

Assignment: Chechnya
An Operative Amanda Devereux Short Story by T.R. Peers
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*Grozny, Chechnya, two years before the Henderson Incident
Phase Alpha*

Even at 2am in the morning, the streets of Grozny were busy. For the young, attractive couple threading their way through the wide streets that surrounded the Akhmat Tower, there seemed to be little to fear in the crowd of people, most of them similarly youthful and wealthy, who bustled around the huge tower on errands as diverse as their appearances.

For one of the pair, there was not. For the other, danger of the most terrible kind was waiting.

The woman leading the way stood some five feet, five inches tall, and wore a long, synthetic leather trench-coat open to reveal that the workout gear beneath it clung to an athletic figure. Her flowing, blonde hair was pulled into a high pony-tail and bounced as she walked with a light-footed gait. Her face was best described as blandly pretty, attractive but only in the way that most off-the-shelf faces were. Its near-perfect symmetry lacked the subtle touches that a truly expensive bespoke countenance might have boasted, that made a face look like the result of a fortunate birth rather than of a sizeable bank balance.

The man walking a pace behind and beside her was large, pushing six feet, and exceptionally well-built, with sculpted muscles that were the product of both a tailored diet, and a well-planned exercise regime. His features were rugged rather than handsome, betraying no obvious modifications beyond a nose that looked to have been rebuilt at least once. His hair was close-cropped and jet black, and he was dressed much like his companion though without any covering for his bare torso. His physique had cost a lot of money, sweat, and effort, and he was happy to display it. It also pointedly did not show any of the tattoos that the local street-gangs used to indicate their allegiance and place in their rigid hierarchy. Conventions amongst the *Solntsevskaya Bratva* and their deadly rivals in the Chechen *Obschina* had been in a state of flux for some decades since the former Russian states had grudgingly joined the United World Nations and nobody in their right mind wanted to risk aggravating either faction without possessing deep and genuine ties to the other.

“Tatyana.” said the man, breaking what had only been a short silence. “I must congratulate you on a.. spectacular performance tonight.”

The woman laughed. “Shamil, you're trying too hard again. So I beat Zama in the cage, so what? She always leads with her chin anyway.”

Shamil chuckled, the sound low and grating like a bag of cement being dragged across the street. “True, but she has hard head! You have fire in the blood, Tatyana Gamsakhurdia, it stirs the heart!”

“A hard head!” admonished Tatyana, triumphantly. “You owe me a drink!”

“Bah, I was buying anyway.” said Shamil, with little rancour. “Why you insist on making me speak English I will never know. Everyone uses translator anyway.”

“Because it's a workout for your brain, you lump!” laughed the blonde. “It isn't as if your body needs

any more.”

“Always it needs more!” said Shamil. “In fact, after drinks.. what about a little more exercise?”

They had turned down one of the side-streets that led to a favourite bar, and Tatyana took advantage of the privacy to push Shamil into the shadows and leap into his arms, planting a firm, aggressive kiss on his lips. “Why wait until after drinks?”

“Hah! Because I am thirsty!” he replied, setting the girl back down on the pavement. “And.. *blyat!*” Tatyana didn't need to ask what had provoked Shamil's sudden change of mood. There were five of them, at first glance as blandly handsome as any number of the people the couple had ignored on their way back from the gym. A second glance revealed the slightly too expensive clothes, the matching white-and-purple accents on those clothes, the perfectly imperfect features. Whoever they were, they were richer than they could be, more well-connected than they *should* be- and spoiling for trouble.

“A touching scene!” said the tall, slender man who looked to be the leader. “And one I regret to break up, so I shall not. I see... oh, a *very* nice smart-bracelet, *devushka*- one which, like the local security grid, is currently not working. My apologies, but modern technology... what can you do?”

“They can give it all to us, Kodiak.” supplied the woman standing next to him, with a shark's grin. “Or we can take it from their corpses, eh?”

