

Project SHIVA Interlude 2

Washington, DC

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The trick with strangling a bureaucrat with his own tie is -- well, there isn't one, really. It's just that it's sometimes not all that easy to have the tie available to hand, as it were. This is particularly true when the goal is to make the incident look like an autoerotic asphyxiation gone terribly wrong. The knots have to be subtly altered, and the victim's hands have to be carefully managed lest they get fingerprints and nails all over everything, and honestly, many of the Group's cleaning squad members preferred to use a silken cord and just put the tie on afterward. The coroner could be counted to sanitize the autopsy report anyway, so what was the harm?

Marie Linh Bronstein privately felt such an attitude was exactly the sort of sloppy thinking that made America lose the Vietnam War in the first place. If you want a job to look right, you had to make sure that it be done right. And the best way to fake an autoerotic asphyxiation is to actually go through the motions. Personally distasteful as they had been, in this case.

But that had been an unfortunate series of events in the recent past. In the present, Marie looked down dispassionately for the signs of life as they resolutely fled -- but she didn't relax until a good minute after her victim's bowels did. And even then Marie tensed as she let go of the victim's tie. It was amazing how hard to life some people clung. Even garbage cultists like this guy. But -- no. The bastard was dead. And he looked most undignified about it, too.

The young woman walked over to her cleaning cart and pulled out a walkie-talkie. "Bravo Oscar to Sierra Hotel. First base reached, repeat, first base reached. Come on in." Marie tossed the walkie talkie back into the cart as the doors opened and three men came quickly, but not hastily, into the office.

The first man immediately started going through the victim's filing cabinets and desk, while the second -- after a quick search of the victim himself -- started arranging the scene to make it look more like an example of solitary vice. The third; well, the third man leaned against the door and looked smug. Marie sighed to herself; she hated these little interdisciplinary meetings. Particularly when it came to men like Howard Thresher.

His smile was mocking as she came over to him. "Miss Linh! Ravishing as always." Thresher's eyes flicked over to the dead man. "Literally. I trust that you had a pleasurable time of it?"

Marie's own voice was cool. "Passable. Although I would like to know why the NBS needed to call in a specialist. Didn't you sweep this office two years ago?"

“Mademoiselle, the Bureau of Standards is hardly the power unto the land that your own agency is. The NSA --”

Marie interrupted, reflexively. “The who?” Thresher snapped the briefest of smiles.

“Forgive my impertinence. The Capitol Cleaners may be able to indulge in scouring, steam-cleaning, and sanitizing at the drop of a hat, but my own poor agency simply does not have the budget. Besides; this one has been very careful. As we root out the Project SHIVA moles, the survivors become cagier and cagier. Think of it as evolution in action, as the writer says.”

This was unfortunately true enough, Marie decided, to make starting an agency fight over it counter-productive. Time to mend fences a little. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” Thresher gave a slight flicker of surprise at the gesture, but forbore to crack his usual smartass comment in response. Maybe the NBS was a little worried about the current state of the fences, too. Marie went on, “So what flushed this guy out of cover?”

“The START talks, of course.” shrugged Thresher. “You know how the Project has always felt about nuclear weapons; they’re obsessed with the things. Death may be their God, but ICBMs are their angels. The idea that Reagan might actually reduce the number of warheads on both sides must be infuriating them. Your, ah, target finally decided that he had waited long enough and could safely start to reactivate the network. He just had the bad luck to call a phone number that we had burned and turned a long time ago.”

“Bad luck for them, good luck for us. Works for me. I don’t mind easy jobs.” Marie looked back at the man arranging the corpse. “You need anything from me?” At his head shake Marie walked over to the cart and pulled out a nylon bag from it. She dropped it to the ground, opened the door, took a just-in-case look around, and very prosaically walked the cleaning cart back to the cleaning station.

Marie was back within a minute; as she entered, she quickly stripped off the wig and subtly eroticized outfit that made her look like a desirable and possibly-accessible cleaning lady. If the other agents had any interest in her state of undress, they were careful to keep it to themselves. Thresher seemed genuinely unmoved; but then, he always did.

