the original design, but I'm not quite there yet."

Grant noticed the disappointed look on Guy's face. "Something wrong?"

"Sorry, Grant... we appreciate the gear," Guy explained, "It's just that most of this stuff is very similar to the gadgets we've already used. Don't you have anything new?"

Wordlessly, Grant hefted his Mark 4 jetpack and looked at them hopefully.

"Besides that," said Amy dryly.

Grant shrugged. "It was worth a shot. Okay, then have a look at this!" He opened a locked drawer and pulled out two sets of high-tech goggles. Guy and Amy regarded them curiously.

⁶⁸ Non-lethal exploding potatoes, eh? Sure! I have no further questions.

⁶⁹ No they weren't! In the previous story, at least one cloaking device survived... and it was used multiple times.

"These goggles are the latest word in optical augmentation!" Grant proudly announced, "Lost in the dark? Trying to find someone in a building? No problem! With these goggles, and you'll be able to see in the dark... *and* through walls! I call them 'Y-Goggles'."

"Because it's like Xray vision, only better?" asked Amy curiously.

"No," laughed Grant, "Because 'Y' not?"

Guy looked skeptical for a few moments, but then he finally shrugged. "Sure, I'll allow that one."

Grant proudly handed them each a pair of Y-Goggles, and Guy added, "This should do for now. If that cowardly attacker tries to kick us in the dark again..." Guy's voice trailed off. He suddenly realized that someone in the main room of the BLA was shouting.

"That sounds like Arthur," observed Amy worriedly.

"We'd better see what's going on!" replied Guy. They dashed out of Grant's workshop.

* * * * *

Guy and Amy burst back into the Muddled Badger's main room, with Grant trailing slightly behind. Guy quickly took in the scene: the agent from the MLA had returned, and he was arguing furiously with Arthur. Between the two of them, Arthur definitely looked more upset. That wasn't a good sign: Arthur was usually pretty cool-headed.

"Is everything okay?" Amy anxiously asked.

Arthur opened his mouth, and hesitated. He seemed to be at a loss for words. Seeing this, the MLA agent calmly stepped in. "It's perfectly simple, Ms. Fields," he explained, "Every agency and department has been asked to lay off one person this year."

Before the full impact of the agent's statement could sink in, Arthur angrily retorted, "And *I'm* telling you, the BLA needs all hands on deck to function properly! Nobody here is indispensable⁷⁰!"

"Everybody says that," smirked the agent, "But rules are rules. And wouldn't you know it, most departments manage to identify someone they can do without."

"Probably because you forced them to!" countered Arthur, "But that won't work here. The BLA is already a small organization: it can't spare even one employee!"

"So, you're saying that *everyone* at the BLA is essential?" replied the agent dubiously, "I mean, really?"

"Yes," insisted Arthur doggedly, "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Then how about this?" replied the agent with a cold smile, "I'll give you exactly one week to solve the art heist case. If you're successful, then I'll accept that everyone on your team is essential⁷¹."

⁷⁰ In this context, I'm pretty sure that Arthur meant to say "dispensable".

⁷¹ Although when you really think about it... if the BLA fails to solve the art heist, wouldn't that suggest they need *more* people and resources, not less?

Arthur looked like he was about to accept, so the agent quickly added, "I'm not done. If you fail to solve the case within a week, then I still get to sack someone on your team... but I *also* get to fire you, Arthur, for believing that everyone was essential when they actually weren't."

There was a stunned silence while everyone considered the agent's unexpected challenge.

"Arthur, don't do it!" urged Thelma, "Why risk two jobs instead of one?"

Arthur turned to face her. "If I don't make the deal, somebody loses their job for sure," he explained, "At least this way, there's a chance we can all make it."

"But it's not fair!" protested Amy.

Arthur shook his head. "A good manager looks after his employees."

He turned back to face the MLA agent. "I accept your terms. Expect our results on this case within a week."

The MLA agent rubbed his hands gleefully. "Oh, I will. And I'm looking forward to it, Arthur: you're going down!" He turned to leave, but as a parting shot, he casually added, "I'll probably fire Ms. Fields or Mr. Stafford. I doubt the BLA needs *two* field agents."

The agent began heading for the door. Out of the corner of his eye, Guy noticed Amy reaching ominously for her backpack of spud busters. Guy quickly grasped her hand and whispered, "No, Amy! He's not worth it!"

Amy reluctantly lowered her arm. "If you say so," she replied sulkily.

As soon as the agent left the room, Arthur's defiant stance softened. "I'm sorry about that, everyone," he sighed, "We're in a tight spot... but if we work together, I still hope we can pull through this without losing anyone. Amy, Guy: did you find anything useful at the Met?"

Amy perked up. "You bet... we've figured out where the bad guys are going to strike next!"

"Huh?" asked Guy in confusion, "We did?"

"You remember the scrap of paper we were examining, right?" explained Amy, "Well, I recognized the stationery! It's from a special souvenir pad that's only sold at the Louvre. And since the Louvre is an art museum, that's probably their next target⁷²!"

"Not so fast," objected Grant, "What makes you so sure that the thieves are going to strike again? What if the Met was their only target?"

Amy looked at Guy expectantly. "Any thoughts, Guy? Think back to when we were attacked in the dark. What were our attacker's exact words?"

Guy tried to think back. "They warned us to stop investigating the art thefts, right?"

"Yeah," Amy grinned triumphantly, "Art *thefts*! Plural! So they're definitely planning to strike again."

⁷² Never mind how Amy has such specialized knowledge of the Louvre's souvenir stationery... it doesn't matter. I'm also skeptical that this conclusively proves the next target is the Louvre, but let's just go with it.

A matching grin slowly spread across Guy's face. "And now we know where they're going to be."

Arthur chuckled. "Very impressive, both of you. I guess it's time for another trip to Paris⁷³!"

⁷³ A preemptive note to astute readers of the previous story: yes, I remember that Amy's parents disappeared in Paris 5 years ago... and no, the next chapter won't attempt to resolve that. Sorry.

Chapter 6: Return to Paris

Guy and Amy walked down a hallway within the Louvre Museum, doing their best to look like casual tourists while scanning each room for potential leads⁷⁴. So far, nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but Amy was still in high spirits.

"This is the third time I've been able to tour a museum with you this week," she cheerfully observed, "That's more 'museum dates' than most girls get in an entire year! Of course, I know these aren't technically dates. But in a way, they sort of are, right? Guy? Hey!"

Guy suddenly realized that he hadn't been paying attention to what Amy was saying. And as so many men in the same situation have done before him, Guy attempted to bluff his way out of the situation⁷⁵. The results were predictable.

"Find something?" he asked tentatively, gambling on the possibility that Amy's keen observation skills had uncovered a lead. Amy raised an eyebrow ironically, and Guy immediately knew that he'd guessed wrong. "Sorry. I guess my mind was wandering a little."

Amy looked at him worriedly. "Guy, you really haven't been yourself today... is something on your mind?"

"I'm worried about that goon from the MLA," he explained, "I mean, what if we miss the deadline? Who gets fired?"

"Nobody's getting fired," Amy insisted, "We're going to smash this case wide open before the week's even out!"

"I just don't want to cost you your job," Guy replied earnestly, "Honestly, if anyone should be laid off, it's me. I'm still the newest recruit, and I actually have a second job now."

"But I don't want to lose you!" objected Amy, a little louder than she meant to, "C'mon, Guy! The BLA wouldn't be the same if you were gone!"

"We'd still be dating, though!" Guy quickly assured her, "I wouldn't miss that for anything, even if I was fired!"

Unfortunately, Guy had struck an unseen nerve. "No!" insisted Amy, and now she was actually shouting, "We're going to solve this case in a week, and make that MLA jerk leave us alone! And that's final!"

Shocked, Guy opened his mouth to protest... but a nearby bystander who'd overheard them caught Guy's eye. The bystander wordlessly shook his head at Guy in a silent warning: *Let it go for now*.

Guy sighed, and replied, "Okay, Amy. Then let's figure this out together."

The bystander nodded approvingly, and Guy and Amy resumed walking down the corridor. *What on earth did I say?* Guy wondered to himself.

⁷⁴ As usual, the story is silent on how the BLA manages to travel to other countries so quickly, especially if money is supposedly tight. Perhaps Guy and Amy simply teleport between scenes.

⁷⁵ Or anyway, I *hope* other guys do this. Otherwise, I just made a fool of myself for no good reason.

As Guy and Amy rounded a corner, they noticed a tall woman in a bright blue shirt painting one of the Louvre's walls. Amy snapped to attention, and quickly ushered Guy back the way they came. "Guy! The woman in the next room is painting a wall... just like at the Met, before the art theft!"

Guy frowned suspiciously. "Yeah... you're right! I'm still not sure what's going on here, but at least this confirms that they're targeting the Louvre. The freshly painted wall proves it⁷⁶!"

Amy rubbed her hands gleefully. "Oh boy, oh boy... and we're in the perfect position to catch the thieves red-handed! How do you want to do this?"

"Good question," replied Guy thoughtfully, "We still don't know which painting they're going after, so we should try to guard as many paintings as possible."

He sat down on a nearby bench and pulled out his map of the Louvre. Amy joined him as he began studying the museum's floor plan. Finally, Guy pointed to a hallway on level 1, near the *Mona Lisa*.

"Here," he explained, "If I stake out this hallway, that puts me near a bunch of paintings on level 1. And Amy, you'll be able to cover the most paintings on level 2 from this hallway here." He pointed to a hallway near the middle of that level⁷⁷. "We'll use our comms to stay in touch, and whoever spots the thief first will call for backup. Sound good?"

Amy grinned. "It's a date!"

Guy laughed. "Let's foil a heist, shall we?"

* * * * *

"I've been waiting all day," whined Charles Bly over the phone, "I'm starting to wonder if the Felonistas are as good as they say they are."

Milieu rolled her eyes as she sat on a crate in one of the Louvre's storerooms. *It's just as well that Niche didn't take this call. She would've had a conniption over that last remark.*

Out loud, she patiently replied, "Cyan's making the final preparations now. Trust me, we'll have your painting by morning."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line. Finally, Charles asked, "If the final preparations are already happening now, then why can't you steal the painting immediately?" He sounded more curious than upset, and Milieu allowed herself a tight smile.

"Our process takes time," replied Milieu simply, "Leave the art heist to us, Charles. As I said, we'll have your painting tomorrow morning."

⁷⁶ Well... not conclusively. This could be a total coincidence, or part of an unrelated initiative to renovate the world's museums. Not that it matters, of course: for the purposes of this story, the freshly painted wall is concrete proof that the Louvre about to be robbed!

⁷⁷ Believe it or not, I actually researched this one... and Guy's deployment pattern is pretty reasonable if you're trying to keep two people near as many paintings as possible! Of course, museums can change their layout over time, so I can always hope for a day when these details will become as inaccurate as everything else in the story.

She hung up and double-checked that the connection was terminated. Under her breath, she added: “You joyless orb⁷⁸!”

Niche had been pacing in a corner of the storeroom. As soon as the call ended, she asked Milieu: “Was that Charles again?”

“Recognized his insufferable pestering, did you?” chuckled Milieu, “Yes, that was Charles. And apparently, he’s still not convinced we can deliver.”

Niche grunted disdainfully. “Loser.”

The storeroom’s door swung open, and Cyan bounded in. “Preparations are complete, Milieu! When does the fun start?”

* * * * *

*11 months earlier...*⁷⁹

Cyan walked into the room. “Preparations are complete, Milieu! When does the fun start?”

Milieu scowled. “Never. Sorry Cyan, but we didn’t make the cut.”

“What!?” protested Cyan in dismay, “But we’ve worked for years on this portfolio!” She gestured at the many paintings spread throughout their college dormitory. “What more could they possibly want?”

“I honestly don’t know!” snarled Milieu, “I was really hoping to make an impact at the exhibition, but I guess this crowd doesn’t respect artists who haven’t already been dead for 100 years!”

Cyan balked. “That might be too great a cost,” she solemnly remarked.

Milieu sighed. She’d been Cyan’s roommate for most of art college, but she still wasn’t sure if Cyan was profoundly deadpan or just slightly dumb. Either way, she deserved better than this. They both did. They’d poured their hearts into these paintings, and now...

“Honestly, the museums are half the problem here,” she muttered, “No matter what these critics say, it’s the museums that put old art on pedestals and leave living artists to starve!”

“Yeah!” agreed Cyan, “And when I turned 12, the museums started charging me full admission! For no reason!”

“Those *precipitous walls*⁸⁰!” declared Milieu, “You know what I’d like to do, Cyan? You know what I’d like to do, more than anything else in the world?”

“What’s that?” asked Cyan curiously.

⁷⁸ In other words, an unhappy sphere. Perhaps she’s calling Charles a ball of pent-up anxiety.

⁷⁹ Oh boy, a flashback! *Now* we’re in for some good writing! Seriously though, I have nothing against flashbacks... I just think that as a literary device, they’re easy to abuse. A little flashback goes a long way.

⁸⁰ In other words, an abrupt barrier. Perhaps Milieu is referring to impolite museum personnel.

Milieu looked out the window with a dark expression on her face, glaring at some imagined museum beyond the horizon. “I’d like to steal every last one of those so-called *masterpieces* from the world’s museums, so that new artists could actually have a chance!”



“But then all the museums would yell at you,” Cyan pointed out.

“Well, that’s true,” Milieu conceded, “I’d want to do it without getting caught. But how do you rob that many museums without risking your own neck?”

“Beats me,” replied Cyan, with a philosophical shrug. “Hey, want to play ‘Go Fish’? I brought a full deck this time!”

* * * * *

Back in the present...

“The fun starts soon, Cyan,” smiled Milieu, “Now that our paint’s been applied, it’s only a matter of time. The Louvre will never know what hit them.”

“Can I lead the pranking this time?” asked Cyan eagerly.

Milieu regarded her cautiously. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want to strew toilet paper all over the abstract art exhibits!” declared Cyan.

“Very well,” replied Milieu, “As long as the painting is stolen successfully, you may scatter as much toilet paper as you please.”

“Is that really a priority right now?” demanded Niche impatiently, “All that matters tonight is the art theft!”

Milieu shook her head calmly. “Quite the contrary, Niche... we aren’t just stealing art. We’re also making a statement. If we take the time to disrespect the museums now, it will actually help the next phase of our plan. Think of it as an extracurricular activity on our resume.”

“Besides,” added Cyan gleefully, “This time I brought multiple colors of toilet paper! It’s going to be epic!”

Niche snorted, and Cyan looked worriedly in her direction. “Did I say something wrong?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about it, Cyan,” Milieu assured her, “And Niche, be patient. You’ll have your day... in fact, we all will. That’s why we’re doing this, right?”

Niche smiled ominously, like a smug thunderbolt⁸¹. “Right.”

⁸¹ This analogy almost makes sense. But not quite.

Chapter 7: Mistakes

It was an hour after midnight, and Guy was struggling to stay awake. At first, the adrenaline rush of a late-night museum stakeout had kept him going. But that was hours ago, and weariness had set in⁸².

It's because of the second job, Guy reflected glumly to himself. If I hadn't been doing double duty at Priorityscapes all week, then I'd have more pep today. What am I supposed to do⁸³?

Guy's mind wandered, and he found himself worrying about the BLA. That jackal from the MLA really seemed to have it in for them... he definitely felt like one of those "mean for the sake of mean" types. Guy wondered if the agent would actually honor his deal, even if they managed to crack the case. It would be awful if Amy was laid off! Guy had a lot of potential, but she was definitely the stronger agent right now. And besides... she was his girlfriend.

That reminded Guy about his earlier conversation with Amy: she seemed to be taking the situation much harder than he would've expected, and Guy still wasn't sure why. It seemed to be related to his second job, but Guy suspected there was more to it than that. There simply hadn't been a good opportunity to talk things over with Amy in the last few days.

Even so, they had a date coming up this Friday: maybe that would be a good opportunity to get back on the same page. Guy smiled to himself. He'd initially suggested a fancy restaurant, but Amy had wanted to go bowling. Guy wasn't much of a bowler, but he actually found himself looking forward it, simply because it was something that Amy wanted to do. Guy's train of thought continued to meander, and he gradually began to drift off. Just as he was about to fall asleep, however, his eye registered movement in the room.

Guy snapped to full attention, and he quickly scanned the room with growing confusion. What had he seen? Had something moved? There was nobody in the hallway. His line of sight passed over the newly painted wall, and it suddenly dawned on him that the wall looked blurry, as if it was out of focus. Guy stared at the wall in confusion: nothing else in the hallway was blurry, and he shouldn't have any trouble seeing the wall from this distance.

"What the..." Guy muttered to himself. He rubbed his eyes and looked again... only to find that the wall was back to normal, in perfect focus. Guy stared at it for a full minute, but nothing happened. Next, he tried watching the wall out of the corner of his eye, but the wall stayed exactly as it was. Finally, Guy tried looking completely away from the wall, and then suddenly looking back. Nothing. The wall was just an ordinary wall.

"That was weird," said Guy. He was already growing sleepy again. "I wonder if I should get my eyes checked..."⁸⁴ His eyelids grew heavy, and he gradually fell into a deep sleep.

⁸² Actually, if it's 1am in Paris, then it should only feel like 7pm to Guy and Amy (who came directly from New York). But wait, there's more! Because of the whole "secret organization" thing, we can assume that Guy and Amy didn't coordinate with the Louvre's security... so how did they manage to stay behind after it closed?

⁸³ Oh, I don't know... maybe *don't* work a second job for no good reason?

⁸⁴ That seems kind of dismissive, but sure! Let's ignore the wall which behaved strangely during a mysterious art heist stakeout!

As Guy slept, the wall became blurry again. The blurriness gradually resolved into a thick layer of dust which peeled itself off the wall, leaving it peppered with millions of tiny holes. The dust cloud began to converge into a swarm, as if it were alive...

* * * * *

Meanwhile, on level 2, Amy was wide awake. She'd been eagerly anticipating the moment when the thief would make their move... and now she heard footsteps. This was it!

She quickly activated her comms and whispered into it. "Guy, I'm hearing footsteps on level 2... come quick!"

The footsteps suddenly stopped, and Amy heard a door being closed in the distance. "Wait, Guy! I think that was the stairwell... they might be heading for your position!"

It took Amy several seconds to realize that Guy hadn't acknowledged anything she'd said.

"Guy! Can you hear me?" Still no reply. Amy grew increasingly anxious. "Guy, please answer! Are you okay up there?" Nobody answered⁸⁵.

Thinking quickly, Amy donned her Y-Goggles. Fortunately, Grant's latest invention seemed to work exactly as intended: Amy began using the goggles to look through the museum's walls for heat signatures in the building. In the distance, on level 1, she saw a figure fleeing the hallway near Guy.

Guy was slumped over on the ground.

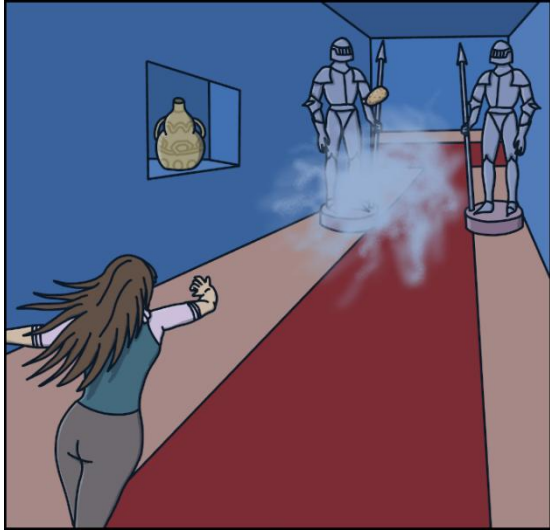
Fearing for Guy's life, Amy abandoned her post and dashed down the hall to the stairwell. On the way down, she noticed that the stair's railing had been violently bent out of shape. "I wonder how *that* happened," she mused to herself⁸⁶.

Amy burst out the door at the bottom of the stairwell and rushed down the halls at top speed. As she rounded a corner, however, she saw a strange swarm-like cloud rushing toward her. The sheer unexpectedness of it momentarily shocked her, but even as Amy skidded to a stop, her basic instincts kicked into action.

She pulled a spud buster from her backpack, armed it, and hurled it at the swarm. Unfortunately, the potato passed harmlessly through the swarm and impaled itself on the spear of a standing suit of armor. The swarm continued moving down the hall, out of Amy's sight.

⁸⁵ Usually, Arthur or Grant tie into the comms to provide remote support from the BLA base... but apparently not today. This seems strange: why aren't they on the line during a crucial stakeout?

⁸⁶ And there you have it, the full payoff from this story's prologue! Thanks to that unrelated short story about Pierre and the photocopier, we know exactly how the Louvre's railing was bent out of shape! Unfortunately, this information has absolutely no bearing on the plot. For that matter, we'll never get any closure on Pierre or his job. Oh, well!



The ugly reality dawned on Amy: in less than 15 seconds, her spud buster was going to explode and vaporize a Louvre exhibit. But there was no time to do anything about it... and Guy still needed her help. “Guy, I’m coming!” she shouted, as she dashed around the corner to Guy’s position.

Amy rushed up to Guy’s inert form and tried to lift him. To her surprise, however, Guy jolted awake as soon as he was moved. Relief washed over Amy: Guy was okay! He looked up at Amy in confusion. “Amy? What’s going on?”

“No time for that!” Amy quickly explained. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Guy, shaking off the last traces of sleep from his mind. Suddenly, the entire hallway was shaken by a large explosion from the chamber Amy had just left. Guy jumped to his feet. “Never mind. Tell me outside!”

They fled the museum as alarms began to go off around them⁸⁷.

* * * * *

Milieu stopped in her tracks, and took in the scene with an expression of utter bafflement: a large explosion had devastated the hallway they were approaching, cutting off their escape from the Louvre⁸⁸.

“What the heck happened here!?” bellowed Niche, “Is the museum onto us?”

Cyan peered at the hallway’s flaming wreckage. “Maybe they’re just renovating.”

“In the middle of the night!?” demanded Niche.

Cyan shrugged. “It’s off-hours.”

⁸⁷ Is this irresponsible behavior, or is it actually necessary because the BLA is supposed to be a secret organization? It’s hard to minimize this: Amy vandalized the *Louvre*! I know it was an accident, but still! And in any event, wouldn’t she be caught on the Louvre’s security cameras?

⁸⁸ So, a spud buster’s explosion can completely wreck a hallway... and yet Grant called it a non-lethal gadget? What am I missing here!?

“Never mind that!” snarled Milieu, “We need a new exit, and fast!”

The Felonistas desperately looked around the room. Milieu’s gaze fell on a vintage car in one of the exhibits. “Everyone in the car!” she shouted. The Felonistas piled into the vehicle, and Milieu took the driver’s seat. She eagerly turned the keys in the ignition, but instead of starting up, the car’s engine briefly sputtered and then died.

“What’s wrong with this car!?” Milieu angrily demanded.

“Most gasoline spoils in less than a year,” Cyan timidly pointed out⁸⁹.

“I’ll handle it,” shouted Niche. She jumped out of the car, dashed around to the back, and then shoved a stick of dynamite into the exhaust pipe. She eagerly dashed back to her seat and grinned mischievously. “Buckle up.”

With a sharp *bang*, the dynamite’s explosion jump-started the car. Without hesitating, Milieu floored the accelerator, crashed through a floor-to-ceiling window, and then sped off into the night⁹⁰.

* * * * *

About an hour later, Guy and Amy reached the outskirts of Paris and collapsed from the exhaustion of their long run⁹¹. They took a few moments to catch their breath, and then sat down on a nearby rock.

“We really blew it this time,” said Amy mournfully, “We damaged the Louvre, and we didn’t even catch the art thief. That agent from the MLA is going to eat this up.”

Guy hung his head in shame. “I don’t know what to tell you, Amy... I tried my best to stay awake, but -”

Amy’s eyes bugged out. “Wait... are you telling me that you fell *asleep* during the stakeout!?”

Guy buried his face in his hands. What could he possibly say? “Yes, I fell asleep. I’m sorry, Amy.”

Amy clenched her fists in exasperation. “I thought you were wounded, Guy... maybe even *dead*! I abandoned my position on level 2, just to make sure you were still alive!”

“I know, and I’m really sorry that I messed up today!” apologized Guy earnestly, “The landscaping job has taken a lot more out of me than I expected... and if we lose the case because of this, then I don’t even know what to say. But I am sorry.”

Guy brought out his stun gun and examined it. “I didn’t even get a chance to use this,” he added regretfully. He tried to put it back, but the gun accidentally clipped against the rock they were sitting on, which pushed the safety switch to the “off” position. Guy quickly tried to reset the safety, but in his haste, he accidentally discharged the stun gun. A stun bolt fired across the ground, ricocheted off a

⁸⁹ Also, *why* would the museum leave a fully fueled and serviced car sitting around with its keys still in the ignition? It’s absolutely preposterous... and yet this plot device shows up surprisingly often in movies.

⁹⁰ Okay, I retract my previous criticism about people escaping in old or abandoned vehicles. Niche’s stunt here is *much* stupider than any of that. By all rights, the dynamite should’ve simply blown up their car, or at least totaled it beyond repair! And if crashing through a window was an option, then why bother stealing a car in the first place? I won’t even bother to ask if the Louvre has any floor-to-ceiling windows... frankly, that’s the least of my concerns.

⁹¹ Are we to understand that Guy and Amy had no escape vehicle, and they just ran all the way to the city outskirts on foot?

speed limit sign, and then flew straight into the air. Before Guy could fully process what had just happened, a stunned pigeon fell from the sky and landed harmlessly in some nearby bushes⁹².

It was just too ridiculous. Guy tried to stifle a laugh, but it burst out of him anyway.

Amy's expression softened, and then she joined Guy's laughter in spite of herself. "Aw, Guy... it's not that I'm mad at you. Well, no... I *am* kind of mad that you fell asleep during a crucial stakeout. But that's not the point! I'm mostly worried about you. Can you please give your career some careful thought? I'm really not sure you can handle 2 jobs at once."

"Yeah... I'm starting to doubt that, too," Guy ruefully replied, "By the way..."

Amy smiled. "Of course I forgive you."

"No, it's not that," Guy began. He paused a moment, and quickly amended, "Wait! No, it's great that you forgive me! But that's not what I meant. When you were at the Louvre tonight, did you see anything unusual? Like maybe..." Guy hesitated. "Well, like maybe a wall that seemed to move?"

Amy was taken aback. "A moving wall? You mean, like a secret passage or something?"

"No, it was more like the wall went out of focus," Guy explained, "Or anyway, that's what it looked like. It only happened once, and it happened on the wall that was freshly painted today. I wasn't sure if I was imaging things⁹³."

Amy assumed a thoughtful expression. "No, I didn't see anything like that... but I *did* see something that looked like a dust cloud, or maybe a swarm of really tiny bugs! It rushed right past me, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. I've never seen anything like that before⁹⁴."

Guy shook his head. "Something weird is going on with these art thefts, and I'm sure these painted walls have something to do with it. But I'm not sure what."

At that moment, Arthur's voice came over their comm units... and it sounded much more agitated than normal⁹⁵. "Guy, Amy... there's been an explosion at the Louvre, and the museum has just reported the *Mona Lisa* as missing. I don't suppose either of you know anything about that?"

Guy swallowed nervously and met Amy's eyes. She shrugged helplessly. Guy braced himself to answer, but before he could say anything, Arthur cut back in: "Actually, no. Don't tell me anything... I truly don't want to know right now. The MLA agent is back, and he's even angrier than usual! You'd better return to base immediately."

"Sorry I couldn't help you on the comms earlier," added Grant apologetically, "I don't speak French⁹⁶."

⁹² "Mistakes" is an excellent name for this chapter. :)

⁹³ I think this was supposed to say "imagining things", not "imaging things". Unless Guy believed that the out-of-focus wall was some kind of post-processing effect in his mind.

⁹⁴ At least we aren't pulling a cliché "you must have been crazy or dreaming" conversation, wherein the other person casually dismisses everything the hero saw. No, sir... this story might be defective, but it still has *standards*.

⁹⁵ So, Arthur *was* on the comms! Why didn't he say anything earlier?

⁹⁶ What in the world does that have to do with anything!? Sure, Guy and Amy are in France, but they've been using English this entire time... why couldn't Grant just speak to them in English, like he's doing now? This is an absolutely bizarre excuse, and it actually calls more attention to how weird it is that Grant wasn't on the comms all along.

Guy sighed resignedly. “Don’t worry about it, Grant. We’ll see you back at base.” Then he turned off his comms and looked at Amy earnestly. “This is going to be rough, Amy. If you want, I’ll take the blame for this mission.”

Amy shook her head. “We’re in this together, Guy! Maybe we lost this round... but we aren’t beat yet!”

Guy smiled and took her hand. They began walking back to the BLA together⁹⁷.

⁹⁷ Uh... *walking* back to the BLA? Across the Atlantic Ocean!?

Chapter 8: Fallout

Guy had assumed that he and Amy wouldn't get a hero's welcome when they returned to the BLA. He was right.

"Well, your crew's off to a great start, Arthur!" snarled the MLA agent, "The *Mona Lisa* was stolen out from under your agent's noses, and the abstract art exhibit was practically smothered in colorful toilet paper! And that's not even the worst part... 3 vintage suits of armor were damaged, one was practically vaporized, and the surviving suits absolutely *stink* of potatoes⁹⁸!"

He glared challengingly at Amy. "Care to comment on any of this, Ms. Fields? I've read your file. You like it when things catch fire and explode, don't you? Look me in the eye, and tell me you had nothing to do with that explosion. I *dare* you!"

Amy carefully cleared her throat and met the agent's gaze. "I can't confirm that I unsuccessfully refrained from not causing the explosion, regardless of whether my alleged lack of avoidance failed to prevent -"

"*Shut it, Fields!*" bellowed the agent. He let the tense silence breathe for a few moments, and then turned back to Arthur. "If you *morons* are trying to get your entire agency canned, then you're doing a terrific job. The only silver lining is that the Louvre has no idea the BLA was involved... so at least we've been spared an international incident⁹⁹. But if anything like this ever happens again, I will personally recommend scrapping the BLA to the highest possible level! Is that clear!?"

Arthur nodded wordlessly, and the MLA agent smiled sardonically. "By the way... in case you weren't keeping track, you now have 6 days left to solve this case¹⁰⁰. Any questions before I go?"

Amy timidly raised her hand. "Could we have your name? We didn't catch it before."

The agent glared daggers at her. "Don't waste my time, Ms. Fields."

He marched toward the exit, but on the way out, his foot crunched down on an unexpected peanut. The agent stumbled and nearly lost his balance, but he managed to recover. He whirled around in a rage.

"That's a tripping hazard!" he bellowed, "Who's leaving peanuts on the floor!?"

Arthur swallowed nervously, but he decided to go with a straightforward answer. "A squirrel named 'Trippy.'"

"He's kind of our unofficial mascot," Thelma chimed in helpfully¹⁰¹.

⁹⁸ I have a feeling that some people will be upset by this. If so, feel free to assume that the *real* suits of armor were being cleaned that day, and Amy only damaged some duplicates. You're welcome!

⁹⁹ Yep... the MLA agent seems to be okay with keeping the Louvre in the dark about this. But hey, maybe that's how secret organizations actually roll! I wouldn't know, because they're secret.

¹⁰⁰ There's still 6 days left? That would mean the BLA received their 7-day ultimatum, traveled to Paris on the same day, staked out the museum overnight, and then traveled back to New York this morning! But it gets even worse... this story began on a Monday, which means that Guy and Amy would've visited the Louvre on a Tuesday. This shouldn't be possible, because the Louvre is closed to the public on Tuesdays!

¹⁰¹ This business with "Trippy the mascot squirrel" was established in the previous story. However, there's no guarantee that the reader will remember... and since Trippy isn't mentioned again in this story, the whole thing feels like it comes out of nowhere.



For several seconds, the agent stared at them with incredulous rage. Without a word, he turned his back, stormed out the door, and slammed it. However, he slammed the door so hard that it bounced back open, revealing him still scowling at the entrance. He jerked back in surprise, and then furiously slammed the door even harder. The doorknob popped off and rolled across the floor. There was a brief, shocked silence as the agent's angry footsteps receded into the distance.

"I can fix that," offered Grant.

Arthur sighed wearily. "I'm so sorry you have to deal with this, everyone. Hopefully, he'll leave us alone once we crack the case. Guy, Amy... I know we didn't nab the thief at the Louvre, but did you get any new leads?"

"You could say that," Guy began cautiously, "Both of us saw something strange on the night of the theft. Amy saw some kind of swarm which raced down the hall, and I saw a freshly painted wall which seemed to go out of focus!"

"Didn't the Met have a freshly painted wall, too?" asked Thelma.

"Yeah, exactly!" replied Amy, "It can't be a coincidence... but what does it all mean? Does the thief have some kind of special paint that can swarm around and block security cameras, or something?"

"Maybe they do," mused Grant, "This is starting to sound like nanotechnology¹⁰²."

"Nanotechnology?" queried Thelma.

"You know, like nanobots," explained Grant, "Thousands, maybe millions of tiny, specialized machines."

"I know what nanotechnology is," returned Thelma dryly, "I meant, what kind of nanotechnology hides in paint, swarms through the air, and blocks security cameras?"

¹⁰² Lazy writing tip: nanotechnology can solve *any* problem. It's as if science and fantasy had a baby!

"It would have to be several generations ahead of anything I've read about," Grant mused, "But this would definitely explain the swarm Amy mentioned. In fact, it even explains the pitted walls: when the nanobots broke free of the paint, they left behind millions of tiny holes."

"But how does the actual painting disappear so quickly?" Guy objected, "The nanobots only disable the cameras for a few seconds."

"I don't know," Grant admitted, "But I'd bet my next jetpack model that nanobots are responsible!"

"Grant, what if we brought you a sample of nanobots from one of the heists?" asked Arthur eagerly, "Could you study them and develop some countermeasures?"

Grant grimaced. "I wish I could, but no. Nanotechnology is a pretty specialized field, and most of that stuff is way over my head. I'm not sure where we could find a nanotechnology expert on such short notice."

"I know one," announced Amy cheerfully.

"Perfect!" Arthur declared, "Track her down for us, and see if she'll lend a hand¹⁰³... we only have 6 days left, so we need to hurry."

Amy smiled knowingly. "It won't be a problem. Trust me."

* * * * *

"Girls, that was a flawless operation at the Louvre," concluded Milieu with satisfaction. "Even the temporary setback in the hallway didn't stop us from getting away clean."

"But how did the hallway collapse in the first place?" prompted Niche, "We still don't know!"

"I made some quiet inquiries, and it seems that nobody does," replied Milieu, "Including the museum staff."

"And we're just going to leave things at that!?" Niche protested. She hated it when people brushed aside important details.

Milieu shrugged reasonably. "What else can we do? We don't have the time or resources to launch a full investigation, and we're not even sure the explosion was directly related to our heist."

