

BLA: The Landmark Caper



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Forward

Hello! Read this first, please!

This is not an ordinary story... but I'll try to explain myself quickly.

Over the years, I've written parodies which poked some good-natured fun at bad writing: contradictions, abrupt reveals, confusing narratives, bizarre character decisions... that sort of thing. But one day, I had an idea: wouldn't it be interesting to write a story that did this stuff on *purpose*?

Hey, wait! Where are you going? Come back... trust me, this'll be fun!

Okay, I'd better cut to the chase. My point is that this story has intentional mistakes in it, 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!

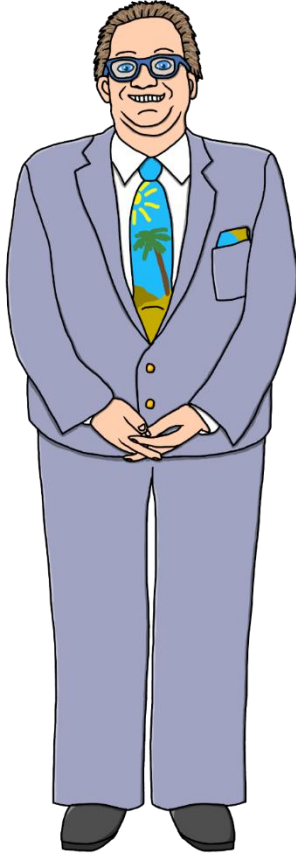
I hope that makes things entertaining. If you insist on skipping the "bad writing" footnotes for some reason, that's up to you... but for the love of goodness, *don't believe anything this story says about science, history, safety, or reality in general!*

Anyway, that's enough exposition. Buckle up, and prepare for a zany ride through a world of mysterious peanuts, absurd analogies, and explosive croissants!

Heroes of 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.

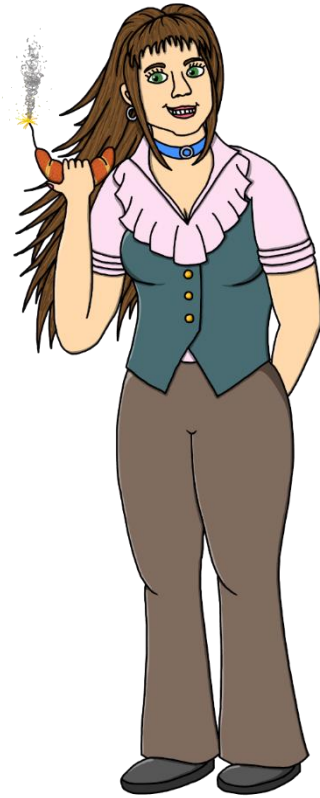
Guy Stafford



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

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

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!

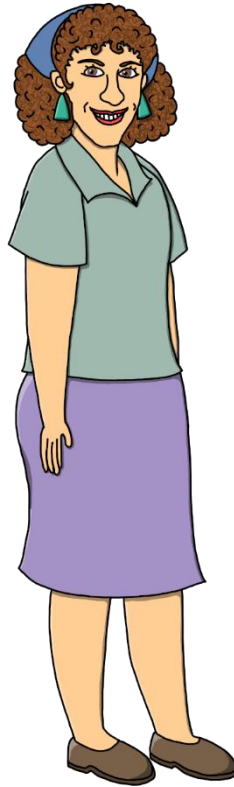
Grant Keeler



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

Grant is a "gadget expert": he's responsible for outfitting the agents on their missions with cutting-edge technology and weapons. 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.

Villains of Crimex

Crimex is a mysterious criminal organization. The BLA has been tasked with thwarting their nefarious plans.

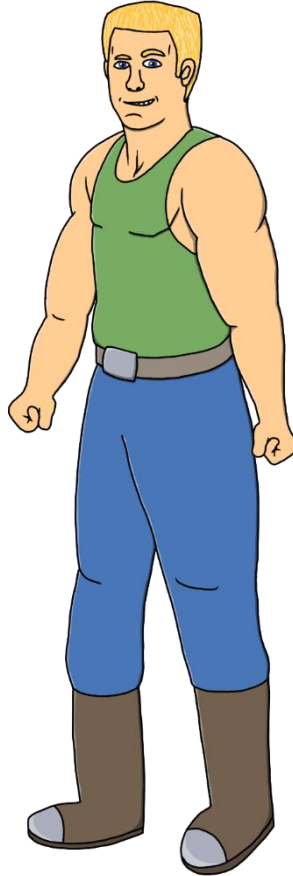
Professor Drake



Height: 175cm (5'9")
Crimex Role: Leader

The mysterious Professor Drake is the organization's leader and mastermind. Hot-tempered and brash, he's a worthy foe of the BLA. Drake has been known to vent his frustrations by hurling office supplies at people.

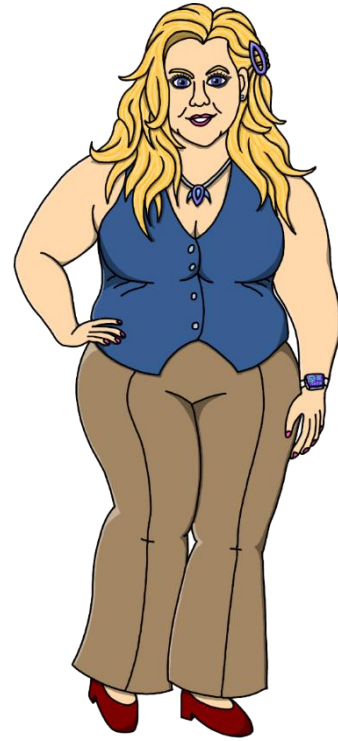
Bruno Bennet



Height: 188cm (6'2")
Crimex Role: Enforcer

Bruno is a tall and powerful titan of a man, but more level-headed and personable than you'd expect. He has a close but combative relationship with his younger sister, Alexia.

Alexia Bennet



Height: 157cm (5'2")
Crimex Role: Chief Scientist

Alexia is extraordinarily brilliant, but also arrogant and condescending. She spends most of her time working alone in her lab, which is how she likes it. She cares about her older brother, Bruno, but she has trouble showing it.

Hank Diesel



Height: 163cm (5'4")
Crimex Role: Chief Engineer

Hank is bold and slightly boastful. He has a remarkable way with vehicles and machines, often building them from the ground up. His hands are usually covered in grease from his endless tinkering. He also seems to have a crush on Alexia.

Malena Midnight



Height: 186cm (6'1")
Crimex Role: "Contractor"

Malena is a freelance mercenary. Tall, lithe, and deadly, her swordplay is second to none. She's easily the most dangerous person associated with Crimex: even Drake is afraid of her.

Part 1: Acquisitions

Prologue

The fog swirled around a gloomy dock in Ireland, obscuring the cargo ship's weathered lines. The dock was currently deserted, except for a lone man who tapped his foot impatiently. As he waited, he eyed the ship's water line again: it was definitely sitting lower than it should be, a clear sign that its cargo bay was overstocked. On this particular day, however, the overloaded cargo bay would work in his favor.

The close silence was broken by hasty, unguarded footsteps. A second man approached the dock: when the first man noticed his approach, he relaxed a little. "Cutting things a little close, aren't you?"



"I made it, didn't I? You worry too much."

"And you don't worry enough. You really think this will work?"

"It's fine. The captain doesn't care if we stow away in his hold. He just doesn't want the crew to find out... you know how people talk."

"Fine, we'll make sure crew doesn't see us. And what about our parents?"

"They won't even miss us. It's time to seek our fortune, brother."

The first man merely grunted, but his half-smirk betrayed his excitement at the journey ahead of them. He extended his hand to his brother.

"We stick together this time, right? No matter what."

The second man shook his hand. "No matter what. That's a promise¹."

¹ A good prologue should set the story's tone, and tease at significant things to come. Unfortunately, this prologue does neither: its tone is somber and dramatic, whereas most of the story is zany and lighthearted. As for teasing at significant things to come, well... this scene doesn't pay off for a very long time. You'll know when it's happened.

Chapter 1: Recruitment

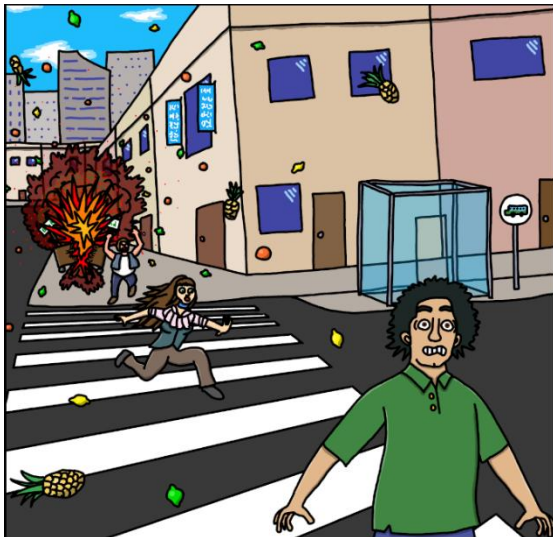
Guy Stafford walked down the streets of New York City, feeling confident about his upcoming job interview². He'd had a chance to work at the prospective company during his co-op program, and he'd completed his schooling with flying colors. As long as he didn't flub the interview itself, he stood a very good chance of getting the job.

Guy checked his watch for the third time in as many minutes: he still had nearly half an hour before the interview. That was more than enough time to walk two blocks and regain his composure from a hot summer stroll in the city. Idly, he wondered if he'd still look sweaty by the time the interview started. That shouldn't matter, should it? Surely, the interviewer would understand that it was in the middle of a heat wave... and anyway, maybe the sweat would make Guy look more dedicated. Or would it look better if Guy wasn't sweaty at all, in spite of the heat wave? Guy wiped his brow, as he tried to puzzle out the options. Maybe the interviewer would -

BOOM!

Startled, Guy came to an abrupt stop. Was that an explosion? He quickly turned around, trying to figure out where the sound came from, and whether he was in danger.

His eyes registered the scene in a moment: smoke was pouring out from a shattered fruit stand that he'd passed just a minute earlier. A young woman was dashing down the street toward him, pursued by a portly, furious man. The street was absolutely littered with pineapples, oranges, lemons, and limes: even as Guy's mind registered this final observation, the young woman reached him.



"Help me!", she implored, "He's out of his mind!"

Guy looked past her at the enraged man, who was rapidly drawing closer. "What's going on!?" Guy urgently asked the woman. Instead of answering, however, she sidestepped Guy and hid directly behind

² Guy's appearance is never given within the story itself, which is a curious omission. You can either use your imagination, or refer to the illustrations for reference.

him. With a nervous gulp, Guy turned back to face the man, who was now within shouting distance... and shout he did.

"You *lunatic!*" bellowed the man, pointing a large sausage-like finger directly behind Guy. "You're going to pay for that!"

Guy wanted to take a step backward, but the woman was directly behind him, blocking his way.

"Don't listen to a thing he says," she whispered urgently, "He thinks I blew up his fruit stand or something!"

Before Guy could ask anything else, the man reached them. Guy's mind raced furiously over the options: should he step aside? Call the police? Ask Rob³ for his side of the story? Guy happened to notice a lapel on the man's shirt which read "Rob", which was presumably the man's name. Guy quickly decided on a neutral, unexpected response: he picked up one of the stray pineapples from the street, and offered it to Rob as he asked: "Hi, Rob. Is this yours?"

Rob stopped short: clearly, he was taken aback by Guy's question. But he quickly recovered, and his face darkened again. "That woman just blew up my fruit stand!" he thundered, "Step aside!"

Things were moving too fast for Guy: he turned to face the woman again. Despite the urgency of the situation, some part of his brain still managed to register her pretty green eyes, topped by eyelashes which curled as gracefully as a dove in a wind tunnel⁴. Guy asked her, "*Did* you blow up his fruit stand?" The woman shrugged helplessly.

Sighing inwardly, Guy turned to face Rob. "Okay, I'm honestly not sure what's going on here... but I agree that there's been an explosion. Maybe we should just wait for the police to get here, eh? I'm sure they'll sort things out."

Rob's face registered surprise, followed by smug satisfaction. "By all means," he agreed with a sneer, "I'm sure the police will love to know what's really going on here."

Guy cocked his head in confusion, "What do you mean?"

Rob laughed. "You've been set up... that girl pulled a lot of strings to get you here today." His face darkened again. "But she never said anything about blowing up my fruit stand."

Guy began turning to ask the young woman if this was true, but a rag was suddenly forced over his face from behind, and he found himself getting dizzy. He had just enough time to hear the woman earnestly say, "Sorry about this!" before he passed out⁵.

* * * * *

As Guy gradually regained consciousness, he suddenly became aware of shouting voices. Was it an argument? Before Guy could ponder this any further, the last several minutes came flooding back to

³ We don't establish that the man's name is "Rob" until the next sentence, so the narrative shouldn't actually know this yet.

⁴ What in the world does *that* mean?

⁵ Incidentally... Guy's job interview will never be mentioned again. And I have to say, it's pretty fun to deliberately drop plot threads with reckless abandon!

him... and it dawned on Guy that he'd probably been snatched off the street! He decided to keep quiet, pretend he was still unconscious, and see what he could learn.

"...and that's on *you*, Amy!" shouted a slightly nasal male voice, "You were only supposed to scatter some fruit around the sidewalk, not blow the entire cart into next week!"

"He's not stupid, guys!" protested a perky female voice. Guy immediately recognized it: this was the same woman who hid behind him earlier... and presumably, the same woman who chloroformed him⁶. She earnestly continued, "It had to be dramatic, to throw him off guard... otherwise, the whole exercise would be pointless!"

"Well, now we have to pay off the fruit stand owner," grumbled a deep male voice, "This new guy better be worth it, because we've officially blown our budget for this month."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" said the female voice wryly, "He's been awake for the past minute."

Feeling slightly foolish, Guy opened his eyes. He was lying on a cot, next to the wall in a conference room. A large table dominated the center of the floor, and it was surrounded by office chairs. But Guy's attention quickly shifted to the room's occupants: there was a tall, heavysset man with sandy-colored hair and glasses, a thin and lanky man with brown hair and brown eyes, and the young woman he'd met earlier: she was slightly tall, with startlingly green eyes and long, flowing dark brown hair. The woman returned Guy's glance, and cocked her head to one side.

Feeling awkward, Guy turned back to the heavysset man, who seemed to be in charge. "Can someone please explain what's going on here?" he asked cautiously.

The heavysset man nodded. "Of course. I'm Arthur Chalmers, head of the BLA... that's the 'Bush League Agency', in case you haven't heard of us before."

"I haven't," replied Guy.

Arthur shrugged mildly. "That's fine. Most people don't know about us. We're an underfunded government organization that deals with, ah... lower-level threats."

"In other words," offered the lanky man, "We deal with the bad guys who *aren't* attempting to take over the world or destroy it. I'm Grant Keeler, and I outfit the BLA's agents with gizmos and weapons."

"And I'm Amy Fields!" the young woman chimed in eagerly. "I kidnapped you! And I'm a field agent. Oh, and I love explosives!"

Guy took a moment to let this sink in, then smiled and replied, "Nice to meet all of you. But can somebody please explain why you snatched me off the street?"

"Of course, of course," replied Arthur soothingly, "I imagine this is all very abrupt for you. To put it simply, Mr. Stafford, we think you can be a big help to us. We'd like you to join the BLA as our newest field agent, and foil a criminal plot to steal the world's landmarks."

⁶ Inhaling a chloroform-soaked item doesn't instantly knock you out: it actually takes several minutes. Granted, this myth already appears in plenty of other stories... but that's honestly no excuse. It takes less than a minute of Google research to clear this up.

Guy blinked. “But guys... I’m a landscape architect! Or anyway, I’ve been trained as one. How does *that* sort of expertise help your investigation?”

“It doesn’t,” replied Amy brightly, “But you make good decisions under pressure, and you show a really good balance of compassion and insight. And it was absolutely *classic* how you faced down an angry man by handing him a pineapple.”

Guy shrugged, “I just thought it would slow him down a little if I did something unexpected. So, was that whole ‘exploding cart thing’ some kind of test?”

Arthur grimaced, and Grant threw a glare at Amy. “Well,” conceded Arthur, “Things didn’t go exactly the way we’d planned. But yes... we were impressed by the way you handled yourself. The job’s yours if you want it⁷.”

“And the pay honestly isn’t bad,” added Grant.

Guy thought about it for a minute, and then shrugged. “Okay. Tell me more about this criminal plot to steal the world’s landmarks⁸.”

Amy grinned. “You won’t regret this, Guy!”

⁷ It was a pretty bizarre situation test, when you come right down to it. But heroes have been hired on flimsier grounds than this!

⁸ Guy’s pretty cavalier about abandoning his chosen career path, isn’t he?

Chapter 2: Orientation

Arthur gestured to the screen at the far end of the conference room. “Let’s keep this short and sweet. We’ll give you a brief overview of the BLA, and then we can get right into your mission.” He signaled Grant, who entered some commands on the laptop in front of him.

The lights dimmed, and the screen showed a fancy title which proclaimed, “The BLA: Thwarting the Semi-Dangerous Criminals of Today with the Resources of Yesterday”.

Guy frowned. “Why does it say, ‘the resources of yesterday’?”

“I told you; we’re underfunded,” replied Arthur absently, “Grant, why isn’t the introductory video playing yet? It shouldn’t take this long to load.”

“You told me to remove the video,” explained Grant, “Remember? It would always get choppy about halfway through.”

“Oh, that’s right,” muttered Arthur. Recovering, he continued, “Now, then... welcome to the BLA! It’s an experimental agency, and we’ve only been around for a few years. The basic idea was to create a group that could combat the world’s minor threats, so that the larger organizations could focus on the *really* dangerous threats.”

“I guess that makes sense,” mused Guy. “So, what minor threat are we going up against?”

“Excellent question!” declared Arthur. “3 days ago, a threatening video was broadcast across the entire United States: it managed to override every major network⁹. I assume you saw it?”

“Not really,” admitted Guy, “I haven’t watched the cable networks in ages. I’m more of a ‘streaming guy’.”

Arthur nodded gravely. “These are tough times for bad guy broadcasts, to be sure.”

“Honestly, they should just make an app or something,” observed Amy¹⁰.

“Anyway,” Arthur interjected, “I guess we’ll have to bring you up to speed. Grant, can you play Professor Drake’s broadcast for us?”

Grant entered some more commands on his laptop, and the broadcast began to play on the conference room’s screen. It showed a tall-ceilinged office, with an intimidating desk. A massive, floor-to-ceiling window took up the entire wall behind the desk... and in front of that window stood a man in a fiery red suit, standing dramatically with his back to the camera. He turned to face the screen: he had a pale complexion and red hair, which included a neatly groomed beard. He regarded his audience with an arrogant look of self-satisfaction, and then began to speak.

⁹ It’s definitely cliché for the bad guys to broadcast a threatening message which shows up on everybody’s TV. Maybe there’s a “universal broadcast interruption module” they order online.

¹⁰ I wrote these jokes in 2023, and I definitely look forward to seeing how badly they age... after all, technology’s always changing.



“Greetings,” he began grandly, “I am Professor Drake, and I represent an organization known as ‘Crimex’. In just 3 days, we will capture the pyramid¹¹ near Cairo, and no one can stop us¹²!” As he spoke, a small picture of the Great Wall of China appeared in the screen’s top-right corner. Drake glanced at the picture: a scowl appeared on his face, and he grabbed a pen from his desk and threw it at someone offscreen. The picture of the Great Wall of China hastily vanished, and moments later, it was replaced by a picture of a pyramid.

Drake turned his attention back to the camera. “Our march toward victory begins now!” He stared defiantly at the camera for several seconds, but nothing else seemed to happen. He began to shuffle his feet awkwardly. After about 15 seconds of this, the video ended.

“Their editing needs work,” observed Grant. “And some ominous background music would’ve made a bigger impression.”

“Agreed,” quipped Guy, “But more importantly, why was the BLA assigned to this case? I thought we only handled the small stuff... isn’t pyramid theft a pretty big deal?”

Amy shrugged. “The other agencies are already busy with supervillains who are actively trying to conquer the world, or blow it up. Or anyway, that’s what they keep telling us when we try to call them.”

“But Drake said they’d capture the pyramid in 3 days,” protested Guy, “Didn’t you say this was recorded 3 days ago?”

¹¹ There are multiple pyramids near Cairo... that’s why they’re collectively called “the Pyramids”. In spite of this, the story will consistently phrase things as though there’s only 1 pyramid.

¹² As already noted, it’s not unusual for bad guys in these stories to broadcast their demands and rants to the general public. However, it’s completely absurd for Crimex to publicly announce their *plans* in advance: that just makes it easier for the good guys to stop them! Strangely enough, however, nobody in the story will comment on how dumb this is: furthermore, the BLA is the only group who ever uses these “advance warnings” to prepare for Crimex’s next move. When a story treats a ridiculous decision as if it’s normal, it often means that the actual *author* didn’t realize it was a ridiculous decision (but in this case, the footnote should reassure you that it was deliberate).

"Indeed I did," agreed Arthur, "Gear up. You and Amy are heading for Egypt this afternoon, to save the pyramid¹³!"

* * * * *

Grant led Guy down a simple hallway, adorned with a variety of abstract paintings. "Are these paintings standard issue for government agencies?" Guy asked curiously.

"Nah," replied Grant, "Arthur knows a guy who does them... he buys them with his own money, too!" Grant paused. "You need to understand, Guy: the BLA might be a government agency, but the government's funding is basically limited to our salaries and this office space. If we want anything else, that's on us... whether it's decent computers, or art to hang on the walls. That's also why we're located on the 15th floor of a shared office building, instead of getting a cool government base."

They turned a corner, and Grant ushered Guy toward a doorway marked "Workshop".

"If our funding is so limited, then how does anything get done around here?" asked Guy.

Grant smiled faintly. "We get by. You just get used to doing things for yourself."

Guy entered Grant's workshop, and his jaw dropped. The walls were lined with shelves, and the shelves were packed full of flawlessly organized gadgets, supplies, and spare parts. In the middle of the room were several tables: two of them were empty, and the other two were occupied by gadgets currently under development. The floor was spotless, and all the garbage cans were empty.

"This is amazing," Guy marveled, "And everything's so tidy and well-organized!"

Grant coughed modestly. "I've been told that I'm OCD about these things... I just reorganized the entire lab again last week, and I've already found some flaws in the new arrangement. But let's stay focused: we need to outfit you for your first mission!"

Guy looked around the room again in wonder. "How do you get all this stuff without funding?"

Grant shrugged. "A lot of it is old castoffs from other organizations. The equipment still works fine; it's just not the 'latest and greatest' anymore. And I buy some of the supplies in bulk."

Guy raised an eyebrow. "And you're okay with spending your own money on company supplies?"

Grant spread his arms out, as he proudly gestured at his workshop. "Look at this place, Guy: it's practically a playground! I get paid to build anything I want, and then I get to see agents use my inventions during real missions. Which reminds me... here's your agent uniform."

Grant handed Guy a dark teal vest and brown pants. Guy cocked his head. "No tuxedo?" he quipped.

Grant chuckled. "If you want a suit, you can apply at the FBI, or the CIA, or someplace like that. Here at the BLA, you get a vest. But on the bright side, your shirt can be any color you want."

Guy thought about that for a moment. "I'll probably go with light blue," he decided.

¹³ We're going to ignore the fact that Crimex could've already stolen the pyramid earlier this morning... and also the fact that Guy's being sent into a potentially dangerous situation without any "field training" whatsoever.

“Classy choice,” approved Grant, “We’ll get it ready for you. Now, let’s get into the gadgets!”

Grant took two items off a shelf: the first one looked vaguely gun-like, except that it had an arrow-shaped attachment protruding from the barrel. The second device resembled a key fob. “The weapon is a stun gun,” Grant explained, “It’s a crucial part of the BLA’s arsenal, because the government doesn’t authorize us to use lethal force. One shot from this thing, and your target will be out of commission for at least an hour¹⁴. And the other device will render you invisible for 3 minutes.”

Guy’s eyes bugged out. “Are you serious? We have the technology to make ourselves *invisible*? Why aren’t people using these things everywhere?”

Grant smirked. “Because no one outside the BLA knows I made these... so try to be discreet with them, alright¹⁵? Make sure you’re someplace out of sight when the 3 minutes expires. The device also takes about 3 minutes to recharge, so that should be easy to remember¹⁶. Oh yeah, and I’ve integrated a comms unit into the vest. That’ll help you and Amy stay in touch with us during the mission.”

“About Amy,” began Guy delicately, “Is she, um... *safe* to work with?”

“There’s no getting around it,” admitted Grant, “She definitely likes it when things catch fire and explode. Even so, you’re in good hands: Amy knows what she’s doing, and her explosions have never hurt a human being. She has a perfect safety record.”

“A perfect safety record!?” objected Guy, “She blew up a fruit stand!”

“Yeah, but she did that on purpose,” Grant explained, “And as usual, no people were hurt... which is pretty impressive, when you consider that it blew up right next to the fruit vendor.” Guy still looked unconvinced, so Grant added, “Listen... for now, you’ll just have to trust us. We wouldn’t keep Amy around if she was unsafe, you know. Now, it’s time to ship out: you have a pyramid to save.”

Arthur’s head popped in the doorway. “And when you get back, we’ll have Thelma add you to the timesheet system... that’s one area the government *definitely* monitors here.”

“Can’t we just do it now?” asked Guy.

“I’m afraid not,” explained Arthur, “Thelma runs our timesheet system, and she has to leave at 3:00 pm every day to pick up her kids from school. But don’t worry... there will be plenty of opportunities to fill out timesheets when you get back. Now, get out there Guy, and show us what you can do!”

Amy came bounding into the room behind Arthur, and ran up to Guy. “Our first mission together!” she exclaimed, “This is going to be fun... we’re going to make the best team ever!”

Grant smirked. “Be careful out there, Guy. And I’m not talking about enemy combatants.”

¹⁴ If the BLA already has stun guns, then why did Amy waste her time with a clumsy chloroform-soaked rag when she snatched Guy off the street?

¹⁵ The fact that Grant’s keeping this gadget a secret could take us down a rabbit hole of questions. Why not patent it, to raise money for the underfunded BLA? Or would the government legally own anything Grant develops here? If that’s the case, is he breaking the law by keeping this gadget hidden? What happens down the road, when the secret inevitably gets out? Am I overthinking this?

¹⁶ We’re never really told how the stun gun or cloaking device work. The funny thing is, most people won’t care.

Chapter 3: A Pyramid Near Cairo

Later that afternoon, Guy and Amy arrived in Cairo¹⁷. They selected an outdoor café with a good view of the distant pyramid, ordered drinks, and were seated at a small table. As the burning sun beat down on them, Guy found himself wishing that the BLA had issued beach clothes instead of a vest and pants. After a short interval, their drinks arrived, and they settled down to wait.

“Any ideas on what we’re up against?” Guy asked. “I mean, how do you ‘capture’ a pyramid in the first place?”

“That’s an interesting question,” mused Amy, “Maybe they didn’t even mean ‘capture’ in the sense of stealing it! Maybe they meant ‘capture’ as in ‘occupy’... like, they’re going to fill it full of bad guys and make it the capital of a new nation in the desert. You know, with a name like ‘Pyramidistan’, or something. Or maybe they meant ‘capture’ as in ‘detain’, and they’re planning to haul the pyramid back to their secret base for questioning.”

She might be crazy. Guy thought to himself.

Amy noticed his apprehensive look. “Hey, relax!” she grinned, “I’m just having a bit of fun. Besides... do my guesses sound any loonier than *stealing* a pyramid?”

“You’ve got me there,” Guy conceded, as he glanced at the distant landmark, “I’m not even sure if it’s possible to steal something that big. Maybe Professor Drake is just messing with everyone.” Guy took a sip from his iced tea, his eyes casually scanning the café for suspicious behavior.

Amy snickered. “Very subtle. You should wear a sign that says, ‘Hi everyone, I’m doing surveillance!’”

Guy raised an eyebrow. “Okay, then. Show me how it’s done.”

Amy smiled engagingly, and raised her own beverage to her mouth. “I ordered this because it had the word ‘citrus’ next to it... and it was the only English word on the menu¹⁸. Citrus happens to be one of my favorite things! But if I can’t have that, chocolate is definitely a good fallback. Or cinnamon: I love cinnamon. Anything that adds a bit of spice, really... I can’t stand bland food.”

“That’s all very interesting,” remarked Guy wryly, “But weren’t you going to show me how you scan an area for suspicious activity?”

Amy blinked innocently. “I already did,” she replied, “I scoped out everything behind you while I was telling you about my favorite drinks. You just didn’t notice.”

Guy looked at her dubiously. “Really,” he said doubtfully, “What did you see?”

Amy took a deep breath. “Most of our café’s patrons are local businessmen, except for a young family with twins and a gaggle of elderly women on some sort of ‘see the world’ tour. Everyone I’ve seen on the

¹⁷ Cairo is at least 9000km from New York. If “later in the afternoon” means “about 2 hours later”, then Guy and Amy would need to travel at roughly 4500 km/h, or Mach 4. Surprisingly enough, this might be possible with the right kind of jet... but unfortunately, there’s a +7 hour time difference between New York and Cairo, so it would still be evening by the time Guy and Amy arrived. Perhaps this would be a good time to mention that the story basically ignores time zones.

¹⁸ Actually, a quick Google suggests that English is widely spoken in Cairo.

sidewalk is preoccupied with cellphones or their own thoughts... none of them have even looked at the pyramid. The businesses across the street have open windows, but they're all just minding their stores. One of them is haggling with a middle-aged couple about the price of souvenirs."

Guy risked a quick glance behind him: it took a few seconds, but he was able to confirm most of the things Amy described. He turned back to Amy, who was grinning triumphantly. "Nicely done," he admitted, "So, were you just making up that stuff about citrus and cinnamon to distract me?"

Amy shook her head. "Nope. I really do love citrus, chocolate, and cinnamon! And I love to talk even more." She smiled. "I've just learned how to multitask."

Guy smiled, as he raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, I'm impressed. Here, let me try this again."

Guy resumed surveying the café, trying his very best to look inconspicuous. Suddenly, he cocked his head: someone behind Amy had caught his eye. A tall, muscular man with blond hair had just taken a long glance at the pyramid, and then started talking into his cellphone. "Hey, Amy... what about the man behind you?"

Involuntarily, Amy turned to look behind her: she quickly caught herself and disguised the motion by brushing away her auburn¹⁹ hair, but she spilled the remains of her drink onto her vest in the process. "Drat!" she fussed, "That's where I was keeping my cloaking device... I hope it still works." She looked back up at Guy, and shrugged mildly. "Pretend you're leaving to get me some napkins or something, then engage your cloaking device and double back to eavesdrop on the guy behind me."

Guy cocked his head. "Did you spill your drink on purpose, so that I'd have an excuse to leave? I honestly can't tell."

"No, that was just me being clumsy," replied Amy lightly, "And now I'm improvising. Go, quick!" Guy excused himself from the table, and slipped around the corner. As soon as he was out of sight, he engaged his cloaking device, then quickly made his way back to the blond man's table. From the relative safety of invisibility, Guy overheard some of the blond man's conversation over the phone.

"Yeah, it's ready," confirmed the blond man irritably into his phone, "It's been ready for an hour. Where in blazes is Hank?"

"He's still running his final check," confirmed a female voice from the phone. The voice had a sweet quality, but it was delivered with a mean, condescending tone: it was like a strawberry milkshake full of stinging nettles²⁰. "The moment you hear his engines, make your move. Think you can handle that, Bruno?"

Bruno rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sis... I'll be fine."

"See that you are," retorted the female voice, "This is our first public operation, and Drake wants everything to go like clockwork." Then there was a click, apparently ending the call.

This guy's working for Drake! Thought Guy excitedly, *He must be here to capture the pyramid!* Guy dashed back around the corner where he couldn't be seen, and then disengaged his cloak. Instead of

¹⁹ Amy's hair is dark brown, not auburn. So either she's wearing a wig (which isn't stated), or this is a mistake.

²⁰ Actually, this analogy kind of makes sense.

returning to his table, he immediately whispered into his comms: “Everyone... I think I’ve identified Professor Drake’s agent! It’s the tall, muscular blond man sitting just behind Amy. He answers to the name ‘Bruno.’”

“Great name for a henchman,” quipped Amy on the comms.

“Never mind that,” Grant interjected over the comms, “What’s Bruno doing now?”

“He just got off his phone,” explained Guy, “He’s waiting for some kind of vehicle to show up... I think. The woman on the call mentioned engines.”

“Good work, Guy,” approved Arthur over the comms, “Now, here’s what you’re going to do: return to your table and act like nothing’s wrong. Once you’re seated, pull out your stun gun and keep it hidden under the table. The moment Bruno makes a move...”

As Arthur was talking, a distant roar had been steadily building. The sudden realization hit Guy like a bag of assorted rocks which had been illegally quarried from a conservation site, and then smuggled into a geology exhibit during lunch²¹. Engines!

Before Guy could warn his team, a custom armored jeep with an unseen driver crashed through a wall on the opposite side of the street: it came to an abrupt halt in front of the café. Guy rushed around the corner, and saw that Bruno had jumped on top of the table he’d been sitting at. “I have a bomb,” Bruno declared, “Nobody try anything funny, or this café goes up in smoke!” Without waiting for an answer, he dashed across the street to the jeep, and leapt into the back. The jeep sped off, leaving an extremely bewildered café in its wake.

Guy dashed up to Amy, who was still at their table. “Amy... if there’s a bomb here, can you find it and defuse it?”

Amy grinned. “I thought you’d never ask!”

“Good enough for me,” replied Guy, “In that case, I’m going after Bruno and the jeep!”

“Go for it,” affirmed Amy, “You’ve got this, Guy!”

As Guy dashed away from the café, he distinctly heard Amy call after him, “Great date!”

“Did she say ‘date’?” Guy muttered with a frown, forgetful of his active comms.

“Yeah, I heard it too,” said Grant dryly, “Just focus on the mission for now, alright²²?”

“Copy that,” replied Guy, as he began scanning the nearby street for inspiration. His eyes fell on a bright red convertible, parked on the side of the road. Its driver was an athletic businessman, who was currently occupied with a phone call. Guy rushed up and brandished his BLA badge.

“Excuse me, sir,” Guy explained earnestly, “I need to commandeer this vehicle. It’s urgent!”

²¹ This analogy is stupid.

²² Did Amy overhear this on the comms? If so, she doesn’t respond.

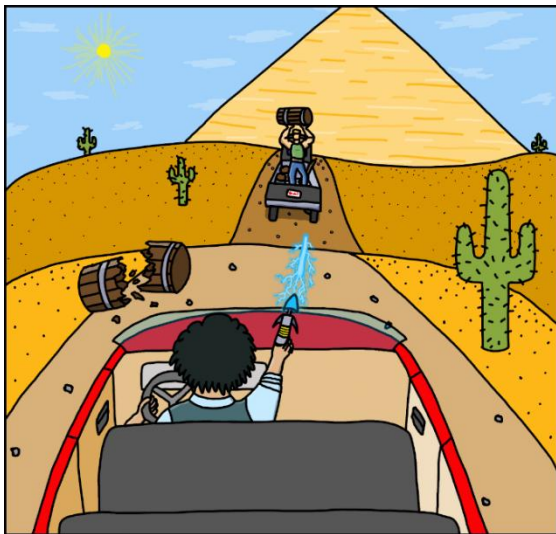
The businessman looked up at him in annoyance, muttered something uncomplimentary in Arabic, and left the car. His impatient gesture conveyed “let’s get this over with” as clearly as spoken English. Guy hopped into the driver’s seat and gunned the engine, taking off in hot pursuit of the enemy’s jeep.

* * * * *

In less than a minute, Guy’s borrowed convertible cleared the city limits. He was driving on a poorly maintained road through the desert... but the jeep was nowhere in sight.

Guy pushed the convertible for all it was worth: cacti²³ rushed past him with blinding speed as he barreled over the crest of a dune. At last, he spotted the enemy jeep in the distance: it was making a beeline for the pyramid! With grim determination, Guy worked to close the gap between himself and the jeep, but he lost sight of it as it crested another dune. About 10 seconds later, Guy topped the same dune, and was gratified to find that he’d nearly caught up with the jeep.

Guy kept one hand on the wheel as he carefully drew his stun gun and aimed at Bruno, who was still riding in the jeep’s cargo compartment with his back to Guy. Guy’s first shot went wide: it impacted harmlessly next to Bruno, who leapt to his feet and immediately spotted Guy’s convertible. Bruno shouted something at the driver through the jeep’s rear window, and then picked up one of the barrels sitting next to him. Guy had a fraction of a second to anticipate Bruno’s move: he swerved to the side just as Bruno hurled the barrel at him. It missed the convertible by mere inches! Recovering quickly, Guy fired a few more stun shots at Bruno, but none of them came close²⁴.



Grinning, Bruno reached for another barrel and reared back to throw it. At that moment, however, one of Guy’s stun shots caught him squarely on the torso, and Bruno immediately collapsed to the floor of the jeep’s cargo compartment. Guy gave a wild whoop of delight, and started to line up an ambitious

²³ Believe it or not (and I urge you to look this up if you’re skeptical), cacti do not grow natively in Egypt! In fact, Africa, India, Europe, and Asia are virtually cactus-free! Any depiction of cacti growing around an Egyptian pyramid is likely a sham.

²⁴ This is starting to feel like a video game.

²⁵ The enemy’s vehicle honestly looks more like a pickup truck than a jeep, but it’s probably not a big deal. I guess I’m just not a “car guy”.

shot through the jeep's rear window at the driver. At the very moment, however, things went terribly wrong.

A weird energy beam lanced out from the jeep's front window toward the pyramid, striking it near the top. The entire pyramid flickered for a moment, then vanished with an inexplicable sensation of motion²⁶. Guy stared in disbelief at the empty space where the pyramid had been only seconds ago... which is why he failed to notice that the jeep had done a U-turn, and was now barreling toward him! Guy realized the danger mere seconds before the collision. He pulled his convertible sharply off the road and into the sand. As the jeep roared past him, Guy could hear its driver laughing at him²⁷.

With a grimace, Guy braced himself and radioed his team over the comms. "Sorry everyone... it's bad news. I don't know how they did it, but the pyramid's gone. I think this mission's a bust."

"It's bad news on my end, too," said Amy unhappily, "I can't find the bomb anywhere... either Bruno was bluffing, or we aren't going to find the bomb in time."

"Get out of there, Amy!" demanded Arthur over the comms, "That's an order!"

"Roger that," replied Amy, "The café's already evacuated, so I'll just cloak and slip out the back."

Guy sighed. His first mission was officially over... and he'd failed. Guy carefully drove the convertible back to the road, and began heading toward Cairo at a considerably more subdued speed. Without warning, there was a flash of light near the city's border, followed seconds later by a distant roar: the bomb!

Guy gritted his teeth: this day just got better and better. "Everyone, the café blew up! I guess Bruno wasn't bluffing about the bomb, after all."

"It's okay, Guy," soothed Arthur over the comms, "The important thing is that Amy got everyone out in time."

"Well, at least one of us got the job done," sighed Guy ruefully, "And you got to see something explode, right Amy?" Several seconds went by without an answer. "Amy, you copy?" Still no answer. Guy felt a sense of foreboding creep over him. "Amy, come in!" There was no reply. Wordlessly, Guy floored the accelerator of the convertible and sped back toward Cairo.

* * * * *

Guy brought the convertible to a screeching halt next to the ruined café, and leapt out. As he ran toward the smoldering ruins, he checked his watch: it had been over 5 minutes since he'd last heard from Amy. She should definitely be uncloaked by now, no matter what... so where was she? Guy began picking around the rubble, calling Amy's name. As the minutes passed, his search grew increasingly frantic.

As Guy began struggling to move a large collapsed portion of the café's wall, he was startled by a tap on his shoulder. He whirled around, but no one was there. Without warning, Amy appeared in front of him,

²⁶ The story never says anything about missing tourists or personnel... so I guess we're assuming that nobody was on or inside the pyramid when it vanished.

²⁷ In retrospect, the bad guy's plan here seems kind of nonsensical. Why did Bruno need to wait at the café, and get everyone riled up with a bomb threat? Wouldn't it be simpler and safer to skip all that, drive their jeep directly to the pyramid, and just steal it?

grinning ear to ear. "Hi!", she smiled cheerfully, "I guess these cloaking devices actually work *longer* if you spill citrus on them!"

Guy's emotions shifted between shock, relief, and anger in rapid succession. "So, you were just *standing* there this whole time I was trying to find you? What were you thinking, Amy!?"

Amy looked chagrined. "You sounded miserable over the comms when you reported the missing pyramid," she explained with embarrassment, "I thought maybe you'd feel better if you came back from something even worse. Like, maybe it would put things in perspective or something." She studied the ground. "Sorry. I guess I didn't think that through."

Guy stared for a moment, taken aback as he began to understand Amy's ludicrously misguided stunt. Finally, he sighed. "It's fine, Amy. For whatever it's worth, I'm definitely not as bothered by the mission's failure now."

Amy brightened a little. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," confirmed Guy, "We're good. Just... don't do that again, okay?"

