



When a pedophile ring attempts to capture one of her young friends, Vickie turns her wrath on them. Her vengeance is devastating, deadly and permanent. They should have remained in the shadows to avoid detection. Now they are prey to... The Raven.

Quoth The Raven: "...I am the Raven."

By Kat Lewis and R.L. Pool

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Quoth The Raven

"...I am the Raven."

A red top hat with a black feather lying on a stone floor. The floor is made of irregular, light-colored stone tiles with dark grout. The scene is lit from above, creating a strong shadow of the hat and the surrounding area on the floor.

A DAHL HAUS CYBER SYSTEMS NOVEL
PART 2

KAT LEWIS AND R.L. POOL

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Chapter One

“Karma is a bitch...”

He'd followed the directions given to the cabin along the Saline River far to the south of Benton, Arkansas. When he stepped out of his Lexus, he rubbed his hand over the short red beard and glared at the dirt and dust on the dark paint. He didn't look pleased.

“He probably don't like no dirt on his fancy car.” said the young man as he monitored the man's approach to the porch. “Them city folks always seem ta like their cars more'n fuckin'.”

“If you was payin' as much as these assholes is for young virgin pussy, Caleb,” responded an older man snidely as he looked over Caleb's shoulder, “you'd be purty persnickety too! You check the cameras in the rooms?”

“Yes, Lonny.” Caleb replied with a sneer. “I done told ya three times. Delores done give them girls a dose so's they should oughta be pliable by now.”

“As long as she don't overdo it...” Lonny responded as he looked at the monitors where the six young girls were tied to their beds. “If we get any complaints, we gonna lose bi'ness. We only got a short while afore them nother fellers comes and checks 'em out. They need ta be broke in b'fore then so's them others can sell 'em quick. Then we'll need ta send 'em on ta L.A. fer shipment. We got a line on replacements?”

“Josh and Felicia been ghostin' Wal-Mart in Benton but I ain't heard nothin' yet.” As Caleb grabbed his crotch, he added, “Them

others ain't checked in neither. Delores is leadin' them rich folks down ta the girls now. I gotta start recordin'."

"Make sure ya get their faces this time." Lonny remarked. "Last time, them fellers couldn't get a lock on 'em an' they was pissed!"

"I got it, Lonny!" Caleb replied loudly. "That ol' boy down at Best Buy done showed me what I was doin' wrong! They all set up this time!"

"Good." Lonny responded as he glanced down at the young man massaging his groin. "I'm goin' up ta sit with Delores. Don't mess up this time, Caleb."

Caleb waited until Lonny turned his back and then stuck out his tongue. He glanced at the monitors and checked to see that the six cameras in each of the rooms was working. With one hand rubbing his groin, he zoomed in on the room the new rich guy was entering and smiled. He turned up the volume and grinned as his breath came in short bursts.

"Please don't hurt me, mister." came the weak, pleading voice of the maybe fourteen-year-old, tied by the hands to the headboard. "Please?"

Caleb zoomed in on the man's face as he took off his jacket and hung it on the end of the bed. The man smiled and...

The screens went black... *all* of them!

"What the *fuck*!" Caleb shouted as he checked to see if the computer was off as well.

It seemed to be working but the video was off. He checked the recorder linked to the computer and it wasn't blinking like it was supposed to.

"Shit!" Caleb shouted as he got on his knees to check the wiring.

“Having trouble, asshole?” came the soft question from behind him.

When Caleb turned around, the muzzle of a silenced pistol was touching his forehead. He froze.

“I need information.” the lethal, but feminine voice stated from behind the black veil the tall woman was wearing. “If I don’t get what I want, you’re no good to me.” Then she said, “Sit.”

Caleb sat in the old office chair with his eyes crossed looking at the long silencer that seemed attached to his head.

“Now, I’m going to ask questions and you’re going to answer them.” she said conversationally. “I need to know the names and addresses of all of the pickup teams you have in your employ.”

“I don’t know ‘em all, lady.” Caleb said softly.

“Then you are of no use to...”

“Wait! Wait!” he shouted as he heard something click on the pistol. “I writ ‘em down. They in the bottom drawer of the desk!”

“Get it.” she responded as she took the barrel from his head and stepped back a pace.