"That's true," replied Niche, grateful that someone else was looking after the pesky details¹⁰⁴.

"Never take an explosion personally," Cyan philosophized.

"Exactly," smirked Milieu, "Now, regarding our loose end: it's imperative that they're taken into custody. The moment we're in position, I want the authorities alerted -"

"Wait," interjected Niche. A thoughtful look had appeared on her face. "What about the BLA?"

¹⁰³ Amy never said the nanotechnology expert is a woman. It *will* turn out to be a woman, but there's no way Arthur could've known that.

¹⁰⁴ I thought Niche hated it when people brushed aside important details. We established that mere seconds ago! Or did she abruptly decide for herself that these details were "pesky" instead of "important"?

Milieu frowned. "The BLA won't be there. They have no idea what our next target is."

"Yeah, but supposing they did?" pursued Niche, "If we get the timing right, it's just as easy as using the authorities. And this way, we can use the BLA for some of our own dirty work!"

A diabolical grin slowly spread across Milieu's face. "Oh, that's perfect. Those *gaseous envelopes*¹⁰⁵ can actually help us for a change!"

* * * * *

Later on, Thelma was at home with her family. Her husband Clive had helped her to clear away dinner, and now he was getting the kids settled in the living room.

Just as Thelma had finished loading the dishwasher, her cellphone started ringing. "Probably just spam," she muttered to herself, but she checked it anyway. The display read "Unknown Number". "Not helpful," Thelma quipped, and she tapped the "Answer" button.

"Hi, is this Thelma?" asked a female voice.

"That's me," confirmed Thelma, "Who's this?"

"It's Milieu," Milieu replied, "You probably don't remember me, but we ran into each other at the open market this week."

"Oh, that's right!" Thelma exclaimed, "You found me a good deal on strawberries. What's new?"

"I have some exciting news that might help your investigation," explained Milieu, "Can you meet me at noon tomorrow? We can get some coffee at the open market and talk business."

"Sounds great!" declared Thelma, "I'll see you then."

"Yes indeed," Milieu replied enigmatically, and she hung up¹⁰⁶.

Thelma's husband poked his head around the corner. "Hey, Thelma... the kids are ready to vote on which movie we're watching tonight. Was that work?"

"Sort of," grinned Thelma triumphantly, "I think the BLA's investigation just reached a *tipping point*¹⁰⁷!"

¹⁰⁵ In other words, a vaporous cover. Perhaps she's calling the BLA a bunch of useless windbags... but in this case, I actually prefer Milieu's original wording.

¹⁰⁶ How and when did Milieu get Thelma's number? Perhaps it's publicly listed somewhere.

¹⁰⁷ Oh, good grief... was that supposed to be a clever pun about getting a tip?

Chapter 9: Plot Twist¹⁰⁸

Thelma walked briskly through the open market. It was noon the next day, and the stands were already bustling with customers trying to make the most of their lunch break. Thelma found Milieu waiting for her at the café, with two coffees on the table.

“Glad you could make it!” declared Milieu, “You must be pretty busy these days, so I ordered our coffees in advance. My treat.”

“Thanks,” Thelma replied, “So, what’s this exciting news?”

Milieu grinned. “It’s like this: for the past few days, there’s been a rumor going around the art community. You know the painting *American Gothic*?”

Thelma nodded. “I think so... that’s the one with the old farm couple on it, right?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Milieu¹⁰⁹, “It’s currently exhibited in the Art Institute of Chicago. Anyway... someone’s been asking questions about *American Gothic*. I couldn’t get a name, but they’re mainly interested in its current market value. That got me thinking: why would anyone care about the painting’s value, if the museum isn’t planning to sell it?”

Thelma frowned. “Unless someone’s planning to steal it.”

“Exactly what I thought!” agreed Milieu eagerly, “Now, I can’t guarantee that this is connected with your investigation... but it might be worth looking into.”

“You’re right,” agreed Thelma, “I’d better get this information to the BLA right away!” She stood up and tossed some coins on the table for the coffee¹¹⁰. “Thanks for the tip, Milieu.”

“You’re very welcome,” replied Milieu graciously, “And hey... are you busy tomorrow?”

“No more than usual,” mused Thelma, “Why?”

“They’re having a two-for-one deal at a rock-climbing place,” Milieu explained, “I wondered if you’d like to come along.”

“*Rock-climbing!*?” shouted a nearby man in a porkpie hat, “Oh, *no!!*” Milieu and Thelma watched in confusion as the man sprinted away from the café, running as fast as his legs could carry him¹¹¹.

“So anyway,” Milieu resumed, “Want to try some rock-climbing tomorrow? Trust me: it’ll be fun!”

“Rock-climbing, eh?” replied Thelma, with a worried look on her face, “I’m not sure. What if I fall?”

“I’d never let that happen!” declared Milieu solemnly.

¹⁰⁸ It’s weird and self-referential to name a chapter “Plot Twist”. It also spoils the surprise that there’s going to be a plot twist.

¹⁰⁹ Actually, this is a common misconception: *American Gothic* is meant to depict a farmer and his daughter, not a farmer and his wife. I wouldn’t expect Thelma to be aware of that... but Milieu should know better.

¹¹⁰ I thought Milieu said the coffee was her treat. But I don’t see her objecting to Thelma’s coins, so... whatever, I guess.

¹¹¹ This incident might seem bizarre and abrupt, but I’m planning to explain it in a future chapter. Although not necessarily in *this* story. :)

“Okay, then sure!” replied Thelma, “Tomorrow it is¹¹².”

Thelma picked up her coffee cup and left the table. Milieu continued to sip her own coffee calmly, with a very smug smile on her face.

* * * * *

It was 1pm at the Art Institute of Chicago. Niche walked down the hallway, rubbing her hands together with glee. She noticed that several bystanders were looking at her oddly. This worried her at first, until she realized they were probably just reacting to her supervillain outfit¹¹³.

Turning a corner, she arrived at a dead end with a fire alarm. Due to the positioning of an adjoining hall’s exhibits, this was the only location in the entire building which wasn’t covered by a security camera... and the museum hadn’t realized that. Niche grinned mischievously and settled in to wait for Milieu’s signal. Minutes later, Niche’s patience was rewarded, and her cellphone buzzed with an incoming message from Milieu: showtime!

Without hesitating, Niche pulled the fire alarm, and the entire building began to evacuate. She patiently waited for the patrons to empty from the surrounding hallways, gave herself an extra minute just to be safe, and then began striding confidently to the room where *American Gothic* was kept.

She immediately bumped into a security guard.

The guard was briefly taken aback by Niche’s costume, but he quickly recovered. “Sorry miss, but we need to evacuate the entire building. Please follow me.”

Niche smiled disarmingly. “No problem, sir! My friend’s almost caught up!” She pointed behind the guard, who turned to look where Niche was pointing. The moment his back was turned, Niche knocked him unconscious with a swift blow to the head¹¹⁴. She grinned. “That was easy enough... now, down to business!”

After taking a final look around to ensure that nobody was watching, Niche sent a message through her cellphone. Moments later, an ominous swarm of particles billowed in from around the corner. It began heading toward the *American Gothic* painting and the nearby security cameras¹¹⁵.

* * * * *

¹¹² As we’ll see in the next chapter, tomorrow is a workday. It’s unclear why Thelma’s allowed to schedule a recreational rock climb during company hours.

¹¹³ Apparently, Niche isn’t concerned about drawing public attention at the museum she’s about to rob.

¹¹⁴ Don’t worry! It’s one of those fictional punches that knock you unconscious for several hours without causing permanent brain damage. Also, Niche attacked the security guard after leaving the dead end, so her assault would’ve been caught by the security cameras... but I’m guessing there won’t be any consequences for this.

¹¹⁵ Why didn’t Niche have the nanobots disable the security cameras *before* she pulled the fire alarm, so that there was no risk of being caught on camera? For that matter, wouldn’t this whole thing be a lot simpler if she’d robbed the museum at night, like Cyan did at the Louvre?

Thelma's car crawled forward several feet, and then stopped again. Thelma slapped the sides of the steering wheel in frustration. She'd been stuck in traffic for at least an hour, and now she was in a tunnel¹¹⁶.

"I can't believe this," she fumed to herself, "Milieu's handed me a potential breakthrough on our case, and I can't even get back to the BLA to tell them about it!"

Thelma's eyes scanned down the endless line of taillights, but the tunnel seemed to go on forever. She checked the clock on her dashboard. Two more minutes had gone by. For all she knew, *American Gothic* was being stolen this very afternoon... and at this rate, the BLA would never know until it was too late.

In desperation, she dug her cellphone out of her purse. To her dismay, however, it wasn't getting any reception in the tunnel¹¹⁷.

Thelma grimaced, and settled in for a long wait.

* * * * *

Niche opened the museum's rear exit door with *American Gothic* in tow. Charles Bly was waiting for her, with a duffle bag at his right side and a burlap sack at his left. He eagerly eyed the painting she was carrying under her arm.

"Is that *American Gothic*?" he asked eagerly.

"No, it's a giant crossword puzzle," she quipped sarcastically, "Of course it's *American Gothic*. Time to pay up¹¹⁸."

Charles Bly nodded. "Of course it is. A deal's a deal, after all."

He hefted the duffle bag and tossed it in Niche's direction. "It's all yours. Feel free to count it."

The duffle bag landed just shy of Niche's feet, and she knelt down to open it. As she worked the bag's zipper, however, she heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked. Warily, she looked up and found herself staring down the barrel of Charles' firearm.

Charles smiled sardonically. "Sorry... but there's been a change of plans."

"That's funny," came Milieu's voice from behind him, "I was about to say the same thing¹¹⁹."

¹¹⁶ Source: I Goggled "does New York have tunnels", and the general consensus was "yes". Unfortunately, we still have a problem: the open market is within walking distance of the BLA, and Thelma always travels there on foot. If Thelma was heading directly back to the BLA from the market, then how did she end up in her car?

¹¹⁷ For crying out loud! If Thelma has a cellphone, then why didn't she call the BLA with this crucial information before she even left the café!?

¹¹⁸ Shouldn't they do this at another abandoned warehouse, or literally *anywhere* other than here, outside the museum Niche just robbed?

¹¹⁹ Milieu was getting coffee in New York only an hour ago... and yet here she is in Chicago, which is 12 hours away! Apparently, the BLA isn't the only organization that can ignore basic geography.

Charles Bly jumped in surprise, and quickly turned around to face Milieu. Even as he pivoted, however, Niche stepped up and knocked him unconscious with a swift blow to the head. She chuckled to herself. “Ah, that never gets old.”

Cyan joined Milieu and Niche. She produced some blueprints of the museums they’d robbed, and planted them on Charles’ person. “Now *that’s* what I call pranking!” declared Cyan.

Meanwhile, Milieu opened the burlap sack at Charles’ left side. To her great satisfaction, both *The Starry Night* and the *Mona Lisa* were in there¹²⁰.

“I think we’ll keep these,” she remarked gloatingly.

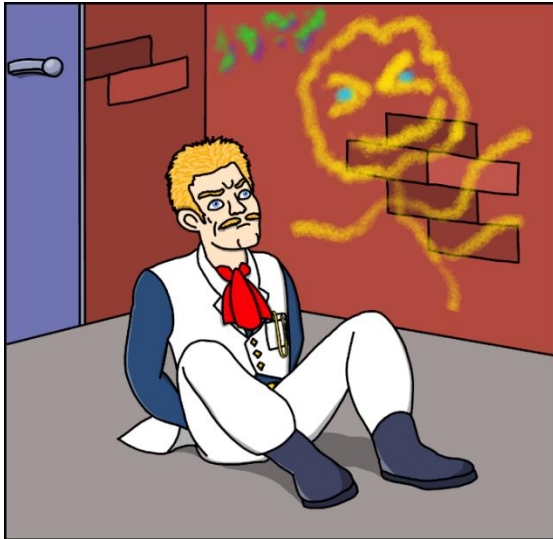
“The money, too!” Niche chimed in, as she rifled through the currency in the duffle bag¹²¹.

Milieu checked her watch and nodded. “The cavalry will arrive presently... they can collect our trash for us. C’mon, we have places to be! Tomorrow, we begin phase 2.”

As the Felonistas left the scene, Milieu’s ego couldn’t resist a parting shot. She turned back to Charles’ unconscious form, and said: “Thanks for playing your role, Charles... you *grain of impalpable dust*”¹²². We’ll take it from here.”

* * * * *

Hours later, Charles Bly groggily opened his eyes... only to find himself staring up at Guy and Amy¹²³. He tried to scramble to his feet, but his hands were handcuffed behind his back, and he quickly abandoned the attempt.



¹²⁰ Why would Charles carry priceless, incriminating paintings around with him? That’s stupid.

¹²¹ Why would Charles fill the duffle bag with real money if he was just planning to betray them? That’s stupid.

¹²² In other words, she’s saying that Charles is insignificant.

¹²³ Wait, *what*? So, are we to understand that Thelma got Milieu’s “tip” to the BLA after all? We never saw that happen! Was the traffic jam in the tunnel part of Milieu’s plan, or was that a coincidence? And didn’t Niche pull the museum’s fire alarm earlier? Why haven’t any firefighters shown up... or for that matter, the police, once people filed back into the museum and realized that a painting was missing?

“Good, you’re up,” quipped Amy, “We’re here to take you into custody, so don’t try anything funny. Actually, no... you can be as funny as you want. Just don’t do anything sneaky or violent.”

Charles groaned. “You’ve got the wrong guy... honest! I’ve been framed!”

“Oh, really?” retorted Guy, as he flashed some architectural diagrams in Charles’ face, “Then explain why you were carrying blueprints of all the museums that got robbed!”

“I’ve never seen those before,” protested Charles in frustration, “Do you really think I’d be stupid enough to carry something that incriminating¹²⁴!?”

“Save it for the judge,” replied Amy curtly. She beamed at Guy. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“I can tell,” said Guy with a smile, “You really nailed the delivery. Okay, my turn... Charles, you have the right to remain silent!”

Guy punctuated this statement by gesturing with his stun gun. The gun discharged unexpectedly and fired a stun bolt at a nearby tree. The bolt ricocheted and hit Charles squarely in the chest, knocking him unconscious.

“Oops,” said Guy sheepishly.

Amy snickered mischievously. “That’ll keep him silent, I guess¹²⁵.”

Guy frowned as he examined his stun gun, taking great care not to point it at himself or Amy. “I think the trigger on this thing has been more sensitive ever since Grant upgraded it.”

Amy shrugged. “No harm done... he’ll be awake again in an hour, grouchier than ever. Anyway, I guess that’s another caper solved!”

Amy glanced at the museum’s exit, where a stickman with a sneering face had been spray-painted on the wall. One of the eyes on the face winked at her, and Amy jumped back in surprise.

“At least, I *think* it’s solved,” added Amy, in a much more subdued voice¹²⁶.

¹²⁴ Actually, Charles *is* that stupid... because as we’ve already noted, he brought the stolen paintings here for no reason, along with a duffle bag of real money that he wasn’t even planning to use!

¹²⁵ When your firearms are non-lethal, there’s a lot more “wiggle room” to be silly. :)

¹²⁶ Winking graffiti aside... Guy and Amy were attacked by a *female* assailant at the Met, so they should know there’s at least one villain still on the loose! And aren’t they even slightly suspicious about the fact that Charles was already unconscious when they got here?

Part 2: Art and War

Chapter 10: Declaration of War

It was the day after Charles' capture, and everyone at the BLA was in a terrific mood. Thelma had arranged an informal celebration in the Muddled Badger's main area, complete with party balloons, takeout fish and chips, and even a disco ball that she'd found in an old storage room¹²⁷.

"I've already informed the MLA agent that we've captured the ringleader behind the art thefts," Arthur eagerly explained, "If we can get Charles to turn on the thieves he used, then we can close the book on this case¹²⁸!"

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Guy with a grin, "Let's see what Charles Bly has to say for himself!"

Arthur, Guy, and Amy made their way to the BLA's detention area. Grant had taken every precaution to make it secure: a single hallway led to the temporary holding cell, and the doors at both ends were solid steel. A small rectangular window had been cut into each door and fitted with vertical iron bars. The hallway was lined with motivational posters (this didn't improve security, but Thelma had insisted on it). The cell itself was a simple room made of concrete, without any windows. A small vent in the ceiling provided fresh air. The cell contained a basic cot and bathroom facilities. The detention area was normally quiet, but this morning, it echoed with the sound of Charles' irritated pacing from within his cell.

Arthur led Guy and Amy up to the cell's door. "Care to do the honors?" he asked.

Guy took a deep breath, and began speaking through the barred window. "Okay, Charles. Let's start with something technical. Your art thieves are using some kind of mysterious swarm to help them steal paintings... what can you tell us about it?"

"I don't know anything about that!" insisted Charles, "I wasn't involved in the actual heists. I'm telling you, I'm innocent!"

"Hiring people to steal paintings for you is still illegal," Amy pointed out, "Or anyway, I'm assuming that it's illegal. I didn't look it up or anything, but c'mon! It just makes sense."

Guy smiled inwardly at Amy's chatter, but he kept a straight face and looked Charles in the eye. "Listen, Charles! We want those thieves... and at the moment, we're feeling generous. If you help us capture them, we'll go easier on you."

"Well, how *nice* of you!" Charles spat out sarcastically, "That's a huge relief to me! Do you realize that yesterday, I'd nearly obtained the 3 paintings I value more than anything else in the world? And today, I have *nothing*! So I'm not telling you anything... and if it's the last thing I do, I'll get you for this!"

"I don't think he's feeling cooperative," Guy stage-whispered to Amy.

¹²⁷ This was meant to be an anachronism, since the Muddled Badger was formerly a Prohibition era speakeasy. But as it turns out, the spheres we now call "disco balls" used to be called "mirror balls", and they were already in use by 1920's. So it's perfectly realistic for the Muddled Badger to have one in storage. The things you learn when you're trying to write a deliberately inaccurate story!

¹²⁸ Huh? So they *do* know that the art thieves are still running loose! In that case, why did Amy say the caper was solved at the end of the previous chapter?

"You can feel that way if you want, Charles," replied Arthur mildly, "But let's be realistic. Forget about those paintings... at the moment, you have bigger fish to fry."

At that moment, Grant burst into the hallway. "Everyone... the art thieves have launched a livestream on the Internet! You have to see this!"

Charles grinned maliciously. "Apparently, *you* have bigger fish to fry, too."

With a growing sense of unease, Arthur, Guy, and Amy followed Grant out of the hallway.

* * * * *

The livestream was just ramping up when Arthur, Guy, and Amy entered the room. The screen showed a short woman in a fiery-colored dress. "Salutations," said the woman condescendingly, "I am Milieu, and we are the Felonistas. Before we begin, I'd like to introduce you to my colleagues."



"I recognize her!" exclaimed Guy, "She's the angry paint lady from the Met!"

As Guy was talking, a tall woman walked onto the screen. She was dressed in a bright blue shirt.

"And that's the same woman who was painting the wall at the Louvre!" declared Amy.

"This is Cyan," explained Milieu, "And lastly, there's Niche."

A woman of medium height marched onto the screen. She was wearing green and yellow armor.

"She's the one who robbed the Art Institute of Chicago!" declared Guy¹²⁹.

"I've gotta admit, those are cool names," Grant conceded, "I'll bet Niche is their leader. Look at that supervillain ensemble!"

¹²⁹ Um... Guy and Amy couldn't have seen Niche robbing that museum. By the time they arrived, the Felonistas had been gone for hours! But the funny thing is, it's still possible for Guy to recognize Niche! An earlier footnote complained that Niche's antics should've been caught by the museum's security cameras... in which case, Guy could've seen her on the evening news. I guess two wrongs made a right!

“Shh!” hushed Thelma, “I don’t want to miss this!”

“My friends,” began Milieu grandly, “Art has grown stale... and it’s in danger of going extinct. And why, you may ask?” Milieu paused dramatically. The background lighting dimmed slightly, revealing a faint spotlight over her.

“Because art has been mismanaged by those who claim to protect it!” Milieu angrily declared, “We continue to revere artists who died centuries ago, while living artists struggle to earn a living right in front us! We put old art on a pedestal, embalming these dusty works like decorative corpses, while we ignore and belittle those who try to make new contributions to this grand aspect of humanity. And where has it gotten us? Our museums are full of dead artists who aren’t even around to thank us, while our streets are full of living artists who starve in obscurity. Art has become a *stagnant swamp*¹³⁰!”

“Ugh, another ranting crusader,” Guy scoffed disdainfully, “Sour grapes.”

“They’re delicious if you prepare them right!” replied Amy cheerfully, “But seriously, I agree. I mean, this woman steals paintings from museums! She doesn’t exactly have the moral high ground here.”

Meanwhile, Milieu continued her impassioned speech. “Well, no more! I won’t allow art to die on *my* watch! You may already be familiar with the recent disappearance of *The Starry Night*, the *Mona Lisa*, and *American Gothic*. Well, that was our doing... out with the old, and in with the new¹³¹! Speaking of which... as of this morning, three brand new works by the Felonistas have appeared in the places once occupied by those ‘legacy’ paintings. I urge all of you to come and enjoy these *new* works of art for yourselves¹³²!”

“They’ve slipped *new* paintings into the museums!?” exclaimed Guy, “How? When!?”

“It must’ve happened overnight,” mused Arthur worriedly, “I have to say, I didn’t see this coming. I thought we were just dealing with straightforward art thieves.”

Milieu wasn’t finished. “In the coming weeks, the Felonistas will be making more substitutions. Painting by painting, we will rejuvenate the stagnant art scene, until it’s something that inspires all of humanity once more! Please show your support for our channel... starting today, art fights back!”

Behind her, Cyan and Niche raised their fists in the air and bellowed a rallying war cry. Milieu beamed with pride. The scene dissolved into a dramatic logo featuring a skull and crossbones, except that the crossbones had been replaced by paintbrushes. After a dramatic music cue, the livestream concluded.

Grant shrugged his shoulders dismissively. “She talks a good game, but that doesn’t give her the right to control the art scene on everyone’s behalf.”

“To say nothing of breaking the law in multiple countries,” added Guy.

¹³⁰ This idiom is pretty self-explanatory... if you can even call it an idiom.

¹³¹ Now that the Felonistas have taken credit for the art thefts, it seems odd that they bothered trying to frame Charles yesterday. Perhaps that was simply an expedient way to get him off their playing field.

¹³² Of course, the museums could easily take down the new paintings, and then refuse to display them. But for some reason, nobody will think of that.

“And she didn’t offer to put anyone *else’s* new paintings in the museums,” observed Amy, “Just the ones from her own group. It’s like she’s pretending to be Robin Hood, but when she steals from the rich, she just keeps the money for herself. You know?”

“Also, I think that Milieu’s confusing museums with art galleries,” Thelma pointed out, “Museums are generally *supposed* to showcase older stuff¹³³.”

Arthur shook his head bleakly. “Unfortunately, that may not matter. Milieu’s chosen her words very cleverly: this is exactly the sort of thing that could excite the general public. A lot of people will probably take her side, and that’s going to complicate the situation.”

As if to punctuate Arthur’s statement, his phone rang. “Hello, this is Arthur Chalmers... Who? Ah, I see... Yes, I’ll tell them. One moment.”

He looked up at everyone, wearing a strained look on his face. “It’s the MLA,” he explained simply, and then he resumed his call. “Yes, I’ve seen the livestream... Now, wait a moment! Anything you have to say... What? Oh, fine.”

Arthur looked up again. “Sorry about this,” he explained disgustedly, “He’s insisting that I put him on speakerphone.”

Arthur pressed a button on his phone. “Go ahead, they can hear you now.”

“Good morning, everyone!” came the mocking voice of the MLA agent. His cruel tones sounded darkly comical over the phone’s tinny speaker. “I assume you saw the same livestream I did? Well, have fun sorting that out for me! And just a reminder: you now only have 5 days left¹³⁴.” He laughed and hung up before anyone could reply.

“Honestly,” remarked Thelma, “That guy is *such* a jerk.”

“Well, we’ll only waste time by moping around,” stated Amy, “I’m going to bring the nanotechnology expert over here this afternoon. If she can figure out the Felonista’s technology, maybe we can stop them from stealing any more paintings. Who knows? We might even turn the tables on them!”

“Excellent point,” agreed Arthur.

“I’m going to spend some time at my landscaping job,” remarked Guy, “But I’ll be back tomorrow.”

An irritated look crossed Amy’s face, but she didn’t say anything¹³⁵.

¹³³ Is that all Thelma has to say!? Until now, Thelma thought that Milieu was a new friend she’d met at the open market. But now she knows Milieu is personally running the very group that the BLA is trying to stop! Shouldn’t Thelma feel personally betrayed, or used? But no... all we get is a little quip about how museums work.

¹³⁴ Actually, there should only be 4 days left... and this time, it looks like a straight-up mistake. There were 6 days left on the evening when Thelma got Milieu’s phone call. On the next day, Thelma actually met with Milieu, and Charles was captured outside the museum in Chicago. And this is now the day after that. But hey, maybe the MLA agent is just bad at math... at least he’s wrong in the BLA’s favor!

¹³⁵ And for some reason, neither did Arthur... even though Guy’s working a second career on the side during company hours! Honestly, this whole “second job” subplot is so bizarre.

"I'll actually be away for the rest of the morning, too," announced Thelma, "I have a rock-climbing appointment to keep¹³⁶."

"Fine, but make sure you're back before lunch is over," Arthur reminded her, "Now that the Felonistas have shown their hand, the pressure's on us to stop to it... before this gets completely out of control!"

* * * * *

Cyan couldn't be happier. For the third time that day, a large dump truck pulled up to the Felonista's lair, overflowing with appreciative fan letters¹³⁷.

"Just look at all these fans!" Cyan laughed, "Everybody likes us!"

"That's because we have style," declared Niche.

"And because we're making a statement!" added Milieu, "Don't forget that."

They spent several minutes opening fan letters at random and reading them appreciatively.

As Niche read one of her letters, she chuckled¹³⁸. "This dude wants to know if 'Niche' is my real name."

Milieu cocked her head curiously. "Is it?"

"You tell me," replied Niche wryly, "Is 'Milieu' *your* real name?"

Before Milieu could answer, Cyan jumped in. "So what's the next step, everyone? Another livestream?"

Milieu looked thoughtful. "We need to keep our heist schedule on track... but you make a good point, Cyan! It's also important to keep the public engaged."

Niche grinned. "Just leave it to me... I have an idea."

* * * * *

An hour later, Guy was at Priorityscapes, helping to plan a brand-new park next to an orphanage. Even though he'd only been working here for a short time, his colleagues already respected his skills. This was the job he'd originally been trained to do, and he loved doing it. The workload was engaging without being overwhelming. His coworkers were nice, in a bland sort of way. And although Guy hadn't had a chance to use his benefit plan yet, he knew that it was excellent.

Guy scratched his head in perplexity. So, why wasn't he happy¹³⁹?

¹³⁶ *What* is going on here!? At this point, Thelma knows that Milieu is one of the bad guys, but she's still treating the rock-climbing appointment like a genuine social outing! And since when is Thelma allowed to leave work in the middle of the day? Man... Arthur's mind must be somewhere else this morning!

¹³⁷ This isn't how mail delivery works. Also, people probably wouldn't send thousands of fan letters through the mail, because it's not 1997 anymore. And even if they did, the letters couldn't possibly arrive on the same day they were mailed. And are we to understand that the public knows the Felonista's address, but the BLA doesn't!?

¹³⁸ I think this was supposed to say "chuckled", not "chucked": Niche hasn't thrown anything.

¹³⁹ Sorry to keep complaining about this, but... maybe Guy isn't happy because *he's attempting to hold down two full-time jobs for no apparent reason!*

Chapter 11: Expertise

Thelma's feet gently touched the ground, and she looked back up at the wall she'd just climbed: according to Milieu, it was about 15 meters tall.



Milieu grinned. "Nice climbing," she commented, "You didn't even hesitate on that last overhang."

"Well, nice rope handling down there," Thelma replied, "You didn't let me fall even once."

"No problem," replied Milieu, "And thanks for coming along! These coupons are so exacting... the two-for-one deal was going to expire next week, so I'm glad I got a chance to use it."

"It was fun!" smiled Thelma, "But I have to get back to work now. See you later¹⁴⁰!"

* * * * *

It was early in the afternoon. Thelma had returned to the Muddled Badger, only to find Arthur at the reception desk's computer. "What's up, Arthur?" she asked with a wry grin, "You're in my seat."

Arthur looked up. "Oh, sorry Thelma!" he apologized, "I thought it was high time to start replacing the abstract paintings we lost when Crimex destroyed our original base. I was just about to order a new one¹⁴¹."

"Getting bored of my motivational posters?" she asked, "I could always put up new ones! I buy them in bulk."

"I don't doubt it," chortled Arthur, "But I think your posters can handle a little competition. Check out this one."

¹⁴⁰ This rock-climbing expedition is pretty much inexplicable. It only makes sense if Milieu wanted an opportunity to dispose of Thelma, or if Thelma wanted a chance to capture Milieu... but neither of those things happened. I guess this entire scene was just a quaint little break from reality.

¹⁴¹ Although it's unclear why Arthur had to do this from the reception desk. Doesn't he have his own computer?

Thelma came over to the reception desk and studied the artwork in Arthur's virtual shopping cart. It was a vivid abstract painting which featured bold orange slashes against a mottled background that resembled snakeskin. "It looks pretty cool," observed Thelma offhandedly.

"Thanks," said Arthur, as he moved his cursor over the "Place Order" button. "It's only a print of the original, of course... but the price is right! And it's very popular online right now."

"I'm not surprised," replied Thelma dryly, "It's one of the Felonista's paintings."

"What!?" yelled Arthur. His cursor still wavered over the "Place Order" button. "Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so," confirmed Thelma, "That particular painting is currently hanging where *The Starry Night* used to be."

"Cancel, cancel, *cancel!!*!" said Arthur urgently, as he removed the painting from his virtual shopping cart and closed the browser. "Whew... that was a close one! Can you imagine explaining *that* to the MLA?"

"Yes, but I'd rather not," quipped Thelma. "Can I have my desk back, now?"

Just then, Amy proudly marched in through the front door. "Gather around, everyone! Because the nanotechnology expert has arrived!" Grant emerged from his workshop. Everyone looked at Amy expectantly.

"I figured we need someone who's already proven her scientific genius," Amy explained, "And to speed things up, it should be someone we already know... any guesses?"

"Alexia?" guessed Arthur.

"Alexia Bennet!" declared Grant.

"It's Alexia, right?" asked Thelma¹⁴².

"Nope!" replied Amy, "It's my roommate, Bethany. She's a specialist in nanotechnology... and better yet, she won't charge us for her expertise¹⁴³."

A tall, heavyset woman entered the room. She was dressed casually in a purple shirt and blue jeans, accessorized by glasses, a beaded necklace, and chunky bracelets. "Hi, everyone," she said shyly, "I hear you're having some nanotechnology problems?"

"Yes, we are," confirmed Grant, "And we really appreciate your willingness to help us... especially for free!"

Bethany looked slightly embarrassed. "I kind of owe Amy right now," she admitted, "You see, I missed the last 2 rent payments, and she had to cover them herself."

¹⁴² If you haven't read the previous BLA story, or if you don't remember who Alexia is, that's okay. You can either drop everything and read the previous story now, or simply fabricate your own mental image of what a scientific genius named "Alexia" might look like. I know which option I'd pick. :)

¹⁴³ It would seem that Amy didn't clear her roommate with Arthur beforehand. Is the BLA still a "secret organization", or has that plot point been completely forgotten?

“That’s... surprising,” remarked Grant diplomatically, “I would’ve thought that nanotechnology specialists commanded a pretty good salary.”

“Normally, that would be true,” agreed Amy wryly, “However, Bethany quit her job last year to compete in video game tournaments full-time. And if she misses 3 rent payments in a row, then she has to go back to her day job. Right, Bethany?”

Bethany studied her shoes and nodded reluctantly. “But I’ve never missed more than 2 months in a row,” she quickly added, “And I always pay you back later!”

“Yes, you do,” agreed Amy, with what Arthur suspected was forced cheerfulness, “And that’s the main reason I’ve put up with this arrangement. Anyway Bethany, you’re up: show us what you can do with these!”

Amy handed Bethany a handful of nanobots and ushered her toward Grant’s workshop¹⁴⁴. Grant followed.

Moments later, Thelma burst in through the main door. “Sorry I’m late, everyone!” she gasped, “Traffic was terrible around the rock-climbing place¹⁴⁵!”

* * * * *

Milieu entered the command center of the Felonista’s lair, beaming with glee.

“Well girls, how’s our online channel doing?” she asked eagerly, “Are the fans responding?”

“Absolutely,” grinned Niche, “Public support has been pouring in all afternoon! People love our art, and they want to see more. We already have more than a *million* fans worldwide!”

“How many detractors?” asked Milieu curiously.

“Who cares?” replied Niche smugly, “Let them attack our artwork, or even our methods... our supporters will defend us online. It’s free publicity¹⁴⁶!”

“This is the best prank we’ve ever pulled!” declared Cyan.

“Right,” said Milieu accommodatingly, “Just don’t lose sight of the fact that this is more than a prank. We’re sending a message to the entire art community!”

“That’s what makes it such a good prank!” insisted Cyan earnestly.

Before Milieu could reply, an alarm chime sounded. Cyan quickly ran up to a complicated-looking computer console and yelped with delight. “Hey, everyone... special delivery!”

Cyan pushed a button at the console, and a small vent near the top of the wall opened. A swarm of nanobots entered the room through the vent, hovered briefly, and then swarmed around an empty

¹⁴⁴ When and where Amy did get a handful of nanobots!? From one of the museums? Is this story missing a scene somewhere?

¹⁴⁵ Sigh... Thelma was already here, right from the start of the scene! There’s no way around this one: it’s a goof.

¹⁴⁶ A criminal group which popularizes their activities through a well-directed social media campaign? Honestly, that doesn’t even seem farfetched! I wish it did.

portion of the floor. The swarm's shape quickly transformed from a vague blob to a rectangle. For several moments, they furiously buzzed and oscillated in place. Finally, the nanobots smoothly dispersed and swarmed away... leaving behind a perfect painting and its canvas. The nanobots retreated into an orifice on the computer console, their assignment complete.

Milieu gestured grandly at the painting. "May I proudly present to you... *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, from the Hague¹⁴⁷! Transported molecule by molecule across the ocean by our nanobots, and painstakingly reconstructed to its exact original condition¹⁴⁸."

Niche shook her head in amazement. "I never get used to seeing that. You would think they'd occasionally miss a glob of paint, or put it back slightly wrong... but look! Not a single brushstroke is out of place. Even the canvas looks exactly the way it did at the museum."

Milieu smiled faintly. "Nanobots are the answer."

* * * * *

7 months earlier...

Milieu smiled faintly. "Nanobots are the answer."

Cyan cocked her head to one side. "What's a nanobot?"

