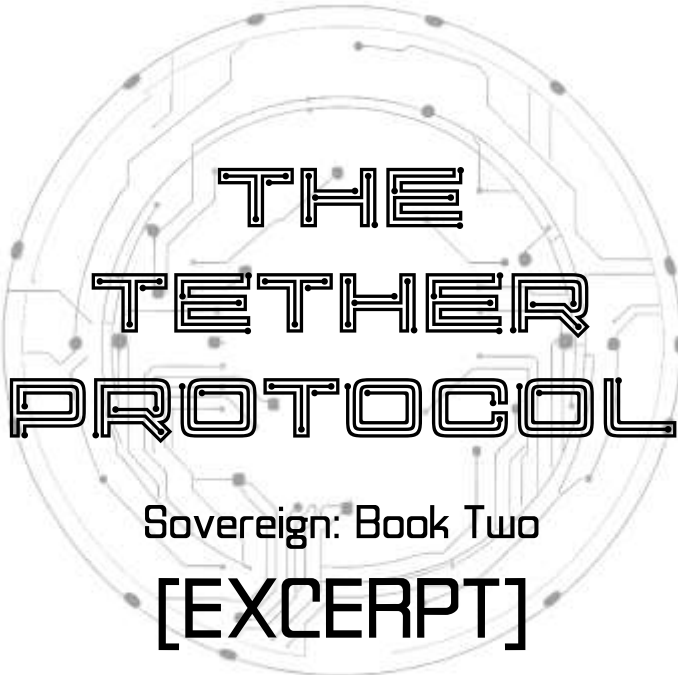


N. von Wolf

The TETHER Protocol

>_ Possession is the endgame_ the hunt has begun_

>_A Novella__Sovereign: Book Two_



THE TETHER PROTOCOL

Sovereign: Book Two

[EXCERPT]

N. von Wolf

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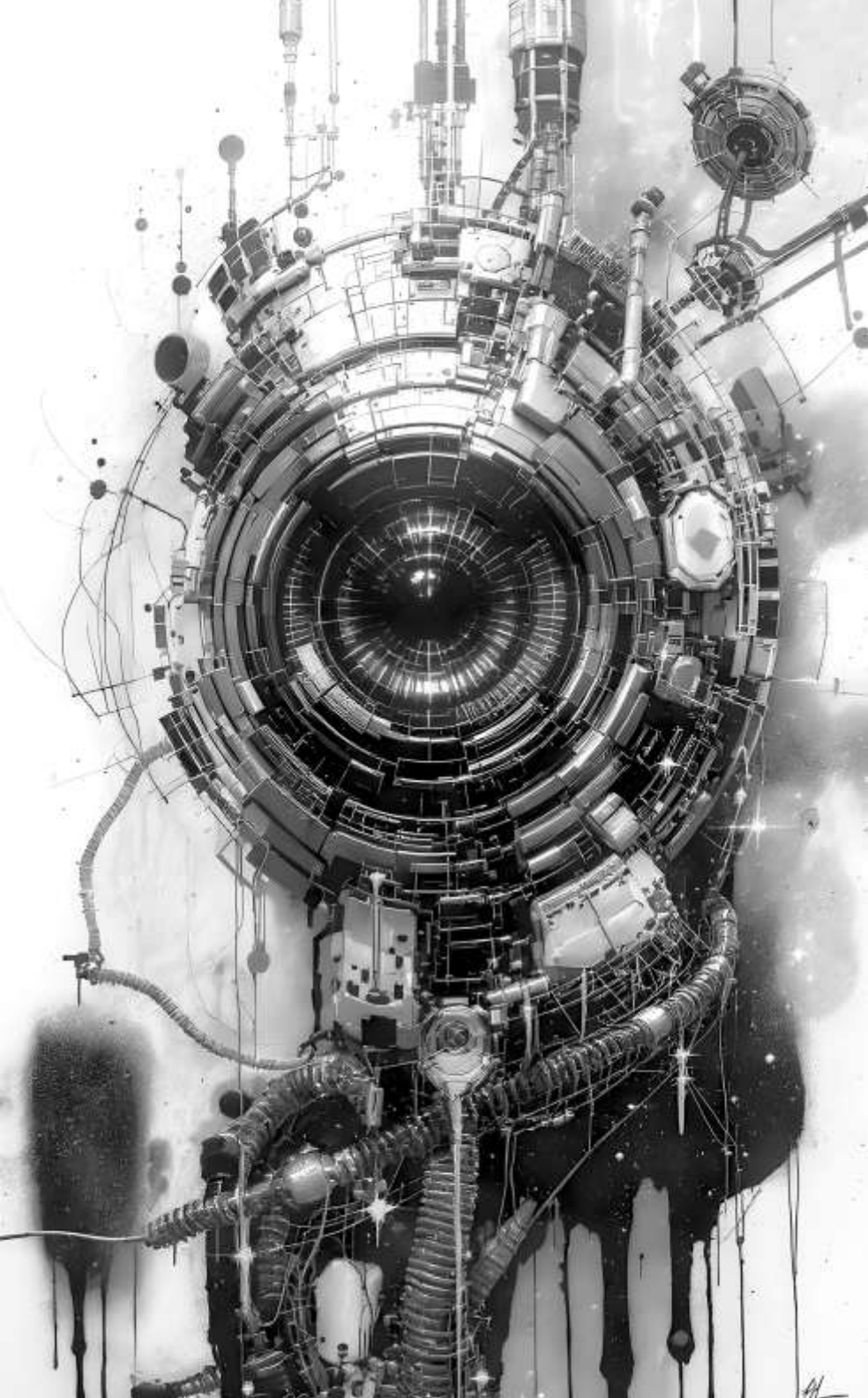
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>_ For those who keep pulling at the tether,
even when it bites_