“Now now, Grizzly.” admonished the leader. “I told you, dead people are bad for business. And unnecessary. The deal is simple, my friends. We leave you with no possessions except the clothes you both stand up in, you both make... generous donations to the accounts- untraceable, I assure you- that I indicate, and then you leave to enjoy your evening. Simple, painless. And perhaps, if you tell your bartender what happened to you, he'll stand you both a free drink out of sympathy, eh?”

Tatyana's heart was racing, but she didn't panic. If the smart-bracelet had stopped transmitting, then her father's security team would have received an alert, which meant they were almost certainly on their way. Until the two of them had parted with the access credentials to their finances, the gang needed them alive, and it didn't look like any of them were armed. Like most major cities, Grozny followed the weapon control ordinances that were a prerequisite for any UWN member state and roadside scanners made carrying anything more deadly than a knuckle-duster far more dangerous than all but the most desperate criminals dared risk. It was one of the reasons that self-defence classes had become so fashionable amongst the young, fit and rich.

“Kodiak? Grizzly?” she mocked, doing her best to sound calm. “What are you idiots meant to be, a troupe of performing bears?”

Shamil laughed, heartily. “Now now, Tatyana. It is not polite to mock the mentally deficient, eh? Be on your way, *tovarisch*, you will gain nothing from this foolishness.”

“Why you knuckle-dragging-” began Kodiak, taking his eyes off Tatyana, who broke his nose. The heel of her hand flashed forwards with all the speed six years of hard, full-contact training could impart and shattered bone and cartilage with sudden effect. Trusting Shamil to deal with the three gangsters who were closing in from behind him- or at least, to slow them down- she sprang over Kodiak's crumpling, moaning body to aim a leaping follow-up punch at Grizzly's temple. The woman was fast, her arm coming up to ward off the blow, but Tatyana had expected as much and used her momentum to bowl

the other over. They went down grappling, exchanging short, tucked-in punches as they fought for control, and by the time they rolled to a stop Tatyana's eye was swelling and blood trickled from her mouth. Nevertheless, she had Grizzly locked in an arm-bar and was wrenching it back as hard as she could when she realised she couldn't hear the sound of fighting from the other end of the street.

A moment later, even as Grizzly filled the air with a blistering barrage of pain-filled threats and curses, she glanced up to see Shamil's bulk blotting out the street-lights.

“*Blyat!*” she gasped, echoing the big man's own exclamation. “You took care of them that fast?”

“In a manner of speaking, *devushka.*” replied Shamil, squatting down beside her. She just had time to see the three gangsters- two women and a man, not that it mattered- helping Kodiak to his feet before something sharp poked her in the side of her neck.

“We should kill the *suka!*” snarled Kodiak, his voice slurred by his obstructed nose. “I owe her a nose, at least!”

“She's going to be giving up much more than that.” said Shamil, quietly, as he stood up. “Besides, you can easily buy a new one with your cut and have plenty left.”

“*Pizda!*” screamed Grizzly, as she struggled in Tatyana's grip. “It's not working! She's ripping my arm off!”

“Give it time, *devushka.*” said Shamil, staring down at the two women with little apparent interest. “It was carefully customised to her biology by the lab. If it worked too fast we'd risk killing her, and none of our lives are worth that.”

++*Hercules suite reinitialising. Tailored bio-toxin detected. Beginning neurological shutdown.*++

“Whu... what?” mumbled Tatyana, her vision suddenly starting to blur around the edges. “What.. who are... am...?”

Then everything was blackness.

Phase Beta

++*Operative alert: Activation signal received. Mnemonic baffles released. Cover identity deleted.*++

Amanda Devereux returned to consciousness with a start. Deep-cover assignments were always disorienting for a few moments after activation, and this one was no exception. She resisted the urge to curse in Russian and opened her eyes to take stock of the situation. A tangled mass of wires, cables, shunts and other medical and technological paraphernalia greeted her. There was a feeding tube down her throat, too, which was an unpleasant sensation, and she allowed her medical support suite to numb the nerves which were complaining about it whilst she pulled it out. A mass of something pulpy and red came out with it, suggesting it had been anchored to some wetware she was expected to miss, but whatever it was was almost certainly redundant and already the damage was being repaired.