"A tiny robot," Milieu explained, "If we had enough of them, we could make them swarm into a museum overnight, break a painting into millions of tiny pieces, and then bring it back to us for reassembly. And the best part is, we'd never have to go anywhere near the museums we were targeting¹⁴⁹!"

"That sounds super-cool!" exclaimed Cyan, "But where do you buy nanobots? I never see them for sale at the mall."

"That's true," Milieu laughed, "We'll need to find a specialized manufacturer. Even so, money shouldn't be an issue... I can always sell some of my rare paintings if I need to."

"Okay," replied Cyan, "Then where do we find a supplier?"

"Good question," mused Milieu, "We either need someone can build them directly, or else a contact who knows the right people."

¹⁴⁷ Which means the nanobots travelled thousands of miles to the Netherlands and back... but at this point, I guess we're way past caring about the logistics of global travel.

¹⁴⁸ Okay... so it sounds like the nanobots disassemble the painting at the museum, carry it away in microscopic pieces, and then perfectly reassemble it at the Felonista's lair. There's no point in analyzing the science behind this, but we should address the fact that this process technically "destroys" the painting, even if it's perfectly reassembled at the other end. I have a feeling this might upset some people, so I can only point out that the Felonistas are bad guys: we aren't supposed to like what they do.

¹⁴⁹ Um... so why *did* the Felonistas physically visit the earlier museums and paint their nanobots into a wall? I mean, the previous scene confirmed that they can dispatch their nanobots across the world without ever leaving the safety of their lair! Those earlier heists had a lot of suspense and mystery built up around them... but now they seem kind of nonsensical.

She paused, and a bemused smile spread across her face. “I might know someone who can help.”

* * * * *

Back in the present...

Cyan cocked her head to one side. “The answer to what?”

Niche rolled her eyes. “Stealing paintings, you *erratic block*¹⁵⁰!”

Milieu looked at Niche in surprise. “Did you just say ‘erratic block’?”

Niche shrugged. “Well, you’ve been having a lot of fun with those highfalutin insults. I wanted to try one for myself.”

Milieu smiled faintly. “And?”

“It was fun, but not as fun as punching things,” reflected Niche, “I think I’ll leave the fancy idioms to you. Now... which painting should we send back to replace *Girl with a Pearl Earring*?”

Milieu considered this, and then turned to Cyan. “Cyan... would you care to substitute one of your abstracts?”

Cyan clasped her hands gleefully. “*Would I!* Let’s use the one I finished yesterday!” From a nearby shelf, Cyan took down an elegantly crafted abstract painting. Its subtle interplay of blue and yellow produced a calming effect. At the same time, its inner complexity appealed to the mind, and brilliantly showcased Cyan’s superior brushwork¹⁵¹.

Niche raised her eyebrows approvingly. “That one’s pretty good, Cyan!”

“Thanks!” replied Cyan cheerfully, “I’ve always had a thing for blue.”

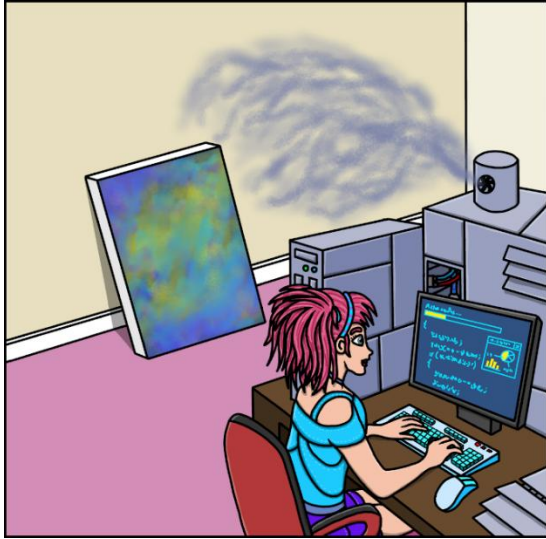
“Well, then that settles it,” declared Milieu, “This painting has a date with the Hague. Fire it up!”

Cyan pushed some more buttons, and the nanobot swarm emerged from the console. They hovered for a moment to get their bearings, and then eagerly swarmed toward Cyan’s painting. After several moments, the nanobots smoothly dispersed and swarmed out the small vent near the top of the wall... leaving behind an empty space where Cyan’s painting had been, only moments earlier. Presto¹⁵²!

¹⁵⁰ In other words, an unpredictable block. Perhaps Niche is saying that Cyan is goofy and oblivious.

¹⁵¹ I assume this is how art people might describe a painting they like.

¹⁵² A narrative doesn’t normally use responsive words like “presto”. I guess it could work if the entire story was trying strike a specific tone... but here, it sticks out like a sore thumb.



"And there they go," observed Niche. "I can't believe this is working so well."

"I'll say!" agreed Cyan enthusiastically, "My paintings have never been featured in so many museums before!"

"Your paintings were *never* featured in a museum before," Niche pointed out.

"I know," Cyan agreed, "That means an infinity percent increase!"

Milieu chuckled. "That's the spirit, Cyan... and we're just getting started! Let's repaint the world."

* * * * *

It was evening. Amy had finished another day of work, and now she was sitting by herself inside the "Depend-A-Bowl", a local bowling alley¹⁵³. Guy's unoccupied bowling shoes sat conspicuously next to her: Amy had made a point of renting them as soon as she arrived. She'd been eager to demonstrate that she remembered his shoe size from last time... Guy always liked it when she noticed details like that. And after all, Guy had arranged this date. Guy had made the reservations. And Guy had told her several times during the week how much he was looking forward to it.

So, where the heck was Guy!?

Amy checked her watch: Guy should've been here an hour ago, and he hadn't answered any of her texts. She felt a growing sense of frustration and unease. At this point, what else could she even do? It was getting late, and she was starting to feel ridiculous sitting in a bowling alley by herself. Abruptly, Amy's unease was beaten out by her frustration.

"Okay then, Guy," she muttered to herself, "Let's *bowl*."

¹⁵³ "Depend-a-Bowl"! I didn't think it was possible, but that name is even sillier than "Priorityscapes"!

She picked up the bowling ball, carefully lined it up with the center pin, and threw it for all she was worth. The ball crashed through the pins at the end with a satisfying clatter. It was a strike! The scoreboard changed to show that it was Guy's turn¹⁵⁴.

"Your turn, Guy," she murmured mischievously, "Give it your best shot!"

She picked up the bowling ball again, but this time she deliberately threw it crookedly. It landed in the gutter without knocking down any pins.

"Tough break, Guy," she declared with mock sympathy, "Gutter ball!"

There was a dry chuckle from the lane next to her. Amy turned, and saw a young couple watching her sympathetically.

"Boyfriend troubles?" the young woman asked gently.

Amy felt a brief pang of conscience. It wasn't like Guy to ignore her. It really wasn't. And they were in the middle of a case against some fairly ruthless art thieves. What if something had happened to him?

"I'm not sure," Amy replied honestly, "For all I know, my boyfriend could be in trouble himself."

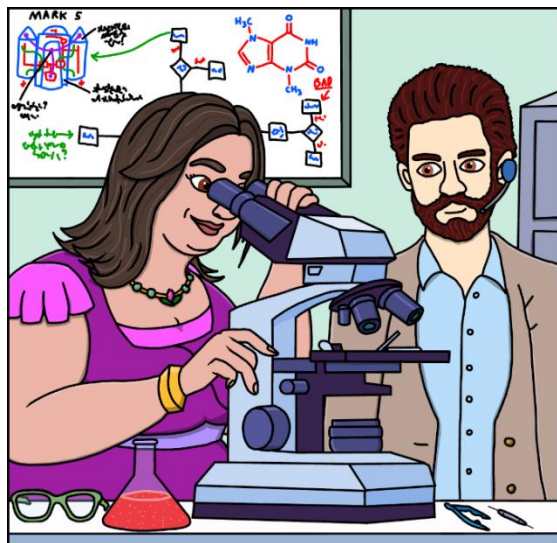
Deep down, she added: *But if he's not in trouble, then he's going to be.*

¹⁵⁴ Actually, if Amy got a strike on her first ball, then she should get to go again. But that would've made the scene clunky, so I ignored this rule.

Chapter 12: Discoveries and Bonds

It was the next morning at the BLA. Bethany was already back in Grant's workshop, doing her best to analyze the nanobots. Grant stayed nearby, and ensured that she had everything she needed to get the job done.

"Hey," said Bethany absently, as she was peering through a microscope and making notes, "You're an engineer, right?"



It was the first time Bethany had spoken in nearly an hour, and it took Grant a moment to realize that the question was directed at him. "Oh, uh... yeah. I invent gizmos and gadgets for the BLA. It's pretty fun."

Bethany didn't look up from her microscope. "Have you ever invented something that prevents delivery pizza from going stale overnight¹⁵⁵?"

Grant blinked from the sheer unexpectedness of the question. "Well, sure... that shouldn't be too difficult. Once this case is over, maybe I can look into it for you¹⁵⁶."

"Thanks," replied Bethany, "Video game competitions are tougher than most people think. There's not always enough time for proper meals and grocery stores, you know?"

"Yeah, I've been there," commiserated Grant.

Bethany looked up from her microscope curiously. "You compete in video game tournaments?"

"Er, no," Grant backpedaled, "But there's this engineering competition they hold once a year in New Jersey. It's about alternative forms of transportation, and I've definitely pulled some all-nighters trying to get something ready on time."

"Alternative transportation, eh?" Bethany asked, looking interested, "So, what was your entry this year?"

¹⁵⁵ It's called a "fridge".

¹⁵⁶ There's no particular reason why a "gizmos and gadgets" guy like Grant would *also* be skilled at food preservation techniques. I'm not saying it can't happen, but the "universal inventor" is a much-abused cliché.

“Nothing,” Grant admitted, “The same as last year. You see, I really want to be the first person to invent a practical jetpack... but no matter how hard I work on the design, there’s always something wrong with it. Just ask Guy or Amy.” He chuckled ruefully. “Anyway, I’ve gotten close with a few prototypes... but in the end, I always have to take the design back to the drawing board. I’m hoping the Mark 4 will be different.”

Bethany smiled faintly. “You must really like jetpacks.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Grant confirmed, “It hasn’t won me any awards yet, but... well, it just would be the coolest thing if jetpacks became the BLA’s hallmark one day! Anyway, how about you? How many video game competitions have you won?”

Bethany cleared her throat carefully. “Technically, I haven’t won any of them. I’ll often place 3rd or 4th, but never 1st. Even so, the money’s usually good enough to coast on for a month or two¹⁵⁷.”

“At least you can improve over time, right?” ventured Grant.

“Sure,” replied Bethany ruefully, “But unfortunately, so does everyone else. I’ve never made any significant mistakes during a competition... the others are just better at it, simple as that. And now I’ve been broke for nearly 2 months. I didn’t even place at the last tournament.”

Curious, Grant asked, “Have you ever considered getting back into nanotechnology?”

Bethany shrugged unhappily. “If this keeps up for another month, I guess I’ll have to. But that was a high-pressure job, and it always made me miserable.” She looked reflective. “Mind you, maybe that was more of a problem with the company I worked for. The pace here is pretty nice, even if we’re working on a Saturday¹⁵⁸... and it’s been fun to put my old skills to use.”

“Yeah, the BLA’s always been great that way,” Grant agreed, “It’s not the highest paying job, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.”

“I don’t suppose the BLA is hiring?” asked Bethany. She smiled slightly, but her tone of voice clearly indicated which answer she expected.

Grant’s face fell. “Probably not,” he admitted, “If anything, we’ve been getting pressure to downsize.”

Bethany turned back to the microscope, and sighed like a cardboard train: speeding steadily, but hollow on the inside¹⁵⁹. “That’s employment in a nutshell, isn’t it? Jobs are stressful, whether you have one or need one.”

Grant smiled. “You should write that one down! It sounded profound, in a gloomy sort of way.”

¹⁵⁷ I was between jobs while writing this story... and I can’t help wondering what my family would’ve thought if they’d seen queries like “typical video game competition prize money” appear in my search history. It was innocent research for a hobby project, I swear! :)

¹⁵⁸ This is true: the story began on a Monday, so it’s Saturday by now. Even so, it would’ve been nice to have a scene where Arthur apologetically asked his team to work during the weekend. Without it, this feels like it came out of nowhere.

¹⁵⁹ This is possibly the most confusing analogy yet. Why is the train made of cardboard, and what makes it hollower than a normal train? How does one sigh like a cardboard train in the first place? And where does the “speeding steadily” part fit in?

Suddenly, Bethany jumped up and faced Grant in excitement. “Wait... Grant, I think I’ve found what we’re looking for! I know how these nanobots work... we need to tell everyone¹⁶⁰!”

* * * * *

The talk show host flashed a big phony smile for his live audience. “Welcome to ‘Flash in the Pan’, the show about social trends and new celebrities! I’m your host, Flash Kenzington. Today, we’re going to meet a rising star on the art scene... please give a warm, flashy round of applause for Niche, from the Felonistas!”

A hearty round of applause greeted Niche as she marched onto the stage and took a seat¹⁶¹.

“So tell us, Niche,” began Flash genially, “As a member of the Felonistas, what’s your favorite art style?”

“Comics,” replied Niche unhesitatingly, “And maybe some pixel art on the side.”

“Interesting,” mused Flash, “Many people in the art community would consider that ‘low’ art.”

“That’s exactly the sort of perspective we’re trying to change, Flash!” declared Niche, “Art is art, and effort is effort... we shouldn’t look down on other people’s styles.” She looked directly at the audience. “Am I right, everyone?”

There was another round of applause from the live audience. Several people shouted, “Twirl your cape!”, so Niche obligingly stood up and gave her flowing cape an elaborate flourish. The audience cheered appreciatively.

Flash leaned back in his chair and smiled. “And how would you respond to the critics who insist that your art crusade is robbing the world of cherished classics?”

Niche laughed. “I say they’d better buckle up, because we’re just getting started! The art world is changing, Flash... they can either get on the bus, or fall under it!”

This prompted a chorus of laughter from the live audience. Flash turned back to the camera. “There you have it, folks... an unabashed art enthusiast who isn’t afraid to speak her mind¹⁶²! Any thoughts before we wrap up?”

“Yeah,” replied Niche enthusiastically, “Everyone: please show your support for our online channel! And read a comic book!”

The audience applauded wildly as Niche triumphantly left the stage. *It’s working*, she gleefully thought to herself. *Who’s going to stop us now?*

* * * * *

¹⁶⁰ Isn’t it amazing how often something important happens just as the characters are wrapping up their conversation?

¹⁶¹ Whoa, hang on a minute! The Felonistas have openly admitted to committing *crimes*! What kind of talk show would interview a known criminal just for ratings? Actually... never mind. I withdraw the question.

¹⁶² Or commit crimes. Seriously, are any cops watching this show?

“Arthur!” Grant called, as he ran into the main area of the Muddled Badger, “Bethany’s figured out how the nanobots work!”

“That’s good news,” approved Arthur, “And we need it, too! We only have 4 days left to crack this.”

In the meantime, Bethany had also entered the main room. She was about to launch into her explanation when Grant suddenly called out, “Wait, hang on... where’s Guy? He needs to hear this, too.”

“Nobody’s heard from him,” replied Amy worriedly, “He missed our date last evening, and he’s still not answering his phone this morning.”

“That’s not like Guy,” observed Grant worriedly.

“I know,” agreed Arthur pensively, “And if we don’t hear from Guy by this afternoon, then we might need to start searching for him. But for now, let’s get through Bethany’s briefing. We can bring Guy up to speed as soon as we find him... or as soon as he shows up. Bethany, if you please?”

Bethany looked around the room and paled a little. “Uh... hi. I’m not really used to public speaking, but um... well, here we go. From what I can tell, the nanobots are designed to operate remotely. They have microscopic cameras which allow them to see, and each one has an apparatus which allows it to float through the air. They share a common AI which allows them to move as a coordinated swarm, but they can also take individual instructions to break a large problem down into smaller pieces.”

Now that Bethany was in her element, she was speaking more comfortably. She shrugged. “So much for technical specs. The question is, what were they actually designed to do? I wasn’t sure until I noticed a small scoop-like attachment on each nanobot. This scoop has an ingenious design: it allows the nanobot to grab a sample from almost any surface, and then carry it long distances. That’s when I realized that the nanobots aren’t simply helping the art thieves by covering cameras: they *are* the thieves. Or at any rate, they’re the tools that the thieves use to steal the paintings.”

“Are you telling me that the stolen paintings were carried off by tiny robots?” asked Thelma incredulously.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” confirmed Bethany, “And the Felonistas probably use the opposite trick to sneak their own paintings *into* the museums. My guess is that each nanobot remembers exactly which portion of the painting it’s carrying in its scoop. Once they all arrive at their destination, they use that information to reassemble the painting with molecular precision¹⁶³.”

At that moment, the Muddled Badger’s front door burst open! Guy stumbled in with a cloth bag in his hand, gasping for breath.

“Guy!” exclaimed Amy, “Where have you been!?”

¹⁶³ This story reveals how the nanobots work twice in a row: once from the “bad guy” perspective (in the previous chapter), and once from the “good guy” perspective (in this chapter). It’s not a deal-breaker, but it’s definitely clunky... and it suggests that the story isn’t being told efficiently.

"Sorry everyone," Guy apologized between gasps, "I was so exhausted from landscaping last night that I muted my phone and turned in early... but I forgot to set my alarm for this morning, so I overslept. I'm really sorry for worrying everyone!"

Amy's face registered shock, followed quickly by anger. "You bailed on our date because you were *tired*!?" demanded Amy indignantly, "Why didn't you at least text me that you couldn't make it?"

Guy jumped involuntarily. "Our date was last evening¹⁶⁴!?"

Everyone in the room did a simultaneous facepalm... except for Guy, who continued to look stunned, and Amy, who turned livid. "This isn't working, Guy!" she shouted tearfully, "You'll have to decide what's more important to you: the landscaping job, the BLA, or me!" Then she turned around and stomped into one of the conference rooms.

Guy felt horrified at the way he'd hurt Amy's feelings. He turned to follow her, but Thelma hastily stopped him. "Wait, Guy!" she urged him, "If you keep crossing bridges with one shoe dropped, then burning your way to the other side won't make a hair trigger's worth of difference!"

Guy halted in his steps and looked baffled. "*What* was that¹⁶⁵?"

"Sorry, that came out wrong," amended Thelma, "Give Amy 5 minutes to cool off, and *then* talk to her."

Guy hesitated. "Why can't I just talk to her now?"

"Because right now she's angry at you," Thelma explained patiently, "And she's ready to reject anything you say. 5 minutes is enough time for her to cool off a little, but not so much time that she'll start to wonder if you care."

Guy reflected on that. "Wow," he marveled, "Did you learn that from dating your husband?"

"Well, no," Thelma admitted, "I learned it from raising our kids. But I'm pretty sure it works with dating, too."

"Got it," affirmed Guy, "5 minutes."

"And for pity's sake, Guy... make sure you listen to her!" admonished Thelma, "I've never seen Amy this upset before. Whatever's bothering her, it must be something important."

* * * * *

Guy cautiously entered the conference room, still carrying his cloth bag. 5 minutes had been more than enough time to reflect on his relationship with Amy, and realize just how much he cared about this girl. More than anything, he wanted to understand what was going on... and make things right if he possibly could. He only hoped he wasn't too late.

Amy was sitting glumly at the conference table, idly firing rubber bands at a coffee mug. Guy carefully pulled up a chair next to her.

¹⁶⁴ Guy obviously hasn't checked his phone since he woke up today... because if he had, he would've immediately seen the increasingly worried and/or frustrated texts from Amy, asking why he wasn't at the bowling alley.

¹⁶⁵ Ah, so Guy was confused by Thelma's statement, too! I'm glad it wasn't just me.

"I'm sorry Amy, for everything," he began, "And I agree that the landscaping job isn't working. I'm willing to quit that, and commit to the BLA... and you, of course."

Amy sighed. "It's not really about the landscaping job, Guy... no matter where we work, we'll still care about each other. I know that."

"Okay, it's not about the landscaping job," replied Guy kindly, "But something's been bothering you, Amy... can you tell me what it is? I want to help, if I can."

Amy took a moment to collect her thoughts. "It's like this, Guy. Ever since my parents disappeared, everything's been my responsibility. My education, my career..." She scoffed gently. "...even my rent, thanks to Bethany's inconsistent payments. And I'm not saying I can't handle it. I'm stronger than most people think. But if I'm going to be in a relationship with someone... well, I don't want everything to be on me all the time."

"You want to know that someone has your back?" ventured Guy.

Amy smiled faintly. "Yeah, something like that. Otherwise, what's the point? I already know how to be strong on my own. But what I really want is to be strong *with* someone, so that we can share each other's loads... like a tag team, or something. That's important to me."

Guy nodded soberly. "I haven't exactly been reliable lately, have I? I fell asleep during a mission, and I missed yesterday's date. I'm sorry, Amy... I really thought our date was today. I'd been looking forward to it all morning."

Amy didn't reply at first. But then she looked directly at Guy, and earnestly asked: "Do you have my back, Guy? Can you be strong for the times when I'm not?"

Guy took her hand. "I know I'm not perfect, Amy. But I've got your back, and I always will... no matter where we end up working. And I'd rather work here at the BLA, with you."

From the cloth bag he'd been carrying, Guy produced a single, beautiful chrysanthemum. "I know it's your favorite flower," he explained, "I was planning to put it in water here, and then give it to you during our date. I'm sorry I missed it."

A tear came to Amy's eye. "Thank you," she whispered.

* * * * *

Guy and Amy walked back into the Muddled Badger's main area, hand in hand.

"Everyone," Guy announced, "I just want you to know that I'm resigning from my landscaping job today¹⁶⁶."

"You have a landscaping job?" asked Grant curiously.

"Not anymore," quipped Thelma.

¹⁶⁶ Good riddance! The landscaping job was a nonsensical source of unnecessary drama. I know this is a sequel, but that doesn't mean the hero needs to spend half the story making frustrating decisions!

Undeterred, Guy continued: "And one more thing: I'm not letting that MLA goon break up our team! We're cracking this case before the deadline. I don't know how, but we'll make it work!"

"I'm glad to hear that," observed Arthur, "Because we only have 4 days left."

Guy was briefly taken aback, and he turned to Amy. "That's it? 4 days?"

Amy nodded in confirmation, and Guy turned back to bravely address the room. "We'll make it work anyway!"

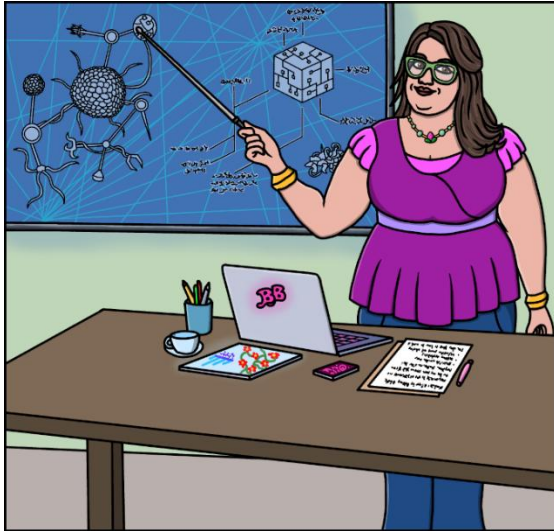
Chapter 13: Finding the Target

Arthur had assembled everyone in the conference room for an emergency meeting.

"People, we need a plan to stop the Felonistas," he announced, "And we're short on time. I need ideas."

Grant turned to Bethany. "Bethany... is there a way we could track the nanobots?"

Bethany considered this. "An active nanobot would probably emit some kind of signal or field that we can trace." She brightened. "I could even add that capability to your Y-Goggles... it might come in handy during your next mission¹⁶⁷!"



"That could definitely help in the field," agreed Arthur, "But do you have any way of tracking the nanobots when they're *inactive*?"

"Well... no," Bethany admitted, "And I see what you're getting at. If we can't track the nanobots until they're already active, then they're going to take us by surprise whenever they're used."

"Exactly," replied Arthur, "I still think it's worth tracking them while they're active... but what we really need is a way to predict where the Felonistas will strike next."

"We're so close, though!" Amy pointed out, "If we could be in the right place at the right time even *once*, then we could stop the heist!"

"Not so fast," interjected Bethany, "I haven't actually found a way to stop these things yet. Normally, I'd recommend hitting the entire swarm with a contained EMP pulse... but it looks like these things are shielded from that. Whoever built them did a magnificent job."

"So we can't track them until they strike... and when they strike, we can't stop them?" asked Thelma bleakly.

"I didn't say we *couldn't* stop them," explained Bethany, "I'm just saying it could be hard to stop them directly."

¹⁶⁷ What a good idea! Unfortunately, that's the last we'll hear of it.

“Then how about indirectly?” asked Grant, “They’re only robots, right? Could we hack their programming?”

Bethany reflected on this. “Well... with enough time, yes. But it could take me weeks to bypass their security measures, and you guys only have 4 days left to solve the case! Fortunately, there’s another option: it looks like the nanobots are designed to receive instructions remotely. If we could disable the source of their programming, then the entire swarm might shut down¹⁶⁸.”

Guy snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it! You said we can track the nanobots once they’re active, right? Well, why not track them back to the Felonista’s lair? That’s probably where we’ll find the computer that’s controlling them!”

“But we can’t scan the entire planet for nanobot signals,” objected Arthur, “We still need some idea of where to look. And that brings us back to the earlier question: how do we predict where the Felonistas will strike next?”

“You’ve got me there,” sighed Guy in frustration, “We can’t stake out every museum in the world, even if we only tried the ones with famous paintings. We need a lead, like the one which led us to the Louvre!”

“Well, we’d better think of *something*,” said Thelma pensively, “We can’t expect someone to just hand us the next clue!”

As if on cue, Thelma’s phone buzzed. She checked it: to her astonishment, there was a new text message from Milieu. “I guess I spoke too soon,” Thelma observed.

“What’s it say?” asked Amy eagerly, “Is it spam? I got one this morning about a package that had been held up in customs. It kind of threw me for a moment, because I was actually expecting a delivery... but then I realized that they misspelled the word ‘intransigent’, so it probably wasn’t legit¹⁶⁹.”

“It’s not spam,” Thelma explained, “It’s from Milieu. It says, ‘Steal *Golconda* painting from Menil Collection in Houston tomorrow. Will cover you from roof. Cyan provides nano support from lair.’”

“But why on earth would Milieu send that to *you*!?” asked Arthur incredulously.

Thelma frowned. “I think it was an accident,” she concluded, “I must still be on her contact list¹⁷⁰.”

Guy grinned. “I think we have our lead¹⁷¹.”

For the first time since the meeting started, Arthur smiled. “Guy, Amy... how quickly can you two drive to Houston?”

¹⁶⁸ I’m sure that these technical generalizations will make some experts cringe. If you’re one of those experts, then give yourself a pat on the back for knowing better... but please don’t forget to enjoy the story. :)

¹⁶⁹ The message included the word “intransigent”? What did Amy order, anyway?

¹⁷⁰ Let’s be honest: this is probably the most realistic plot development in the entire story so far. Just ask anyone who’s done an unintentional “reply all”! Also, nobody seemed surprised when Thelma announced that she’s on Milieu’s contact list. Is everyone already aware that Thelma and Milieu have hung out socially? We really could’ve used a scene where the BLA had a chance to talk through that.

¹⁷¹ That’s well and good, but Milieu’s text leaves us more confused than ever about the Felonista’s heists. Why have they gone back to their earlier (seemingly unnecessary) strategy of visiting museums in person? And why would Milieu need to cover Niche from the roof? What’s *that* about?

* * * * *

Milieu strode briskly into the command center of the Felonista's lair. "Hey Cyan," she called out, "Did you get my text about the next heist?"

"I sure did!" replied Cyan, "I'm providing nanobot support from here, right?"

"Right," agreed Milieu, "And Niche?"

"What?" asked Niche absently, from behind a comic book.

"Did you get my text about the next heist?" repeated Milieu pointedly.

Niche snapped to attention. "Right, sorry... let me check."

Niche pulled out her phone and spent nearly a minute checking through it. Finally, she put it down. "We've passed 2 million followers," she announced, "But no, I don't see a text from you anywhere."

"Are you still trying to use that stupid email app with the synchronization problem?" asked Milieu impatiently.

"No, I got rid of that," replied Niche defensively, "And yes, before you ask... I also checked my junk folder¹⁷²."

Milieu scowled. "It's just a text message," she muttered to herself, as she got out her own phone, "This shouldn't have to be rocket science... see? I sent it to you more than 10 minutes ago. It was... oh, shellac¹⁷³! I accidentally sent our plans to Thelma, the BLA's secretary!"

"But why would you tell the BLA about our plans?" asked Cyan in confusion.

"I didn't do it on purpose, you *yawning chasm*¹⁷⁴!" retorted Milieu in frustration, "She must've been at the top of my 'recent contacts' list when... oh, what difference does it make!?"

"Well, what are we supposed to do now?" demanded Niche, "I really wanted the *Golconda* painting! It would've looked great in my rec room... the thing is nearly 15 feet wide¹⁷⁵! Maybe we should bust up the BLA right now, before they cause us any more problems."

"But we don't have their address," Cyan pointed out.

Milieu sighed in frustration. "She's right. Nobody knows the new location of the BLA base. We couldn't attack them even if we wanted to¹⁷⁶."

"So... do we abort the next heist?" persisted Cyan, "It sounds like the BLA is going to crash our party."

¹⁷² I thought this was a text message, not an email. But more importantly... if the Felonistas spend so much time together, then why take the enormous risk of texting critical information to each other in the first place?

¹⁷³ If this isn't a euphemism among artists, it should be.

¹⁷⁴ In other words, a huge gulch or opening. Perhaps Milieu is suggesting that Cyan has a big mouth.

¹⁷⁵ This isn't true.

¹⁷⁶ But Milieu was already able to find Thelma at the open market near the BLA! From there, wouldn't it be easy to track Thelma back to the BLA's base?

Milieu thought carefully for a moment. Aborting the heist would definitely be the safest choice. But then again, perhaps there was a more artful way to deal with this. A devious smile flashed across her face. “Actually, Cyan... perhaps that’s exactly what we want! Here’s what we do...”

* * * * *

That evening, after Bethany went home, she found it difficult to concentrate on her video games. They were still as fun and engaging as before, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the work she’d been doing at the BLA. It was too long since she’d done anything that really mattered.

The thought made Bethany wince a little, but there was no getting around it. The video game competitions had been a wonderful escape from that awful corporate job... but even so, she knew in her heart that she’d never stopped running. In fact, she’d put her entire life on hold for over a year now, and what did she have to show for it? Nothing but honorable mentions at some entertainment venues that nobody would remember.

But what was the alternative? Bethany reminded herself that she got out of nanotechnology for a reason. That company had practically squeezed the life out of her, and no matter how hard she worked, management was never happy. The day she quit had practically been the happiest one in her life.

At that moment, Bethany made an easily avoidable blunder in the game she was playing... which destroyed her current speed run attempt. She paused the game and sighed. A miserable corporate life which asked too much, or an irresponsible isolated life which asked too little. Were those really her only options? Surely not¹⁷⁷!

Bethany’s train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. Leaving her game controller on the sofa, she walked up to the apartment door and looked through the peep hole. She immediately grimaced as she recognized Ethel, her landlord. This wasn’t going to be pleasant. Bethany opened the door, but she left the chain latched... that would prevent the door from opening more than 2 inches, and more importantly, it would prevent Ethel from walking in and lecturing her for the next hour.

“Your rent’s due,” Ethel informed her.

“Amy’s away this evening,” explained Bethany, with as much pleasantness as she could muster, “But I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

“Away again?” sniffed Ethel. “She seems to go on a lot of trips.”

“Well, it’s really none of my business,” replied Bethany. *And it’s definitely none of yours*, she thought to herself.

“Then at least give me your half of the rent,” persisted Ethel, looking as menacing as she could through the 2-inch gap between the door and its frame, “I’ll collect Amy’s half when she gets back.”

“The money’s with Amy right now,” explained Bethany nervously, “But you’ll get it soon... I promise!” That was basically the truth. More or less.

¹⁷⁷ Just to be clear, Bethany’s calling *herself* irresponsible: this isn’t a dig at video games.

Ethel gave her a scrutinizing glare. "I don't like delays," she finally answered, "I'll be back for the full rent later this week... and for your sake, you'd better have it. Promises don't keep tenants in my building."

And with those ominous words, Ethel finally left¹⁷⁸.

Bethany closed the door and looked back to the sofa, where her game controller was waiting expectantly. She sighed. "One of these days, I need to rethink my life."

¹⁷⁸ And apparently, Ethel left the entire *story*, because she's never mentioned again.

Chapter 14: Trouble on the Road

Later that day, Guy and Amy were driving a rental car to the Menil Collection, in Houston. It was getting dark, but they were close to their destination: they only had to finish driving through the Appalachian Mountains¹⁷⁹. It had been a long and cheerful journey, full of small-town coffee shops and sparkling conversation, but now Guy and Amy were both feeling tired.

"I'm getting a bit sleepy," Amy admitted, "Want to play an observation game to keep us awake?"

Guy laughed. "But you always win at those!"

"I know," grinned Amy, "That's why I like 'em!"

"You're on," replied Guy smugly, "But fair warning: this time, I'm prepared. You see, I thought you might try something like this... so I've spent the entire trip looking for things to quiz you about, just in case! For example, how many tunnels have we gone through?"

"Eight," replied Amy immediately.

Guy jumped in his seat. "How did... never mind. I guess tunnels are too obvious. Let's try another one! How many convertibles -"

"None, until we were about halfway to Texas," explained Amy cheerfully, "And since then, thirty-five."

"What in the world!?" howled Guy, "Alright, then! The gloves are coming off! Which species of tree -"

"Spruce," interrupted Amy gleefully.

"You didn't even let me finish my question!" protested Guy.

"Was I right?" asked Amy. She was practically giggling now.

Guy shook his head incredulously. "Okay Amy, nobody's *this* good... not even you! What's your secret this time?"

Amy laughed. "You're always trying to stump me with observation questions, Guy! And the first time we passed through a tunnel, you got this mischievous grin on your face... I figured you were making a mental list to stump me with later. And ever since then, I've carefully followed your line of sight every time that grin appeared on your face, to see what you were looking at."

There was a stunned pause, so Amy added, "I haven't seen that grin on your face for the last hour, so I figured you were planning to use your information soon... but I couldn't wait any longer, so I sort of maneuvered you into asking me."

Guy shook his head in amazement. "Thank goodness you're on our side."

¹⁷⁹ These stories have *never* worried about the logistics of getting from point A to point B, so it's curious that we suddenly have a travel scene here. And unfortunately, it's wrong! It actually takes about 24 hours to drive from New York to Houston, so there's no way they could be nearing Houston on the same day they left. And if they're approaching Houston, then they shouldn't be anywhere near the Appalachian Mountains!