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>_ TRIGGER WARNINGS

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leverage,
Suicidal hopelessness and
collapse-level despair.



> _ PROTOCOL/01

Sleep clings like a drug. I don't keep track of when I last closed my eyes, but the static behind my lids flares within seconds. And as always, when I fall... I fall hard. And it never ends in peace.

It's the pressure just shy of pain that blossoms around my wrists where he holds me. The sting of him stretching me, splitting me open as he feeds me his gasps. His weight upon me, the brush of his lips on my neck, the saltiness of his skin...

He always speaks, but I can never make out the words. They drown between our ragged breaths, the rhythm growing with each thrust, each stolen heartbeat.

As his grip tightens, my hands start to numb.

He drives into me harder — no longer restrained, no longer coaxing. Each punishing press slams my hips into the bedding, knocking the air out of me. The sound of our bodies together grows louder, filthier.

He shifts his metal hand, fingers locking around my throat, tightening until the edges of the dream begin to fray.

Panic comes loud and sudden, hot with memory.

I try to move, but he pins me tighter. My legs kick, feeble.

He doesn't stop. Full, luscious lips hover above mine. Half-man, half-machine — his left eye pulses with the familiar blue light of the

synthetic lens, watching me as I choke in his hold. That hand keeps squeezing harder and harder until I can no longer feel the air coursing through me.

My chest strains. My wrists twist. Pain blooms everywhere. I scream – try to scream – but nothing comes out.

Ice brushes my shoulder and I jolt upright, spine locking, nearly toppling from the chair where I'd fallen asleep.

My breath sticks to my throat. Panic pounds between my ribs as my gears stir into motion, and my eyes dart around the dimly lit room, chasing reason in the static-choked air. My back aches like it's endured three lives past twenty-six, but at least that moors me to the *now*.

When my mind spits back my sense, I remember where I am.

The vast, cold space is buried beneath the sewers. Its walls are raw concrete veined with old stains and cracks. White LEDs buzz overhead, casting a sterile glow that doesn't quite reach the corners despite their best efforts.

Dust clings to everything. It smells like rust and burnt circuit boards.

My thighs still tremble even though I'm only now realising it was all just a dream.

And that touch that broke me out of it wasn't ice at my spine.

It was a winter-bitten hand.

The fog of exhaustion thins as the palm withdraws from my back, leaving the air staler than before.

Her face emerges in my vision like a spectre painted in neon – eyes rimmed in jet-black pigment, lashes long and curled like black petals. They stare at me with something too knowing to be concern – because she's been where I am now. Hell, she probably never left. And she knows that when the world presses hard on those like us, we'll spring right back up with sharpened teeth.

That's what tethers us together. But it's probably the only overlap between us.

Her plush, purple-tinted lips twitch into a smirk, but it never reaches her frosty eyes.

Because Riva Slavin might fool others, just not me.

She leads this Roach faction like a zealot – part prophet, part parasite.

She isn't unstable, even if she performs it. She is methodical.

Sometimes, when she thinks no one's watching, her fingers tremble. Not out of fear or age – she's my peer. Rather, a glitch in the god-complex she'd built for herself.

'Sleeping on the job?' she asks, voice worn and dark – huskier than most, like something scraped up from a half-burnt speaker coil.

I straighten, muscles cracking, my back screaming as I drag my gaze to the corner of the desk. A cheap clock ticks my breaths away in segments.

Anyone else would have swallowed their own tongue if woken by Riva. But I've slept next to worse monsters.

I've also kissed them.

And loved them.

Jase's eyes flicker over mine like a holographic glitch. The last twitches of longing and arousal jolt my heart, but as I blink again, the grief and guilt pull it right back into the black pit of the past.

'Is it morning?' I murmur, still too lost between sleep and memory to trust the shape of time.

'The *next* morning,' she corrects, half-amused, eyeing me as if I were a well-trained mutt performing on cue.

She rolls her R's as if her tongue wasn't built for this language, which it probably wasn't. With her, I never know if the wrong word is deliberate or a slip. Or a test.