Amy smiled. "Deal!" she declared. "Now, let's get out of here, before the authorities start asking awkward questions about the disappearing pyramid. Or the exploding café."

Guy smiled lopsidedly. "Or the commandeered car?"

"Especially the commandeered car," confirmed Amy, "Because you didn't actually have the legal authority to do that."

Chapter 4: Meanwhile

Deep in the Crimex base, the armored jeep arrived at an underground parking lot, where it came to a smooth stop²⁸. The driver's door opened, and a short, wiry man jumped out: it was Hank Diesel, the chief engineer at Crimex. He opened the jeep's cargo compartment, and quickly checked the unconscious Bruno's vital signs. Satisfied that Bruno was still alive, Hank dumped him unceremoniously into a nearby wheelbarrow²⁹, and began carting him toward a waiting elevator.

Hank whistled tunelessly as the elevator climbed, and finally arrived at his destination floor. The elevator doors opened, and he was immediately confronted by a short, stocky young woman with blonde hair. It was Alexia Bennet, Crimex's chief scientist... and Bruno's younger sister. She immediately spotted Bruno's comatose form in the wheelbarrow, and turned on Hank.

"What's going on, Hank!?" she demanded, "What happened to my brother?"

Hank held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Relax, Alexia... Bruno's fine! I already checked his vitals. He was hit with some kind of stun blast while we were nabbing the pyramid."

Alexia's eyes narrowed. "Stun blast? Who was shooting at you? Don't tell me you morons have already brought some goony agency breathing down our necks!"

Hank laughed dismissively. "It was just some dude in a convertible. Anyway, let's save the details for Drake... I'm sure he'll want to hear the whole story. Your splinter dimension device worked perfectly, by the way."

Alexia favored him with a condescending smirk. "Of course it did," she replied modestly³⁰, "I designed it. So, I assume the mission was a success?"

Hank triumphantly held out a complicated-looking device in his hand. "One genuine pyramid... it's here in the device! Not bad for a day's work, if I say so myself."

Alexia rolled her eyes. "'A day's work'? You drove a jeep over some dunes and then pushed a little button. Try not to get too excited." She gestured toward the jeep. "You got anything in there that could wake up Bruno?"

Hank looked thoughtful. "Yeah, I have some medical supplies in the back."

"Good," Alexia replied curtly, "Then let's wake up this oaf, and we can call in Drake without embarrassing ourselves."

Hank walked back to the jeep's cargo compartment and rifled through the supplies stacked in the back, as Alexia tapped her foot impatiently. After a brief search, Hank returned with a medical kit.

"Do you know what to give him?" Alexia asked. Hank nodded.

²⁸ I wonder how the jeep got here from Cairo? And the trip apparently took less than an hour, because Bruno's still unconscious from Guy's stun shot.

²⁹ Which was just sitting around the bad guy's underground parking lot for some reason.

³⁰ Alexia is clearly being boastful here, so why does the narrative say she's being modest? Some stories actually use sarcasm or irony in their narrative, but that's a dangerous place to stray beyond stating exactly what you mean.

A few minutes later³¹, Bruno's eyes fluttered open. "Whoa," he groaned to himself, "Whatever that dude hit me with, it packs a punch." On seeing her brother awake and well, Alexia relaxed just a little. However, her overall manner lost none of its acidity.

"Welcome back," she said mockingly. "The mission was a success... not that you were much help."

Bruno shrugged off Alexia's abuse with years of acquired skill, as he eased himself out of the wheelbarrow. "It's good to see you too, sis," he replied evenly.

"Are you going to call Drake now?" prompted Hank.

"Of course," Alexia replied, and she touched a button on her watch with a smirk. "Drake, are you there? Special delivery."

"Did my vinyl erasers come in already?" asked Drake over the comms, sounding pleased. "They're way better than those useless pink ones, you know."

Alexia scowled. "It's the *pyramid*, Drake," she replied. Her tone skirted a narrow line between annoyance and insubordination.

"Oh, of course," replied Drake, "Great news! I'll be right there."

"Is it me," asked Bruno, "Or did he sound more excited about the erasers?" Nobody felt like venturing an opinion.



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A minute later, Drake came striding into the room, smiling triumphantly. "Well done, everyone! Looks like our first mission went smoothly."

"Yeah, about that," replied Alexia sarcastically, "Bruno was shot with a stun ray."

Drake froze where he stood, then scowled darkly. "What? Who shot him?"

³¹ We're apparently skipping the medical details. I guess I was too lazy to research any.

³² Bruno is supposed to be out of the wheelbarrow by now. And is that a "gift shop" sign in the background?

Hank quickly explained what had happened. Drake listened carefully... and as Hank's story unfolded, Drake's frown deepened.

"I don't like this," Drake muttered, "I don't like it at all. Somebody's onto us³³."

"Bruno, do you remember what your attacker looked like?" asked Alexia.

"Kind of," shrugged Bruno, "I mean, I might recognize him if I saw him again."

Everyone looked expectantly at Drake, as he carefully weighed the options. "Okay," he began, "For now, we're going to proceed with our next heist. And *this* time, everyone needs to watch for interlopers. I want this problem nipped in the bud! No more trouble... got that?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Good," concluded Drake, "Alexia, start preparing for our next broadcast. We need to keep up our momentum. And Hank, see what you can do with our helicopters... something tells me they'll need a little more kick for the upcoming mission."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Bruno.

"Learn how to dodge, stupid!" interjected Alexia.

Drake gestured approvingly in Alexia's direction. "She has you there, Bruno." He turned and left the room.

"If anyone needs me," growled Bruno in annoyance, "I'll be in the weight room."

As Bruno left, Hank walked up to Alexia. "Hey, Alexia," he said, "Once you're done preparing the broadcast, I could use a little help upgrading the helicopters."

Alexia smiled smugly at him. "I'm sure you do. But I'm a scientist, not a wrench jockey."

Just then, Drake poked his head back around the corner. "I forgot to mention, Alexia... the next heist is a 3-person job, so I'll need you to pilot one of the helicopters."

"Aw, c'mon Drake!" Alexia protested, "You know I'm better off in the lab. Besides, I hate field work!"

Drake shrugged with a knowing grin. "Afraid of getting hurt? Well then, you should help Hank upgrade the helicopters, so that they'll be nice and safe for you." Then he left the room without a backward glance.

Alexia whirled around to face Hank, who was studying the floor, trying his best to look inconspicuous.

"Fine," she said icily, glaring daggers at him, "I'll help you upgrade the stupid helicopters. And my upgrades will make *your* upgrades look like preschool toys!"

As she angrily stormed away, the smallest hint of a smile crept over Hank's face.

³³ If this bothers Drake so much, then maybe he shouldn't publicly announce his target 3 days in advance... but as we've already mentioned, nobody will ever call him out on how dumb this is.

Chapter 5: Back at the BLA

"Guy, meet Thelma Bradford," said Arthur, as he gestured toward the middle-aged woman seated at the lobby's desk. "She's our secretary-of-all-trades, or something along those lines."

"That means he doesn't realize how much I do around here," Thelma stage-whispered. Before Guy could think of a reply, she added: "Let me guess... timesheets?"

"Yeah," Guy confirmed, "Arthur says it's the one thing the government really keeps track of around here."

She chuckled, "He's got that right. Now, let's see..." She tapped a few keys on her computer, and pulled up a listing of available projects. "Yep, I knew it. Those knuckleheads haven't even made the project for stopping Crimex available yet. Looks like we're booking another week of work against last month's 'popsicle bandits' caper."

"'Popsicle bandits'?" queried Guy, "What's *that* about?"

"It's just a case we cracked last month," chuckled Arthur, "It was pretty funny, actually. I'll tell you about it later³⁴."

"So Guy," interjected Thelma, "I've added you to the project. You can book your time against that until they make the Crimex project available."

"Couldn't we just hold off on booking time until they bother to make the right projects available?" queried Guy.

"That's a good, sensible suggestion," replied Thelma approvingly, "But it'll never happen. It's just the way these bureaucrats work: they want the time booked *now*, whether it makes sense or not. Believe me, it's not worth getting upset about."

Guy opened his mouth to protest, but then changed his mind. "Okay, fine. I guess we have bigger fish to fry, right? I mean, a pyramid's disappeared... I'll bet the government's taking this more seriously now!"

"Not really," replied Arthur dryly, "The senate's calling it a coincidence. Anyway, don't worry... we can handle this little caper ourselves. Oh, and speaking of handling things," he added, "Thelma, that peanut on the floor still hasn't been cleaned up."

Everyone looked at the floor where Arthur was pointing: sure enough, there was another peanut³⁵.

Thelma sighed in exasperation. "It's a new peanut, Arthur... I don't know who keeps leaving them there, but I really did clean up the one from yesterday."

Arthur shook his head. "That's so bizarre... I wonder where they're coming from? Anyway, I have some calls to make. Guy, we'll talk about your mission in Cairo a little later." He turned to leave the lobby.

"Have a good morning!" Amy called after him³⁶.

³⁴ But probably not in *this* story.

³⁵ Wait... "another" peanut? This is the first we've heard of peanuts on the floor! Are we missing a scene in an earlier chapter?

³⁶ Oh... has Amy been here this whole time?



“So, what’s the game plan for next time?” asked Guy, “I mean, how do we stop Crimex?”

“There’s not much we can do except wait for their next move,” replied Thelma.

Guy balked. “Oh... um, really? I thought we were some sort of spy organization. I mean, can’t we chase down leads, reach out to our contacts... or maybe do some reconnaissance?”

Thelma shrugged. “Those are great ideas, Guy... but in case you haven’t noticed, we’re a little short-staffed around here³⁷.”

“Don’t worry,” Amy assured him, “We always make do.”

Just then, Arthur’s voice came broadcasting over the lobby speakers. “Guy, Amy... could you please come to my office?”

Thelma grinned teasingly. “Ooh... somebody’s in trouble!”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Don’t listen to her. C’mon Guy, this way!”

* * * * *

Amy bounded into Arthur’s office, with Guy trailing hesitantly behind her. “Ah, good morning, Guy,” said Arthur, “You too, Amy. Please, have a seat... we should discuss yesterday’s mission³⁹.” He gestured at two chairs in front of his desk.

Once Guy and Amy were seated, Arthur cleared his throat. “So... there were no injuries during our mission in Cairo, including civilians. That’s the good news. The bad news is that the mission was a bit of a

³⁷ In this picture, Guy’s buttons are on the wrong side of his shirt. In the interests of full disclosure, I’m forced to admit that this was a genuine mistake: I didn’t do it on purpose.

³⁸ Fair enough. But Guy still makes a good point: surprisingly often, the good guys in this kind of story never take any initiative. Instead, they spend most of their time reacting to stuff the bad guys do.

³⁹ This is kind of bizarre: Arthur was talking with Guy and Amy just moments ago, but now he’s behaving as if he hasn’t seen them today!

failure: the pyramid is gone, and the café exploded. And then there's the matter of the convertible... Guy, did somebody tell you that we have the authority to commandeer vehicles in other countries?"

Guy gulped. "No, sir. I guess I just assumed we could do that."

"In Guy's defense, sir," piped up Amy, "We wouldn't have even spotted Bruno without his help... and thanks to Guy's eavesdropping, we have the name of a Crimex agent⁴⁰!"

Arthur smiled vaguely. "Yes... 'Bruno'. That should certainly narrow things down." Amy looked ready to jump in again, so Arthur added, "Relax, Amy. Nobody's in trouble this time. And fortunately, the convertible's owner was actually excited to learn that his vehicle was involved in a car chase against Crimex. He's taking it like some sort of big compliment. As for the café..." he shrugged, "The authorities understand that you did your best to find the bomb. The explosion was clearly Bruno's fault, so we aren't on the hook for that, either."

Arthur took a deep breath. "But we need to learn from our mistakes on this mission, and learn fast. It's only a matter of time before Professor Drake strikes again."

"Agreed," stated Guy, "But can we at least expect more government support on the next mission? I mean, a pyramid's disappeared, right? They must be taking this more seriously now!"

"I'm afraid not," sighed Arthur, "The senate's calling it a coincidence⁴¹. This is entirely on us."

"Well, at least we know what to look for next time, right?" said Amy, "It seems like they have to get close to the landmark before they can make it disappear."

"And now I know that I shouldn't commandeer people's cars, especially in another country⁴²," added Guy.

Arthur's response was interrupted by a burst of static from the wall-mounted monitor in his office. Everyone turned to face the monitor. The passive newsfeed it had been showing just moments earlier was replaced by a video of Drake, standing in front of the same window and desk as before: it was a new Crimex broadcast!

"Greetings," Drake said, as he grinned menacingly, "I've interrupted your networks again, to provide you with a crucial Crimex update. As you've no doubt heard by now, our operation in Cairo was a complete success. Its pyramid is now ours... despite the best efforts of some guy in a convertible, who tried to stop us."

"Some Guy!" giggled Amy.

Guy mentally rolled his eyes. *I've heard that one before*, he thought.

⁴⁰ Actually, Guy also overheard Hank's name. Maybe they forgot about that.

⁴¹ Yep, apparently the previous scene's been forgotten... now Guy and Arthur are having the same conversation they had earlier! You can sometimes introduce mistakes like this during a story's development, if you move a conversation or plot point and forget to clean up the original location. But in most cases, decent proofreading will catch something this blatant. Unless you introduce it on purpose, of course.

⁴² I wonder what kind of authority the BLA actually has in other countries? They're ostensibly run by the United States government, but most of their operations seem to occur in other nations.

“Quiet, Amy!” admonished Arthur, “I don’t want to miss this.”

Drake continued, “Our next target will be the magnificent city of Paris, France. By tomorrow night, both the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa will be ours⁴³!” He paused dramatically, and then arrogantly drew himself up to his full height.

After a few seconds, Drake relaxed. “I think that one went a lot better,” he said to someone offscreen, “You were right: I *do* shuffle my feet when I’m nervous. Should we do another practice run, just to be sure?” An exasperated female voice made an indistinct reply in the background. Drake frowned. “Wait, what?” Then the transmission ended.

Guy shook his head. “And *this* man somehow organized a successful pyramid heist.”

“Let’s make sure that it’s his last success,” rejoined Arthur, “Both of you: report to Grant’s workshop, and suit up for your next mission!”

* * * * *

“So... a mission in Paris, eh?” remarked Grant, as he walked along his orderly workshop shelves. Amy noticed that everything had been reorganized again since the previous mission.

“Yeah,” confirmed Guy, “And this time, Crimex is targeting two landmarks instead of just one.”

Grant looked thoughtful. “Huh... this calls for a more technical approach than last time. You’ll both need high-powered binoculars for scouting. That’s a given...” he paused in thought, as he retrieved the binoculars from a shelf filled with optical equipment.

“...Guy, you did pretty well with the stun gun last time,” Grant remarked, “So, let’s give you another go at that.” He handed Guy the familiar stun gun, and then approached a shelf filled with all manner of creative and bizarre-looking explosive devices.

“Amy, I don’t know why I’m encouraging your destructive tendencies,” he began, “But I’ve got something new for you this time.” He took 2 innocuous-looking pastries off the shelf. “These are explosive croissants. They’re completely stable until you cut into one... and then you have about 15 seconds before they go off! Just don’t cut them all the way through, or they’ll blow up right away⁴⁴.”

Amy accepted the croissants with an unmistakable gleam in her eye. “Sweet,” she said with a grin, “Thanks, Grant!”

“Just be careful with those,” admonished Grant, “There’s enough explosive power in those croissants to clean out a small room. By the way... how did the cloaking devices hold up in Cairo?”

“Oh, they were great!” approved Guy, “It’s just a shame that they can’t run for more than 3 minutes at a time.”

⁴³ Drake seems to be implying that the Leaning Tower of Pisa is located in Paris, France... which is absurdly inaccurate. In spite of this, the next chapter will feature *both* landmarks in Paris!

⁴⁴ It’s worth mentioning that this trigger mechanism differs from the implied “dynamite fuse” that’s pictured with the croissant in Amy’s character art.

"I know," nodded Grant, "Maybe we can improve the design someday⁴⁵. Anyway, you'd better hang onto them for now: you never know when invisibility will come in handy. Oh... and uh, one more thing." Grant glanced nervously at Amy, and Guy cocked his head in curiosity. "With two landmarks at stake, you'll need to get around quickly... so I thought that... well, this might be a good time to give the jetpack another try."

"No, Grant!" replied Amy emphatically, "Your 'Mark 2' jetpack was bad enough. I still have a scar on my knee from the landing! Face it: it's just not safe."

"But I've covered all the angles this time!" insisted Grant, "Completely new controls... it'll handle like a dream, I swear! I just need someone to try it. Hey, maybe Guy could give it a spin!"

"I really don't like this!" insisted Amy.

"Well, Grant makes a good point about getting around quickly," mused Guy, "With a jetpack, we could easily stake out a location between the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and then stop whichever theft is attempted first⁴⁶."

"I know my last two jetpack designs haven't worked out," added Grant, "But *this* jetpack will get the job done... trust me! And if it works, we can issue them to everyone."

Amy arched an eyebrow. "If it works?"

"When it works," amended Grant, "C'mon, this has been a passion project of mine for more than a year: give me one more chance!"

"I think we'll need every advantage we can get on this one, Amy," remarked Guy.

Amy sighed. "Fine. I can't argue with that." She held up one of her croissants and looked Grant in the eye. "But if Guy gets himself killed in that contraption, then this croissant is going to appear in your lunch when you least expect it. Are we clear?"

Grant gulped. "Crystal clear, Amy!"

⁴⁵ I guess we're ignoring Amy's discovery that citrus makes them run longer.

⁴⁶ This doesn't seem like a good plan: the BLA only has one jetpack, so what happens if Crimex tries to steal both landmarks at exactly the same time? Not that this should be an issue at all, since (as we've already noted) the Leaning Tower of Pisa isn't in Paris!

Chapter 6: Two Towers in Paris

"See anything yet?" asked Guy, as he watched the Eiffel Tower through his binoculars. He and Amy were perched on the roof of the Palais Garnier opera house at night. It was an ideal stakeout location: Guy could watch the Eiffel Tower across the river⁴⁷, and Amy could watch the Leaning Tower of Pisa to the east, on a nearby hill⁴⁸.

"Nothing's happened to the Leaning Tower of Pisa so far," replied Amy over the comms, from the opposite side of the roof. "I'm enjoying this stakeout, though... I've always wanted to visit Paris!"

"Because it's full of museums and culture?" inquired Guy curiously.

"You know it!" confirmed Amy, "But also because my parents disappeared here 5 years ago⁴⁹."

"Whoa, that's terrible!" exclaimed Guy, "Maybe the BLA could investigate their disappearance."

"Hey, that's a great idea!" replied Amy.

"But for now, we have a job to do," added Guy, "Let me know the moment something happens, okay?"

"Anything for you, Guy!" Amy cheerfully declared over the comms.

Guy raised an eyebrow at that, but he said nothing.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in a nearby diner, a middle-aged couple had just started their main course. The man cut into his steak, and delicately sniffed it.

"It needs more pepper," he declared.

As he began using the table's grinder to apply more pepper to his steak, his wife gently chided him: "Careful not to overpower the steak's natural flavor, Henry."

"The steak's natural flavor needs pepper, Sally," Henry explained with a grin, "And don't worry, I know just how much to add."

Henry finally placed the pepper grinder back on the table, and experimentally tried another bite of his steak.

"Better?" inquired Sally.

"It still needs more pepper," observed Henry.⁵⁰

* * * * *

⁴⁷ This is *technically* true: the Eiffel Tower is across the river from their current vantage point. But even by car, it would take them 10 minutes to get there. For practical intents and purposes, it's pretty distant.

⁴⁸ This isn't true on any level whatsoever. The Leaning Tower of Pisa would be hundreds of kilometers away. In Italy.

⁴⁹ You'd think Amy's missing parents would be the first thing on her mind... it's kind of weird that she didn't mention them earlier.

⁵⁰ What is this scene even *doing* here?

From inside her armored helicopter, Alexia scowled. She could've spent the entire day in her lab, but instead Drake was making her do field work. What was so great about field work, anyway? Crimex's field operations wouldn't even be possible without her scientific breakthroughs.

The Eiffel Tower gradually loomed in the distance. At least this mission would be over soon. Suddenly, a movement far below caught her keen eye: two people were on the roof of a nearby opera house. Alexia's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and she keyed for her helicopter's heads-up display: it showed a magnified image of a man and a woman perched on opposite sides of the roof, wearing similar uniforms. One was watching the Eiffel Tower, and the other was watching the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Right.

"Look sharp, everyone," Alexia spoke into her comms unit⁵¹, "I think I've identified the man from Cairo. He's on the roof of the opera house, near the river... and it looks like he's brought a friend."

"Roger that," came Hank's voice over the comms unit, "We're approaching your position to assist."

Alexia briefly studied the two people on the rooftop, and finally settled on the woman. She lined up her targeting computer, and held her finger over the helicopter's firing controls.

"Don't bother, Hank... I've got this."

* * * * *

"These wine lists are so confusing," complained Sally, as she tried to study the options. "Are you sure you ordered red wine⁵²?"

"Of course I'm sure," Henry assured her, "It's the same wine we ordered last time."

"But I thought you ordered Riesling," pursued Sally, "That's a white wine, isn't it?"

"I talked with the waiter about Riesling, yes," explained Henry, "But I *ordered* a red. You loved it last time, remember? It goes great with peppered steak."

"You and your pepper," smiled Sally, shaking her head.

Henry grinned mischievously. "Oh, that reminds me..." He reached for the pepper grinder again.

"Oh honestly, Henry!"

* * * * *

Guy had about two seconds of warning. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a helicopter approaching their position, and then slow down. Something about the helicopter's customized design reminded him of the jeep from Cairo. Guy suddenly realized that there was no time to think, hesitate, or even warn

⁵¹ An earlier chapter told us that the BLA agents have comms units wired right into their vests, but we're never really told how the Crimex agents carry *their* comms units. Maybe they use earpieces? But then why did Bruno need to use a phone in Cairo? Oh, well.

⁵² It's kind of annoying to interrupt a tense scene where someone's life is on the line... especially when it's interrupted by inane table banter which has no apparent connection to the actual story.

Amy: if there was any chance that the helicopter was planning to fire on them, he had to act immediately.

Acting on instinct, Guy turned to face Amy, took half a second to line himself up, and then activated his jetpack. The kick from the jetpack was unlike anything Guy had experienced before: in half a second, he'd reached Amy on the other side of the roof, where he scooped her up as if he'd practiced the maneuver for years. And roughly 2 seconds after that, the area of the roof where Amy had just been standing exploded from the helicopter's missile. 3 more seconds passed. Amy realized that she was flying through the air in Guy's arms, and she whooped like a kid on a rollercoaster. Guy realized that he'd just crossed several city blocks in a matter of seconds, and he screamed in terror⁵³.



Forcing himself to focus, Guy thumbed the “emergency landing” button that Grant had installed on the controls. Quick as lightning, the jetpack cut its engines and deployed an enormous rubber crash mat beneath them⁵⁵, which instantly inflated and caught their fall on the pavement below. Even as the crash mat absorbed their fall, it rapidly deflated. Within seconds, Guy and Amy found themselves on the streets of Paris, slightly disoriented, standing on a large, deflated crash mat.

“Guy, that was incredible!” raved Amy, “You totally saved my life back there!”

“Uh huh,” replied Guy absently. His brain was fully occupied with processing the events of the last several seconds.

⁵³ In “real life”, the high-speed acceleration and mid-air catch would likely injure Guy and/or Amy... but for the sake of this zany, lighthearted story, we’re going to pretend that it doesn’t. While I’m at it, I shall also decree that all this property damage was fixed inside a week.

⁵⁴ There’s a subtle issue with this picture: by all appearances, Amy was standing on the front (SSE) side of the opera house roof when Guy scooped her up, which meant that Guy would have started from the rear (NNW) side. But Guy was supposed to be watching Eiffel Tower, which is SWW from the opera house: his vantage point doesn’t make any sense. Ironically, however, Amy’s facing the perfect direction to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa at its true location in the real world... if her eyesight was good enough to see all the way to Italy.

⁵⁵ I’m impressed that there was enough room in the jet pack to store an enormous rubber crash mat, even if it was deflated at the time. In all seriousness, though: building a rudimentary jetpack isn’t that hard... the tricky part is not getting killed when you land.

“See?” declared Grant triumphantly over the comms, “No knee scars this time⁵⁶!”

Guy shook his head to clear the mental shock. “I agree that your jetpack saved the day,” he conceded, “But I’m still taking the rest of this mission on foot. That thing is *way* too fast.”

Before Grant could object, Amy pointed at the sky over the distant opera house, now several blocks away. “Guy, look!” she said, “Another helicopter is joining the first one!”

“Right,” Guy said, “We still need to stop this heist somehow.” As he turned back to face Amy, he saw that she’d already flagged down a cab and was getting in. She eagerly gestured for Guy to join her, and Guy reluctantly followed.

“The opera house, please,” said Amy to the cab driver, “And step on it!”

* * * * *

“Hey, let’s order some dessert today,” mused Henry, as he took another bite of his peppery steak. “I don’t think we’ve done that since the children were born.”

“That reminds me,” said Sally, as she took a sip of wine, “We should really give our daughter a call. It’s been ages since we’ve talked⁵⁷.”

Henry nodded. “Agreed... let’s try next week. She should be back from her geology conference by then, and we can offer to pick up our grandkids from the daycare⁵⁸.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation. Henry eyed the pepper grinder.

“*Enough*, Henry!”

* * * * *

Alexia frowned at the opera house roof, trying to make sense of what had happened. Just as she’d fired her helicopter’s missile, her eye caught a flash of movement on the man’s side of the roof. She’d turned to see what was going on... only to find that the man wasn’t there anymore. Immediately after that, her missile impacted against the roof. Because of the momentary distraction, however, she hadn’t been watching the missile when it exploded.

So... had she hit her target or not? And where had the man disappeared to?

“You okay, Alexia?” queried Hank from the other helicopter. “You’ve gone awfully quiet! That isn’t like you.”

“Shut up, Hank,” replied Alexia absently, as she pried her eyes away from the roof. “Something’s not adding up. The man’s completely vanished, and I’m not sure I hit the woman either. Get Bruno to shine your helicopter’s searchlight around the opera house roof!”

⁵⁶ Grant’s back at the BLA base, talking to them over the comms. How does he know that Guy just engaged the jetpack and landed safely? Is he tracking Guy’s position in real-time?

⁵⁷ Wait... are these Amy’s parents? Is *that* why we keep coming back to this scene?

⁵⁸ Sigh. Never mind.

"Are you sure?" asked Hank, "Maybe we should just go for the Eiffel Tower. Even if the agents survived, your missile probably sent them running for the hills."

"Drake wanted this problem nipped in the bud, remember?" demanded Alexia curtly, "So let's handle it!" She activated her own searchlight, as Hank reluctantly got Bruno to work the searchlight on his own helicopter. The two beams of light began to pan across the roof, searching for the elusive agents.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the taxi pulled up to the opera house. Amy and Guy piled out, and immediately noticed the two helicopters panning the roof with their searchlights.

"I think they're looking for us," ventured Guy.

"I'm sure they are," agreed Amy, "We'd better act fast. Pay the cab driver, will you?"

"Uh, sure," replied Guy, as he brought out his wallet. "What are you going to do?"

Grinning, Amy produced one of her explosive croissants, and skewered it on the end of her grapple gun⁵⁹. "What I was born to do."

Amy smoothly brought up her grapple gun and fired it at the first helicopter, snaring its rotors. The rotors immediately began pulling the cable, yanking the gun out of Amy's hands.

"Amy?" asked Guy in concern, "You know you just lost your grapple gun, right?"

Amy smiled with anticipation. "Wait for it."

The grapple gun swung in a huge arc, tethered by its cable to the first helicopter's rotors, and managed to wrap itself around the landing gear of the second helicopter. As the first helicopter's rotors continued to spin, it dragged the second helicopter closer and closer. The two helicopters collided just as the explosive croissant detonated, and both helicopters crashed helplessly onto the opera house roof below.

"And that's why you never bring grapple guns to a marshmallow roast!" declared Amy triumphantly⁶⁰.

"Wow," Guy exclaimed, "What a shot!" But then he observed the distant rooftop wreckage, and his mood sobered. "Do you think any Crimex agents survived?"

Amy laughed at that. "Of course they survived, Guy: it's just a helicopter crash⁶¹. It looks like the Eiffel Tower is safe! Too bad we missed the Leaning Tower of Pisa."

Guy whirled around. "Huh?" Sure enough, the Leaning Tower of Pisa had disappeared from its hilltop. In the gloom, they could just barely spot a familiar jeep driving away from the site⁶². Guy's face fell.

⁵⁹ Wait... Amy has a grapple gun? Since when? Was that detail missed in the scene where Grant was outfitting them for this mission?

⁶⁰ Whatever *that* means.

⁶¹ Actually, Amy makes an interesting point: in action movies, most helicopters end up crashing... and a surprising number of those crashes are survivable (especially for main characters).

⁶² So... if Alexia was in one helicopter, Hank and Bruno were in the other helicopter, and Drake was back at the Crimex base... then who's driving that jeep? Honestly, it should've been Bruno... surely, Hank can manage his helicopter by himself.

"Hey," said Amy reassuringly, "We still managed to save one of the landmarks... we're improving, right? C'mon: let's get dinner or something and celebrate!"

Surprised, Guy turned to face her. The rational part of his brain shouted a clear warning: *Guy, wake up! Amy's been trying to get close to you ever since you joined the BLA... and she's a nice girl, but she's also kind of a space cadet! If you aren't interested in her, then you need to end this now. Be nice, but tell her no!*

"Sure," said Guy out loud, "Dinner sounds good."

Amy beamed. "Perfect," she declared, "I know just the place."

What are you doing!? Guy's brain demanded indignantly.

*I don't know what to tell you, Guy thought to himself sheepishly, But I am kind of interested in her*⁶³.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, back on the opera house's rooftop, Alexia, Hank, and Bruno crawled out of the dual helicopter wreckage.

"It's a good thing Alexia added some extra safety features," observed Hank. "Drake's still going to be ticked off that we didn't get the Eiffel Tower, though. To say nothing of the toasted helicopters."

"We can deal with that later," said Bruno, "Let's head for the roof exit: we can escape down the alley and call for an emergency extraction."

He looked over his shoulder, and noticed that Alexia was still sitting on the ground near the wreckage. "Pick up the pace, sis!" he urged.

Alexia grimaced. "I have a broken leg, you selfish jerk!" she retorted acidly.

In seconds, Bruno was by her side, and Hank was just behind him. "Yeah, it's broken all right," confirmed Hank grimly. "We don't have time for field medicine, though... the cops will get here before you can say 'splint'."

"Alexia," said Bruno carefully, "Brace yourself, okay? We're going to help you up."

Bruno began to lift Alexia from her left side. "Hank, help me steady her on the right."

Hank approached on Alexia's right side, but she took one look at Hank's grease-stained hands and blurted out, "Wait, I'll do it myself! I don't need Hank's greasy hands helping me up!"

"Oh, *grow up*, sis," retorted Bruno, "We need to get out of here before the police arrive, and you can't walk on your own. Besides, Hank's only going to hold your hand." Bruno looked directly at him. "Right, Hank?"

Hank blinked, and then said, "Yeah! Of course." He took Alexia's right hand, and helped Bruno bring Alexia up on her good leg. She yelped in pain from the sudden movement, but they quickly steadied her,

⁶³ It might seem like Guy and Amy's relationship is moving quickly... but honestly, compared to some of the other stories in this genre, its pace is downright leisurely.

and the brief moment of agony dropped to a more manageable level of discomfort. They began to carefully walk Alexia to the roof's exit.

"See?" Hank said to Alexia encouragingly, "Nothing to it!"

Alexia winced from a small jolt, and clenched her teeth. "Drop dead."

As they left the roof, Bruno looked over his shoulder at the helicopter wreckage, and then back at Alexia's broken leg. He scowled in the darkness: "They've just made this whole thing personal."

Chapter 7: Perspective

In spite of his tentative interest, Guy was a little nervous going into his dinner with Amy. What would a whole evening of conversation with this girl be like? However, he wasn't kept in suspense for long: when the waiter brought them their wine, Amy cheerfully remarked, "Oh, that's right... you can drink this stuff, too⁶⁴!" To his surprise, Guy laughed out loud at her bizarre observation. Clearly, Amy would be her normal, zany self for the entire meal... and Guy found that her mannerisms were gradually growing on him.

They talked about Paris, music, hobbies, and an astonishing variety of other subjects⁶⁵. Guy quickly found that Amy's silly, lighthearted banter was not to be underestimated. She had a remarkable knack for noticing things that most people would take for granted, and she toppled commonly accepted logic with reckless ease. With less familiar topics, she would initially have Guy re-explain things from multiple angles, and then suddenly respond with a new insight that Guy had never considered before. Guy found her unique perspectives fascinating, and in seemingly no time at all, 2 hours had passed.

It was shortly after dessert that disaster struck. Conversation had drifted to the BLA again, and Guy wanted to know more about the day he was recruited.

"So, how did you know I'd be passing by that fruit stand?" Guy asked, "It wasn't exactly on my regular commute."

"But we knew where you'd be going that day⁶⁶," explained Amy, "So we just diverted a few roads to make sure you'd take the right path⁶⁷."

"Sounds like you went to a lot of trouble," smiled Guy, as he idly cut into another pastry, "What made you pick me in the first place?"

For the first time since Guy could remember, Amy blushed a little. "I should probably..." she suddenly trailed off, staring in horror at Guy's pastry. "*Where did you get that croissant!?*"

Guy stared down at the seemingly innocuous pastry on his plate. It had been cut halfway through. "It was sitting over..." Guy began, but Amy had already leapt to her feet and scooped up the croissant. She made a mad dash for the women's washroom, cranked the door open, and shouted "Anyone in there?" She waited 4 seconds, and when there was no answer, she hurled the croissant into the washroom and slammed the door shut behind it.

Just in time! Seconds later, there was a muffled *WHUMPH* from the washroom which almost blew the door off its hinges, rattling some nearby paintings on the wall. A few startled patrons turned to look, but there was nothing to see except a very relieved Amy standing next to the women's washroom door. Amy quietly made her way back to the table. "Check, please!" she called briskly.

Guy buried his face in his hands. "Arthur's going to hate us for this," he muttered.

⁶⁴ Huh?? What does Amy normally do with wine?

⁶⁵ But they don't discuss Amy's missing parents. In fact, Amy's parents will never be mentioned again. Sorry.

⁶⁶ Which is probably a huge privacy violation.

⁶⁷ Which is likely far beyond the BLA's legal jurisdiction, to say nothing of being needlessly complicated. If they already knew Guy's destination, then why couldn't they put the fruit stand *there*? Why divert him at all?

Amy sniffed indignantly. "If you ask me, this restaurant had it coming. At least now their washroom is clean."

Guy stared for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "Amy, you're all right⁶⁸."

* * * * *

When Guy and Amy returned to the BLA, they were immediately met by an angry Arthur in the lobby. "Did you just blow up a washroom in Paris!?" Arthur demanded.

"This one's totally on me," exclaimed Guy, "We were in the restaurant, and I lost track of which pastries were the explosive ones. Fortunately, Amy was able to throw it into an empty washroom before it went off."

"Are the authorities angry at us?" asked Amy worriedly. "I'm not trying to minimize what happened, but we *did* save the Eiffel Tower... and it's just one little washroom, right?"

"One little washroom, eh?" retorted Arthur. "Oh, if only it was that simple! Since the story broke, more than a dozen dirty washrooms in Paris have been vandalized by copycats using firecrackers! Apparently, there was a fake news item on social media that you blew up the washroom deliberately, as a statement against restaurants who don't keep them clean enough. Someone even made memes!"

Guy bristled indignantly. "*That's* the public's takeaway from our mission to save France's landmarks!?"

"It *is* kind of funny, in a cynical sort of way," offered Thelma, from behind the safety of her desk.

"The point is," insisted Arthur, "If you keep causing property damage like this, it's only a matter of time before some oversight committee hits us with one of those obnoxious 'they cause more damage than they prevent' initiatives."

"Oh, I just *hate* those!" said Amy feelingly. "I mean, I'm *so* sorry for saving the day, right? But honestly, the whole thing is probably my fault. Guy's only been working here for a month⁶⁹, so I shouldn't expect him to know the difference between an explosive croissant and a regular one."

Arthur did a face palm. "Then train him, for goodness' sake! I want our next mission to be a clean one. No more property damage! Now, go see Grant in his workshop... he'll brief you on the Crimex thefts. I have some calls to make."

As Arthur left the lobby, he spied a new peanut in the middle of the floor. "And somebody do something about these confounded peanuts!" he bellowed.

As Thelma hastened over to the peanut with a broom and a dustpan, a thoroughly chastened Guy and Amy made their way to Grant's lab. Once they arrived, Grant looked up from his computer and noticed them.

"I see my exploding croissants made the news," Grant remarked dryly.

⁶⁸ I know: this story is irresponsibly cavalier about property damage. Fiction is fun that way!

⁶⁹ Really... a whole month has passed? When? Did several weeks pass between the Cairo and Paris missions? Maybe Guy and Amy's relationship isn't as fast-paced as we thought!

"Yeah," replied Guy, "In retrospect, I think you made them a little *too* realistic."

"Just be glad you didn't chew it," quipped Amy.

Guy shuddered, and tried to push the mental image out of his head. "Anyway... Arthur said you had some information on the Crimex thefts?"

Grant cleared his throat. "Ah, yes... I've gone over some footage from both missions, including a lucky cellphone video that some kid happened to shoot when the Leaning Tower of Pisa disappeared. In both cases, just before the landmark vanishes, there's a weird flicker of motion. It's like..." he paused, searching for the right words, "It's like it moved without actually changing position."

"Yeah, I remember that in Cairo," said Guy thoughtfully, "The pyramid looked like it was in motion somehow."

Grant nodded. "I think Crimex is using some sort of technology that can move objects to an adjacent dimension."

"Ooh," Amy chimed in, "Let's call it a 'splinter dimension'!"

Grant shrugged. "Sure, a splinter dimension. Anyway, that's good news for us: if they're just stashing these landmarks in another dimension instead of destroying them, then we might be able to recover them."

"But how could Crimex invent something this advanced?" objected Guy.

"I'm not sure," Grant replied, "But something tells me that Drake didn't invent this technology on his own. He just seems..."

"...like a doofus?" suggested Amy.

"Well, yeah," agreed Grant, "My guess is that he's hired someone really smart to run his science program for him."

"But why would someone with those qualifications work for Drake in the first place?" asked Guy, "I mean, Drake can't even make a decent 'bad guy' video."

"That's a good question," replied Grant, "Could it be simple greed, or perhaps..."

Grant's hanging question left an awkward pause in the conversation, so Guy finally prompted him: "Or perhaps what?"

Grant snapped back to attention. "Oh! Or, something else, I guess. Sorry... I got lost in thought trying to think of other motives⁷⁰."

* * * * *

"A disgrace, that's what this is," bellowed Drake, "A complete and utter *disgrace*!"

⁷⁰ Occasionally, movies use dramatic hanging sentences to try and increase a scene's mystique. I personally find it kind of annoying, and just a little pretentious.

Bruno had spent the last 20 minutes attempting to explain the Paris mission's partial failure to Drake, but Drake's constant ranting made it a slow, frustrating process. *At least when Alexia says something mean, she gets to the point*, Bruno reflected glumly.

Bruno's attention wavered from Drake's current rant, and he found himself looking around Drake's office. In all honesty, Drake's private office wasn't nearly as impressive as it appeared during the broadcasts. The entire back wall was actually just a greenscreen: the impressive floor-to-ceiling window was just an illusion. The desk was the only genuine feature of the room... and it always struck Bruno as slightly weird that Drake used this glorified studio as his actual office. Bruno suddenly realized that Drake had spoken his name. Rallying his senses, he forced himself to pay attention again.

"...which reminds me," Drake continued, unaware of Bruno's wandering concentration, "Not only did you fail to steal both landmarks, but you managed to lose *both* of our helicopters! Explain to me how 2 advanced helicopters, upgraded by my chief engineer *and* a genius scientist, were taken out by 1 girl with a grapple gun!?"

That rankled Bruno a little. "The girl had exploding *pastries*!", he retorted, "How are we supposed to prepare for something like that!?"

In a rage, Drake hurled his stapler at Bruno⁷¹. Bruno neatly stepped to the side, and the desk projectile clattered harmlessly to the floor. "Anything else, sir?" Bruno asked mildly.

"Yeah, send in Hank!" Drake fumed, "I want to yell at him, too! And then tell Alexia to prepare for our next broadcast."

"She has a broken leg," Bruno carefully reminded him.

"And I have a schedule to keep!" Drake roared. "Now, tell them both to get in here!"

Bruno swallowed a nasty retort, and gave his boss a nod. "Sure thing, Drake."

He left Drake's office, and immediately bumped into Hank. "Drake wants to see you," Bruno informed him, "And be ready to dodge office supplies: he's in a bad mood."

"Yeah, well Alexia's in an even worse mood," replied Hank feelingly. "She's still getting used to her crutches, so I dropped by her lab to see if she needed anything. She told me to bring her a soda, and I did... but when I asked if there was anything else I could do, she told me to jump out a window!"