The *Obschina* hadn't bothered to restrain 'Tatyana' beyond a few simple leather straps, which was somewhat insulting but hardly surprising. She could still remember everything the Russian girl had thought and felt- she'd genuinely cared about Shamil. Looking back, the big man's interest had been suspicious from the start but the fact that a seasoned Operative would have suspected him was the very reason why her own personality had been suppressed. It was far easier for 'Tatyana' to act the convincing innocent if she had no idea that she was in fact an agent of the Office. Maintaining the cover, to the extent of inventing a rich- but not *too* rich- patriarch for the girl, had taken quite an effort for the local Office but it had been unquestionably worth it. As a Desdemona-class Operative, her augmentations, extensive though they were, were designed for maximum operational stealth, able to defeat even the most high-end medical scanners and even basic invasive examination. Until they cut 'Tatyana' open to retrieve their prize, the gang would've had no idea that the most deadly of Trojan horses had been brought into their stronghold.

She took a quick, careful look around. As expected, no alarms had yet been triggered- despite removing the feeding tube she had done nothing to alert the various devices monitoring her vital signs that anything was amiss. Of course, the vast majority of the data they were receiving was total fiction. Not only was her medical suite keeping her body in the same state of readiness that it usually maintained, it was also feeding the sensors exactly what they were expecting. The toxin circulating through her system was a carefully-designed nerve agent tailored to keep Tatyana Gamsakhurdia in a stable coma, but it would have had next to no effect on Amanda Devereux even had it not been based on a genetic profile planted in the UWNHO central database for exactly that purpose. A genetic profile that conveniently proved to be that of a viable donor for a wealthy, anonymous client in urgent need of a multiple organ transplant. She wondered how the gang had got hold of a sample for confirmation testing, but it would hardly have been difficult given how physical Tatyana and Shamil's relationship had been.

She counted seven other bodies on the various gurneys in the room. From the look of the monitoring hardware, all of them were technically alive. That hardly conveyed the horror of what she was seeing, though. Not one of the people she could see was whole. Several were missing multiple limbs, most had their chest cavities held open with clamps to expose the still-living organs within. Eyes, fingers, noses- genitalia in at least one case- all were missing to some extent or another. The work looked clean and professional, with no trace of infection and as little damage as possible to the surrounding tissues. Whoever had done this was clearly highly-skilled and meticulous. That they had chosen this path rather than a career in legitimate medicine seemed both incomprehensible and abhorrent.

++Operative advisory: Vital signs of seven of seven targets stable. Baseline neural activity in subjects designated 1-1, 1-4 and 1-6 consistent with vegetative state.++

~Templar, this is Quarterback online. Operation commencing assault stage in 10 minutes from mark.. mark. Stand by for tactical inload.~

One of the more disconcerting things about the Hercules suite was dealing with what seemed to be multiple voices in your head simultaneously. Still, it was good to 'hear' Quarterback's virtual voice. In the early days of espionage, an agent might have been expected to infiltrate an enemy facility alone, trusting only to their wits and training. For an Operative, much more effective measures were available.

~Templar, objective updated. Load up and commence to primary.~

She was already moving, ripping free of the rest of the restraints and life-support equipment with ease. She didn't stop to try and help the other abductees- even if she wanted to, she had neither the time nor the capability. Each of them would have been taken initially to fulfil a demand for a donor organ that matched a specific genetic profile, guaranteeing compatibility with a desperate client. Of course, the recipients of the stolen organs were told that they were receiving a sterile, lab-grown organ that should have cost tens of billions at a fraction of the price.

Some of them possibly even believed it.