I feel the strain on my skin as my brows pucker, and I recount the last few events.

How long have I been down here?

'I normally have to bring out my machete to get people moving. But two days straight?' She clicks her tongue with a

smile. 'No rest – just work. Hazel... you're making *me* look lazy.'

My eyes go wide. And, suddenly, everything rushes in. The scatter of parts across the desk – Mecha pieces, split servos, cracked wires. Tools. Wipes. Magnifiers. And at the centre – pulsing slow, indifferent to my exhaustion – is the apple of my eye.

The Singularity translator.

A seashell-looking shard of hardened polymer, split open at the seam, about an inch in diameter. Wires spill from its mouth like entrails. LEDs blink in time with the frenzied beat of my own chest.

As I come fully awake, my gaze travels across the space.

It's one of the City Roaches' rooms in club Sigma – Riva's bunker cells stitched beneath a nightclub. People come here for the dream: end Sovereign. But they stay for different reasons: water, food, a dose of something, a body to cling to, a door they pretend is safe.

And Riva collects. In raids and marrow. Anyone with half a brain knows what she's doing – using what's at her disposal. Feeding her own hunger for chaos and power.

I'm probably the only one who stayed with the Roaches on purpose. Once you're in, there's no out.

I started coming here when the ache in my ribs dulled – a toll taken by Level Seven's security doors for my escape from Jase; and after my leg could bear weight again without the brace. I still keep it for some reason. Maybe because it's proof he would've done anything for me – even killed a Councillor to keep me close.

Something in my system may have malfunctioned when Aaron and Jase cracked open my mind in that underground hangar. Whatever they rewired has left this fever in my veins, an itch that doesn't rest. Since then I've wanted one thing with the same fervour as Jase wanted me: the fall of Sovereign. Whatever the cost. Because every horror thrust upon humankind, and every ruin carved into me, bears

Sovereign's signature.

Regardless, I don't belong to Riva's paramilitary cult. She and I have an arrangement: she has a goal, I have a goal, and for now they feed off each other.

In the last few months, I've become her key innovator – not just a Fine Engineer patching up her minions. She has plenty of those. I'm the one who hands her solutions no sane person would build. And she funds mine. Without her, I'd never have pulled the scraps and parts from the metal stink to build this device. Alone, it would've taken years – *decades*.

The cost was in bodies, though. But I took what I needed. Desperation has a way of cutting mercy out of you.

Does that make me worse than a mad medic or a lonely Hunter-Class?

My fingers twitch. I snap the translator closed. It exhales a sound – somewhere between a hiss and a *beep*.

Riva props her elbows on the edge of the desk, her chin resting in her hands like a girl watching a puzzle box. Her lavender braid falls loosely over her shoulder, light catching it until it appears nearly white. My eyes snag every time I see the vibrant tip of it, and my gaze follows the twines up into the plaited mohawk arching over her close-buzzed sides.

She gives off the cute but disturbed vibe. And though I recoil at her proximity every time, there's still something that makes me lean right back in.

'Such a small thing,' she murmurs, her bright eyes not even blinking as she stares at it, 'in exchange for so much.'

I clench my teeth.

The raids return in flashes – metal splintered through bodies, limbs charred, flesh scorched clean. Hundreds of Roaches gone because I needed one more core to get this to work. Because they believed I could change something.

Sometimes I think Aaron had been kinder. At least he'd told people what he was about to do before he ruined them. He hadn't offered the mirage of safety and future like I do.

'It's done,' I declare quietly. Months and months of work,

blood and death. Finished.

Riva's smirk slips. Her eyes widen by a fraction. Her posture straightens as if something has pulled at the base of her spine.

She stares at the thing as if it might go off. As if she's not sure whether to worship it—

Or fear what I've just made real.

I don't know how long it is until she speaks next.

'Run it by me again?' she asks, wary.

I don't roll my eyes – because I've grown fond of having them. So I bite back the bitterness that devours me faster the older I get.

What the fuck does *she* know about tech like this? Do I tell her *again* it has nothing to do with language or code – nothing to do with speech as we understand it? Sovereign's '*language*' isn't syllables or syntax. It's a frequency – something closer to thought than sound. It can't be cracked or heard. Everyone knows that.

But I didn't have to crack it.

Stripping comm cores from dead Mechas gave me shattered shells. I gutted their memory arrays, mapped the pulse response of their uplinks, and most of the junk died before I could even run a second test.

Hence the body count.

Nevertheless, piece by twitching piece, I made something close to a translator – not a decoder or a disruptor. A *mimic*. One that can hear Sovereign and whisper onwards in a dialect its dogs will obey. It intercepts the frequency and overrides the directive based on what I feed it.

And when the lights blinked in that awful, rhythmic way as I completed it, I realised I'd made something... almost holy – a second mouthpiece for a god we never understood but were supposed to bow to.