He watched her drop the pistol to her crotch and cover her shooting hand with her left. He slowly reached down, partially opened the drawer, reached in and closed his hand on the 40-caliber automatic he’d stashed. As he drew it quickly from the drawer, he didn’t even hear the pop that sent the 9mm through his head to smash one of the monitors and splash his skull fragments, with what little he had left of his brain, all over the desk.

“Dumb move.” she stated lethally as she pushed the rolling chair away with her foot, leaving a trail of blood across the floor. Then she opened the bottom drawer.

She pulled out three small black ledgers, thumbed through them and sighed. She tapped the earbud twice and sighed again.

“You okay down there, Frank?” Victoria Dahl asked softly.

“Yeah,” he replied, “but this little girl doesn’t trust me at all.”

“Can you blame her?” she asked with a grin as the monitors came back up to let her see Frank Costello, the AAG for the Criminal Division of the United States, standing near the door. “As far as she’s concerned, you were going to rape her.”

The door had the chair from the desk under the knob holding it secure and the little girl sat on the bed unfettered with Frank’s jacket over her partially nude body.

“She’s been drugged, Raven.” he replied softly as he stood next to the door with his arms crossed. “There is some paraphernalia here but...”

“Once we get all sorted out,” Vickie replied softly, “I’ll get someone down there to test it. In the meantime, just talk to her... reassure her that it’ll be okay. If she is on something, it might be hallucinogenic. I’ll be finished here in a sec.”

“Hurry up.” he replied in frustration. “I want her to get some treatment. What about the others?”

“They’re good, Frank.” she replied as she glanced at the monitors, each pedophile on their knees with a fully armed soldier holding a gun to their foreheads. “Give me a few minutes.”

Frank threw up his hands and crossed his arms again. Victoria Dahl saw he was trying desperately to calm the little fourteen-year-old, but the girl was crying uncontrollably as she rocked back and forth on the bed. She tapped the earbud once.

“Reaper. Raven.”

“Reaper1.”

“Perimeter secure?”

“Roger.”

“I need the man of the house and his woman down here now.”

“Copy.”

While she waited, Vickie pulled two heavy chairs, the solid wood making her smile a bit, to face the main monitor. She set them about three feet apart and sighed. She reached up and tapped the earbud three times.

“You got me, Raptor?” she asked softly.

“Got it.” came the reply in a young girl voice.

“Start recording when they get here.” Vickie responded as she turned to watch the door.

There was a scuffling noise outside the door and, when it opened, two people were pushed through by three soldiers in full combat gear to include ski masks. When Vickie motioned to the chairs, the two struggled with their captors.

“If you don’t stop and sit, I’m going to put a bullet in one of eight places.” she grated angrily. “Now sit!”

“You cain’t do this!” shouted the woman. “I got rights! If yer gonna arrest us...”

“I have no intention of arresting you, bitch.” Vickie responded as she sat on the desk... a clean spot that is. “If you don’t sit, I’m going to decide that you have no information for me and I’m going to end you.”

“Did Polenski send you?” asked the man as he was forced into the chair. “You tell him we ain’t done nothin’...”

“Shut up, Lonny!” shouted the woman as she continued resisting.

The Sig spoke softly and the woman screamed.

“Now, that was your foot.” Vickie said as the woman tried to reach down for her wounded left foot but was held by the guard. “If you don’t sit down, I’m going to shoot you in the right foot, the left knee, the right knee... You get the picture?”

The woman sank into the chair and stared at the veiled woman while the guards used zip ties to strap her arms and legs to the chair. Lonny struggled as well but his arms and legs were also lashed.

“Now,” Vickie said conversationally, “you were saying something about... Polenski?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ ‘til I get my lawyer!” Lonny shouted.

The pistol whispered again and Lonny screamed as the blood pulsed from the top of *his* left boot.

“Let me explain.” Vickie said calmly as the man glared hate at her through his pain. “I’m not a cop and neither are the people who brought you in here. As far as we’re concerned, your value is only good if you can tell us something. Now, I’ve already wasted two bullets. Once I put one in each of your feet, knees, hands and elbows, the only target I will have left will be your head. You tell me when you’re willing to talk.”

With that, she pointed the pistol toward the man’s right foot.