Bruno smiled crookedly. "Yeah, she's not handling the broken leg very well. Try to be patient with her."

Hank looked embarrassed. "Um... about that. After she mouthed off at me, I shook up her soda can and dashed out the door. So, now she's *really* angry. Sorry."

Bruno sighed wearily. "It's fine. Just leave her alone for a few days, alright? We have enough trouble right now."

From beyond the office door, Drake's voice bellowed, "*Hank!* Get in here!"

⁷¹ Childish? Perhaps. But it's nowhere *near* as puerile as bad guys who kill their own men for no good reason.

Bruno shrugged. "You're up. He's already thrown his stapler, so he'll probably try pens and erasers next. Just watch out for his coffee mug." They went their separate ways, and Bruno made several turns through their base's hallways. He ended up at a stainless-steel door that was simply marked "Lab". Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and walked in.

Alexia was hunched over a microscope at one of the lab's tables, awkwardly trying to balance on her new crutches. At the sound of the door opening, her head snapped up with a fierce scowl. "Hank, I'm going to... oh, it's you."

Bruno sighed in exasperation. "He went out of his way to get you a soda, Alexia. Why are you such a jerk to him, anyway?"

Alexia looked smug, "Because Hank's always bothering me with irrelevant stuff, tracking in grease, and offering to help with things he doesn't understand. He can't get it through his head that I'm a brilliant scientist, and he's just a wrench jockey." She almost took a spill on her crutches, but caught herself just in time.

Bruno rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Just remember, some of Hank's upgrades protected you during that helicopter crash... it could've been a lot worse than a broken leg." His eyes fell on her cast, and he felt an unexpected wave of anger sweep over him. "And when I finally catch up with the agents who did this to you, they're going to regret it."

Alexia noticed the look on Bruno's face, and pointed directly at him. "Hey... no!" she snapped, "Don't make this personal, Bruno... you'll end up doing something stupid. I'm fine, see?" She wobbled on her crutches again, but remained standing.

"No promises," Bruno informed her crisply, "And we're supposed to put a stop to those guys anyway, aren't we?"

"You know what I mean!" snapped Alexia, "Be smart out there on your next mission... you're no help to me dead or captured."

Bruno raised an eyebrow. "You aren't going soft on me, are you? I thought you didn't need anyone's help."

Alexia did a face palm, but she also calmed down a little. "I'm glad you're around, Bruno... okay? You know that. Just make sure you look after yourself!"

Bruno smiled. "Close enough," he replied, "So... are you still glad we took this job?"

Alexia shrugged vaguely. “Drake offered us access to incredible technology, and he’s made good on it,” she explained, “The splinter dimension device⁷² is more than enough justification for joining Crimex, all on its own⁷³.”

“Well, now Drake needs your help with another broadcast,” smirked Bruno. “Can you get to the camera room on your own?”

Alexia scowled. “I can get to the camera room just fine... the hard part will be getting through the broadcast, without that lunkhead embarrassing himself again⁷⁴.”

Bruno laughed. “Well, then I’ll leave you to it, sis... have fun!”

As he left, Alexia called after him: “Hey, Bruno: I’m serious about the next mission! Keep your cool!”

Bruno didn’t reply; he merely threw her a salute and left. Alexia scowled again.

* * * * *

That evening, the next Crimex broadcast went live. Drake appeared, sitting at his desk in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. He smiled sardonically.

“Greetings,” he began, “By now, you’ve doubtlessly heard of our success in Paris: the Leaning Tower of Pisa is ours! And it’s just the beginning. Thanks to the technology developed by my chief scientist, Alexia, we have embarked on a world-wide landmark heist⁷⁵! For our third heist, we intend to strike -”

With an abrupt *pop*, Drake’s audio cut out. Oblivious, Drake continued speaking inaudibly for several seconds, before suddenly turning his head: presumably, someone offscreen was talking to him. He frowned in annoyance, and asked the offscreen person a question. After listening to the response, he began fiddling with the clip microphone on his collar, growing increasingly frustrated and looking back periodically at the offscreen person for additional clarification. Finally, in exasperation, he gestured for the offscreen person to come over.

A short, stocky woman on crutches made her way to Drake’s desk, and she gestured insistently at his collar. Drake pointed a finger directly at her and said something curt. The woman scowled, and angrily gestured in his direction. The whole thing quickly devolved into an inaudible shouting match. The woman angrily turned to leave, but one of her crutches jammed against the side of Drake’s desk.

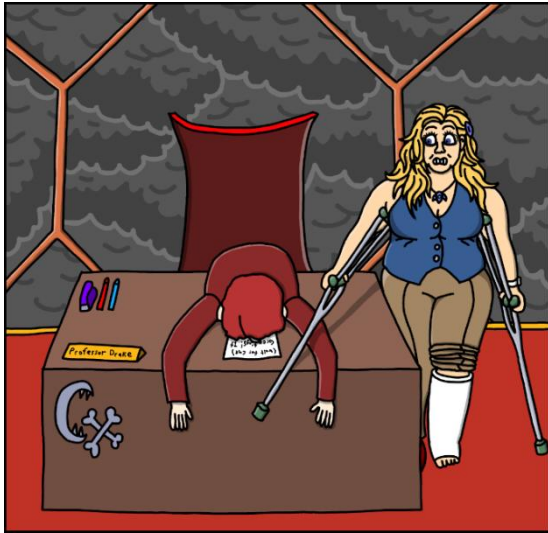
⁷² Did you notice? In the previous scene, Amy spontaneously decided to call this technology a “splinter dimension”... and by remarkable coincidence, that’s what the bad guys are actually calling it now! It’s like everyone’s “cosmically aware” of what it’s called after the first person says it... in other stories, this is a potential sign that the author’s not keeping track of which characters know what.

⁷³ Earlier, Grant speculated that someone other than Drake must have invented the splinter device... we’d naturally assume this meant Alexia invented it. But here, Alexia implies that the device was her incentive for joining Crimex. In other words, Drake already had it somehow. So, what’s going on here?

⁷⁴ Of course, some of the technical issues around the broadcasts could actually be Alexia’s fault. Maybe it’s just not her area of expertise.

⁷⁵ Huh? Now Drake seems to be saying that *Alexia* developed the “splinter dimension” device... did she invent it or not!? It’s almost a paradox: if Alexia invented it, then she didn’t have a motive to join Crimex. But if Drake invented it, then how’d he manage that without Alexia’s help?

Furious, she yanked the crutch as hard as she could: unfortunately, it snapped up and whacked Drake in face, knocking him unconscious⁷⁶.



For a few seconds, the woman was completely frozen in place, staring in horror at what had just happened. Then she looked directly at the camera, and retreated offscreen.

For two full minutes, the broadcast showed nothing except Drake's comatose form, slumped face-down over his desk. Then there was another sharp *pop* in the audio, and an offscreen female voice declared: "We're taking the Empire State Building next! Buckle up!"

⁷⁶ Don't worry: this is one of those silly, fictional concussions that knock the person out for a while without causing any permanent damage.

Chapter 8: A Skyscraper in New York

It was the next morning at the BLA. Arthur was holding a brainstorming session with Guy and Amy, to decide how they could prevent Crimex from stealing the Empire State Building.

“The good news is, they’re coming here!” observed Arthur, “New York is our home turf, and that gives us an advantage.”

“Maybe so,” cautioned Guy, “But by now, they’ll be expecting us. We can’t count on the element of surprise.”

Amy grinned mischievously. “I’ll bet I could surprise them.”

“That reminds me, Amy,” added Arthur quickly, “In case you’ve forgotten, I want this to be our cleanest mission yet. I don’t want collateral damage: understood?”

“You got it, boss!” she agreed cheerfully. “It’ll only be *non*-collateral damage this time!”

“Amy’s right, though,” Guy mused, “Even if they’re expecting us, maybe we can still find a way to catch them off guard. It would make a huge difference if we knew where they were coming from.”

At that moment, Thelma happened to walk by⁷⁷. “Don’t they usually attack in a big, armored jeep?” she asked, “Maybe you should look for a parking garage near the Empire State Building, or some other place where a jeep wouldn’t stand out.”

“Thelma, that’s brilliant!” exclaimed Arthur.

“Thanks,” she replied pertly, “Can you put that on my performance appraisal this year?”

“I don’t see why not,” said Arthur, “By the way... did you get to the bottom of that peanut thing?”

“Not yet,” admitted Thelma, “There was another one on the floor this morning, but I’ve already cleaned it up. Don’t worry, though... I’ll figure out what’s going on⁷⁸!”

“Sounds good,” Arthur approved. Addressing Guy and Amy, he added, “Now, suit up, you two! I have a good feeling about this one: maybe this is the mission where we stop Crimex in their tracks!”

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, Guy and Amy were staking out the only parking garage in New York with a perfect approach to the Empire State Building⁷⁹. They’d found perfect cover in an alley across from the garage: now, the only thing left to do was wait. A random passerby happened to recognize them.

“Hey”, he said jovially, without slowing down, “Aren’t you those agents from the BLA? That was a great job in Paris... maybe you could blow up my washroom, too! Ha, ha!”

⁷⁷ Where is this scene, anyway? Arthur’s office? The lobby? The story doesn’t really say.

⁷⁸ These guys have heard of security cameras, right?

⁷⁹ I actually tried to do some research on this one: I searched for things like “Empire State Building parking”, and I even used the Google Maps street view to scope out possible approaches. However, after spending 10 or 20 minutes without getting a definitive answer, I grew bored and abandoned it like restless toddler. There’s a reason I don’t write “serious” stories set in concrete, real-world locations.

Guy shrugged off the jibe, and cheerfully called after the man, "We'll call you with a quote!"

Amy chimed in, "Never mind the quote! We'll blow up your washroom for free!"

Guy cocked his head. "He didn't mean it, Amy."

"I did," replied Amy, with a mischievous grin. "So... are you doing anything after the mission?"

Guy chuckled. "If we can ace this mission without causing any property damage, I'll buy drinks for the entire office... all 5 of us." He brought out his trusty stun gun and examined the barrel: Grant had outfitted it with a special attachment, which gave it enough power to disable vehicles⁸⁰. The downside was that the gun drew a *lot* more power, so he'd probably only get about 4 or 5 shots with it.

"You'll have to act quickly," Guy reminded Amy, "As soon as they realize their vehicle's disabled, they'll come out swinging."

"Don't worry," Amy assured him, "I've got you covered."

They settled in for a potentially long wait. Tense minutes turned into an hour, and Guy began to fret. Had they guessed the wrong location? Pensively, Guy looked up at the New York skyline. The Empire State Building was still there: whatever Crimex was planning, it hadn't happened yet. He looked back at Amy, who was keeping a watchful eye on the street. Somehow, she managed to notice Guy's glance, and she turned to face him with a smile. "What's up, Guy?"

Before Guy could answer, there was a sickening crunch of concrete across the street, and the familiar Crimex jeep crashed through the outer wall of the parking garage!⁸¹

Guy leapt into action: he raced out of the alley and quickly fired at the departing jeep. His first shot missed the jeep by mere inches. Instead of swerving, however, the jeep did an abrupt U-turn and came barreling toward Guy!

* * * * *

"What are you *doing*, Bruno!?" howled Hank, from the jeep's passenger seat. "The Empire State Building is back *that way*!"

"I know," growled Bruno, "And we'll get it in a minute... I just need to take care of these guys, first!"

"Don't be an idiot!" protested Hank, "Our target's just behind us... we can deal with the agents later!"

"No," said Bruno grimly, "I will deal with them *now*." Bruno aimed the jeep at the male agent on the sidewalk and gunned the engine. The male agent leapt out of the way, and fired a strange gun at the jeep as it roared past him. The jeep gave a violent shudder as the engine cut out. With a shower of sparks, it ground to an abrupt halt in the middle of the road. Nearby cars immediately began swerving and doing U-turns to escape the commotion.

⁸⁰ Perhaps you're wondering why a gun which stuns humans can also disable vehicles. Well, not to worry... we can easily explain this by saying that it works by (plausible technical explanation goes here).

⁸¹ Crimex really likes to drive that jeep through walls, don't they? Maybe it's just for dramatic effect.

“Oh, that’s just *great!*” exclaimed Hank sarcastically, “Now our jeep’s toast! C’mon Bruno, we need to salvage this... we can still reach the target in a few minutes if we get out and run!”

But Bruno wasn’t listening: he’d already spotted the male agent again. Enraged, Bruno pulled out a gun and started firing shots through the driver’s window. The hasty shots went wide, and the agent dove for cover.

“Are you nuts!?” bellowed Hank, “We need to get out of here, *now!*”

As if to punctuate his statement, a female agent suddenly jumped out of nowhere and tossed a pen into the jeep’s shot-out window. Bruno stared at it for a moment, and then the stark truth hit him.

Panicking, Bruno shouted “*Croissant!*” As he threw his door open and jumped out, Hank’s brain caught up with what Bruno had actually meant. Acting quickly, Hank opened his own door and dove out of the jeep, aiming for the dubious safety of the street.

BOOM!

The pen exploded, blowing out the jeep’s remaining windows. The small fireball within the jeep quickly guttered down, leaving thick black smoke pouring out of its interior.

Hank hit the ground hard. As he landed, he felt an ominous snap from the dimension device he’d been carrying in his pocket. He pulled it out for examination: sure enough, there was an ugly crack in its casing, and it refused to power on.

By now, Bruno had come bounding around from the jeep’s other side, looking as concerned as a hungry sheep in a discount clothing store⁸². “Hank... you okay?”

Hank lost it. “No thanks to *you*, Bruno! You nearly got us both killed, and now the dimension device is broken!”

Bruno paled. “Oh, man... what are we going to tell Drake!?” At that moment, however, a powerful stun shot from one of the agents buzzed right between them.

“No time for that!” snapped Hank, “Let’s get out of here!”

* * * * *

Guy lined up another shot at the fleeing Crimex agents and fired, but nothing happened. “Hey, what’s with this!?” he exclaimed in annoyance, “Grant, you said I’d get at least 4 or 5 shots!”

“How many did you fire?” asked Grant curiously over the comms.

“Three!” said Guy.

“That’s weird,” said Grant, “It should still work. I’ll take a closer look when you get back⁸³.”

“Never mind that,” Arthur interjected over the comms, “Did we do it? Have we saved the Empire State Building?”

⁸² This analogy has a maddening way of *almost* making sense, but quite.

⁸³ This will never be further explained.

Guy looked back at the Crimex agents: they were fleeing in the opposite direction of the Empire State Building. "I'd say so, sir. We didn't capture the Crimex agents, but they're fleeing the scene. And better yet, the only thing we destroyed was their jeep."

"No collateral damage!" added Amy gleefully.

"Wonderful!" declared Arthur, "We'll have a big celebration when you get back. Well done, both of you!"

Just then, Amy ran up to Guy with a broad grin on her face. She gave him an enthusiastic high-five. "Nice marksmanship!" she complimented him.

"Nice, uh... blowing up the enemy's jeep!" Guy replied.

"Thank you," she modestly replied, "Of course, I only threw the pen. The explosion did the rest... you know, the fireball, and the smoke, and whatnot. I'd say this was our best mission yet, wouldn't you?"

Guy laughed. "Yes, I'd definitely say that." He looked reflective. "I guess this means I'm buying drinks for the entire office."

* * * * *

Back at Crimex, Drake listened with mounting fury to Bruno and Hank's reluctant tale of their mission's abrupt failure. In an act of great sportsmanship, Hank refrained from throwing Bruno under the bus as he gave his side of the story... but he still wasn't willing to take any direct blame. Hank concluded his narrative, and waited for the inevitable tantrum.

He didn't have long to wait. "You *idiots!*" thundered Drake, "I should've put a *potted geranium* in charge of this mission!"

"A flower couldn't have driven a jeep," Bruno offered sheepishly.

"Maybe so," Drake ranted, "But at least a potted geranium couldn't have failed as *spectacularly* as you just did! Bruno... how *dare* you compromise the entire mission, just to satisfy some stupid personal vendetta!" He hurled a fistful of paperclips at Bruno, who was obliged to shield his face with one arm.

Alexia entered the room on her crutches. "Where's my dimension device!?" she demanded.

Sighing in resignation, Hank reached into his pocket and pulled out the damaged device for Alexia's inspection. Alexia let out a shriek of rage. "What were you lunkheads *doing* with it!?... playing street hockey!?"

"It was an accident -" Bruno began, but Alexia cut him off midsentence. "Don't even talk to me right now, Bruno!" she snarled, pointing her finger at him accusingly. "Didn't I warn you against making this personal? Didn't I warn you to be careful on the next mission? *Didn't I*⁸⁴!?"

Unexpectedly, Drake threw a vinyl eraser at her. "Pipe down, Alexia!" Drake bellowed, "It's still my turn to yell at these guys⁸⁵!"

⁸⁴ Incidentally, Bruno will never lose his cool like that again. Maybe Alexia got through to him?...

⁸⁵ It just occurred to me: we never got a scene where Drake chews out Alexia for accidentally knocking him unconscious during his previous broadcast. Use your imagination!

“Can we all just take it down a notch?” pleaded Hank.

“Yeah, we’re supposed to be on the same team here!” added Bruno, “And if it wasn’t for those stupid agents from the BLA⁸⁶, everything would be going great!”

Without warning, all the lights within Crimex cut off simultaneously, plunging them into complete darkness. Alexia let out a surprised yelp of fear before she caught herself.

A woman’s deep voice cut through the blackness like an icy knife. It was confident, cold, and ever-so-slightly mocking. “So, enemy agents are ruining your schemes? How sad.”

There was a moment’s shocked silence. “Who’s there!?” demanded Drake.

With a distant click, the lights came back on... but only at a quarter of their normal brightness. In the dim light, the silhouette of a tall, lithe woman was framed in the hallway. “You have a pest problem,” she explained simply, “I’m the exterminator⁸⁷.”



Drake took a moment to let this sink in. “No really,” Drake repeated, “Who are you?”

The woman laughed chillingly. “Who am I?” She began walking toward them. Her stride was a perfectly calculated glide, which allowed her to cover ground quickly without making a sound. “I’m the ‘fatal’ in ‘femme fatale’. I make heroes fall, and problems disappear. I’m Malena Midnight... and for the right price, my services are yours.”

Drake looked intrigued. “You mean, you can do something about the BLA?”

Malena smiled coldly, and Bruno found himself shivering involuntarily. “For the right price,” she stated, “I’ll help you erase the BLA from existence. Not only that, but I’ll ensure that Crimex gets full credit, so that you can have the prestige and fear you deserve. No extra charge.”

⁸⁶ This appears to be the first time Crimex mentions the BLA by name, which ought to be a big deal... how did they learn this name? I guess they could have heard it from a news broadcast, but it’s never explained.

⁸⁷ I don’t know how she made the lights do that. It doesn’t matter: the point is, it would look awesome.

"I don't know about this, Drake," muttered Alexia nervously, "I'm sure she'd skilled, but she seems kind of... dangerous."

Drake grinned fiendishly. "Perhaps 'dangerous' is exactly what we need right now. Malena: you're hired! Name your price."

Malena bowed gracefully. "A wise choice, indeed. You won't regret this, Drake." Her eyes glittered dangerously in the dim light. "But your enemies will."

Part 2: Reprisals

Chapter 9: The Plot Thickens

It was the next morning at the Crimex base, and Malena had called a council of war against the BLA. Everyone was seated in a circle around Malena⁸⁸, who took center stage as she explained her plan of attack.

"You have a nice operation here," Malena approved, as she surveyed the room. "And capturing landmarks! Clearly, Crimex has a flair for the dramatic... like me. But you sure can't handle a little competition⁸⁹." She gestured at the room's monitor, which showed Guy and Amy being interviewed by a local news crew. "Look at these two. *Look at them*. Your entire crime spree is being held hostage by a couple of underfunded goody-two-shoes."

"One of them is pretty good at blowing things up," said Hank defensively.

"And the other one's a pretty good shot," added Bruno ruefully.

"Who cares?" demanded Malena icily. "They shouldn't be any match for the likes of you... but here we are. So it's time to put a stop to their meddling, before things get any worse." She looked at Alexia. "Is the dimension device repaired yet?"

"Yeah, it's repaired," confirmed Alexia sourly, "It took all night though, because I needed -"

"Good," interrupted Malena, uninterested in the details, "Bring up the image of our next target."

Alexia bristled at the interruption, but she kept quiet. She obligingly tapped a button on her watch, and the monitor's picture changed to show Big Ben, the famous clock tower in London.

"We're going to pretend that nothing's changed," announced Malena, "Drake will announce our next target in advance: this time, it's Big Ben. Naturally, the BLA will send its agents to try and stop us. What they don't know is that we're setting a trap for them."

"Does this mean we aren't actually going after Big Ben?" asked Drake tentatively, "I really wanted that one, and we've already missed the Empire State Building⁹⁰."

Malena smiled coldly. "Priorities, Drake, priorities," she reminded him, "Of course you can steal Big Ben, but only after we've sprung our trap."

She pointed at Hank and Bruno. "I'll need you two to infiltrate the surrounding area and find the BLA agents. Once you find them, you will bait them into following you. As soon as you've lured them into a nearby alley, I'll ambush them and knock them out. Then we capture one of the agents, and leave the other one behind."

"Can't we capture them both?" objected Drake, "It's bad enough that we're just knocking them out, instead of finishing them off."

"We're making a point," Malena explained patiently, "By deliberately leaving one of them behind, we're sending the BLA a message: 'Stay out of our way, or this will get much worse.' Better yet, the remaining

⁸⁸ Meaning, of course, that they're seated on chairs... as opposed to sitting cross-legged on the floor like a kindergarten class. Presumably.

⁸⁹ Technically, the BLA is *interfering* with Crimex, not competing with them... but just try explaining that to Malena.

⁹⁰ Of course, they could always just try again... couldn't they?

agent will waste their time trying to find and rescue the captured agent, instead of stopping our heists... which means we can resume stealing landmarks without any interference⁹¹."

"I'd rather just crush their agency out of existence," said Drake sulkily.

Malena rolled her eyes. "There's more than one way to exterminate an agency, Drake," she pointed out, "The BLA is already an underfunded joke within their own government. If we prove that they're completely ineffective, then we can get their whole department canned without firing a shot."

"What if that doesn't happen?" Drake pursued.

Malena held his gaze for just a moment, and the room's temperature seemed to drop ever so slightly. "Then I'll handle them myself," she replied, with a quiet confidence that silenced any other questions Drake might have asked. "Alexia, once the agents have been knocked out, you'll arm the dimension device and capture Big Ben for us. We'll all be gone before anyone can -"

"Hey, wait a second!" objected Alexia, "Are you saying that I'll be travelling to London, as well?"

Malena cocked her head disingenuously. "Yes, Alexia... that was implied when I said you'd be arming the dimension device. Is there a problem?"

Alexia gestured to the cast on her broken leg. "Yeah... this! I have a broken leg."

Malena scoffed. "Do your arms still work? Then you'll be fine! For crying out loud, you're just pushing a button... I doubt you'll even strain yourself."

Alexia bristled again, and this time she couldn't keep quiet. "Listen, I'm a valuable scientist! I can't waste my time on field operations when -"

With a harsh ringing of steel, Malena drew one of the swords slung on her back. The motion was so startlingly quick that the blade seemed to appear from nowhere: one moment it was slung on her back, and then it was suddenly in her hand. Bruno and Hank both squirmed in their seats, ready to leap to Alexia's defense if needed. Drake watched on with detached curiosity. As for Alexia, she stared at the sword in terror, looking for all the world like a deer gazing into the headlights of a tank driven by wolves⁹².

But Malena did not threaten Alexia with the sword: she simply leaned on it for emphasis, and the room's temperature seemed to grow downright chilly. "Listen... 'sunshine'," Malena began with mock sweetness, "Big Ben needs to be stolen by someone the BLA hasn't seen yet... otherwise, we'll risk attracting attention. That means it's either you or me⁹³."

Malena locked eyes with Alexia. "So you can either do *your* job, and steal Big Ben, or you can do *my* job, and ambush the agents on that broken leg of yours. Which is it going to be?"

⁹¹ Plus, it would just be such a *bummer* if Guy or Amy got killed.

⁹² An over-the-top analogy? Perhaps. But Malena is an over-the-top character.

⁹³ Actually, the BLA *has* seen Alexia: it was during the broadcast where she accidentally knocked Drake unconscious. But perhaps Malena doesn't know that... and right now, Alexia's probably too scared to think of it.

Alexia's defiance withered under Malena's cold fire. Her gaze dropped to the floor, and she quietly murmured, "It's fine, Malena. I'll capture Big Ben."

With one smooth motion, Malena returned her sword to its sheath. Bruno and Hank both released a breath they hadn't realized they'd been holding. "Good choice," Malena replied condescendingly. She looked up at others: a profound silence had fallen over the room.

"Hey everyone, cheer up!" Malena declared placatingly, "It's time to get this train back on track!"

* * * * *

Back at the BLA's cafeteria, Arthur was holding a small celebration for Guy and Amy's successful mission in New York. "I've always favored the 'carrot and stick' approach to management," Arthur said with a grin, "If you do poorly on a mission, you get reprimanded. If you do well on a mission, you get pizza!"

Guy, who'd already eaten two slices, nodded happily. "We'll try to keep the victories coming, sir!"

"So, what should we get if we take down Crimex completely?" asked Amy, "Ice cream cake?"

Arthur chuckled. "If you manage to shut down Crimex completely, you can have caviar!"

"Oh no, ice cream cake will do just fine," Amy assured him, "I really don't care for fancy foods... champagne, truffles, and snails⁹⁴. That sort of thing." She looked thoughtful. "Wait, did you say 'caviar' or 'candy bar'?"

"Caviar'," replied Arthur. "As in 'tiny fish eggs'."

"Yeah, I can't stand that stuff!" confirmed Amy, "Chocolate eggs, on the other hand... those are amazing! And ice cream cake. I love ice cream cake."

"Speaking of things that people don't like," Thelma interjected, "Don't forget to take the corporate anti-bribery course before the month is out. Our whole department gets penalized if everyone doesn't complete it."

"Oh, lighten up Thema," chided Arthur, "Just enjoy the pizza, already!"

"Don't mind if I do!" she declared, as she reached for a slice, "Can I take 2 extra slices for my kids? I'm leaving in 15 minutes to pick up them from school."

"Go for it," encouraged Arthur.

As Thelma stacked two more pizza slices onto her paper plate, Grant burst into the room. "Everyone!" he declared, "Drake is doing another Crimex broadcast!"

"So soon?" protested Guy, "After the butt-kicking we just gave them, I thought they might lie low for a while."

"Apparently not," shrugged Arthur, "Lead the way, Grant!"

⁹⁴ For what it's worth, this *does* seem consistent with Amy's earlier remark in Paris, where she'd inexplicably forgotten that wine was for drinking.

The group followed Grant to the conference room. On the way past the lobby, Guy noticed another peanut, sitting neatly in the middle of the floor. “That is so weird.” he muttered to himself⁹⁵.

Everyone filed into the conference room, where Drake’s broadcast was already in progress. “...but our losses in New York were only a minor setback,” he grandly proclaimed. “The Crimex machine roars on, ever closer to our goal!”

“A ‘minor setback’?” Guy scoffed, “We foiled their plans and blew up their jeep!”

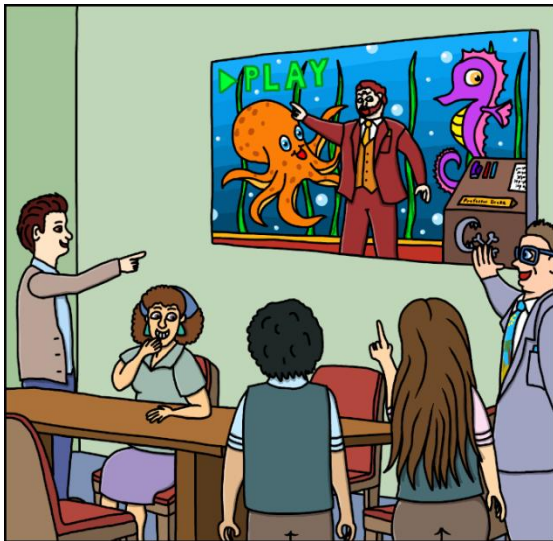
Amy smirked. “Don’t sweat it, Guy... ‘minor setback’ is just executive lingo for ‘total dumpster fire’.”

As Drake continued building up to announcing his next target, the impressive floor-to-ceiling window behind him abruptly vanished. In its place was an enormous grid of candy, which was being moved around by an unseen hand. As pieces of candy were matched with each other, they disappeared with a colorful blast of sparkles.

“Wait,” said Thelma, “Is that... video game footage? What’s it doing behind Drake?”

“He’s using a greenscreen!” laughed Grant, “His entire back wall is a sham!”

The entire group roared with laughter as the video game footage was replaced by an aquatic scene with colorful cartoon animals, a physics simulation program, and finally the impressive floor-to-ceiling window again⁹⁶. Oblivious to the changes behind him, Drake boldly continued his speech, ramping up to his conclusion.



“By this time tomorrow,” Drake declared, “Big Ben will be ours! I hope you enjoyed London’s famous clock tower while it lasted... because Crimex has big plans for it. That’s all for now!”

⁹⁵ Admit it: you’re getting curious about the recurring mystery peanut, and the role it will play in the story. :)

⁹⁶ My theory here is that Alexia sometimes gets off-task during the broadcasts, and she accidentally changed the input for Drake’s greenscreen... which would actually suggest that these images came from *her* device.

Arthur was thoughtful for a moment. "I think it's time to prioritize capturing these Crimex fellows," he mused. "Grant, please outfit Guy and Amy for the next mission. Guy should have his trusty stun gun, and Amy should get..."

As Arthur paused to think, Amy looked at him pleadingly. Shrugging, Arthur concluded: "...an entire bandolier of flashbangs."

"Yes!" bellowed Amy, pumping her fist.

"Use them wisely." Arthur added dryly.

Several minutes later, Guy and Amy were ready to head out.

"Make us proud!" said Arthur.

"Win us another pizza party!" added Thelma.

"Consider it done!" Guy declared.

Grant chuckled at that. "Don't get cocky, Guy."

Guy and Amy proudly walked out the door, eager to make their next mission successful.

Little did Guy know that he would never see his base again.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ This isn't true.

Chapter 10: A Really Big Clock in London

Guy and Amy strolled down the London streets near Big Ben, watching for any signs of trouble.

“Have you noticed that people keep looking at us?” asked Amy brightly, “Maybe they’ve seen the news reports of what we did in New York.”

“Honestly, I think they’re just staring at your bandolier of flashbangs.” Guy replied.

Amy laughed. “Every girl should get to wear accessories like these! I just hope we’ll have a chance to use them... they’ll be perfect for capturing a couple of Crimex agents.” Her gaze suddenly darted to the left.

“What is it?” asked Guy, instantly on the alert, “Did you see the Crimex agents somewhere?”

“That flower shop has a sale on chrysanthemums!” Amy said excitedly. “They’re like, my favorite flower ever! Did you know their oil can be used an insecticide ingredient? And yet its flowers and leaves are edible! Is that crazy, or what⁹⁸?”

“Wow,” remarked Guy, “I’d never heard of that before.”

“Yeah, and they even have a fun name!” declared Amy, “Chrysanthemum, chrysanthemum, chrysanthemum!”

Guy laughed. “We should probably focus on the mission, don’t you think? We don’t want to miss seeing the Crimex goons.”

“Oh right,” said Amy with a casual smile, “No worries: they’re standing next to the flower shop.”

“Huh?” Guy exclaimed. He took a closer look at the flower shop, carefully observing each nearby pedestrian. He soon spotted them: two men, one tall and muscular, the other short and wiry. “Those are our guys, alright,” he confirmed, “But they wouldn’t have a clear view of Big Ben from the flower shop, so it beats me why they’re waiting there.”

“Who cares?” grinned Amy, gesturing at her bandolier, “This is a great chance to capture them!”

“Wait, Amy,” Guy cautioned, “Something feels off about this: why are they standing in the open like that? By now, they must know that we’ll be looking for them!”

“Especially if they know that we know that *they* know,” remarked Amy.

Guy took a moment to run that statement through his mind, to see if it came out to something sensible.

“Exactly,” he replied, “I think. Let’s just observe them for a few minutes, and see what they do⁹⁹.”

* * * * *

Bruno pretended to check his reflection in the store window, as he stole another glance at the BLA agents across the road.

“What are they doing?” came Malena’s deep voice over the comms, “Have they seen you?”

⁹⁸ This is true.

⁹⁹ Or they could use their cloaking devices to sneak up and eavesdrop, like Guy did in Cairo. Wouldn’t that be more effective? Oh, well.

"Yeah, they've seen us," confirmed Bruno, "I think they're just watching right now, to see what we do."

"It's a start," said Malena, "But now, you need to make them suspicious. When you finally bolt for the alley, they need to chase you without even thinking about it!"

"I can do that," replied Hank. He walked over to Bruno, making an exaggerated gesture toward Big Ben. "That sure is a great clock tower," he announced loudly. Some nearby pedestrians looked at him strangely, and walked a little faster¹⁰⁰.

"Not like *that*," said Malena in disgust, "Try to look like a trained criminal operative, not a street performer."

Acting on impulse, Bruno dropped into a half-crouch, and began looking suspiciously around him. Several pedestrians jumped back from him in alarm.

"That's even worse!" snapped Malena, "Dial it down, immediately¹⁰¹!"

"You said to look suspicious!" protested Bruno.

"Yes, but it can't look like you're *trying* to look suspicious," explained Malena, with strained patience.

"How are we supposed to look suspicious without looking suspicious!?" demanded Hank.

"Yeah, that doesn't even make sense!" agreed Bruno.

"Bruno," interjected Alexia over the comms, "Remember on Wednesday, when you stole my last cupcake from the lab's fridge?"

"How do you know that was me?" asked Bruno innocently.

Alexia snorted. "You've been stealing my desserts since... look, it doesn't matter right now! Just act like you're planning to steal one of my cupcakes, got it? And Hank, follow his lead."

Responding immediately, Bruno eased his body into a relaxed slouch which didn't draw any attention whatsoever. His eyes casually roved around the surrounding area: only his tensed hands betrayed that he was ready for some sort of mischief. Hank studied Bruno for a moment, and then followed his example.

There was a brief silence on the comms. "Okay, that's actually perfect," admitted Malena. "Good suggestion, Alexia."

"You just need to know your audience," Alexia smugly replied.

Malena rolled her eyes, but decided to let it slide. "Are the BLA agents still watching you?"

Bruno took another casual glance at the store's reflective window. "Yeah, and now they definitely want to come after us... especially the girl."

¹⁰⁰ I can understand why the pedestrians are confused: as Guy pointed out in the previous scene, Hank doesn't have a clear view of Big Ben from the flower shop! Either this is a storytelling goof, or Hank is being really dumb.

¹⁰¹ Notice that Malena had to ask Bruno what the BLA agents were doing, but she immediately knew when *Bruno* did something dumb. How is she keeping tabs on Bruno and Hank? Perhaps she's lurking somewhere which allows her to see the Crimex agents, but not the BLA agents. That's my best guess.

“Good,” Malena replied, “Both of you, get ready to sprint for the alley. On my mark...”

* * * * *

“What are they *doing* over there?” asked Amy, mystified.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Guy, “For a minute there, I thought Bruno had lost a contact lens or something.”

“Well, we can’t keep waiting for the right moment,” Amy pointed out, “If we don’t make a move, they’re going to get away with whatever they’re doing.”

As if to emphasize her point, Bruno and Hank abruptly bolted for a nearby alley. “There they go!” shouted Amy, as she dashed across the street. A passing taxi swerved to miss her, and the angry driver shouted something indistinct and decidedly uncomplimentary. Guy hesitated for a moment, and then took off in pursuit, doing his best to catch up. He entered the alley just a few steps behind her.



“Amy, wait!” Guy panted, as he tried to close the gap, “They might be -”

Too late! A dart suddenly appeared in the back of Amy’s neck. Confused, she turned around and looked back at Guy, before stumbling to her knees. Guy heedlessly ran up to help her, but even as he reached for her hand, he felt an ominous stinging sensation in the back of his own neck. He tried reaching behind his neck for the dart which had struck him, but his coordination was already severely impaired, and his hands wouldn’t obey his brain’s commands. As Guy struggled, Amy slumped to the ground, completely unconscious. Guy had just enough time to slur the words, “I think we’ve been swindled,” over the comms before collapsing next to her¹⁰².

Malena dropped down into the alley like a shadowy nightmare. She holstered her dart gun, and coolly eyed Guy and Amy’s inert bodies. After a moment’s consideration, she settled on abducting Guy. She frisked him for weapons and identification: the first thing she found was his stun gun, which she set aside.

¹⁰² This is more realistic than the chloroform stunt Amy pulled near the start of the story: sedatives often hit you faster if they can directly enter your bloodstream.

Next, she discovered Guy's cloaking device: "Nice," she smiled coldly to herself, "I'll keep the cloaking device for myself¹⁰³." She pocketed the cloaking device, and checked Guy once more. This time, she found an ID badge which proclaimed Guy as an agent of the BLA. "The 'BLA', is it?" she smiled cynically, "Drake will be pleased to finally learn who his enemy is¹⁰⁴."

By this time, Bruno and Hank had returned to the scene, grinning triumphantly. As Bruno got closer, he noticed Guy's stun gun sitting nearby. He contemptuously stomped it with his boot, crushing it underfoot.

Malena glared daggers Bruno. "I was going to have Alexia analyze that," she said icily.

Bruno winced. "Oh... um, sorry. I'm sure she can still study the pieces." He scooped up the broken gun fragments sheepishly. "Do you need a hand with our prisoner?"

Malena smirked, then effortlessly hefted Guy's inert body over her shoulder. "I'm good," she replied flatly. Then she spoke into her comms: "Alexia, hit it."

In the distance, Big Ben flickered briefly and vanished. Gasps could be heard from the streets, as shocked onlookers pointed to the empty space where the clock tower had been.

"Let's pack it in, people," declared Malena with cold satisfaction, "We're done here."

* * * * *

About 15 minutes later, Amy woke up. She groggily became aware that Arthur was trying to reach her over the comms.

"I repeat... Amy, Guy," he said anxiously, "If you can hear us, please respond."

Amy shook her head, trying to clear the sedative's lingering effects. "I'm here," she assured him over the comms, "And Guy is..." Amy stopped in surprise. Guy was nowhere to be found.

"What happened over there?" asked Grant over the comms, "We've been trying to contact you!"

"Never mind that," Amy interrupted, "Have you heard from Guy?"

"No," replied Arthur, "Isn't he with you?"

Amy looked around frantically, but there was no sign of Guy in the alley. A terrible suspicion began to dawn on her. "We were ambushed," she explained, "I think... I think they've taken Guy."

She ran back out to the open street. No sign of Guy there, either. And Big Ben... she scanned the skyline. Big Ben was gone. "I think they've taken Big Ben, too."

"I know," confirmed Arthur grimly, "It's already on the news... but let's take this one step at a time. Can you return to base safely?"

¹⁰³ Yep, Guy and Amy definitely should've used their cloaking devices here... they might have thwarted this entire ambush! Also, how does Malena know this is a cloaking device? Does it have a "Cloaking Device" label on it?

¹⁰⁴ In recent chapters, both Malena and the rest of Crimex have demonstrated that they already know these are BLA agents... but now, Malena's behaving as if this were a new discovery. This is obviously a goof, but it can happen all too easily in fiction. Keeping track of which characters should know what is a perilous business!

“Yes. I’m not injured, and I don’t see the Crimex agents anywhere,” confirmed Amy, who was starting to feel a little shaky. Something was bothering her. “Arthur, they played us good... and they didn’t even bother to take my flashbangs, or anything! I think they wanted to prove they can hurt us.”

And then the realization came flooding back. “It was my fault,” she moaned in a quavering voice, “Guy thought this whole thing smelled fishy. He wanted to wait! Why didn’t I listen?”

“It’s okay, Amy,” said Arthur kindly, “Don’t beat yourself up over this. It’s like you said: they played us good. For now, just get back to base. We’ll find a way to make this right!”

“Understood,” said Amy quietly, “I’m heading back now.”

But Amy didn’t head back immediately: first, she returned to the alley. She did one final sweep of the area, to see if there were any clues that could help them find Guy. There was nothing. Once she was satisfied that she’d done everything she could, Amy dropped to her knees and abruptly burst into tears.

Amy cried for several minutes, until her tears were completely exhausted. Finally, with a shaky step, she got back on her feet: she looked weary, but more determined than ever. “Hang in there, Guy... we’ll find you¹⁰⁵!”

¹⁰⁵ You know, this was actually a pretty sincere moment! I hope it wasn’t a mistake to make this a silly story, instead of a serious one... nah, it’s probably fine.

Chapter 11: Captivity

Guy woke up in an unfamiliar prison cell¹⁰⁶, still feeling slightly groggy from the sedative¹⁰⁷. As Guy gradually got his bearings, recent events came flooding back to him... he'd been captured! Scrambling to his feet, he tried to look outside his cell into the prison hallway: was Amy here, too? He looked left and right down the hallway, but the other cells seemed to be empty.