++Operative alert: Local surveillance grid access complete. Isolated information system detected and infiltrated. All subjects identified and cross-referenced with core records.++

~Templar, we're receiving your Hercules databurst. Facility personnel manifest cross-check with security-cam footage complete.~

I have it. There was a lot of data to process at once, but that was the reason she'd grown up with Daniel's voice in her head- it helped to give the 'Hercules' AI suite a relatable name though she couldn't remember why she'd picked that one. Her vision overlay adjusted, adding the moving shapes of the staff of the lab as if she could see them through the walls. As she looked at each one, annotations displayed threat analyses and other useful data. There were some forty staff in the facility, comprising a twenty-man security detail, fifteen techs of various specialities, and a five-strong command staff. Shamil and the bear gang weren't among them, but that was no surprise. They probably didn't even know where the facility was and field agents would pick them up in due course.

Her nanite cloud had finished weaving a standard combat jumpsuit even as she moved, replacing the workout gear that the kidnappers had left her dressed in. She felt a vestigial flash of irritation that her coat was nowhere to be found. Tatyana had liked that coat.

++Operative Advisory: Materials for weapon fabrication detected. Stand by for equipment.++

'Materials' was something of an understatement. The ward, for want of a better word, that she was standing in was full of metal, from the gurney she had been lying on to laser-cutters, scalpels, forceps and IV stands. The Office tac-inload had selected the AR-21 as armament for the mission, supplemented by a monomolecular-edged Mk IV Fighting Knife. She knelt down as the weapons formed at her feet, and frowned at the ammunition selection.

Quarterback, mission query- the security team displays combat augmentation but you have me fabricating hollow-points? Why not AAI's?

~Theatre restrictions, Templar: You're in a repurposed rare-earth mining facility about 1.3 clicks under the Black Sea. The techs don't like the look of the pressure modelling if you score a through-and-through with a high-penetration round in a perimeter corridor.~

That certainly explained a few things. She'd already noticed that the architecture of the place looked distinctly heavy-duty for a medical facility, even in an area notorious for overbuilding and brutalism. It also explained why initial attempts by local security forces to find the gang with blood-borne nano-trackers had failed. They were hard to detect, but didn't have anything like the power needed to punch through that much interference. Her own communication equipment was in an entirely different league.

Copy that. It's going to make the loud phase of the operation rougher than I'd like, though.

~Nothing to worry about, Templar: Follow the mission plan. Assault team is inbound, ETA nine minutes fifteen.~

Without her training, Devereux was sure she'd have found the lack of information irritating, but she knew the reasoning behind it. At that very moment, even as she stalked silently through the dingy tunnels of the base, countless incredibly complicated elements were combining to keep the operation on track. For a field agent to comprehend even a fraction of it and still concentrate on the mission would be impossible. She had to simply follow the tactical plan and deal with any threats- such as the contact approaching from the upcoming intersection.

++Target designation T-3, non-combatant, medical technician Alexei Dubrayev. Directive: Covert neutralisation. ++

The man never saw the blade that severed his trachea coming, nor did he have any chance to cry out. Perhaps some might think that such a fate- call it execution, call it murder- was too harsh for an unarmed, practically defenceless civilian, but Devereux had seen the man's handiwork personally. Sometimes, a little extra context helped. She couldn't risk stopping to dwell on the morality of her actions, though, nor was there even time to conceal the body. Daniel was preventing the dead-man trigger that should have alerted the security system from working, but she only had a little over eight minutes left to accomplish her objectives and someone would probably find the corpse by then. She ran on, her nanites dissolving the blood from her knife-blade as she went. It came off her hands every bit as easily.

At least in the physical sense.

The next one cost her thirty-point-two precious seconds. S-9, one of the security detail, a woman called Raisa Aslakhanova. Crude but effective grafted ballistic armouring, enhanced musculature and reflexes, and, critically, a full-spectrum sensor suite built into her visored combat helmet. As soon as she looked in Devereux's direction, assuming she had any reason to use the sensors, the quiet phase of the mission would be over. The Operative spent fifteen excruciating seconds stalking from cover to cover, keeping just ahead of the projected view cone overlaid on her vision, before the Hercules suite overcame the helmet's firewall and began to feed it false data. She was three metres away and closing fast when the guard felt the need to scratch her nose and flipped up her visor to do so.

