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Inside the Cage

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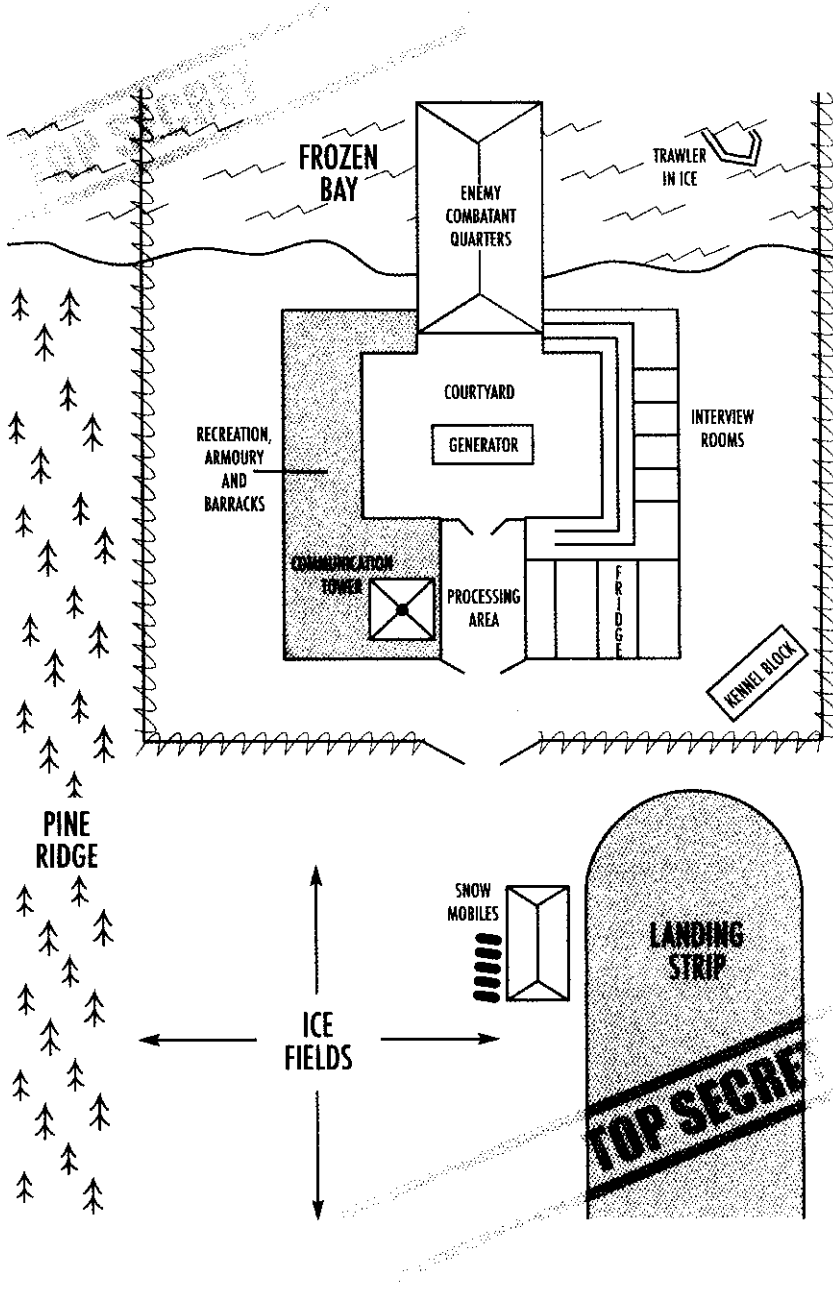
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FROZEN BAY
ENEMY COMBATANT QUARTERS
TRAWLER IN ICE
COURTYARD
GENERATOR
INTERVIEW ROOMS
RECREATION, ARMOURY AND BARRACKS
COMMUNICATION TOWER
PROCESSING AREA
FRIDGE
KENNEL BLOCK
PINE RIDGE
ICE FIELDS
SNOW MOBILES
LANDING STRIP
TOP SECRE

1

Nobody got hurt because of what I did. Not a soul was maimed or injured in the making of my crime. People got *rich*, I imagine. The word is millions of dollars went missing. Now the finger of blame is jabbing at me. I have even heard whispers that my actions funded arms deals, drug deals, most probably mafia meals on wheels and all manner of crimes and misdemeanours.