Guy's movements caught the attention of the guard who'd been posted outside his cell. The guard touched his earpiece and said, "The prisoner's awake, ma'am." Then he turned back to Guy and grinned sardonically. "Sit tight and behave yourself," he instructed, "The lady who hired us doesn't mess around."

Guy didn't have long to wait. Within a minute, he heard a door open down the hallway, followed by approaching footsteps which halted just short of his field of view. Guy heard a whispered argument: he couldn't catch most of the words, but at one point he heard a male voice distinctly say, "No, I'm the boss! I want to do it!"

Moments later, a man walked up to Guy's cell. Guy immediately recognized him as Professor Drake, the leader of Crimex. Drake held up Guy's ID badge and grinned evilly. "So... 'Guy Stafford', is it?" he inquired, "It's good to finally meet you. Your little agency has caused us a lot of trouble, you know."

"It's our job," replied Guy evenly, "And before we talk about anything else, I want to know what you've done with my partner! Where is she?"

"You mean the girl, I assume," said Drake with a smirk, "She's fine, actually... we left her where she was. We only needed to abduct one of you."

Guy's mind raced. Was Drake telling the truth, or was this some kind of sick mind game? "Prove it!" Guy insisted.

Drake shrugged passively. "I told you, she's fine. But hey, don't believe me... see if I care. Either way, you're going to be staying here for quite a while." He gestured dramatically at the concrete prison walls around him.

"Yeah, I sort of figured that," Guy observed, "But I have to say, I expected the Crimex base to look more impressive. It's nothing like your broadcasts with the greenscreen."

Drake bristled, and blurted "How did you know about -" before catching himself. Then he turned smug. "Well, guess what, 'Guy'? The joke's on you! This isn't even our base! An... associate of mine knows some mercenaries. We've rented one of the cells at their complex for the time being."

Prideful, talkative, and stupid, Guy thought to himself. *Let's see how much information I can get out of this bozo.* "So, why are you stealing landmarks in the first place?" Guy asked, "You must have a plan for them."

Drake laughed, and replied, "Oh, please. Do you really think I'd tell you something that crucial?"

¹⁰⁶ As opposed to a *familiar* prison cell, I guess.

¹⁰⁷ Of course, it only took Amy 15 minutes to recover from the dart's effects... so either this prison cell is about 15 minutes away from where Guy was ambushed, or else Crimex gave him something else along the way to ensure that he'd remain unconscious during transport. This isn't necessarily a plot hole: it's just not explained.

Guy shrugged. "Now that I think about it, you don't seem like the planning type. You're probably just collecting the landmarks for kicks."

"That's where you're wrong!" declared Drake, "I have a brilliant plan, and those landmarks are going to make me rich!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Guy skeptically, "Sell them on the black market?"

Drake chuckled condescendingly. "Nice try... but I'm not telling you anything about my plan!"

Guy shrugged again. "Selling them on the black market won't work, you know. Nobody wants a giant clock tower in their backyard. It's tacky."

"Don't be stupid," Drake shot back, "I'm not going to sell them on the black market! I can make far more money by -"

Guy heard an exasperated grunt from just beyond his field of view. A tall, menacing woman in a bodysuit approached Drake, warning him in a deep voice: "Stop talking, Drake! You're playing right into his hands."

"No, I'm not!" protested Drake, as the woman began ushering him away from the cell.

"Wait... just wait!" insisted Drake, and he ran back to Guy's cell. "One more thing! This afternoon, while your friends were wasting time looking for you, we stole the Golden Gate Bridge! So, in your face¹⁰⁸!"

The woman rolled her eyes, and resumed ushering Drake out of the prison hallway. A minute later, she returned. "My name is Malena Midnight," she informed Guy calmly, "And if you cause any trouble here, you'll answer to me."

Guy suppressed a shudder: Malena seemed very dangerous, but he was determined to put on a brave face. He grinned: "Understood. So, that's what 'Professor Drake' is really like, huh? This explains so much."

Malena smiled coldly. "Oh, there's no need for bravado," she replied calmly, "Your increased heartrate, your shallower breathing, your fidgeting hands... we both know that you're scared of me." She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head mockingly, inviting Guy to respond, but Guy couldn't think of anything to say. "And you should be," she added, with a chilling touch of satisfaction.

Malena allowed the silence to continue for several seconds, enjoying the fearful anticipation as it grew in her prisoner's mind. It was one of the few indulgences she allowed herself.

Finally, she spoke again. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we? Your position here is simple: stay put, shut up, and don't cause any trouble. If you try to escape, or if you do anything stupid, then my mercenary friends will shoot you." She smiled coldly. "But try to avoid that, won't you? You might have some value as a hostage."

¹⁰⁸ Do people still say this? I don't hear it much anymore.

Something deep within Guy rallied, and he steeled himself to stand up against this formidable woman. He returned Malena's cool gaze, and asked: "You're the one who knocked us out in the alley, aren't you? There's no way you'd leave something that important to anyone else."

Malena raised an eyebrow. "Not bad, little agent... you do your agency credit. Yes, that was me."

Guy drew himself up to his full height, and looked Malena in the eye. "Well, only cowards attack from behind. I guess you couldn't take us without the element of surprise."

Guy had been expecting Malena to get angry, deny his accusations, or perhaps even threaten him. But what actually happened was far worse. Malena laughed out loud, and it was the most terrifying sound that Guy had ever heard. It was the sound of utter confidence and cold supremacy, like a spider mocking a fly in its web. Guy winced involuntarily, despising himself for it, but he couldn't prevent himself from cringing at Malena's dreadful glee.

And then, without any warning, Malena struck.

Guy heard the unmistakable ringing sound of steel, and thought he saw Malena make either three or four sudden movements: it happened so quickly that he wasn't sure. Then Malena calmly returned her sword to the sheath on her back, even as the ringing of steel ceased echoing against the prison's cement walls. It was like a death knell on a muffled hilltop which time had abandoned to a thankless den of critical thinkers¹⁰⁹.

Guy blinked in confusion, trying to understand what had just happened... and then he noticed that the left sleeve of his shirt was lying on the floor. Guy grabbed his left arm involuntarily, but to his great relief, he found it uninjured. Somehow, Malena had managed to cut the sleeve off his shirt without even touching his arm!



Malena observed Guy's dumbfounded expression with grim satisfaction. "Surprised?" she asked, in a soft mocking voice. Guy nodded wordlessly.

¹⁰⁹ I can't even guess what that means. But it's probably bad.

“Good,” she replied quietly, “I’ll be back later, to make sure you’re behaving yourself. Just remember, Guy: losing the sleeve off your shirt isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you. Not even close.” Then she turned and left the prison hallway without a backward glance.

Guy felt himself reeling from the encounter. Malena was, without a doubt, the most dangerous person he’d ever met. “I’ve got to get out of here,” he moaned.

“Yeah,” remarked the guard stationed by Guy’s cell, “She has that effect on people.”

Chapter 12: Escape

"Bartender!" called Amy impatiently, "We're here to see Chekhov!"

"Not so loud," hissed Grant nervously, "You want the whole tavern to hear?"

Amy snickered at that. "Grant, we're in a tavern called 'The Subversive Crustacean'. I don't think anyone's going to care if we meet a crime boss."

From the tavern's counter where they were sitting, Grant nervously looked around the smokey room. His senses were assaulted by raucous laughter, coarse language, and the fumes of cheap alcohol.

"Somebody just might!" he insisted, "Criminals have enemies too, you know!"

It had been Thelma's idea to comb London's criminal underworld for clues that could lead them to Guy. With Amy heading the mission, Grant had been pressed into service as her acting partner... and he was hating every minute of it, especially since Amy insisted on disguising themselves as criminals during the search¹¹⁰. *How does Guy put up with this?* he asked himself, feeling a newfound respect for his missing colleague. *Amy's such a loose cannon. I'd give anything to be back in my workshop.*

The funny thing was, they were actually making good progress. After a few false starts (including a close call with some local thugs, which led to an awkward conversation with the police), Amy had stumbled onto a potentially useful tidbit of information. Apparently, a local mercenary group had recently been paid to keep an unknown prisoner at their complex. Nobody was willing to tell them where the mercenary complex was located, but Amy had a pretty good feeling that the "mystery prisoner" was Guy.

Things had continued this way for almost 20 hours, and Grant had been getting close to despair... but then he struck up a conversation with a local grifter, who explained that a man named "Chekhov" was calling the shots in this part of town. If anyone could tell them where to find the mercenary complex, it would be Chekhov... and he could sometimes be found in a tavern called "The Subversive Crustacean". So Grant and Amy paid the bar a visit, but they quickly hit a snag: the bartender was completely ignoring their questions, and Amy was growing increasingly frustrated¹¹¹.

"Bartender!" Amy repeated. "Where's Chekhov!?" At this point, she was practically shouting, but the bartender still didn't give any indication that he'd heard her.

"Amy, let's just get out of here," urged Grant, feeling extremely uncomfortable. "If we keep hanging around places like this, we're going to end up face-down in a ditch somewhere."

"This bartender knows something," insisted Amy, "Every time I try to talk to him, he turns away! He couldn't possibly be this evasive by accident." By this time, the bartender was turning to face them again, so Amy yelled out, "Hey, bartender! We need to see Chekhov right now. Hey! Stop ignoring me, you great big jerk!"

¹¹⁰ An earlier chapter indicated the BLA's comm units were integrated into their vests... but maybe Grant was able to work a comms unit into their criminal disguises, too. Or else they barged into criminal territory with no way to call for help. Not that it matters, since they don't end up using their comms in this chapter. I'm not even sure why I brought it up.

¹¹¹ Incidentally, this is a time-honored way to start a scene: you jump right into the middle of it, and then backtrack a little to explain how the heroes got here. It's an effective writing technique, so I apologize for using it in a story that's supposed to showcase bad writing.

Grant cringed at Amy's outburst, but to his amazement, the bartender turned away again as if he hadn't heard anything. Impulsively, Amy dug her hand deep into a nearby bowl of pretzels and hurled a fistful of them at the bartender. Most of them found their mark, bouncing off him and clattering to the floor. The bartender froze where he stood, and then angrily bellowed "*Hey!*"

The noisy tavern abruptly fell silent. The bartender slowly turned around, glaring daggers in their direction. Grant threw up his hands in resignation. "Well, we're dead. Thanks, Amy."

The angry bartender stormed towards them, and pounded a meaty fist on the counter. "I was wearing *earbuds*, you impatient little twerp! Can't you just place your order on our app, like everyone else¹¹²!?"

Amy gulped. But since they were already in trouble, she decided to just go for it. "We aren't here for a drink," she told him, "We're here to see Chekhov."

There was a tense, expectant silence. Abruptly, the bartender burst out laughing. "Chekhov? *You!*?" roared the bartender mockingly. The rest of the tavern's patrons chuckled amongst themselves. Having concluded that the bartender was unlikely to clobber anyone, they lost interest in the altercation and returned to their drinks.

Amy stood up defiantly. "Yes, us!" she declared, shouting over the bartender's derisive laughter, "Is there something wrong with that?"

At this point, the bartender was actually doubled over, leaning against the counter as he tried to regain his composure. "Chekhov is a hardened criminal!" he laughed, "If *you* walk into his office, he'll send you back in a shoebox!"

"Well, we're pretty hardened ourselves!" Amy insisted.

But this was too much for the bartender. With a howl of mirth, he completely collapsed over the counter, convulsing with laughter. "There's no way... you're hardened criminals!" he said between gasps, "You look like... a couple of kids at a... 60's costume party!" He continued laughing uncontrollably, as Amy looked on with increasing annoyance.

Grant was mortified. "I told you these disguises weren't any good," he muttered to Amy in disgust, "I'm starting to wish the bartender had just killed us."

Amy ignored the bartender's laughter and Grant's embarrassment. She decided to try another tack. "You mentioned Chekhov's office," pursued Amy, "Does that mean we can find him here?"

Recovering a little, the bartender nodded and grinned, wiping tears from his eyes as his laughter gradually began to subside.

"Fine," replied Amy, "Just point the way, and we'll take care of the rest."

A strangled snort escaped the bartender, but he managed to restrain himself from another laughing fit. He pointed a slightly quavering hand at a steel door, nestled at the very back of the premises. "Be my guest," invited the bartender with a chuckle, "It's your funeral. And thanks for the laugh, guys... I really needed that."

¹¹² What a high-tech disreputable tavern!

Amy didn't deign to offer a reply. Instead, she gestured for Grant to follow her. With extreme reluctance, Grant got off the barstool and joined Amy at the ominous door. Amy knocked politely, and a deep brash voice from inside demanded, "Get in here!" Obliging, Amy opened the door and ushered Grant inside.

If I manage to get out of this alive, Grant thought to himself, I'm never leaving my workshop again.

* * * * *

The moment they entered the room, Grant froze in place, and even Amy stumbled to a hasty stop. They were in a small, sparsely furnished room. The room's main feature was a rough wooden desk, colored the same shade of brown as a decrepit wooden wagon that had been sun-bleached with age, and then repainted with a fresh coat of umber from the local hardware store, only to be left outside in the elements for over a decade until no trace of the umber paint remained¹¹³.

In front of the desk stood one of the most gigantic people either of them had ever seen.



Chekhov was an absolute grizzly bear of a man: nearly 7 feet tall, with massive arms, a massive neck, and a huge thuggish body. His curly hair poured behind his head like a wave, and hung in front of him as a colossal beard. As he eyed them appraisingly, his bushy unibrow furrowed. "You look like a couple of kids at a 60's costume party," he remarked, in a gruff baritone voice.

"So we've heard," remarked Grant dryly. *Did I just say that?* He thought to himself. *Stay quiet, Grant, and just maybe you'll get out of this alive!*

Chekhov stared at them for another few seconds, and then wordlessly pushed a button on his desk. The steel door behind Grant and Amy slammed shut automatically, locking itself in the process. "For security," explained Chekhov simply. He walked behind his desk and sat down, then he opened a drawer and began rummaging around for something.

¹¹³ I'm pretty sure this analogy could've been expressed more efficiently.

"You should know that I don't like company," remarked Chekhov causally¹¹⁴, as he drew his hand out of the drawer and came up with a gun. Grant gulped involuntarily. "That's why I always keep this on hand," Chekhov continued, "It has a way of discouraging repeat visitors. You know what I mean?"

Amy nodded, unsure of what else to do.

"I like to keep my gun in good condition," said Chekhov calmly, as if he were discussing the weather. He opened up his gun, and began to clean it as he continued talking. "You never know when a pair of annoying intruders will show up in your private office, in your favorite tavern, at a time when you're just not feeling polite. It's times like that when I'm especially glad to have this baby on hand."

Chekhov put the gun back together, produced a box of bullets from the desk drawer, and began loading them into the gun. By this time, Amy and Grant were both nervously shuffling their feet. What could they do? With the steel door locked behind them, they were completely trapped in this room!

Chekhov continued his monologue, seemingly unaware of their discomfort as he brandished the loaded gun and pointed it experimentally around the room. "And I'm especially glad to have this gun when I'm disturbed by punk kids, who think they can walk in on London's most dangerous criminal and ask him for some stupid favor." Then he nonchalantly unloaded his gun, dropped it back into the drawer, and closed it.

"But enough about me," he said pleasantly, "What can I do for you¹¹⁵?"

Surprisingly, it was Grant who found his voice first. "We're looking for a local mercenary group," he explained cautiously. "They were recently hired to keep a prisoner at their complex."

"I see," replied Chekhov neutrally, as he studied them closely, "And what's your connection with these mercenaries?"

"No connection," replied Amy, "We're interested in their prisoner. He's a friend of ours, and we want him back."

Chekhov made a gruff sound in the back of his throat. "Friends..." he said vaguely. He pondered this information for a few moments, and then leaned forward on his desk. "As it happens, I do know where to find those guys. And I'm even willing to tell you... in exchange for a favor."

An expectant silence hung upon the room. Amy gulped. "That depends. What's the favor?"

Chekhov leaned back in his massive chair. "Those mercenaries have interfered with my business. If I give you their location, I want you to bring them down for me."

¹¹⁴ "Causally" describes how one thing causes another... so this was probably supposed to say "casually". *That* little doozy is easily missed by spellcheckers and proofreaders alike!

¹¹⁵ There's a narrative principle called "Chekhov's Gun", which basically states that every element in a story must be necessary, and irrelevant elements should be removed. The original example behind this principle is that if a story features a gun, then the gun must have some purpose in the plot, such as being fired. It's a decent writing principle (although it can be taken too far)... but in this scene, we have a man named Chekhov who calls a lot of attention to his gun, and then he puts it away without using it. So, yeah... I'm laying it on pretty thick here.

Grant stiffened. "Forget it!" he declared, "I don't care if those mercenaries are a bunch of lowlifes... we're still not going to kill them for you. That's disgusting!"

Chekhov looked taken aback, and he held up his hands placatingly. "Whoa there... easy, kid! I never said you had to kill them. You could just, like, call the police on them." He grinned sheepishly. "I'd do it myself, but the police and I aren't exactly on speaking terms¹¹⁶."

Amy nodded confidently. "It's a deal," she declared, "We get our friend back, you get your revenge, and some dangerous mercenaries are taken off the street. Everybody wins! Except for the mercenaries."

Chekhov laughed. "You've got spunk, kid... I'll give you that! Okay, then. Here's where you'll find them..."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the Crimex base, Drake was doing some research on the BLA. He pulled up the government's official page which described the organization, chuckling with delight as he read the agency's full anagram: Bush League Agency¹¹⁷. "So, you're underdogs," Drake remarked under his breath, "Good. That should make our job easier." He began reading the employee directory, but the name at the top immediately caught his attention: Arthur Chalmers.

Drake leaned back in surprise. It couldn't be... could it? "'Chalmers', is it?" he remarked to himself, "Interesting... very interesting indeed¹¹⁸..."

¹¹⁶ "But wait," you might say, "Couldn't Chekhov just give the police an anonymous tip, without needing any help from Grant and Amy?" And you'd be correct. Let it go.

¹¹⁷ "BLA" is an acronym, not an anagram.

¹¹⁸ Wait a minute... why was this chapter called "Escape"? Nobody escapes! That's extremely confusing, especially since our main character (Guy) currently *needs* to escape from an enemy prison!

Chapter 13: Freedom

Guy had spent the last hour trying to find a way to escape from his prison cell. So far, he didn't have anything to show for it. Every bar on the cell door was securely welded in place. There was no lock to pick: the door's locking mechanism was securely controlled by some external device. The ceiling's ventilation duct was far too small to crawl through, even if he had a way to remove the access panel. And the walls and floor were just featureless concrete.

It was time to try a different approach¹¹⁹. Guy knew that the mercenary guarding his cell was nearby... and he also knew what motivated mercenaries the most.

"Hey," Guy called out, "Hey, guard! Come over here a minute!"

Guy heard a reluctant grunt, and a few moments later the guard walked indolently into his field of view. "What is it?" asked the guard impatiently.

"Whatever they're paying you, my organization can double it!", whispered Guy slyly, "All you have to do is look the other way while I escape!"

"Forget it," replied the guard flatly, "There's no way I'm crossing Malena! That lady scares the daylights out of me."

"Okay, that's fair," conceded Guy, desperately trying to think of another tactic before the guard lost interest and left. *Maybe I could fake some kind of sickness...*

"And if you're thinking of faking sick, don't bother," added the guard, "We get that one a lot."

"Well, guess what?" retorted Guy, indignant at being preempted so easily, "I *am* sick! I need my medication... and if I die on your watch, Malena's going to blame you!"

The guard smiled lopsidedly. "Yeah... Malena said you might say that. She also said that if you insist on pressing the issue, I get to hose down your cell with pepper spray." He cocked an eyebrow. "Do you feel like pressing the issue?"

"Never mind," muttered Guy in disgust.

The guard nodded in mock approval. "Good call."

The guard was just turning to leave, when Guy had a sudden inspiration: he still had his cloaking device¹²⁰! "Fine, then!" he called after the guard, "I didn't need your help, anyway... I have a hand-held teleportation device!"

The guard stopped mid-step, and looked back suspiciously. He was clearly skeptical, but he was also slightly nervous that Guy might be telling the truth. Guy held up his cloaking device, and grinned at the guard. "Say 'hi' to Malena for me!" he called, then he pushed the button and disappeared.

¹¹⁹ According to the picture in the "Captivity" chapter, Guy still has his vest. And as we've already established, the BLA integrates its comm units right into the vest. Why can't Guy call his team for help?

¹²⁰ Um... no he doesn't! Malena confiscated all of Guy's stuff after she ambushed him. In fact, Malena's going to use Guy's cloaking device in a later chapter! The fact that Guy still has it here is a *major* plot hole.

The guard jumped a foot in the air, cursed under his breath, and ran over to Guy's cell. Then he pulled a device from his pocket and pressed one of its buttons. Guy was careful to step aside as the guard blindly rushed past him into the cell, alert for any signs of trickery. Guy briefly considered knocking out the guard, but then decided against it: his escape would be easier if everyone really believed he'd teleported out of the complex. *Besides*, he realized belatedly, *I don't actually know how to reliably knock someone unconscious without my trusty stun gun*. As the guard continued to search his cell, Guy quietly slipped out.

Guy walked down the prison corridor, trying his best to strike a balance between speed and stealth. In less than 3 minutes, his cloak would run out: by then, he needed to be someplace where he could safely wait another 3 minutes for it recharge¹²¹.

The seconds ticked by as Guy decisively turned one corner after another. He wasn't sure where he was going: he just needed to find his next safe stop. He passed 2 intersections, and the corridor opened out into a courtyard. Opposite to where he stood was another door, leading back into the complex. On the right side of the courtyard was a group of parked vehicles. On the left was a wall with two doors. One of the doors was huge, and made of reinforced steel: it was probably for the vehicles. But the other door was human-sized, and it bore a small sign labeled "Exit".

Guy eagerly dashed toward the exit door and pulled the handle. It was locked! Just then, the cloaking device began to vibrate silently in his hand, warning him that the 3 minutes were nearly up. Gritting his teeth, Guy dashed across the courtyard to the parked vehicles and threw himself underneath the nearest one, nestling himself behind one of its tires to minimize his exposure. Moments later, the cloak expired, and Guy became visible again.

Under the temporary cover of the vehicle, Guy waited for his cloak to recharge as he planned his next move. He briefly considered stealing one of the vehicles, but he thought better of it. The vehicles probably had built-in alarm systems, which meant that attempting to steal one could bring the whole complex down on him. Besides, he didn't need a vehicle: he already knew where the exit was. He just needed keys. Guy glanced in the direction of the door which led back into the complex: perhaps the barracks were in that direction. One of the mercenaries might have a set of keys. That was probably his best bet.

The 3-minute recharge completed, and Guy's cloak was ready for another sprint. He eyed the door which led back into the complex, engaged his cloak, and bolted toward it. He came across a T-intersection and turned to the right. He ran to the end of the hall, passed through an open doorway, and found himself in a darkened lounge room. At one end of the room, a few mercenaries were relaxing on a couch, watching TV. Guy stared: there was a ring of keys sitting on the coffee table! Unfortunately, the coffee table was right in front of the couch: if Guy moved the keys, the mercenaries would notice.

¹²¹ Of course, as Amy already established many chapters ago, the cloaking device can last longer if you spill citrus on it... but that detail has apparently been completely forgotten.

Guy scanned the room, looking for inspiration. The TV remote was sitting on an end-table next to the couch, and nobody was watching it. And at the other end of the room was a fireplace, where two mercenaries were toasting marshmallows¹²². A huge bag of marshmallows sat nearby.

Even as Guy registered these facts, his cloaking device began vibrating again. Guy looked around frantically, searching for a place to hide, but the room didn't seem to offer any foolproof hiding places. No matter where he hid, he'd be discovered if one of the mercenaries looked the wrong way. Unless... Guy realized that the TV was perched on top of a solid wooden cabinet, and there was just enough clearance between the cabinet and the wall for him to fit. Feeling somewhat audacious, Guy dashed for the wall and tucked himself behind the TV cabinet. Guy knew he was safely hidden behind the cabinet, but it was still unnerving to know that the TV-watching mercenaries were looking in his direction.

The cloak expired again, and Guy began formulating a plan in his mind. However, his concentration was broken when one of the mercenaries on the couch spoke up.

"You think that dude really teleported?" the first mercenary asked his comrades.

"Well, how else do you explain it?" replied the second mercenary. "Sarge said he vanished right out of his cell!"

The third mercenary chuckled. "I'd sure hate to be Sarge when Malena gets back tonight. There'll be nothing left of him but his army boots!"

"Not our problem," shrugged the first mercenary, "If Sarge is gone, one of us can be promoted. Maybe it'll be me!"

"Oh, whatever!" scoffed the third mercenary, "The only thing *you* know how to shoot is your mouth!"

"Hey, shut up guys!" interjected the second mercenary, "The commercial break's over!"

Pleasant background music played out of the speakers, and an elderly voice announced, "Our next contestant is little Erika Grange. What have you planted for us today, Erika?"

A young girl's voice earnestly explained, "Well Stanley, I mainly focused on Black-eyed Susans, Blue Lobelia, and Milkweed."

They're watching a gardening show, Guy realized.

"That's no good," remarked the second mercenary, "She'll be struggling with pests all summer."

"Quiet!" shushed the third mercenary, "I'm sure she has that figured out."

"My, that's an unusual selection," remarked the announcer pleasantly, "How are you planning to keep the pests under control? Those plants are all known to attract a lot of bugs¹²³."

"I know," said the young girl dreamily, "That's what I want. I love bugs."

¹²² Are the mercenaries actually heating this room of their military complex with a common fireplace? Or did they install the fireplace purely so they could toast marshmallows on it? Either way, it's kind of weird.

¹²³ Source: 30 seconds of Googling.

"I, uh... I see," stammered the announcer, clearly taken aback.

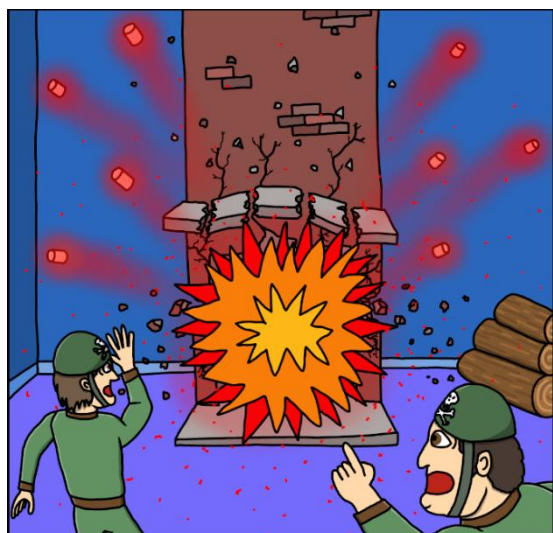
"She's making a mockery of the entire contest!" howled the first mercenary.

"Well, I say 'kudos' to her, for having such an original idea!" declared the third mercenary loftily.

"But this is a *gardening* contest, not a bug contest!" protested the second mercenary indignantly.

Guy tuned them out. His cloak was recharged, and the longer he stayed here, the more likely he'd be caught. Time to make his move. Guy recloaked, crept up to the unattended remote control, and mashed several buttons at random. In response, the TV changed channels several times and muted the sound. The mercenaries at the TV shouted indignantly, which drew the attention of the mercenaries toasting marshmallows. While the mercenaries were distracted, Guy ran up and grabbed the giant bag of marshmallows, throwing the entire thing into the fireplace! Then he dashed back toward the TV, and silently waited for the marshmallows to combust. He didn't have to wait very long.

With a deafening BANG, the marshmallow bag exploded with the force of a grenade, shaking the entire room and severely damaging the fireplace. The mercenaries at the fireplace yelled in panicked surprise, and the mercenaries at the TV rushed to their aid, gardening show temporarily forgotten¹²⁴.



Now that nobody was watching, Guy grabbed the keys off the coffee table and dashed out of the lounge. He retraced his steps down the hallway until he found himself back in the courtyard. He walked up to the exit door, pushed the first key into the lock, and pulled the handle. Nothing. He tried a second key, and pulled the handle again. Still nothing. *Three keys to go*, Guy nervously thought to himself. The third and fourth keys were equally unsuccessful. Steeling himself, Guy tried the final key and pulled the handle.

Nothing.

Now what!? he thought to himself, as he fought the urge to panic, *Any minute now, those goons in the lounge will notice the keys are missing, and then the trouble will really start!* Guy gathered his wits and took a step back from the door, to see if there was anything he'd missed. That's when he noticed a

¹²⁴ What in the world is going on here!? Marshmallows can't explode like that! And don't bother trying this at home... you'll just waste food.

modern keycard slot installed next to the door. “That’s just great,” he muttered to himself. “I don’t suppose the mercenaries were dumb enough to leave a keycard sitting around, too¹²⁵?” With no other options left, Guy ran back to the doorway which led into the barracks. Maybe, just maybe, he could pick somebody’s pocket and find a keycard before the entire complex realized that something was amiss.

At that moment, however, everything fell apart. As Guy dashed into the barracks doorway, he ran headlong into a mercenary that was coming from the other direction, knocking the man to the floor. Before Guy could react, the bewildered mercenary called in an alert. An alarm started blaring across the entire complex, and Guy heard the unmistakable sounds of shouting and hurried footsteps from inside the barracks. Desperately, Guy dashed across the courtyard for the doorway into the prison area. But it was too late: mercenaries were already pouring into the courtyard from that direction. Guy was well and truly trapped, and even as this bleak realization hit him, his cloaking device started to vibrate again.

Guy realized he was out of options. He couldn’t run, he couldn’t hide, and there was absolutely no chance of fighting his way through this many mercenaries. He resignedly put his hands on his head to surrender, and moments later his cloak expired. There was a shout, and within seconds Guy was completely surrounded by angry enemies. All hope began to fade, like an egg yolk running down the sidewalk¹²⁶. *It’s going to be hard to get out this one*, Guy reflected grimly.

Without warning, one of the courtyard’s parked vehicles exploded. Even as everyone’s eyes snapped toward the expanding fireball, another vehicle exploded... and then another! Guy smiled, as the truth dawned on him: *Amy’s here*. Seconds later, a flashbang exploded amidst the gathered mercenaries, and a SWAT team rappelled down the courtyard’s walls. The mercenaries were caught completely off guard: even the most hardened of them quickly realized that they were surrounded and outgunned. At the SWAT team’s command, the mercenaries reluctantly began dropping their weapons to the ground, and they were taken into custody¹²⁷.

From behind the SWAT team, Guy suddenly heard a familiar voice: “Hey, out of the way! Official BLA business! C’mon, man, let me in... hey, cool shades!” Two SWAT officers parted to reveal Amy, anxiously searching the courtyard. But then she caught sight of Guy, and broke into the widest grin he’d ever seen.

“Hey, Guy! Miss me?”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Malena was riding her motorcycle toward the mercenary complex. Nobody was answering her calls. Something was wrong.

She crested the last hill before the complex, and stopped short. In the distance, she could see that the complex was surrounded by police cars, and the mercenaries were being led away in handcuffs. In the

¹²⁵ Actually, that would be a pretty reasonable expectation if this was a video game.

¹²⁶ If you tried hard enough, you could probably find a plausible explanation for this strange analogy. But don’t worry about it.

¹²⁷ What’s the deal with these mercenaries, anyway? Were they hiding from the law this entire time, and the police couldn’t find their enormous military complex without Amy’s tip? Or were they actually doing semi-legitimate work until now, and the police are mainly arresting them because they cut a deal with Crimex to keep one of their prisoners? I guess we’ll never know for sure, but it’s probably a moot point now: I doubt that we’ll see them again.

darkness, she scowled fiercely. “For the amount they charged us to rent one little prison cell, I expected better.”

After a few moments, the scowl faded, and Malena’s calculating mind began planning her next steps. She turned her motorcycle around and shrugged philosophically. “On the bright side, now we don’t need to pay them¹²⁸.”

¹²⁸ Apparently, the mercenaries didn’t insist on an upfront deposit. Perhaps they were too scared of Malena to ask for one.

Chapter 14: Contingency Plan

“...I’ll admit, the mercenaries didn’t buy us as much time as I would have liked,” conceded Malena, as Drake and the other Crimex agents listened attentively. “Even so, they served their purpose. We’ve been able to run some missions without interference, and now we know for sure that the BLA isn’t going to back down.”

“Big surprise,” grunted Drake, “These ‘goody-two-shoes’ types never know when to quit. I just wish we hadn’t involved those useless mercenaries at all: then Guy would still be our prisoner.”

Malena eyed him coolly. “If we’d imprisoned Guy ourselves, then the BLA might’ve traced him back to *our* base, instead of the mercenary’s complex.”

Drake pondered this for a moment, and then turned to address the other agents. “Subject change! Now that we’ve lost our prisoner, we need a contingency plan to keep things on track. So give me options! Alexia, what have you been working on?”

Alexia smiled smugly. “I’ve been studying the stun gun fragments that Bruno expertly ‘recovered’ from the ambush.” She shot Bruno a sarcastic look, wordlessly inviting him to protest, but Bruno just shrugged blandly. Alexia continued, “I’ll admit it’s a well-designed little toy, but the actual stun mechanism is very basic. I’ve developed a formula that can render our agents immune to its effects, at least for a few hours¹²⁹.”

“So, now we’re stun proof?” grinned Hank, “I’m impressed!”

“Of course you are.” sniffed Alexia disdainfully.

Hank decided to ignore this, and chimed in: “Well, I have an update too. I’ve pulled together a new batch of vehicles that are even stronger than before: helicopters, boats... you name it, we’ve got it.”

“That’s good,” replied Drake with a smirk, eyeing Alexia’s crutches, “If we have to drag Alexia into field work again, she won’t slow us down.” Alexia scowled, but didn’t reply.

Drake turned to Bruno. “How about you, Bruno?”

Bruno grinned triumphantly. “I can now bench press 300 pounds¹³⁰!”

Drake nodded approvingly. “Nice. And Malena, what about you?”

Malena smiled mirthlessly. “I’m Malena Midnight.”

“Fair enough,” Drake replied, “These are all great assets for our next heist... and we have one more advantage that will turn the tide: *this*.” He tapped his own temple significantly. Somewhere in the room, there was a stifled snicker.

¹²⁹ “But wait,” you might be saying, “Shouldn’t Alexia also study the cloaking device that Malena stole from Guy, so that Crimex can develop countermeasures?” But in this case, the plot has us covered: Malena kept the cloaking device to herself, so Alexia probably doesn’t even know she has it.

¹³⁰ This is possible, although it’s rare.

Drake scowled. “Okay, you still need convincing. Well, what if I told you I have the ultimate wildcard? We have a mole working for us at the BLA!”

“What!?” replied Bruno skeptically, “Since when?”

“Since the beginning,” boasted Drake, “And they’ve been feeding me information ever since¹³¹!”

“So, what are we waiting for!?” blurted Alexia, “Let’s have the mole take out their agents right now, when they least expect it!”

Drake cocked his head thoughtfully. “Actually, yeah... that’s a pretty good idea! It would cripple the BLA!”

“If that’s our plan,” objected Malena, “Then shouldn’t I do the job? I have far more experience with infiltration and assassinations.”

But Drake waved this away. “Nah, there’s no need for infiltration: my mole is already in place. Besides, any moron can fire a gun.”

“I use swords,” replied Malena icily, and the room’s temperature seemed to plummet.

“Um, exactly... swords!” Drake stammered nervously, “I didn’t mean *you* were a moron, Malena! I was only talking about people who use guns, and you use swords! So you’re obviously not a moron... please don’t kill me.”

Silence descended upon the room for several seconds. Malena didn’t respond to Drake’s babbling, but she also didn’t move to attack him. She just continued to glare in his direction.

“This is awkward,” announced Hank.

“Anyway,” Drake quickly resumed, “I’m placing the landmark heists on hold until the BLA’s agents are dealt with. If you’ll excuse me, I need to give the order to my mole immediately.”

Drake left for his office¹³², and there was a general migration toward the room’s exit. Alexia lagged behind the others: she was still clumsy on her crutches.

Hank noticed her struggling, hesitated for a moment, and then walked up to her. Alexia bristled at his approach, but he surprised her with a question. “Alexia, why do you keep using those crutches? Wouldn’t a wheelchair be more comfortable?”

Alexia frowned. “Yeah, but not as convenient. I can’t reach most of my lab equipment from a chair.”

“I thought that might be the case,” agreed Hank, “What if I built you a specialized wheelchair that can raise and lower its seat, so that you can reach anything you need?”

¹³¹ This *can’t* be true: Crimex didn’t even know the BLA existed until they started foiling their heists, so how and when did Drake manage to plant a mole in their organization? And if this alleged mole has been feeding Drake information ever since, then why hasn’t Crimex been better prepared for the BLA’s interference? This whole “mole idea” seems tacked on, without bothering to consider how it affects earlier chapters. Or anyway, that’s the impression I’m hoping to create. :)

¹³² Actually, I’d kind of assumed this scene was in Drake’s office. Apparently not.

Alexia stared in surprise, then did a face-palm and sighed in exasperation. “Look Hank, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer, but the last thing I need in my life is some wrench jockey...” Her voice trailed off, as she assumed a thoughtful expression. Hank had no idea what was going through her mind, but he decided to patiently wait for whatever came next.



Alexia eyed him speculatively. “What else could the wheelchair do? Could it include a robot arm?”

“Absolutely,” confirmed Hank enthusiastically, “I can even make it voice-operated, if you want.”

A glimmer of excitement appeared in Alexia’s eyes. “What if we made the chair hover, instead of just moving up and down?”

Hank blinked. “Well sure,” he replied, “It would take more time to design and build, and we’d need the right materials. But we could do it.”

Grinning, Alexia continued: “And what about some kind of energy shield? Could the wheelchair have that, too?”

Hank’s face fell a little. “Well... I don’t actually know how to design an energy shield,” he admitted.

“But I do!” declared Alexia triumphantly, “And if we can make this work, then it’s just the beginning. Oh, this could be *epic*!”

Without any further preamble, she began heading toward the lab on her crutches. Hank hesitated, unsure of whether he should follow her, but Alexia impatiently called after him: “Well, c’mon! We’ve got work to do! Isn’t this what you wanted?”

Hank eagerly ran to catch up with her. “You know, we could plan the wheelchair faster if we ate our lunches together.”

Alexia gave him a half-smirk. “Don’t push your luck, wrench jockey¹³³.”

¹³³ I hope Hank knows what he’s getting himself into. I mean... he *is* a bad guy. But still.

Chapter 15: Welcome Home

“...and that’s when one of the vehicles exploded!” Guy explained, as he recounted his misadventures to the team at the BLA.

“Let me guess,” Thelma remarked, “Amy?”

“You got it!” replied Guy with a grin. “And if I had any doubts, they were dispelled when a second and third vehicle blew up, too!”

“I do have a certain recognizable style,” Amy admitted modestly, “Kind of like Van Gogh, but set in modern day. With explosives. And instead of a missing ear, I have a scar on one knee.”

“Van Gogh’s missing ear was self-inflicted,” Grant pointed out.

“Well, at least he didn’t lose his ear because of an unsafe jetpack!” retorted Amy.

Guy sensed an impending argument, and quickly jumped back into his narrative. “Anyway, the SWAT team swooped in right after that. Bottom line: if Amy hadn’t rescued me at that exact moment, I’d be toast!”

“Aw... thanks, Guy!” declared Amy. She gave him an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

Grant gave Amy an odd look. “Uh... isn’t that kind of forward, Amy?”

Guy cocked his head. “No, it’s fine! She’s my girlfriend, after all.”

“And he’s my boyfriend!” Amy cheerfully chimed in, “That’s how it works. We come in pairs.”

Grant scratched his head in confusion. “Wait, what? How long has this been going on?”

Guy thought for a moment. “Since Paris, I think. Wait, no... we made it official after the New York mission. We went out for burgers after saving the Empire State Building, and... well, we decided that we really liked each other.”

Amy beamed at him. “Our two and a half weekiversary is just around the corner!”

Guy looked around the room, and shrugged helplessly. “Gee, everyone... I’m not sure why, but somehow I assumed you already knew we were dating.”

Arthur shook his head in mock exasperation. “How could we possibly know that, when you didn’t tell anyone?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” conceded Guy, “Well, anyway... now you know¹³⁴!”

“Hey, I’m just glad you’re back in one piece,” remarked Grant, “It means I don’t have to change the alphabetical order of our lockers.”

¹³⁴ We’ve seen Guy and Amy drawing closer for most of the story... so it’s kind of annoying that we missed the moment when our two main heroes officially started dating (apparently, the dinner in Paris didn’t count). But it gets even worse: this sudden reveal also means that ever since New York, we’ve been missing an important subtext for any scenes between them!

"You're all heart," quipped Thelma.

"By the way," said Guy, "While I was gone, did anyone solve that weird mystery? You know... the one where peanuts kept appearing in the middle of the floor?"

"No, we haven't," sighed Arthur, "And it's driving me nuts." An odd look appeared on his face, and he hastily added, "No pun intended."

Guy chuckled. "Well, we'll crack it someday... pun intended. Anyway, what's our next move against Crimex?"