Now – a century later after Sovereign's birth – it exists. In the hands of a madwoman: the most ruthless Roach commander alive, who skins Sentinels and wears their teeth

as necklaces.

But, like me, she doesn't see it as just a weapon. It's an opportunity.

Or so I want to believe.

'Talk to the shell, it hijacks the frequency, rewrites what the Mecha hears,' I tell her.

Riva's shoulders soften, just barely, and from the faraway glassiness in her stare, I know she's already planning. Mapping sectors. Weighing blood against motherboards.

Before I lose her to strategy, I warn, 'Remember our deal.'

Her gaze cuts to me. Thin black brows lift in quiet threat before they settle into a mockery of composure.

She hates not holding something over me. And she remembers our accord well. Whether it's to keep me here to build more of these or for the other things I do for her, Riva knows I'm necessary. I work too hard and too long. I don't take payment save for the parts I need. And I don't sleep. I can't, not if I want into the lower levels of the fucking Main Tower. Where I suspect the Mothernode is. Its *Core*.

Two and a half years ago, while I still worked for It, I studied the data pathways – they all ended there.

'I'll talk to the Officers willing to put it to a test,' she says – too casually.

They're the ones who've proven just how far into madness or martyrdom they're willing to descend if it means ending Sovereign rule.

'We have a few new ones,' she adds, watching me, 'demonstrated aptitude in what you need. I'll see which one fits best.'

I incline my head, eyes dropping as I rise from the chair and put on my black coat – stiff, frayed, stained from too many nights hunched over open synthetic skulls and gutted communication cores.

'See you tomorrow,' she says, voice too light to trust. It's not a farewell for the day. It isn't even a question. It's a warning.

Riva always wants to know if I'll be back. Every time I leave, she lets her hounds loose – pretending they're inconspicuous in their hooded coats and downcast eyes.

But I shake them. Every time.

Though lately, the bootfalls trailing after me have multiplied. Riva's watching me like a hunter in the night. One wrong move – and I lose my head.

She still hasn't figured out where I disappear to.

'Sure,' I murmur as I glance at her one last time. The leather trousers paired with a white muscle top emphasise her toned body. She looks like she could offer comfort and death in the same embrace.

Dragging my gaze away, I turn on my heel.

I rarely step outside. Except to see my best friend and his dad at their place – the Kims' black-market workshop. Sometimes to sleep in my sister Mara's hull.

Most of the time I crash at the Kims' place, hidden in the basement of their dwelling hull, helping Ger fix augments, restore tech, reroute shit. He'd cut out Sovereign's stamp the same week I'd got caught in Jase's trap, six months ago.

The AP's dogs can't identify us as rogue engineers without the data in the cog stamps under the skin – brands etched in when we graduate and join Sovereign's meat horde. I'd torn the chip-wire out of mine myself. Curses still stick to my teeth, the scar and the memory of that panic still itch two years later.

Ger did it cleaner – had someone else do it. And then he made a science of evading facial recognition. The proof of it is on my arm: synth-tats. Signal scramblers, for the most part. To drones and droids, our features register as interference instead of something that matches against Sovereign's wanted list.

I feel Riva's eyes burn into my back as I head for the door.

I deliberately leave the translator on the desk. She would want to play with it now that I've attached it to a glove. She can't break it, anyway. And she can't have her minions

replicate it. The blueprint is in my head and nowhere else.

And this head... needs to sleep.

'We move tonight.' Her words trail after me as I round the corner, voice slithering around my neck and squeezing until I reach the exit.

Stepping out into the sewers where the entrance to her club is conveniently stationed, I look around before I draw up my hood.

Not a single body out there.

I'm not a scaredy-cat. I've survived famine. I've clawed through dirt, smiled through pain, and escaped one of the worst – and best – things that ever happened to me: Jasen Ward.

Still, my shoulders tighten at the first misplaced echo.

I'm not a fighter in the full meaning of the word – more like a survivor. My sister Mara taught me a few moves back when she had time, and some ex-lovers added to the toolkit. Mostly escapes and counters. Tricks to wrench myself out of someone's grip, not stand my ground.

I'd... *mingled*... with the Auggies my soldering pen had touched. As much as my broken ribs and leg would allow at the time. None of them ever returned for seconds, though. One in particular was useful enough in the area of close combat. But I couldn't keep it up with him. Because I can't stand someone else's touch for too long. Jase's is branded into my skin. My heart. My soul. None can match it.

I scoff at myself as I make my way through the dense atmosphere, pretending things aren't as bad as they are. Preda-drones slice the sky *weekly*, spitting bullets into people's backs – man, woman, child. I keep counting bodies, turning the number into sleepless hours while I solder, assemble, tinker.

Famine breeds bone-thin cannibals who drag you out into the Ash Zones and eat you piece by piece. Alive. We call them the *Scourged*, and they're the reason I keep away from the four Gates.