I just don't know. I couldn't say who cashed in or how much anyone made. All I did was sneak my way into a system network where I could call the shots. My orders may have opened the door to America's most revered vault, but I do not consider myself to be a bank robber – let alone an enemy combatant. The regulation clothing I've been issued with might condemn me as an enemy of the state, but no terrorist network put me up to the job, nor paid me for my time and skill. I did it out of curiosity, and from the other side of the Atlantic.

Operating from the computer in my bedroom, I did it because I could.

The money meant nothing to me. I knew it wasn't mine, so I didn't take a dime. It was the security measures I wanted to beat. When an institution claims to be virtually impenetrable in this day and age, you *know* it's only a matter of time before someone starts testing the firewalls. If it hadn't been me, another script kiddie would've done the same thing. I just wish I'd known the spooks would track me down. It meant every keystroke, call and command I'd made could be used by the security agencies as evidence against me. Online, I worked my way onto closed networks with swagger, confidence and even a little cheek. Right now, a long way from any keyboard, all I can do is keep my head down and pray nobody notices that this boy is totally out of his depth here.

Ping. The illumination goes off on the seatbelt sign overhead. I glance up, drawn from my thoughts, and figure the trigger for it must be hardwired into the aircraft's system. For there aren't any passengers on this flight at liberty to stretch their legs. Our leather seats and head-rests may be designed for comfort, but I very much doubt that anyone on board is feeling relaxed. This isn't because the upholstery is worn and scuffed, with tired springs underneath guaranteed to bring on backache – frankly, that's the least of my concerns. I tell myself to stop looking around, just in case I catch

anybody's eye. Instead, I study the pressure marks that circle my wrists.

I only wore the plastic tie restraints for the short walk from the terminal to the plane, but that was enough to make an impression. Apparently it's against safety regulations to fly anyone with both hands bound. I don't really understand why it's acceptable to be handcuffed to a special agent instead, like I am now. If a plane went down at this height, we'd all die regardless. And should my body be recovered, dressed like so many others on this flight, I can't help thinking it would be said that I had got what I deserved.

'Problem, son?'

This is just about the first thing the guy accompanying me has said since we took off from Heathrow. I had tried to find out more about my situation. I figured that was entirely understandable. The course of events has seriously shaken me up, after all, but it doesn't seem to concern him. It's only now that he tunes in to me, in fact, which makes his question feel a little loaded.

'No problem here, sir,' I say, and exchange a glance with him.

Like all the Men in Black on board, he's dressed in a casual suit – open at the throat – with a badge clipped to the inside pocket of his jacket that opens doors as soon as he flashes it. He's forty, maybe forty-five at most, and married for some time. I also guessed that he had gained some pounds since he walked up the aisle.

His wedding ring gave all this away. A platinum band so tight it had squeezed his finger out of shape behind the knuckle. I couldn't help but notice, what with time to kill and the handcuffs linking us. It wasn't exactly information that could earn my freedom, but I knew not to ignore even trivial detail. Often, personal stuff like this can help you crack passwords and PIN numbers, which made it invaluable.

I hear him clear his throat just then, and worry that he knows what I'm thinking. So I turn to him once more, sensing the cuff that binds us tighten.

'It's just you look a little green,' he tells me. 'Scared of flying?'

I wanted to reply that I had no fear of being in the air. It was what I faced on *landing* that made me feel so sick with nerves. Instead, I look at my lap and tell myself he must be watching every move I make.

Some minutes later, we hit turbulence. The aircraft starts to shake and judder. An overhead locker springs open like a dropped jaw. The agent underneath reaches up to close it, which obliges the prisoner shackled to him to stretch from his seat uncomfortably.

In response, like a cruel taunt now, the light blinks on once more, advising us to buckle up.

2

Right now, I should be in lectures. It's Friday morning, which means Design Technology. Computer Studies is what really interests me, but it's actually Drama that I do best. I have a genuine flair for character acting, so my teacher says. Without her support, I would never have been permitted to combine such different subjects. You didn't get many vacancies for system software developers who could also do improvisation, but I knew other uses.