“Ya cain’t do this!” Lonny shouted. The Sig spoke again and Lonny screamed, “*God dammit!*”

“Let’s see.” Vickie responded as she dropped the magazine into her hand and made a point of counting the cartridges there. “This thing carries... what... sixteen?” she asked as she glanced at the three soldiers behind the captives. “That means I won’t even have to change magazines until I have to end them, right?”

“Sounds about right.” replied one of the men with a chuckle.

She shoved the magazine into the Sig and pointed the pistol at the man's left kneecap.

"Okay!" he shouted. "What do you wanna know?"

"Shaddup, Lonny!" the woman screamed. Then she screamed louder as the 9mm shattered her right foot.

"Now, before we go on," Vickie said calmly over the woman's whimpers, "it looks as if you've been recording your rapes." With a glance at the men behind the two crying pedophilic slavers, she continued, "Look around. There must be a library around here somewhere."

The soldiers opened cabinets until they found the many... *many* tapes... labeled and dated... in one of the larger wooden cabinets.

"Load 'em up in whatever you can find, guys." Vickie said angrily. "We're taking them with us."

While one of the men used the stacked Tuffy-Tubs to load the tapes into, the others continued to open drawers and cabinets. They found more.

"You've been busy." Vickie stated viciously. "Each of those tapes represents a child you have allowed to be savaged. If I don't get what I want from you, the pain I will inflict will become much worse... *before* I kill you. Understand?"

"Yer just gonna kill us anyways." the woman cried as she looked up into the emerald green eyes painfully.

"Maybe." Vickie responded as she lifted the Sig and glared at Delores. "I haven't decided. It may depend on how much you're willing to tell me."

Vickie glanced at the monitors and frowned. The little girl with Frank was crying and holding her hands together as she seemed to be pleading with him. She tapped the earbud twice.

“What’s she saying, Frank?” she asked softly.

“She has a little sister, Raven.” he replied as he looked around for the camera. He found it and continued, “She said she and her sister were brought in about two hours ago and her sister Abby was taken away. Something about a buyer.”

Vickie tapped the earbud and glared at the two captives.

“A group of kids were taken from here about two hours ago.” she said lethally. “Where?”

“Polenski said there was folks willin’ ta pay high dollar fer young virgins.” the woman replied through her sobs. “They been tooked ta the airport outside a Little Rock fer...”

“You got that?” Raven asked out loud.

“Got it.” came the soft reply in a young girl’s voice through her earbud. “I’m having Roger check the satellite feed while I tap the Bill and Hillary Clinton International computer system. Give me a minute.”

“Tell him to hurry.” Vickie responded.

“Got it.” came the soft voice to her ear in just a few of seconds. “There’s a Jet Stream waiting for them at the... Dassault Falcon Jet taxiway. They’re ten minutes away according to Roger.”

“Get Guy and...”

“Got it, Vickie.” Cindy replied softly. “Meet them at the Saline County Regional on the south side.”

“Gotcha.” Vickie responded and tapped the earbud again. “Okay, you two. You have maybe ten minutes before I start bringing pain. Who’s first?”



The old Jet Stream 32 sat at the Dassault Falcon taxiway waiting with the boarding door open. The SUV pulled up and two men got out. One opened the passenger door for the backseat and he leaned in with a sneer.

“When I tell you,” he told the three little girls sitting in fear, “I want you to run to the airplane and up the stairs to the inside. If anyone tries to run away, I’m gonna shoot all of you dead. Understand?”

All three little ones nodded fearfully, the tears running down scared cheeks.

“Good.” he said with a nasty grin. “Now run.”

He stood out of the way while the three jumped out and ran the twenty feet to the boarding steps and clambered inside the small turbo prop aircraft. His partner waited until they were aboard, stepped inside with them, made them sit and strapped them in.

“Don’t you move.” he ordered.

Then he waited while his friend boarded and pulled the boarding steps in. He grinned at the other man and walked to the front, sat in the big comfortable chair and reclined the seat.

The first man checked the little girl’s seatbelts, grinned again and, as the aircraft began moving, walked up to join his partner.

“We’ll drop these off in Dallas and then take this on to Chicago.” he told his friend softly. “I gotta pee and then we’ll see what the galley has for us.”

The other man nodded, laid his head back and closed his eyes. It had been a long day and he was tired. As long as those crying little shits in the back stayed quiet, maybe he could get some sleep.