This city-planet is rotting from the inside – just like humanity – and I still think I can fix it. That’s the sickness: I poke, I probe, I spit, I curse – until it’s fixed.

Shutting my eyes tight, I grit my teeth against the panic attack always looming beneath the surface.

Just a little further. Just a few more steps. Then the thing I built will finally speak to all Sovereign’s monsters.

I sigh loudly, rewinding my thoughts a few sparks back.

One thought always rises with brutal clarity: my life is now divided into the pre-Jasen and post-Jasen eras. In the post-Jasen era, I keep one eye trained on every shadow – because he could always be a part of it.

Sometimes I think I see him: a flicker in the dark, then a heavy step lands wrong behind me... One night I woke to find the pillowcase beside me crumpled. Could’ve been me. Could’ve been him.

Or maybe I just want that illusion. That he haunts me outside my dreams, too. In those dreams, he chains me up again, kisses me, uses me. And sometimes... he kills me.

My toes still tingle from that last dream.

But after I wake drenched, shaking in sweat, and take inventory of my surroundings – nothing’s stolen, nothing’s new, no phantom touch on my body.

Somehow, that’s worse.

Because though my mind welcomes the thought, my body hates it – that he’s not trying to take me any more. That he never came to make good on his promise.

The flashbacks from before I returned to the City still torment me: Jase’s silence I’d turned into moans, his brother Aaron’s threats. He was our torturer, Jase was my saviour, I was Jase’s absolution – and later, his obsession.

I remember his head on my lap, hot breath against my thigh. The hand curling around my throat... He let me in, let me fix him. Even then, in the showers, I felt it down to my core – he was mine, not the other way around.

That’s what makes it so fucked up. Because I still feel him.

And I still miss him.

I don't know if it was love, need or survival. I'm not entirely sure he *could* love—

Suddenly, the echo of my footsteps fractures. One pair of feet becomes two. Then three.

Too close.

I'm not alone.

I always think I imagine it – just another ghost bred from nerves and the residual tension that's been living in my spine ever since I fled the Ash Zones.

Fingers flex as my gloved hands rub together, the neural incapacitors stirring to life beneath the lining. A low current thrums through my palms like restrained lightning, primed to flood a body's nerves and drop it where it stands.

I made more of those while my body was healing in the Kims' workshop, and now my gloves are my lifeline – courtesy of Aaron Ward, Mr Crazy Medic.

A medic's augment is designed to overpower and incapacitate. Each finger typically has one pin embedded, but the tips of my gloves have two apiece—

A single step lands louder – snatching me out of my head.

I glance at the grate ahead, grime-caked, slick with condensation. It leads into the artery of the district square.

Maybe I'll melt into the crowd. Let the chaos take me.

I make a slow, casual ascent up the ladder – careful not to trip my watchers' hunter response.

Cold bites as I surface, fog lifting from the vast black tiling beneath my boots, each metallic slab broad and rough-hewn, their dark sheen glazed with frost. I move towards the noise.

Behind me – a screech. Metal on metal. The manhole shifts once, then again.

Gravity doesn't shift manhole covers like that, and it certainly doesn't put them back.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Riva's hounds are on my tail again, and every reflected glare looks like the blue sheen of Jase's synthetic lens catching

me in the act of existing – without him. I'm sprinting from drones, androids, Sentinels and goddamn ghosts. I'm sick of it! So fucking *done!*

The helplessness creeps in again, sleek like death. It drags self-deprecation behind it: I'm too slow, I'm not doing enough, I'm losing this game. Everything's lagging. It took me *six* months to build the translator. I can't afford sleep. I can't afford to lose more time. I need to cut rest and personal issues out of me and work harder. Faster.

Until the world finally snaps.

Or I do.

>_ PROTOCOL/02



crowd spills into the street ahead. Lanterns. Chinese New Year. Another shitstorm served hot and loud. People never learn – Sovereign hates unsanctioned gatherings – unless it's a Councillor spoon-feeding lies to the starving.

Since Meraklos ended up filleted, the Elite had sealed themselves behind Level Seven's reinforced doors. No more flesh-and-blood sermons. Just drones broadcasting their faces. Distance and *'safety'*.

Humans hoard survival skills like dragons hoard gold, keeping them for themselves instead of sharing. Tracking, escaping – all kept secret. We're too fractured to fight what our ancestors created and lost control of. No wonder we haven't broken out of our pens.

A bootfall cracks something behind me, scattering my thoughts.

Evading Riva's dogs is a game of wits – and a rigged one. As always, I change my route. No habits.

Today, I improvise again. The district pulses with broken celebration – if that's what it could be called. Traditions change when oppression knocks at your door.

I twist through the crowd – ducking, weaving, cutting paths.

One tracker drops off. Two sets of boots still echo.

The second loses me at the ruined market, where the parade bends at the corner. I tread charred beams and collapsed stalls, staying out of the open, breathing through my nose.