Arthur scowled. "I wish I knew. While we were busy searching for you, Crimex managed to steal several landmarks... including the Golden Gate Bridge, Sydney Opera House, and a famous landmark in South America¹³⁵. Ever since we pounced on that mercenary complex, though, they've gone completely silent."

"That's kind of suspicious," Guy replied with a frown. "I wonder if they're planning another ambush against us. We could at least try to improve our defenses."

"What can we do, though?" objected Amy, "The last time they attacked us, Malena just snuck up from behind and whacked us on the head¹³⁶! How do we counter something like that... wear helmets everywhere we go?"

"Grant," said Thelma thoughtfully, "Why don't you invent some kind of gizmo that can detect if people are sneaking up from behind?"

"That's a great idea!" declared Grant, and he dashed away toward his workshop¹³⁷.

"The meeting isn't over yet!" Arthur called after him, but Grant was already out of earshot. "Well, too late now. I guess I'll see if I can track down any new leads on Crimex. Oh, and one more thing: don't forget to file your timesheets, Guy. They're overdue."

"I was in a prison cell!" protested Guy.

"Bureaucracy," declared Thelma philosophically, "What can you do?" She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I guess you should book your time under 'general absence'. The only other category which fits is 'vacation', and that seems kind of macabre."

"Okay, I'll finish them before I leave today," replied Guy resignedly. Then he perked up a little. "But first... Amy, want to get some ice cream in the cafeteria?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" declared Amy excitedly, "Well actually, I thought you might ask, because you often get a snack in the middle of the afternoon, and we both like ice cream. But still, it's great to hear you say it!"

Guy chuckled, as he looked fondly at Amy. "It's good to be back."

¹³⁵ Why is Arthur vague about the landmark in South America, when he was specific about the other ones? This comes off as "placeholder text".

¹³⁶ This is incorrect. Malena used tranquilizer darts on them.

¹³⁷ This idea will never be mentioned again. Maybe Grant couldn't make it work.

* * * * *

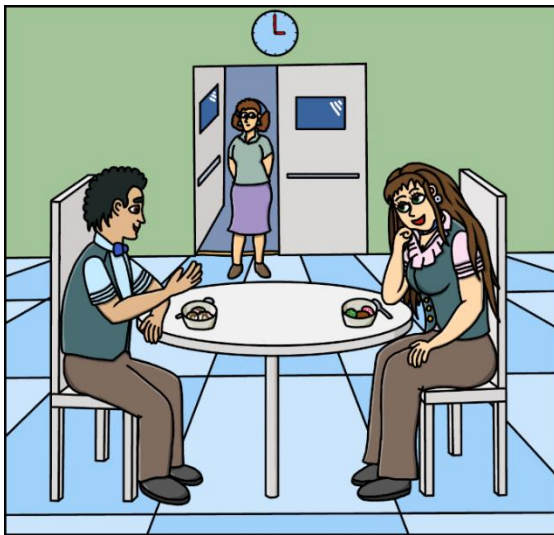
The BLA's cafeteria was small, but cozy... and it was stocked with a surprising variety of ice cream flavors and toppings. Guy and Amy each took a few scoops of their favorite ice cream flavors, added a spoonful of their favorite toppings, and sat down together at one of the tables.

"I was wondering," said Guy, "Does your morning commute take you anywhere near Central Park?"

"Yeah, it does!" replied Amy brightly. "In fact, my bus gets off on the north side¹³⁸."

"Hey, that's close to my route!" declared Guy. "If you like, we could meet there each morning, and walk together on the way to work."

"That sounds great!" agreed Amy.



Guy smiled, and then turned his head at the sound of the cafeteria door opening. As Thelma walked into the cafeteria, Guy happened to notice that the clock above the door was nearing 3 o'clock.

"Hey, Thelma," said Guy apologetically. "I know I haven't filled out my timesheets yet, but I'll do it before I leave today."

Abruptly, Thelma pulled a gun on him! Guy's eyes bugged out, as his brain struggled to catch up with this unexpected turn of events.

"Whoa, never mind!" he hurriedly added, "I can fill them out right now!"

Thelma shook her head tersely. "I'm sorry, Guy. Crimex planted me as a mole in the BLA, and now they've ordered me to terminate its agents¹³⁹."

¹³⁸ I don't know if this is accurate. Earlier on, I was too lazy to figure out if there were any parking garages near the Empire State Building. I'm *definitely* not going to research bus routes near Central Park.

¹³⁹ It doesn't make any sense whatsoever that Thelma would be a mole. Just for starters, she's often undermined Crimex interests with the advice she's given the BLA... including her idea to stake out a parking garage during the Empire State Building heist!

“Thelma, how could you!?” demanded Amy, sounding more hurt than afraid. “Why would you work for the bad guys?”

“They have a better dental plan,” Thelma explained nervously, “And moles pay better than secretaries¹⁴⁰.”

Thinking fast, Guy blurted out, “Well, can’t you have Arthur promote you to an administrative assistant? I’ll bet that pays even better than a mole... and maybe you could negotiate a better dental plan, too¹⁴¹!”

Thelma considered this for a moment. “Yeah, you’re right. And better yet, I’m still on my 3-month probationary period at Crimex. That means I can quit without any penalty¹⁴²!”

There was an anxious pause, and then Thelma put the gun away. “You won’t mention this to anyone, will you?”

Guy shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned, you just came in here to remind us about timesheets.”

Thelma nodded gratefully, and left the cafeteria¹⁴³.

“Wow,” said Amy, looking more subdued than normal, “That was some fast thinking, Guy! How in the world did you know that would work?”

“I didn’t,” replied Guy, feeling slightly shaky, “But no matter what happened, I was pretty sure she wouldn’t shoot us.”

Amy cocked her head. “Because deep down, she’s a good person who just made a bad decision?”

“Probably,” agreed Guy, as he gestured toward the wall clock, “But also because Thelma never works past 3 o’clock.”

¹⁴⁰ This motivation is asinine, and completely out of character. It’s as if the role of Thelma is being played by a different person for the purposes of this one ill-advised plot development.

¹⁴¹ I’m pretty sure that Thelma could’ve realized this on her own, *before* turning to a life of crime.

¹⁴² No penalty for abandoning a criminal organization? Seriously? In the “real world”, Crimex would probably retaliate by going after Thelma’s kids, or some other horrible thing... but that would be extremely grim and miserable, so we’re basically going to ignore the fact that Crimex would want revenge.

¹⁴³ Sure, why not? Every aspect of this “mole subplot” was ridiculous, so we might as well sweep the whole thing under the rug now.

Chapter 16: Shifting Gears

Hank and Alexia had been working on her new wheelchair for a couple of hours. Combined with the work they'd already done yesterday, the chair itself was starting to look complete. However, its base wasn't attached to anything yet.

"Now, if you don't mind using boring old wheels, we can have a 'Mark I' wheelchair ready for you to use today," Hank pointed out. "Are you sure you're willing to wait for a hovering wheelchair?"

Alexia considered this for a moment. "How much longer would it take to make it hover?"

"A few days at least," admitted Hank, "It needs to be extremely stable and maneuverable if you're going to use it inside the base. And I might need your help with some of the design work."

"Okay," replied Alexia, "Let's just go with the wheels for today, and then we can work on the hover designs afterward. And what about the energy shield? How's that going?"

Hank grimaced. "I've gone over your specs, Alexia, and I don't think we should do it. It wouldn't be safe on a small, compact vehicle like this."

The resulting scowl wrinkled Alexia's face like a sour washcloth which had been used to mop up a blueberry yogurt spill, and then carelessly discarded near a battered washing machine¹⁴⁴. But after a few seconds of careful thought, Alexia relaxed and shrugged casually. "I suppose we can shelve that idea until our next project."

"Our next project?" asked Hank quizzically, "What else are you planning to build?"

Alexia favored him with a slight smile. "I was planning to tell you after my wheelchair was done... but I suppose now's as good a time as any." She used her crutches to carefully ease herself onto a couch against one of the walls, so that her hands would be free to gesture. "Hank... when you proposed such a practical yet advanced idea for a new wheelchair yesterday, I realized something. It's just possible that I underestimated you! I think that between your engineering skills and my scientific genius, we could produce an advanced series of next-generation machines together. I'm talking armored ships, flying exoskeletons, and who knows what else?"

"That's a great idea!" declared Hank enthusiastically.

Alexia's smile broadened, just a little. "I thought you might like it. But don't get ahead of yourself: before we get too deep into this, I need to make sure that you're smart enough to deliver. In other words, I want to be super-impressed by this wheelchair we're building. Understood?"

"Absolutely!" Hank exclaimed, "In that case, I'll make sure this is the best chair you've ever sat in!"

Alexia's smile changed to her more characteristic smirk. "Well... I'll be the judge of that." She glanced speculatively at the arms of the unfinished wheelchair. "By the way, Hank... you know what this chair still needs?"

Hank studied the chair carefully, trying to anticipate Alexia's train of thought. He remembered the last time he'd asked her if she needed anything... "A soda can dispenser?"

¹⁴⁴ What a weird analogy! What does the battered washing machine have to do with anything?

Alexia's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I'm impressed... I was just going to ask for a cup holder. But yeah, a soda can dispenser sounds even better. Let's make it happen!"

Just then, Drake's voice burst in over the base's speakers. "Everyone... report to my office immediately!"

Alexia sighed. "Nothing but delays. And you just know that Drake wouldn't appreciate what we're trying to accomplish down here."

"And yet he'll still expect us to save the day when the chips are down," agreed Hank, but Alexia wasn't paying attention. She was busy trying to get off the couch and back onto her crutches. Despite weeks of practice, it was still a clumsy maneuver for her.

"Need a hand?" asked Hank mildly.

"I'm good." Alexia insisted. And a few seconds later, she was back on her feet... although she nearly wiped out in the process. "Alright. Let's see what our fearless leader has to say."

* * * * *

Drake's face was a picture of disgust. "Our mole has resigned without completing the job," he informed everyone, "So I guess we're back to square one¹⁴⁵."

"Good help's hard to find," quipped Bruno.

Drake irritably threw a coffee mug at him, which Bruno easily caught in midair. "Nice catch," Drake added grudgingly.

"So, are we doing another landmark heist yet?" asked Alexia.

"No," Drake replied impatiently, "I already told you: we aren't doing another heist until we've dealt with the BLA."

"Aw, c'mon Drake!" protested Hank. "Our helicopters and boats are just sitting around, collecting dust!"

Malena stirred, and gracefully strode to the center of the room. Everyone else quieted down, as they waited expectantly: without even consciously realizing it, they'd allowed Malena to place herself in charge of the meeting. "Drake is right," she began, "If we try another heist right now, the BLA will just get in our way again¹⁴⁶. We gave the BLA fair warning by kidnapping Guy, but now it's time to stop them dead in their tracks."

Malena turned toward Drake. "Did the mole ever give us the location of their base?"

"Of course," confirmed Drake, "That was in one of their first reports¹⁴⁷."

"Good," replied Malena, "Where is it?"

¹⁴⁵ I'd love to know how Thelma announced her resignation. Did she send a formal email, or did she call Drake directly? Was she professional about it, or did she make snide remarks about his organization? I'm just curious!

¹⁴⁶ Of course, as we've already noted, Crimex could get away with practically anything if they just stopped announcing their targets in advance... but nobody in this story seems to realize that.

¹⁴⁷ Let me get this straight: Drake's known where the BLA base was this entire time, and he's done *nothing* with that information? That stupid "mole subplot" causes endless problems!

Drake gave her the location. It didn't even occur to Drake to be cagey or reluctant: Malena had asked a question, so he answered it.

Malena nodded in acknowledgement, then wordlessly turned to leave the room.

"Hey, wait!" Drake called after her, "Where are you going?"

Malena turned around, and then adopted a menacing pose. Everyone saw the cold fire burning in her eyes, and they took an involuntary step backward.



"I'm going to end this," she replied, in a calm voice that was far more frightening than the most unhinged scream.

Drake blinked in confusion. "How?"

With a fearsome ringing of steel, Malena drew both of her swords at once. "No more mercenaries. No more moles. No more gadgets. I'll do it myself: the BLA threat ends tonight."

Silently, she left the room. Her inaudible footfalls promised calamity and doom for her foes.

Bruno gulped. "She's kind of intense, isn't she?"

* * * * *

Later that evening, a man stumbled through a doorway, surprised to find the hallway beyond it in complete darkness. Why were the lights out? He walked down the hallway, as a sense of foreboding gradually began to creep over him. Where was the light switch, anyway? He found himself regretting that he'd never taken the time to find out. In his defense, though, he'd never needed to use it before: the office's lights were always on when he arrived.

Somewhere in the darkness, he heard the barely perceptible sound of a footstep in the dark. "Who's there?" he called out, trying to sound braver than he felt. But no one answered his challenge. The man nervously continued down the hallway, as his overactive imagination began playing tricks on him:

¹⁴⁸ This is a pretty cool picture, but I can't shake the feeling that Malena is posing for an unseen camera.

shadows seemed to loom and grasp at him from every direction, and the broad patterns in the carpet reminded him of bottomless pits, eager to claim him.

The man's nerves peaked as he rounded the corner. In the gloom, he could just make out a dark figure reaching for something. He gave a terrified yelp, fully convinced that he was about to die. Just then, however, the lights snapped on: in the sudden brightness, the man saw all of his co-workers gathered in a semi-circle, grinning as they held a huge banner which read, "Happy Retirement Steve!"

"Surprise!" everyone shouted in unison.

Steve wilted in relief. "Wow. You guys really got me good¹⁴⁹!"

¹⁴⁹ Steve's co-workers really got *us* good, too... because apparently, this scene was just a silly fake-out!

Chapter 17: Midnight Falls

It was evening at the BLA. Everyone had agreed to stay past the usual quitting time, in an effort to help Arthur analyze Crimex's previous heists and anticipate their next move. Even Thelma had agreed to stay late for the task: her husband had picked up their kids from school. At this point, the takeout pizzas had been polished off and people were starting to get tired.

"You've all gone above and beyond," said Arthur kindly, "Perhaps 15 more minutes, and then we'll close up shop for the day."

This was greeted by tired cheers. Guy looked down the hallway, and noticed a fresh peanut sitting in the middle of the floor. "Hey," he mused, "Was that peanut there when we started?"

Everyone turned and stared.

"No," replied Thelma, "I'm absolutely positive... I'd already cleaned up the peanuts from today."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" declared Arthur, "Whatever's going on with these peanuts, it must be happening after work hours. No wonder we haven't been able to figure it out!"

"I'll see if I can gimmick up some motion-activated cameras tomorrow," promised Grant, "Maybe we'll finally get to the bottom of this peanut mystery!"

"Too bad we haven't made any progress on Crimex," sighed Amy, "I wonder what they're up to right now?"

* * * * *

A mysterious figure stood outside the office building in the failing light, blending in perfectly with the dark. She eyed the 15th floor ominously: the BLA's office awaited her there.

Malena was coming¹⁵⁰.

* * * * *

"It would help if we understood what Crimex was driving at," mused Grant, "I mean, what's their 'endgame' here? They end up with a bunch of landmarks... so what?"

"I almost got Drake to tell me, back at the mercenary complex," replied Guy ruefully. "But Malena stepped in and warned him off."

"I think we're missing the point," argued Thelma, "Crimex has gone to ground for now... so whatever their big plans are, they've probably put them on hold. I'd be a lot less worried about their master plan, and a lot more worried about what they might try over the next few days¹⁵¹."

* * * * *

¹⁵⁰ Wait, though... the only reason anyone's still at the BLA right now is because they happened to be working late! Did Malena somehow know they would be working late, or is this another plot hole? Food for thought!

¹⁵¹ I think the BLA missed an opportunity here: instead of announcing her resignation as a mole, Thelma should've acted as a double agent and fed Crimex information back to the BLA! Oh, well.

Malena approached the office building's door. She slipped past the security guard's desk, taking professional satisfaction in how easily she evaded his notice. She ignored the elevator and headed straight for the stairwell, where she allowed herself a brief but arrogant smirk.

Most office workers couldn't climb 10 flights of stairs without needing to rest... but Malena could climb 20 flights of stairs without breaking a sweat.

* * * * *

"If you ask me, Drake doesn't even have a plan," snickered Amy, "I mean, we've all seen his broadcasts, and Guy's met him in person: the man's a doofus."

There was laughter and general agreement.

"He definitely seems to ride the coattails of his minions," mused Arthur, "You have to wonder how someone as scary as Malena ended up working for him."

"It wouldn't surprise me if she ended up running Crimex one day, instead of him," reflected Guy. He shuddered. "Let's hope that never happens."

Arthur smiled. "It won't, Guy... because we're going to stop them." He turned to face the group. "Everyone, it's getting late! I think it's time to pack it in. But first, I just wanted to say a few words of thanks for everyone's dedication on this project..."

* * * * *

Malena paused at a door in the stairwell: she'd arrived at the 15th floor. She produced the cloaking device that she'd stolen from Guy¹⁵², and a sinister smile spread across her face. *I've always been stealthy... but with this cloaking device, I'm practically unstoppable. 30 seconds to do the job, and then 2 minutes to escape the building. By the time I'm visible again, it'll be as if I was never here. And the BLA will be history.*

After taking a moment to savor her impending victory, Malena activated the cloaking device and vanished from sight. Then she entered the BLA's office. Following the sounds of conversation and laughter, she turned to the right and walked down a hall. She rounded the corner and entered the lobby, where she was delighted to find the entire BLA staff gathered together. Better yet: with the exception of Arthur, everyone had their back turned to her. She couldn't have asked for a more perfect setup.

Malena unsheathed her swords... and for the first time since joining Crimex, she was careful to ensure that they didn't make a sound.

* * * * *

"...and that about wraps it up," concluded Arthur warmly, "It's my firm belief that we're building lasting legacies for the greater good at the BLA, and I hope you'll continue to lend me your support in making this possible."

¹⁵² This is the cloaking device that Malena stole from Guy in the alley. This is also the cloaking device that Guy used to escape his prison cell. And now Malena has it again! This confirms our earlier suspicion that Guy shouldn't have had the cloaking device while he was a captive... basically, the "Freedom" chapter is a sham.

Arthur's speech was greeted by cheerful applause. Guy put his arm around Amy, who smiled at him.

* * * * *

Malena began closing the last few meters between herself and her targets, coldly calculating her escape route before the deed was even done. She was a force of nature, one with the shadows: a creature of discipline, rigor, and unbending steel. Her structured mind rejected all notions of foolishness, disorder, and whimsy.

And that's why she never noticed the peanut on the floor.

* * * * *

From Arthur's perspective, three things happened in rapid succession.

The peanut on the floor crushed itself, seemingly of its own accord, and then kicked out to one side. Then there was a disembodied (and undignified) yelp. And finally, Malena Midnight abruptly appeared behind everyone, flailing in midair as she lost her balance and clumsily struck the floor headfirst with a mighty thud¹⁵³. Everyone gasped in shock, but there was no immediate danger: the impact had knocked Malena unconscious, and her swords had dropped harmlessly beside her.



Guy recovered first. "We'd better call the police before she wakes up," he said, as he started dialing on his cellphone.

"Amy, disarm her," ordered Arthur. "And Grant, get some zip ties to restrain her."

Amy quickly confiscated Malena's swords, while Grant dashed off to his workshop for zip ties.

"She tripped on a peanut, eh?" remarked Thelma sympathetically, as she regarded Malena's unconscious body, "You just know that her assassin friends will never let her forget this¹⁵⁴."

¹⁵³ It's curious that Malena's cloak deactivated before she even landed, especially when the cloak is supposed to last for 3 minutes... did she reflexively push a button on the device which turned it off? This isn't explained.

¹⁵⁴ An absurd defeat? Perhaps. But actually, I really like the idea that Malena's attack failed because she was "out of sync" with the story's zany, whimsical tone.

* * * * *

An hour later, Malena was safely in FBI custody, sporting a large bump on her head where she'd hit the floor. As it turned out, she already had several outstanding arrest warrants against her, which had ensured an enthusiastic response from law enforcement.

A police officer had nearly finished taking statements from everyone. "One thing that still bothers me," the officer said, "Where did the peanut come from?"

Arthur laughed. "We really wish we knew. They've been appearing in the middle of the floor for weeks now. We can't figure out who's been putting them there, or why."

Suddenly, they heard a distant skittering sound in the suspended ceiling above them. Everyone looked up in confusion. The skittering sound got closer and closer, approaching an air vent over the lobby. Suddenly, a fresh peanut dropped in from the air vent, and landed neatly on the floor.

The officer chuckled. "Sounds to me like you have a squirrel problem. Although in this case, you should probably thank him."

Guy laughed. "If we ever track him down, maybe he could be our mascot."

* * * * *

Later that evening, Drake was watching the evening news in the Crimex lounge, waiting for Malena to report back. Bruno was there, too.

"Malena's taking a while, don't you think?" asked Bruno.

"I kind of figured she'd just waltz in, kill everyone, and then waltz out," agreed Drake, "But who knows how these things work? Maybe she's waiting for the perfect opportunity."

"Hey, maybe it'll show up on the news tonight," joked Bruno, "You know... 'tragedy at the BLA', or something like that."

"Oh, that'd be perfect," laughed Drake. "Maybe we should record this broadcast, just in case."

"I don't know how to record on these things anymore," admitted Bruno, "I'd have to get Alexia to set it up for us."

"Ah, never mind," replied Drake lazily, "It's not *that* important."

Several minutes went by.

"Speaking of Alexia," began Drake, "I noticed that Hank's been hanging out with her lately."

Bruno nodded. "Yeah. They're working on some kind of project together."

Drake grinned. "C'mon. You really think that's all it is?"

"Oh, Hank likes her," acknowledged Bruno, "That's been obvious for a while now. But I think Alexia's still figuring things out."

Curious in spite of himself, Drake asked: “And what do *you* think about it? That’s your little sister, after all.”

Bruno shrugged. “Hank’s a good guy¹⁵⁵. If they end up dating, I’m fine with that.” He shook his head ruefully. “But I doubt it’ll happen... I love my sister, but she’s not easy to live with. And I don’t think Hank’s figured that out yet.”

Drake snickered, and Bruno raised an eyebrow. “Hey... go ahead and laugh, Drake. But Alexia’s still smarter than both of us put together.”

“And she knows it!” added Drake pointedly.

Bruno sighed. “Yes. Yes, she does.”

Suddenly, the evening news switched to a special bulletin. “This just in: an assassination attempt was foiled on the 15th floor of a New York office building this evening. Fortunately, there were no casualties, and the assassin is now in FBI custody. Authorities have identified her as the notorious ‘Malena Midnight’.”

Drake’s jaw dropped in disbelief. Moments later, his face turned purple with rage. “How?” he whispered hoarsely, “How could those miserably wholesome, pathetic do-gooders stop a *professional assassin*!?”

The news footage changed to show the BLA office, where the employees were giving statements to an officer. A young woman with long, brown hair ran up to the camera and gleefully proclaimed, “Can you believe it? A random squirrel beat their assassin with a *peanut*!”

With a roar of fury, Drake hurled his TV remote at the television. He missed the screen completely, but the remote still shattered against the wall.

“Just calm down Drake,” cautioned Bruno, “We’ll figure something out!”

“I’m so *sick* of failure!” Drake bellowed. He grabbed a nearby stack of computer paper and hurled it at Bruno, but the paper fanned out harmlessly in all directions. Drake glowered, surrounded by a gradually settling blizzard of stationery.

“That does it,” growled Drake, “That is the last and *final* straw! So they beat my assassin, did they!? Well *this* time, the gloves come off!”

Drake stormed out of the room, leaving Bruno on his own. Bruno shrugged philosophically. “On the bright side, now we don’t have to pay her¹⁵⁶.”

¹⁵⁵ For a bad guy, that is.

¹⁵⁶ This is a poetic call-back to Malena’s own words at the end of the “Freedom” chapter... although Bruno probably wouldn’t know that. By the way, did you notice the pun in this chapter’s title? “Midnight Falls”! (Rim shot)

Chapter 18: The Gloves Come Off

It was a beautiful morning, and Guy had just met up with Amy at the north side of Central Park.

"I got something for you," remarked Guy cheerfully, "It might look nice on your desk." From behind his back, he produced a potted pink-hued chrysanthemum.

Amy clasped her hands with delight. "Oh, a *chrysanthemum*!" she cried. "Thanks, Guy!"

Guy shrugged modestly. "Someone told me that you like these."

"Thelma, right?" Amy inquired. "Oh, wait... you were being coy. Me, then. Yes, of course... our mission in London! Nice memory, Guy."

They began making their way through the park, toward the BLA's office building. "I'm curious," Amy began, "Why did you choose a pink chrysanthemum?"

"It just seemed like an 'Amy' sort of color," explained Guy with a smile. "Also, you chose pink for your uniform's shirt."

"You totally get me," grinned Amy, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "And I see you've been improving your observation skills, too! But I still might be a step or two ahead of you." She gestured toward a bench they were approaching. Sitting on the bench was a small potted cactus, with a single red flower on top.

Guy stared at it, dumbfounded. "Did you..."

"Yep," confirmed Amy, whose grin was now stretching from ear to ear. "It's for you."

In amazement, Guy approached the potted cactus and picked it up. "It's perfect," he marveled, studying it more closely, "And it's just what I need for my indoor garden! But how in the world did you know I wanted something like this?"

"Every time we walk past a window display or garden shop with cacti in it, you stare at them," she explained, "And you have a taste for sharp contrasts... a green, prickly cactus with a pretty red flower on top fits the bill perfectly."

Guy threw Amy a salute, and then performed a mock bow. "I have much to learn," he acknowledged.

Amy blushed a little. "Yeah... um, I've been told that my attention to detail isn't quite normal. But it's handy in this business! You never know when a small, overlooked item will blow open an entire case! That's one of the main reasons they hired me."

"Speaking of hiring," said Guy as they resumed their walk, carrying their respective plants, "Back in Paris, I asked you why the agency picked me... and I seem to remember you blushing at the time. Should I assume you had something to do with that decision?"

Amy blushed again, even deeper this time. "I saw you across the street one afternoon, and I thought you looked cute," she admitted, "So I shadowed you for a few days to see if you looked like agent material... which you did. And better yet, you were job hunting! I recommended you to Arthur, and the rest is history."

"I thought it might be something like that," replied Guy with a faint smile, "You have an unorthodox way of doing things, Amy... but I'm glad you found me."

Amy beamed and looked into Guy's eyes, then reached for his hand. "Ouch!" she yelped. Amy had grasped the cactus by mistake.

"Whoops," said Guy sheepishly, "Sorry, Amy! I'll carry that in my other hand."

Amy rubbed her hand, and reached out again: this time, nothing got in the way. They continued their morning walk holding hands, as they made their way to the BLA's office building.

* * * * *

Guy and Amy emerged from the 15th floor elevator, walked down the hallway, and entered the BLA's main lobby. To their surprise, Grant, Thelma, and Arthur were crowded around the lobby desk's computer monitor.

"What's up, everyone?" asked Amy, as they approached the desk.

"Grant rigged up an optical camera, and we poked it into the air vent," explained Arthur. "We managed to get some footage of our resident squirrel."

"He's really cute!" added Thelma.

"How are you booking your time for *this*, Grant?" asked Guy slyly.

"R&D," replied Grant absently, as he set the video footage to play back again.

Guy craned his neck to see the computer monitor, but a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned to face the window on the opposite side of the lobby, and noticed a distant helicopter: it seemed to be approaching the building. Guy's eyes narrowed.

"Hey everyone," said Guy warily, "Is it me, or is that helicopter heading toward us¹⁵⁷?"

Everyone turned to face the opposite window. There was no mistaking it: the helicopter was drawing steadily closer, in a direct line for the building.

There was a tense silence. "I don't like this," said Thelma nervously.

Arthur hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Everyone... let's make our way down the hall to the stairwell, just in case."

Just then, however, the helicopter came to a sudden stop. A twinkling projectile appeared just below the hovering craft.

"Missile!" bellowed Grant.

Guy's mind raced. There was absolutely no chance of reaching the stairwell before the missile hit, and attempting to use the elevator would be nothing short of a death wish. That only left... Guy cranked his

¹⁵⁷ Guy's already faced two Crimex helicopters... I wonder if he's wary because this one has a similar design? The story doesn't say.

head toward the window behind them. A pair of vertical cables outside suggested that a window washing platform was just beneath them.

“Out of the window!” shouted Guy. Without waiting for an answer, he hurled a nearby chair through the glass¹⁵⁸, scooped up Amy, and then jumped out through the empty pane. Fortunately, his hasty deduction was right on the money: with a rough jolt, they landed together on a window washing platform just 1 floor below their own¹⁵⁹.

“Wow,” breathed Amy, “That was pretty impulsive, Guy... and coming from me, that’s saying a lot!”

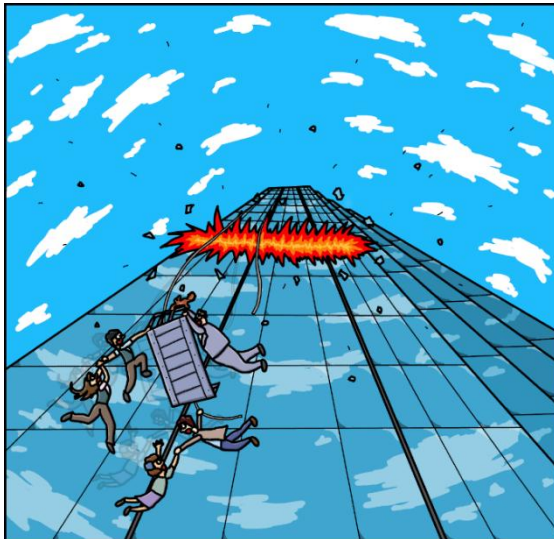
“There wasn’t enough time for anything else,” replied Guy, feeling slightly shaken, “I only hope the others -”

Guy was cut off by another jolt, as Grant and Thelma jumped onto the platform. It began to sway from the impact, and its cables creaked warningly. Guy had roughly half a second to anticipate the inevitable, before Arthur came down heavily beside them. The platform actually buckled for a moment, but then it rebounded. The cables shrieked in protest, but they still managed to hold.

Everyone enjoyed roughly 3 seconds of relief. Guy laughed nervously, “I think we -”

Then the missile impacted, rocking the building and propelling the platform into a crazy back-and-forth motion against the building’s side. “At least the platform’s holding!” shouted Arthur.

Without any warning, a squirrel leapt out of the smashed window and landed on their platform. Unfortunately, its tiny weight pushed the cables beyond what they could endure. One of them snapped completely, and the horizontal platform abruptly became a vertical one, suspended by its one remaining cable. Guy, still holding Amy, managed to grab onto the platform’s frame. Grant grabbed Thelma’s hand, and used his other hand to hold the severed cable. And Arthur, with surprising agility, managed to grab the top of the platform with both hands.



¹⁵⁸ The chair is never mentioned again, so let’s assume it safely falls to the street without killing anyone.

¹⁵⁹ Apparently, this window washing platform was abandoned at the 14th floor for some reason. Lunch break?

For several moments, all 5 of them (and the squirrel) dangled from the broken platform as it swayed crazily in the wind. Then the cable on the other end snapped, and they were truly in freefall. Incredibly, the trajectory of the platform's swing when the cable snapped put it on a collision course with a series of clotheslines, each of which slowed their fall just a little before snapping¹⁶⁰.

It was the most chaotic 8 seconds of Guy's life¹⁶¹. The platform shook him this way and that, as he desperately tried to hold on. Clothes whipped against his face. The air was filled with the sound of additional explosions, as the helicopter continued to wipe out the 15th floor. Thelma and Grant were both screaming at the top of their lungs. Amy somehow had the presence of mind to shout "BLA Forever!" Some detached part of Guy's mind shrugged with a smile. *Hey, why not? We're all about to die, anyway.*

Amazingly, however, death didn't come: the multiple clotheslines had actually absorbed enough of their velocity to make the fall survivable. The platform, BLA staff, and squirrel hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud, but no one was seriously injured. After a moment's shocked silence, everyone shakily got to their feet. The nearby pedestrians who'd witnessed their fall applauded and cheered for them (except for a portly, grouchy-looking fruit vendor who booed them¹⁶²).

Amy crouched down and regarded the squirrel who'd shared their terrifying ride... likely the same squirrel who'd been dropping peanuts into their office, and unknowingly foiled Malena just yesterday. "Hey, little squirrel!" she said coaxingly, "Want to be our mascot?"

But the squirrel skittered away from her without a backward glance¹⁶³. "Maybe he's thinking it over," offered Guy diplomatically.

"No time for that!" said Arthur urgently, "Crimex might have men on the ground, too! Everyone: grab a clothesline for yourself and run for that alley across the street! Then we'll plan our next move."

Without wasting any time, everyone obligingly grabbed one of the downed clotheslines and began running for the alley.

"Hey Thelma," quipped Grant, "How do you want us to book *that* time?"

Running breathlessly, Thelma shouted back, "Travel!"

* * * * *

From the relative safety and seclusion of the alley, the BLA sadly watched the 15th story of their office building burn.

"My workshop," wailed Grant, "I spent hours reorganizing it this morning!"

"My abstract paintings," agonized Arthur, "I'll have to start all over with a new collection!"

¹⁶⁰ What are clotheslines doing here!? This is an office building, not a residential district.

¹⁶¹ I actually tried to do some research on how long their fall would take. But between the variety of answers I found, the multiple clotheslines which slowed their fall, and the fact that this entire sequence already breaks the laws of physics and probability, I still have no idea what the correct answer is. Let's just enjoy the ride!

¹⁶² This is probably Rob, the fruit vendor from the first chapter. Sour grapes. :)

¹⁶³ Honestly, that's probably the most realistic part of this entire chapter.

“Our office records and motivational posters,” sniffled Thelma, “How are we supposed to replace *those*?”

“My cactus,” mourned Guy, as Amy sidled up to him comfortingly, “I never even got a chance to take a picture of it.”

“My chrysanthemum,” commiserated Amy. Suddenly, the building was rocked by an unexpected series of secondary blasts. “Also, my collection of explosives.” she added.

“Well, what if we wait until it gets dark, and then sneak back to into the office?” proposed Guy, “Maybe we could salvage something!”

As if on cue, there was a horrendous groaning noise from the office building. With a terrifying crunch, the weight of the building’s upper stories squashed the weakened 15th floor flat: the 60-story building was now a 59-story building, and the 16th floor was now the new 15th floor¹⁶⁴.

“That’s just great,” said Grant disgustedly, “The building’s elevator buttons are going to be *really* confusing now.”

“Arthur, what are we going to do?” asked Thelma anxiously, “We’ve just lost everything!”

“Not everything,” said Arthur firmly, “We’re still alive. And more importantly, Crimex doesn’t know that¹⁶⁵! Now, the first order of business is disguises: we need to keep our survival a secret for as long as possible, so that Crimex doesn’t come after us again! I want everyone to put together a new outfit from the garments on the clotheslines we brought with us.”

“Seriously?” asked Grant.

“Yes, seriously!” replied Arthur, “We’ll give the clothes back to their rightful owners when we’re done, but right now we need to go unnoticed¹⁶⁶!”

Guy held up an 80’s track suit dubiously. “Yes... and I’m sure these clothes will help with that.”

Arthur ignored him. “Next, we confirm our resources. Is anyone still carrying something useful?”

“I still have the cloaking device we recovered from Malena,” offered Grant¹⁶⁷.

“That’s great news!” declared Arthur. “Amy, what have you got?”

“Just an explosive lipstick, and a remote detonator that can set it off,” said Amy sadly, “It’s the last of my explosives stash.”

“It’ll do for now,” Arthur reassured her, “Thelma, do you have anything useful with you?”

¹⁶⁴ Office buildings can’t lose an entire floor this neatly: in all likelihood, this event would destroy the entire structure. But we’re definitely not going to do that, so just be glad this building ignores the laws of physics.

¹⁶⁵ Of course, given the highly public nature of the BLA staff’s 15-story drop, it’s almost inevitable that Crimex would discover they survived. But for the purposes of this story, we’re going to ignore that.

¹⁶⁶ Yes, this is a silly, off-the-wall idea... and it’s unlikely that they’d be able to get new shoes, etc. from a clothesline. And it’s also unclear how they’re supposed to change clothes in an alley. Don’t worry about it.

¹⁶⁷ I see a missed opportunity here: we could’ve had a scene where Grant realized that one of his own gadgets was used by Malena to nearly wipe out the entire organization. It would’ve been a good opportunity for some character growth, and perhaps some technological countermeasures. Please do your best to imagine it. Thanks!

“Are you kidding me!?” retorted Thelma, “I just about fell 15 stories to my death!”

“That’s a ‘no’, then,” replied Arthur mildly, “And Guy? How about you?”

“I still have my trusty stun gun,” replied Guy¹⁶⁸.

“Actually, that gun isn’t supposed to leave the office between missions,” remarked Arthur, “But under the circumstances, I’m glad you kept it on your person.”

There was a brief silence, as reality began to sink in. The BLA’s base of operations was destroyed, their enemy was still at large, and they were only safe because that same enemy believed they were dead¹⁶⁹.

“So,” Guy asked tentatively, “We have disguises and a tiny reserve of gear. What’s the plan?”

Arthur nodded with renewed determination. “First, we find ourselves a temporary base of operations: it needs to be a secure location. And from there, we find a way to end Crimex’s Landmark Caper once and for all! Who’s with me?”

“We are!” cheered everyone.

“Not so loud!” admonished Arthur, “We’re in hiding, remember?”

¹⁶⁸ This is kind of interesting, because Bruno destroyed his old stun gun, and we never saw Grant issue him a new one. But this isn’t necessarily a plot hole: we’re simply missing a direct explanation.

¹⁶⁹ This whole “lay low and pretend we’re dead” thing is kind of weird, when you think about it: the BLA is supposed to be a government agency. Shouldn’t they at least inform their superiors that they’re still alive, if for no other reason than to keep their paychecks coming? And isn’t this kind of hard on their friends and family?

Part 3: Comeuppance

Chapter 19: Regrouping

It was late at night, the same day as the attack on the BLA's office. Guy, Amy, Grant, and Thelma were still hiding in the alley. Arthur had left to arrange shelter for the night.

"He's been gone for hours now¹⁷⁰," muttered Grant, "What if Crimex got him?"

"Crimex probably thinks we're all dead," Guy pointed out, "Stop worrying. It can't be easy to find shelter for 5 people on short notice, especially when you're trying to keep it a secret."

"We're going to end up sleeping under a bridge," moaned Thelma, "Or right here in this alley. I just know it."

"Everyone, snap out of it!" demanded Amy, "We're lucky to be alive after an attack like that! We just need to be patient. Arthur's never let us down before."

There was a brief silence. Grant chuckled. "I guess it could be worse," he smiled, "At least my 'clothesline outfit' wasn't an 80's track suit. Right, Guy?"

Guy made a show of stretching comfortably in his track suit. The salvaged clotheslines hadn't provided many options, but he was actually pretty happy with his choices... especially the shades¹⁷¹. "At least my outfit's built for action, Grant! The most active thing you'll be doing in that golf outfit is putting."

"Suits me," grinned Grant. And with that, silence fell upon the group again.

Eventually, Amy spoke up. "Hey... isn't anyone going to make fun of my 'cowgirl' outfit?"

"Not really," replied Guy, "To be honest, you're rocking it."

"You're not just saying that to be nice?" she asked skeptically.

"No, Guy's right," admitted Grant, "It's a good look for you."

"Well, I hate my outfit," announced Thelma, in her executive businesswoman suit¹⁷². "This was the only thing worth borrowing from my clothesline, but it's stiff and itchy! I feel like I should be sitting in some boring meeting, droning away about pie charts."

"It's just until we come out of hiding," soothed Amy.

"Speaking of which," Arthur announced, "I've found our temporary base of operations!"

Everyone turned to see Arthur approaching, wearing a large grey hoodie and baggy jeans.

"Does the new base have a phone?" asked Thelma, "My husband and kids must be worried sick by now¹⁷³."

¹⁷⁰ Actually, it would seem that Arthur has been gone for most of the day. Their base was blown up in the morning, and now it's night! I mean, did they get anything to eat? What about washroom breaks? No wonder they're getting restless!

¹⁷¹ Which is definitely a very normal thing to hang on a clothesline.

¹⁷² Which is also, definitely, a very normal thing to hang on a clothesline.

¹⁷³ Nobody has cellphones?

“Of course,” Arthur assured her, “You can call them as soon as we get there¹⁷⁴. Now, everyone... follow me!”

* * * * *

Everyone followed Arthur out of the alley and down the street. After walking for several minutes, they turned a corner and found themselves at a public records office¹⁷⁵. Without hesitating, Arthur led them around the building, and in through a back door.

“My cousin runs this place¹⁷⁶,” he explained, “We can come and go as we please through the back.”

Grant looked around dubiously, as they continued to follow Arthur down a musty hallway. “We’re setting up shop in an old records building?”

“Not exactly,” replied Arthur with a grin. “Follow me!” The hallway turned a corner, and they found themselves staring at a row of dusty bookcases. Arthur walked up to one of the bookcases, and tugged at an old leather volume. Without warning, the leftmost bookcase slid into the wall, revealing a hidden doorway.