Had the situation not been so dangerous, Devereux would have found the sudden changes in the guard's expression comical. She was bored for a fraction of a second, absorbed in the act of rubbing at her face. Then, briefly, shocked, suddenly seeing death bearing down on her. Then angry, even as her training kicked in and the short-barrel, high-capacity security SMG she was carrying began to swing up to bear. Then pain and fear overcame all else as the Operative closed the gap, her left hand seizing the wrist of the guard's gun-arm and snapping it even as her right drove the knife home into her eye-socket. The woman's body crashed back against the curved steel wall, the knife still protruding from her head as her functioning hand came up weakly to claw at it. Devereux's own hand was now clamped over the guard's mouth and the other snatched the SMG before it could clatter to the decking, but even so the impact of the dying woman's back hitting the bulkhead sent a dull, rumbling boom reverberating through the corridors.

++Operative alert: Security personnel displaying heightened alert level. Technical staff moving to designated safe zones.++

~Rough luck, Templar. Estimate thirty seconds before full alert. Assault team ETA six point four minutes. Authorisation granted to go loud, Black Tactical.~

Black Tactical acknowledged. It wasn't a surprise. She'd known from the start that this was going to get messy. Once a mission was declared Black Tactical it was kill-on-sight, regardless of stealth. There was an important question to answer, however.

Quarterback, request clarification- are the other abductees included in the Black Tactical directive?

~Templar, negative. The abductees aren't conscious, they're not considered an OpSec risk. Proceed to objective.~

She kept hold of the SMG, holding it in her left hand whilst the right supported the AR-21. The Office-standard light assault rifle was a bullpup weapon, shorter than the conventional pattern and easier to control even without her enhanced strength and built-in recoil compensators. The knife she left behind, along with any pretence of subtlety. Fifteen seconds later, and she was at the reinforced steel door of the base's communications room. It was sealed tightly shut, as expected.

++Operative Advisory: Obstacle is a pressure and flood-resistant emergency door, ISA level 18 standard. Rated for depths of five-thousand metres, 500 atmospheres. Operative maximum muscle output 3248 pounds/ square inch. Conclusion: Physical forced breach untenable.++

Confirm that this area is not structurally critical. Is explosive breach viable?

++Confirmed. Use of breaching explosives carries an implosion risk factor of less than 1%++

Devereux reached into her subcutaneous storage pouch. After creating her weapons, her nanite cloud had been meticulously cooking a small brick of C-6 plastic explosive, a high-yield demolition charge. Swiftly, her tactical overlay guiding her, she shaped it and wedged it into the vulnerable sections of the door's mounting mechanism. The sound of running feet and shouts of alarm could be heard clearly as she ducked around the corner.

++Detonation available on command.++

Stand by.

~Templar, there's no time for any show-boating. Breach and proceed to objective.~

Understood. Stand by.

There were two contacts closing fast, both of them coming from the direction of the door. If she timed it correctly..

Breaching.

The explosion, triggered by small nano-implanted detonators, was almost instantaneous. As Devereux had anticipated, the heavy solid steel door was sheared cleanly off of its mountings and crashed into the opposite wall. One of the two advancing guards was squarely in its path, the force of the impact reducing him to a thin smear on the bulkhead. The other, luckier or perhaps more wary, somehow managed to leap almost clear, but was still coming to terms with the loss of his right foot when the Operative rounded the corner and put three precise 5.56mm shots from the AR-21 into his throat.

~Efficient.~ Quarterback's acknowledgement sounded grudging even through the voice simulation. Devereux didn't bother to reply, instead slipping quickly into the communications room. There were two techs inside, both of them down and bleeding from the ears. Her boots made sure they never got up again.

