

1 – Spatial Relations

Nevada State Military Zone (NSMZ), 2073

Turret mech-guns mounted on steel towers tracked the Chameleon helicopter's progress as it approached NSMZ's electrified barrier. Wires shimmering in the sun like strands of silver gossamer carried a continuous pulse of 5,100 volts. At five hundred foot intervals, a mechanized voice repeated in a half-dozen languages: Warning! This fence can kill you.

Inside the Chameleon, Agent Vince Farrell, NSMZ's head of security, glanced out the window. Despite the warnings, he found it remarkable how many charred bodies the border guards removed during weekly patrols.

Below and to the south lay Nevada's main security checkpoint on Highway 80, three miles east of Reno. Nacks, the name given to Nevada Hacktivists, gathered to protest the closed state's military secrets, underground bases, and maximum-security prison. They chanted 'Free Nevada!' and 'No more secrets!' and raised faded homemade signs. A shanty settlement known as Nacktown had sprung up along the dried Truckee river and the highway's dusty edges. Protesting Nevada had become a lifestyle.

Farrell's primary directive was to make sure NSMZ secrets stayed beyond the reach of any politician or civilian.

On the Chameleon's belly, a high-resolution camera mapped protesters' faces and uploaded them to base computers to be analyzed.

"Transmit to local output," Farrell said, and a holoscreen lit up. He swiped through the images, then paused on a young woman. A hoodie covered her hair, and mainline system goggles hid most of her features.

"Capture target IO."

The computer replicated the unshielded data streaming into the target's implant and displayed it on the holoscreen. Farrell's eyes narrowed. She wasn't close to hacking

through the NSMZ firewall but give her another few hours and she might get a foothold. Enough to encourage her to keep trying.

"Identify target," Farrell said. The hoodie and goggles were stripped away, the computer software reconstructing missing areas of the face.

"Identifying Nizhoni Deschene, 84.6% certainty," the computer returned.

"Contact Agent Gonzales."

A woman with dark eyes and mahogany-colored hair in a tight braid appeared on the holoscreen.

"Transmitting an image," Farrell said.

Gonzales's eyes narrowed, and she blinked several times as the information downloaded into her neural storage. "Received. I recognize her."

"Kill Nine?" Farrell asked. They were one of the more prominent and well-funded nack crews.

"Negative," Gonzales responded after a short hesitation. "She's just a groupie."

"Not according to the data capture I'm looking at. Detain her. Confiscate her equipment, data dump her implant and have the techs perform a full mindwipe," Farrell ordered.

Gonzales's lips thinned. "Any preference where you'd like me to turn her loose when we're finished?"

Plain-clothed NSMZ agents often detained troublesome nacks, and after questioning and selective mindwiping, they were left drugged and confused outside the nearest town. 'Nesmized' nacks called it, and they considered it a badge of honor.

"Pick a spot that will help her reevaluate her life's choices."

"I know of a good barren mountaintop. How goes your investigation in San Francisco? I heard your target is one of Sommerfeld's escaped lab rats. Word is he's running circles around your team."

"Do your job, Gonzales. I didn't hire you to worry about mine." He heard her chuckle as the holoscreen went dark. The comment stung, but she was right.

Farrell's team had taken a hit on his current investigation, and three security agents were dead. He'd grossly underestimated their target, Joshua, and his Old Town San

Francisco gang, the Epitaphs. Then again, no one could have predicted a problem who wasn't supposed to exist.

Fucking punk kid, Farrell thought.

"Chameleon 08, access code 88N01," the Chameleon's AI said, communicating with the main Nevada base at Groom Lake, once famously known as Area 51. Access codes changed every 24 hours. "One occupant detected. Thirty seconds to confirm identity."

In front of Farrell's seat, a panel on the floor opened and a robotic arm unfurled with a backlit square device. Farrell slid his finger inside for a skin scrape. A holoscreen appeared with his face overlain by a grid. His features—slate gray eyes, dark hair on the longish side, trimmed beard streaked with gray—were mapped and compared to the information on file.

"Nevada State Military Zone Agent Vincent Michael Farrell, DNA confirmed, facial data points confirmed. Cleared," the base's AI returned, and the arm folded back into its housing.

Twenty-five years ago, the federal government had declared eminent domain over Nevada and nominally compensated its population for their property. State government was dismantled, and borders redrawn. Arizona absorbed the bottom half of the state, including Las Vegas, receiving a much-needed influx of funds for its failing economy. California had inherited Reno and Carson City. Minor highways had been fenced over and the Interstate 80 skylane and ground highway rerouted through Oregon and Idaho. Nevada became the home of secret test bases, underground research centers, and an infamous prison for sensitive government detainees.