Amy laughed again. “You bet I am! But you’ve gotten pretty good yourself, Guy. When you first joined the BLA, there’s no way you could’ve tracked a mental list like that over several hours. Your observation skills have absolutely skyrocketed!”

“I learn from the best,” remarked Guy, with a smile.

“Aw, thanks Guy,” replied Amy, blushing.

“You two know that your comms are active, right?” came Grant’s voice over their earpieces.

“Thanks for the reminder,” quipped Guy, “But yeah... I’d totally forgotten.”

“Me too.” added Amy.

Guy smirked. “No you didn’t,” he said to her, “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Yeah,” Amy admitted, “Hey, do you think there’s anything good on the radio?”

“Only one way to find out,” smiled Guy. He risked a brief glance at the dashboard: he wasn’t familiar with the rental car’s controls. However, he quickly located the button for the radio and turned it on.

After a brief burst of static, a droning voice came through the rental car’s low-quality speakers.

“Welcome back to ‘Appalachian Access Academy’, everyone’s favorite mountain-based radio talk show¹⁸⁰! Our next guest is a rising celebrity with some daring new ideas...”

“This should be good,” chuckled Guy.

“...say hello to Milieu, from the Felonistas!” announced the host.

Guy’s face fell. “Maybe we should change stations.”

“No, we might as well hear what she’s up to,” insisted Amy, “I can take it!”

“So tell me, Milieu,” asked the host, “What’s your preferred art style?”

“Classical,” responded Milieu, “Although I’ll occasionally indulge in some impressionism. Nothing too abstract, though... that’s more Cyan’s style.”

“Understood,” smiled the host, “Now, your rise in popularity over the last few days has been almost unprecedented. How do you explain this meteoric rise to fame?”

“It’s simple,” replied Milieu smugly, “We’re doing something that should’ve been done decades ago, and people appreciate that. And our superior paintings don’t hurt the picture... if you’ll excuse my pun.”

“Bold words, to be sure,” remarked the host, “But I understand that your exploits have put you at odds with the law.”

“You mean the BLA?” asked Milieu, and she laughed dismissively, “If that underfunded joke of an agency thinks they can stop us, then they’re welcome to try!”

¹⁸⁰ Don’t bother trying to find this show: I made it up. And if *does* exist at any time after October 1st, 2024, then I just want to state for the record that I thought of it first.

Amy clenched her teeth and gripped the armrest tightly.

"You okay, Amy?" queried Guy.

"I'm fine," she insisted, "But I'd sure love to wipe that smug smile off Milieu's face!"

"Now, I'm curious about the dynamics within your group," continued the host, "What's it like to work for a character like Niche?"

"I don't work for Niche, you *nebulous mass*¹⁸¹!" stormed Milieu, "I'm the leader!"

Amy grinned mischievously, and turned off the radio with an air of satisfaction. "There, see? It was worth tuning in, just to hear her lose it." She eyed the rearview mirror, and then frowned with concern. "Hey, Guy... isn't that pickup truck following us kind of closely?"

"He's been creeping up on us for the last few minutes," replied Guy disgustedly, "I've already sped up twice, but he won't give me any space. I *hate* tailgaters."

"Maybe you should let him pass," suggested Amy.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," confirmed Guy, "A mountain road is no place for stupid games like this."

Before Guy could change lanes, however, the pickup truck rapidly accelerated and rammed them from behind! Guy's car threatened to fishtail, but he wrestled the vehicle back under control, just in time to navigate a dangerous turn.

"What's *wrong* with this lunatic!?" Guy bellowed.

"I think he means trouble, Guy!" said Amy nervously.

"What's going on over there?" asked Grant over the comms, "Are you in danger?"

"We might be," replied Guy tensely, "Hang on."

The current stretch of the road offered a fairly safe shoulder on the right side. Guy tried to slow down and pull off the road, but the pickup truck matched his move and threatened to ram him from behind again. Guy quickly floored the accelerator and swerved back onto the road. The pickup truck followed him.

"Yeah, we're in danger!" confirmed Guy, "We're being pursued by a maniac in a pickup truck!"

Guy looked ahead: the relatively safe stretch of road was ending. Up ahead was a series of dips, rises, and hairpin turns. One side of the road terminated in a steep hill, although it was protected by a guardrail¹⁸².

"Amy," he called out, "Who are we dealing with? Can you see through their windshield?"

¹⁸¹ In other words, a vague bulk. Perhaps Milieu is saying that the host tends to dwell on unimportant side issues.

¹⁸² I don't know if the Appalachian Mountains have any of the features mentioned in this chapter. But honestly, we've already misplaced the entire mountain range by saying it's near Houston... a few fictional details in the road won't make any difference.

“No,” said Amy in frustration, “They must have about an inch of tint on their windows... Guy, watch it! He’s coming again!”

Guy braced himself, and the entire car shook as the pickup truck rammed them again. The sheer impact drove the car against the guardrail, which bent dangerously under the car’s weight¹⁸³. Guy struggled against the impact, and managed to get the car back on the road.

“This is starting to feel personal,” he muttered to himself.

“Guy!” shouted Amy, “Tunnel!”

Guy looked ahead: sure enough, they were roughly 10 seconds away from a short tunnel. Guy checked the road to confirm there was no oncoming traffic, and then deliberately aimed for the middle of the road. “That should give us some space on the sides,” he explained.

However, the pickup truck had other plans. It picked up tremendous speed and rammed the car again: this time, the car actually popped into the air from the impact just as it entered the tunnel. The tunnel sheared off the car’s roof, filling the air with the horrible shriek of rending metal¹⁸⁴.

“Make that thirty-six convertibles,” Guy quipped, as they left the tunnel without their roof.

“That does it!” yelled Amy furiously, and she pulled a spud buster out of her backpack.

Guy noticed what she was about to do. “Wait, are we allowed to use those on random civilians!?”

Without warning, a bullet hole suddenly appeared in the dashboard between Guy and Amy.

“I don’t think this is a random civilian!” Amy declared.

She armed the spud buster and lobbed it at the pursuing pickup truck. The truck swerved to miss the potato, but its rear tire accidentally flattened it. The spud buster instantly blew up, propelling the pickup truck through the air. The airborne truck landed with its rear tires on the road, and its front wheels planted on the exposed back seat of Guy’s roofless car. The car, having detected the truck’s weight on its back seat, helpfully informed Guy that the rear passengers should fasten their seatbelts.

There was a stunned moment while everyone tried to process what had just happened, and then the truck renewed its assault. It accelerated, attempting to climb its front wheels over the seat so that it could crush Guy and Amy. Amy screamed, while Guy panicked and hit the gas. The sudden change in speed dislodged the pickup truck from their car, but unfortunately, Guy hadn’t been watching the road. He blew into a hairpin turn at full speed and crashed through the guardrail.

The car plunged down the steep, tree-lined hill. Several frantic seconds passed, as Guy made a series of tiny, rapid-fire corrections to avoid hitting any trees. Without warning, the car burst through the tree line at the bottom of the hill and skidded onto a lower section of the highway. Along the way, they flattened a friendly-looking sign which proclaimed, “Share the road”.

¹⁸³ As opposed to bending safely, I guess.

¹⁸⁴ Let me save you a bunch of individual footnotes in advance: this car chase will sometimes ignore the laws of physics. Buckle up!

Guy took a shaky breath, and allowed the car to slow down a little. He laughed nervously. "Well... at least we lost them, right?"

At that moment, the pickup truck burst through the tree line and joined them on the lower road.

"Are you *kidding* me!?" howled Guy.

Grant's voice came over the comms. "Guy, you should be approaching a railway bridge... take it across the chasm!"

"What if a train hits us!?" demanded Amy.

"The schedule says there won't be a train on this bridge for hours," Grant assured her, "But I'll bet the pickup truck doesn't know that. I doubt they'll risk following you."

"Got it," confirmed Guy, "I'm taking the railway bridge."

Guy veered off the road and onto the rails. It was a much bumpier ride, and he was obliged to slow down to reduce the shakiness. However, he was also gratified to see the pursuing jeep¹⁸⁵ hang back, hesitate, and then roll to a stop. A few moments later, Guy and Amy had followed the tracks onto the railway bridge. Their car began crossing the vast chasm between the two opposite cliffs. Distantly, Guy heard several shots being fired from the truck, but none of the bullets hit his car. Moments later, they were completely out of range.

"Are we safe yet?" laughed Amy nervously.

"Not until we're off this bridge," replied Guy, "But on the bright side, we finally escaped the maniac pickup truck."

The momentary peace was interrupted by an urgent question from Grant over the comms. "Guy, are you still on the railway bridge?"

"We're not even halfway across," responded Guy wearily, "Let me guess... train?"

"It wasn't listed on the normal schedule," explained Grant apologetically, "Maybe it's a special charter; I don't know! But you've got about 30 seconds before it creams you."

Guy looked ahead. Sure enough, a freight train was just starting to round the corner and approach the far end of their bridge. "It's already cut us off on the far end," Guy informed him, "And the bridge is too narrow to turn the car around. Any other options?"

"Can you jump?" asked Grant hopefully.

Guy looked over the side of the railway bridge, as the car continued to coast to its imminent collision with the train. They were more than 50 feet off the ground¹⁸⁶. "Not safely," deadpanned Guy.

"We're up high," Amy reminded Grant.

¹⁸⁵ No, it's a pickup truck! Those are very different vehicles.

¹⁸⁶ Chapter 11 gave a measurement in meters, but I decided to provide this measurement using feet. That way, everybody has a chance to be confused about the size of something!

“Did you say you’re a *pie*!?” asked a bewildered Grant over the comms, “As in, pastry?”

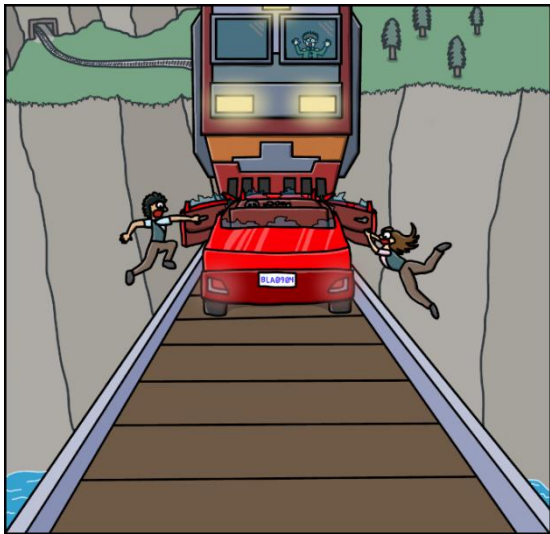
“I said we’re *up high*!” replied Amy impatiently, “As in, elevated!”

“Gee,” remarked Grant innocently, “I’ll bet you wish you had a jetpack right now¹⁸⁷.”

“Never mind that now!” interjected Guy, “I just had an idea!” He turned to Amy. “Quick! Open your car door, then climb onto it and hang off the side!”

“*That’s* your idea!?” demanded Amy incredulously.

“This car gets crushed in 10 seconds!” Guy exclaimed¹⁸⁸.



In unison, Guy and Amy opened their car doors. Then, they each climbed out onto their respective doors and hung off the side. The doors swung out far enough to dangle Guy and Amy over open space. Moments later, the train struck the car at full force! The car was crushed beyond recognition, but both of its doors broke away cleanly and fell off either side of the railway bridge, with Guy and Amy still clinging to them for dear life¹⁹⁰.

“Well, that bought us about 5 seconds!” declared Amy, yelling to be heard over the rushing wind from their freefall, “What’s next?”

“Hang on tight,” shouted Guy, “And hope we survive the fall!”

* * * * *

Guy woke up in a hospital room. His eyes groggily opened, and the events of the car chase gradually came back to him. A nurse was examining a chart on a nearby table.

¹⁸⁷ Is Grant using a life-and-death situation to push his jetpack idea!? That seems in really poor taste.

¹⁸⁸ The train’s conductor really should’ve noticed the car on the bridge, and at least attempted to brake. He’ll have a tough time explaining this collision to his boss.

¹⁸⁹ In the illustration, the car’s license plate begins with “BLA”. You’d almost think that the artist didn’t know this car was a rental when he was drawing the picture!

¹⁹⁰ No, you may not criticize the science behind this maneuver. I warned you that there would be physics violations!

"Where am I?" asked Guy groggily.

"Houston," answered the nurse, "This is a hospital."

From the other side of the room, Amy stirred. She briefly glanced around the room to take in her surroundings, and then spoke up. "How long have we been here?"

"Just overnight," the nurse assured them, "You were a little banged up, but it was nothing serious... you're going to be fine¹⁹¹."

"Thank goodness!" replied Amy, "Sorry, but we have to get going... see you later¹⁹²!"

Guy and Amy rushed out of the hospital. Despite their ordeal on the road, they were feeling more optimistic than ever.

"There's still time to prevent the heist!" declared Guy, "And if we stop the Felonistas here, then we can crack this case with 3 days to spare!"

They began making their way to the Menil Collection¹⁹³.

¹⁹¹ Sure, it's ridiculous. But this is hardly the first action story where the heroes face an imminent catastrophe, only to wake up the next day with no injuries... and no explanations. I mean, how'd they survive? Who found them and brought them to the hospital? If they weren't badly injured, then why'd they remain unconscious overnight? Did their car's dramatic collision with a train end up on the news? Does the BLA know that Guy and Amy are okay? There's just so many unanswered questions!

¹⁹² Of *course* we aren't going to deal with hospital fees or patient checkout procedures. This is an action story!

¹⁹³ Wait a second... so, who was chasing them in the pickup truck? Did the Felonistas hire someone to attack Guy and Amy on the road, or was that a completely random car chase? Does the BLA have to pay for wrecking the rental car? Is this really the last we're going to hear of the mysterious assailant in the pickup truck? What was the *point* of this chapter!?

Chapter 15: Preparations

Guy and Amy had spent the day casing the chambers and hallways of Houston's Menil Collection, particularly the ones near the *Golconda* painting. The museum wouldn't close for another hour and a half.



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"This is a lot easier when we know which painting they're after," smiled Guy. "Any thoughts yet on how to stop the heist?"

"Well, there's only two of us," Amy reasoned, "So we should probably focus on capturing Niche: she seems to be their leader¹⁹⁵."

"Good point," agreed Guy, "If Milieu's providing cover from the roof, then Niche will probably go for the painting. We can nab her in the act, and then sneak her out of the delivery area to avoid drawing attention¹⁹⁶."

"Pardon me," interrupted a nearby man, "Are you talking about Niche?"

"Oh, uh... yeah," stammered Guy, "You know, this whole Felonista thing... it's got everyone talking!"

"You said it!" agreed the man enthusiastically, "And don't get me wrong, Niche is great... but *my* favorite is Cyan! Her abstracts just speak to me!"

Guy blinked in confusion, as his mind processed the full meaning behind the man's comment.

"I take it you're a fan," remarked Amy dryly.

¹⁹⁴ This isn't what the interior of the Menil Collection looks like. Also (trivia time), all of the paintings in this image are photos that I've personally taken.

¹⁹⁵ The radio show from the previous chapter clearly established that Milieu is the Felonista's leader. But apparently, Guy and Amy forgot about that.

¹⁹⁶ By the way: the Menil Collection *does* have a delivery area. And better yet, it's well-hidden in the exterior walls, which would make it well-suited for sneaking. I thought I'd do a little research this time, just to keep you guessing!

"Of course!" replied the man, as if it should be obvious, "It's about time the art community had a champion... and now we have *three*! Oh, I couldn't be happier!"

Amy stiffened, and Guy could see that the man had struck a nerve. "We should get going," Guy declared, as he put one hand on his hip, "It was nice talking to -"

Unfortunately, Guy's hand brushed the stun gun's sensitive trigger mechanism. The gun discharged a stun bolt, which ricocheted off a decommissioned drinking fountain and struck the man in the leg. The man's leg instantly went numb, and he began flailing his arms in an attempt to remain upright¹⁹⁷.

Guy looked to Amy helplessly. "What do we do!?" But Amy couldn't answer: she'd covered her mouth with both hands to stifle an impending laugh, and her entire body was shaking with the effort of keeping it down.

Guy turned back. By this time, the man had regained his balance by leaning against a wall, and he was glaring angrily at both of them.

"What did you do to me!?" he demanded, "What's wrong with my leg!?"

"Nothing's wrong! It'll wear off!" Guy hastily assured him, "It was just an accident, see?"

Guy attempted to show him the stun gun. But his index finger brushed the trigger as he was drawing it out, causing it to discharge yet again. This time, the stun bolt didn't even ricochet: it hit the man directly in the abdomen and he dropped to the floor, completely unconscious.

"Dang it!" exclaimed Guy in frustration.

He turned back to Amy for advice, but his last exclamation had pushed her over the edge. She was doubled over with laughter. "Sorry! I'm so sorry!" she gasped, desperately trying to regain her composure, "The look on your face when it hit his leg... and then you tried to explain yourself to him, and... and..." A fresh wave of mirth swept over Amy, and she was forced to leave her sentence unfinished as she doubled over again.

"Laugh all you want," replied Guy anxiously, "But now we have a *real* problem on our hands." He gestured at the unconscious man. "This joker is a death sentence for our stakeout! As soon as he wakes up, he'll report us to the museum!"

With a supreme effort, Amy managed to pull herself together. "Don't panic," she assured him in a slightly shaky voice, "Help me take him outside, and everything will be fine!"

Guy wasn't sure what Amy was planning, but he was immensely relieved to have any sort of plan at all. He grabbed the man's arms as Amy grabbed his feet, and together they began carrying him out of the museum. As they approached the exit, the guard at the front desk caught sight of them. He jumped up in surprise, but Amy was ready. "Too much excitement," she explained earnestly, as she nodded at the comatose man they were carrying, "He just needs some air."

¹⁹⁷ Huh... this is the first time we've seen a stun bolt numb somebody's limb, instead of leaving them unconscious. I know this is fictional technology, but now I can't help wondering what the rules are. Just for starters, *why* does the stun effect work differently on limbs, as opposed to the body or head?

Once they were outside, Amy did a quick scan of the parking lot. She pointed toward a distant bench. "There... see that bench over by the tree? Our Felonista fanboy can cool his heels over there."

With a final effort, Guy and Amy carried the man over to the bench and deposited him on it. They both took a moment to catch their breath.

"Now what?" asked Guy, "When he wakes up, he'll just march right back into the museum!"

"Nope," declared Amy triumphantly, "By then, the museum will be closed... so he won't be able to complain about us! And by the time the museum reopens tomorrow, we'll be long gone."

Guy considered this. "Not quite," he replied worriedly, "The museum doesn't close for an hour and a half... and my stun bolts only knock people out for an hour."

Amy blinked in surprise. "You may have a point, Guy! Here, can I see that stun gun for a moment?"

Guy shrugged and handed the stun gun to Amy. Amy briefly inspected the stun gun, brandished it, and then smoothly fired another stun bolt into the unconscious man.

"There, that's two hours!" she declared mischievously, "Problem solved¹⁹⁸."

* * * * *

In the Menil Collection's security room, three security guards were preparing to hand things over to the evening shift. It had been another uneventful afternoon of watching the surveillance monitors: the most exciting moment occurred in the cafeteria, when a child spilled their juice box on an elderly man¹⁹⁹.

Just then, the door to the security room opened, and two women walked in. The security guards immediately recognized them: it was Milieu and Niche²⁰⁰.

"It's the Felonistas!" whispered one of the guards nervously.

Niche grinned broadly. "Ah, you've heard of us! I'm so pleased to hear it."

"And that means you know why we're here," added Milieu warningly, "Now... shall we do things the easy way, or the hard way?"

In response, the lead security guard stood up and wordlessly reached for his holster.

Milieu smiled blandly. "Very well... that's the easy way."

Without warning, a large cloud of nanobots swarmed in from behind Milieu and Niche. The swarm instantly separated into three smaller clouds which flew toward the individual security guards. The startled guards drew their weapons, but to their dismay, they couldn't shoot: the nanobots had already swarmed inside the guns and eaten away at the inner workings.

¹⁹⁸ Wow, they're playing fast and loose in this scene! But I sure enjoyed writing it. :)

¹⁹⁹ Clearly, the security guards somehow failed to notice the moment when two government agents stunned a random civilian and then dragged him outside the building.

²⁰⁰ And how did the guards miss two distinctively dressed criminals striding toward their security room!? Were they too distracted by the "juice box kid" to notice?

The frustrated security guards attempted to rush Milieu and Niche, but the nanobots were too quick! The small swarms buzzed in their faces, hindered their movements, and attacked them from every angle. Niche quickly closed in on the beleaguered security guards and knocked each of them unconscious. Meanwhile, the nanobots merged back into one swarm and hovered into a corner, waiting patiently for further instructions²⁰¹.

“Nice work, Cyan,” said Milieu into her cellphone, “The nanobots were efficient, but merciful. That’ll keep our approval ratings as high as possible.”

“Thanks!” replied Cyan over the cellphone, “I always wanted to prank a room full of security guards!”

Niche smirked. “Hey, what about me? I’m the one who actually knocked them out!”

“We couldn’t have done it without you,” confirmed Milieu generously. She eyed a security monitor, which showed Guy and Amy walking down one of the museum’s hallways.

Milieu smiled ominously. “Welcome to our show, little agents... I look forward to watching you dance.”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, at the BLA base, two police officers were escorting Charles Bly out of the temporary holding cell.

“Thanks for taking him off our hands,” said Arthur graciously, “If today’s operation goes well, then we’ll need the cell ready to go.”

“I won’t forget this!” declared Charles, as he was led out the door, “You haven’t heard the last of me!”

“I know, I know,” said Thelma soothingly, “Believe me, we get that a lot.”

Moments after Charles was gone, Grant’s head poked out of the workshop. “Guy and Amy checked in. They’re ready to go for this evening’s heist.”

“Excellent,” replied Arthur, “And Grant, I’m sorry for all these evening missions we’ve been running lately... as you know, we’re caught in a bit of a time crunch.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Grant. There was a brief moment of hesitation, and then he added, “By the way, can Bethany stay for tonight’s mission?”

Arthur looked vaguely amused. “Is this Bethany’s idea?”

“Well, no,” Grant admitted, “But she did help us with the case, and I thought she might like to see how things turn out.”

Arthur considered for a moment, and then nodded. “Very well. I don’t see any harm in that.”

“Thanks, Arthur!” replied Grant cheerfully, and he disappeared back into the workshop.

There was a moment’s silence.

²⁰¹ Yikes... these nanobots are actually pretty dangerous! Thank goodness this isn’t one of those “dark and gritty” stories, or those security guards would be toast.

"Grant is definitely crushing on Bethany," observed Thelma.

"Oh, give them some space!" chided Arthur, "They've only known each other for 2 days."

Thelma shrugged. "Every relationship starts that way."

* * * * *

Grant entered the workshop. Bethany was idly wandering around with a distant look on her face. She noticed Grant, and immediately walked up to him.

"Hey," she addressed him, "So, I guess I'm pretty much done for now, right? Give me a call if you need anything else with the nanobots, okay? I'm going to head home and practice for the next tournament."

Grant blinked in surprise. "Oh... yeah, I hadn't thought about that. You must be itching to get back to your video games, right?"

Bethany smiled vaguely. "Something like that. I have a lot of training to catch up on. A lot of rent, too."

"Of course," said Grant, trying to hide his dismay, "I mean, you're welcome to stick around for the mission if you want. I'll be supporting Guy and Amy all evening. I don't want to hold you up, though."

Bethany hesitated, and Grant gestured at a second terminal next to his. "I wouldn't mind a second pair of eyes on the mission," he added brightly, "You might catch something that I'd miss."

Bethany looked at the second terminal, and then back at Grant. It was a distinctly measuring glance. *She knows*, Grant thought nervously.

Finally, Bethany sighed. "It's a nice offer, Grant... but I really need to get back to my practice. If I don't place above 5th in the next tournament, it's over."

"I totally get it," Grant assured her, doing his best to smile, "We all have to earn a living, right?"

"Right," Bethany replied, "Nothing personal, okay?" She began walking toward the door, and hesitated. She pointed at the second terminal. "I honestly don't remember. Did you have two terminals here yesterday?"

Grant gulped. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Uh, never mind," Bethany replied, "I should go." On impulse, she added, "Sorry!" and awkwardly shuffled out the door.

Grant was left alone in the workshop, feeling slightly ridiculous. "Well," he sighed, "Back to work..."²⁰²

Several minutes passed. Grant tried to focus on his work, but it was more difficult now. He chided himself for being so easily upset, but it didn't make concentrating any easier.

Eventually, Arthur entered the workshop. "Bethany left?"

Grant smiled ruefully. "Yep, it sure looks that way."

²⁰² Poor Grant. :(

"I see," said Arthur tactfully, "Disappointed?"

Grant laughed self-deprecatingly. "It's fine, Arthur... honestly, we barely knew each other! She had to practice for her next tournament."

"That makes sense," replied Arthur mildly, "It's how she earns a living, after all."

Grant couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he resumed trying to focus on his terminal. However, it was painfully obvious that he was still distracted.

Arthur sighed. "Alright, Grant. I hate to do this, but you can't be distracted during a critical mission... so you're getting a lecture."

Grant was about to protest, but Arthur charged ahead. "No, I'm serious! Listen up: I know you're a little OCD about organization and order, and that's well and good in your workshop. But relationships are *nothing* like that! You can't expect everything to fit into perfectly defined boxes and categories."

"That's probably true," Grant conceded, "But respectfully, sir, I have no idea what you're getting at."

"You've upset because you've already decided that Bethany isn't interested in you," Arthur explained, "But really, all you know for sure is that she wasn't available today. You have *no idea* what she thinks of you. And remember, she's dealing with a rent crisis: attraction was probably the last thing on her mind! Maybe you just caught her off-guard and spooked her a little."

Grant considered this. "So... are you saying that things might still work out?"

Arthur shrugged. "I'm saying it's too early to know. If she *does* tell you flat-out that she's not interested, then respect her decision. But that hasn't happened yet... so take it slow. Look for an opportunity to spend time around her, pay attention to what she says, and see what happens." He grinned. "And in the meantime, be the best possible support operator you can be. Can you do that for us, Grant?"

Grant chuckled like a grinning desk lamp²⁰³. "Yes, sir. And thank you."

Arthur nodded with a smile. "It's part of my job. Now, let's show those Felonistas what we're made of!"

* * * * *

The Felonistas had settled into the Menil Collection's security room. They'd moved the unconscious security guards to the side, where they'd be out of the way²⁰⁴. The nanobot swarm continued to hover in the corner, awaiting instructions. Every monitor had been dedicated to tracking Guy and Amy's movements throughout the museum.

Milieu put Cyan on speakerphone. "Cyan, are you getting the museum's security footage back at the command center?"

²⁰³ This analogy is just plain silly.

²⁰⁴ You know, it just occurred to me: don't any of these security guards have families or friends who would miss them overnight? By all rights, shouldn't the police already be looking for the missing guards, and investigating the museum? "Building takeover" scenarios are pretty common in action stories, but most of those lead to some kind of standoff with the authorities. An *undetected* building takeover seems pretty unlikely.

"I sure am!" exclaimed Cyan, "Aw, look at Guy and Amy wandering around... it's so cute that they're trying to thwart us!"

Milieu frowned. "But why are they staking out *those* hallways?" she murmured to herself, "My text message told them I'd be on the roof. They should be focusing their attention up there."

"Maybe they're going after me," mused Niche, "They probably think I'm the leader, just like Charles did." She saw the look on Milieu's face and grinned broadly. "You know... because my outfit is more impressive than yours."

"At least I actually dress like an artist!" stormed Milieu.

* * * * *

6 months earlier...

"At least I actually dress like an artist!" stormed Milieu.

"That doesn't make you my boss," retorted Niche, "Listen... I'd love to help you. But I'm not interested in your little scheme. Simple as that."

"So don't join us!" Milieu replied, "Nobody's making you. But can't you introduce us to your contacts? We need their expertise to build the nanobots. And money's no object! I can borrow as much as I want from my rich parents²⁰⁵."

"Not a chance," said Niche firmly, "If I'm not willing to work with you, then I'm *definitely* not getting my contacts involved."

Niche gestured at the room around them. The walls were covered in glass-encased shelves which housed thousands of comic books. Multiple overlapping security systems protected the entire collection with lethal cunning. "In case you haven't noticed, I have a flair for the dramatic. Watching some nanobots eat an old painting isn't my idea of excitement."

"This is grander than mere robbery," exclaimed Milieu with rising frustration, "It advances the cause of art! And my scheme will put us at the center of an excited art community."

Niche perked up at the sound of that. "You mean... fans?"

"Fans, exactly!" confirmed Milieu, seizing on Niche's interest. "We'll be the center of attention!"

Niche pondered this for a moment.

"I'm intrigued," she admitted, "But you need to understand something: my contacts are *very* exclusive. They won't work with wannabees... and I can't risk bringing them into this unless I'm sure you can deliver."

"Our plan will work perfectly, you *differential coefficient*²⁰⁶!" Milieu snarled.

²⁰⁵ I'm confused. In the previous flashback, Milieu was going to finance the plan by selling her rare paintings. Did she change her mind, or did the story forget about that?

²⁰⁶ This appears to be a semi-obsolete physics term. Perhaps Milieu meant that Niche is stuck in her ways? Yeah, that's probably it.

Niche shrugged smugly. "Alright then... convince me. You have one month."

* * * * *

Back in the present...

"You're the boss," grinned Niche, "I'm just saying, my 'comic book villain' ensemble seems to impress people."

"C'mon, let's not fight," said Cyan in a reconciliatory manner, "In a way, you *both* have the best outfit!"

"Ugh, forget it!" replied Milieu. She glared at the monitor. "Anyway... the important thing is, this can still work. We'll just have to switch things up a bit."

She studied the monitors for another moment, and smirked mischievously. "Well, girls... the BLA is expecting a heist. Let's give them one."

Chapter 16: Second Chances

It was evening, and Houston's Menil Collection had closed for the day. Guy and Amy were waiting in a hallway near the *Golconda* painting, hoping to catch Niche in the act²⁰⁷.

Guy took a moment to admire the painting: it depicted a fairly normal urban setting, except that the air was filled with nearly identical men dressed in dark overcoats and bowler hats, hovering inexplicably in the air. "What do you think of *Golconda*?" asked Guy curiously, "Do you like it?"

"It has a certain whimsical charm," remarked Amy, "I don't know if I'd hang it in my apartment, but it's definitely fun to look at. How about you?"

"I like it," affirmed Guy, "The scene is absolutely insane, and yet the painting looks like it's taking itself completely seriously. I sure don't want the Felonistas to get it."

"Me neither," agreed Amy feelingly, "But that's why we're here, right?"

Several minutes ticked by in silence.

"How long do you suppose we'll have to wait?" asked Amy. "An hour? Until midnight? I'm starting to wish I'd brought a deck of cards or something... oh, wait!" Amy pulled out her phone and spent a few moments checking it. "Yep, I thought so... there's more than a thousand card games we could download right here! Want to play 'Go Pick an Exploding Clingstone Fruit'? It's like 'Go Fish', only with exploding clingstone fruit."

Guy made a sound that was somewhere between a stifled laugh and a snort. "You made that up."

Even in the dim lighting, Amy's grin was unmistakable. She triumphantly handed her phone to Guy, who studied it with growing amazement.

Guy shook his head in disbelief, and handed the phone back. "You didn't make it up²⁰⁸."

"Maybe we should try it," suggested Amy, "It's free to download, and the reviews say that the sound effects are hilarious."

Guy snickered, but he shook his head. "Maybe we should finish the mission first."

"I've been watching the hallways this entire time," Amy assured him.

"Oh, I believe it," Guy replied, "But I don't multitask quite as well as you."

"Or anyway, not yet," said Amy with a smile. But then she suddenly tensed. "Guy, behind you... it's the nanobots!"

²⁰⁷ Once again, how did Guy and Amy manage to hide in a locked museum overnight? I assume they didn't coordinate with the staff, or else the security guards would've been better prepared for the Felonista's attack on their security room. In fact, if the guards had been warned in advance, they might have stopped the Felonistas all on their own, instead of getting knocked unconscious! Yikes... it just gets worse the more you think about it. This "secret organization" policy needs to go!

²⁰⁸ Sadly, this game doesn't exist in the real world. If you're a mobile developer, then please make this game and send me a link. Thanks!

Guy spun around. Sure enough, a cloudy swarm had billowed around the corner. It was heading directly for the *Golconda* painting.

“Stop them!” bellowed Guy, swatting at the swarm with his hands and arms. But the nanobots were far too nimble: they easily avoided Guy’s frantic movements and continued toward the painting. Guy and Amy could only watch helplessly as the nanobot swarm advanced across the surface of *Golconda*, boiling and oscillating as they perfectly deconstructed the painting. Amy cringed at the sight of it, and tried to remind herself that the nanobots would perfectly reconstruct the painting back at the Felonista’s lair²⁰⁹.

“Wait a moment,” said Amy, “Guy, what about your stun gun? Maybe we could stun them!”

Guy shook his head ruefully. “It’s too late for that! If we damage the nanobots now, parts of the painting could be lost forever!”

“Then what can we do!?” shouted Amy in frustration.

* * * * *

In the Menil Collection’s security room, Cyan was watching the security monitors while she munched on an orange²¹⁰. “The swarm is almost finished with the painting,” she announced, “And just like you predicted, it’s thrown the agents off balance!”

“Excellent,” declared Milieu, “Niche, get ready.”

Niche marched toward the room’s exit, grinning with anticipation. Meanwhile, Cyan continued to munch on her orange. She held up one of the slices and gazed at it appreciatively. “Isn’t it neat that they call this orange-colored fruit an ‘orange’?”

“Sure,” replied Niche absently. She wasn’t really paying attention.

Cyan popped the orange slice into her mouth and smiled. “I wish every color had a flavor!”

Milieu checked her watch, counted silently to ten, and pointed at Niche. “Okay, go! And make it look convincing.”

“Don’t worry,” grinned Niche, as she gestured at herself, “Those goody two-shoes will follow this classic villain ensemble wherever I go.”

Niche sprinted out the door, and Milieu began counting down for her own appearance.

* * * * *

Golconda was gone, and the nanobot swarm was starting to vacate the hallway. Amy was struggling between outrage and helplessness. Realizing this, Guy put his hand on her shoulder. “Let’s stay focused,” he said calmly, “If we capture Niche, that’ll be our first step toward fixing all of this.”

²⁰⁹ Actually, the BLA doesn’t have any proof that the stolen paintings are reassembled. As readers, we’ve been taking this for granted because we’ve seen the Felonistas do it... but no one outside their caper has ever actually seen a painting after it’s been stolen.

²¹⁰ Wait... isn’t Cyan supposed to be providing nanobot support from their *lair*? And in the previous chapter, that’s exactly what she was doing! So, why is Cyan suddenly here at the museum in Houston?