I also have an essay to deliver today, I remember. I hadn't even started it. My plan had been to work through the weekend and deliver it first thing on Monday. Most likely my tutor would mark me down as a result, but I could always tweak the grade. One of my first online conquests on starting college was to access the central database. With every student record stored here, I found I could subtly manipulate anything from notable achievements to attendance rates. Not just for

me, of course, but anyone I could trust not to give the game away. I never made money from this kind of thing either. Instead, I earned the kind of favours and respect that ensured I never got a hard time for having a connection with computers.

Even if some people did quietly consider me to be a geek, I was well aware of how to turn that to my advantage. Like those who came to me for help, I would've improved my essay results by no more than half a grade if necessary. I didn't want to draw attention to myself, after all.

Which is why it had come as such a shock to be quietly picked up by the police on my way out of college yesterday.

The car had appeared out of nowhere. One moment I was walking along, quietly considering who I might find online at home. The next thing a dark saloon with smoked out windows was purring along behind me.

In my view, drivers who make out that they're too important to be seen are generally crying out for attention. Our college recently dealt with a cocaine dealer who did business at the back gate from a motor just like this. As caffeine was my drug of choice, I figured they would drive on by when it became clear I wasn't interested. So I pushed on, turning left into my street.

The car stayed right with me.

I remember wishing I had remained on the main road

all of a sudden. In public view, in case I was about to become the victim of a crime. I didn't turn around, however. Even when the vehicle doors opened and footsteps joined my own. I could actually see my house, midway along the terrace. I even decided that if I could make it to the gate these goons would walk on by. Just then, my home seemed like the safest place I could be. All I wanted to do was close the door behind me, check my email and a message board I used, and then get on with clearing my homework.

'Carl Hobbes?'

It took a moment for me to register my own name. And another to click that the person on my tail was talking to me. I switched around, unwilling to stop moving, and then faltered on seeing a couple of suits.

'Can I help?' I asked, somewhat uselessly.

I knew they weren't trying to sell me drugs. They were too old, too well dressed and well spoken for that.

'*Are* you Carl Hobbes?'

I looked from one of the two men to the other. In response, the guy asking the questions snapped a wallet open at me. I only caught a glimpse of a badge before he closed it again. It could've been anything. A day-pass to Disneyworld, for all I knew. Even so, it was enough to bring me to a stop.

'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Has something happened?'

I lived alone with my dad. This close to home, and

judging by the look on both guys' faces, I worried they had stopped me with some bad news.

As it turned out, I was right. But not in the way I had feared. Nor did it have anything to do with my activities on the college database. What I went on to hear was the last thing I expected, and the most shocking.

A third figure appeared from the front passenger seat just then. He clasped a walkie-talkie handset to his chest. From the car, I could hear radio chatter. And that's when a voice through the speaker mentioned Fort Knox.

'Come with us,' he said, as the man who had shown me his badge stepped around to stand at my side. I felt his hand grasp my upper arm from behind. Just then it felt as if I might fall down like a rag doll if he chose to let go. As they took my bag away from me, I thought about the books and papers inside. For some reason, I panicked that without them I'd be unable to complete my homework. The guy at the car held the rear door open for me. He was staring at me as we approached, reading the wrong thing from my stricken expression. 'It's over for you now. This thing is finished.'

3

Nobody has called me Carl for the last twenty-four hours. Ever since they picked me up, I've had to answer to Hobbes. My father was the last person to address me by my first name, and that was through the glass partition in the visiting room. 'Don't worry, Dad,' I assured him, despite feeling utterly dazed by what had happened, but he was in the same mind state as me. Frankly, nothing was going to shift the disbelief from his eyes. I knew he was thinking of my mother. Even if he didn't say as much, I could sense him question what she would have made of all this. I was taken back to my cell before he departed. I left him staring at the plastic seat. He could still be there for all I know.

My solicitor clearly hadn't dealt with a case like this before. I didn't hire her. It wasn't like that. I was simply read my rights at the station desk, and advised to get some legal representation.

'How?' That was my first response, which came out in barely a whisper. For I'd never been in trouble with the law before, as I tried to tell them then. I had no idea where to begin trying to appoint a lawyer, nor did I have any funds to hire one. The officer behind the desk said I should try to relax, handed me a laminated sheet with some numbers on it, and told me I qualified for legal aid.