Farrell reclined in the synth-leather seat, one arm along the back, one leg crossed, and the ankle propped on the knee. A professional gambler would envy the serene poker face disguising the uncomfortable knot in his stomach. He typically viewed people in shades of gray. Good and evil were reserved for comic book heroes and villains.

If evil did have a name, it was Dr. Josef Sommerfeld.

"Estimated Time of Arrival: Nevada State Penitentiary three minutes," said the Chameleon's AI.

Farrell felt a change in the rotor speed and a slowing shift as the craft began its descent. The reflective skin that gave the Chameleon its name deactivated, revealing

an odd angular transport, its rotors whisper quiet. It settled on a raised platform inside a complex of five squat buildings.

To the south lay the scattered ruins of Rachel, Nevada. High voltage fencing and electrified razor wire surrounded the prison complex and the deserted town. The compound had a notable absence of ground exit points. Air transport was the only way in or out. Armed mechs, impervious to the heat, patrolled the grounds, and armed drones flew the perimeter.

The platform began to drop, pneumatics hissing, and a hatch closed over the Chameleon as it descended into a cavernous cement bunker. The warden met Farrell as he stepped off the craft.

Warden Mara Bell was medium height for a woman, with a blocky, fit build and brown hair wound into a tight bun. She wore a pressed uniform of green khaki. The only identifying mark was her name tag.

“Agent Farrell.”

“Bell,” Farrell greeted. “We’re bringing up Sommerfeld for you in cell block 3. This way, please.” She held out a hand for him to proceed.

A four-seater transference vehicle hovered in a corridor. Red block letters on a plain cement wall read ‘Visitor Intake’. After a short ride down a featureless corridor, they arrived at a door marked #3. A camera above the door beamed a thin fan of light over Warden Bell and it opened with a blast of cool scrubbed air, then sealed tightly behind them, steel bolts sliding into place. Bell led Farrell down a sterile white hallway, through a second door, and into a small observation area.

A two-way mirror looked into a plain, rectangular room. A set of wide stainless-steel rollers on the floor ended with rubber bumpers. The back wall opened, and an eight-by-eight cage slid off a conveyor, then coasted down the rollers and came to a gentle stop against the bumpers. The corners of Warden Bell’s downturned lips twitched, betraying her disgust.

“In the room, you’ll see a red button by the door,” Warden Bell said. “Press it when you’re ready to return Prisoner 1184 to his cell. Good luck, Agent Farrell,” she said before turning on her heel and exiting.

Agent Farrell shifted his gaze from Bell's retreating figure to Dr. Sommerfeld. He stood somewhere above six feet; his mouth set in a straight, indifferent line. His hands were clasped in front of him, stance relaxed. He looked around the room with mild curiosity, keen intelligence reflected in his confident gaze. Sommerfeld wore the baggy orange prison jumpsuit like it was a temporary inconvenience. After twenty-odd years, he continued to cling to the distinguished professor image.

Farrell had joined the NSMZ security force six months before the arrest of Dr. Sommerfeld. Dismantling Sommerfeld's lab had been his first major assignment. He would never forget the horrors at the abandoned mental ward outside Boston. A bullet to the head of Sommerfeld's experiments had been a kindness. The lab had contained dozens of cages confining humanoid babies and adolescents. Bonobo and Chimpanzee DNA splices gave some elongated arms, sharp teeth, and inhuman strength. One toddler with large round eyes and webbed limbs swam in a tank. It had a subtle glow to almost translucent skin and a set of gills on its neck. Others had appeared normal at first glance until Farrell saw their glowing, feral eyes filled with hatred and mistrust. Unable to speak, they had growled and whined and scratched at their bloody limbs and faces as if seeking to crawl out of their twisted bodies.

Farrell's team had relocated three experiments to NSMZ labs. Only one survived. Medical nanomachines were unable to repair him. His tiny, weak body inhabited a sterile stasis pod while his brain matured and seamlessly became part of NSMZ's computer AI.

Few things rattled Farrell. Dr. Sommerfeld's lab had shaken him to his core. No judge or jury for this fucker. Sommerfeld deserved no less than death, and Farrell would have volunteered to play the executioner. Instead, the government wanted him to continue his implant experiments under strict protocols and surveillance.

A necessary evil, Farrell thought darkly.

All NSMZ agents and soldiers had implants and wetware in their heads—inventions courtesy of the necessary evil.

The sealed door opened with a slight change in pressure, and Farrell stepped into the interview room. The doctor's gaze swung from the two-way mirror to Farrell.

“Twenty-three years, fifty-six days, thirteen minutes,” Doctor Sommerfeld said in a supercilious tone.

Farrell removed a holodisk from his shirt pocket. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Since we last met, Agent Vincent Farrell. Do you think I would forget the day you killed my children and burned my lab?”