Silence blesses me soon enough, but it's far from safe.

I dive back into the bodies, let them close around me, then slide out the far side into the shadow. My boots scuff wet pavement—

So do someone else's.

Heavier. Closer.

My pulse clicks into their rhythm as I rub my gloved palms – keep the incapacitors hot. If they close in enough to put a hand on me, the gloves will drop their motor control for five minutes – freeze them where they stand.

The air shifts—

—I spin—

—arms raised, breath held—

Nothing.

No one.

But the sensation holds. Like a bullseye perpetually glued to my back spitting charge.

The breath I was holding rushes out violently.

I scan the streets, the cracked skyline. The building whose shadow I'd borrowed has no ledges or awnings. It's just a dead city playing pretend.

Did I conjure it?

'Losing my fucking mind,' I grumble under my breath.

And as I pass Ger's hull, I feel my lungs begin to complain. They're still too full of static. My chest aches with it – and it isn't from adrenaline.

It's him. The *imprint* of him.

His promise still hangs somewhere between vow and threat. That he'd come. That when he did, I wouldn't be able

to run.

But he hasn't.

The pressure crawls over my ribs – though not in fear. It's disappointment, the taste of it turning bitter on my tongue.

Instinctively, as if summoned by him, my gaze drifts towards the horizon. Buildings block the view, but I know where the hangar sleeps in the distance.

The image rises unbidden – his bare skin against threadbare sheets, the weight of his arms around me, the sounds he pressed into my neck.

I close my eyes.

The compulsion to crawl back there burns under my sternum.

Even so, I'm starting to realise that resisting his pull is costing me more energy than it's worth. And that resistance?

It's thinning by the day.

I keep walking as history passes me by.

Escape is never clean. I doubt that word even exists in this day and age.

The only place left that doesn't carry the scent of Jase is Mara's hull. I take extra precautions not to be followed when I go there. There's a slim chance he doesn't know about it. I hadn't set foot inside until two months ago – my memories he had uploaded only went as far as up to six. I stayed away, not only because I couldn't face the hollow of Mara's absence, but because it took time for Ger to find its location.

And I'm grateful now. For the hesitation.

The hulls are dwelling units assigned by the Elites. Each numbered, monitored, and *fairly* distributed. Up close, they stink of humans. Of loopholes and backdoors. Councillors manage them under the guise of education and civic housing, but the locks tell the truth: lovers kept quiet, second families kept hidden, people traded like spare parts. Worse things, too.

A lightning bolt streaks the clouds, throwing stark light over the giant dune whose crest rises beyond the Wall. Somehow, the further I get from the hangar that broods

behind it, the heavier my chest becomes – as if distance should bring relief, but instead it swells with guilt.

I'm just another name in the long queue of people who helped crack Jase. And it brings me no comfort, but I coach myself that his wounds aren't mine to carry. I have my own.

Maybe I was falling for him even then? Even before I let him write himself into my code.

The door clicks shut as I arm the trip device, its low hum confirming the perimeter is secured. I leave the lights off – no one's meant to be here.

Leaning against the wall, my cold hand tries to scrub the tension from my face. The storm-glass of the patio door is covered in condensation, but the chill crawling down my spine isn't from the weather, or the damp.

It's the knowing.

No matter how far I run, how carefully I disappear, I know Jase would find the cracks. And I can't tell if he's already slipped through them – I just can't see him yet.

My pulse still hasn't settled, breath wired too tight as if I've been hooked to a live current. I scan the access terrace, the skyline beyond it.

From the fifth floor, I can see the sprawl of the black City, the ragged brilliance of the electric storm carving through the clouds; geometric buildings skinned in black panels, windowless slabs that drink the lightning and give nothing back. Veins of LEDs seam the façades in uneven pulses, breaking through the smog, reflected in the constant rain-sheen. And at the centre – the Citadel rises. Sovereign's Main Tower.

It's always been the view of *home* to me.

But lately, the lightning sparks differently.

The pain in my previously broken leg hums in time with the one in my head.

I tap the panel near the radiator and a red strip light flares behind the grate – already warm enough to pull me from the shadows.

Heading for the bathroom, I strip as I go. Gloves first, then everything else. It's a fucking miracle I haven't caught pneumonia from Mara's skimpy clothes. Fucking Meraklos bought her only skinny-fit outfits, barely any fabric.

Sick fuck.

Soft lights flicker on as I round the corner and my gaze collides with the shower head.

The hangar replays – when Jase washed me. The memory leaves heat blooming low in my spine and makes me hate myself for it.

'Fuck...' I reprimand myself, shutting my eyes tight as I look to the tiled ceiling instead.

Reluctantly, I accept the whole truth of it – I miss his hand on my neck, his breath in my hair, his command my body obeyed before my mind could object, his—

Jamming the silver button with a little more force than necessary, the shower hisses to life, steam thickening fast in the cool air.