The first man walked back toward the lavatory, his malevolent grin for the little girls sitting with wide frightened eyes.

“Don’t you move or make a sound.” he said over the noise of the engines. “My friend is tired and he would have no problem at all cutting your little throats if you make noise.”

Having adequately frightened the girls to silence, he chuckled and moved quickly for the lavatory door. He could sit on the pot in there for takeoff and then...

He opened the door. Chip grabbed his shirt and drove the dagger up through his chin and into his brain. Chip pulled the twitching thug into the lavatory, turned him around and sat him on the toilet, closed the door behind him and drove the dagger twice into the thug’s chest.

“Now you just sit there quietly.” Chip said in a soft whisper. “We wouldn’t want to disturb your friend, now would we?”

Chip checked the pad he was using to monitor the cameras he had mounted in the cabin. The other thug was still reclined with his eyes closed. Vickie’s favorite copilot waited and held the thug still while Guy lifted the small plane into the air and pointed it southwest. Once the plane began to level off, Chip washed his hands and the dagger to remove some of the blood, took a towel from the rack and dried his hands thoroughly. Then, with the dagger up against the inside of his right forearm, he took the towel and opened the lavatory door.

He walked quickly past the girls and, as he came to the other thug, used the towel to smother the cries while he drove the dagger into the thug’s chest, jerked it to the left and right and pulled it out. Blood spurted from the wide gash and struck the forward bulkhead. Chip held him until he stopped struggling and then held him for a moment more. Then he wiped the dagger clean, sheathed it and then took great pains to clean the blood from his hand. He dropped the bloody towel to the thug’s lap, slowly walked back to the rear and knelt next to the seats where the girls sat in wide eyed terror.

“Which one of you ladies is Abby?” he asked softly. One of the girls lifted a shaking hand and Chip smiled. “Amy told me to tell you that she’s okay. We rescued her and all of the other girls before the bad men could hurt them. Now we’re taking you all home.” He sighed and added, “I know that it’s hard to trust big people right now but I promise that we are taking you home to your parents. Amy said you always pinky-swear when it’s important so...”

Chip held his hand to the little one with his little finger out and smiled at Abby. After a short hesitation, Abby slowly reached out and hooked his little finger with hers. He nodded sternly and stood up.

“I have to tell the pilot to take us home now, okay?”

“Okay.” Abby replied in a tiny voice.

After Chip walked forward, one of the little girls asked in a whisper, “You trust ‘im?”

“He pinky-swears.” Abby responded with a nod.

After a couple of minutes, Chip came back, sat across from Abby and buckled in.

“We’ll be landing in just a few minutes, ladies.” he said. “My friend, the pilot, is very good at this flying thing and he’s gonna make it look like we’re in trouble. It’s just pretend-like though. When the plane stops, we’re gonna jump out and run. There’ll be big people waiting to pick you up and run with you so you won’t have to run very far. We need to make sure the bad guys don’t catch us, okay?”

“Okay.” came the three small voices almost as one.

“Okay.” Chip responded with a grin. “Hang on. Here we go.”

The small plane swung to the left and then the right. It dropped several hundred feet and then leveled off. Guy turned final and began a rapid descent while yelling into the microphone about a fire in the cabin.

“We’re gonna bounce!” Chip said as he laughed loudly to keep the little ones from screaming in fear. “It’s just pretend so hang on! Yippee!”

Guy brought the Jet Stream in to the southwest, touched down, lifted back into the air and dropped the plane again. It bounced twice... not so hard that it burst the tires, but hard enough to give the tower guys a heart attack. Then, as he got all wheels down, he made as if he had no brakes and the plane sped down the runway toward the end.

“It’s gonna get bumpy.” Guy said into his microphone for the passengers. “Hold on, ladies.”

He sent the small plane off of the end of the runway and into the field beyond. When he was close enough, he spun the small plane to the right and it stopped.

“Everybody off!” Chip shouted with a big grin as he unbuckled and moved quickly for the door.

He dropped the boarding stairs and moved back to help the little ones unbuckle. Once free, he led them to the stairs and off. He picked up the smaller girl and they all ran as fast as they could for the trees. Three people in combat gear ran out of the trees toward them and picked up the other two girls. Then they all ran toward the dirt road beyond.