Amy shook off her mood as best as she could, and nodded to Guy. “Okay. Then let’s find her.”

“Try using your Y-Goggles,” suggested Grant over the comms, “They’ll pinpoint Niche in no time²¹¹!”

Guy eagerly donned his Y-Goggles, and performed a visual sweep of the museum. “I see her!” he exclaimed excitedly, “She’s running in our direction, just a few hallways back. Get ready²¹².”

Moments later, Niche rounded the corner and bounded into the chamber. Without hesitating, Guy popped out of hiding and fired a stun blast in her direction, but Niche was surprisingly agile. She dodged back around the corner and began running in the opposite direction.

“Freeze!” shouted Guy.

“Aren’t you supposed to say that *before* you start shooting?” queried Amy.

Guy shrugged. “Meh... it’s non-lethal. C’mon, after her!”



Guy and Amy dashed through the doorway and down a darkened hall, in pursuit of Niche. As Guy rounded a blind corner, he ran headlong into a display rack of souvenir postcards. He hastily pushed the rack to one side, but it tipped over and toppled two other display racks that were standing next to it. Postcards scattered everywhere.

“How many souvenir postcards does a museum *need*!?” fumed Guy.

“We’ll clean them up later²¹³!” said Amy urgently, “Don’t let Niche escape!”

Guy and Amy put on an extra burst of speed, chasing the sound of Niche’s retreating footsteps for all they were worth. As they rounded the corner, there was a sudden muzzle flash from the next room, and a bullet lodged itself in the wall mere inches from Amy.

²¹¹ Are we to understand that Guy and Amy haven’t used their Y-Goggles on this mission yet? Why not!?

²¹² Wait a second! If the Y-Goggles can see through walls, then shouldn’t Guy and Amy also be able to see Milieu and Cyan in the security room? Not to mention the unconscious security guards!

²¹³ No, they won’t.

"She's armed," observed Guy.

"No kidding!" retorted Amy, "How are we supposed to catch her without getting shot?"

"Try using my force field gadget," Grant advised over the comms.

"Of course!" declared Guy, as he pulled a small metal cylinder out of his pocket. "I've been looking for a chance to try this²¹⁴!"

Guy engaged the force field gadget and turned to Amy. "Hang back for a minute... I'll make Niche waste her bullets on the force field!"

With a loud bellow, Guy charged headlong into the room. From an unseen corner, Niche fired several increasingly frantic shots at Guy, but they all splashed harmlessly off his force field²¹⁵.

"Give it up, Niche!" demanded Guy, "We're taking you in!"

An ominous cackle echoed across the room. With an increasing sense of dismay, Guy realized that he'd lost track of Niche. He used his Y-Goggles to scan around the room. At the far end of the room was a doorway. The goggles clearly showed the heat signature of a person crouching directly behind it, ready to spring.

Guy smirked. "You can't hide from us, Niche," he announced, as he carefully advanced toward the doorway. "We can see everything that's going on in this museum."

"Guy, on your left!" Amy called out urgently.

Guy spun around and saw a shadowy figure dashing toward him. He reflexively fired his stun gun! The bolt caught his attacker square in the chest, rendering them unconscious. Guy quickly snapped his attention back to the doorway, ready for trouble... and it suddenly dawned on him that the figure behind the doorway still hadn't moved.

Guy warily approached the doorway and peeked around. It was an unconscious security guard, posed to look like he was crouching in an ambush.

"Clever trick," remarked Guy²¹⁶.

"But not clever enough!" added Amy gleefully, as she approached the downed attacker in the middle of the room. She suddenly stopped in surprise. "Guy... this is Milieu!"

"Oh!" replied Guy in surprise. Recovering, he added, "Well, that's okay... Milieu is worth capturing, too!"

Amy smiled. "One down, two to go!"

²¹⁴ Um... *that* came out of nowhere! When did Grant give him a force field gadget!? And if Guy was eager to try it out, then why didn't he use it when that pickup truck was actively trying to kill them on the road?

²¹⁵ That's odd: we know that the Felonistas are using this heist to trick the BLA in some way. But here, it seems that Niche is actually trying to kill Guy! Is this part of their trick? Or did Niche somehow know that Guy would have a force field? What's going on?

²¹⁶ This ruse was clearly designed to fool someone who can see heat signatures through walls. Do the Felonistas know about Grant's Y-Goggles? How?

* * * * *

Later that night, Milieu groggily began to regain consciousness in the confines of the BLA's temporary holding cell²¹⁷.

"Look who's up!" observed Amy cheerfully, "Can we get you anything? Water? Food? Reality check?"

"Then again, you really seem to enjoy talking about yourself," added Guy, doing his best to match Amy's light tone. "Why don't you tell us something about the Felonistas? Like where to find their lair?"

Milieu scowled. "I'm not telling you anything."

"That's okay," said Guy, with an exaggerated yawn, "It's well after midnight, so we're honestly too tired to listen to you, anyway. Let's pick this up in the morning."

"We would've preferred to question the Felonista's leader, but you're almost as good," added Amy.

"What is everyone's *problem*!?" thundered Milieu indignantly, "*I'm* the Felonista's leader!"

"You are!?" asked Guy in surprise²¹⁸.

"Even better!" declared Amy triumphantly, "See you in a few hours, Milieu. We have a lot to talk about."

Milieu glared at them, but she remained silent.

Guy turned to leave, and Amy smiled in Guy's direction. "I think this caper's close to wrapping up!"

Guy and Amy left the detention area, carefully locking the steel door behind them. The moment they were gone, Milieu's angry glare was replaced by an evil grin. "Not at all, Amy... in fact, it's just getting started²¹⁹."

²¹⁷ Whoa, *whoa*! Are we to understand that Guy and Amy left the museum immediately after capturing Milieu!? Couldn't they stick around and try to get Niche, too? How'd they get back to the BLA base so quickly, especially since their car was crushed by a train? And wasn't the whole point of this scheme to track the nanobots back to the Felonista's lair? So much for *that*, I guess!

²¹⁸ Glad to finally clear that up. Again.

²¹⁹ In many action stories, there's a point where the good guys imprison the main bad guy in their base, only to discover that getting captured was part of the bad guy's master plan. So uh, yeah... I'm doing it, too!

Part 3: Artfully Done

Chapter 17: Good Cop, Bad Cop

It was the next morning. Guy and Amy had resumed interrogating Milieu... but unfortunately, they were getting nowhere.

"Where's your lair?" demanded Guy.

"Why are you assuming I have one?" replied Milieu innocently.

"If you don't have a lair, then where'd you broadcast your little livestream from?" asked Guy pointedly.

"We shot that at an old, abandoned warehouse," explained Milieu dismissively, "It's not our lair."

"But you *do* have a lair?" rejoined Amy.

Milieu shrugged expressively. "I didn't say that. You inferred it."

Amy bristled. "You implied it, you *odoriferous young hyson*²²⁰!" She balked. "Dang... now you've got me doing it!"

Milieu chuckled. "Join us, Amy. You'd like the Felonista life."

"Maybe we should take a break," suggested Guy.

At that moment, the detention area's outer door opened, and Thelma popped her head in. "I'm ordering pizzas for lunch," she announced, "Arthur wants to keep up morale, especially since we only have 2 days left. Which toppings do you want?"

"Anything with meat on it," replied Guy.

"Pineapple for me," answered Amy.

"Personally, I've always preferred anchovies," ventured Milieu, from within her cell.

"You would!" retorted Amy.

Thelma took a quick note. "So that's meat and pineapple... and I assume we're skipping the anchovies?"

"No, you know what?" replied Amy, "Let's get some anchovies, since Milieu likes them so much."

"That's very sporting of you," replied Milieu dryly, "But I'm still not telling you anything."

"I didn't say they were for you," retorted Amy, "I'm going to eat them right in front of you. Uncooperative prisoners don't get any pizza."

Milieu laughed out loud. "Oh no... is this your idea of an interrogation technique? That is just *adorable*!"

"I also have a backpack full of explosive potatoes!" Amy warned, "Maybe we should feed you one of those, instead!"

²²⁰ In other words, a type of Chinese tea which gives off a distinct smell and hasn't been aged. I'm sure that Amy didn't really mean it.

"Except we both know that you'd never, under *any* circumstances, do that to an unarmed prisoner," returned Milieu smugly, "By the way... what did Thelma mean when she said you only have 2 days left? Are you guys on some sort of time limit? Tell me: what happens if you miss the deadline?"

"We send our uncooperative prisoners through the trash compactor," retorted Amy acidly.

There was a brittle silence in the detention area.

"Well, I'll go place the pizza order," remarked Thelma. She turned around briskly and left the detention area.

"And we're taking a break," said Guy firmly, "C'mon, Amy... let Milieu cool her heels in here for a while."

Amy sighed. "If only we'd captured the Felonista's leader."

"I *am* the Felonista's leader!" bellowed Milieu indignantly.

"I know that," replied Amy cheerfully, "I just wanted to upset you."

* * * * *

"How's it going in there?" asked Arthur anxiously.

"Not well," Guy admitted, "So far, all she's given us is a bunch of smart-aleck remarks."

"Well, we need a breakthrough soon," replied Arthur, "I told the MLA that we've captured Milieu, but the agent's informed me that it doesn't count as solving the case. We need to capture all the Felonistas *and* recover the stolen paintings²²¹."

"I wish we'd gotten the particulars of this deal in writing," lamented Amy, "We could've bargained for just two Felonistas captured, and half of the paintings recovered. And maybe some better 'win conditions' for us, like a free cruise. Ooh, and harsher 'lose conditions' for them... like, maybe the MLA agent has to do a silly dance in Central Park, or something!"

Arthur sighed. "That's the value of hindsight, I suppose. If we manage to get through this, I'll try to be cagier with the MLA going forward. Also... I don't want to alarm anyone, but I have some distressing news."

* * * * *

*5 months earlier...*²²²

"Do you think she'll come?" asked Cyan.

"Oh, she'll come all right," replied Milieu smugly, "And sooner rather than later."

²²¹ Actually, when the MLA agent originally introduced this case to the BLA, his main concern was learning how the art thieves were disabling security cameras. But then he slapped the BLA with a 1-week time limit to solve the case, and now we have this! Talk about moving the goalposts!

²²² The previous flashbacks always transitioned to the past with some clever mirrored dialogue... so why does this flashback break that pattern by rudely interrupting an unrelated scene? And the interruption is especially annoying because Arthur was about to say something important!

Their conversation was interrupted by an angry, insistent knock at their dormitory's front door.

Milieu smiled. "I believe that's her now."

Milieu opened the door to reveal Niche, scowling furiously and holding a note which read "Courtesy of Milieu".

"Good morning, Niche!" said Milieu pleasantly, "I see you found my note."

"Cut the coyness!" snarled Niche, "Where's my comic books? What did you do with them? How did you steal them!?"

Milieu smiled disarmingly. "Your comic books are safe and sound, Niche... and I'll return them to you immediately. But you asked me to convince you that our plan would work, and I believe I have. Those nanobots slipped past your security measures and stole your comic books out from under your nose... they even left you a fun little note, so that you'd know it was us."

Niche stood there, frowning. Milieu waited patiently, but it was Cyan who broke the silence.

"Pretty good prank, eh?" she asked eagerly.

"Well... yeah, it really was," admitted Niche grudgingly, "And if your nanobots were that effective at stealing my comic books, then stealing paintings should be a cinch²²³."

"I couldn't agree more," replied Milieu, "And in case I forgot to mention it earlier, this little enterprise will earn us a ton of fans. C'mon, Niche! Are you in?"

Niche considered for another moment, and finally grinned. "You know... on my way here, I was just planning to beat up both of you. But you've made your point. Yeah, I'm in."

* * * * *

Back in the present...

"Charles Bly escaped police custody this morning," explained Arthur gravely, "And we're not exactly on his good side right now, so please watch your backs."

"How did Charles escape!?" asked Guy incredulously.

Arthur sighed. "He beamed a guard with his pocket watch, stole the uniform, and then slipped out through the chimney."

"That explains everything," replied Amy ruefully²²⁴.

"Pizza's here!" announced Thelma.

²²³ Ummm... wait a minute. This flashback completely ruins the established backstory! The only reason that Milieu and Cyan approached Niche was because they needed nanobots. So, if Milieu *didn't* have nanobots yet, then how could she use them to steal Niche's comic books? And if Milieu *did* have nanobots, they why would she need to approach Niche in the first place? Have fun unravelling *that*!

²²⁴ It really doesn't.

"It sounds like we need some fast results with Milieu's interrogation," declared Amy, "And I'm tired of trying to match wits with her! I think it's time for the old 'good cop, bad cop' routine!"

"I don't know, Amy," said Arthur skeptically, "I honestly think that trick is overplayed. Besides, I doubt that any of us would make a believable 'bad cop'."

"I'll do it," offered Thelma darkly. She picked up the anchovy pizza box and began walking to the detention area.

"But who's going to be the 'good cop'?" asked Guy curiously.

Thelma briefly turned back to face them. "No one."

* * * * *

"What do have we here?" asked Milieu mockingly, as Thelma approached the cell door with a pizza box. "Room service? Okay, sure! Let's see if kindness makes me talk!"



Thelma wordlessly slid the pizza box between the bars, and Milieu accepted it. Thelma watched calmly as Milieu ate two slices, and then set the box aside. "That's enough for now," remarked Milieu casually, "Thanks for the anchovies! I have to say, though... you guys are *shockingly* naive about interrogation techniques. I mean, there's no way I'd betray my entire operation over a pizza!"

"Oh, I don't know about that," replied Thelma coolly, "You see, the pizza was poisoned."

Milieu hesitated for a moment, but then the smug look returned to her face. "No it wasn't," she replied, "Arthur would never let you do something like that."

"Arthur doesn't know," replied Thelma simply, "And you're the only one who likes anchovies, so it was easy to poison your pizza without risking anyone else."

²²⁵ In this illustration, Milieu could easily use the keypad next to her cell by reaching through the bars. I assume the BLA wouldn't be stupid enough to put the door controls within the prisoner's reach, so maybe this keypad is just for room service, or checking your stocks.

Doubt flashed across Milieu's face. "You're bluffing," she insisted.

"Then don't believe me," shrugged Thelma, "After everything *you've* done, you deserve whatever you get. Enjoy your short life." She began walking toward the exit.

Milieu hesitated, then called out, "Wait!"

Thelma paused, but she didn't turn around. "Yes, Milieu?"

"Show me the antidote, first," requested Milieu, "Then I'll talk."

Thelma turned around. "You'll talk *first*, or you don't get the antidote."

"If you're actually crazy enough to poison me, then you might be crazy enough to lie about having an antidote," insisted Milieu, "Show me the antidote!"

Thelma hesitated, then reached into her purse. She quickly flashed a small bottle in Milieu's direction, and then put it away again.

The smug look returned to Milieu's face. "That was a bottle of nail polish. You don't have any antidote, and you didn't poison my pizza, either. That was a nice try, though... you really had me going there for a minute."

Thelma scowled in frustration. "You really think you're smarter than everyone else, don't you? Well guess what, Milieu? Nobody cares! You're just an angry artist with delusions of grandeur. Oh, and about those paintings you've been sneaking into the museums: I honestly liked the classics better."

Milieu stuck out her chin proudly. "If you hate my art, then maybe you're too stupid to understand it!"

"I never said I hated your art!" retorted Thelma, "But I don't think it's anything special."

That took Milieu by surprise. "My art is *vastly* superior to those *phosphoric coruscations*²²⁶ that were collecting dust for centuries!" she shouted angrily, "And they were painted by a living, breathing artist!"

Thelma decided to go for broke with the "bad cop" routine. She drew herself up to her full height, and stared threateningly through the cell window. "Are you sure about that, Milieu?" she asked ominously, "Maybe I was bluffing about the poison, but it's still just you and me in here. Nobody's watching. I can do whatever I want to you and get away with it!"

Milieu was unmoved. She crossed her arms and grinned defiantly. "Like what?"

* * * * *

Thelma returned to the Muddled Badger's main room, looking somewhat deflated. "Yeah, you're right," she admitted, "This 'bad cop' stuff just isn't us"²²⁷.

"Okay, so that didn't work," agreed Amy, "But I have another idea. Maybe we need some outside advice on how to make Milieu talk. I figure we should ask someone who understands how a criminal

²²⁶ In other words, something bright and glittery. Perhaps Milieu is saying that the paintings she stole were of amateurish quality. Or perhaps Milieu has no idea what she's saying when she uses these idioms.

²²⁷ It feels like a missed opportunity that during Thelma's entire "bad cop" routine, she never brought up her brief friendship with Milieu (i.e., "you used me!"). But I guess that's water under the bridge now.

organization works. And to speed things up, it should be someone who grudgingly respects us... any guesses?"

"Alexia?" guessed Arthur.

"Alexia Bennet!" declared Grant, from within his workshop.

"It's Alexia, right?" asked Thelma.

"No, it's not Alexia," replied Amy, looking slightly confused, "Why do you keep guessing her?"

"Sorry Amy," Arthur apologized, "She was a memorable adversary, that's all. Who did you actually have in mind?"

Amy smiled. "I was thinking we pay Chekhov a visit."

Chapter 18: Advice from Chekhov

Later that day, Guy and Amy were approaching the disreputable tavern called “The Subversive Crustacean²²⁸”.

Guy tugged nervously at his “bad guy” costume. “Are you sure these disguises will work?” he asked Amy skeptically, “They don’t look very menacing to me.”

“They don’t need to look menacing,” Amy assured him, “Trust me! They’ll work.”

Amy opened the door to the tavern, and Guy followed her in. Guy hadn’t been with Amy when she’d originally visited this place, and his first impression was a direct assault on his senses. His eyes watered from the smokey air. His nose burned from the fumes of cheap alcohol. His ears stung from the coarse language. *I can’t believe Amy managed to drag Grant in here*, he thought to himself.

In the middle of the room, the bartender caught sight of them and immediately guffawed. “Everyone, look! They’re back... the kids from the 60’s costume party!”

The room’s tension instantly dissolved. The other bargoers roared with laughter as Amy confidentially approached the bartender. “We’re here to see Chekhov,” she informed him.

“Sure, go ahead!” laughed the bartender, “Knock yourselves out. Man, it’s good to see you guys again!”

Guy was still blushing from the derisive laughter as Amy led him to a steel door, nestled at the very back of the premises. “I thought you said these disguises would work,” he whispered indignantly.

“They *did* work,” explained Amy, “If we’d walked in here dressed as government agents, they would’ve thrashed us in seconds.”

She knocked politely on the door, and a deep brash voice from inside demanded, “Get in here!”

Obligingly, Amy opened the door and ushered Guy inside.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the phone was ringing at the BLA’s main desk. Thelma answered it. After listening for a moment, she smiled a little. “Why, hello Bethany! What’s new?”

As Thelma continued to listen, her smile gradually turned into a concerned frown. “Yeah, I agree. That *is* a bit worrisome.”

Grant’s head poked out from the workshop door. “Is something wrong?”

Under other circumstances, Thelma might have smiled at him knowingly. In this case, however, she simply replied: “Yes. Bethany says that she’s being followed.”

“Put her on speakerphone,” urged Grant.

²²⁸ Astute readers of the previous story may recall that this tavern is in Britain. It looks like the BLA has gone back to inexplicably teleporting between scenes.

Thelma obligingly pressed a button, and Grant called out, “Bethany... can you describe who’s following you?”

“He’s blond, and slightly short,” came Bethany’s worried voice over the phone, “And he’s wearing white, fancy clothes.”

“That’s Charles Bly!” declared Grant in alarm, “He escaped police custody this morning! Bethany, where are you right now?”

“I’m just north of the Reservoir in Central Park²²⁹,” she replied nervously, “What should I do?”

“Hang tight, Bethany... and try to stay where other people are,” urged Thelma, “I’m calling the police for you.”

Thelma looked up. She was surprised to see Grant dashing out of the Muddled Badger, wearing his Mark 4 jetpack.

“Although Grant might get there first,” she added dryly.

* * * * *

Amy had warned Guy that Chekhov could be intimidating... but even so, Guy found himself unprepared for the encounter. Chekhov was an absolute grizzly bear of a man: nearly 7 feet tall, and big in every sense of the word. Even his beard was huge, and his voice boomed when he spoke.



“Amyyyyy!” he thundered pleasantly, from behind his rough wooden desk. “Alive and well, I see! I’m glad you survived that cowardly attack on your base last month.”

²²⁹ Which is a body of water that I know about, because I did 15 seconds of research on Google. :)

²³⁰ By sheer coincidence, the previous story’s “Chekhov illustration” was drawn in September 2023, and this one was drawn in September 2024. Both illustrations reflect this through the calendar in the background. However, it should be noted that neither illustration’s calendar necessarily matches the actual story’s chronology. Don’t worry about it... maybe Chekhov doesn’t keep his wall calendars up-to-date.

"Oh, we survived just fine," laughed Amy, "But Crimex is toast. We took down them down a few days after the attack."

"Attagirl!" Chekhov declared, "I never did like that organization. And their broadcasts were *awful*." He eyed Guy suspiciously. "By the way... who's *this* dude?"

"Oh, he's with me!" Amy assured him, "This is Guy... he's the friend we rescued last time, thanks to your tip."

"Can you vouch for him?" asked Chekhov warily.

"I'd certainly hope so," replied Amy with a smile, "We're dating."

Chekhov's glance shifted to Amy, and then back to Guy, who smiled and waved nervously. Chekhov's eyes made a subtle evaluation, and then he finally nodded. "Yeah, that checks out," he confirmed, "You both have 'couple' written all over you. And Amy, if you don't mind my saying so... good choice. It never would've worked with the other dude."

"We were never -" began Amy.

"I know, I'm just sayin'!" interrupted Chekhov placatingly. He eyed Guy again. "And before you ask... no, I'm not Russian. I had nerdy parents... they named me after a science fiction character²³¹."

"How did you know I was wondering that?" asked Guy in amazement.

"It's the first thing most people ask me," explained Chekhov, "Besides... you don't last long in my line of work if you can't read people. Speaking of which, I assume you're here on business. Let me guess: the Felonistas?"

"We might be having some trouble with them, yes," hedged Amy.

"Hey, no need to be cagey," replied Chekhov, "I hear a lot more than you think. Now, you're far too 'goody goody' to ask me for muscle or equipment... so I'm guessing you want advice."

"Exactly," confirmed Guy.

Chekhov pointed at Guy and grinned. "Concise. I like that. Just to be clear, I usually expect money or favors in exchange for information... but as it happens, I'm in a terrific mood today. The police have cracked down on a rival gang in my neighborhood, which means my network of thieves will bring in a bigger score for the next few weeks."

"Yay," offered Guy lamely.

Chekhov laughed, and then continued. "Here's the thing. I've seen Milieu's type before, and she's not your run-of-the-mill egomaniac. No, she's a true believer! Deep in her heart of hearts, she's convinced that she's right, and she uses that to justify everything she does. For her, winning isn't enough: she wants everyone else to *agree* that she's right. She's like... a braggart with purpose, you know?"

"Fascinating," mused Amy, "So, how can we use that against her?"

²³¹ And more importantly, I wanted to make a "Chekhov's gun" joke in the original story.

Chekhov scratched his massive head. “There, I’m less sure. I know criminals, but I sure don’t understand these artsy types. One minute they’re criticizing the public’s taste, and the next minute they’re begging the public for funding²³².”

“Okay, then let’s try something else,” suggested Guy, “Let’s pretend that some wise guy has been hassling your organization. He’s a real egomaniac, and he’s always one step ahead of you. You don’t know how to find him or stop him. What would *you* do?”

Chekhov blinked in surprise, and then smiled wolfishly. “I’d do something that makes him *really* mad, to throw him off balance. And the moment he made a false move, I’d stomp him out like an insect!”

“We can work with that,” mused Amy mischievously, “And win or lose, I like the idea of upsetting Milieu.”

“Works for me!” laughed Guy, “Let’s get back to the BLA, and turn this idea into a full-blown plan. It was nice meeting you, Chekhov!”

“Right back at you,” said Chekhov cordially, “And drop by again sometime, eh? I enjoy our little chats. Think you can nail them?”

Amy grinned, “Keep an eye on the news.”

Chekhov laughed, and gestured in Amy’s direction. “You look after this one, Guy... she’s a keeper, you understand?”

Guy smiled broadly and nodded. “I know it.”

* * * * *

Bethany sat nervously on a bench in Central Park, waiting for help to arrive. There were pedestrians walking around nearby, but not as many as she would’ve liked. She also regretted not picking a bench that was closer to the path. *I wonder if it’s safe to get up and look for another bench*, she wondered to herself. It had been several minutes since she’d last seen Charles. Where had he gone?

“Bethany, isn’t it?” came a smooth voice from behind her. Bethany nearly jumped out of her skin. Charles walked around to the front of the bench and sat down next to her.

“I don’t believe we were formally introduced,” said Charles apologetically, “But I’m sure I saw you hanging around the BLA once or twice²³³.”

“Please leave me alone,” pleaded Bethany, “I don’t even work there. Whatever you’re after, I don’t have it.”

²³² The views and opinions expressed by Chekhov are his own, and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions of this story’s author.

²³³ It’s unclear when Charles would’ve seen Bethany at the BLA. Bethany wasn’t around when he was put in the holding cell, and she was in the workshop when he was moved out of the holding cell by the police.

“Now, don’t be so modest,” chided Charles, “You actually have something that I want very much: the location of the BLA base. You see, I have a score to settle with them²³⁴.”

“They’re good people,” protested Bethany, “I can’t betray them.”

“Bethany, Bethany,” replied Charles condescendingly, “You’d be amazed at the things you can do when your life is on the line. Which it is. Just give me the information I want, and I’ll leave.”

Bethany suddenly noticed a speck in the sky. At first, she thought that her glasses were dirty, but then the speck rapidly grew larger. A second later, Bethany could plainly see that it was Grant, diving toward them with a jetpack.

Bethany smiled at Charles with mock sweetness. “As much as I appreciate your offer, Charles... I think that you’re about to leave, anyway.”

Like a bolt from the blue, Grant shot down from the sky in his Mark 4 jetpack and executed a perfect landing in front of Bethany’s bench. “The game’s up, Charles!” declared Grant challengingly. In the distance, several bystanders concluded that they were witnessing some sort of live entertainment, and they clapped their hands appreciatively. One teenager even whooped.



Charles was quick. He jumped off the bench and ran behind it, keeping Bethany between himself and Grant as he pulled out a gun. “Careful now,” he warned, “I’m sure you wouldn’t want anything to happen to her.”

Grant’s face fell... and not just because of Bethany’s predicament. He suddenly realized that in his haste to get here, he’d forgotten to bring anything else with him. He was completely unarmed!

Grant’s mind raced. “Let’s be civil about this,” he suggested, “You let her go, and I’ll give you a 5-minute head start.”

²³⁴ Charles’ vendetta against the BLA is pretty nonsensical. It was the *Felonistas* who betrayed him, and even there, Charles tried to betray them first! But it gets even stranger: why *doesn’t* Charles know the BLA’s location, since he was led out of their base by the police? Was he blindfolded on his way out?

“You’ll have to do better than that!” sneered Charles.

At that moment, however, their confrontation was interrupted by the sound of distant police sirens. The sirens began drawing closer, and Charles wavered as he contemplated this new development.

Grant shrugged expressively. “It’s a better deal than you’ll get from the police.”

In response, Charles pointed his gun directly at Grant. He’d dropped any pretense of civility. “Jetpack! Now!”

Grant hesitated. He hated the idea of giving Charles his prized equipment... but at the moment, it seemed like the only non-fatal choice. Reluctantly, he unstrapped the jetpack and handed it over.

Charles quickly strapped the jetpack to his body and prepared to take off. “Thanks for the hardware,” Charles jeered, “Tell the BLA I’m coming for them!” He threw Grant a mocking salute, and then took off into the air.

The moment Charles was gone, Bethany excitedly jumped off the bench and ran up to Grant. “Grant, that was incredible!” she gushed, “You literally swooped out of the sky and saved me²³⁵!”

“Gee, thanks Bethany!” replied Grant gratefully, “I just wish Charles hadn’t escaped.”

“The way I see it, you stopped an armed criminal without throwing a punch!” declared Bethany, with an admiring smile, “And your jetpack was absolutely brilliant! I’ll bet you can showcase its design at the engineering competition this year, right?”

“Actually, the jetpack still needs work,” admitted Grant, “It got the job done, but it was pretty hard to steer.”

Bethany smiled sympathetically. “I’m sure it just needs a few tweaks. Maybe I could...” Her voice trailed off. A sudden movement in the sky had caught her attention. “Actually, I think you’re right,” she exclaimed, “Look! Charles is already in trouble!”

Grant glanced up at the sky. Sure enough, Charles had lost control of the stolen jetpack. He spiraled through the air several times, corkscrewed across the entire park, and finally crashed through the open window of a nearby police station. Shouts were heard, followed by the distant sound of several tasers being discharged²³⁶.

Grant shuffled his feet awkwardly. “So, uh... do you want to get some coffee or something?”

“Absolutely!” smiled Bethany engagingly, “And on the way, maybe you can tell me more about your inventions.”

Elated, Grant began leading the way to his favorite coffee shop. Strictly speaking, he was already 20 minutes behind his carefully planned schedule... but for once in his life, he didn’t care²³⁷.

²³⁵ To the best of my knowledge, pretty much every guy dreams of doing something like this.

²³⁶ I tried to Google “is there a police station within jetpack range of Central Park”... but for some reason, I didn’t get any meaningful answers.

²³⁷ That’s really sweet... but shouldn’t Grant and Bethany wait for the police cars to arrive, so that they can explain what happened?

Chapter 19: Trolling Campaign

The next morning, Arthur called an emergency meeting. “As you’re probably aware, we only have 1 day left to solve this case,” he began, “I don’t mean to sound dramatic, but the next 24 hours will define what happens to the BLA. Guy, Amy... did we get any useful information from Chekhov?”

“Definitely,” Amy confirmed, “Chekhov had some pretty good insights on Milieu. She really believes that she’s in the right, but she wants everyone else to agree. That’s probably why she tries so hard to think a few steps ahead of us: she wants to win with style. But if we can get her angry enough, then she might get careless and make a mistake!”

“What kind of mistake?” asked Grant skeptically, “In case you’ve forgotten, Milieu’s sitting in our holding cell right now.”

Guy balked. “That’s true,” he admitted, “And she’s already seen through most of our attempts to manipulate her.”

“Sure, but nobody’s perfect,” insisted Amy, “There must be a gap in her armor somewhere.”

“It would have to be a pretty good gap,” Arthur pointed out, “We need a way to capture the other Felonistas *and* recover the paintings, and we need it fast.”

“I’ve got it!” declared Thelma. Silence descended on the meeting room, and everyone waited expectantly.

Thelma grinned excitedly. “It’s so simple! The Felonistas aren’t just art thieves... they’re trying to lead an art *movement*! So if we want to get them angry, then we need to hit them where it really hurts: their *fanbase*! We can use the Felonista’s online channel to discredit their entire art crusade!”

“You want us to *troll* the bad guys!?” asked Amy incredulously.

“Exactly,” confirmed Thelma, “We’ll use trolling to divide and conquer their fans! *That’s* how you enrage the Felonistas! And once they’re angry enough, we can manipulate them into retaliating at a location of our choosing... and ambush them there!”

“If it works, we’d capture the other two Felonistas,” mused Arthur, “And we could also recover the stolen paintings if we persuaded Cyan or Niche to tell us where their lair is.”

“My money’s on Cyan,” remarked Amy.

“But how do we divide and conquer the fans?” asked Guy skeptically, “I mean, the Felonistas have always had a few detractors, and the fans just shout them down. They love the Felonista’s art, so why should they care if some online *nobody* calls it rubbish?”

“Right,” Thelma eagerly agreed, “And that’s why we need to strike the perfect balance! If we’re too negative, they’ll just throw it back in our face and argue that we don’t ‘get it’. Instead, we need to argue that the Felonista’s art is dull and uninspired, and no better than the art they’ve replaced. That’ll be much more effective, and it’ll make the Felonistas angrier, too! I saw it myself when I was playing ‘bad cop’ with Milieu!”

“Okay, so how about this,” Grant proposed, “We all create accounts for their channel right now, and we start flooding them with comments like that!”

“Wait, though,” Bethany interjected, “If you want to troll the Felonistas, then you’re better off creating a single nemesis for them to fixate on! They’ll respond much more directly to that.”

Arthur turned in surprise to face Bethany: he hadn’t realized that she was in the room²³⁸. Bethany ducked her head in embarrassment. “Oh, wait... am I not supposed to be in this meeting?”

Arthur looked at Grant questioningly. “I asked her if she could help us today,” explained Grant sheepishly.

Arthur smiled lopsidedly. “Very well. Now, does everyone approve of the ‘single nemesis’ idea?”

There was a general chorus of agreement.

“Good,” replied Arthur, “Let’s break for 15 minutes, and then we’ll meet back here to brainstorm. I want to start trolling these Felonistas before lunch!”

* * * * *

“You’re looking more cheerful than usual,” remarked Milieu cynically, as Thelma dropped Milieu’s rations through the bars of the cell door.

“Well, we’re about to overturn your entire organization by trolling them online,” replied Thelma smugly, “So, yeah. That makes me pretty cheerful²³⁹.”

“You’re *what!*?” demanded Milieu, “Hey! I don’t know what you’re planning, but the Felonistas would never -”

“Enjoy your rations,” interrupted Thelma with a chuckle, “But maybe save some for Cyan and Niche. They could be joining you later.”

* * * * *

Arthur was in a considerably better mood when the brainstorming meeting started. Against all odds, they had a plan. Now, they just needed to make it work. “If we’re going with a single nemesis, then we’ll need a great alias for him. Any thoughts?”

“‘The Professor’,” intoned Thelma, in her best dramatic voice.

Arthur considered that. “I like the intellectual angle, but ‘Professor’ might be a little too generic.”

“How about ‘Nayslayer’?” proposed Amy, “It’s on the nose, and it’s kind of aggressive.”

“It’s almost *too* aggressive, though,” mused Arthur, “We need something with a little more authority... and perhaps a little pompous.”

²³⁸ Possibly because she didn’t have any lines until now.

²³⁹ I guess this is an empowering moment for Thelma, but it still seems kind of reckless to tell Milieu what the BLA’s planning to do. Sure, Milieu’s currently in a holding cell... but why take that risk, when the BLA’s future is riding on the outcome of this case?

“Mark the Disparager,” suggested Bethany. There was a confused silence. “You know... ‘disparaging remark’? You take the ‘Mark’ from ‘remark’, and then... no, never mind. It’s too complicated.”

“I like where you’re going, though,” approved Arthur, “That’s the right kind of tone. We just need something a little more self-explanatory.”

“‘The Skeptic Tank’?” grinned Guy.

Arthur laughed. “I love the pun, but I don’t think it’ll work. We’re trying to anger the Felonistas, not crack them up.”