As she stuffed her disguise and gloves into the bag, Marie asked “Who’s handling the house raid?”

“We have local police doing that one,” replied Thresher. “Somebody called in a burglar, burgling. The usual dodge.” Marie stopped.

“Wait, we’re not using Group resources?”

“Miss Linh, this is not the 1960s. The Group does not have as much leeway as it did back then. It is not so much money as it is manpower. There are four different agencies running around in this room tonight, and only two of them are run by men who understand what the Group is, and why we are necessary. If the cops find something obvious, wonderful. If they do not, well, somebody we know will eventually check the house for clues.”

“Manpower? As in, not enough recruits? Thresher, how are we expected to maintain operations if we’re not bringing in new people?”

“Oh, that’s an easy one, Miss Linh. We’re not. If the Group doesn’t have to keep killing Project death cultists, then we have been graciously given permission to simply wither away.”

Marie felt, deep in her bones, that this was a mistake. But it was hard to argue against it. The Group had fought Project SHIVA constantly for most of the Sixties and Seventies; it had been a war of attrition, and once the Project had fallen below a certain membership level it grew ever-easier to roll up cultist cells. This was the first real incident in eighteen months, and it might be several years before there was another one. In fact: Marie suddenly was struck with the thought that this might have been the last time that she would ever be called on to kill a Project death cultist.

This must have shown on her face, because Thresher smirked a bit. “Regretting that you didn’t savor every little last detail?” Marie turned to him, slowly.

“Mister Thresher. I am aware that it is the Group’s custom to keep a very jaundiced eye on people like me.” Marie leaned forward. “But jaundiced is not bloodshot, which is what your eye is going to be if you do not stop suggesting that I am a Death-lover. Or simply just swelled shut. I’m not doing this because I love killing people.”

Thresher threw up his hands. “My turn to cry pardon. For clumsiness, not zeal. It is absolutely vital that we keep people like you on the straight and narrow. But I could have handled it better.”

“Indeed you could. If it makes you feel any better? I do like killing Project members. But that’s OK. They tried to kill me first.”

Well, not specifically, admitted Marie in the privacy of her head. The Project merely took advantage of Watergate to pull strings in Congress and deny -- out of spite, and delayed revenge against Gerald Ford -- South Vietnam the aid it needed to keep from being overrun. Those two months in 1975 would have been sheer hell for anybody; but for a seventeen year old girl separated from her American father? Well, it was excellent training for working with the Group, later. And even more excellent motivation.

The two searchers had finished their work. The one on file detail had scored an address book, carefully hidden away under a potted plant (plastic, of course). Between that and the age of it

there was definitely a possibility of a jackpot. The man on person and scene-arrangement detail was just finishing up making quick clay impressions of the keys, pulling everything out of the corpse's wallet that wasn't a driver's license or a credit card, the usual. And Thresher? He was doing -- whatever it was that he did at these scenes. Marie respected the man's ability to glean useful data seemingly out of the air without liking him in the slightest; presumably Thresher's talents required this kind of macabre visitation.

Marie took one last look at her victim. In death, he looked absurd, particularly after the careful arrangements and changes done to his wardrobe. In life he hadn't been much more appealing, either. His body had reacted to the presence of a desirable woman, to be sure; but the mind inside of it was much more interested in other things, like whether she had family in America and how she felt about it being hard for her to meet friends, how sad.

Oh, he wouldn't have done anything that night. But Marie had been involved in three other 'cleaning contacts' like this one, and in each one the eyes were always the same. Eyes that looked at people, and only saw meat. The bastard was marking her down for later, after the Project was up and running. And he must have thought that this was the life, right up to the point where Marie slammed the heel of her hand into his solar plexus, spun his chair halfway around, and yanked the tie tight into a killing knot.

Marie perhaps shivered, just a touch. If Thresher was right, and the Group was going to wind itself down, then perhaps not having to do these kinds of jobs anymore wouldn't be so bad after all. Even killing monsters takes its toll.

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