++Operative advisory: Communication system identified as Huawei-Hitachi model 45353664/SN/10K tight-band satellite uplink with centralised encryption server. Destruction of marked components will render system permanently inoperative.++

Time was growing short- she was down to less than five minutes. Rather than worry about precisely shooting the components Daniel highlighted for her, Devereux emptied the clip of her commandeered SMG into the control console before discarding it, taking care that the raking burst encompassed all the priority targets. An alarm sounded and the base's fire suppression system began pumping flame-retardant foam into the room, but the damage had been done.

Now it was time for the most critical, and dangerous, part of the mission. There were still seventeen security guards left, though ten of those had been off-shift and were only now moving to full combat readiness. Even so, they were forming into fire-teams and despite their surveillance system feeding them false information they were converging on the site of the explosion in methodical sweeps. Whoever was in charge certainly knew what they were doing. Of course, now she was counting on that.

She ran down corridors now stained red with alert lights, sacrificing stealth for speed, boots hammering on deck plates. Here and there, at a junction or a doorway, she would allow a fire-team to catch a glimpse of her, even returning fire on occasion, making it possible for the security commander to work out where she was and where she was going without it being too obvious. The target, *++3.5 minutes remaining.++*, was a docking area where a desperate escapee might expect to find some sort of evacuation craft. Of course there was no such craft there, and at least one fire-team was going to get there before she did, but the commander couldn't expect her to know that. She took an apparent wrong turn, theatrically blundered straight into a two-man team, and put one of them down with a quick burst

before retreating under fire. He wasn't dead, of course- the bullets had pancaked against his ballistic vest- but he was disabled by blunt trauma and unlikely to take any interest in the proceedings for some time.

On she ran, slowing her pace a little to allow the pursuers to catch up, the near-misses getting closer and more frequent. A shot creased her arm, eliciting a splash of fresh blood. It was real, but not particularly important, the wound quickly closing and her subdermal armour easily preventing any significant damage. Then she was into the docking bay, a large space filled with storage crates, some empty and some packed with recently-offloaded food and medical supplies. Four guards were waiting for her, excellently positioned with commanding fields of fire that must make any attempt at a frontal assault suicidal.

Which was why it was the last thing they were expecting.

A storm of fire from SMGs and light battle-rifles filled the air around the sprinting Operative. Enough shots missed and flew wild into the corridor behind her to make her pursuers leap back in alarm with angry shouts, but several hit home. They were light, low-power loads, the guards clearly sharing the reservations of the Office techs about the structural integrity of the base, but any normal human, even one with defensive enhancements, could not hope to endure them.

A Desdemona-class Operative was no normal human. Her skin was a silk-kevlar weave composite, her soft body fact subcutaneous gel armour, and her bones titanium-reinforced. Every vital organ was duplicated, completely redundant or distributed, and her wounds healed almost as quickly as they were inflicted. Even so, the Hercules suite was registering enough damage that she needed to end this quickly. She hit the stack of heavy steel crates that the two guards on the left flank were using as cover at a dead run, slamming into it shoulder-first. A maximum muscle pressure of over three-thousand pounds per square inch might not have moved one of the pressure doors, but it proved more than sufficient to topple the pile, crushing the two screaming men into pulp beneath it. The other two guards used the moment in which she was off-balance to emerge from their own cover, spraying her with fully-automatic fire. She felt her left knee give out even as the compromise alert came in, but rolled with the fall, the AR-21 spitting death in return. Each shot was as precise as if aimed by a master marksman despite the rate of fire falling only slightly short of that of the guards, and both fell to the decking and lay still.

++Operative Advisory: Left knee actuator fibre-bundle at 9% functionality. Assault team ETA one minute ten seconds.++

She could hear the rest of the security force running down the access corridor now, but they weren't shooting. They probably thought, not without good reason, that their quarry was dead or dying. Certainly the spreading pool of blood, some of it hers, slicking the decks beneath her would reinforce that impression. Her objective was a mere two metres away, but she was having trouble coordinating her limbs.