Guy closed the boarding door and ran toward Chip as the younger man waited, little Abby in his arms. Chip chuckled as the older pilot huffed.

“I told you that you needed some exercise, Guy.” Chip quipped as he helped the older man run toward the SUV.

The backdoor to the SUV opened and Amy sat buckled in, but her arms reached for her little sister. Abby jumped in and grabbed Amy

tight. Once Chip and Guy were in the vehicle, Guy pulled the remote from his pocket, checked to see that the emergency vehicles were just now leaving the hangers and pressed the button.

The Jet Stream burst into flame. After a moment, the aircraft fuel caught and the ball of fire rose high into the air and black smoke covered their escape. The SUV drove quickly to a specific place on the dirt road, crossed the grass and drove through the hole cut in the fence. They were soon up on the blacktop and driving sedately toward I30.

“You guys alright back there?” asked one of the soldiers from the front.

“We’re good.” Chip replied with a grin at the little ones. “How long?”

“We’ll be at the plane in about an hour.” the soldier, a woman, responded softly. “Then we’ll fly these ladies home.”

“Where?” Guy asked crossly.

“Arkadelphia.” the woman answered. “Why?”

“I left my plane in Little Rock.” he replied with a frown. “I’ll need a ride...”

“Raven is having it flown down for you.” the soldier responded with a grin. “It’ll be waiting when we get there.”

“They better not put a scratch on her.” Guy stated sullenly.

“Are you takin’ us home, mister?” Abby asked Chip softly.

“We’ll be flying you to a special place where there will be ladies hired special just to take you home, baby girl.” Chip replied. “They will stay with you until your Moms and Dads can come pick you up. Just remember to tell the police everything when they come to question you. Always tell the police the truth, ladies. They’re there to help you.”

“But what about you, mister?” Abby persisted. “How come you can’t come with us?”

“There are other little girls like you out there, Abby.” he said with a gentle grin. “Me and my old friend here need to find them and take them away from the bad men like we did for you. If we don’t...”

“They’ll get hurted.” Abby finished for him sadly. “Thanks for savin’ us.”

“Just make sure you hug your Moms and Dads when you see them.” Chip replied softly. “They’ve been so worried about you. And tell them we’ll be watching to see that the bad men get caught. That’s our job.”

Abby grinned and nodded.



“So what now, Raven?” Frank asked as he sat next to the masked woman while she drove toward Little Rock.

“Now you continue with your... vacation, Frank.” Vickie replied with a chuckle. “I’ll drop you at the Burn’s RV Park and you can do a little fishing and then drive to the airport to fly back to Washington. You heard about some weird things happening around you but nobody called so...”

“I’ve got to tell somebody... something, Raven.” he responded in a serious tone as he peeled the fake beard painfully from his face. “I can’t just ignore the fact that I was there with you when...”

“Where, Frank?” she asked with a quick sidelong glance. “What were you doing there? How did you know what was going down? Do you really want to answer *those* questions?”

Vickie sighed and continued, “Leave it alone, Frank. If they find out you were anywhere near me and what we did, it could be the end

of your career. We have bigger things to worry about now. I need you, Frank. I need you to be there when we get all of the information on Polenski. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise you will have to take him down without me." Frank responded with a sigh. "I still have to arrest you one day, Raven. I'm hoping that will never happen but you are always in the thick of things when the *real* bad guys come calling. I'm not certain I want to know what you did with the assholes you found in the cabin."

"We turned them loose in the woods naked, Frank." she responded with another chuckle. "There is a US Congressman, two State Senators and two rich businessmen in that group. Once we go over the videos, we'll leak some or all of them to the press. Their careers will be over and you can get them in for questioning. You'll happen to see it all on the six o'clock news."

He laughed with her for a moment and then sighed.

"How did you find out about..."

"That's a secret, Frank." she responded quickly. "It's what I do, remember?"

Vickie drove on... hoping Frank wouldn't ask about Lonny and Delores. Their bodies would be found within the burned out cabin after somebody reports the fire. She sighed, glanced at the... *too* honest man... and sighed again.

Chapter Two

“The Shadows gather...”

The Gulfstream G450 rocketed west.

“We’ll be in Oakland in a couple of hours, Vic.” the soft, man’s voice said into her earbud. “You need anything?”