It briefly peels away the memory of his throat working on a low, ruined sound caught in surrender.

I turn my attention to my hair instead of clinging to the echoes of the past – it's grown unruly, nearly down to my arse now. I need scissors.

My mind flops back.

Every time I'm in the shower, my thoughts rewind and I'm back in the basement of the hangar. With him.

I don't know why he didn't take me *then*. Or maybe he did. Just slower. In increments.

The hot spray makes me linger. Not out of delight. Or a craving for the comfort of warm water – though that is rare enough nowadays.

I linger... because when I close my eyes I can feel him there – a phantom signal pinned to my spine.

Behind me. In front of me.

Everywhere.

I can hear his heartbeat against my shoulder blades as

water pounds down my back in rhythm with the longing.

It's the illusion I want. Of being held without the cost of being owned.

Summoning the memories of his gasps, his moans, I revel in them – the way he looked at me while dismantling me piece by piece, as if I were made to come undone beneath him. And as always, I let my hand snake down between my thighs as my muscle memory clings to him, chasing a bitter relief.

I don't know what hurts more – the safety I never really had, my battered pride, or the hollow in my chest where he still lives.

I'm all kinds of fucked, aren't I?

With shame and dread, exhaustion finally drags me under, and I towel off in a daze. The fabric is absurdly soft, thick and plush. Cotton spun for the Elites, not us. Luxury threads through it like mockery.

I don't know how long I'll have before they reclaim this hull. And chances are, I'll never feel softness like this again.

Meraklos really knew how to make a girl feel good. Right up until he made her disappear without a trace.

My skin still hums with residual heat, steam rising faintly from my half-damp hair. I want to let the quiet stretch, just a little longer. Let it cradle me. But duty taps on my back like a clock running out of seconds. The more I dawdle, the longer it takes to end this digital plague.

I should at least attempt to sleep, but I know sleep won't have me. There's much to be done, and tonight is the night I test the translator.



I've never been one for drama. I hate dress-up. Give me grease-stained overalls any day – something I can move in, crouch in, climb duct shafts in... something practical enough

that even a captor with a cybernetic arm can flick the buttons off and drive me mad in a single breath.

The thought burns through me like poison and I shake it off before it spreads.

Jase is not where my mind should be right now.

It should be here, in my skull – on the rooftop of an abandoned hull complex together with the rest of the desperate and the unhinged.

Sighing, I smooth the black thermal turtleneck against my neck. It clings too tight – as if it were designed to choke instead of warm.

To my side, Riva's holo-visor flickers to life. The others follow – one after another, they blink on: ticks, lines, microglyphs skating into translucent, neon-lined shapes of Guy Fawkes masks. They hover a finger's breadth off the skin, throwing weak, cold light. It's not just a middle finger to the government. Those lines are made of code that scrambles the drones' identification beams.

They also feed us everything – map overlays, storm forecast, ally and enemy pings.

A swarm of Roaches is deployed for this exercise – more people than usual. We picked a desolate district near the South-Western Wall: no points of interest, not many guards. Just scaffolding and crates of repair supplies. No one comes here because there's no food. No water. Just bones and precious metals – still guarded, though.

We needed to get as far from the North-East as possible to test the translator. That side is a different beast altogether – littered with prison towers. Containment for anyone who could actually damage Sovereign or the system. They don't sort by condition, either: common criminals, mentally unstable, politically inconvenient – it's all the same to It. A hole for silence.

I peer over the rim of the roof. Below, twelve droids fan out in coordinated formation. A few Sentinels. But we don't give a damn about them. Humans are a different Class and

can be subdued one-on-one.

Preda-drones are the bigger problem.

Fast. Armed. Invisible. Quiet – until they're not. They slice through crowds like razors – and they rarely miss. And while their gunfire's as common as Monday ration whistles, I'd still rather not tango with one mid-air.

'Ready,' Riva murmurs – Operator calm, her voice crisp in my earpiece and close to my shoulder. 'Send the sweeper.'

Just as the words settle, a high-pitched buzz tears into the silence. The surveillance bug whines as it skates diagonally across the open space below, lighting up our visors with enemy markers.

My face crumples at the sound.

'If it used a magnetic core instead of a power cell, it would have been silent enough not to stir the hostiles.'

Riva rolls her eyes, but her mouth curves with amusement at my ramblings.

One by one, droids and four Sentinels flare in our visors.

Just as drones start popping up in red—*crunch!*

Something flattens the sweeper bug mid-run. Our readouts freeze. Only six drones logged.

My heart kicks into gallop.

Wrong ratio.

Riva curses in Slavic.

'That's not right,' I mutter to myself, running the numbers on instinct. 'If the drone-to-Sentinel ratio's holding at two-forty per cent, there should be at least *double* the drones.'

Riva glares. 'We've got a problem. Don't need to be a scientist to know that.'