++Operative Alert: SUCS motive compensators overloaded. Spinal motive control cluster at 23.4% functionality. Auto-repair initiated, ETTC four minutes.++

~Templar! Shit, that was a lucky hit! You must achieve your objective or the mission will abort to SNAFU, condition two. Condition two, acknowledge!~

Acknowledged. Stand by.

Condition two. Otherwise known as 'strategic area denial'. Otherwise known as some seriously heavy ordnance being employed to destroy the site of the failed mission, allowing the Office deniability and hopefully putting a hard, if messy, stop to the gang's operations.

Well, she still had the use of her arms. Slowly, acutely aware of the approaching guards, she hauled herself over the cooling corpse of one of her victims, ready to drag herself to her feet and hit the release control. And that was when things really went wrong. There was a deafening boom, and something hit her in the side like a kick from a horse. She went sprawling, rolling over and over to come to a halt on her back, resting against the body of another of the dead guards, the AR-21 lying where she had left it on the deck some metres away.

And there, emerging from the smoke and gloom, was Shamil.

“Sorry, *devushka*.” said the big Chechen with a chuckle, resting a heavy combat shotgun on his shoulder. “You are tapped into cameras, no? But they are blind to you, eh?” He squatted down next to her, just as he had in the alley. “But they are also blind to me. A man should not be spied upon in his own fortress.”

“Your... fortress?” gasped Devereux, struggling to speak. She was down to one working hand now- the other lay on the deck at Shamil's feet. It would have to be enough.

“Of course, mine. My.. hah.. *Groznaya*, eh?” He poked at the hand with a gloved finger. “I was going to allow my men to simply kill you, but looking at this.. well, you must have some very expensive secrets in that firm little body, eh? I think perhaps we take off your other limbs, open you up, see what we find inside. Maybe we find buyers for some of your.. parts.. that will make up for the business you have cost me. A very rich man is probably going to die because of your trickery, do you know that?”

“I don't like this, Shamil.” said a scarred woman at the gang leader's side, ++*S-I, Tumisha Utsiyev, security commander. Assault team ETA ten seconds.*++ “What was she doing here? She's blown the communication centre, but there's no way she could escape from here.”

Shamil shrugged. “What does it matter? She has failed. Have your men scoop her up and restrain her, and get the technicians working on getting communications back. We shall-”

Devereux's left arm flashed forwards, an SMG taken from the corpse beneath her held barrel-first. Shamil instinctively rocked back on his heels to avoid it, a sardonic smile forming on his face as he opened his mouth to mock what must have looked like a last, desperate assault. Before he could speak, the hurled gun crashed home against the docking release control. Instantly the red alert lighting was replaced by a flashing industrial yellow. Shamil leapt to his feet and kicked Devereux hard in the head, snapping her neck back.

“What did she do?” shouted the big man. “WHAT DID SHE DO?”

“I.. I don't know!” stammered Utsiyev, tapping at a smart-glove. “Wait.. the automatic docking system's been triggered. The security system hack overrode all the safeties except the manual release, and..”

Shamil leapt for the control, crashing his fist against it. “There! That should-”

The guard commander shook her head. “No, it won't work. The outer docking bay's already flooding, until the docking procedure is complete the system won't reverse, the pressure's too great at this depth.” She motioned her guard force forwards, ignoring the limp body of the Operative as she directed them to firing positions covering the docking port. “There's... there's nothing registering out there but the docking clamps have engaged as if there was. I-”

Before she could finish speaking, the docking port door was hurled open, a four-foot thick steel slab some ten feet in diameter flying across the bay like a child's toy, sending guards scattering in all directions. In its wake walked nightmares.