“How about ‘The Great Detractor’?” mused Grant. “It’s grandiose, it gets the point across, and it references a scientific concept.”

“Which one?” asked Bethany curiously.

“‘The Great Attractor,’” explained Grant earnestly, “It’s this region in intergalactic space where -”

“You can tell us all about it tomorrow, *after* the case is solved,” interjected Arthur quickly. Once Grant got started on a technical subject, he’d often talk for hours²⁴⁰. “So... thoughts, everyone? Who agrees with using ‘The Great Detractor’?”

“Works for me!” declared Thelma.

“Yeah, I like it!” agreed Amy.

“If we can’t do ‘The Skeptic Tank’, then that’s my second pick,” conceded Guy.

“Motion carried!” declared Arthur. “Now, let’s start brainstorming our first post!”

“I’ve been waiting for this part,” said Thelma eagerly, “Our first statement should sound grand and vaguely disapproving. I’m picturing something like ‘The great tragedy of the Felonista’s current campaign is that they’ve put so much effort into it, only to find themselves back where they started’. That way, we acknowledge *and* undermine the Felonista’s efforts at the same time: it makes it harder for the Felonistas to argue. And we can follow up by arguing that specific Felonista paintings are mostly derivative of the ones they stole.”

There was an awed silence.

“What?” asked Thelma, “I was good in English class.”

“Well, this might take less time than I thought,” observed Arthur wryly, “But I still can’t believe that it’s come to this. I started out as a police detective, chasing down leads on the street... and now, here I am. Trolling bad guys on the Internet.”

“Would it make you feel better if we gave this an official name, like ‘Tactical Trolling’?” asked Guy.

Arthur smiled like a goose that had just driven a tractor into a hen house²⁴¹. “You know... it kind of does.”

²⁴⁰ Does he, though? We’ve never seen that happen in either story, and this is the first time it’s been mentioned.

²⁴¹ Actually, I like this analogy. It doesn’t really make sense, but it *feels* like it should.



* * * * *

Cyan sat at the Felonista's primary computer console in the command center. It was time for her routine check on their channel. Cyan quickly scanned through a summary of the day's traffic, and a worried frown appeared on her face. Their popularity had become sharply divided during the afternoon: in fact, nearly a third of their supporters had disappeared²⁴².

"That's weird," Cyan murmured to herself. She sounded more mystified than upset.

"What's weird?" asked Niche absently, as she lounged on a nearby couch with a comic book.

"We lost a third of our supporters today," replied Cyan.

"What!?" howled Niche. In an instant, she was off the couch and looking over Cyan's shoulder at the computer console. "How!?"

"I'm still investigating," explained Cyan, "But it looks like it started this afternoon."

"How dare they... how *dare* they!" bellowed Niche angrily, "And after we've put on such a good show for them!"

Cyan scanned deeper into the channel's traffic, looking for patterns. She frowned again. "I think a lot of it was caused by this guy... he calls himself 'The Great Detractor'."

"The Great..." Niche was so angry that she couldn't even finish her sentence. With a supreme effort, she forced herself to calm down. "And what kind of magical words has the so-called *Great Detractor* been using to alienate our fans!?"

²⁴² Yep... the BLA alienated a third of the Felonista's fanbase in less than a day! But hey, this massive fanbase emerged in less than a week, so is it really *that* unrealistic? Easy come, easy go!

Wordlessly, Cyan showed Niche one of the Great Detractor's posts. Niche scanned through it. Her left eye twitched, and she let out an unintelligible shriek of rage. Niche's scream brought Milieu charging into the room²⁴³.

"What on earth is going on here!?" Milieu demanded, "Did Niche drop her cellphone through the floor grate again?"

Wordlessly, Niche pointed a quavering finger at the computer console. Rolling her eyes, Milieu walked over and began reading the screen's contents. Moments later, she let out an enraged shriek of her own.

"And he calls himself the 'Great Detractor'!?" bellowed Milieu, "I can't believe that *metallic coffin*²⁴⁴ was able to corrupt so many fans!"

"On the other hand," mused Cyan, "Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that a shallow crowd of novelty-oriented trend followers would be so easily dissuaded from following us."

Milieu whirled away from the screen to face Cyan. "*What* was that!?" she demanded.

"The Great Detractor pranked us good!" Cyan amended²⁴⁵.

Milieu gnashed her teeth. "Yes he did, Cyan... yes he did. And somehow, the Great Detractor is going to pay for this affront... *dearly!*"

"But what can we do about it?" asked Cyan reasonably, "We don't even know who the Great Detractor is."

"Maybe not," replied Milieu darkly, "But I know someone who could find out for us! It's time to put our contingency plan into action."

"About time," smirked Niche, "I can't believe they think that's *you* in their little holding cell."

Cyan's face grew worried. "Are you sure you want to do this, Milieu? There's no going back!"

Milieu glanced again at the computer console, where the Great Detractor's taunting words dominated the screen. Her gaze hardened. "Fire it up."

²⁴³ "But wait!" you're probably thinking, "Isn't Milieu behind bars at the BLA's base?" Keep reading and see!

²⁴⁴ In other words, an ironclad symbol of death. It's probably one of Milieu's better idioms.

²⁴⁵ It's extremely unclear whether Cyan is actually as dumb as she seems, and the story never clarifies this. I figure, that's what fan theories are for.

Chapter 20: The Felonistas Strike Back

It was late in the evening, and time was running out for the BLA. Everyone was determined to stay as long as it took to crack the case.

"It's working," Grant marveled from his terminal, "Most of the newest comments are Felonista fans bickering with each other! And a whole bunch of them have dropped out completely."

"Perfect!" declared Thelma, "Niche and Cyan must be absolutely furious."

Arthur dashed into the room. "Everyone, I found the perfect place to lure them! There's an abandoned mansion not far from here. It's a great location for an ambush... and better yet, it's scheduled to be demolished anyway! Even if it gets a little banged up, there's no harm done²⁴⁶."

"So, how do we bait the trap?" asked Guy eagerly.

"We need a couple of posts which make it look like the Great Detractor accidentally leaked his location," Arthur explained, "Here's what we do: in his first post, we'll make him lose his cool, so that it seems more convincing when -"

Just then, Bethany's phone began to emit a strange tone. She cocked her head in confusion. "That's weird... I assigned that tone to my nanobot detector app. There must be active nanobots nearby²⁴⁷!" She studied the app for a moment, and her eyes widened in alarm. "Guys, the nanobots are inside our base... I think they're in the temporary holding cell!"

Guy and Amy exchanged looks. "Milieu," said Guy grimly.

"Yep," agreed Amy.

They bolted out of the room together, and raced toward the detention area.

* * * * *

Guy charged into the detention area's hallway with his stun gun drawn. Amy was right behind him, brandishing a spud buster.

"Okay Milieu, what's your game?" demanded Guy, "We know you have nanobots!"

Milieu responded with a chilling laugh. "I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken."

"I don't think so," retorted Amy, "The nanobot detector app never lies²⁴⁸!"

²⁴⁶ Unlike the museums that the BLA's been fighting in all along. And has Arthur cleared this with whoever currently owns the property?

²⁴⁷ I'm going to take the easy way out, and assume that you have absolutely no follow-up questions about Bethany's nanobot detector app.

²⁴⁸ Amy's right: the nanobot detector app is consistently rated 5 stars, and its monthly fee is very reasonable. :)

“You misunderstand me,” replied Milieu, with a wicked grin, “The real Milieu has been with the Felonistas all along... I’m actually a decoy copy of her. I don’t *have* nanobots... I *am* nanobots!” With that, “Milieu” suddenly dissolved into a nanobot swarm²⁴⁹!

Guy and Amy both gasped in alarm and jumped back from the cell door, but the swarm effortlessly flew between the bars and entered the hallway. It hovered near the ceiling for a moment, then abruptly charged straight for Guy. Guy fired reflexively, but the stun bolts didn’t even slow it down.

Just before the swarm reached Guy, Amy hurled herself in front of it. In response, the swarm wrapped itself around Amy’s wrists and ankles, and lifted her right off the floor²⁵⁰! Guy continued to fire stun bolts at the swarm, but they ignored him and began carrying Amy toward the hallway’s exit.



Guy immediately activated his comms and sent a broadcast to the entire BLA base. “Everyone... our prisoner was actually a nanobot swarm in disguise, and now it’s got Amy! I need help!”

Within seconds, the hallway’s exit door was thrown open by Thelma, who was wielding a broom. She swung wildly, but the swarm easily parted to avoid her, and the broom connected with Amy’s shin.

“Ouch!” Amy howled, “Watch it!”

“Sorry Amy,” panted Thelma, “But if we don’t stop this thing, a bruised shin will be the least of your worries!”

Thelma wound back for another mighty swing, but the swarm darted toward the open door and flew into the Muddled Badger’s main area, taking Amy along with it.

²⁴⁹ The fact that these nanobots can convincingly impersonate humans is absolutely mind-blowing. This *should* be a game changer for security, fraud, espionage, organized crime, and who knows what else... but fortunately, this trick will never be used or mentioned ever again. And even this instance is problematic: the nanobot swarm of Milieu *was* knocked unconscious by Guy’s stun gun at the Menil Collection... later on, it even ate some pizza! What’s up with that? And why didn’t Bethany’s app detect these nanobots earlier? But let’s be fair: it’s not unusual for a sudden plot twist to “break” earlier moments in the story, even in high-budget action movies.

²⁵⁰ Perhaps you’re skeptical that a swarm of nanobots could physically carry a human being. Well, let me assure you: these are *very* strong nanobots!

“Let her go!” demanded Guy, as he barreled after the swarm. Thelma was right behind him.

As the swarm passed Thelma’s desk, Amy lunged out with all her strength and grabbed the edge. The swarm stopped abruptly and began tugging against her grip. “Do something!” she shouted urgently.

Arthur ran in from a supply closet and threw a garbage bag over the thickest part of the swarm. Unfortunately, the captured nanobots simply flew out of the open bag before Arthur could close it. Guy ran up to the desk and grabbed Amy’s arms, trying to help her pull against the swarm.

Thelma caught up and resumed attacking the swarm with her broom. Without warning, the swarm dropped Amy, who fell roughly to the ground. The impact knocked the spud buster she’d been carrying out of her hand. Before anyone could react, the nanobot swarm gathered itself into a fist-sized object and rammed into Arthur, Thelma, and Guy in rapid succession. All three of them landed flat on the ground, momentarily stunned by the force of the blow.

The swarm fanned out again and began to pick up Amy. In desperation, she reached for the spud buster she’d dropped. She had just enough time to arm it before a small part of the swarm broke away and knocked it out of her grasp. With an odd flicking motion, the spud buster was sent flying across the room, still armed. The breakaway swarm rejoined the main one, and it quickly wrapped itself around Amy’s wrists and ankles again.

Guy struggled to get up, but then he collapsed back to the floor, still dazed from the swarm’s earlier blow. “Amy!” he bellowed.

At that moment, the door to the workshop was thrown open! Grant and Bethany stormed into the room, wielding specialized gadgets.

“Swarm your way out of *this*!” declared Grant, as he clenched a gloved fist. The glove began to glow with a pale blue light, as a powerful magnetic current formed around it. Without hesitating, Grant took two steps forward and swung his glove mightily into the thick of the swarm. Nothing happened.

“The nanobots aren’t magnetic!” yelled Grant in dismay, “They’ve thought of *everything*!”

“Not everything,” rejoined Bethany, as she brought a powerful and intricate-looking gun to bear on the swarm, “Let’s see how they handle an expanding cloud of sticky slime²⁵¹!”

As if on cue, the swarm dropped Amy again and darted directly toward Bethany. Bethany panicked and fired blindly. The resulting wave of sludge engulfed Grant, Thelma, and Arthur, trapping them against the Muddled Badger’s floor. Meanwhile, the swarm quickly disassembled Bethany’s sludge gun.

“Aw, *c’mon*!” protested Bethany indignantly.

But the swarm wasn’t done: it suddenly split in two. The first half stole the glasses off Bethany’s face and tossed them aside, while the second half pulled her feet forward and brought her crashing to the ground.

And then the armed spud buster exploded.

²⁵¹ These gadgets sound pretty cool. Why are we only seeing them now?

A section of wall on the far side of the room disintegrated, and light from the streets above poured into the basement through the gaping hole. Amy and Guy both struggled to their feet, but they were too slow. The swarm grabbed Amy once more, and began flying her toward the smoking hole in the wall.

"Amyyy!" bellowed Guy in desperation.

"I love you, Guy!" shouted Amy, and then the swarm disappeared with her out into the streets above.

Seconds later, Guy reached the hole in the wall and looked up. The swarm was long gone, and so was Amy.

Tears welled up in Guy's eyes. "No..."

* * * * *

The first order of business was to free everyone from the sticky sludge that Bethany had sprayed around the room. Grant coached Guy and Bethany through the process, and roughly half an hour later, the sludge had been safely dissolved. As soon as Arthur was free, he pulled a tarp across the hole in the wall, to prevent curious onlookers from peering in. They even managed to recover Bethany's glasses: fortunately, they'd landed safely in one of the sludge puddles.

"I'm really sorry about the mess," said Bethany. She sounded completely miserable.

"Don't feel too bad about it," replied Thelma, "I accidentally clocked Amy in the shin with my broom."

"The fact is, that swarm beat all of us pretty easily," added Grant, "It's obvious now... the Felonistas are the most dangerous enemy the BLA has ever faced."

Guy choked down a rising tide of anger and panic. "And now they've got Amy!" he exclaimed in despair, "I... Arthur, what even happens next? How do we fix this!?"

"I'm honestly not sure," moaned Arthur, "The timing couldn't be worse! This was our last day to solve the case... and not only did we lose our prisoner, but now the Felonistas have a hostage!"

Just then, the Muddled Badger's landline began ringing. Grimacing, Thelma picked it up. "It's Milieu," she confirmed disgustedly, "The real one. I'm putting her on speakerphone²⁵²."

"This is Milieu," came the condescending voice over the speaker, "I'm sorry to escalate things this way, but a matter has come to my attention which needs to be addressed immediately. Needless to say, if you don't cooperate with us, Amy will be hurt... and if you try to involve the police or any other agencies, she will be terminated immediately. Are we clear so far?"

Arthur silently queried the room for suggestions, but nobody knew what to say. "We understand, Milieu," he answered wearily, "What do you want from us?"

²⁵² So apparently, the BLA's phone number *isn't* a secret. Let's pretend that the phone's location couldn't be traced, even though it's apparently an established landline.

"Someone has caused the Felonistas a great deal of trouble today," explained Milieu menacingly, "Some *sponge-like formation*²⁵³ who calls himself the Great Detractor..." She spat out the name as if it were venom.

For the first time since he'd started running the BLA, despair flashed across Arthur's face. *The game's up*, he thought desperately, *She knows everything*.

"...we want you to track him down for us!" Milieu continued, "If you give us the Great Detractor's location, then we'll release Amy. Deal?"

Arthur was dumbstruck by Milieu's ultimatum. The faintest spark of hope reappeared on his face. *Is it actually possible that Milieu... doesn't know who the Great Detractor is?*

Milieu mistook Arthur's silent astonishment for hesitation. "If you don't find him for us," she warned, "You'll regret it... but not as much as Amy will!"

"We'll do it!" promised Arthur. He had no idea how to follow through, but he could figure that out after the call. "We'll find the Great Detractor for you! Just don't hurt Amy!"

"Smart move," replied Milieu smugly, "And for Amy's sake, you'd better get started. I'll be calling back soon, and I expect to hear good news. *We own you now!*" Then there was a click, as Milieu hung up.

"I must admit," Arthur confessed to his stricken employees, "I'm not sure what to do next. This completely upsets our plan to stop the Felonistas."

"Well, we sure can't give her the Great Detractor," said Grant worriedly, "Because guess what? He doesn't actually exist!"

"No, it's even worse than that," mourned Thelma, "The Great Detractor does exist... and he's *us*! Once the Felonistas realize that, Amy's as good as dead, anyway."

"I don't see any way out of this," muttered Arthur bleakly, "If only we'd located their lair, I might have risked a rescue raid, but as it is²⁵⁴..."

Guy was deep in thought. "Actually," he began, but then he paused to run things through his mind once more. Could it really work? Yes, he wasn't mistaken. "Actually, I don't think this changes anything! The whole point of this 'Great Detractor' business was luring the Felonistas to the abandoned mansion, right? Well, now we can do it directly! We'll just tell the Felonistas that we figured out where the Great Detractor is hiding... and give them the abandoned mansion's address! As long as we capture the Felonistas there, Amy should be safe!"

There was a moment's silence, as everyone considered this.

"Yes," replied Arthur cautiously, "Yes, I believe you're right, Guy! It's risky, but I think it's our best chance at stopping these hooligans once and for all... and saving Amy!"

²⁵³ Perhaps Milieu is calling the Great Detractor a lower life-form who's absorbing her fans? Actually, that idiom really works!

²⁵⁴ I guess the story already forgot about Bethany's nanobot detector app... because I'm pretty sure they could've used it to track the escaped nanobots back to the Felonista's lair. Whoopsie!

His face brightened. "And the day's not over yet! We might even win our little bargain with that weasel from the MLA!"

Just then, however, the clock struck midnight. Moments later, Arthur's phone began to ring. He looked at it apprehensively. "It would seem that I spoke too soon," he announced quietly. "It's the MLA agent! And we're out of time."

Chapter 21: Setting the Trap

The MLA agent didn't waste any time. He immediately asked to be put on speakerphone, and then gleefully addressed the entire room. "Well, my friends... you played a good game, but I'm afraid you've lost our little bargain. You now officially have zero days left, and your time is *up*!"

Arthur grimaced, but he couldn't think of anything to say. The MLA agent continued relentlessly: "Arthur, you can start packing your things immediately. I warned you what would happen if you didn't solve the case in time! You insisted that everyone at the BLA was essential, and you were clearly mistaken. It's time to pay the price for your mismanagement."

"Mismanagement!?" protested Arthur, "Look, we're dealing with a crisis right now -"

"Not anymore," the agent interrupted curtly, "You're *done*! I'm filing your termination papers right after I hang up. But first... while we're on the topic of terminations, I guess it's time to decide who else is getting the axe!"

"We don't have time for this garbage!" shouted Guy hotly, "Amy's been abducted, and we're right in the middle of planning a rescue!"

"Wait a minute," replied the MLA agent. He sounded surprised. "Did I hear that correctly? Did you say that Ms. Fields was abducted?"

"That's right!" confirmed Guy.

"Well, that's perfect timing!" laughed the MLA agent, "We can just downsize Ms. Fields. Problem solved!"

The sheer nastiness of the agent's jibe briefly shocked Guy into silence. But moments later, his entire body stiffened ominously, and his face turned dark red. "Listen, you..."

At that moment, however, Bethany jumped in. "Wait a minute! We're not out of time yet! This is day zero, so we still have the rest of the current day that just started!"

"Who said that!?" demanded the MLA agent.

"Who did it sound like?" asked Arthur, trying to stall for time.

"You tell me!" demanded the MLA agent suspiciously, "It sure didn't sound like Thelma!"

"*You* don't sound like Thelma," retorted Arthur, as he rallied behind Bethany's argument, "Anyway, it doesn't matter who it sounded like: the point is, she's right! The expiry date was today, so we still have until midnight today!"

The MLA agent struggled to work it out. "But wouldn't that make... no, if you started 7 days ago... um, and each day ends at... argh, fine! Lucky for you, I hate math even more than I hate the BLA. But when midnight falls today, you're *toast*!" The MLA agent hung up sharply²⁵⁵.

"Bethany," said Arthur gratefully, "You may have single-handedly saved the BLA."

²⁵⁵ Let me be honest: I also struggled with trying to figure out whether the "zero day" should count as part of the BLA's 7-day limit. In the end, I decided that it was easier to just play it up for laughs.

“Nah, that’s what you guys are about to do,” she replied modestly, “I just know how to argue with idiots over the phone.”

Arthur laughed. “Well said! Now... down to business. We are truly down to our last 24 hours, so let’s make them count!”

He pointed at Guy. “Guy, you’ll head to the abandoned mansion immediately. I need you to start preparing our ambush there. While you’re doing that, I’ll compose an email which tells the Felonistas that the Great Detractor can be found at your position. I’ll send it at noon²⁵⁶.”

“Why noon?” asked Guy curiously.

“Because noon leaves you plenty of time to prepare the mansion for an ambush,” explained Arthur, “And it still leaves us with half a day to wrap things up. Don’t forget, we still need to recover the paintings if we’re going to save the BLA!”

“What about Amy?” asked Guy, “How do we save her?”

“We’ll allow at least one Felonista to escape our ambush, so that we can follow her back to their lair and rescue Amy,” Arthur replied, “But it could be tricky, because we don’t know how many Felonistas will attack the mansion. It could be all of them, or two of them, or even just one. We’ll have to play that part by ear.”

“Got it,” acknowledged Guy, “I’ll let you know when I get there.” He dashed out of the Muddled Badger’s front door.

Arthur turned to Grant and Bethany. “Grant, Bethany... once I send the email to the Felonistas, I need both of you on operational support. Get on the comms, and help Guy with anything he needs.”

“You got it, boss!” replied Grant crisply.

“And Bethany, thanks for helping,” added Arthur graciously, “At this point, I wish we could pay you for your time, but...”

“Hey, don’t worry about it!” replied Bethany with a smile, “This is *way* more interesting than playing video games²⁵⁷.”

“Arthur, what about you and me?” asked Thelma, “How do we help?”

“Ah yes,” said Arthur knowingly, “Well, we’re currently down an agent, and Guy needs all the help he can get. So I say... let’s bring him some coffee!”

“Coffee!?” protested Thelma indignantly, “The BLA’s future and Amy’s safety are at stake, Arthur! We can do better than that!”

Arthur grinned. “I was just kidding. As a matter of fact, Grant has some spare gadgets he can lend us.”

²⁵⁶ Actually, Milieu never gave the BLA an email address: she contacted the BLA by phone and said that she’d call again soon. But maybe the Felonistas have a public email address for their fans... I don’t know! Use your imagination.

²⁵⁷ Sure it is... but shouldn’t Bethany express a more personal stake in this? Amy is her friend and roommate!

“Which ones?” asked Thelma curiously.

“I’ll explain later,” Arthur assured her, “But for now, we need to get going²⁵⁸!”

He smiled proudly at his team. “Everyone, this will be a critical day... but if anyone can get the job done, it’s the BLA²⁵⁹!”

* * * * *

“What do you want from me!?” demanded Amy. She was sitting on an office chair in the Felonista’s lair: from the looks of things, this room was the command center. Her hands were zip-tied behind her, and the zip tie itself was fastened to the chair’s back. The command center had an impressive-looking computer console near the middle of the room. Couches and desks lined two sides of the room, and the room’s other two sides each had a steel door.

“Honestly, nothing much,” remarked Milieu smugly. She gestured grandly at the room around her. “Everything we need is right here!”

* * * * *

*1 month earlier...*²⁶⁰

“Everything we need is right here!” declared Niche, as she placed the briefcase on the table.

“We’ll see about that,” replied Milieu cautiously, “Let’s open it, first.”

Niche unlocked the briefcase, which opened with a satisfying “click”. Inside was a series of velvet-lined compartments. The compartments along the side contained various handling equipment. The central compartment was occupied by a large tube, which was filled with densely packed nanobots.

Milieu took a moment to study the briefcase’s contents. Finally, she nodded approvingly. “It’s perfect, Niche! Did your suppliers ask what we were planning to do with the nanobots?”

Niche shrugged offhandedly. “I gave them a vague answer about ‘artistic license’²⁶¹... they trust me to look after the details.”

Cyan eagerly looked into the briefcase. “Look at all this hardware! We’re the most awesome team ever!”

Milieu rubbed her hands eagerly. “Shall we begin²⁶²?”

²⁵⁸ I don’t see any reason why Arthur couldn’t explain things now: the dialogue was probably written like that to keep the reader in suspense. This doesn’t automatically indicate lazy writing, but it *is* important for dialogue and actions to make sense within the story’s context, and not purely to make a specific impression on the reader.

²⁵⁹ I hate it when things accidentally rhyme.

²⁶⁰ This is a better “flashback transition” than last time, but it still feels clumsy... the previous scene had barely started!

²⁶¹ Ah... so the mysterious “epilogue tease” at the end of the previous story was referring to the Felonistas! Mind you, the mysterious client from that scene said they wanted to “keep this quiet”, and the Felonistas have been very, very public about their art agenda. Perhaps they only needed to keep quiet about the nanobots?

²⁶² For the record, this is the last Felonista flashback, and Charles Bly was never even mentioned. It seems like the Felonistas already had everything they needed to start robbing museums at this point, so why did they involve Charles Bly at all?

* * * * *

Back in the present...

"All I see are some nanobots and a few angry painters," retorted Amy, "Do you really think your little art crusade can last forever?"



Milieu laughed at Amy's bravado and began pacing around her chair. "It doesn't need to last forever," explained Milieu smugly, "It just needs to breathe *life* back into this stagnant medium we call 'art'. And once the Felonistas have changed the art world, there's no going back: even if you stop us, others will take our place. Mark my words, Amy... our names will be remembered, long after the world's forgotten about the BLA!"

Amy stared for a moment, and then shook her head in wonder. "I've seen some delusional bad guys in my day, Milieu, but wow... you're right up there with the dude who tried to replace Central Park's drinking fountains with bird baths." She grinned at the memory. "The only explanation he gave us was that the pigeons made him do it."

Milieu sniffed disdainfully. "You think this is funny, Amy? Well, I didn't expect you to understand. The BLA's idea of art is those ludicrous motivational posters you hang around your base!"

Amy sat bolt upright. "How do you know about our motivational posters?" she asked warily, "You've never actually seen them."

"But my doppelganger did," replied Milieu triumphantly, "Those nanobots sent us everything they saw and heard while they were in your base. Your secrets are now ours²⁶³!"

"Well, enjoy those secrets while you can," retorted Amy, "Guy's coming for all of you."

²⁶³ In that case, we have a *major* problem. Thelma told "nanobot Milieu" about the BLA's plan to troll the Felonistas online... so why don't the Felonistas know that the Great Detractor is actually a BLA plot?

Milieu laughed. "I'm afraid Guy won't have time for last-minute rescues. You see, the BLA works for us now: they're going to help us find the *fantastic cloud pile*²⁶⁴ who calls himself the Great Detractor."

An unreadable look crossed Amy's face, as the full implication of Milieu's statement hit her. *Milieu has no idea who the Great Detractor is*, thought Amy, *I'd better steer the conversation away before she gets suspicious*. "The BLA would never stoop to helping you!" she quickly insisted.

"Of course they would," smiled Milieu mischievously, "The BLA will do anything to save their star agent... especially Guy."

"You're underestimating the BLA," retorted Amy, "Or maybe you're just overestimating yourself. I'm not sure which, but your plans definitely have a bad estimate in them somewhere!"

Milieu rolled her eyes condescendingly. "You truly can't help running your mouth, can you? Well, guess what? I haven't even gotten to the best part yet! Once we've taken care of the Great Detractor, the BLA is next! You see, the nanobots have also given us the location of your base. Can't you see the artfulness of it, Amy? We're forcing one of our enemies to help us destroy another enemy... right before we destroy them, too!"

"You're a nasty piece of work, Milieu!" snarled Amy.

Milieu shook her head solemnly. "Don't be so sure, Amy. When you come right down to it... we're not so different, you and I."

Amy blinked in confusion. "Huh? We're *completely* different!"

Milieu chuckled, and shrugged dismissively. "Yeah, you're right²⁶⁵."

Just then, one of the steel doors opened. Niche and Cyan entered the room.

"The BLA came through for us!" declared Niche, "We have the Great Detractor's address!"

A look of fiendish delight appeared on Milieu's face. "See, Amy?" she said ironically, "The BLA was good for something, after all! Niche, you're with me: it's time to pay the Great Detractor a visit. Cyan, mind the nanobots and guard Amy²⁶⁶."

When Milieu was halfway out the door, she turned to face Amy. "What's the matter, Amy?" asked Milieu mockingly, "Isn't this your big moment to shout something cliché? Go ahead! Why don't you warn me that I'll never get away with this?"

"Why would I warn you?" asked Amy cheerfully, "I *want* you to fail!"

Milieu scowled. "I'll deal with you later. Let's go, Niche."

* * * * *

²⁶⁴ I give up. Milieu obviously thought this was a splendid insult, but I can't even guess what it means in this context.

²⁶⁵ Bad guys love insisting that they're not so different from the hero. I thought I'd take the opportunity to flip that on its head.

²⁶⁶ No offense to Cyan... but she wouldn't be my first pick for guarding a prisoner.

Meanwhile, Guy had finished his initial reconnaissance of the abandoned mansion. The building was mostly cleared out, so it didn't offer much in the way of cover. He'd have to rely on the mansion's layout to help him. Still, there was probably enough time to block off a hallway or two: that would provide a handy dead-end for his ambush²⁶⁷.

Suddenly, Arthur's voice came over the comms: "Change of plans, Guy!" Arthur's voice had an urgent edge to it. "I was using a new app to compose the 'Great Detractor' email, and... well, long story short, I accidentally sent the mansion's address to the Felonistas already²⁶⁸."

"What!?" Guy yelled, "You said I'd have until noon! As in, several hours to prepare!"

"Well, now you have several minutes," replied Arthur apologetically, "The Felonistas will be coming straight for you! Thelma and I will get there as soon as we can, but until then, be extra careful!"

Guy shook his head with anxiety. "A critical day, indeed²⁶⁹."

²⁶⁷ Why didn't Guy bring along gear or equipment to prepare some clever traps? I mean, Arthur was planning to give him half a day to get things ready here!

²⁶⁸ This is why you shouldn't fill out your email's address field until you're actually ready to send the email. I'm sure Arthur's learned his lesson.

²⁶⁹ If Guy is echoing Arthur's words from the earlier scene, then it should be noted that Guy left the room before Arthur said that. But hey, maybe Guy heard it over the comms.

Chapter 22: System Exception

The minutes ticked by anxiously, as Guy waited for the Felonistas to arrive. As he risked another peek out the front window, he saw a car pull up across the road: he immediately recognized it as the car that the Felonistas stole from the Louvre²⁷⁰. Moments later, the car doors opened, and Milieu and Niche got out.

"The Felonistas are here," Guy announced over the comms, "It's Milieu and Niche."

Guy heard Grant whistle ominously over the comms. "Sounds like this stunt got their attention. That only leaves Cyan back at their lair."

"Now remember, Guy," Arthur reminded him, "We only need to capture one of them... let the other Felonista escape, so that we can follow her back to their lair!"

"Got it," confirmed Guy. From the window, he watched Milieu and Niche apprehensively. "This could get a little intense."

* * * * *

"The mansion looks abandoned," observed Niche.

"Of course it does," replied Milieu, "The Great Detractor wanted to keep his location a secret... for all the good it did him."

Niche took a step toward the mansion, but Milieu held her back. "Not yet," said Milieu grimly, "There's no need to get our hands dirty for this part."

Milieu held up her phone. "Cyan, send in the nanobots. Let them deal with the mansion's inhabitant."

* * * * *

Guy was still watching out the mansion's window. It had been several minutes, but Milieu and Niche hadn't moved.

"What's the holdup?" asked Grant, "Are the Felonistas approaching the mansion?"

"No," replied Guy. He was starting to feel uneasy. "They're just standing by their car."

"Be careful, Guy," warned Arthur, "They're up to something. They *must* be."

Suddenly, Guy noticed movement across the street... and his blood froze in his veins²⁷¹. It was the nanobot swarm, and it was heading for the mansion! "I think they're sending the nanobots after me!"

"What!?" shouted Arthur, "Grant, Bethany... any suggestions?"

"Run," said Bethany urgently, "Hide somewhere and hope the nanobots don't find you."

²⁷⁰ The Felonistas kept the car that they stole from the Louvre? Are you *kidding* me!? How did they get it across the ocean? And even if we ignore how ridiculous this is, it still doesn't work: Guy didn't witness the car theft, so how could he recognize the car? I should also point out that we have no idea where the abandoned mansion is located, let alone how close it is to the Felonista's lair. Let's just suspend our disbelief for this one.

²⁷¹ Metaphorically, of course. Guy isn't standing in liquid nitrogen.

"But our ambush -" protested Guy.

"Forget the ambush!" Grant insisted, "The Felonistas mean business this time... and if that swarm catches you, there's no telling what it could do! Hide somewhere *now*!"

Obligingly, Guy turned away from the window... and began running for his life.

* * * * *

Amy struggled to free her zip-tied hands from the back of the office chair, but she finally concluded it was no use. It was time to try something else.

"Hey Cyan," she said pleasantly, "Can you help me out of these?"

"Oh no," replied Cyan sternly, "Milieu warned me about this. You aren't allowed to leave."

"I'm sure Milieu didn't really mean it," reasoned Amy, "And 'leave' can mean a lot of things. Right?"

"She also warned me that you'd try to argue," replied Cyan, "So just drop it, okay? You aren't getting out of here."

"But Cyan -" Amy protested.

Cyan stood up. "I'm hungry, so I'm going to make myself some popcorn. Niche warned me not to be nice to you... so you can't have any!" And with that, Cyan abruptly left the room, leaving Amy alone.

Amy carefully pondered her options. The first thing she noticed was her backpack, which had been left sitting on the floor nearby²⁷². Fortunately, even though her hands were zip-tied to the back of the office chair's main column, her legs were still free. She carefully wheeled her office chair toward the backpack, trying to make as little noise as possible. In a matter of moments, she drew even with the backpack and peered inside. The Felonistas had looted most of its contents... but to Amy's delight, there was still one spud buster left at the very bottom²⁷³.

Amy stretched out her leg and snagged her foot into one of the backpack's straps. Then she used her foot to begin pulling the backpack upward and into her lap. Unfortunately, one of the backpack's straps snagged on the chair's recline lever, and Amy was abruptly thrown backward. The sudden shift in weight threatened to tip the chair: Amy had just enough time to jolt her body to the side so that she wouldn't hit the ground headfirst, and then the chair crashed to the ground.

"Are you okay in there?" came Cyan's muffled voice from the other room.

"I'm fine!" Amy quickly assured her, "I'm just moving some furniture!"

"Okay, but don't move the desk on your own!" replied Cyan helpfully, "It's heavy."

²⁷² It occurs to me that Amy's had her backpack of spud busters for most of the story, and yet none of the illustrations showed her wearing a backpack. This is almost certainly a mistake. Whoops!

²⁷³ I find it hard to believe that the Felonistas are smart enough to remove the spud busters from Amy's backpack, but stupid enough to miss one of them... and *then* leave the backpack within Amy's reach. And don't get me started on how absurd it is to imprison Amy on an office chair which can *move*.