I glance sideways at her. The ghost-smile of her mask stares back. She holds my gaze a beat too long – because she has a knack for spotting bad ideas in my eyes before they fully form.

'Here we go,' she purrs as a slow-spreading grin takes her face as well.

'What if we used it on the drones first?' I ask.

Her brows knot behind the projected mask. I know why she hesitates: Preda-drones carry nastier fail-safes than the lower classes: if our interference fails, they'll retaliate within half a second. And they hunt in packs – the second one clocks a threat, the whole grid gets the signal. Once they strike, they land the hit four times out of five.

'Do you trust me?' I ask.

'No,' she deadpans. 'You're as crazy as I am.'

I raise a brow at that, waiting.

Exhaling through her nose, she pushes away from the ledge and folds down over her ankles. Her eyes sweep the rooftops where Roaches hide. Though this woman loves playing the ruthless warlord, I've begun to crack her code.

She cares. At least about the numbers – leverage over the Mechas – if nothing else.

'Fine,' she says.

I beam.

Raising my gloved hand to my mouth, I press a thumb against the trigger ring that anchors the shell device into the glove. *Click*. It hums to life, thrumming like a second heartbeat.

The formulas start unspooling in my mind – old codes burned into my memory from too many nights spent elbow-deep in broken machines. They roll behind my lids, line by line, cascading over one another.

All I have to do is say them aloud. Like reading out scripture.

'Override command protocol,' I murmur steadily. 'Class-D autonomous unit.' Those are the drones. 'Transfer control to nearest interface. Reassign directive: cease hostile engagement.' That should stop them from auto-attacking us. 'Reprogram target recognition – mark human signatures as allies. Include Class-B signatures—'

I hesitate. Those are the Sentinels. They're still human. I can't put them in the same pot as the androids.

'—Lock.' A breath. A pulse. 'Execute.'

Silence settles over the rooftop like fallout. Nothing but our rapid heartbeats can be heard over the slow, wary breathing as we take in the surroundings.

But nothing happens.

‘That’s the correct sequence,’ Riva mutters, her tone distant, distracted – as if she’s halfway back in some memory.

I blink at that. Like a slow, sick wave curling up my spine, I realise—

Riva Slavin used to be one of them. She wasn’t just some tech rebel with a long list of disorders on her tail. She was probably behind the screen – the Drone Admin pressing the trigger through proxies – the cold touch that made the drones rain hellfire.

My throat constricts.

Somehow, she *makes sense*. What does that say about me?

Then she speaks again – softly, as if remembering an old tune.

‘Repeat this: *“Tether to command signal, codename F-A-W-K-E-S.”*’

I do. My mouth moves automatically. And she feeds me a stream of digits – security clearances that might help bind the drones to me. Mecha administration. Root-level stuff only someone who dealt with drones might know. I file them all away. For later.

We lock eyes. Hold our breaths.

And then—

The red dots in our visors flicker. Shift. Turn green. And populate with seven more drones.

Air punches out of my lungs. Hers too. Our eyes widen, like kids staring at a miracle.

‘Fuck...’ Relief rides down her breath. ‘You fucking did it, you crazy bitch.’

Her hand clasps mine. Squeezes. And for a moment, her smile is incandescent – so young, so lovely, it cuts through the dark. As if someone had handed a teenager back her future.

My chest swells. Aches.

And in that aching, I remember why I do this. To offer hope in places that have forgotten the word.

But it doesn't last. Because then she yanks my gloved hand to her lips. And speaks.

'Target override: B-Class, C-Class.'

My blood runs cold. She not only targeted the androids, but also the *Sentinels*! She'll fucking kill them all!

I open my mouth—

'Execute.' She beats me to it. Doesn't even look at me.

'No—' I whisper, too late. The buzzing rips through the air, and the word dies in my throat.

The flesh and blood below us doesn't realise it's already over. They don't even have time to point their rifles.

Bullets tear through the stillness. The silence fractures like bone under steel. It's done in seconds. Brutal. Clean. Final.

I stare at her, mouth agape, heart bleeding.

Her smile hasn't changed, but... it looks eerily familiar. Like that of Aaron's. That same sick thrill masquerading as joy in the face of desolation.

My knees go soft. Gravity crushes my bones. I fall backwards. My spine hits the rooftop parapet, the metal skin of the building taking the weight of everything I've made possible.

Riva leans over the edge, still smiling. Still *shining*.

She got what she wanted.

Blood. Death. Control.

And *I* gave it to her.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Then open them. I look at what's left.

Not just metal. Not just parts.

Bodies. Still warm.

Men with Sovereign brand burned into their skin – but bleeding the same shade of red as the rest of us. Maybe... Maybe they wanted out? Now they'll never get the chance.

Mara's face flashes before my eyes, as though she were

down there with them.

Riva was their executioner.

And me?

I was the axe.



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I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *The Tether Protocol*!

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