“I’m good, Guy.” she responded as she opened the laptop and tapped the on button. “Just let me know when we’re close.”

“Roger.”

Victoria Dahl rapidly typed in her access code and waited for the video conference screen to pop up. Suddenly, the face of a young girl came on, one hand absently twisting at the sandy-brown pigtail.

“Happy Birthday, Cindy!” Vickie said with a big grin. “So... now that you’re old enough, can I at least buy you a car?”

“As long as it’s not some fancy sports car, Vickie.” Cynthia Sanders responded... again absently as she looked away seemingly at other monitors around her. “Something in a ’65 Chevy pickup with a standard transmission would suit me fine. I’ve been driving Pop’s since I was nine. It’ll have to wait until I get a license but...”

“What are you...”

“Polenski.” the young seventeen-year-old all but whispered, her eyes traveling from one monitor to the next.

“What ya got, Cindy?” Vickie asked softly.

The girl adjusted her big glasses, looked away from the screen for a moment and then sighed.

“Saul Polenski would never have popped up on our radar if one of his teams hadn’t tried to take Gypsy.” Cindy said softly... and a little angrily. “If Adriana and her Mom hadn’t been with her in Kohl’s...”

“Adriana is still with her?” Vickie asked to take some of the anger away.

“Something about Penny and her Mom liking her Jambalaya.” Cindy replied with a chuckle. “She’s been working as bodyguard, housekeeper and close friend to Penny’s Mom in Little Rock now for the past year. When Penny was attacked, that little hellion kicked the guy in the balls and ran to Adriana. Then Adriana chased the asshole from the store and she got his plates. Gypsy jumped on *World of Warcraft* and told Ballsafire and Darkgoth about it and they both started investigating. That’s what led us to the cabin where you found...”

“They weren’t supposed to...”

“They’re friends, Vickie.” Cindy responded quickly. “They get together every Saturday... with me... to run quests. Balls and Goth got really pissed and dove into the web hard. I monitored them until they pulled up Polenski. Then I told them to back off until I could talk to you. If it hadn’t been for them...”

“Okay.” Vickie interrupted with a deep sigh. “Tell me about Polenski.”

“As far as we can tell right now,” the girl responded, again looking at different monitors around her workstation, “I can’t tell you much. I know Polenski is neck deep in human trafficking... I feel it in my guts... but there’s no solid link I can find that ties him in. From what little we have found so far, he has a network that stretches all the way around the world with his own teams working here in the US. He also deals with independents... assholes who take kids from stores while

their Moms are distracted and sell them to kiddie porn sites and underground whore houses. I just can't get a lock on him."

Cindy sighed and looked at the monitor before her.

"He also deals with snuff sites, Vickie." she said softly. "They buy up kids, young women and boys, make them do... really bad things and kill them for the camera. But that's not the worst thing."

"That's bad enough, Cindy." Vickie responded with a frown. "What could be worse than..."

"They have... cooking shows on the dark web, Vickie." the girl replied softly. "They..."

Cindy quickly reached down and her head disappeared behind the desk while her shoulders hunched. Vickie heard the retching and waited. When Cindy sat back up and wiped her mouth with a Kleenex, Vickie frowned.

"You coming down with something?" she asked.

"A bad case of I wanna kill somebody." replied the girl as she punched a few keys.

Vickie then saw the video where a man in a chef's uniform, with a mask over his face, showed the proper way to roast a baby... complete with vegetables and an apple. The bile leaped to Vickie's throat and she looked away. Cindy's face came back up and Vickie swallowed.

"I know I'm not supposed to, Vickie, but..."

"We need to get a line on each of those sick assholes, Cindy." Vickie interrupted lethally. "I'll get Colonel Weatherby to put teams together and, once we know where they are, we'll... end their broadcast." Then, softer, "This is for me and those trained for it to do, baby girl. Your skill is needed to show us the way and make certain we're taking on real monsters. If Polenski isn't involved..."

"I'll need help this time, Vickie." Cindy replied softly.

“I’ll put more of our...”

“I need the *Shadows*, Vickie.”



Darkgoth666 sat in the classroom working diligently on the project the professor had given them. She could have completed it an hour ago but thought it better to pace the other students. She frowned when the pretty young thing at the computer in front of her turned around and smiled sweetly.