Amy smiled and shook her head, then got her bearings again. She'd landed pretty close to the backpack. This was going to be trickier from the ground, especially with a toppled chair slowing her down... but it could still be done. Through a series of twisting, jerky motions, she brought herself closer and closer to the backpack until her face was actually inside it.

Now for the tricky part. Leaning forward, she gently bit down on the remaining spud buster's pin. She took a deep breath to steady herself, and then pulled her head backward. The pin pulled cleanly out of the spud buster, arming it. *15 seconds*, she thought to herself. Amy performed another series of rapid twists and jerks to maneuver the chair, so that it was shielding her body from the backpack. Then she braced herself.

With a thunderous *BOOM*, the spud buster exploded! The chair took the full force of the blast, causing the back to cleanly break off from its base. Now that the back wasn't attached to anything, Amy easily slipped her hands out of the zip tie and separated herself from the chair. She was free²⁷⁴!

Moments later, Cyan dashed back into the room, looking alarmed. "What's going on in here!?" she demanded.

Amy looked down. There was a blackened scar on the floor where her backpack had been, and the office chair's severed base was sitting near her feet. "I was just playing a prank on you!" she explained innocently²⁷⁵.

Cyan gave a relieved laugh. "Oh, okay! Good one... you scared the daylights out of me! For a minute there, I thought our microwave had exploded... but then I realized that the sound came from this room, not the room where I was making popcorn."

"Good point," agreed Amy, "Hey... what if we played an even better prank on Milieu?"

"No, you can't leave!" protested Cyan earnestly, "Milieu was very clear about that!"

"Of course, of course," replied Amy reassuringly, "But we could *pretend* that I've left! And then, as soon as Milieu thinks I'm gone, I'll jump out and surprise her!"

"Oh, that's *hilarious*!" declared Cyan enthusiastically, "Yeah, let's do that!"

"Then you'd better wait somewhere else while I find a hiding place," advised Amy, "Otherwise, you might give me away and spoil the surprise!"

"Got it!" confirmed Cyan, "I'll stay in the other room and eat my popcorn."

And with that, she turned and left. Amy shook her head knowingly. "There's always a weak link²⁷⁶."

Amy looked around the room eagerly: something in here would help her save the day. She was sure of it.

* * * * *

²⁷⁴ I know that Amy's supposed to be an explosives expert, but man... that was a *very* precisely engineered blast!

²⁷⁵ Would Amy know that Cyan has a preoccupation with pranks?

²⁷⁶ Especially when a weak link is necessary for the story to continue. :)

Back at the BLA, Grant and Bethany were tensely waiting to hear back from Guy²⁷⁷.

"I hope Guy and Amy make it back safely," said Grant worriedly.

"Me too," agreed Bethany, "Amy's been a pretty good friend. She gives great advice, and she always sticks up for me when our landlord tries to hassle us. And not just anyone would've put up with my unreliable rent payments."

"We'll get her back," Grant promised. There was a brief silence.

"Of course, we both put up with each other," amended Bethany, "Like, I don't complain when she spends an entire evening tossing coins at her TV remote, trying to improve her throwing aim. And she's always running in place, or training at something. She's super high-energy!"

"Bethany," cautioned Grant, "Maybe you should -"

"Oh, and she's kind of high-strung too," added Bethany, "Like, I always have to clean my dishes off the table right after I'm done eating! Otherwise, Amy will bug me about it all evening."

"That's because when I *don't* bug you, you leave the dishes out overnight," countered Amy over the comms.

"Oh!" exclaimed Bethany in dismay, "Sorry, Amy!"

"I was trying to warn you," explained Grant, "Amy joined the comms while you were talking."

"Never mind that now," interjected Amy, "This is urgent! I'm locked in the Felonista's command center, but Cyan's basically left me to my own devices... and theirs. I've patched into the comms through their landline. We need a way to shut down the nanobots once and for all, and we need to act fast²⁷⁸! Once the Felonistas have dealt with our fictional troller, they're planning to attack the BLA next!"

"It's even more urgent than you think," said Grant grimly, "The Felonistas just sent their nanobot swarm after Guy!"

"Yikes!" Amy exclaimed, "Okay Bethany, talk to me... I'm standing next to a fancy-looking computer console, and I'm guessing it controls the nanobots. Can you walk me through the procedure to shut them down?"

"Let's do this," replied Bethany determinedly²⁷⁹.

* * * * *

²⁷⁷ Shouldn't they be looking for a way to stop the nanobots that are hunting him? I mean, one of the two operators in this room is a nanotechnology expert!

²⁷⁸ Ah, so *that's* why Grant and Bethany weren't trying to find a way to stop the nanobots... because the story already knew that Amy was about to call them with a potential solution!

²⁷⁹ I know Bethany is a nanotechnology expert, but that doesn't necessarily mean she has detailed knowledge of the Felonista's nanobot control computer. And even if she does, it's positively *asinine* for the Felonistas to keep their prisoner in the same room as their control computer in the first place.

Guy was blindly running through the mansion's hallways at this point, trying to keep one step ahead of the swarm that pursued him²⁸⁰. He risked a quick glance behind him and fired a few stun bolts at the pursuing swarm, but they remained unaffected.

On impulse, Guy dashed up the stairs and into a nearby washroom. He slammed the door, grabbed a towel from the counter, then jammed the towel under the bottom of the door. "Let's see those little monsters get through *that*," he muttered.

There was an ominous thud against the door as the nanobots impacted against it, followed by several moments of silence. Guy waited tensely, but no nanobots flew in through the towel. So far, he seemed to be safe. Guy took a moment to assess the situation. What was his next move here? Even if he managed to escape the mansion, the nanobot swarm could still pursue him wherever he went.

Guy's thoughts were interrupted by a strange, irregular scraping sound outside the door. Guy frowned. Was that the nanobots? And then it hit him like a ton of bricks: the nanobots were scooping away at the door, eating through it one micrometer at a time. And given how quickly they'd been able to dismantle a painting, the door would be breached in a matter of seconds²⁸¹.

Guy frantically looked around for a way to escape. There was no window... but from his early scouting, he happened to remember that this washroom had a laundry chute. It would have to do. He cranked open the closet and jumped in, then closed it behind him to cover his tracks. Then he began climbing down the laundry chute, using his limbs to carefully control his descent²⁸². Above him, he heard a terrible splintering crack as the nanobot swarm broke into the washroom and began searching for him.

Guy quickened his pace, and carefully dropped down into the laundry room. He landed as gently as he could, but his shoes still made a telltale *slap* against the bare concrete floor. Guy winced at the noise, and dashed out of the room, hoping against hope that the swarm hadn't heard him. As Guy rounded a corner, however, he was dismayed to see another swarm patrolling near the front door. It noticed him and immediately gave chase.

Guy turned and dashed down another corridor, grimly aware that his lungs were starting to ache from the constant running. Guy put on a desperate burst of speed, but a third swarm appeared at the corridor's far end and cut off his escape. He was trapped! The swarms on both ends of the corridor began to advance menacingly.

"How many of these things are there!?" bellowed Guy in frustration.

There was still a stairway to his left, but that led down to the cellar... and those stairs were the only way in or out. Even so, he was *definitely* trapped up here, so what other choice was there?

²⁸⁰ Wait a second! In the previous chapter, Milieu told Amy that the nanobots send everything they see and hear to the Felonistas. If that's true, then by now, shouldn't the Felonistas be aware that the nanobots are chasing *Guy*, instead of some mysterious troller they've never met?

²⁸¹ If the nanobots can eat through solid wood, then wouldn't it be faster for them to eat through the towel that's jammed under the door? And I'm not convinced that a tiny nanobot could be blocked by a towel in the first place.

²⁸² Note to impressionable young people: never do this.

Guy dashed down the stairway and into the cellar, urgently looking for cover. There was a decent-sized stack of crates in the corner, so he might be able to hide behind those. If he could just throw the nanobots off his trail for a few seconds, then maybe he could double back up the stairway.

Before Guy could move, however, a nanobot swarm began to billow out of the cellar's airducts. Guy was well and truly cornered now. The swarm began to surround him ominously...



* * * * *

Back at the Felonista's lair, Amy was desperately trying to shut down the nanobot control program. Bethany had repeatedly tried to walk her through the procedure over the comms... but unfortunately, it wasn't going well.

"The computer won't let me save the updated file!" exclaimed Amy, "It still says it's locked by another process!"

"Did you kill the task first?" asked Bethany in frustration.

"Of course I killed the task first!" replied Amy indignantly, "But we're honestly grasping at straws, because the stupid error message won't tell us *which* task is locking the file²⁸³!"

"Try stopping the service completely this time," suggested Bethany, "Maybe the actual service is locking the file, even after the initial read."

"When I try to stop the service, the computer starts it back up again!" Amy reminded her testily.

"Oh, *hang* this!" exploded Bethany, "We're out of time! Just use one of your explosive potatoes to blow the computer to smithereens."

Amy grinned. "Now you're talking²⁸⁴!"

²⁸³ I'm sure the computer experts out there could quickly suggest multiple ways to handle this. But Amy isn't a computer expert, so please cut her some slack.

²⁸⁴ Amy already used her last spud buster to free herself from the office chair. She shouldn't have any other spud busters. This is a goof.

* * * * *

Back in the mansion's cellar, the swarm had grabbed Guy by his wrists and ankles and lifted him off the floor.

"You don't want to do this!" Guy urged the swarm, with a hint of giddy fear, "I'm more useful to you alive! And I'm really good at landscaping! Maybe that can help you somehow!"

In response, part of the swarm began to encircle Guy's neck, gradually tightening around it. Guy felt a brief sensation of panic, but then he was abruptly dropped to the ground. For a moment, Guy stayed perfectly still, wondering what was going on... but several more seconds passed, and nothing else happened.

Cautiously, Guy picked himself up and looked around. To his amazement, the swarm was scattered all over the floor, completely inert and dead to the world.

Guy breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness... that was getting kind of dark."

* * * * *

Outside the mansion, Niche began tapping her foot impatiently. "What's taking so long?" she asked. "The nanobots should've finished this dude a long time ago."

"I don't know," replied Milieu in annoyance, "I'm calling Cyan." She pulled out her phone and dialed their lair's number. "C'mon Cyan, pick up... pick up, you *philosophical disputation*²⁸⁵!"

After waiting for half a minute, Milieu finally hung up. "Cyan's not answering."

"What's going on!?" demanded Niche in frustration.

Milieu's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Amy," she muttered²⁸⁶.

"What do we do, Milieu?" asked Niche uncertainly, "We don't even know if the nanobots got the Great Detractor."

Milieu pointed at the mansion. "Niche, please get in there and finish the job. I'm returning to our lair."

"At a time like this!?" asked Niche in confusion.

Milieu scowled ominously. "I have a pest of my own to deal with."

²⁸⁵ In other words, a theoretical argument. Perhaps Milieu was anticipating a stupid argument with Cyan.

²⁸⁶ Actually, Amy was only responsible for demolishing the nanobot control computer. It's unclear why Cyan didn't answer the phone... and it will never be explained.

Chapter 23: Showdown

From the mansion's cellar, Guy spoke into his comms. "Everyone... I think the nanobots are dead!"

"Thank goodness!" breathed Amy into the comms, "Without the nanobots helping them, the Felonistas are just a trio of artists. Angry, vengeful artists. With guns. Rescue me as soon as you can, okay?"

"Amy!?" shouted Guy joyfully, "Are you okay²⁸⁷?"

"Yes!" confirmed Amy, "Or anyway, I'm okay for now! I'm still locked in the Felonista's command center."

"We're running a trace on your phone call now," Grant assured her, "We'll have the location of the Felonista's lair soon²⁸⁸."

"We're going to need it," warned Arthur, "Milieu left the mansion, so she's probably heading back to deal with you, Amy."

"I figured as much," replied Amy grimly, "I'm still looking for a way out of here, but I'm running out of ideas. Just come as soon as you can, okay?"

Guy grimaced. Despite all their struggles today, Amy's life was still in danger!

"First things first," interjected Arthur, "Guy, on your way out of the mansion, I need you to help us capture Niche."

"Do we really have time for that!?" protested Guy.

"Thelma and I are in position now," Arthur assured him, "Just lure Niche outside, and we'll handle the rest²⁸⁹!"

"Wait a minute," objected Guy, as the full import of Arthur's instructions suddenly hit him. "I need to lure Niche *outside*? Is Niche already -"

"*You!!!*" roared Niche furiously, from the top of the cellar stairs, "*You're the Great Detractor!?*"

"No time for negotiations," muttered Guy, and he quickly fired several stun bolts at Niche. Ironically, however, the stun bolts were easily absorbed by her armor²⁹⁰.

Niche laughed triumphantly. "Nice try, but my epic villain armor isn't just for show!" she gloated, "This is going to be too easy!"

²⁸⁷ It's strange that Guy's only reacting to this now, because Amy already spoke over the comms in the last chapter (during a scene with Grant and Bethany). Still, let's be fair: perhaps Guy missed that, because he was busy trying to escape the nanobots.

²⁸⁸ How can *both* organizations be so stupid about using traceable landlines?

²⁸⁹ Do Arthur and Thelma *both* need to be here to capture Niche? If not, then Thelma could tail Milieu back to the Felonista's lair, and they wouldn't even need Grant's call trace. In fact, it would be very poetic if Thelma found the Felonista's lair, because of the way Milieu manipulated her earlier. Oh, well!

²⁹⁰ That isn't ironic. It's just inconvenient for Guy.

Guy whirled around and dove behind the crates in the corner of the room, seconds before Niche opened fire²⁹¹.

From behind the crates, Guy grunted with impatience. "Can't *anything* be simple today!?"

* * * * *

Across the street, Arthur and Thelma were perched at the top of a parking garage. From their vantage point, they anxiously watched the mansion. So far, there was no sign of movement.

"Do you think we can win this, Arthur?" asked Thelma anxiously, "Pretty much everything's gone wrong today."

"Plans go wrong all the time," replied Arthur simply, "But I trust my team."

"I've traced the location of the Felonista's lair," confirmed Grant over the comms, "But we'd better send someone there fast. Milieu already has a head start on us... and once she gets there, it might go badly for Amy²⁹²."

Arthur nodded in acknowledgement. "Thanks, Grant. Guy will head to the lair in just a minute."

"But Guy's not even outside yet!" objected Thelma.

Arthur turned to face Thelma, and spoke with complete confidence. "Don't worry. He's got this."

* * * * *

Niche began approaching the crates in the cellar's corner. "Come out, Guy!" she called goadingly, "It's time to finish this!" She waited to see if Guy would sprint around the other side, but nothing happened. *He must be directly behind the crates*, thought Niche smugly. With a sudden burst of speed, she raced around the crates with her gun drawn.

Guy wasn't there.

Niche frowned. Where else could he even be? The basement didn't offer any other cover.

Without warning, the front panel of a stacked crate in front of her burst open, catching her full in the face! She staggered backward as Guy leapt out of the crate, with a shout of "Surprise!"

Enraged, Niche shook off the effects of the impact. She quickly brought her gun up, but Guy was already halfway up the stairs which led out of the cellar. Niche fired several shots anyway, all of which missed.

"Too slow, Niche!" came the mocking voice from upstairs, "If you want me, come and get me!"

Niche bellowed furiously. Blind to everything else around her, she thundered up the stairway in pursuit of Guy.

²⁹¹ Survival tip: despite what action movies and video games have taught us, wooden crates do not offer reliable protection from gunfire. I guess it's better than standing in the open... but still. Also, whatever happened to Guy's force field gadget!?

²⁹² In that case, couldn't they just call the police and send a SWAT team to the Felonista's lair immediately? At this point, Milieu already has it in for Amy, so what do they have to lose?

* * * * *

At the top of the stairway, Niche heard Guy's footsteps running in the direction of the mansion's exit. She charged toward the door at full speed and burst outdoors, confident in the knowledge that she'd only need one clear shot at Guy.

The moment Niche exited the mansion, however, she was assaulted by a barrage of potatoes fired from the parking garage across the street. Arthur and Thelma were using souped-up versions of Grant's old potato gun. One of the potatoes even knocked the gun out of Niche's hand, disarming her!



Niche staggered under the barrage of potatoes... but she held her ground, and she didn't go down. "You'll have to do better than that!" she roared defiantly.

And then the potatoes exploded.

The force of the shockwave hurled Niche to the ground, knocking her unconscious and rending her armor.

"One down!" whooped Thelma.

Arthur spoke into his comms. "By the way, Grant... what is it with you and explosive potatoes lately?"

Grant's shrug was practically audible over the comms. "They're cheaper than explosive croissants."

Guy cautiously approached Niche. He confirmed that she was still unconscious, and then bound her hands with a zip tie. "Niche is ready for capture, Arthur," remarked Guy. He shook his head with grudging respect. "She's one tough customer. I'm impressed she could survive a blast like that."

"Well, of course she's still alive!" Arthur chided over the comms, "Don't you remember? The BLA isn't authorized to use lethal force²⁹³!"

²⁹³ Okay, but that's not really an explanation... explosions are still dangerous, and you can't fix that by merely stating that it's "against the rules" for the bad guy to die! But that's the joy of writing a story like this: you can occasionally take a break from reality, and make a scene play out like a cartoon.

“Now go save Amy, and be quick about it!” urged Thelma.

Guy didn’t need to be told twice. He raced across the street to a waiting cab and jumped in. “The Felonista’s lair... and step on it²⁹⁴!”

* * * * *

Back at the Felonista’s lair, Amy was frantically looking for a way out of the command center. So far, she’d focused on escaping through the metal door that Milieu had left through earlier: presumably, that door led to an exit. Unfortunately, every attempt to pick the lock had failed, and she hadn’t found anything strong enough to break the door.

Maybe she could push Cyan a little further, and try to get into the room with the microwave. It would take her deeper into the lair, but it could also provide some new options. She just wasn’t sure how Cyan would react... but what other choice did she have at this point?

Amy took a deep breath and began walking toward Cyan’s door, brainstorming possible excuses for why she suddenly needed to hide from Milieu in a different room. However, an ominous click from across the room instantly diverted her attention: the exit door was being unlocked, which almost certainly meant that Milieu was back!

There was no time for anything clever. Amy dove behind the nearest couch, and rapidly assessed the situation. She was still visible from the door that Cyan had used, which meant Cyan would see her if she returned... but right now, Cyan was the least of Amy’s worries. It was much more important to stay hidden from Milieu, and she’d be entering from the opposite door.

The cavalry was coming. She just had to stay hidden and survive for a little longer.

With startling abruptness, the door crashed open, and Milieu stormed into the room. “Cyan!” she shouted.

Then Milieu froze in mid-step. As she stared in disbelief, her eyes took in the multiple scorch marks on the floor, the ruined office chair... and most of all, the smoldering remains of their nanobot control computer.

“CYAAAN!!!” shrieked Milieu. From behind the couch, Amy cringed.

Moments later, the door on Amy’s side of the room opened, and Cyan bounded in.

“Cyan, you *dismantled rampart*²⁹⁵!” bellowed Milieu, “What happened to our control computer!?”

Cyan stared in amazement at the ruined console. “I have no idea! It was working fine before I left Amy alone in here.”

²⁹⁴ The cab driver shouldn’t know where the lair is... but maybe we’re just skipping the part where Guy gave him the address from the phone trace. Also, I’m curious: where did this cab come from? Did Guy use it to get to the mansion? Has it been waiting here the whole time? What did the driver think of everything, especially the potato explosion?

²⁹⁵ In other words, a fortification that’s been taken apart. Perhaps Milieu is saying that Cyan is an ineffective jailkeeper. Which is true.

Milieu did a facepalm. “Do you even *hear* yourself sometimes!? Now, where’d Amy go?”

Cyan caught sight of Amy behind the couch. Amy silently shushed Cyan, fervently hoping that she’d remember the “prank” idea and play along.

Cyan loudly announced, “I guess Amy must’ve escaped!”

Amy relaxed a little, but Milieu exploded. “Are you *kidding me*, Cyan!? You had one job... *keep Amy in this room!*”

“And I did,” laughed Cyan proudly, “We were just kidding... she’s behind the couch! Man, we got you good.”

Amy did a facepalm of her own, and the room went ominously silent.

“Come out, little agent,” said Milieu dangerously, “We have unfinished business.”

Amy seriously considered staying put, but she didn’t see what good it would do. Her cover was blown, and there was nowhere to run. She briefly toyed with the idea of pushing past Cyan and running deeper into the lair... but Milieu was in a dangerous mood, and likely armed. Any sudden movements would just goad her into shooting immediately. There didn’t seem to be any moves left on the board.

Reluctantly, Amy put her hands on her head and stood up from behind the couch. Actually, there was one move left: talking. But in Milieu’s current state of mind, Amy honestly wasn’t sure what to say. Was it possible to de-escalate Milieu, and buy some time? Or should she push harder, in the hopes that she could compromise Milieu’s judgement without getting herself killed?

Milieu pointed icily toward the ruined computer. “Did you cause that?”

Amy tried to put on a brave face. “Yeah, that was me. We’re still friends though, right?”

Milieu responded with a look that could’ve melted lead, and Amy immediately realized that she’d made a mistake.

“Sorry,” muttered Amy quickly.

Milieu shook her head with barely contained fury. “You’ve sabotaged our online popularity²⁹⁶. You’ve spoiled heist after heist²⁹⁷. And now *this*...” She gestured despairingly at the console’s ruins. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to acquire those nanobots? Or how *expensive*? We dreamed of changing the art world, Amy! And this was our one big chance to make it happen... but now you’ve ruined it.”

Amy sighed. She could see where Milieu’s train of thought was heading, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say... except for the plain and simple truth.

“We didn’t set out to ruin anyone’s dreams,” replied Amy quietly, “But you don’t have the authority or the right to decide what ‘art’ should be for everyone else.”

²⁹⁶ Actually, Niche never got a chance to tell Milieu that the Great Detractor was a BLA plot.

²⁹⁷ Actually, the BLA didn’t prevent the Felonistas from stealing a single painting.

Milieu stared at her for a few moments, and then shrugged. “You don’t get it, Amy. Most people don’t.” And then, just as Amy feared, Milieu pulled out a gun. “You know, I’d always intended to win this like a true artist... but I guess I’ll have to settle for winning like a petty thug.”

The gun cocked, and Milieu’s gaze hardened. “I hope you’re happy.”

At that moment, a stun bolt flew into the room through the open door. Before anyone could react, it ricocheted off a desk fragment and hit Milieu squarely from behind! She was instantly knocked unconscious, and her gun clattered harmlessly to the floor²⁹⁸.

Amy stared in surprise, and then felt herself relax for the first time in hours. “Actually,” she quipped at Milieu’s unconscious form, “Now that you mention it, I’m feeling *much* happier now! Thanks for asking.”

Moments later, Guy charged into the room, brandishing his stun gun. He saw Amy and nearly wilted with relief.

“Amy, are you okay?” exclaimed Guy, “I was so worried about you!”

Amy’s entire face lit up with joy, and she bounded up to him. “I knew it, Guy, I knew it! You have my back!”

She sobered briefly, as she looked back at Milieu. “Not to mention impeccable timing. I really thought I was in trouble there for a minute, but you came through! Thank you!”

“I love you too, Amy,” replied Guy fondly.

Amy cocked her head in confusion. “Huh?”

“Remember?” Guy clarified, “Right before you were abducted by the nanobots, you said you loved me. Well... I love you, too!”

“Oh, right! Sorry!” replied Amy quickly, “The context just made that a little confusing, but I get it now. I love you Guy! Er, again! And I have *your* back, too!”

Guy chuckled softly. “I know. Let’s keep looking out for each other, okay?”

The circumstances couldn’t have been less romantic. It had been a stressful, frantic day. They were both exhausted from a week of working around the clock to meet an impossible deadline. Milieu was lying comatose nearby. The room was strewn with debris from two separate explosions...

...but in the chaotic mess of their enemy’s lair, Guy and Amy shared their first kiss.

²⁹⁸ It’s about time those bouncing stun bolts did something *useful* in this story!



"This is awkward," observed Cyan²⁹⁹.

²⁹⁹ I'll bet you forgot that Cyan was still standing there. :)

Chapter 24: All in a Day's Work

It was late afternoon, and everyone was back at the Muddled Badger. The entire BLA team had pitched in to fix the hole in the wall from the earlier nanobot attack³⁰⁰.

The Felonistas were in the temporary holding cell, but they were currently being questioned by the police and the MLA agent. The BLA had been asked to wait outside the detention center until a verdict was reached.

Finally, the MLA agent came into the main area. "Well," he admitted, "It looks like you managed to wrap everything up in time. The Felonistas are captured, and we've recovered the stolen paintings from their lair. Thanks to your unorthodox 'trolling tactic', you even managed to undermine most of their online support."

"I'd say we did pretty good, for an organization full of unnecessary people," replied Arthur. He didn't bother trying to hide his sarcasm.

The MLA agent sighed with exasperation... but he'd been beaten at his own game, and he knew it. "I may have been mistaken when I insisted that the BLA had expendable personnel," he admitted, "Obviously, nobody's getting downsized here. And Arthur can keep his job, too."

"That's awfully nice of you," observed Thelma pointedly, "Especially since you accused Arthur of mismanagement."

The MLA agent gnashed his teeth. "Fine. I'll also apologize for suggesting that Arthur was a bad manager. The truth is, he's a great boss: not just anyone would've put themselves on the line for you like he did³⁰¹. There... I admitted I was wrong, okay? Are we good now?"

"Not quite," insisted Amy feelingly, "You should also have to do a silly dance in Central Park!"

Even behind the shades, the agent's glare was unmistakable. "Don't push it, Ms. Fields."

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Guy spoke up. "What's going to happen to the Felonistas?" he asked curiously.

"A pretty good prison stretch would be my guess," replied the MLA agent wryly, "At least for Milieu and Niche. We're not really sure what to do with Cyan."

"Don't be too hard on her," suggested Amy gently, "I don't think she fully understood what she was supporting."

"Well, that's the problem," explained the agent, "She's not the brightest color in the palette, but she's also really loyal to her friends. She's insisting that we give her the same sentence as everyone else³⁰²."

"Maybe you could give Cyan community service, instead," suggested Thelma, "That way, she still gets punished... but maybe she'll have a chance to find some better friends along the way."

³⁰⁰ I'm no handyman, but I seriously doubt that you could fix a gaping hole in an exterior wall in one afternoon. Unless Grant has a "wall fixing gadget" that we aren't aware of.

³⁰¹ Yes! Eat humble pie, you sneering *jerk*!

³⁰² That isn't really Cyan's call to make.

The agent considered this. “You know, Mrs. Bradford, that’s not a bad idea,” he agreed, “We’ll pick a good work crew for her.”

Then the agent turned to Grant, who’d been hovering nearby³⁰³. “You’ve been awfully quiet this whole time, Mr. Keeler. But it looks like you have something to say.”

Grant hesitated, and then spoke up. “Is there any chance of hiring a new person to work at the BLA? After all, we cracked this case in record time.”

The agent laughed mirthlessly. “You’re kidding, right? You had to win this entire bargain just to avoid *losing* staff! There’s no way you’ll be hiring new people, not for a long time yet... but I’ll tell you what. Since I’m in a good mood this afternoon, I’ll declassify the BLA so that it’s no longer a secret organization³⁰⁴.”

The agent handed his contact card to Arthur. “You did well today, Mr. Chalmers... but I’m going to keep my eye on you. We’ll be in touch.”



Arthur casually looked over the business card, and his eyes bugged out. “Gary... *Chalmers*? Little brother!?”

Gary Chalmers, the MLA agent, jumped back incredulously. “Brother!? Wait... what was your last name, again?”

“I’m Arthur Chalmers!” Arthur declared excitedly, “My little brother Gary went missing years ago... could it possibly be you³⁰⁵?”

³⁰³ Figuratively speaking... not with his jetpack.

³⁰⁴ Well, why not? We never really understood the point of making the BLA a “secret organization” in the first place.

³⁰⁵ Um... I can see where this is going, and it looks like we’re about to introduce a continuity problem. Yes, at the end of the previous story, Arthur revealed that he had a missing younger brother... but that was supposed to explain why the villain Drake Chalmers mistakenly believed he was Arthur’s brother! The missing brother’s name is supposed to be *Drake*, not Gary!

Gary reeled. “Why... I think you might be right! I always thought it was weird that I couldn’t remember the first 15 years of my life. I must’ve developed amnesia³⁰⁶!” He sighed. “Well... alright, then. Now that I know you’re family, I guess I can let you hire an extra person³⁰⁷.”

“Thanks, Gary!” replied Arthur gratefully.

Gary grinned. “Just don’t tell anyone else, okay? I have a reputation to maintain.” He briefly lowered his shades to wink, and then he left³⁰⁸.

A few minutes later, the detention area’s door opened again. The police began escorting the Felonistas out of the BLA.

Milieu couldn’t resist a final insult. “You’re all so proud of yourselves, aren’t you? You *phosphoric coruscations*³⁰⁹! Well, I think you’re all pathetic! And one of these days, I’ll get my revenge!”

Amy shook her head. “You know what the sad thing is, Milieu? Some of your art was actually pretty good! I especially liked the ‘winking graffiti’ you did at the Art Institute of Chicago, the night we captured Charles Bly.”

Milieu looked confused. “What ‘winking graffiti’? We didn’t do any graffiti.”

Amy blinked in surprise. “You didn’t!? Um... never mind, then³¹⁰.”

The Felonistas were led outside, and the door closed. Another case solved!

Guy shrugged. “All in a day’s work.”

“A *day’s* work?” laughed Arthur, “That was the craziest week we’ve ever had at the BLA!”

“No kidding,” remarked Thelma, “After this, I wouldn’t mind a boring week or two.”

A brief silence fell upon the room, as everyone reflected on the events of the BLA’s most recent caper.

“Hey Arthur,” Grant suddenly asked, “About that extra job opening...”

Arthur smiled knowingly. “It’s hers if she wants it, Grant. Go ask her.”

“Thanks, Arthur!” replied Grant. He headed directly for his workshop.

³⁰⁶ This reveal is too ridiculous for words, even if it resolves an old plot thread from the previous story. How is it possible that Arthur didn’t recognize his brother until he read his last name? Besides... Gary has been calling Arthur “Mr. Chalmers” this whole time, so why didn’t Gary make the connection right away? And even if Gary spontaneously “developed” amnesia when he was fifteen, how could he disappear so effectively and completely? Wouldn’t there be a ton of people living nearby who could easily identify him, and set things straight? And I’m sure that’s just scratching the surface.

³⁰⁷ Actually, being family should make it *more* problematic for Gary show the BLA favoritism. You know... nepotism and all that.

³⁰⁸ Oh... that’s it? Shouldn’t there be a long-awaited family reunion, or at least a scene where Arthur and Gary catch up? No? Okay... I guess we’re done here. Mystery solved, everyone!

³⁰⁹ In other words, something bright and glittery. Perhaps Milieu is trying to sneer at the BLA’s shining moment... but frankly, at this point, who cares what she meant?

³¹⁰ Uh... *excuse* me? Then what was the story behind the winking graffiti!? I think we deserve an explanation!

Guy nudged Amy. "You think Bethany's interested?"

Amy smiled mischievously. "Of course she is. She knows she can't make this month's rent."

Guy chuckled. "That's not what I meant."

Amy took his hand. "Yeah, I know."

* * * * *

Grant entered the workshop. Bethany was idly wandering around with a distant look on her face. Grant felt a brief, nervous sensation of déjà vu, but he forced it aside. "Hi, Bethany!" he greeted her.

Bethany turned around and smiled sadly. "Oh, hi Grant!" she responded, "Sorry if I'm looking a little glum, but I'm really going to miss this place. You guys get to do some pretty cool stuff... even if the work hours are hectic."

Grant laughed. "This is usually more of a 9 to 5 job," he explained, "But yeah. We all put in some serious overtime to crack this case." He paused. "So... when's your next video game tournament? Maybe I could cheer you on from the audience."

"I'm not entering," Bethany replied simply, "At this point, I've missed too much practice... I'd be swept in the first round. Besides, I'm getting pretty tired of the whole thing. I think I enjoyed video games more when they were just a hobby." She studied the ground. "I guess I'll have to get my old job back, eh? It's stressful, but at least it pays the bills. Not to mention the rent."

"About that," ventured Grant, "Have you ever considered trying something completely different... like maybe working at an agency?"

Bethany looked up in surprise, and there was a hopeful gleam in her eye. "Grant... are you really saying that I can work here? I'm in a pretty tragic headspace right now, so please don't get my hopes up if you don't mean it."

"I mean it," replied Grant with a smile, "It's already cleared with Arthur. The pay's not bad, and the work is a lot of fun. Of course, most of our cases don't involve nanotechnology... but your science background could be pretty useful in the workshop! And you'd make a good support operator, too."

"Sounds like I'd be spending a lot of time with you," ventured Bethany slyly.

"Well, yes," Grant admitted, "It's up to you, obviously, but... um, are you interested³¹¹?"

Bethany smiled. "Sign me up, Grant! And thank you."

Grant grinned from ear to ear. "That's great, Bethany! Thelma can add you to the system this afternoon... just remember to fill out your timesheets every week, and you'll be fine."

Bethany laughed dismissively. "Oh, does this place have timesheets, too? At my old job, I wrote a macro to fill them out automatically."

³¹¹ Some people might be concerned that Grant is offering Bethany a job in the same context as a potential romantic relationship. For the purposes of this story, please don't overthink it.

Grant jumped in surprise. “You can *do* that³¹²?”



“Sure you can!” grinned Bethany, “In fact, there’s all sorts of neat things you can do with code. Maybe I could even write some control routines for your next jetpack. Oh, and I already had a few ideas for some new gadgets... maybe we could talk them over this afternoon!”

Grant smiled broadly. “Bethany... I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

The future was full of possibilities.

The End

³¹² This is cute joke, but it honestly would’ve played better in the first story, which repeatedly mentioned Thelma’s timesheets. Timesheets weren’t even mentioned in this story until now, so it comes out of nowhere.

Epilogue

Mist swirled around the silent, deserted dock. At precisely 1:00 am in the morning, two pairs of footsteps began approaching from opposite directions. One pair of footsteps heralded a payment, and the other pair of footsteps heralded merchandise.

"Well... *that* went well, didn't it?"

"Calm yourself. Clearly, the Felonistas aren't the up-and-coming power we'd hoped for."

"No kidding. You know, I took a big risk arranging all that for them."

"You were paid, weren't you?"

"Yeah, but the nanobots were supposed to finish this! Instead, the BLA's stronger than ever."

"What's your point?"

"I can't keep sticking my neck out, that's all. Your clients have been asking for some pretty risky stuff."