'What does that mean?' I'd asked. It didn't sound good.

The officer had glanced at a colleague, who was sending a fax from the side-counter, and exchanged a playful glint. 'It means you are entitled to free professional advice,' he said, 'from an expert in dealing with drunks, drug addicts and wife-beaters.'

An hour later, I faced a tense young woman with mousy hair and a Biro that kept on failing as she scribbled down notes. Her name was Ms Lorna Greene. It said so on her badge.

'I'm sorry,' she kept saying, whenever the Biro stopped working. The third time, I began to wonder if Ms Greene was apologising for being so nervous, or because she knew more about why I had been brought in. She didn't ask me too many questions. Just the basics, I suppose. Finally, she stared at her notebook as if she couldn't read her handwriting, and then stood up to leave.

'Is something wrong?' I'd asked. I wasn't just lacking confidence in Ms Greene. I wanted someone who knew how to cut through paperwork *and* get me out of here. 'You are coming back, aren't you?'

She shouldered her bag, open at the clasp, and forced a smile. 'A lot of people have been called to this station because of you. Some of them have asked to speak to me.'

Five minutes later, and looking a lot more assertive, my solicitor returned to explain that an offer had been made.

'It's from the American authorities,' she began, as if this made it something I couldn't refuse. I'm not sure what I'd expected to hear. When Ms Greene finished, I had to ask her to repeat it so I could be sure I hadn't missed some kind of catch.

According to her, I had actually been invited by the Americans to *fly out* and answer some friendly questions. This wasn't an order, she stressed. It was a *request* for me to come voluntarily. Once they understood exactly how I had managed to hack into such a high-security financial institution, they would put me on a plane home again. I wouldn't be arrested or earn any criminal conviction. Not a caution or even a fine. As part of this package, my father would be forbidden from talking to the press, as would I on my return. In fact, they proposed that the whole thing would be kept completely off the record.

If word got out, of course, I would be known forevermore as *the hacker who broke into Fort Knox.*

It was the coolest thing I had ever done, and also the most reckless. Nobody was supposed to be able to compromise the Kentucky-based gold bullion depository. With almost five thousand tons of gold bars locked away inside the vault, it had earned its reputation as being the most secure location on earth.

Until now, that is.

I would be notorious, if people knew. Most probably I could even profit from the story for a while. And yet no interview or lecture fee could ever compare to the high price I'd pay for ruining the reputation of an institution the American people regarded as a national treasure. That's how my brief saw things, anyway. Ms Greene's delivery was designed to make me think she had really thought this through. Given the state she'd been in when I first met her, it simply helped me to conclude that someone had treated her with great respect out there. Someone who also clearly knew how to soften a hard sell. She even confessed that the offer 'broke every rule in the book and then snapped the spine clean in two', which clearly hadn't come from her. Even so, she strongly suggested that I accept.

My first response was obvious.

'I'm only seventeen.' I'd said this like she needed

reminding, even though she had all my details on the pad in front of her. 'Can they do this to me?'

'Technically, you're still a minor. So, is your answer no. They can't touch you until you turn eighteen.'

'Which isn't until later this year,' I'd pointed out, and then realised where she was heading.

'Do you know what you're getting for your birthday?' Ms Greene addressed me quite firmly this time, and given me no time to reply. 'Because if you don't agree to come voluntarily it will be a very public arrest. I'm sure I can get you out for the time being, but you'd only be counting down the weeks and days until they come for you. And when they do, they'll want to exact some revenge on you for being so slippery.'

I remember shrugging at this, like a fool, because I was pretty sure she could tell I was frightened underneath.

'It would be quite a party,' was all I could think to reply, and then apologised immediately. 'I'm listening,' I promised, and sat up straight while she spelled it out. If I refused to accept their invitation right now, so she told me, the Americans would do it the official way. First, they'd haul me through the British courts, prosecuting me as an adult, of course, and then extradite me to face full charges across the water. Yes, I'd have a defence team, but at this level the prosecution would make sure the evidence against me was watertight. I could be looking at a very long term in a

penitentiary, she warned, and spared no detail on what a fresh-faced Brit boy might encounter in that kind of jail environment.

I told her I would sign the agreement immediately. She told me they were refusing to provide any paperwork, and then left to confirm my decision before I could change my mind.