“Do those things in your ears, nose and eyebrow hurt you, dearie?” the blonde bimbo asked impishly while two others grinned maliciously. “They certainly hurt me, freak!”

Goth ignored their vicious giggles and decided against loading their laptops with lesbian porn, alerting the professor with an anonymous email and destroying the smug looks. She concentrated on her work and tried to ignore them.

The door to the side of the professor’s platform opened and two men walked in. Each wore a black suit, a thin black tie and sunglasses. While one stopped to whisper to the professor, the other made a show of whispering into his cuff and then looking at all of the shocked faces.

When the man looked directly at her, Goth frowned.

“Miss Garner?” he asked softly. She stood up slowly and he continued, “Miss Garner, the President sends his regards. We have a... situation that, again, requires your expertise. If you will come with us, the limousine is waiting.”

“What’s the problem?” she asked while the three girls in front of her looked at her with wide eyes and astonished faces.

“I don’t have a need to know, Miss Garner.” the man replied apologetically. “All I was told is that there is some... shadow work

that needs your talents to see it through. The Director has expressed his undying faith in your skills. He says that you may reject the mission but...”

“Give me a moment.” Goth replied as she began unplugging her laptop, placing the charger into her computer bag and pulling all of the rest of her stuff together.

After she zipped the bag closed and lifted it to her shoulder, she glared at the three girls who had taunted her.

“It would be in your best interest to make certain of the target for your bullying in the future.” she said softly and with lethal intent. “You never know what they are capable of, and who they have as friends.”

Then she walked down to the floor of the classroom and stopped in front of the professor.

“I’ll try to make up the work when I get back, Professor.” she said with a sweet smile.

“Don’t worry about it, Felicity.” he replied with a shocked look at the two men. “Your grade is secure.”

“Thank you.” she responded softly and, with a man to either side, they escorted her out.

Once in the limo, she giggled and patted one of the men on the arm.

“Hi, Roy.” she said softly as the man took off the sunglasses with a big grin.

“Hey, Fel.” he responded softly. “Did we do okay?”

“Perfect!” she replied as she laughed. When she managed to come up for air, she asked, “Where to?”

“Same place.” Roy responded. “We’ll have to bag you but I think you can trust us this time. Right?”

“Right.” she replied with a grin and sat back for the ride to the airport.



“If you lay the runs precisely and within... one-ten-thousandths of an inch, you can eliminate over 97.6 percent of the inductive-capacitance, as well as wavelength distortion, at the higher speed.” the young man explained as he pointed out the particulars on his diagram for the professor and the other students at MIT. “Then, if you gang the processors... specific processors designed for this purpose and with some imaginative interconnection... you can form a computing system that will react to your desire almost before you realize you have had the thought.”

“Interesting concept, Colin.” the professor replied as he looked the diagram over with a jaundiced eye. “It will create an enormous amount of heat however. How...”

“Liquid cooled.” Colin replied with a grin. “Using a larger cooling system built separate from the system, and experimenting with liquid mediums with the capacity for major heat transference, it is possible to keep the processors cool. That in itself will allow for a better result at the higher speeds.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this.” the professor whispered.

“I have.” Colin responded. “It was a one-of-a-kind built by... friends. It was so close to the perfect AI model that, given the right hardware and programming, it could learn and think for itself.”

“Was?” the professor asked with a sharp look at the young man.

“Sadly,” Colin explained, “it couldn’t survive the continual experimentation. At 8GHz, it self-destructed. Up until then, it ran perfectly and with speeds you would not believe. It wasn’t very cost

effective anyway. The amount of precision, as well as material, was prohibitive.”

“I can see that.” the professor responded with another look at the diagram. “I suppose one day someone with very deep pockets will...”

“Mr. Anders?” came a question from the door.

“Yes?” Colin answered with a glance at the young woman at the door, an astonished, frightened look on her face.

“Mr. Anders,” she repeated softly, “there are... some men from... the National Security Agency who need you to look at their... system? Something about shadows... or something?”

“Tell them I will be with them in a moment.” Colin replied and turned back to his professor. “This may take a while, sir. Is there any way I can make up the work for the next...”

“Take as much time as you need, Colin.” the professor replied distractedly as he held the diagram in one hand with his other rubbing at his chin. “We will discuss this further when you return. Don’t worry about the work. I’ll grant you full credit for your work for the government as well as for this effort.”