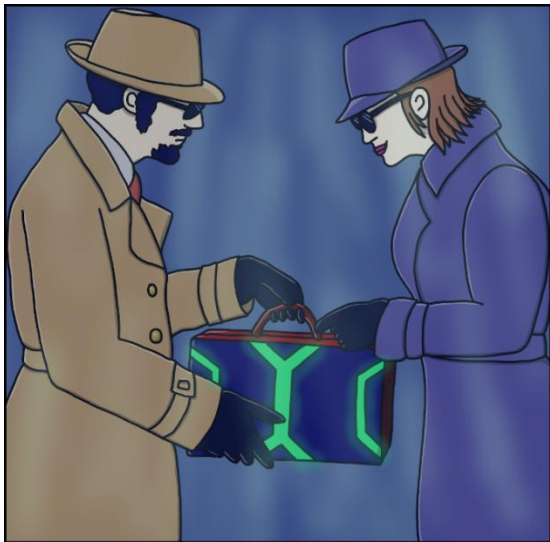
"Are you saying you didn't bring the merchandise?"

"No, I have it right here... but I want to know that there's an end to this."

"It ends when she gets what she wants: revenge."

"I thought she wanted 'artistic license'."

"No, that was the Felonistas... *this* is for our primary client. Now head home, and make sure you aren't followed. We'll be in touch³¹³."



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³¹³ Oh, okay... I guess these epilogues are building up some kind of "ultimate nemesis" scenario for later. I sure hope I can pay that off someday! But just in case I don't, please assume that the good guys prevail. Thank you.

³¹⁴ This is obviously the same "epilogue picture" from the previous story, except the briefcase is a different color.

Afterword

Story Timeline

The previous story had the luxury of being slightly nebulous about the passage of time. However, this story was different: the 7-day ultimatum was a major plot thread, which made it necessary for me to carefully track each day as it passed. This ensured that I wouldn't make any mistakes around the timeline... aside from the ones I wrote on purpose, of course.

Day	Chapters	Days Left	Essential Events
Monday	1, 2, 3		Guy and Amy visit the Met. <i>The Starry Night</i> is stolen. Agent Gary puts the BLA on the case.
Tuesday	4, 5, 6, 7	7	Guy and Amy revisit the Met. Agent Gary delivers his 7-day ultimatum to the BLA. Guy and Amy stake out the Louvre. The <i>Mona Lisa</i> is stolen.
Wednesday	8	6	Milieu tells Thelma to meet her tomorrow.
Thursday	9	5	Milieu tips off Thelma about the next heist. <i>American Gothic</i> is stolen from the Art Institute of Chicago. The Felonistas betray Charles, who is captured by the BLA.
Friday	10, 11	5*	The Felonistas deliver their livestream. Bethany is brought in to help the BLA. <i>Girl with a Pearl Earring</i> is stolen from the Hague.
Saturday	12, 13, 14	4	Bethany figures out how the nanobots work. Guy quits his job at Priorityscapes. Milieu accidentally texts Thelma about their next heist. The Felonistas decide to use this mistake to their advantage. Guy and Amy are attacked on their road trip. Guy and Amy are hospitalized overnight.
Sunday	15, 16	3	Guy and Amy stake out the Menil Collection. Bethany finishes her work at the BLA (for now). <i>Golconda</i> is stolen. "Nanobot Milieu" is captured.
Monday	17, 18	2	The BLA attempts to interrogate "Nanobot Milieu". Charles escapes police custody. The BLA seeks advice from Chekhov. Grant rescues Bethany from Charles.
Tuesday	19, 20	1	The BLA initiates their trolling campaign. "Nanobot Milieu" escapes the BLA and abducts Amy. The Felonistas deliver their own ultimatum to the BLA.
Wednesday	21, 22, 23, 24	0	Bethany insists that the BLA still has until the end of the day. The BLA prepares an ambush at an abandoned mansion. Amy destroys the nanobot control computer. Niche is captured, followed by Milieu and Cyan. Arthur and Gary realize they're brothers. Bethany becomes an official BLA employee.

* Because Gary Chalmers apparently lost count.

How this Story Originated

This section briefly explains the story's origin: if "behind the scenes" stuff doesn't interest you, then you can skip this part.

Even as I was finishing the first story, I knew that I wanted to do another one of these. It's a fun format to write in, and I had plenty of unused ideas that I could bring forward into a sequel. Sometime in late 2023, I got the idea for the "Felonistas": a group of art-oriented criminals who could provide a more intellectual challenge for the BLA than Crimex (don't get me wrong: I had a *lot* of fun writing for Drake, but outwitting him isn't much of an achievement).

I completed a basic outline for this story by May 2024. Before that could happen, however, a much more significant event took place: in January 2024, I lost my job of 17 years due to corporate downsizing (in fact, my entire team was downsized, including my boss). The remainder of 2024 would be an ongoing rollercoaster of attempting to find new employment. For better or worse, these conditions influenced the new story, including two significant plot points:

1. The agent from the MLA wants to downsize somebody from the BLA, and everyone rallies together in a tremendous effort to stop it from happening.
2. Bethany is burned out from a corporate career, and she's arguably fled from a responsible adult life by attempting to make a living through video game competitions. She eventually finds a new job with the BLA (and no, I never attempted to make a living through video game competitions... Bethany's career path is not a literal allegory).

In both cases, this story allowed me to write happy endings for my fictional characters, long before I successfully found new employment for myself in 2025. In a way, it was kind of therapeutic... but mostly, I just wanted to write another wacky story with memorable characters and the occasional bit of heart.

The basic planning for this story came together faster than the first one. A big reason for this is that the first story had already established the 3 critical principles for writing a "deliberately wrong" story which follows the weird path between absurd and genuine (I've refined these principles from their original version in the first story):

- **The characters must feel sincere.** The characters should have a consistent (and ideally unique) perspective, personality, and skill set. Intentional mistakes where they act out of character should be rare. The characters should be reasonably appealing: you don't want the reader to give up on a character the first time they do something inexplicable or dumb.
- **The core story must feel sincere.** Storytelling goofs should normally focus on side points or minor issues, to avoid compromising the story's main thrust. The core story should be reasonably compelling. Also, all meta-humor must be relegated to the footnotes, to keep the main body of the story as genuine as possible.
- **Intentional mistakes should be amusing, but never frustrating.** This isn't an exact science, but certain goofs are riskier than others. For example, repetitive gags and long-running goofs can wear down a reader if they aren't handled carefully. And extra caution is needed when a goof could undercut a character or situation that the reader is supposed to care about.

Anyway, like I said... a few months after releasing the first story, I began outlining the plot for this one. But we'll cover that in the next section.

How this Story was Written

This section briefly explains how I wrote the story. If “behind the scenes” stuff doesn’t interest you, then you can skip this part.

As with the previous story, I started by outlining a very high-level plan that was based around a 3-part structure. For example, part 1’s original outline looked like this (you might notice that some points are different from the final story, or even completely absent... we’ll get to that shortly):

- Open with disappointment regarding Cilantro Brothers falling out of BLA jurisdiction
- Early chapters can contradict some previously established facts
- A curious visit to the museum, where a painting later disappears: BLA is put on case
- MLA agent classifies the BLA as top secret
- Pestle Cilantro hired as revenge by Malena Midnight
- A series of museum robberies and Pestle run-ins
- Guy is troubled: he’s been offered a job by a landscaping firm (how?), and doesn’t seem to understand that he doesn’t have to accept it... instead, he does his best to work both jobs
- Felonistas betray the man who hired them to steal the paintings: they tie him up, frame him for everything and walk away with his money (“I think we’re just getting started”)

You could think of this as the story’s “skeleton”: they’re the fundamental points which give the story its overall structure. I believe it’s important to understand the overall story before getting too deep into any specific plot point... otherwise, you can waste a lot of time on stuff which might ultimately be changed or completely dropped.

With the story’s “skeleton” established, I fleshed it out with... um, vital organs or something. I guess I’ve already lost track of the analogy, so let’s just move on. The important thing is, most of the “skeleton’s” points suggested tentative chapter headings, so the next step was writing a detailed series of bullet points to define what should happen in each chapter. In the process, each chapter’s length became more apparent: this allowed me to split up chapters that were getting too long.

For example, the expanded bullet points for chapter 1 began like this:

- Guy and Amy meet at their usual street corner. As they walk to the BLA, they eagerly compare their notes on the Cilantro Brothers:
 - Started as a string of local grocery thefts.
 - Eventually, the BLA noticed the pattern and opened an investigation: they discovered it was all the work of one gang, led by a man named Pestle Cilantro and his two brothers (is this guy’s name a joke, or was it meant to be serious?).
 - The BLA got a lead on the Cilantro Brothers’ hideout last Friday, and today they get to raid their hideout.
 - At this point, Guy and Amy have reached the public records office. They enter through the back door, follow a hallway down a corner, and reach a row of decommissioned vending machines.
 - They open the panel on the right-most vending machine, revealing stairs that lead down to the Muddled Badger (this isn’t how they reached the stairs in the previous story: the

vending machines were bookcases, and they activated the stairs by tugging one of the books).

- Guy and Amy are surprised to see everyone looking glum:
 - Arthur explains that over the weekend, the Cilantro Brothers escalated from grocery fraud to taking over the world. That puts them out of the BLA's jurisdiction: major threats are handled by other organizations, like the FBI or CIA.
 - Guy protests, "How could a trio of grocery thieves pose any credible threat to the entire planet?" Wordlessly, Thelma hands him a report, and he scans through it. "Okay, that's actually a pretty good explanation." Thelma shrugs philosophically. "Never underestimate a garnish."

...and so on.

It's worth noting that the first story's detailed outline was very lean on dialogue snippets and gags: it was mostly focused on the events which needed to happen, and why certain plot developments were intentionally defective. This is a pretty good approach, because you don't want to invest a lot of time developing dialogues and gags at this early stage... you can easily lose "premature" content like that as the story matures and scenes are changed, added, or removed.

However, *this* story's detailed outline ended up with a lot more dialogue snippets and gags than the first story. I didn't deliberately set out to do this... but I was more familiar with the story's world and characters this time, so it was easier to imagine some of the gags and dialogue upfront. However, I still didn't spend a lot of time refining them to sound "just right": that's something I do during the actual writing/reviewing/rewriting phase.

Here's a partial list of changes and improvements that occurred during the detailed outline stage:

- **The "Pestle Cilantro" running gag:**
 - Pestle Cilantro was one of the Cilantro Brothers mentioned in the first chapter. He was going to escape police custody, and be hired by Malena Midnight (from the previous story) to get revenge on the BLA.
 - The basic problem was that Pestle's story arc didn't connect with anything else in the plot: he was just going to make a series of increasingly over-the-top botched assassination attempts on the BLA, and eventually end up in the hospital.
 - Of course, when I'd originally dreamed up this side-plot, its lack of relevance to the overall story was the whole point... it was basically a "bad writing" running gag. As I reached the end of part 1's detailed outline, however, it became increasingly obvious that Pestle's side-plot was dragging down the actual story, and so it had to be dropped.
- **The Felonista's grand plan:**
 - At this stage, I was still pretty vague about the Felonista's grand plan... I only knew that they'd be stealing art. Somewhere toward the end of part 1's detailed outline, I settled on the Felonista's agenda of replacing "legacy" paintings with their own.
 - Before then, I'd considered some pretty fanciful ideas for the Felonista's schemes. At one point, they were going to break into museums by painting "holes" in the walls, and then crawling through them. I also thought they could paint minions or monsters which "came to life" and did their bidding, because of nanobots in the paint.

- These ideas were scaled way back: the nanobots just became a tool for the Felonista's heists. The only surviving fragment of the "living paintings" idea is the winking graffiti at the end of part 1... and that was left in as a joke.
- It might seem insane that I didn't truly understand the Felonista's agenda until I'd finished outlining part 1, but that's the beauty of outlines: they're fast and easy to change. If this had been a "serious" story, I also would've gone back and changed some stuff in part 1 to better reflect the Felonista's motives and methods... but because this is an intentionally defective story, I just added some snide footnotes about it.
- **Thwarting the Felonistas:**
 - Originally, the BLA was going to beat the Felonistas by tricking them into escalating to world domination, so that the MLA could take them down. I liked the idea because it returned full circle to the Cilantro Brothers' escalation in the first chapter.
 - Unfortunately, there was a major problem: the crux of this story is whether the BLA can solve the case before the deadline. If the MLA takes down the Felonistas, then you could easily argue that the BLA never actually solved the case.
 - After some brainstorming, I settled on the idea of trolling the Felonistas online to lure them into a trap. And the nice thing is, the Felonistas had been running an online channel... so this resolution still feels like it could've been "in the cards" all along.
- **The Prologue:**
 - The prologue was originally going to be a brief story about two knights who hide their treasure behind a series of elaborate riddles, and then confidently state that no one will find it for centuries. The punch line was going to be that they're right, because the treasure is never found and it has nothing to do with the actual story.
 - At some point, however, I changed my mind: I decided that the prologue should have at least *some* connection with the story, even if it's the most tenuous connection imaginable. And thus, the short story of Pierre and the photocopier was born.
- **Fine tuning:**
 - I realized that part 2 was a little short (and to be honest, it still is). To bulk it up, I added the "random car chase" chapter. As a nice bonus, I got to recapture just a bit of the flavor from the discarded Pestle Cilantro idea.
 - Guy was originally going to quit his Priorityscapes job in part 3... but I bumped it to an early point in part 2, before it had a chance to become too aggravating.
 - I bumped Amy's kidnapping to later in part 3, so that she'd still be around for the trolling campaign. The trolling stuff wouldn't be as fun if Amy was already in danger.
 - I added the "Felonista Flashbacks". Although I didn't want people to sympathize with the bad guys, I did feel it was important to understand their perspective. Better yet, I got to introduce some fun plot holes (if you want to break your story *fast*, then add some random flashbacks without cross-checking the details... it's amazingly easy to introduce contradictions this way).

I reviewed the detailed outline with my wife Laura, let the entire thing "cool off" for about a month, and then reviewed the detailed outline once more. The month-long break ensured that I wouldn't be too close to the material during the review (which makes it easier to catch problems). The detailed outline was then officially finished in July 2024.

Now that I had my detailed outline, I knew exactly what needed to happen in the story from beginning to end. It was time to start writing completed scenes! This was the fun part: with the big questions answered, I could be more spontaneous and organic with my writing. This included some fairly important (but more self-contained) changes and additions:

- **Charles Bly scoping out the Met.** This scene wasn't in the original outline, but I felt a need to establish Charles' character (and hint at the main plot) a little sooner.
- **The explosion-related art exhibit.** Guy and Amy were originally going to discuss more generic, traditional museum exhibits... but then I thought, nah. We needed an exhibit that Amy could get *excited* about!
- **The bargain with the MLA.** Originally, the MLA agent was just going to challenge the BLA to solve the case in 7 days, or else he'd go ahead and fire someone. However, I realized that this deal was too soft on the BLA: the agent was going to fire someone anyway, so he didn't stand to gain anything if the BLA lost. To raise the stakes, I added the additional penalty that Arthur would lose his job, too.
- **Bethany's introspection.** I hadn't originally planned the landlord scene with Ethel, but I decided that this would be a good way to demonstrate Bethany's current situation in practical terms.
- **Bethany doesn't stay during the "Golconda heist".** Bethany was originally going to stay and help Grant during the "Golconda heist", but then I realized 3 things:
 - 1) She added nothing to the mission.
 - 2) She's not even mentioned again until chapter 18.
 - 3) The story already had a "straightforward relationship" where both characters liked each other almost immediately (Guy and Amy, in case that wasn't obvious).
- I decided to take things in a different direction. In the revised scene, Bethany turns down Grant's offer without providing a clear explanation of where they stand. This allowed me to explore Grant's character on a completely new level. It also made the jetpack rescue in chapter 18 more satisfying, because it feels like Grant actually overcame something to earn Bethany's admiration. Or anyway, that's the theory.

The initial story writing was completed at the end of August 2024, and the initial illustrations were completed on September 19th, 2024. In the previous story, I'd tried to create the individual chapters and their corresponding illustrations at roughly the same time, but for this one I let the story get ahead. This meant that I spent a lot of time at the end doing illustrations: despite their simplistic appearance, most of them take at least an hour or two before they "look right" (and even longer, if it's a crowd shot).

And with that, the story's initial writing phase was done! It was time for the completion phase.

How this Story was Completed

This section briefly explains how I completed the story. If “behind the scenes” stuff doesn’t interest you, then you can skip this part.

It’s sad, but true: by the time you’ve finished the initial writing phase, your story is about as *awful* as it’s ever going to be. Sure, the story’s “complete” in the sense that you wrote all the chapters... but it’s also full of clunky passages, stilted dialogue, missed opportunities, overused phrases, unclear descriptions, and probably some straight-up spelling and grammar errors that your word processor didn’t catch. Trust me.

The good news is, the completion phase comes next. Everything you do from this point forward will gradually improve your story to the point where it’s actually ready for people to read it. Oddly enough, although this story initially came together faster than the first one, refining it took much longer.

I began with the following steps:

- **Mistake insertion.** I scanned the story for areas which didn’t have many intentional mistakes. At these locations, I inserted bad analogies, incoherent expressions, narrative contradictions, etc. These particular “mistakes” can be inserted almost anywhere, so I save them until the end to balance how many problems appear on each page.
- **Spell check.** This was a deliberate search for things that a modern word processor could still miss. For example:
 - Using “chucked” instead of “chuckled”.
 - Using “causally” instead of “casually”.
 - Using two spaces instead of one.
- **Phrasing consistency.** This ensured consistent use of the same phrasing within the same context. Some of these points are pretty subtle, and in most cases, either way would’ve been fine: the important thing was to settle on one consistent standard for the story. For example:
 - “Jetpack”, “landline”, “cellphone”, and “postcard” are written as one word, instead of two words.
 - The shots from Guy’s stun gun are “stun bolts” (the previous story often called them “stun shots”, so I added a token explanation for this in chapter 5).
 - The BLA’s headquarters is a “base”, and the Felonista’s headquarters is a “lair”.
 - Grant invented “explosive potatoes”, not “exploding potatoes”.
 - This is a “story”, not a “book”.
 - With regard to written numbers like “five” vs. numerals like “5”, I basically decide each instance on a case-by-case basis. One of these days, I should probably decide on a consistent way to use each one.

At this point, I did a full readthrough of the previous story, so that its established facts would be fresh in my mind. From there, I did a full readthrough of this story. I read it aloud, because it’s easier to catch mistakes that way. The readthrough was concerned with the following things:

- **Story continuity.** This is why I read the previous story first: I didn’t want to contradict the previous story by accident (on purpose, sure... but not by accident). For example, this is how I realized that Arthur’s cousin helped him run a cable down into the Muddled Badger.

- **Character consistency.** I realized that Amy wasn't particularly zany in the initial draft of this story, so I dialed up the silliness in much of her dialogue. It was a lot of fun.
- **Content check.** In rare cases, content was added or removed. For example:
 - I just wasn't feeling the full impact of Amy's frustration with Guy over "Priorityscapes", so I decided to add the scene in the bowling alley.
 - I removed a line where Arthur explains that there's been some public backlash against the BLA for capturing Milieu ("someone even made t-shirts"). This plot point wasn't referenced anywhere else... and in this case, dropping it seemed more economical than adding another wise-guy footnote.
- **Repetitive phrases.** There are certain phrases that I tend to overuse, so I did a "find and replace" to reduce how frequently they appear. To understand why it's so easy to overuse a phrase, consider these examples:
 - "Or something" is often used to follow up a silly thought ("baboons or something"), especially when the delivery is cavalier. I try to give Amy most of the "or something" lines, although other characters use them occasionally.
 - "Okay" can be used to confirm something ("Okay, got it!"), begin a sentence ("Okay, let's..."), end a sentence ("...after lunch, okay?"), affirm one's support ("Okay with me"), indicate wellbeing ("are you okay?"), etc. I tend to give Guy more "okays" than anyone else, although it's not a hard-and-fast rule.
 - "At least" can be used to indicate optimism ("At least we still..."), a missed target ("We still need at least..."), a minimum requirement ("This solution must at least..."), and so forth.
 - "You know" can be used rhetorically ("It's difficult, you know?"), reflectively ("You know, I think..."), to introduce a thought ("You know how dogs always..."), to discuss imparting knowledge ("I'll let you know when..."), and probably other uses, too.
 - "I mean" can be used to start a sentence with a casual tone ("I mean, we always..."), to convey seriousness ("I mean it"), to correct a misunderstanding ("that's not what I mean"), and so on.
 - "Just" can be used as a substitute for a surprising variety of words and phrases, including only ("I just want it to..."), merely ("just an imitation"), fair ("a just decision"), exactly ("just what I was looking for"), recently ("we were just there"), please ("just hurry up"), and others.

The full readthrough was finished in late September 2024. Immediately afterward, I began a second full readthrough with my wife, Laura. As before, not a single chapter escaped without a variety of corrections and refinements, ranging from minor rephrasing to structural reshuffling (a strong indicator that at least one more readthrough would be required before the story was "good enough").

Toward the end of part 2's readthrough, we both agreed that this story felt slightly less funny (or possibly less zany) than the first one. That worried me: had I undercut the story's humor, by giving the BLA a more intellectual/artsy opponent? Had I strayed too far from the original story's tone? I honestly wasn't sure. Then again, maybe we were just feeling the strain of analyzing each chapter so heavily. When you're working so hard to confirm that the story's *correct*, it's awfully hard to tell whether the story's actually *enjoyable*.

By the end of our readthrough (which coincided with the end of September 2024), we agreed on some additions to make the story zanier:

- **Arthur nearly buys a Felonista painting.** I was pretty happy with this one, and I love his frantic reaction at the end. It also felt relatable: it's the sort of mistake that anyone could easily make.
- **Every scene where Guy accidentally stuns something.** I rarely laugh out loud when I'm writing, but I did when I was writing these scenes. They're just so ridiculously irresponsible!
- **The Felonista publicity scenes.** This includes the "fan mail" scene, the "Niche talk show" scene, and the "Milieu radio show" scene. Besides adding some absurdity to the story, they also demonstrated how much work the Felonistas put into building their fanbase.
- **Chase scene silliness.** For example, we added the moment where Guy flattens the "share the road" sign during the car chase. We also added the moment where Guy knocks over the postcard stands while chasing Niche.

Conversely, we made the nanobot chase through the mansion longer and scarier, since it was more engaging that way.

At the end of October 2024, we did a second readthrough. This one was mainly focused on confirming that the story was enjoyable and struck the right tone... and I'm happy to say that this time, it was a much more enjoyable read. Of course, I still noticed plenty of passages which needed to be tightened up (and a handful of typos). I also made a couple of significant additions:

- **The Menil Collection security room takeover scene.** The story originally jumped directly to the scene where the Felonistas had already taken over the control room. However, my wife found this disorienting on its own ("Wait, why are there unconscious security guards in there? When did *that* happen?"). Besides... this new scene gave the Felonistas an opportunity to be awesomely evil.
- **The MLA agent attempting to fire Arthur, and later eating "humble pie".** When the MLA agent called to inform the BLA that they'd run out of time, Bethany originally interrupted him almost immediately. Instead, my wife convinced me to let the agent's nastiness play out a little longer, so that we can really feel the impact of the BLA's failure before Bethany finally catches him on a technicality. We also leaned more into the final scene, where the MLA agent is forced to admit that he was wrong: it's much more satisfying now!

In early December, Laura started her proofreading run. Besides providing countless wording improvements and catching the occasional rogue typo, she also helped to make significant improvements with the story itself. For example:

- In the final scene of chapter 2, Charles never actually pays the Felonistas, even though he spent half a page bargaining about their fee. Whoops! Rather than fix this, we decided to add a fun new footnote about it.
- In the opening scene of chapter 4, Guy and Amy slyly inspect the Met's crime scene while pretending to be normal tourists... while wearing their BLA uniforms. This was pretty dumb, so it deserved a new footnote, too.
- In chapter 13, Milieu complains that nobody knows the new location of the BLA base. But at this point in the story, she's already met Thelma twice at the nearby open market! We added a footnote to explain that it should be easy for her to follow Thelma back to the BLA's base.

- In chapter 14, when Guy and Amy are about to jump for their lives from the train bridge, Laura thought that Grant should bring up his jetpack idea again, for comedic effect.
- In chapter 16, Laura realized that nobody in the story (except for the Felonistas) actually knows for sure that the Felonistas reassemble the stolen paintings in their lair. Good point... footnote time!
- In chapter 18, some feedback from Laura made me realize that Chekhov should make a meaningful contribution to the BLA's plan (originally, he just left things at "I don't understand these artsy types"). I added some dialogue where he suggests making the Felonistas angry, which Thelma then builds on in chapter 19 (she originally came up with the entire plan herself).
- In chapter 20, the nanobots originally just grabbed Amy and took off through the door. Laura pointed out that this was a missed opportunity for a fairly epic action scene. She was right.
- In chapter 22, Laura suggested that the Felonistas should be using the car that they stole from the Louvre. This idea was so wonderfully bizarre that I just had to include it. Also, in the scene where Amy escapes from the office chair, I'd forgotten that the chair had *wheels*... which made a lot of Amy's original escape maneuvers unnecessary, and even confusing. I rewrote them accordingly.
- In chapter 23, it was very unclear why Amy hadn't already escaped, or why she was speaking so recklessly to Milieu. I added some introspection to explain things better.

That's a *lot* of additions and changes... but that's also the value of having such a great collaborator. We also took the opportunity to slightly reduce the number of footnotes: their main purpose is to be amusing, so there's no need to exhaustively address every possible question a reader might ask. We finished this phase by the end of December.

In early January, I did another "read out loud" readthrough on my own. The objective this time was to get through the story as quickly as possible, so that it was easier to catch things from an overall story perspective. Wouldn't you know it, I *still* found sentences and phrases which needed to be tightened up on practically every chapter! I finished my readthrough, and decided to let the whole thing sit until February. That would give it time to "cool" for the next casual readthrough with Laura... and as long as we didn't find too much at that point, it could also be the final readthrough before releasing the story.

As January ended, I began the (hopefully) final readthrough with Laura. This time around, things actually looked pretty good: we found relatively few issues, and the corrections were very minor (aside from an embarrassing typo in chapter 2 where "Arthur" was spelled "Arther", and a missing word in chapter 23). Based on that, we decided the book had finally crossed the threshold of "good enough", and it was ready to release in February 2025. By remarkable coincidence, I also found new employment for myself at roughly the same time!

Of course, in spite of everything, it's still possible that I didn't catch every issue in the story. But if you've made it this far in the "Afterword" section, then I hope you'll agree that I gave it a pretty good shot! :)

Besides... every project has to end at some point. Onto the next adventure!

Author's Commentary

This section provides my own thoughts on various aspects of the story. If “behind the scenes” stuff doesn’t interest you, then you can skip this part.

The BLA: This organization sets the tone for the story’s entire world: it’s a close-knit, “everyman” sort of group, comprised of good people who respect each other. Nobody has a sinister past, and nobody stoops to despicable measures just to win the day. The BLA isn’t even authorized to use lethal force! Obviously, this only works because the story allows them to solve problems on their own terms... but honestly, I like that the heroes get to win without going “dark”. This is *not* a gritty or dystopian setting: it’s a lighter sort of world. There can be danger and drama, but at the end of the day, nothing truly horrifying or heartbreaking is going to happen. I haven’t even killed a bad guy yet. :)

The MLA: As mentioned in one of the footnotes, the MLA basically exists because I wanted a big agency to bully the BLA... but I didn’t want to negatively portray a specific agency in the real world. If the BLA is the “everyman” group, then the MLA is the “elite” group. Most of them are busy offscreen, handling the big, gritty threats which are never actually portrayed in these stories.

The Felonistas: As noted elsewhere, I wanted the BLA to go up against a very different enemy in this story. The Felonistas are a group of disgruntled artists on a mission, and you get the impression that they work reasonably well together (despite their occasional jabs at each other). As an intelligent and motivated enemy group, they also needed a coherent perspective: you’re not supposed to agree with them, but it’s still important to understand where they’re coming from. Because the Felonistas are artists, I designed their outfits after the primary colors: Milieu wears red, Cyan wears blue, and Niche wears yellow and green (the “middle primary color” depends on which color system you’re using, so I had Niche wear both of them to avoid causing silly arguments between painters and digital artists).

Arthur Chalmers: Arthur is the boss that everyone wishes they had. He’s considerate, professional, and he knows how to help his employees reach their full potential. He’s also willing to take a hit for the team. We see this in practice, when he risks his own job in a bargain that could prevent one of his employees from getting downsized. But we know basically nothing about his personal life... for now.

Guy Stafford: Far from being the star agent, Guy is basically the “new guy” at the BLA. He’s also the story’s main character, even though I try to give everyone something meaningful to do. Aside from the landscaping thing, his background and family situation are currently a blank slate. And so far, it hasn’t really made a difference in the storytelling.

Amy Fields: Amy comes close to personifying the writing style of this series: she’s quirky and lighthearted, and yet she has an earnestness that can take you by surprise. I’ve always done my best to make Amy an interesting and compelling character in her own right, and not just “the hero’s girlfriend”. I also made her slightly taller than Guy, since this almost never happens in action movies. One of these days, I should probably resolve her parents’ mysterious disappearance in Paris.

Guy and Amy’s relationship: Guy and Amy share a straightforward relationship based on mutual trust and respect. Of course, attraction is definitely a factor, too: you may recall that Amy was the original instigator of their relationship, simply because she thought that Guy was cute. Their (mostly) simple, sunny dating life might seem a little too perfect... but that’s partially a reflection of this fictional world’s

lighter tone. And just for the record, Guy and Amy's relationship is progressive, not static: if I wrote enough BLA stories, then they would eventually get engaged, married, and perhaps even have kids.

Grant Keeler: I've always struggled a little to make Grant more than just "the gadget guy". From that perspective, Grant's new beard is almost an inside joke: it's my own desperate attempt to give him something new. Fortunately, this story gets to explore Grant in further detail: we learn more about Grant's aspiring jetpack project, and we discover that he's a bit clueless around women. If I write another story, then I'll look forward to seeing where his character goes next.

Bethany Blake: Bethany was likely born out of my own struggle to find employment in 2024: most of her character development in this story revolves around her career crisis. As a late addition to the BLA cast, I had to find a tricky balance between meaningfully establishing her character and not giving her too much focus. Bethany was also useful for exploring new aspects of Grant and Amy's characters. Unlike Amy, I didn't intentionally set out to make Bethany taller than Grant... but it happened anyway, so now we're stuck with it.

Grant and Bethany's relationship: Grant and Bethany's relationship has barely started by the end of this story. Even so, we can already see that they have some common ground (for example: they're both technically minded, and they prefer peace and quiet over action and excitement). They also have potentially complementary differences (for example: Grant could help Bethany be a little more disciplined, and Bethany could help Grant have more fun). The rest is up to them!

Thelma Bradford: Thelma adds some spunk and wisdom to the BLA team. She also works with Arthur to ground the BLA, so that it's not just a hero's club for young people (if there's one thing you rarely see in an action movie, it's a middle-aged mom who makes meaningful contributions to the plot). I had fun giving her new things to do in this story, whether it was the bizarre rock-climbing episode or the brief look at her home life. Her husband's name is Clive, everyone! Isn't that nice to know?

Milieu: Milieu is a fundamentally unbalanced character. On the one hand, she's a frustrated artist who firmly believes in her own superiority. On the other hand, she harbors a burning need for other people to acknowledge her superiority. Along similar lines, she wants to be known for winning artfully and using her intelligence to stay a step ahead of her enemies... and yet she's immediately willing to throw that aside when things don't go her way. Milieu is definitely talented, but unfortunately, she's decided to squander that talent on criminal pursuits.

Niche: Niche practically lives in the world of comic books, and styles herself as a major supervillain. However, she also has a distinctly mysterious side. She has access to powerful contacts... and apparently, she has enough of a reputation that Milieu knew to reach out to her. Who *was* Niche, before Milieu and Cyan found her? I honestly don't know, but perhaps that's worth exploring someday.

Cyan: I have a terrible feeling that people will dismiss Cyan as "the dumb one" and leave things at that. It's true that Cyan says and does some fairly dumb things throughout the story, but she also makes some pretty reasonable observations. I'll also point out that she seems to singlehandedly manage the Felonista's nanobots. I think that Cyan is mostly just naïve, and perhaps a little spacy.

Charles Bly: Poor Charles doesn't get to make much of a contribution to the story! He's betrayed by the Felonistas at the end of part 1, and his subsequent escape from the police is quickly foiled by Grant. We never get to learn much about him, except that he's aristocratic, slightly ruthless, and obsessed with

collecting art. Perhaps he'll show up in another story someday, especially now that we've established his grudge against the BLA.

Gary Chalmers: Gary is the mean-for-the-sake-of-mean antagonist of this story... but unlike the Felonistas, he's one the "good guys", so the BLA basically has to put up with him. He's revealed to be Arthur's brother at the last minute, but I doubt this will impact his character very much. Every story needs a jerk or two, right?

Chekhov: I didn't originally plan to make Chekhov a recurring character... but I had so much fun writing his scene for this story that I'm tempted to keep bringing him back. I have a theory that Chekhov sees Guy and Amy the same way you'd see a couple of ladybugs in your garden: cute and mostly harmless. This would explain why he's willing to stretch a point and occasionally help the BLA. I have no idea what Chekhov would do if he ended up on the wrong end of a BLA investigation. Let's hope it never happens.

The Footnotes: I'll be the first to admit that the story's footnotes use an inconsistent perspective. In some cases, they sound like a reader who's surprised or confused by an unexpected mistake. In other cases, they sound like a knowing author who's explaining why the mistake was deliberate. However, this inconsistency doesn't bother me, because the footnotes don't represent a distinct character: they only exist to crack jokes at my own story. As such, each footnote is written from the perspective that seems to get the best mileage out of its own punchline.

The Illustrations: Each illustration is hand-drawn, using a digital application. However, I'll sometimes use AI-generated images as a visual reference for things like perspective. For example, I might play around with phrases like "wide angle shot of a warehouse" until I get an AI-generated image which approximates what I had in mind. Then I'll eyeball the AI-generated image to imitate its perspective, as I manually draw my own characters and background elements. This is usually enough to get the illustration 80% of the way there, at which point my wife reviews it for fine-tuning and minor corrections. I have a short attention span, so most illustrations either focus on the background or the characters (but rarely both). I usually avoid large crowd shots for the same reason.

Acknowledgements

Let's keep this short and sweet (and as it happens, identical to the first story's acknowledgements).

I'd like to thank my wife, Laura Ashley Amoroso... not just because I love her, but also because she helped me improve practically every aspect of this story, including the illustrations. It's tremendously useful to have someone who can share your artistic vision on a project, and help to make it better.

Thank you!

Thanks for reading this!

I really enjoyed writing this story. The characters got to move forward and try some new things, and the BLA was able to prevail over new enemies and challenges.

Will there be another BLA story? I hope so! I definitely have ideas for new stories, but life can be an uncertain thing. And perhaps that's why I'm fond of this series: for all its intentional defectiveness, it's comforting to write about a lighter sort of world, where a team of good-hearted heroes can still carry the day. I hope you've enjoyed it, too.

In any event, thank you very much for reading this!