“A secret passage!?” squealed Amy, “I’ve always wanted a bookcase with a secret passage! This is the second-coolest thing I’ve ever seen in a public records office¹⁷⁷!”

Guy stared at the doorway in disbelief. “But... *why* is there a secret passage in a public records office?”

Arthur gestured for them to follow. “See for yourself!”

The group followed Arthur through a doorway, and down a stone staircase. Near the bottom, it opened up into a cavernous basement. The bare bulbs which hung from the ceiling illuminated an unexpected scene: the entire chamber was furnished like an abandoned tavern. Booths, tables, and chairs were sprinkled throughout the common area. A large serving counter took up a quarter of the chamber, and behind that was a large collection of barrels and bins. Alcoves were regularly placed along the other walls, which offered additional seating and tables. A couple of doors on either side of the chamber led to other rooms.

“Okay, I give up,” announced Guy, “What *is* this place? An old movie set?”

Triumphantly, Arthur declared, “You are now standing in the common area of the ‘Muddled Badger’... a prominent speakeasy from the distant past! During the Prohibition era, people would come down here to buy themselves a drink.”

“That explains the kegs,” remarked Thelma.

¹⁷⁴ Wait, aren’t they supposed to be in hiding? Why is Thelma allowed to call her family?

¹⁷⁵ Let me be honest: I pulled the phrase “public records office” out of thin air. They might be a real thing, but I haven’t done any research into what they’re actually like. I pictured a plain office-style building filled with row upon row of shelves and filing cabinets, which would be overflowing with paper documents. The building’s sole occupants would be a token security guard, and a middle-aged clerk with a name like “Edward” or “Sebastian”. Edward/Sebastian would be wearing glasses and a sweater, and he’d work from precisely 9:00 am to 5:00 pm.

¹⁷⁶ I’m just going to say it. This place is only minutes away, and Arthur presumably knew it existed (he knows his cousin works here). So, what in the world was he *doing* all day when everyone else was waiting in the alley?

¹⁷⁷ Feel free to pause for a moment, as you try to imagine what the first-coolest thing might’ve been. :)

“Most of them are still full,” replied Arthur, “I’ve tried some of the beer myself, and it’s still delicious¹⁷⁸.”

Amy looked around curiously. “So... what happened here? Why is it abandoned?”

Arthur shrugged. “Nobody remembers the exact story, but apparently there was some ownership mix-up or re-zoning during World War II, and this whole place was forgotten at the peak of its operation¹⁷⁹!”

Everyone quietly looked around, taking in the enormous room they’d inherited as a fallback base.

“I’m sorry for the hasty accommodations,” Arthur added apologetically, “But this was the best I could get on short notice.”

“Arthur,” declared Grant, “I think I speak for everyone, when I say this place is *much* cooler than our original office building.”

There was general agreement, and Arthur beamed. “Excellent! Well, everyone... pick a booth for tonight, and get some sleep. Tomorrow, the real work begins.”

“The real work?” asked Amy quizzically.

“Of course,” Arthur explained, “We’ll need to outfit this place so that the BLA can operate again. And as soon as we’re ready, we’ll seek out the Crimex base and bring them to justice! Then we can safely come out of hiding¹⁸⁰.”

“Well, I’m going to do my part,” declared Thelma, “Until this crisis is resolved, no more timesheets!”



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¹⁷⁸ Most beer expires within a year or two... and even if it wasn’t toxic after decades of neglect, it definitely wouldn’t taste the same.

¹⁷⁹ This vague explanation raises *way* more questions than it answers. And Prohibition ended in 1933, which was well before World War II even began!

¹⁸⁰ So, yeah... the good guys are going to stay hidden, play dress-up with random clothes, refurbish a secret base with cool stuff, and then stop the bad guys. It’s like a 6-year-old’s dream come true!

¹⁸¹ The scar on Amy’s knee should be visible while she’s wearing her current outfit, but I completely forgot to draw it... so we’re just going to pretend that it doesn’t exist for the rest of this story. Sorry!

There was a hearty cheer.

“Wait,” asked Guy nervously, “Can the records office people hear us?”

“Not a chance,” declared Arthur, “This place was specially built to avoid being noticed, you know! You can yell as much as you want.” This got another hearty cheer.

There was a lot of work and planning ahead... but the BLA was back.

Chapter 20: The Ballad of a Scientific Genius and a Wrench Jockey

It was morning at the Crimex base, and Drake was in a terrific mood. On the way to his office, he bumped into Bruno.

"Morning Drake," Bruno greeted him, "Did your helicopter strike do the trick¹⁸²?"

"Oh, it did the trick all right," gloated Drake, "The BLA is history. And now it's time to kick our landmark heists into high gear!" He looked reflective. "You know, in a way, I'm almost glad that we lost Malena... we were getting too dependent on her. It's time for Crimex to return its strengths! Now, fetch Alexia and Hank for me, will you? We need to start planning our next heist!"

"Sure thing, Drake!" replied Bruno, and he began heading for Alexia's lab. *At least I only need to make one stop to find both of them*, he thought to himself. As he approached the lab, however, he began to hear shouting. The lab's door was abruptly thrown open and Hank stomped out, looking angry.

Hank noticed Bruno, and declared, "Sorry, Bruno, but I won't be your sister's *minion*!" Then he stormed away in the direction of his workshop.

Bruno sighed to himself. *Why can't everything in life be as simple as stealing landmarks?* Bracing himself, he walked through the open door into Alexia's lab.

Alexia was typing away on her laptop, looking furious. She caught sight of Bruno, and immediately bristled. "I don't want to talk about it, Bruno!" she snarled.

"Well, I do," returned Bruno. "What just happened?" Alexia studiously ignored him and continued typing. Finally, Bruno gave her a "you-asked-for-it" shrug, and gently slid her laptop just out of reach. There was no way Alexia could retrieve it without getting onto her crutches.

"Hey!" she shouted indignantly, "That's not fair, you big jerk!"

"I'm serious, Alexia," said Bruno. His voice was quiet, but as firm as steel. "Hank just stormed out of here, and said he's not going to be your minion. What's going on?"

"It's nothing," she growled, "Hank said I was getting too bossy, so I finally asked him, why I shouldn't I be the boss, since I'm smarter?"

Mentally, Bruno did a face-palm, but he maintained a straight face in the interests of keeping the conversation productive. "Uh huh. And what did Hank have to say about that?"

Alexia glared at Bruno. "He stood up, and said he wanted us to work on the project as equals! I mean, *equals*... can you believe that!? How are we even remotely equal?... I'm the resident genius, right!? In fact, technically, I don't even *need* his help... with enough time, I could probably figure out how to build anything he can!"

"Is that what you told him?" asked Bruno quietly.

¹⁸² This question suggests that Drake personally flew the helicopter which attacked the BLA building. Also, it's surprising that Bruno doesn't already know how the attack went! Perhaps by the time Drake flew the helicopter back to base, the Crimex agents had already gone home for the day. And then nobody watched the evening news.

"Yes," snarled Alexia, "And then he said 'fine', and just walked out. He wouldn't even turn around when I called after him! I was right about Hank the first time... he's just a stupid wrench jockey!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bruno saw Drake poke his head in the lab's door, register what was taking place, and hastily duck back out again. *Helpful as always, Drake*. Bruno thought to himself wryly. He tried to collect his thoughts. Alexia had basically finished her rant, so at this point, the easiest thing would be to just shrug it off and walk away... but Alexia's ego was getting out of control, and Bruno cared too much about her to let it go unchecked. The two siblings had practically raised each other, and even now, Bruno knew that Alexia had his back when it really mattered. He had to try talking some sense into his sister.

And besides... Bruno was getting *really* tired of having conversations like this with her.

"Just a stupid wrench jockey, eh?" asked Bruno pointedly, "So, Hank didn't have any good ideas of his own?"

Alexia looked taken aback, but then she stuck out her chin defiantly. "Well, maybe one. He thought the chair should have a soda can dispenser." She laughed, but it sounded shaky. And if Bruno was any expert on his sister, that meant she was about 30 seconds away from tears. Maybe he could actually get through to her this time.

"A soda can dispenser on a wheelchair?" he asked, with a genuine smile, "That actually sounds pretty cool, don't you think?"

"Doesn't matter," muttered Alexia. She gestured at the unfinished wheelchair. "It'll never happen now." Tears formed around her eyes, and she quavered, "Why wouldn't he just let me be in charge? I'm the genius around here!"

"Alexia," said Bruno gravely, "You're the brightest person I've ever met, but there's one thing you've never managed to figure out."

Alexia looked up, and tearfully scoffed, "What's that?"

Bruno looked directly at her. "Being smart isn't the same thing as being *right*... not by a long shot. No matter how intelligent you are, you're going to make mistakes. You need to start *listening* to other people, instead of assuming you have all the answers." Alexia bowed her head, but Bruno doggedly continued. "Otherwise, one of these days, you're going to make a huge mistake: maybe you'll wipe out half a city block with some disastrous experiment, or just blow yourself up by accident."

"Or push away a good friend," Alexia quietly added.

"Yeah," Bruno agreed, "Or push away a good friend. Hank put up with an awful lot to work with you... but I'm sure you already know that."

Alexia looked up tearfully. "Bruno, I messed up. What should I do?"

Inside, Bruno practically wilted with relief: Alexia *was* listening. "Well, since you're asking," replied Bruno, "The first thing you should do is apologize to Hank for being so arrogant. That's just human decency, whether you like him nor not."

He eyed her speculatively. "By the way... do you like him, Alexia?"

Alexia sniffled, and woefully asked, "What does it matter now?"

"I'll assume that's a 'yes,'" replied Bruno mildly, "In that case, you should also try your best to convince him that you've had a change of heart, and you're willing to work on the project as equals." He paused. "You *have* had a change of heart, right?"

Alexia grimaced, but she reluctantly nodded.

"Good," said Bruno, "Then you'd better go tell him right away."

"Oh," Alexia protested, "But I really don't think -"

"You'll have a better chance if you don't wait too long," Bruno interrupted her, "And don't get upset if he doesn't forgive you at first. You've been pretty hard on him."

Alexia nodded gratefully. "I will... thanks Bruno." She got up on her crutches, and gave Bruno a clumsy surprise hug. She whispered, "You're the best brother ever," and then she left the lab.

Bruno smiled to himself. Maybe Alexia was finally starting to turn a corner¹⁸³.

Drake poked his head into the lab again. "Everything good?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah Drake," Bruno replied dryly, "Just give Alexia a few minutes to wrap things up, and then we can start planning our next heist."

* * * * *

Alexia nervously walked through the open door into Hank's workshop, dreading the impending conversation. *Maybe he won't be here*, Alexia thought to herself, *And I can put off this conversation for a little bit longer*. But of course, Hank was in his workshop: where else would he be? As Alexia walked in, she saw him crouched under an armored helicopter, twisting at something with his wrench.

He hasn't seen me yet, Alexia thought, *I could still run away, and he'd never know I was here*. Alexia scowled at her own cowardice. *Stop being stupid*, she told herself, *Let's just get this over with*. She hesitated, and then tentatively called out, "Uh... Hank?"

Well, she was committed now. Unfortunately, Hank didn't give any sign that he'd heard her. *He's probably still angry*, Alexia thought to herself. Steeling herself, she tried again. "Hank? I'm sorry I was so arrogant back there."

Hank stopped working. He pulled himself out from under the helicopter, stood up, and gave her a smirk. "What happened after I left? Did Bruno put you up to this?"

"No, I really mean it!" Alexia insisted, "I mean, yes... Bruno talked to me. But what he said really hit home. And if I don't start listening to other people, I'm going to blow myself up or whatever. And maybe you can help with that!" *It's coming out completely wrong*, Alexia despaired, *I never was any good at this stuff*.

¹⁸³ Hurray! Alexia is becoming a happier, more well-adjusted... um, criminal. Well, don't worry! We'll try to figure out a satisfying resolution before the story ends.

Sure enough, Hank cocked his head in confusion. "Wait, back up a minute. What was that about blowing yourself up?"

"It doesn't matter!" Alexia exclaimed in exasperation, "The point is, I've learned a lot from Bruno in the last 5 minutes! And if I can still learn that much from a 'muscle for hire' like my brother, then maybe I'm not the smartest person in the room after all. You know?"

Hank sighed wearily, but he walked closer to her. "I like you, Alexia... I really do. But I need to be honest: you have a real hangup about your intelligence, and it makes you a lot meaner than you need to be. I'm not sure I can deal with that."

"I know," she admitted earnestly, "But I really am sorry for the stuff I said, and I'll try to do better."

Hank looked into her eyes. He wanted to believe her. And if she was willing to talk about it, then maybe there was hope. "Let's say that we gave this another try, Alexia," he began, "What happens the next time we disagree on something? Are you just going to override me again?"

"What if my idea's better?" asked Alexia nervously, knowing that it was a mistake even as she said it.

"And who decides that?" replied Hank in frustration, "You? Because you're smarter than I am? Honestly, Alexia... why do you *care* so much about being right all the time? What's the big deal if someone else has a good idea?"

Alexia's old instincts urged her to throw the question back in Hank's face, but Bruno's recent lecture was still fresh in her mind. *What is my problem, anyway?* Alexia thought to herself, as Hank waited expectantly for her answer, *If someone else has a chance to look smart, why should that intimidate me?* And as the word "intimidate" echoed through Alexia's mind, the glum truth dawned on her: she *did* feel threatened when other people looked smart. And the reason why...

Alexia hesitated, and then gestured self-deprecatingly at herself. "C'mon Hank," she replied, with a quavering voice, "Look at me! I'm not brave like you, I'm not athletic like Bruno, and I'm not even personable! If I can't be the smartest person in the room, then who am I?"

Hank's face softened. "You're Alexia Bennet!" he replied sincerely, "You'll always have enough brains to get the job done, whether you're the smartest person in the room or not. And I think that deep down, you can be personable, too. Maybe you've just forgotten how."

"You really think so?" asked Alexia hopefully.

"Absolutely," replied Hank reassuringly. He gave her a conspiratorial smile, "And between you and me, we all struggle with our egos from time to time. It's hard to stay nice when your boss is an idiot."

"That's for sure," Alexia snickered, "So, um... are you going to give me another chance?"

"I think so," replied Hank cautiously, "Are you willing to work with me, Alexia? As equals, this time?"

"That sounds great!" declared Alexia happily, as she walked toward Hank on her crutches, "I already had plans for an improved -"

At that exact moment, one of Alexia's crutches slipped on a patch of oil, spilling her unceremoniously onto the floor with a yelp. "Dang it!" she blurted out, "What kind of slob would leave... I mean, um..."

She looked up in embarrassment, expecting to see disapproval or even anger on Hank's face. But instead, Hank was already by her side, looking concerned.

"Sorry about the oil," apologized Hank, "I'll clean that up right away! Are you hurt?"

"Just my pride," smiled Alexia sheepishly. On impulse, she reached out to him. "Help me up?"



"Are you sure?" Hank said with a knowing smile, "My hands are pretty greasy."

"I can live with that," Alexia replied. And she meant it.

Hank accepted her outstretched hand, and moments later she was back on her feet. "Thanks, Hank." she said quietly.

Hank smiled at her. "C'mon... we've got a wheelchair to build¹⁸⁴."

¹⁸⁴ I just realized that this chapter doesn't include anything particularly zany or stupid. I sincerely apologize for this oversight (not really), and I'll try to make the next chapter much more defective.

Chapter 21: Acquisitions¹⁸⁵

"How are we doing with the new computers, Grant?" asked Arthur, in the common area of the Muddled Badger. "Will we be online soon?"

"Yes, sir!" confirmed Grant, "I salvaged some old desktops from the dump and daisy-chained them together: they've been defragmenting all afternoon, so now they're nearly as fast as a modern server¹⁸⁶!"

"I've got us some sleeping bags," announced Amy, "And I arranged some of the furniture to make little privacy enclosures for sleeping."

"Nice work," replied Arthur, "That'll make our stay here a little more bearable."

"I've dusted and cleaned everywhere, so that Grant can concentrate again," chimed in Thelma, "And I've rerouted the BLA's phones to our new location¹⁸⁷."

"What've you been working on, Arthur?" asked Grant curiously.

Arthur smiled slyly, and patted an ancient TV unit that was perched on a counter. "With a little help from my cousin, I've spliced the building's cable into this TV," he explained, "Now we can receive Drake's next broadcast... and watch celebrity fishing shows, if you're into that sort of thing."

"Are you?" asked Amy curiously.

Arthur hesitated. "No," he finally replied, "Anyway, now we're just waiting on Guy. I sent him out to find some hardware for our upcoming missions."

As if on cue, Guy entered the room with a large garbage bag and a grin on his face. "This 80's track suit is awesome," he declared, "I walked right through one of my favorite stores, and no one even recognized me!"

"Maybe they were just afraid to approach you," offered Thelma.

Guy ignored her. "Anyway, most of the stuff we needed was a little beyond our price range, so I had to make a stop at the dump¹⁸⁸."

"Any trouble while you were there?" asked Amy.

"Yeah, almost," said Guy, as he chuckled at the memory, "Even with my cloaking device, the junkyard dog found me, so I had to stun him." Guy noticed the worried look on Amy's face, so he added, "He's already back on his feet, Amy! Besides... it was either stun the dog, or let him bite me¹⁸⁹."

¹⁸⁵ Hang on a minute... "Acquisitions" was the name of Part 1! It's confusing to have a chapter in Part 3 that's also called "Acquisitions".

¹⁸⁶ I wonder how many computer experts I can enrage with one sentence? :)

¹⁸⁷ I thought the BLA was in hiding! If they start taking calls here, won't people know that they're still alive? And what if Crimex traces one of their calls?

¹⁸⁸ Wait... so the good guys are just taking stuff from the dump without going through official channels? I mean, I guess they're in hiding, but still... how many times are we going to use that as an excuse?

¹⁸⁹ I definitely had to reassure everyone that the dog was okay, or else people would get upset. By the way... why didn't Grant encounter the junkyard dog, when he was salvaging old computers at the dump earlier on?

"I guess that's true," conceded Amy.

Guy dumped the garbage bag's contents onto the cement floor, creating a small pile of cheap appliances and other assorted items.

Grant's eyes lit up. "Wow... it's going to be fun making gadgets out of this stuff!"

Just then, however, a burst of static came from the TV on the counter. "Everyone, gather around!" Arthur called. "Let's see what Crimex has to say for themselves."

Drake appeared on the screen, in front of the now familiar desk and floor-to-ceiling window. "Greetings," he announced grandly, "By now, you've no doubt heard of the BLA's demise. Let this serve as a warning to the rest of the world: those who oppose us will meet certain doom!"

"That's what they think," remarked Amy with a smirk.

"We can now pursue our landmark heists without hindrance," Drake continued, "Furthermore, we have decided on our next target: the Great Wall of China! Prepare to lose a landmark so large, it can be seen from space¹⁹⁰! Bwa ha ha ha!" Drake's gloating image gradually dissolved into blackness. A tense silence followed.

"Wow," remarked Guy, "I think that's the first broadcast he's done without some kind of -"

Suddenly, there was another burst of static from the TV: the picture showed Drake dashing back into the ominous-looking office. "Wait," he gasped, "Sorry, everyone... I got the dates wrong! We aren't stealing the Great Wall of China next... we're stealing the Amazon River. It's this stupid calendar app I'm using! It's hard to tell when you're looking at the wrong week, because there's a dropdown near the top where you have to... what?"

For a moment, Drake listened to a frustrated but indistinct female voice¹⁹¹. "Okay, never mind. The Amazon River, everyone... brace yourselves¹⁹²!" Then he dashed off the screen again, and the image abruptly disappeared.

"Well," Arthur remarked, "It looks like we'll have to stop at least one more heist before we take the fight to Crimex."

"Give me an hour, and I'll scrape some gear together!" promised Grant.

* * * * *

"Listen up, everyone!" declared Drake. The Crimex staff was gathered in his office for a briefing on their next heist. "This is our largest heist yet, and we have to get it right... it's our big comeback¹⁹³!" He

¹⁹⁰ There's a common misconception that you can see the Great Wall of China from space. However, it's not actually true, even from low orbit. The wall itself is simply too thin (relatively speaking) to be visible without magnification.

¹⁹¹ I feel like we're at a point in the story where we can just say it's Alexia. But I guess the BLA might not know that.

¹⁹² This is the most nonsensical target yet! You can't "steal" a river... at least, not in the same sense that you can steal a solid landmark! What would this even mean? Stealing all the water? Stealing the land which surrounds the Amazon riverbed? And no matter what you steal, won't the river's water source just start carving a new path?

¹⁹³ What is Drake talking about? Crimex has enjoyed an uninterrupted string of successful heists ever since Guy was abducted! Their comeback already happened.

pointed at Bruno. “Bruno: you’ll take our new boat along the Amazon River. Your job is to capture the telemetry data for the splinter dimension device.”

“Got it,” confirmed Bruno.

“Hank,” continued Drake, “You’ll pilot our helicopter above the boat: as soon as you have enough data from Bruno, you can engage the device and capture the entire river at once¹⁹⁴.”

“Uh... wait a minute,” objected Bruno, “If my boat’s on the river, won’t I get captured along with it?”

“Yep,” confirmed Alexia, looking comfortable on her brand-new wheelchair, “Don’t worry though, it’s perfectly safe! As soon as we take the device back to our base, we’ll open up a portal to get you out of there.”

Drake noticed Alexia’s new wheelchair, and frowned. “Wait a minute... that wheelchair looks pretty high-tech. Where’d you get it?”

“Hank and I made it,” Alexia grinned, “It hovers just above the ground, and it handles like a dream! And see? It has a little robot arm on the side, in case something’s out of reach.”

Bruno examined the wheelchair appraisingly. “It’s kind of cool, actually. Makes me wish I had a broken leg.”

Alexia rolled her eyes, “Go for it. But anyway, there’s more... check this out. Hey, chair: soda me!”

A small circular hole opened on the chair’s left arm. From inside the chair came a soft whirring noise, followed by a sudden, violent metal crunch. Moments later, a fountain of soda spurted out through the chair arm’s opening and into Alexia’s face. She briefly looked startled, and Drake braced himself for a tantrum. To his surprise however, Alexia laughed. “Well, it worked this morning!” she declared with a chuckle. “Hank, any thoughts¹⁹⁵?”

“Something might be jammed,” he mused, “Maybe the soda delivery chute’s too narrow.”

“As much as I’d love to hear all the details about your wheelchair’s soda dispenser,” said Drake, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “We should keep this meeting focused on the heist, instead of hobby projects.”

“I know it’s just a wheelchair, Drake,” explained Hank, “But the point is, Alexia and I designed and built this thing in a matter of days! We’ve got all kinds of ideas for new weapons and vehicles... Crimex could have some pretty cool stuff coming its way.”

“Alright, I get it,” replied Drake, “Just... try to stay focused on the business at hand! Once we have the river, I think it’s time to begin ‘Phase 2’.”

Bruno perked up. “You mean, we finally get to know your master plan for all these landmarks¹⁹⁶?”

“That’s right,” announced Drake grandly, “Our endgame is just around the corner.”

¹⁹⁴ I have so many questions about how this “splinter dimension” device actually works.

¹⁹⁵ Wow... Alexia’s giving Hank credit and staying relaxed when she’s sprayed with soda. That must’ve been some powerful character growth in the previous chapter!

¹⁹⁶ It seems kind of dumb that Drake still hasn’t told them his master plan, but I guess that’s his call.

* * * * *

"We'll need to be extra careful on this mission," Arthur cautioned his team, "Secrecy is our biggest advantage right now: if at all possible, we want to stop the heist without giving ourselves away."

"Easier said than done," murmured Guy.

"Indeed," agreed Arthur, "But there's more. The authorities have been interrogating Malena for some time now, and they haven't gotten anything useful out of her. At this point, they'll probably just transfer her to long-term imprisonment." He paused. "They've asked us to capture another Crimex agent, so that they can try interrogating someone else¹⁹⁷."

"Oh, c'mon!" protested Amy, "We have to foil the heist, capture a Crimex agent, *and* avoid tipping our hand?"

"I know it's asking a lot," admitted Arthur, "But those are the objectives. Grant, what do you have for us?"

"Uh, right," said Grant carefully, "Our equipment for this mission consists of a stun gun, a cloaking device, Amy's explosive lipstick, and a... a potato gun."

Arthur wasn't stupid. "Wait a minute," he objected, "The only new item you've mentioned is the potato gun. Is that really the best you could come up with?"

Grant shrugged helplessly. "I only had an hour. But it works just fine! And we have plenty of ammo." He gestured to a large bin of potatoes behind the main counter¹⁹⁸.

Arthur shrugged. "Well... fair enough. Moving on! Guy, you'll be our point man: take the cloaking device and stun gun. Amy, you'll back him up with the potato gun."

"I don't know," said Amy skeptically, "A potato gun? That doesn't really sound like my style¹⁹⁹."

"It uses a small explosion to launch a spud more than 100 meters." Grant pointed out.

An excited gleam appeared in Amy's eyes. "Give me that."

¹⁹⁷ Um... no. The BLA has deliberately chosen to stay off the grid. The authorities literally *can't* ask them to do anything right now. Mind you... Thelma *did* reroute the phone lines here, so maybe they could. Sigh... this whole "remain hidden" thing is a confusing, inconsistent mess.

¹⁹⁸ If those are the speakeasy's original potatoes, they definitely would've decomposed decades ago.

¹⁹⁹ Never mind whether an agency would ever, under any circumstances, bring something as crude as a potato gun into a potential combat situation. At this point, we're just having fun!



Guy smiled at her. "Next stop... the Amazon!"

²⁰⁰ Just curious... in this picture, who is Arthur waving at?

Chapter 22: An Amazonian River

Guy and Amy hacked their way through the underbrush surrounding the Amazon River²⁰¹.

“Man, this is taking forever,” complained Amy, as a protruding tree root nearly tripped her. “The Crimex agents could be almost anywhere along this river²⁰².”

“If they’re bringing their fancy new boat on this heist, then they’ll have to pass us at some point²⁰³!” insisted Guy, “That’s when we’ll get them!”

* * * * *

Unbeknownst to Guy and Amy, someone was discreetly watching them at a distance. It was a hidden group of warriors: an elderly male, a man and his wife, and their oldest son.

“I don’t think they mean any harm,” declared the son, “Perhaps we should help them!”

“Yes,” agreed the woman, “As you know, our ancestors were subjected to illegal laboratory experiments and developed superpowers before they escaped into the jungle, where they formed a secret civilization which has thrived in peace for three generations²⁰⁴!”

“Indeed,” replied her husband, “Perhaps our superpowers could aid these strangers!”

They looked expectantly at the elderly male, who carefully considered what they should do next. “No,” he proclaimed, “It’s not the right time to reveal ourselves to the world.”

“So be it,” the son acquiesced. The group of warriors resumed their nature hike²⁰⁵.

* * * * *

Bruno carefully piloted the Crimex boat down the Amazon River. *Hank did a pretty good job with this boat*, Bruno reflected, *It’s a shame we don’t get more water-related capers*.

Alexia’s voice came over Bruno’s comms. “Bruno, you should have enough telemetry data by now. Can you confirm that?”

Bruno compared his current position against his projected course. “Almost there,” he replied, “We should have everything we need in about 5 minutes. Assuming your numbers are correct, of course.”

“They’re correct,” Alexia assured him. Bruno could almost hear her confident smile. “In that case, I’ll have Hank activate the splinter dimension device in 5 minutes. All you need to do is hang on for the ride! We’ll retrieve you from the splinter dimension after the mission.”

“Right,” Bruno said uncertainly, “And you’re sure the splinter dimension is safe, right?”

²⁰¹ It’s anyone’s guess as to how Guy and Amy reached the Amazon so quickly, without any resources.

²⁰² In fact, this is a massive understatement: Guy and Amy are basically searching more than 6000km of river on foot, looking for two bad guys. Thank goodness this story doesn’t need to worry about pesky things like probability!

²⁰³ How would Guy know that Crimex is using a boat on this heist, let alone a *new* boat? This is another example of failing to keep track of which characters should know what.

²⁰⁴ There are many different options for conveying exposition to an audience... but one of the laziest approaches is to make a character say “as you know”, followed by a big chunk of unnaturally precise dialogue.

²⁰⁵ We will never speak of them again.

"You'll be fine," she assured him, "I've already tested this trick on a dozen robots, and only one of them turned inside out."

"Uh... I'm not sure I like those odds, Alexia," stammered Bruno nervously.

Alexia laughed. "I'm just messing with you, Bruno! I already tried it myself. Honestly, it's as safe as crossing the street! In fact, it's safer, because physics does all the walking for you: basically, your body just uniformly changes its quantum phase²⁰⁶."

"I'll take your word for it," replied Bruno wryly, "Well, then... see you back at base, sis. And don't keep me waiting in the splinter dimension."

Alexia smirked. "If you get bored, the ship has some weightlifting equipment in the cargo hold."

"Cut the chatter, everyone," Malena ordered over the comms²⁰⁷, "We're in the middle of a heist!"

"That's true," agreed Hank over the comms, "And the sooner we finish up, the sooner we can learn what Drake's planning to do with all of these landmarks."

"I'm looking forward to it," Alexia wryly replied, "See you back at base, everyone."

* * * * *

"Hey, did you hear that?" asked Guy, motioning for Amy to stop. They both strained their ears to listen over the constant sound of the nearby river: in the distance, they could hear an approaching helicopter.

Amy grinned. "Crimex?"

"Let's check it out," Guy replied. He pulled out a pair of binoculars²⁰⁸, and scanned the horizon in the direction of the noise. Sure enough, there was a heavily modified helicopter hovering over the river, with a boat travelling directly beneath it²⁰⁹. "There's the helicopter... and there's a boat, too."

"And there's Bruno," added Amy, as she looked through her own binoculars. "I can see him on the deck."

"Perfect," said Guy, "And the boat will be here any minute. But how do we get onboard?"

Amy studied the river carefully. "There," she said, pointing a short distance upstream, "The boat's going to pass a rocky outcropping on this side of the river. If we're at the top of the outcropping by then, we can jump directly onto the boat."

²⁰⁶ The implication seems to be that changing an object's "phase" can shift it into another dimension. As with most science fiction, we're blending real scientific concepts (and plausible-sounding words) with fantasy.

²⁰⁷ Um... *what?* Malena's in jail! How is she suddenly ordering people around on the comms? This *must* be a goof! If this had been done accidentally, we might suppose that it's either a simple "name swap", or else Malena was originally captured later in the story. Of course, the *real* reason it's here is that this story's deliberately defective, and I threw it in for a quick laugh. :)

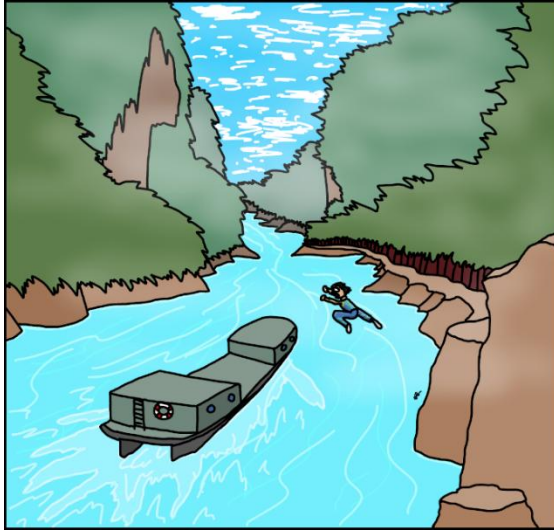
²⁰⁸ This is the first we've heard that the BLA still has binoculars. And I'm only picking on it because the last few chapters have made a big deal of saying "this is all we've got, and this is what we've salvaged or purchased".

²⁰⁹ The previous scene with Guy and Amy gave us the impression that they were surrounded by jungle... so it's hard to guess how they can spot both the helicopter and the boat from their current position. Maybe the river runs really straight where they're standing, so that they have an unobstructed view when they look upstream.

Guy smiled admiringly at her. "Attention to detail, indeed! Okay... let's go!"

Together, they sprinted toward the rocky outcropping. Guy could tell that the timing would be tight: even running at top speed, they'd probably only reach the outcropping a few seconds ahead of the boat. Just as they were getting close, however, Amy tripped on a tree root and sprawled flat on the ground.

Guy slowed his pace and looked back at Amy, his face a picture of concern. "I'm fine, just go!" Amy urged him, "I can still cover you from the shore!" Nodding wordlessly, Guy put on a final burst of speed and reached the outcropping, just in time to engage his cloak, jump through the air, and land neatly on the passing boat's deck²¹⁰.



Guy quickly turned back to the shore: sure enough, Amy was back on her feet by now, doing her best to match the boat's pace as she ran along the riverside.

"Uh... I forgot that I'd have to run to keep up with the boat!" panted Amy over the comms, "If you want my cover fire, you'd better work fast²¹¹!"

"Then let's make this quick," agreed Guy. Secure in the knowledge that he was cloaked, Guy snuck across the boat to Bruno's position and fired a stun shot at point-blank range.

Bruno flinched from the impact of the energy bolt, but to Guy's alarm, he remained standing. A bemused smile appeared on Bruno's face, as he began looking around for signs of his would-be assailant. "Well, well, well... if it isn't the BLA," he gloated, "Not that it matters: as you can see, we're now immune to your stun shots. Why don't you come out with your hands up -"

²¹⁰ I assume Guy did his best to land quietly... invisibility alone isn't enough to avoid being noticed.

²¹¹ Honestly, I don't see any other way this could've worked: Guy has their only cloaking device, and they're supposed to be staying hidden... so Amy probably shouldn't have tried to board the boat at all.

From the riverside came a distinct “phoot” sound. A potato shot across the river and struck Bruno directly in the face, knocking him unconscious²¹².

“Wow,” marveled Guy, “That was an incredible shot, Amy!”

“I was aiming for his chest,” admitted Amy over the comms, “*Man*, this thing is inaccurate!”

Guy chuckled. “Well anyway, I guess we have our captive. Now, where’s that device they always use to steal landmarks?” Guy looked around the boat, and his eyes fell on the boat’s cabin door. “Amy, I’m going to search inside. I won’t need your cover fire now, so take a quick rest and catch your breath.”

“Thanks!” Amy gasped, as she came to a stop on the shore. “Phew... that boat moves faster than you’d think.”

Guy walked over to the door. However, just as he put his hand on the latch, Amy’s voice came urgently over his comms: “Guy, get off the boat *right now*!”

Guy looked behind him, and then did a double-take: the river behind him was starting to disappear, the same way the other landmarks had. The weird flicker of pseudo-motion and vanishing water had already consumed most of the river, and now it had almost reached the boat! Pivoting on one foot, Guy made an urgent dash toward the vessel’s side, but it was too late: the effects of the splinter dimension device caught up with the boat.

From the shore, Amy watched helplessly as the river, the boat, and Guy vanished before her eyes. “No!” she cried.

Just then, Arthur spoke over Amy’s comms. “Amy! We’re seeing news reports that the Amazon River disappeared²¹³ ... what’s going on over there?”

“We were too late,” she answered grimly, “We nearly captured a Crimex agent, but I guess the dimension device was in the helicopter. The river and the boat are both gone.”

There was a pause. “Where’s Guy?” asked Arthur, with concern.

Amy anxiously regarded the empty space where the river had been, only moments ago. “I have absolutely no idea.”

²¹² If you’re an impressionable young person, then please take note: *DO NOT shoot potato guns at people*! It’s a stupid and irresponsible thing to do. Amy would probably get in trouble with her parents for this stunt, if they hadn’t disappeared in Paris 5 years ago.

²¹³ Wow... those must be *very* speedy news networks!

Chapter 23: Splinter Dimension

The moment Guy was hit by the effects of the splinter dimension device, he felt a strange sensation of motion. Everything around him remained stationary²¹⁴, but he had the distinct impression that he was moving somewhere. And then, without warning, it happened: the trees, sky, and everything else around him faded out of existence, replaced with black.

However, it wasn't a "dark" blackness, caused by the absence of light: Guy could still see his hands in front of his face, along with the river and the boat he was standing on. It was the blackness of total nothingness. There was simply nothing else to see except himself, the boat, the river, and beyond that... the landmarks stolen by Crimex, standing out starkly against the complete nothingness. Guy suddenly realized that the area around him was profoundly quiet: the total silence was almost more unsettling than the lack of visuals.

"So, this is where all the landmarks end up," Guy muttered to himself. The sound of his voice seemed like an intrusion on the silence... but in spite of this, Guy felt his curiosity growing by the minute. What kind of place *was* this, anyway?

He leaned on the side of the boat, and observed the distant landmarks which dotted the black, featureless landscape. As he gazed at them, he noticed a curious detail: each of the landmarks were lit differently. For example, the river and the boat still looked like they were in broad daylight. In contrast, the Pyramid and the Eiffel Tower seemed to be illuminated by moonlight. "Fascinating," he observed, "All the landmarks are illuminated as if they're still in their original locations²¹⁵!"

Guy's cloak had already run out, and common sense was reminding him that this was no time to indulge his scientific curiosity. Even so, Guy wanted to try one thing. Experimentally, he picked up some gravel that he'd tracked onto the boat, and then hurled it as far as he could into the blackness. The gravel lost altitude and suddenly hit an invisible floor, where it spread out.

"So there *is* a surface out there, even if I can't see it." Guy mused. Now that his eyes were growing accustomed to the blackness, he began to notice vague, shifting patterns in the distance. He squinted for a better view, but they seemed to disappear when he focused on them²¹⁶. "I wonder if my eyes are just playing tricks on me."

Guy's speculations were cut short by a strange buzzing noise behind him. He whirled around to see a portal opening up before his eyes: it was roughly the size of a door and fringed with crackling energy. It dawned on him that Crimex deliberately captured this boat along with the river... and in that case, this portal likely meant that someone was coming to retrieve Bruno²¹⁷. Opting to conserve his cloaking device for a more desperate moment, Guy hid behind a nearby barrel to watch the portal²¹⁸.

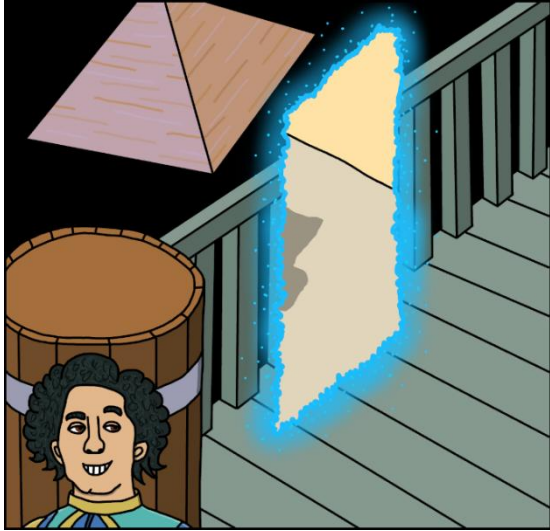
²¹⁴ This should be spelled "stationary". Guy's surroundings are not writing materials.

²¹⁵ This is pretty cool, except for one little problem: *Crimex never stole the Eiffel Tower!* If you don't believe me, just read the "Paris chapter" again. :)

²¹⁶ Incidentally, none of these observations have any bearing on the plot. They're just here to tease some nifty details about how this bizarre dimension works.

²¹⁷ I wonder how Crimex is planning to get their boat out of here? Perhaps with an even bigger portal?

²¹⁸ Many heroes owe their success to conveniently placed cover within the bad guy's bases and large vehicles.



* * * * *

Alexia piloted her wheelchair through the portal and onto the ship's deck. *Right where I'd calculated it would be*, she thought with satisfaction. "Hey Bruno," she called out, "C'mon! Break time's over. Let's go." That's when she noticed Bruno's unconscious form, slumped on the deck.

"Bruno!?" she shouted in alarm. "Are you okay? *Wake up!*"

Bruno stirred with a groan, and groggily opened his eyes. "Ugh... Alexia? What happened?"

"That's what I was going to ask you!" Alexia replied with concern, as her wheelchair drew up to him.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Bruno slowly got to his feet and massaged his head. "I remember we were nearly finished the Amazon River heist," he said groggily, "You were just explaining to me how safe the splinter dimension was, and then..." He frowned. "And that's it. Sorry, I don't remember anything else²¹⁹."

Alexia frowned and looked at Bruno more closely. "Bruno, you're covered in gunk! What is this?" She carefully plucked a piece of gunk from his shoulder, and sniffed it experimentally. Her frown deepened. "Why do you have potato flecks all over you?"

Bruno looked thoughtful for a moment, but he finally shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe an enraged monkey threw a *papa criolla*²²⁰ at me."

Alexia scowled, as her eyes scanned the boat's surroundings suspiciously. "Well... we can chase down that theory later. For now, we'd better get you out of here. Drake wants us for the big meeting."

²¹⁹ Ah, selective amnesia... the ultimate expression of lazy writing! Instead of carefully structuring the story to ensure that Bruno never learns the BLA ambushed him in the first place, we just *forced* him to forget the few details that we didn't want him to remember. For the record: amnesia is rare, and it almost never works this conveniently.

²²⁰ A South American potato variety. I'm not sure why, but I find it amusing that Bruno knows this... it's just so specific!