“Thank you, professor.” Colin replied as he gathered his things and reached for the diagram.

“I will hold this for the moment, if you don’t mind, Colin.” the professor responded as he held the diagram away while still staring at the implications. “I want to work out some... calculations while you are away. Take your time, son.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Orion7 grinned, lifted his backpack to his shoulder and walked out.



“My ride’s here, Mom.” the young man said as he leaned down to kiss his mother on the cheek. “Try not to overdo while I’m away.”

“Sarah will be here to chide me if I do, Kevin.” Paula Jurgenson replied with a grin at the woman kneeling next to her. “We’ll just keep puttering about the garden while you’re gone. Maybe when you get back you might find no path to walk!”

Sarah Heath laughed as she stood and looked down at the woman sitting on the cushion, her gloved hands wrapped lovingly about a new peony plant she was just about to place into the garden.

“I’ll walk Kevin to the door and get us some iced tea, Paula.” Sarah said with a hand to the big boy’s shoulder. “Don’t move.”

“I won’t.” the woman responded as she watched her new friend and housekeeper walk her son to the back door and into the house.

“She’s getting stronger.” Kevin remarked in almost a whisper as Sarah led him toward the front door.

“Yes, she is, Kevin.” she replied softly. “Before I got here, she was on the verge of being bedridden. Now, she walks to her wheelchair, rides it to the garden and can stand up and get down without too much help. If you don’t watch out, we may just go dancing before you get back.”

“That I’d really like to see.” Kevin replied softly as he opened the front door and looked out at the SUV waiting for him. “Take care of her for me, Sarah. And take care of yourself. Thanks for being here.”

“You go do what you do best, Kevin.” Sarah responded sternly. “There are those who need your capabilities in the worst way. I’ll keep the fort safe and your mother and I will have a ball. Go.”

Kevin nodded and walked slowly toward the waiting vehicle while Sarah closed the door behind him.

“Kick their asses, Ballsafire.” she whispered under her breath.

Then she walked toward the kitchen to make a couple of glasses of iced tea.



Seventeen-year-old Cody Wilson drove the big International Harvester tractor into the barn and shut it down. He'd seen the big black GMC in the driveway when he came in and frowned. He lifted his John Deere cap from his head, rubbed his hand through the fresh flattop haircut and again wondered why he'd decided to change hairstyles. He stuck his gloves in a back pocket as he walked over to the porch where the two people, a man and a woman, sat drinking some of mama's sweet tea. Pop sat in his rocker talking to them and, when he saw Cody, waved him to the steps.

"These folks say they need yer help, son." Wilfred Wilson began without preamble. "Said they got a computer problem only you can fix. Said it might take a bit a time but..."

"It seems that a... shadow has come over the system that is causing some trouble, Cody." the black man said with a glance at the nodding woman. "You wanna come see if you can fix it?"

"Sure, Tyrone." Cody replied with a big grin as he took a glass of tea from his mom and sat on the stoop. "Anybody else comin'?"

"Some old friends of yours have volunteered their time so..."

"This ain't a payin' job?" Wilfred asked with a frown.

"Yessir!" Tyrone replied quickly. "The company we work for will be paying time and a half for Cody's expertise."

"Then ya need ta get packed, son." Wilfred said with a grin as he leaned back in his rocker. "If ya finished the discin', me an' Fred got it from here."

“Then yer all set, Pop.” Cody replied softly as he drank half of the glass of tea, stood and walked into the house to pack.

Cody Wilson frowned as he put some clothes into his old suitcase and closed it. They said “shadow”. That could only mean...

He walked back out with his bag and, after hugging his Mom, glanced at his Pop.

“Get Jim to change the oil in the little Ford tractor, Pop.” Cody said as he sauntered toward the waiting vehicle, the two others walking behind. “That old thang needs some love.”

“I’ll do’er, son.” Wilfred replied with a grin as he rocked slowly, his tea in hand.

Cody Wilson... Route66... climbed into the SUV and grinned.



When a pedophile ring attempts to capture one of her young friends, Vickie turns her wrath on them. Her vengeance is devastating, deadly and permanent. They should have remained in the shadows to avoid detection. Now they are prey to... The Raven.

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