Alexia and Bruno left the splinter dimension through the portal, which closed behind them a few seconds later. Unbeknownst to either of them, Guy had already cloaked and slipped out through the portal half a minute earlier.

* * * * *

The moment Alexia mentioned “potato flecks”, Guy decided it was time to go. If Alexia got suspicious enough, she might start searching the ship... or even worse, close the portal and trap him in this bizarre dimension. Guy engaged his cloak and quietly dashed out through the portal: he found himself in a large laboratory filled with advanced equipment. *This must be the Crimex base*, Guy thought excitedly. *If I can just escape from here, I’ll know where Crimex has been hiding this whole time!*

At that moment, Alexia and Bruno entered the workshop through the portal. Even though Guy was invisible, he instinctively ducked behind a nearby counter. From his hiding place, he could hear the portal close itself.

“Can’t Drake put off the meeting for an hour or so?” Bruno complained, “I’ve got a headache.”

“If we ask him to put off the meeting, he’ll want to know why,” Alexia explained impatiently, “And *then* he’ll want to know why you have a headache. And *then* he’ll demand to know why you don’t remember what happened, and why you have potato flecks on you, and so on. Believe me, that would be an even bigger headache than the one you already have... especially since we don’t have a good answer yet.” She paused. “Besides... I really do want to hear his big plan for all these landmarks. Don’t you?”

“Good point,” affirmed Bruno, “Let’s go see what this is all about.” Bruno and Alexia left the room, still unaware that they’d left an enemy in their lab.

Guy took a moment to consider what he’d just overheard. The safest bet was to get out of here right now, and report back to the BLA: that way, he could tell everyone where the Crimex base was, and they could plan their final attack. *Besides*, Guy reflected ruefully, *My last escape attempt didn’t really work out... and this time around, I can’t expect Amy to save me at the last minute. The sooner I’m out of here, the better.*

There was only one problem. This mission wasn’t just about stopping Crimex... it was also about safely returning the world’s landmarks²²¹. And from the sound of things, Professor Drake’s impending meeting might provide crucial answers about the landmark heist. There was no guarantee that the BLA could obtain this information later on, even if they captured and interrogated the Crimex agents. Guy steeled himself: he would take the risk and try eavesdropping on the meeting.

Guy snuck out the lab’s door and down the hall, conscious of his cloaking device’s time limit. If everyone was going to meet Drake, then they’d probably be in an office somewhere. He turned a corner and spotted a likely-looking door at the end of the hall, but his cloaking device started vibrating its silent warning that it was about to run out. Silently cursing the 3-minute limitation, Guy dashed into a nearby closet.

²²¹ Actually, this is the first time anyone’s mentioned returning the landmarks as a BLA objective... but I guess you could argue that it was implied by their overall mission to stop Crimex.

As his cloaking device recharged, Guy realized that he could hear voices through the closet's ventilation duct. Drake's voice impatiently asked, "What's keeping them, anyway?"

Another voice, likely Hank's²²², jokingly replied "Maybe Bruno really *did* turn inside out."

"If Alexia said it's safe, then it's safe," replied Drake's voice dismissively, "She'd never enter the splinter dimension herself unless she was convinced of that."

"Well, she would know," replied Hank's voice, "She designed the whole thing herself²²³."

Guy squirmed with impatience. He wanted to get in that office before Drake's meeting started. As if to emphasize his concern, he heard Bruno's footsteps pass by the closet door²²⁴. Once Bruno and Alexia reached the office, the meeting would start! Fortunately, at that moment, his cloaking device finished charging.

Guy engaged the cloak, and silently dashed to catch up with Bruno and Alexia. He managed to slip past Bruno's huge frame and into the office, just as Bruno turned to close the door. From the look of things, Drake was going to address everyone while standing in front of his desk. Guy quickly dashed across the room and hid behind Drake's desk. *Even if my cloak runs out*, Guy thought to himself, *I should have plenty of cover*.

"Attention everyone," Drake began, "It's time to bring everyone up to speed on 'Phase 2'... and how we're going to use these landmarks to make ourselves stupendously rich!"

From his concealment behind Drake's desk, Guy smiled. *Perfect*²²⁵.

²²² Guy and Amy saw Hank in New York, and Guy heard Hank's name back in Cairo... but no one from the BLA has really heard Hank's voice. So, Guy wouldn't know to associate this voice with Hank. I guess you could argue that in this case, Hank's name is only identified in the narration, which is allowed to be omnipotent... but then again, the narration is currently following Guy's perspective. Is the narrator still "allowed" to know things that Guy doesn't know when it's following his perspective, especially if it's not written in first person? Actually, you know what? Never mind... I've just given myself a worse headache than Bruno, so I'm going to lie down for a bit.

²²³ Hank basically confirms here that *Alexia* designed the splinter dimension device. It must have been a goof when Alexia said that Drake designed it... which is frustrating, because you'd think that Alexia of all people would know.

²²⁴ Bruno and Alexia left the lab before Guy did. It's unclear why they're only just passing Guy's closet now.

²²⁵ Wait, though! Wasn't Guy already able to eavesdrop on Drake and Hank through the ventilation duct in the closet? Why did Guy need to take the extra risk of sneaking into the actual meeting room?

Chapter 24: Master Plan

As Guy continued to hide behind the desk, Drake grandly addressed his group.



“Before I explain my full plan,” Drake began smugly, “Does anyone want to hazard a guess? What do you think we’re going to do with all these landmarks?”

“I figured we would just ransom them back to each country,” replied Bruno.

“Or we could sell them piece by piece to collectors on the black market,” suggested Hank, “We could probably keep that going for a long time.”

“Maybe you don’t have a plan, and you’re hoping to steal one of our ideas,” grinned Alexia. Drake scowled, and she hastily added, “Or maybe you’re planning to use the splinter dimension as some kind of super-expensive, permanent black-market tourist attraction.”

Drake raised an eyebrow. “Actually, that’s not a bad guess, Alexia... but you aren’t quite there yet.” He grinned wolfishly, like a bagel that was 20 stories tall²²⁷. “We’ll use the dimension device to combine and overlap the landmarks into one *super*-landmark! Picture the Pyramid with a Leaning Tower of Pisa jutting out of it, joined to Sydney Opera House by the Golden Gate Bridge, and ringed by the Amazon River!” He paused thoughtfully. “And I think there’s some more. I’ll have to check my list again.”

Drake grinned expectantly, as everyone digested this information. Finally, Bruno spoke up. “I don’t get it. What good does a super-landmark do? How does that make us stupendously rich?”

“Don’t you see?” demanded Drake impatiently, “We’ve just stolen a bunch of the world’s most tourist-driven landmarks! That means we’ve cornered the market on scenic destinations! We’ll put the super-landmark on a remote island somewhere. People will come from all over the planet to see it... and we can charge whatever we want!”

²²⁶ Wait a minute... previous chapters indicated that the impressive floor-to-ceiling window in Drake’s office was only a greenscreen! So why is the dramatic window still here, when Guy’s visiting the office in person?

²²⁷ I have no idea what this means. Use your imagination.

There was a stunned silence, as everyone mulled over Drake's plan.

"That sounds great, Drake," said Alexia tactfully, "But once you go public with this, I'm pretty sure the world's governments will shut us down. Violently."

"That's where you're wrong!" declared Drake gloatingly, "Because we're going to plant explosives throughout our super-landmark, and make sure everyone knows it! Then, if we catch even a whiff of anyone's agents or military sniffing around, we'll detonate the explosives... thus permanently disfiguring all the landmarks! No country would dare risk the stigma of being the nation which got everyone else's landmarks destroyed."

"But... won't the explosives discourage tourism?" asked Hank skeptically.

"You'd think so, but no," Drake assured him, "With the right marketing campaign, we'll still get plenty of business. Humans are funny that way²²⁸."

"Come see the world's only super-landmark," mused Alexia, "But if you try any funny business, we'll blow it all up."

There was another silence. "I still like my ransoming idea better," announced Bruno, "It just seems simpler²²⁹." There was general agreement.

"Well, too bad!" Drake snapped, "We're doing my idea." Then he turned to Alexia, and almost as an afterthought, asked: "By the way... I assume we can use the dimension device to combine the landmarks *and* make them reappear on a remote island in our original dimension... right?"

Alexia was taken aback. Her eyes briefly bugged out as she considered the implications of Drake's question. "Well... yeah, probably. But you really should've asked me earlier! What if I'd said it couldn't be done²³⁰?"

Drake waved his hand dismissively. "You would've figured something out. You always do, right? Anyway... job well done, everyone! With this latest mission, we have all the landmarks we need²³¹. Alexia, did you bring the device with you?"

Alexia piloted her wheelchair over to Drake, and handed him the splinter dimension device with a proud grin. "Amazon River included," she announced.

²²⁸ Honestly, that's probably the most realistic aspect of Drake's entire plan.

²²⁹ Bruno makes a good point here: although Drake's plan deserves points for originality, there's a hundred reasons why it would likely fail, either sooner or later.

²³⁰ Actually, now that I think about it... this device can snatch massive objects, safely transport them in another dimension, and then make them reappear in a completely different country! This has insane implications for travel, trade, security, and even military conquest! Why isn't Crimex trying to profit from any of *that*?

²³¹ Before the Amazon River heist, Drake said it was time to "kick our landmark heists into high gear". But this latest statement suggests that he was only planning to steal one more landmark. Perhaps Drake is just making things up as he goes along.

"It'll make a fine moat for my super-landmark," grinned Drake, carefully setting the device on his desk. "Everyone... let's head to the cafeteria and celebrate! The burgers are on me²³²!" Everyone gave a hearty cheer, before following Drake out of the office.

Guy was left alone with the splinter dimension device.

He peered over the top of the desk incredulously. It was just sitting there, unguarded: the very device which Crimex had used to steal and store every landmark, and apparently, the key to restoring those landmarks to their original locations.

It can't be this easy, can it? Guy thought to himself, *It must be a trap! Somehow, they've realized they have an intruder, and they know we can cloak... so they've secretly blocked the exits and left this as bait. They're just waiting for me to give away my position, and then they'll pounce!* But the more he thought about it, the more he realized it didn't matter. *Then again... if they really are on to me, I'm probably as good as caught anyway. I might as well hope for the best, and just go for it!*

Guy cloaked himself, hesitated ever so briefly, and then snatched the device off the desk. He stood there for several seconds, waiting tensely for the axe to fall... but nothing happened. "Right then," he muttered to himself, "Here goes nothing!"

Under the cloak's protection, Guy strode purposefully out of the office and down the hall. As he passed the cafeteria, he distinctly heard Drake protest, "Hey, I said I'd pay for burgers... buy your own fries!" Guy smiled wryly to himself, and kept moving.

After making another turn, Guy found a door labeled "Stairs". He opened the door and entered a stairwell, which stretched surprisingly far both up and down. *Man, this place is huge*, he marveled, *But which way to the exit?* He carefully considered the options. If this was an underground base, then the exit would be near the top. But if this was an aboveground base, then the exit would be at the bottom²³³. "Which way..." he mused. He finally settled on taking the stairs down: it looked like there were fewer floors in that direction, which meant less wasted time if he guessed wrong.

Near the bottom of the stairwell, his cloaking device started vibrating its silent warning. He paused at the final door and patiently waited 3 minutes for it to recharge. *For all I know*, Guy reflected, *There's a dozen guards behind this door*. Finally, the cloak was ready again: either Guy was about to escape, or he was walking into a brilliantly orchestrated trap. He recloaked, opened the door, and walked into a nondescript lobby which exited out onto the street. Guy frowned at the lobby, as a sudden suspicion began to dawn on him. *This looks exactly like...*

Guy sprinted out of the lobby and into the bright daylight. He looked back at the building he'd just exited: his suspicions were confirmed. Even though he'd been expecting it at this point, his jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me..."

²³² This raises some interesting questions. Does Crimex have a staffed cafeteria at their base? If so, does the cafeteria staff know they're working for criminals? Food for thought! Pun intended.

²³³ Mind you, the picture at the start of this chapter clearly showed clouds outside, so Guy should already know this is an aboveground base. But let's hedge our bets! As we've already noted, Drake's office was supposed to have a greenscreen instead of a window... in which case, Guy's uncertainty might be perfectly reasonable!

* * * * *

Guy burst through the entrance of the Muddled Badger, taking everyone by surprise.

“Guy!” exclaimed Amy. She rushed up and gave him a hug. “Thank goodness you’re safe! We were just starting to plan a rescue mission to find you²³⁴!”

Guy cocked his head. “How were you going to rescue me if you didn’t know where I was?”

“We were still working on that,” smiled Arthur, “But I guess it won’t be necessary now.”

Amy examined Guy’s face. “Hey, your shades are gone!” she observed.

Belatedly, Guy felt his head and patted his pockets in dismay. “You’re right,” he groaned, “I must’ve lost them during the mission²³⁵!” Then he shook his head. “Wait, no... never mind that now! I have great news, everyone! I know where the Crimex base is located!”

“Where?” asked Arthur eagerly.

“You aren’t going to believe this,” said Guy excitedly, “The Crimex base is in our old office building! In fact, they were just one floor above us²³⁶!”

“No way!” exclaimed Grant.

“Oh, that’s right,” remarked Thelma, “I already knew that.”

Everyone stared at her. “Well, I used to be their mole, right?” she explained sheepishly, “I had to keep going upstairs to deliver my reports²³⁷.”

“Well... I suppose that’s water under the bridge now,” remarked Arthur, “The important thing is, we know where their base is. That means we can start planning our final attack on Crimex right now!”

“By the way, Guy,” asked Amy curiously, “What’s that little device you’re carrying?”

Guy grinned ear to ear. “That’s right! I’d almost forgotten... everyone, I hold in my hand the smell of victory²³⁸!”

²³⁴ This is still the same afternoon as the Amazon heist. How did Amy return from South America so quickly?

²³⁵ Bonus credit: review the images from the previous chapters, and see if you can figure out exactly when and where Guy lost his shades. No, really! Give it a quick look... it’ll be fun. :)

²³⁶ As ludicrous as this revelation is, it *does* partially explain why Drake was able to plant a mole at the BLA so easily, and how he was able to get a helicopter to their base so quickly. Of course, it *doesn’t* explain why Malena had to leave the building and then sneak back into it when she attacked the BLA. And how is it possible that the BLA staff never bumped into the Crimex staff in the building’s main lobby? What about the Crimex underground parking lot, which we briefly saw after the pyramid heist? And I’m sure that’s only scratching the surface of the many plot problems caused by this reveal.

²³⁷ Nobody seems surprised to hear that Thelma is a former mole, even though only Amy and Guy knew this, and they’d promised not to tell anyone else. Also, why didn’t Thelma immediately give away the location of the Crimex base, once she switched sides? As noted earlier, the whole “mole” sub-plot causes an avalanche of secondary headaches for the story.

²³⁸ “The smell of victory!?”

Chapter 25: Final Preparations

Alexia was in a pretty good mood as she piloted her wheelchair into Drake's office, and with good reason. She was feeling better about herself, she was working on some cool new projects with Hank (although the topic of dating hadn't been officially broached yet), and by all accounts, Crimex was poised to achieve fame and fortune. And now, she was bringing good news to her boss. *This is shaping up to be an excellent day*, she smiled to herself.

"Hey Drake," Alexia announced, as she approached Drake's desk. "I finished running the numbers, and everything's good. We shouldn't have any trouble using the splinter dimension to combine the landmarks, exactly like you wanted."

Strangely enough, Drake's eyes briefly bugged out with surprise, as if he'd only just remembered that he'd asked Alexia to investigate this. A sheepish look crossed his face. "Oh, uh... right. The super-landmark. Well Alexia, I appreciate your work on those calculations, but... um, I was just thinking. Maybe it's a better idea if we use Bruno's idea to ransom the landmarks, instead."

Alexia was taken aback. "Really? Well... if you say so. It's definitely a simpler idea." She cocked her head thoughtfully. "Why the change of heart, though? You seemed pretty set on your 'super-landmark' idea."

"What difference does it make?" challenged Drake, as he studiously avoided her gaze, "Bruno just made some good points, that's all. Besides, the super-landmark idea was too impractical."

Alexia's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Okay, Drake... what's going on? C'mon! If we're going to help you with your plot, we need to know what's happened."

"It's nothing, really," insisted Drake, "It's just that we can't do the super-landmark thing anymore because I... um... well, because mumble mumble mumble."

The last part of Drake's sentence was unintelligible, and Alexia was now on full alert. Something was definitely wrong. "What was that last thing you said?" challenged Alexia, "Speak clearly!"

Drake gulped, and then in the smallest voice he could manage, muttered: "I lost the dimension device."

For a full 10 seconds, Alexia stared at Drake in disbelief, finding herself at a complete loss for words. Then her face scrunched up in rage, and she shrieked, "You lost *what*!?" The word "what" ended on a completely different octave from the rest of her sentence.

"It's no big deal!" said Drake defensively, as he hastily gathered up his desk supplies, "I mean, nobody outside Crimex knows the device is gone, right? So, we'll just ransom the landmarks back to everyone, and by the time they realize we don't have the goods anymore, we'll be long gone!"

"That's assuming someone else doesn't find the device in the meantime, you *doofus*!" she barked at him, "Do you have any idea how many months of development, and weeks of mission execution you just scuttled with one boneheaded move!?" She glared at him for a moment. "And why are you gathering up your desk supplies!?"

Drake winced. "So that you can't throw them at me."

“Oh, that’s *rich*,” she thundered, as she impulsively reached for a coffee mug. Drake quickly snatched it away, so Alexia settled for ranting at him. “This whole time you’ve been pelting us with desk supplies, calling us names... and meanwhile, it turns out that the biggest *idiot* in the entire building was *you*!”

By this time, Bruno and Hank had dashed into Arthur’s²³⁹ office to see what the shouting was about. “What’s wrong, sis?” asked Bruno quickly.

Alexia glared, and pointed her finger at Drake like a pistol. “Drake lost the splinter dimension device!”

“Are you *kidding* me, Drake!?” howled Hank, “Do you have any idea how much work it took to capture all those landmarks!?”

“In my defense, I came up with a pretty good contingency plan,” offered Drake lamely.

“Actually, ransoming the landmarks was Bruno’s plan!” countered Alexia, “And it was a better idea anyway... so, maybe we should put *him* in charge!”

“Guys, guys!” interrupted Bruno, “Let’s back up for a second... Alexia made the device, right? Why can’t she just make another one²⁴⁰?”

“Because it wouldn’t help,” snarled Alexia, “The device has to be tuned to *exactly* the same phase variance as the original one, or else it won’t access the same splinter dimension where we stashed the landmarks. And before you ask, the answer is ‘no’... we don’t know the original phase variance, because *Drake* wouldn’t let me write it down!”

“If it helps, I think it ended with a ‘2’,” Drake muttered, “It was a security risk to write down the entire thing.”

“Well, that’s some pretty great security, Drake!” retorted Alexia, “I guess *nobody* gets to have the landmarks now! That device was our only...” her voice trailed off, and she looked thoughtful for a moment. A terrible suspicion crept into her mind. “I should’ve asked this right away. Drake, when’s the last time you saw the device?”

“At our big meeting yesterday,” Drake replied. “I left it on my desk.” He didn’t know where this conversation was going, but he was relieved to have Alexia’s attention diverted elsewhere. Unfortunately, his relief was short-lived.

Alexia slapped her forehead in despair. “We’re *done*, guys. I mean, we are *toast*! I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming... I should’ve known better, the moment I found Bruno unconscious on the boat deck.”

“You found Bruno unconscious and didn’t tell me!?” demanded Drake, but Alexia silenced him with a withering glare.

“Alexia, what are you getting at?” asked Bruno warily.

²³⁹ Whoa... I’m pretty sure that was supposed to read “Drake’s office”.

²⁴⁰ Now that we’ve established that there was only one splinter dimension device... I wonder how the “double landmark heist” in Paris was originally supposed to work?

“Don’t you get it!?” she asked in exasperation, “We must’ve picked up one of the BLA agents along with the Amazon River!” She looked at Bruno. “They knocked you unconscious, and then they used that stupid cloak of theirs to steal our device and escape!”

An ominous silence descended upon the room, as its occupants began to digest what they’d just heard.

“The BLA has our splinter dimension device,” said Hank quietly.

“Yeah,” agreed Bruno, “And even worse: now they know where our base is!”

“But I destroyed them,” whispered Drake in disbelief, “I literally crushed their base out of existence. The news report said there were no survivors²⁴¹!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Drake,” replied Alexia, “But you must’ve missed at least one of them.”

“Prove it!” demanded Drake, “Who was watching the security cameras yesterday?”

“No one,” Bruno reminded him, “You pulled us off our normal duties so that we could celebrate in the cafeteria and eat hamburgers. Remember²⁴²?”

“Well, why would you let me do something that stupid!?” protested Drake indignantly.

Alexia opened her mouth and then shut it again, stifling a second tantrum. “You know what, Drake?” she declared, sounding calmer than she felt, “We don’t have time to debate this with you. The BLA is coming for us, and we need to prepare. We can figure out how to salvage your landmark fiasco afterward. Hank, Bruno... you’re with me. We’ll have to pull an all-nighter in the lab to get ready.”

Alexia grimly piloted her wheelchair out of the office, followed by Hank and Bruno. Drake was left alone.

“Well,” Drake finally remarked, “I’m glad that worked itself out.” He began putting back his desk supplies.

* * * * *

Back at the Muddled Badger, the BLA was making final plans for their attack.

“Based on Guy’s report, the Crimex agents have apparently developed a countermeasure to our stun gun,” Grant remarked, “Until we can figure out how they did it, I’ve decided to repurpose the stun gun’s parts to make something new.” He handed Guy a complicated-looking device which resembled a high-powered water gun. “This thing fires a thick, black, sticky substance at its target. It should be useful for slowing down opponents: I’m calling it the ‘gunk gun’.”

“Thanks Grant,” replied Guy, as he accepted the gunk gun, “Any progress on the splinter dimension device?”

²⁴¹ How could the news crews possibly report no survivors? A bunch of people saw the BLA agents land safely on the street... they even applauded! Let’s just agree that the whole “let Crimex think we’re dead” subplot is a confusing mess, and leave it at that.

²⁴² It shouldn’t matter if no one was actively watching the cameras at the time: there should be recordings! Or are we supposed to understand that Drake installed a security camera system which doesn’t make recordings, and *then* failed to staff it properly? Ugh... that sounds like something he might do.

Grant shook his head ruefully. “The science behind that thing is way over my head,” he admitted, “And I don’t dare take it apart for further study... I’m not sure I could get it working again.”

“Can’t we just turn it on?” asked Amy curiously.

“Sure, if you’re willing to risk accidentally beaming all of us into another dimension,” replied Grant.

“In that case, I’m afraid the device will have to wait until later,” said Arthur decisively, “Right now, I need everyone focused on tomorrow’s raid.”

Arthur pointed at Thelma. “Thelma’s provided us with a detailed blueprint of the Crimex base²⁴³. Tomorrow, using a rental truck, she will drive us to the enemy office building. Grant will stay behind at the Muddled Badger, to provide remote support.”

Arthur spread the Crimex office blueprint over one of the nearby tables, as he continued: “Since this is our final attack on Crimex, the need for disguises is over. We can all revert to our standard attire, except for Amy: she’s going to disguise herself as Alexia, and convince the main lobby’s guard to grant her access to the Crimex floor. Once she has an elevator pass, she and Guy will lead the main assault against Crimex itself. As they capture the enemy agents, I’ll bring them back to Thelma’s rental truck, where they can be safely detained until the authorities arrive²⁴⁴.”

Arthur paused. “And that’s about it. We have a dangerous mission ahead of us, everyone... but I’m proud to call you my agents. If everyone does their best, I’m convinced that we can put an end to Crimex for good! Now, everyone get a good night’s sleep... tomorrow will be a busy day!”

“Three cheers for the BLA!” declared Amy, and everyone enthusiastically joined in.

* * * * *

Back at the Crimex base, Drake was conducting a job interview with an eager young applicant²⁴⁵. “So tell me, Kelly,” Drake queried, “What advantages do you feel you’d bring to the Crimex organization?”

“Well,” replied Kelly cheerfully, “I’m a fast learner, and I like working with other people!”

“You might change your tune after meeting some of our people,” chuckled Drake, “But anyway, that’s a good start.” He shuffled some papers. “Now, it happens that our company’s primary assassin recently... uh, left the organization. How are your combat skills?”

Kelly looked confused. “Combat skills? I’m training as a General Accountant.”

“That’s fine,” said Drake dismissively, “You can always pick up the technical stuff later. The main thing is that you’re willing to learn. Now, let’s shift gears: can you give me an example of a situation at your previous job that you wish you’d handled differently?”

²⁴³ That’s some pretty technical knowledge for a humble mole.

²⁴⁴ Wait... so why can’t they just call in the authorities against Crimex *now*? If the BLA is basically coming out of hiding, then why do they need to do this on their own?

²⁴⁵ Yes, it would seem that Crimex conducts job interviews like any other place of business. This is far too absurd to dignify with a detailed analysis, so let’s just enjoy the scene for what it is.

Kelly thought about it for a moment, and then smiled offhandedly. "I guess I kept forgetting to take my coffee mug back to the kitchen. That always annoyed my boss."

"Yeah, that would annoy me too," replied Drake wryly, "But speaking of your last job, what was your reason for leaving, anyway?"

"Well, to be honest, my co-op at the accounting firm wasn't everything I'd hoped it would be," explained Kelly earnestly, "In fact, I'm starting to wonder if accounting's really for me... that's why I took this interview. The advertisement said this place does something tourism-related, right?"

Drake swallowed uneasily. "Um... that remains to be seen. Maybe. Now, one more question! It's a hypothetical situation: let's say that you made a massively stupid mistake which irreversibly ruins all your plans, and your organization's survival hinges on what happens in the next 24 hours. What course of action would you take?"

Kelly looked at him curiously. "Um... are you sure this a hypothetical question?"

"Of course it's hypothetical!" barked Drake. "What would you do?"

Kelly shrugged helplessly. "That's awfully vague, and also strangely specific... but I guess I'd consult with my other employees, and try to come up with some kind of strategy."

Drake sighed with relief. "Good, good. That's exactly what Alexia did."

"Who's Alexia?" asked Kelly.

"Doesn't matter," said Drake absently, "Anyway, good interview! We'll let you know by next week!"

"Um... okay," replied Kelly uncertainly, "Thanks."

As she began leaving his office, Alexia piloted her wheelchair into the room, bearing a piece of paper.

"Hey Drake," she said casually, "Can you sign this really quick?"

"Eh?" asked Drake in annoyance, "Oh, fine. Give it to me." He signed the paper and returned it to Alexia, who began leaving the office without a second glance.

"Hey, Alexia," called Drake after her, "What was that document for, anyway?"

Alexia looked over her shoulder, and threw him an innocent smile. "Insurance," she replied simply²⁴⁶.

²⁴⁶ Ooh... something tells me that Drake's going to regret signing that. :)



* * * * *

In a café near the Crimex office building, Kelly was meeting some of her friends for lunch.

“So Kelly,” asked one of them, “Don’t keep us in suspense! Did you ace your interview at Crimex?”

“I’m not sure,” Kelly admitted, “I honestly got a better impression from the garden center job. This Drake guy seems pretty disorganized.”

Chapter 26: Infiltration

It was a pale morning. Thelma carefully stopped her rental truck at the office building where Crimex was located. “Everyone out,” she quipped, “Next stop: justice.”

Arthur chuckled at Thelma’s remark, as Guy and Amy piled out of the truck. Guy was wearing a backpack, so that he could carry some extra gear for the mission. Amy was wearing the best “Alexia disguise” they’d been able to cobble together on short notice: a shoulder-length blonde wig, a blue tank top, and some other accessories.

Amy stared down at her fake leg cast. “Are you sure Alexia’s right leg is the broken one?” she asked apprehensively.

“No,” replied Guy frankly, “I might be remembering that wrong²⁴⁷. But maybe the lobby guard won’t look too closely.” Amy began easing herself down into the battered wheelchair they’d found at the dump. Unthinkingly, Guy helped Amy into it.

Amy smiled at him sweetly. “I appreciate your help, Guy... but my leg isn’t actually broken.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Guy laughed, “Well... it’s the thought that counts.” He gestured toward the office building’s main entrance. “Make us proud, Amy! We’ll be listening over the comms, as usual.”

Amy wheeled herself through the main entrance, while Guy stationed himself just outside, ready to lend support if it was needed. Amy maneuvered herself to the main desk, where the security guard was waiting. “Morning,” said Amy casually, “I need an elevator pass for the 15th floor.”

The guard looked up at Amy: compared to Alexia, she was a completely different height and build, and some of her brown hair was sticking out from under the blonde wig she was wearing, which differed from Alexia’s normal hairstyle. Each accessory on Amy’s person was an unconvincing imitation of Alexia’s normal ensemble. Amy’s eyes were also a different color than Alexia’s, and she hadn’t made any effort to conceal this with contact lenses. And to top it all off, her cast was on the wrong foot.

A great guard would’ve noticed all these differences. An average guard would’ve noticed at least some of these differences. But this particular guard spent most of the day playing games on his cellphone, and he rarely looked directly at the people he was talking to. As a result, he only had a vague idea of what the building’s occupants looked like. And thus, against all odds, Amy’s lame disguise worked exactly as intended²⁴⁸.

²⁴⁷ And he is. If Guy wasn’t sure which leg was broken, then why couldn’t he just review the Crimex broadcast where Alexia accidentally bopped Drake in the face with her crutches? Even if the BLA didn’t have a recording of it, the broadcasts were supposedly public... you’d think they could find it online pretty easily.

²⁴⁸ Wait a minute! Amy shouldn’t need a disguise at all: the BLA used to work at this building, so she should already have her own 15th floor elevator pass. I mean, it’s the *perfect* setup: as we’ve established, the Crimex floor crushed the BLA floor, which means the Amy’s elevator pass would now legitimately take her to the Crimex floor! And even if Amy’s pass was already revoked, I still think she’d have an easier time obtaining a new one as herself, instead of staging this silly farce.

"Oh, it's you," remarked the guard, "That's funny... I don't remember seeing you leave the building last night. How'd you get down here²⁴⁹?"

"Act snarky," Grant advised Amy over the comms, "I get the impression that Alexia's pretty snarky²⁵⁰."

Obligingly, Amy rolled her eyes at the guard. "*Obviously*, I must've come down the elevator and left the building when you weren't looking. I couldn't be in two places at once, could I?"

"I suppose not," conceded the guard, "By the way, what happened to that cool wheelchair you had?"

Heedless of her own words, Amy scornfully replied, "I forgot it upstairs, okay?"

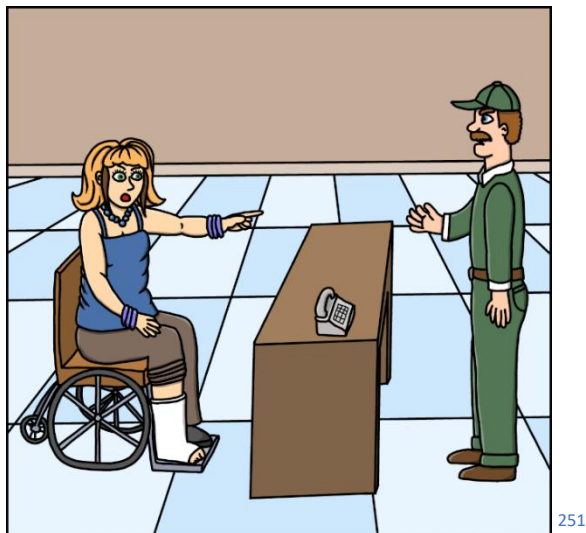
The guard looked confused. "So... you came down here on your crutches, and then came back in this old wheelchair?"

Amy stared at him haughtily for a few moments, trying to collect her thoughts. Finally, she replied, "Yes, that's exactly what happened."

"But that doesn't make sense," the guard protested, "Why didn't you just borrow a loaner wheelchair from our storage room?"

"Why didn't *you* just borrow a loaner wheelchair from our storage room!?" retorted Amy, determined to maintain her snarky facade at all costs.

"I'm just going to say it," sighed Grant over the comms, "This is physically painful to listen to."



"Let her concentrate!" urged Guy.

²⁴⁹ By the way... is this guard part of the general building security, or is he actually on Drake's payroll? At this point in the story, it would be nice to know.

²⁵⁰ Grant must be a superbly accurate judge of character, because the BLA hasn't had many opportunities to hear Alexia mouthing off at people.

²⁵¹ In this picture, the axle on Amy's wheelchair isn't connected to anything: the chair is just sort of "floating" above its 2 wheels. Fortunately, it's subtle enough that most people won't notice... unless somebody points it out. Oops.

"You know what? I don't even care," said the guard disgustedly, "I'm tired of arguing about stuff like this with you. Let's just get down to business." He got out a pad of paper. "How'd you lose your assigned elevator pass?"

"Who says I lost my elevator pass!?" retorted Amy.

"If you haven't lost your elevator pass, then why do you need a new one!?" asked the increasingly frustrated guard.

Amy gulped. "Amy", said Guy over the comms, "Tell the guard you'll report him to the inspector if he doesn't give you the pass!"

"Just give me the pass," insisted Amy belligerently, "Or I'll report you to the inspector!"

"What inspector!?" demanded the guard, "What are you even *talking* about? I've had enough... I'm calling this in!"

"Sorry, Amy," said Guy sheepishly over the comms, "I really thought that would work²⁵²."

Amy sighed. "Fine, call it in," she told the guard, "But first, can you have a quick look at this?" As Amy spoke, she pulled out her potato gun from the bottom of the wheelchair, and with a distinctive "phoot", she fired a potato directly into the guard's face. He was instantly knocked unconscious.

"*Dang* it!" said Amy in frustration, "No matter how carefully I aim for the chest, the potato always clobbers them in the head... it's just impossible to aim!"

"At least it's consistent, though," replied Grant over the comms. "Next time, you can compensate for the aim by pointing lower."

Guy came dashing into the lobby, with Arthur following shortly behind him.

Arthur pointed to the unconscious guard. "Is he with Crimex?"

"I didn't get a chance to find out," admitted Amy, "Lying is really hard!"

"Arthur, you'd better take this guy to the truck, just in case," suggested Guy. He looked at the stairwell ruefully. "I guess we're taking the stairwell, instead²⁵³."

"So much for subterfuge," sighed Amy. She pulled off her disguise, revealing the BLA uniform underneath²⁵⁴.

Guy shrugged. "It was worth a shot."

²⁵² We've all seen it before: that moment in a movie or show when a character lies about something, and for some reason, it has to be *painfully* obvious that they're lying. Sometimes, it actually seems that the character is making up their fibs on the spot, even if they've had plenty of time to prepare. This is a much-abused cliché... and I just figured, why should professional writers have all the fun? I want to try a scene like that!

²⁵³ Why can't Amy or Guy grab a pass from the guard's desk? I mean, yes, that's stealing... but they've already blasted him in the face with a potato! Or does the guard need to perform some special authorization on a pass before it works? This is another case where we don't necessarily have a plot hole... we're just missing some information.

²⁵⁴ Um... Amy's disguise included a tank top. You can't "hide" a vest under that, let alone a sleeved shirt!

* * * * *

Guy and Amy trudged up the stairwell, trying to pace themselves as they went. "15 floors is a *lot*," panted Guy, "Can we rest a moment?"

"Sure," replied Amy, who casually leaned against the wall.

Guy regarded her for a moment. "Hey, why aren't you winded from all these stairs?"

Amy smiled, looking vaguely pleased with herself. "I live on the 25th floor of an apartment building. Compared to *that* climb, this is nothing."

"Doesn't your apartment building have elevators?" asked Guy, somewhat incredulously.

"Sure it does," Amy explained, "But I deliberately take the stairs every day, so that I'll be prepared for a situation like this one."

Guy cocked his head. "Did you really mean that, or were you kidding? I still can't tell sometimes."

"You'll get the hang of it," Amy grinned, "But in this case, yeah... I really do take the stairs every day for the exercise." She looked thoughtful. "I also spend 10 minutes a day tossing coins at the buttons of my television remote, in case I'm ever thrown into prison with a pocketful of change, and the controls to my cell are within throwing distance. But so far, it's never come up."

Guy studied Amy's face carefully. She smiled back at him enigmatically, daring him to make a guess.

"You're serious about that one, aren't you?" he asked, "It's too unusual to be made up. I think."

"Yep," she replied gleefully, "I really do spend 10 minutes a day tossing coins at my remote! Good call, Guy!"

"I'm definitely still guessing," Guy admitted with a smile, "But at least my guesses are getting more accurate. So... 10 minutes a day, huh? You must be a pretty good shot by now."

"Not really," she giggled, "They say 'practice makes perfect', but sometimes it doesn't. Ready to climb the last few flights?"

"Yeah," confirmed Guy, "Let's do this."

They arrived at the 15th floor, only to find that the door had been welded shut. "That's probably a violation of their rental agreement," observed Amy.

"They must be expecting us," remarked Guy pensively, "This wasn't welded shut when I escaped yesterday."

From her pocket, Amy produced her explosive lipstick. "Shall we knock?" she asked with a grin.

"Actually, I thought we could save that little gem for later," replied Guy, "I've brought a few tricks of my own this time... courtesy of Grant."

Guy reached into his backpack and drew out a long length of toaster coil, which was still attached to a salvaged toaster. Working carefully, Guy placed the toaster coil along the seam between the door and the wall, and then twisted the toaster's dial to 10.

The toaster coils quickly began to heat up, until they glowed a bright red. However, the welding wasn't affected.

"This is taking too long," urged Amy, "Hit the 'Bagel' button!"

Guy compliantly enabled the toaster's "Bagel" setting, and the coils began to glow even hotter. The welding gradually began to soften, and then abruptly gave way. The super-heated coils bit right through the frame, separating the wall from the door, which fell to the ground with a loud clang²⁵⁵.

Over the comms, Arthur anxiously asked, "Are you in? Did you get past the door?"

"Yep," quipped Guy, "It's toast." He looked apprehensively into the Crimex base. "Now for the tricky part."

²⁵⁵ I'm very fond of the idea that you could use toaster coils to breach a door. Unfortunately, some hasty research shows that toaster coils only reach about 500 degrees Celsius, whereas many (but not all) metals melt at over 1000 degrees Celsius... although you might be able to break the door without reaching the full melting temperature. Of course, it's also questionable whether hitting the "bagel" button would actually burn through the door any faster. But the real question is: what's powering this toaster?

Chapter 27: Showdown

Guy and Amy exited the stairwell, and found themselves in a gymnasium-sized room, except that it was circular²⁵⁶. The only other door was on the opposite side of the room.

“Marvelous place for an ambush, don’t you think?” mused Guy.

“Well, we have to cross the room one way or another,” Amy pointed out, “The door’s on the other side.”

Guy thought for a moment. “We only have one cloaking device... if we’re close enough, maybe we can share it.”

Grinning, Amy put her arm around his shoulder. “Try it now.”

Guy engaged the cloak, and sure enough, both he and Amy vanished from sight²⁵⁷. They carefully began crossing the room together, ready for anything. “This is fun,” said Amy lightly, “Remind me to share your cloaking device more often.”

“Careful,” cautioned Guy, “They can still hear us, you know.”

Without warning, there was a flash of blue light, and they suddenly found themselves visible again. “Surprise, BLA losers!” gloated Alexia’s voice over a loudspeaker, “We’ve disabled your cloaking device²⁵⁸. Cream them, Hank!”

A hidden wall panel opened up, and Hank roared out in a motorized go-cart with blades mounted on the front. The wall panel closed behind him.

“That explains the rounded room,” exclaimed Guy, as Hank came barreling toward them, “There’s no corners for us to hide in. Split up!”

Guy and Amy dove in opposite directions as Hank roared past them. With an excited hoot, he expertly banked his go-cart for another pass. Guy found himself coughing from the exhaust fumes, but he kept his wits long enough to dodge Hank’s second attempt to run him down. Guy’s coughing worsened, and he belatedly realized that Hank was wearing some sort of breathing mask: the exhaust from the go-cart was almost certainly spreading something bad into the air. In other words, the longer this confrontation took, the more likely it was that he and Amy would lose²⁵⁹.

Hank started banking for another pass: this time, he was steering for Amy. “Hit him with your best shot, Amy!” Guy shouted hoarsely.

²⁵⁶ Isn’t this supposed to be an office building? Did the room actually come like that, or has Crimex done some remodeling? Perhaps it’s the latter: the narrative didn’t mention this room in the earlier chapter, when Guy was escaping. That’s some super-fast remodeling, though!

²⁵⁷ I wonder how far you can push this trick: could it be used to hide, say, an entire football team? What are the limits? And now that I think about it, how does the cloaking device “know” that it should hide you and any people or objects you’re holding, but *not* the floor directly underneath you? I mean, your body is also touching the floor, right? Shouldn’t that disappear, too? And if the floor disappeared, what would you see? I’m just curious. :)

²⁵⁸ We’ll never learn how Alexia managed to beat their cloaking device. I guess we’ll have to go with the catch-all explanation that she’s a genius.

²⁵⁹ This attack deserves points for sneakiness... but if dumping chemicals into the air is an option, then why not forgo the go-cart entirely, and just flood the room with poisonous gas?

“With pleasure!” replied Amy. She deftly tossed her explosive lipstick into Hank’s projected path, waited as long as she dared, then stepped lightly to the side as she squeezed the detonator. To Amy’s dismay, however, Hank anticipated her move! He put on an extra burst of speed and blew past the lipstick tube, which exploded moments later without damaging the go-cart. Hank laughed triumphantly as he narrowly shot past Amy, who began coughing from the fumes.

“That was my last explosive!” bewailed Amy, who already sounded a little hoarse.

“Any other ideas?” coughed Guy. “This is getting bad!”

An angry, determined look spread across Amy’s face. As Hank came around for another pass, Amy pulled out her cellphone and began tapping furiously at it. She continued tapping as Hank’s vicious charge grew closer, making no attempt to dodge the imminent peril. Finally, she looked up with a grimly satisfied smile and stepped neatly to the side. Inexplicably, Hank didn’t even try to compensate: instead, he shot past her and ploughed into the room’s rounded wall at top speed. The impact knocked him unconscious and wrecked his go-cart. With the go-cart out of commission, the room’s air immediately began to clear.

Guy dashed up to Hank and zip-tied his hands, then he returned to Amy. “What in the *world* did you do with that cellphone!?” he asked in baffled amazement.

“Nothing much,” replied Amy with a smirk, “I just sent him a text. That’ll teach him not to check his phone while he’s driving²⁶⁰.”

Guy laughed. “Nice one!”

Thelma’s excited voice came over the comms. “Did I hear that correctly? Do we have another prisoner for my truck?”

Amy’s smirk broke into a proud grin, as she replied into her comms: “You bet... we’ve captured our first genuine Crimex agent²⁶¹! Well, other than Malena, but that’s old news. And this time, we didn’t need a squirrel to help us!”

“He’s in the first room after the stairwell,” Guy added, “You’ll find him unconscious in his go-cart.”

“Sounds like I missed an interesting battle,” declared Arthur, “I’ll come and collect him! Keep up the pace, both of you... Crimex is going down today!”

“Roger that,” replied Guy. He gestured to the door on the opposite side of the room. “Now, let’s see what’s behind door number two.”

* * * * *

²⁶⁰ I really like this trick... but how did Amy get Hank’s phone number?

²⁶¹ Does this mean we’ve already decided that the security guard wasn’t a Crimex agent? The last I heard, we still weren’t sure about that.

Guy and Amy went through the next door, and found themselves in a long hallway lined with pillars²⁶². At the end of the hallway was another door... but in front of it was a large, bipedal robot with multiple arms. It had two glass pods at the top: Alexia was inside one, and Bruno was inside the other.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," protested Guy, as the robot reared up and pointed its arms at them threateningly²⁶³.

Over a loudspeaker, Alexia's voice howled, "You'll pay for hurting Hank! Bruno, let's do this!"

Two of the robot's arms pointed directly at Guy and Amy. "Guns!" bellowed Guy, as he grabbed Amy and leapt backward to the safety of the nearest pillar. Moments later, the air was filled with a deadly hail of bullets which peppered the floor and ceiling.

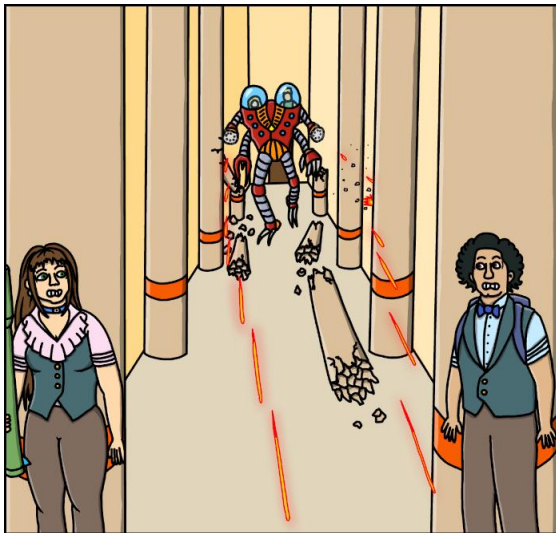
"This is pretty intense," shouted Amy over the din, "Somehow, I don't think my 'texting trick' will work on Alexia and Bruno... got anything good in your backpack?"

"I've got an idea," Guy shouted back, "First, let's get rid of those protective glass pods. Cover for me?"

Amy nodded apprehensively.

"Okay," said Guy, "GO!"

Amy leapt across the hallway for all she was worth: reflexively, Alexia and Bruno changed the robot's aim to shoot in her direction, but they weren't quick enough. By the time they opened fire again, Amy was safely behind the pillar opposite to where Guy was positioned.



While the robot was focused on Amy, Guy pulled the gunk gun out of his backpack and fired a clear shot at each of the glass pods. To Guy's delight, both shots hit square on target, and both glass pods were completely covered in sticky black gunk.

²⁶² Again, it's very mysterious that this sort of room would exist in an office building... and also that it's never been shown before in any of the "meanwhile at Crimex" scenes.

²⁶³ I can accept Hank's go-cart, because it's the sort of thing he might have already had in his workshop... but how did Crimex manage to build a towering "death robot" overnight?

Alexia's frustrated grunt was clearly heard over the loudspeaker, and one of the robot's arms began firing blindly in Guy's general direction. None of the shots came close.

"We're fighting blind, Alexia," came Bruno's voice, "We'll have to ditch the glass canopies!"

"I know, I know!" shouted Alexia's voice, as the glass pods retracted into the robot's body. She called out to Guy and Amy over the loudspeaker, "You think you're pretty smart, don't you? Well, let's see how long you last without cover!"

One of the robot's lower arms struck the nearest pillar with a mighty blow. The pillar snapped near the base, and came tumbling down. Without even waiting for it to finish falling, the robot's other lower arm felled the pillar's twin on the hallway's opposite side. The robot advanced forward, as Bruno continued to spray a steady stream of bullets across the room.

Even though Guy was just on the opposite side of the hallway, the racket was so loud that Amy had to use her comms to talk to him. "This is bad, Guy," she exclaimed to him, "They have us completely pinned down... and once they've destroyed all the pillars, we'll have nowhere to hide."

"We still have about a minute to think of something," replied Guy, "It looks like Alexia's determined to smash every pillar on the way here."

It was true. The robot was stopping at each pair of pillars in the hallway, demolishing them to ensure it didn't leave any standing cover behind²⁶⁴.

"I mean, at least Alexia and Bruno are exposed now," observed Guy, as his mind worked furiously, "I don't suppose you could peg one of them with your potato gun?"

Amy risked a quick peek around her column, and ducked back only just in time to avoid the sudden hail of bullets from the robot.

"I could maybe hit one of them," replied Amy ruefully, "But it'd be the last thing I ever did. What about your backpack? Do you have any other gizmos?"

Guy shook his head with a grimace. "Nothing strong enough to stop a giant robot²⁶⁵. I'd trade everything we have for that grapple gun you used in Paris... we could've used it to trip the robot's legs."

Over the comms, Grant asked, "Do you still have the toaster coils?"

"Yeah," Guy confirmed.

"Well, couldn't you use the coils to trip the robot?" pursued Grant.

"Yeah..." mused Guy, warming to the idea, "Yeah! That just might work. And if we can topple it, we should stand a chance."

By now, the robot was almost on top of them. "Amy," called Guy, "Catch!" Guy grabbed one end of the toaster's coils and threw the toaster across the hallway to her. "Now, hang on tight!"

²⁶⁴ Clearly, these are not load-bearing pillars.

²⁶⁵ We're apparently ignoring the fact that Guy could fire his gunk gun directly at Bruno and Alexia, so that they couldn't operate the robot effectively. Perhaps the gunk gun is empty now... yeah, that must be it!

They stood their ground, stretching the toaster coils across the hallway just as the robot drew even with them. Alexia and Bruno were so intent on their targets that they never noticed the toaster coils, spread like a tripwire.

It was a close call: the robot tripped on the coils and nearly fell forward. Alexia righted it with a jerk in the opposite direction, and nearly recovered the robot's balance... but it was just slightly too much. The robot fell over backward with a tremendous crash, spilling Alexia and Bruno out onto the floor.

Guy didn't waste any time. Even as the robot was toppling, he dashed to the spot where Bruno was most likely to land. Guy pulled a spray bottle from his backpack and soaked Bruno up and down with a homemade pepper spray. Bruno was instantly incapacitated, sneezing over and over in a helpless fit. "Thank goodness we saved all those jalapeno peppers from last night's takeout," quipped Guy²⁶⁶.

Meanwhile, Alexia was trying to crawl across the floor to reach the weapon mounted on the robot's closest arm. Before she could get close, however, a voice from behind called out a warning: "I wouldn't do that if were you."

Alexia reluctantly turned around, and found herself staring down the barrel of Amy's potato gun. "Seriously, don't move," warned Amy, "I know how to use this thing... and you do *not* want a potato migraine!"

"Don't forget to aim low," reminded Grant over the comms.

Alexia scowled in frustration. "Fine, you got us," she snarled, over the sound of Bruno sneezing, "Let's get this over with."

"Not so fast," interjected Guy, "I assume Drake's just up ahead, behind the last door. What kind of surprises does he have waiting for us?"

"If you tell us, we'll ask the law to go easier on you," offered Amy.

To Guy and Amy's surprise, Alexia snickered. "Oh, I'm way ahead of you there," she said with a mischievous smile, "And believe me... right now, nothing would please me more than spoiling Drake's big surprise. But I'm afraid he refused to tell us what it was. He said it would be a 'security risk'." She made a derisive scoffing sound, and then cocked an eyebrow. "So do me a great big favor and take him down a peg, will you?"

"Uh, sure," agreed Guy, "We'll do that. Arthur... we've got two more Crimex agents to take into custody..." He regarded the door at the end of the hall. "...and then I think we're ready to close in on the last one²⁶⁷."

²⁶⁶ I have no idea whether you can make pepper spray using hot peppers... and I didn't particularly want queries like "how to make pepper spray" in my search history. It's bad enough that I had to research chloroforming techniques, the top speed of modern jets, and whether it's legal to be a mercenary.

²⁶⁷ Notice how the stairwell led directly to Hank's go-cart room, which led directly to this hallway with the robot...which apparently leads directly to Drake's office. But this couldn't possibly be the Crimex base's normal layout: where's the door to Alexia's lab, or Hank's workshop, or Bruno's weight room? Where's the elevator? What in the *world* is going on with the Crimex base's layout during these last few chapters?

Chapter 28: Drake Blows Up His Own Base²⁶⁸

Arthur rejoined Guy and Amy, who were waiting patiently at the final door. “Bruno and Alexia are safely stowed away in the truck,” Arthur confirmed²⁶⁹.

“We’ve already faced a bladed go-cart and a two-headed robot,” mused Amy, “What do you think Drake has in store for us?”

Guy nodded with determination. “Let’s find out.”

Guy opened the door, and the three of them walked into Drake’s office. Drake had his back to them with his arms crossed, as he stared menacingly out the floor-to-ceiling window²⁷⁰. “You are worthy opponents,” Drake remarked, without turning around, “Your victories against my minions have been most impressive. Why not join forces with Crimex? Together, we’d be unstoppable.”

Guy laughed. “Really? You’re trying the ‘come join us’ sales pitch? Does that ever actually work?”

Drake shrugged. “It worked on Hank, when he beat Bruno at a helicopter race... but that’s another story for another time. The point is, anyone can be persuaded with the right inducement.” Drake turned dramatically to face them, sporting an evil smile. “And I know just how to convince you.”

“Not likely,” Guy scoffed.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” replied Drake dismissively, “I was talking to Arthur. Isn’t that right... *brother*²⁷¹?”

Arthur’s face turned pale. Amy looked at him anxiously. “Arthur?” she asked, “What is he talking about?”

Arthur cautiously regarded Drake with new eyes. “My younger brother went missing when I was just a teenager... but it couldn’t be...”

Drake laughed with the reckless abandon of an incompetent car thief driving a stolen sports car down a steep mountain road at top speed, unaware that the steering mechanism had failed moments earlier²⁷². “Oh, but is!”, he gloated, “Once I learned about the BLA, I looked up your organization’s records... imagine my surprise when I learned that it was headed by a man named ‘Arthur *Chalmers*’! So, I did a little digging, and... here we are! Say hello to your little brother... Drake *Chalmers*! You wouldn’t turn on your long-lost family, now would you²⁷³?”

²⁶⁸ I have to say, this chapter title’s is a terrible choice: it gives away a major plot point. If you’re in the habit of skimming a story’s table of contents first, you’d know this was coming before you’d even read the prologue!

²⁶⁹ It’s weird that Guy and Amy didn’t rush Drake’s office immediately after stopping the robot: instead, they waited just outside Drake’s door until Arthur got back. This *should* have given Drake more than enough time to do something preemptive, such as escape, or spring a trap. Fortunately, Drake is behaving like a “video game” boss, which makes him willing to wait in his office indefinitely until the good guys barge in to challenge him.

²⁷⁰ You can’t pass the first year at Bad Guy School without mastering this pose. Also, at this point it’s official: the story’s completely lost track of the fact that the window was originally just a greenscreen.

²⁷¹ The “family connection” cliché is used just a little too often: the good guys don’t *always* need a personal connection to the bad guy!

²⁷² Actually, I kind of like this analogy. It’s unwieldy, but it tells a fun little story.

²⁷³ Drake’s one to talk about turning on family... he apparently learned Arthur Chalmer’s name at the end of the “Escape” chapter. In other words, by the time Drake attacked the BLA office with helicopter missiles, he already believed his brother was working there!

Arthur drew himself up to his full height, assuming an air of great dignity. "I'm sorry, little brother... but if this is really the path you've chosen, then I'm afraid you'll have to face the consequences."

Drake smiled smugly. "Are you sure about that, Arthur? When we left our parents behind in Ireland²⁷⁴, we promised each other that we'd always -"

"Wait, back up a minute," interrupted Arthur, looking perplexed. "What was that about Ireland?"

Drake blinked in confusion. "You know... we left our parents behind in Ireland to seek our fortunes, and we promised each other -"

"My parents were born in Cleveland," replied Arthur, "And *their* parents came from Belgium, not Ireland. They weren't even called 'Chalmers' until they immigrated. It was a whole thing."

Silence fell upon the room, as the two respective Chalmers considered the consequences of this new information.

"This is awkward," observed Amy.

"But... no, it *has* to be!" protested Drake, "You're missing a younger brother, and I'm missing an older brother... and we have the same last name²⁷⁵!"

Guy shrugged. "Sorry, Drake. Sometimes a coincidence is just a coincidence²⁷⁶."

Drake scowled and pulled out a detonator. "Fine, then... I'll just blow us all to smithereens! Say goodbye, BLA, because everything -"

Guy's ears had just enough time to register the now familiar "phoot" of Amy's potato gun. The potato smacked Drake squarely in the face, knocking him unconscious. The detonator dropped harmlessly to the floor.

²⁷⁴ In case you've forgotten (and by now, I certainly wouldn't blame you), this is *finally* the payoff for that seemingly unrelated Prologue scene at the very start of the story. This is a pretty unsatisfying way to do a major reveal: there were no clues or references throughout the story to keep the Prologue fresh and relevant in our minds. As a result, now that the reveal's finally happened, it's almost too late to care.

²⁷⁵ To say nothing of the fact that Drake's older brother was apparently called "Arthur", and Arthur's younger brother was apparently called "Drake".

²⁷⁶ Ha ha ha! And now we've undone the whole thing with an improbable coincidence! Subverting expectations is also cliché... but since we used it to revoke the previous "family connections" cliché, maybe it all balances out. Although this *does* mean that there's no resolution to Drake's missing older brother, or Arthur's missing younger brother. Yikes.



"You forgot to correct for the aim again," Guy pointed out.

Amy smiled mischievously. "No, I didn't."

* * * * *

Drake woke up inside the back of the BLA's rental truck. He quickly realized that both of his hands were bound securely. His minions were there too, eyeing him coolly. Predictably, it was Alexia who broke the silence.

"So, thanks for the leadership and everything," she said sarcastically. "Ready for some jail time?"

"If you'd just done your jobs properly, we wouldn't be here!" retorted Drake.

"Oh, like you did any better?" scoffed Hank.

Unexpectedly, Drake grinned wickedly. "Watch and learn." He carefully squirmed, and a remote control dropped out of his pocket.

Bruno eyed the remote control warily. "What's that?"

"A second detonator!" gloated Drake, "A *true* criminal mastermind always has a contingency plan²⁷⁷."

* * * * *

Outside Thelma's rental truck, the FBI had arrived on the scene. The lobby's security guard had already been released from the truck, when a brief background check confirmed that he had no direct ties to Crimex²⁷⁸.

The guard scowled at Amy. "Thanks for the migraine, lady... the next time you shoot someone with a potato gun, make sure they're a bad guy, first!"

²⁷⁷ I'm pretty sure the BLA would've frisked him and found that before throwing him in the truck. Oh, well.

²⁷⁸ But even if the guard wasn't on the Crimex payroll, it still doesn't make sense that Malena had to slip past him when she was trying to assassinate the BLA... she was legitimately employed at the office building!

"It won't happen again," Arthur assured him, "But going forward, the building's owners might want to screen their tenants a little more carefully²⁷⁹."

"Yeah, I guess that's fair," the guard conceded, "Am I free to go?"

At that moment, the FBI unlocked the truck's back door, so that they could lead the Crimex captives out to the waiting police cars. Without warning, Drake leapt out, holding a remote control between his bound hands and his body. As he let the remote drop to the ground, he bellowed, "Fools! If I go down, I'm taking you with me!"

And then he stomped on the remote's button with his foot.

With a deafening blast, the entire floor which held the Crimex base exploded. Moments later, there was a horrendous groaning noise: with a terrifying crunch, the weight of the building's upper stories squashed the weakened Crimex floor flat. The 59-story building was now a 58-story building²⁸⁰.

A shocked silence descended around the truck. Then Thelma remarked, "At this rate, that building will be a parking lot by November."

Moments later, Alexia shrieked from inside the truck: "*That's* your contingency plan!? How is *that* supposed to help us, Drake!?"

Drake looked stunned. "But... I just thought I'd take the good guys down with us!"

"Everyone's *outside* the base now, you moron!" thundered Alexia, "You just blew up my lab for no good reason!"

"And my workshop!" bellowed Hank.

"And my weight room!" added Bruno.

Drake paled. "Well, uh... I just thought it would be better to destroy the evidence, because..."

"'Destroy the evidence'?" scoffed Hank, "You just publicly blew up an entire office building floor! And that's entirely on *you*."

"Yeah, no wonder you didn't want to tell us your big plan," said Bruno disgustedly, "It's stupid."

"I'm a criminal mastermind!" insisted Drake indignantly, as he pointed at his chest.

"You know what, Drake?" snarled Alexia, "Forget it! I am *so* done with this. Get us out of here, you FBI goons... and the sooner, the better!"

As the former Crimex agents were loaded into police cars, the security guard remarked, "Well, I'd better get back to the lobby... but something tells me this place is going to be a lot quieter from now on."

Arthur turned back to his team, beaming proudly. "As for us, though... I think the fun's just getting started!"

²⁷⁹ Seriously.

²⁸⁰ As already discussed, buildings don't work this way. Just roll with it.

Chapter 29: A Landmark Victory

It was a couple of weeks after the Crimex raid, and the media frenzy²⁸¹ had finally died down. After her arrest, Alexia had willingly divulged enough information to help the BLA operate the splinter dimension device: by now, all of the missing landmarks had been returned to their proper places²⁸². What's more, every last slice of the BLA's "after party" ice cream cake had been eaten.

Meanwhile, the BLA was settling into their new speakeasy base. Thelma's desk had been integrated into the bar area, and Grant had the beginnings of a new workshop in one of the alcoves. But on this particular morning, the BLA got its biggest surprise of all: a rogue peanut, sitting in the middle of the Muddled Badger's main room.

"No way," breathed Grant, looking up at the ceiling. A ventilation duct ran the length of the entire room, and there were several vents... including one right above the peanut.

"I guess the squirrel wants to be our mascot, after all!" remarked Arthur in amusement.

"Let's call the squirrel 'Trippy'," exclaimed Amy, "After that time he tripped Malena Midnight!"

"Works for me," agreed Guy.

"You're all nuts, pun intended," remarked Thelma, "But fine. 'Trippy the Squirrel' it is."

"Now, is everyone sure they don't want me to shop around for a new location?" asked Arthur, "I'm sure I could find a good deal somewhere²⁸³."

"Nah, we like it here!" said Guy.

"And I only just started organizing my new workshop!" added Grant.

"Very well," nodded Arthur, "By the way... the government called, and they commended our group for a job well done. They're offering everyone a 3% raise."

"A 3% raise for saving the world's landmarks!?" protested Amy indignantly, "We should be getting a big, fat bonus! And maybe a parade. Or a commemorative coin!"

"Agreed," said Arthur, "But frankly, I think we've gotten used to working things out on our own. Besides... our new location is free, so we can allocate our property budget to our salaries²⁸⁴. It was a landmark victory, after all."

Everyone groaned good-naturedly at Arthur's pun.

"And what about the Crimex agents?" Thelma inquired, "Any word yet on what's going to happen with them?"

²⁸¹ Which apparently won't be depicted.

²⁸² "But wait!" you're probably saying, "What became of the device itself?" Don't worry about it: the story's nearly over.

²⁸³ Isn't that something the government would normally do for them?

²⁸⁴ I'm not sure if it's actually legal to use the property budget that way... but given the government's complete lack of involvement with the BLA throughout this story, I'm guessing it won't matter.

“Malena’s been transferred to long-term imprisonment,” explained Arthur, “As you might recall, she already had several outstanding arrest warrants against her, so she won’t be getting out anytime soon. Drake’s in for a long prison sentence, too: after all, he blew up two stories of an office building, and that’s generally frowned upon.”

“What about the other 3 agents?” asked Guy curiously.

Arthur smiled wryly. “Well, that’s where things get interesting. It seems that the FBI found a document on Alexia’s person: it was a signed confession from Drake, taking full responsibility for Crimex’s misdemeanors, and absolving his minions of any involvement.”

Guy stared incredulously. “You’re kidding me. We’ve all met Drake, and he’s a self-absorbed doofus. Why would he take a bullet for his team like that?”

“If I had to guess,” Arthur speculated, “Alexia probably typed up the whole thing herself, and then tricked Drake into signing it. She’s supposed to be clever, and it wouldn’t take much to outsmart Drake. But the bottom line is, the confession carried a lot of weight at their hearing. Alexia, Bruno, and Hank are being released at the end of the week²⁸⁵.”

Grant looked thoughtful. “So... maybe we haven’t seen the last of them.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Guy confidently, “If they try anything nefarious, we’ll put a stop to it!”

“Yeah,” agreed Amy, “After all, we’re the BLA! We’ve got our new base, and we’ve got each other!”

“And we tied up all the loose ends!” observed Thelma²⁸⁶.

There was a hearty cheer.

“So...” said Guy, “...as long as we’re waiting for our next mission, how about a game of cards?”

“Count me in!” declared Amy.

“What should we play?” asked Grant, “Euchre?”

“Personally, I always preferred Five Hundred,” said Thelma.

“You guys enjoy yourselves,” smiled Arthur, “I’m going to start planning my new office.”

The card game was great²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁵ The legal process here is questionable. And extraordinary fast.

²⁸⁶ Except for Amy’s missing parents, Arthur’s missing brother, those mysterious warriors in the Amazon, and various other minor plot threads which fell by the wayside during the story.

²⁸⁷ This scene probably should’ve ended several lines earlier. But a few minutes after this, Thelma and Grant will get into an argument about prunes, so at least we missed *that*.



* * * * *

It was a bright and sunny morning when Alexia, Hank, and Bruno were released from prison.

“Ugh,” complained Alexia. “I really miss my wheelchair. Too bad Drake blew it up.”

“Your leg will probably heal in the next month or so,” Bruno pointed out. “Then you won’t even need crutches anymore.”

“I could build you a new wheelchair, anyway,” offered Hank, “You’ve given all of us a second chance... we owe you big for that.”

“Thanks Hank,” sighed Alexia, “I know it won’t be the same without Crimex’s resources, but I’m sure you’ll come up with something good.”

Bruno smiled. “Don’t let it get you down, sis,” he said encouragingly, “As long as the 3 of us stick together, we’ll be fine. The big question is, what should we do next? I’ve got half a mind to start our own criminal organization... build it from the ground up, you know? If we put our talents together and recruit the right people, we could be running this city inside a year! What do you think?”

Alexia hesitated. “It’s a nice thought, Bruno²⁸⁸,” she replied, “But we’ve just been through all that. I wouldn’t mind a change of pace... ideally, something which *doesn’t* need to be thwarted by a government agency.”

“Alright then,” mused Hank, “What if we contract our services to the BLA? You know... if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em? And they’ve already seen what we can do, so they’d probably pay top dollar for us!”

Alexia chuckled ruefully. “I like that idea, Hank... the only problem is that we already know the BLA is underfunded. They probably couldn’t afford us, even if they wanted to.”

“Well, how about you, Alexia?” asked Bruno, “What do you want? We’ve got no money, no resources, and our job references are in jail. We’re going to need a plan.”

²⁸⁸ Is it, though?

Alexia thought about it carefully. As she did, she realized that Bruno and Hank were both waiting expectantly for her answer. “You’re really trusting me to have a great idea, aren’t you?”

Hank shrugged modestly, and grinned. “Well... you *are* the brains of this operation.”

“Just not our boss,” Bruno added quickly.

Alexia laughed. “That’s all I could ever ask for. Well, here goes...”

She held up her left crutch, then popped off the rubber stopper at the end. To everyone’s surprise, she pulled out a tidy roll of large-denomination bills. “As Drake used to say,” declared Alexia with a mischievous grin, “Always have a contingency plan. This should get us through the next month or so²⁸⁹.”

“I should’ve known you had another ace up your sleeve!” chortled Hank.

“Sure, and that’s great,” acknowledged Bruno, “But... what’s the actual *plan*? What are we going to do?”

Alexia smiled. “Honestly, guys... this morning, all I really want is a decent breakfast and a big, fancy cup of coffee. But if we pool our talents together, I’m sure we can figure out the rest afterwards.”

“That works for me!” grinned Bruno.

“I know the perfect place,” added Hank, “And it’s just a couple of blocks from here.” He offered his hand to Alexia. “And, uh... would you like to make this an official breakfast date?”

Alexia smiled. “Lead the way²⁹⁰.”



The End

²⁸⁹ But how did Alexia keep her crutches? She didn’t seem to have them when she was dumped out of the robot, and Drake blew up the entire base pretty soon afterward. Perhaps Arthur kindly retrieved her crutches, and brought them when he was taking Bruno and Alexia down to the truck? Sure, let’s go with that.

²⁹⁰ There we go: happy endings for the good guys and the redeemable bad guys! That should wrap up everything in a nice, tidy, package... unless some bozo throws in a last-minute epilogue to stir things up again.

Epilogue

Mist swirled around the silent, deserted alley. 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.

"Were you able to get it?"

"Of course I did... it's all there in the briefcase. Did she say what she was planning to do with it?"

"Not really. She said it was for 'artistic license'."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Hey, they don't pay me to ask questions. I'm just their go-between."

"Fine. But be careful who sees you with that."

"Yeah, I know the drill... if anyone catches us, you don't exist."

"I'm serious! Word of this can't get out, understand? Make sure she's discreet."

"Look, stop worrying. She's nothing like those Crimex has-beens. And I can promise you this much: she's just as motivated as you are to keep this quiet."

"You don't mean..."

"Oh, yes I do. And the best part is, no one will ever see it coming²⁹¹."



²⁹¹ This epilogue is extremely vague, and needlessly dramatic... but so was the prologue, so at least there's symmetry. Too bad we've officially run out of story to clarify what the epilogue means! If I never write a sequel, feel free to use your imagination... but my suspicion is that the good guys will win.

Afterword

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.

As I'd mentioned in the forward, the original idea behind this story was pretty simple: write a story that deliberately contains a bunch of writing mistakes and plot holes. In fact, the original title was going to be "Worst Spy Story Ever". However, it didn't take long to realize that a simplistic "comedy of errors" wasn't quite what I wanted. To understand why, let's take a quick look at how this story came together.

The basic idea had already been rattling around in my head for a year or two before I did anything about it. My wife and I would be watching a show, playing a video game, or reading a book, and some silly writing problem would come up: I'd think to myself, "hey, that might be something I could include in that 'bad writing' story I wanted to do"... and that would be the end of it.

One day, however, I decided to start formally cataloguing the ideas: I broke them down into major categories, such as story inconsistencies, downright inaccuracies, character stupidity, worldbuilding issues, and so on. After a month or two, I had a pretty big list of possibilities... and if you think this story is wacky or absurd, then you should see the ideas I left out! To cite some examples:

- A character who dies in one scene, but then inexplicably appears in subsequent scenes as if nothing happened
- A character whose physical appearance and personality changes from one chapter to the next
- Unexplained anachronisms, such as using candlelight and electric lighting in the same building
- A character swats a fly, carefully places it in a file folder, and then puts the file folder in a drawer
- A scene that gets sidetracked: for example, the hero enters a building to retrieve something, but ends up watching sports, or getting into a fun argument with a guard, and then leaves without accomplishing his objective
- Excessive "country hopping", perhaps even changing countries in the middle of a conversation
- A character walks into a known bad guy den without taking any precautions, mouths off at the main bad guy, and then gets captured... seemingly for no reason (actually, there's a movie where James Bond really seems to do this)

From the above examples, you can see that I had more than enough raw material to push this story *way* over the line from zany to insane... so why didn't I do it? Why did I back off from my original premise of writing the worst spy story ever?

The turning point came when I started outlining the characters and plot. As an example, let's examine some of the traits I originally planned for Arthur:

- The boss seems more interested in office layout, upgrading the cafeteria, etc. than on operational matters
- The boss is constantly overridden by the heroes, and shrugs off subversiveness in an offhand manner
- The boss is always distracted (shuffling papers, moving pens around, brushing off a monitor, etc.)

As I did the initial treatment for each character, a grim realization began to dawn on me: *everyone in this story was an idiot*. Sure, I'd had fun brainstorming dysfunctional story ideas... but that didn't mean I

would enjoy hours of writing about a cast of irredeemable morons. And if I didn't enjoy writing that, then how could I possibly expect anyone to enjoy *reading* that?

That's when I realized that this story couldn't be a straightforward, ludicrous exercise in narrative anarchy like I'd originally planned. Instead, it had to function like one of those old-fashioned roller coasters: create the *impression* of being zany and "out of control"... but use carefully planned rails to keep everything on track. To help maintain this weird truce between zany and logical, I came up with some guiding principles for the story:

- **The characters must feel sincere.** This doesn't mean that they can't have flaws or be slightly wacky... but they do need to be *mostly* consistent. Furthermore, each character should add something meaningful and reasonably unique to the story. If every character is a clown, then things will get old very quickly.
- **The story itself can't use meta-humor.** In other words, I couldn't write jokes where the characters know they're in a story, or have the characters directly comment on the story's "writing mistakes". This was a tough decision, because I've always been fond of meta-humor, especially in parodies. Unfortunately, meta-humor tends to undermine sincerity... and with all the wacky stuff I wanted to do, this story urgently needed all the remaining sincerity it could muster. I contented myself with the idea of using footnotes to call out the "writing mistakes", so that I could speak directly to the reader without "breaking the fourth wall" inside the story itself.
- **Avoid repetition, especially with flaws and stupid decisions.** Basically, I didn't want to hit the same note too frequently. For example: stupid or impulsive actions should be balanced by clever or helpful actions (with the notable exception of Drake, who played the "boss clown" fairly consistently). Along similar lines, silly scenes should be balanced with straightforward scenes, or even playfully "dark" scenes (Malena was helpful there). As for jokes, I tried to rely more on situational humor which fit the immediate context, and less on repetitive "running gags".

I have no idea if these principles would work for other stories... but hopefully, they worked for this one (you can decide that for yourself). Anyway, now that I was armed with the above principles, I began outlining the actual plot.

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.

I should state upfront that I’m not a writing expert, so please don’t think of this as a story writing tutorial... I just wanted to document my process, in case I ever want to use it again.

I started by defining a basic “3 part” structure, wherein each part had a basic theme and potential cliffhanger:

- **Part 1: Acquisitions**
 - *Theme:* The hero is recruited, and helps the good guys foil a series of bad guy operations.
 - *Cliffhanger:* The bad guys get angry, and decide to dedicate themselves to taking down the good guys.
- **Part 2: Reprisals**
 - *Theme:* The bad guys try a series of schemes to bring down the good guys.
 - *Cliffhanger:* The bad guys successfully destroy the good guy base, and the good guys go into hiding.
- **Part 3: Comeuppance**
 - *Theme:* The good guys regroup, and organize a plan of attack.
 - *Resolution:* The bad guys are foiled, and brought to justice.

Each part ended with a major plot development which changed the story’s direction, to prevent the plot from growing stale (or anyway, that was the theory).

Then I used bullet points to expand on each part’s events. By this time, I’d decided that the bad guy’s main scheme would be stealing world landmarks, so I expanded part 1 like this:

- Guy Stafford is hired in a wacky recruiting incident
- Guy meets his team, and is introduced to the BLA
- Guy and Amy try to foil a pyramid heist in Cairo, but they aren’t successful
- A “meanwhile at the Crimex” chapter introduces the bad guys
- A “back at the BLA” chapter sets up the next heist
- Guy and Amy successfully foil an Eiffel Tower heist in Paris
- A “both bases” chapter sets up the final heist in part 1
- Guy and Amy successfully foil an Empire State Building heist in New York
- Enter Malena, who promises to help the bad guys crush the good guys

These bullet points became tentative chapter headings. To complete the story’s initial outline, I identified all the important things which would happen in each chapter. To that end, I expanded on each chapter with further bullet points. For example, the bullet points for the Cairo chapter looked something like this:

- Grant gives Guy some gear for the Cairo mission:
 - It quickly becomes apparent that Grant is super-organized, to the point of obsession
 - They get an invisibility device that can only work for 3 minutes at a time

- Guy gets a stun gun, in case he catches the bad guy in the act (it's unclear how the stun gun works... not necessarily a deal breaker, but you do wonder a little because the story seems to be set in modern day, with current technology. What does the stun gun actually do?)
 - They both get a comms unit to stay in touch with the team and base
- 2 hours later (9000km, 4500 km/h or Mach 4), Guy and Amy are sipping drinks at a café in Cairo, as they stake out the pyramids
 - This is a good place for some "Amy & Guy" banter
 - For now, Guy should feel that she's kind of crazy
 - She accidentally spills her citrus drink on her invisibility device, and hopes it will still work
- Guy spots someone else at the cafe (Bruno) who seems to be looking around suspiciously. Guy decides to go invisible and eavesdrop nearby
 - Guy learns Bruno's name
 - He overhears a disparaging female voice on Bruno's phone, giving him instructions and reminding him not to mess up (the female voice sounded like a "strawberry milkshake full of stinging nettles")
 - Bruno calls her "sis", and she alludes to their mysterious boss
 - Then she says the vehicle's on its way.

...and so on. From the above sample, you may have noticed a couple of things which underscore how useful it is to do the story in point-form first:

- **In the full story, the scene in the lab was moved to an earlier chapter.** A fully written scene is harder to move around than a bullet point. Moving a fully written scene is also riskier: a seemingly innocuous detail can cause story problems at the scene's new location. With bullet points, however, there aren't any innocuous details to worry about: just the bare bones of what needs to happen.
- **The points are very specific about what needs to happen, but very minimal about dialogue and narrative phrasing.** If I happened to think of a specific line or joke that I really wanted in the final story, then I'd include it in the bullet points... but otherwise, I tried to avoid that kind of detail during this phase. If I spent a lot of time trying to phrase a scene *just right*, then I wouldn't want to change or remove the scene later on... even it improved the overall story. By point-forming the whole thing first, I minimized difficult (and potentially painful) revisions to carefully worded scenes.

Point-forming was also a good time to consider where my characters were going. For example: from the beginning, Hank clearly had a crush on Alexia (who just as clearly didn't like him)... but at some point around planning part 2, I thought to myself, "wouldn't it be more interesting if this actually went somewhere?" And wouldn't you know it, the events around their relationship proved to be a major turning point for their characters! It even suggested that the trio of Alexia, Hank, and Bruno should be redeemed (at least a little) by the end of the story... instead of simply joining Malena and Drake in jail, like I'd originally planned.

It's also worth noting that during the entire outline process, I had only the vaguest idea of what the characters actually looked like (tall, wiry, blond, short, heavysset, dark-haired, etc.). After the outline was

complete, I finally decided to draw the characters. That's also when I decided to draw an illustration for each chapter... they ended up taking a lot more time than I'd planned, but I'm glad I drew them.

Sometime in September 2023, the story had been fully outlined in point-form. Now that I knew exactly what *needed* to happen from beginning to end, I could start writing completed scenes. This was a lot more fun than you might think: with all the "big questions" and major plotwork figured out, I was much freer to be spontaneous and organic within the scenes themselves.

For example, here's some story points that were added spontaneously, as I was writing the completed scenes:

- **Amy's eye for detail in Cairo:** Amy often comes across as a "space cadet", so I wanted to establish her credibility as soon as possible. Her conversation about surveillance was a great way to demonstrate that Amy had plenty of skills and intelligence to justify her role in the story.
- **Grant's unsafe jetpack:** I'd originally meant for the jetpack to be a "where'd that even come from" gag: that is, Guy would just inexplicably have it the moment it was needed. But then I got the idea that it could be Grant's pet project: one that he's repeatedly tried, even though it never works out. It brought out something new in Grant's character, so I made the change (and moved the "where'd that even come from" gag to Amy's grapple gun).
- **The squirrel:** The "recurring mystery peanut" was originally going to be an unsolved mystery. But as I reached the end of part 1, I decided that just wasn't satisfying enough. Instead, I blamed the whole thing on a squirrel. Of course, that also meant adding some new details, to reassure people that the squirrel didn't perish horribly when the 15th floor was destroyed. Later on, I even added the squirrel to the final chapter, to permanently associate him with the BLA.
- **The bartender laughing at Amy and Grant:** The bartender was originally just going to point them to Chekhov right away... but then I thought, no, our BLA agents are too absurdly wholesome to truly blend in at a disreputable tavern. We needed to have a little more fun with this!
- **Drake's master plan:** When I started writing completed scenes, I still didn't know what Drake was planning to do with all the landmarks... but fortunately, the exact details didn't matter, because I knew from the outline that he'd never get a chance to do it, anyway. I believe I came up with Drake's "master plan" somewhere in the middle of writing part 2.
- **Guy stealing the "splinter dimension" device:** Believe it or not, my original idea was to have Drake lose the splinter dimension device, completely by accident! However, once I realized that Guy was going to be accidentally picked up by the splinter dimension device during the Amazon heist, it made more sense to have Guy steal it from Crimex. It's a lot more satisfying, and Drake already has plenty of other opportunities to make a fool of himself... without misplacing some of the world's most cherished landmarks.

Once the story had been written, I combed through the entire thing for minor flaws and oversights (any *major* flaws should've already been corrected at the outlining stage, although you never know). Many of the minor flaws were corrected... however, I deliberately kept some of the "better" ones and called them out with new footnotes (in that sense, this was a uniquely liberating project)! The initial "combing for flaws" process was finished by about the end of October 2023.

Once that was done, my wife Laura generously agreed to proofread the whole thing, end-to-end (she'd been helping throughout the entire process, but this was her first direct read-through of the entire story). Thanks to her insights, we made many useful changes, including:

- Inserting the occasional missing word
- Simplifying excessively complex sentences (yes, this story used to be even wordier)
- Consolidating and simplifying some of the footnotes
- Reducing repetitive phrases used by all characters, such as “or something” and “okay”
- Clarifying some of the narration, to reduce potential confusion
- Providing more information in some places, and less information in others
- Slightly reducing the number of italicized words (I distinctly remember my 9th grade English teacher remarking that I had “an inordinate fondness for italics”)
- Fine-tuning my choice of words, like the difference between:
 - “On” and “at”
 - “Which” and “that”
 - “and” and “then”
 - Colons, commas, periods, and semicolons (apparently, I also have an inordinate fondness for colons)

Once Laura's read-through was finished (by the end of December 2023), I deliberately left the story alone for month or so to “cool”. Then we did a final proofreading run in February 2024... sure enough, now that I'd left the story alone for a couple of months, we were able to catch several new issues.

And with that, we called the whole thing a wrap! I can't guarantee that we caught every last (unintentional) issue, but I believe we've pushed the story into the “good enough” zone. If you noticed any problems in this story which *aren't* called out with footnotes, then they're probably genuine misses on my part. Congratulations on finding them. :)

Acknowledgements

Let's keep this short and sweet.

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!

As I'd noted in the forward, this was definitely not an ordinary story: I'm honestly not sure what kind of appeal it will have.

At the very least, I can confirm that I thoroughly enjoyed writing and illustrating this story... and I hope you've enjoyed this exploration into the delightfully defective world of the BLA as much as I have.

In any event, thank you very much for reading this!