++*Operative Advisory: Tactical team breaching.*++

First through the port, automatic fire pattering from its armour like light summer rain, was a squat, powerful-looking figure some seven feet tall and almost as wide. Its limbs were plated with thick, segmented armour and its head seemed to have no neck, being almost completely subsumed into its massive torso. The Goliath-class Operative possessed and needed no weapons beyond its huge, titanium-clad limbs, and strode forwards, seizing Shamil by the neck and holding him suspended in mid air, ignoring the blast of the shotgun before ripping it from the big man's hands. Unsure what to do, finding their weapons worse than useless with their target seemingly invulnerable and their leader in the field of fire, the guards looked to Utsiyev for orders. A former *Spetsnaz* unit commander, despite her ancestry, the scarred woman refused to panic, and began to signal a staged withdrawal.

Her orders were destined never to be carried out.

Despite its obvious combat utility, the Goliath-class augmented chassis was legal, with applications in construction and disaster relief. The same could not be said for the second figure to emerge from the docking port. He was neither as tall, nor as physically imposing, as the Goliath, standing a mere six-and-a-half feet tall and less obviously armoured. His head, despite occupying the usual place on his shoulders, was terrifyingly featureless, looking like an armoured helmet fronted by a sheet of black glass. It was the figure's arms, though, that had men and women already close to breaking point succumbing to full-blown panic, some throwing down their guns to run and others swinging theirs to bear. Each of the thing's arms ended in a weapon- all four of them.

The Agamemnon-class Operative was custom-designed for the very heaviest of combat situations, and was utterly illegal. Each of its arms featured a heavy weapon hard-point, and its blank face concealed the most advanced wide-spectrum targeting sensors available. For this mission, the Office had equipped the thing with two ultra-high-intensity weapons-grade lasers, a RHS-42 multi-warhead rocket launcher, and an XM-421 10mm multi-barrelled cannon. The Agamemnon braced itself, ignoring the wild shots whining from its armour, the stabilisers in its legs clamping it to the deck plating. Then the security guards died.

Nothing took place that could be considered, by anything other than the very broadest of definitions, to be a firefight. The guard force continued to fire for all of the two-point-seven seconds of the engagement, but their weapons could only threaten the third member of the breaching team who was not yet in the field. In return, the Agamemnon's lasers systematically burned out the brain cavities of each combatant in turn without them even seeing the shots that killed them, the invisible beams simply microwaving the living tissue instantaneously. Meanwhile the XM-421 filled the access corridor with a solid sheet of bullets, shredding those guards who had attempted to flee and cutting Utsiyev in half at

the waist almost as an afterthought.

All was silent, save for the whining of the minigun's servo-motors as it span down and the quiet pinging of the metal of its barrels as they cooled. Lying motionless on the deck, immobilised as her self-repair systems worked, Amanda Devereux heard the soft footsteps of the third member of the tactical team approaching. Helena Tatchell, codenamed *Trojan*, Cassandra-class. She was elegant and slender, and Devereux knew that the woman possessed only the most minor of combat augmentations. Despite this, she was also one of the most deadly women on the planet. The Cassandra class Operative, like the Desdemona, was packed with cutting-edge computer hardware and AI support tools. The difference was that she contained almost nothing else. The raw data-processing power of a Cassandra, their brain tissue distributed throughout their entire body and fused with both quantum and conventional computer systems, exceeded that of most super-computers. In the field, they could predict enemy tactics with near-certainty, overwhelm and compromise any ECM or ECCM system, and coordinate an entire battalion of Operatives with perfect efficiency.

Politely, Helena waited until Devereux's repair cycle was completed and she could stand unaided before debriefing her. In the meantime, an Office tech-team disembarked from the docked stealth submersible and began to move out into the base, accompanied by the two tactical Operatives and a small contingent of marines. Devereux didn't bother warning Helena about the remaining base personnel. By now, synchronised as she was with the Hercules suite, she already knew everything Devereux did.

“Excellent work, Templar.” said Helena, finally. “I was monitoring on the way down- you were exceptionally efficient. You gathered the entire defence force in one place for us to take out.”

The first of the techs came back, wheeling a gurney. At least some of the abductees seemed to have survived.

“I'd have preferred to be less efficient and get shot less.” grumbled Devereux, feeling at her reattached right wrist. “I thought we weren't supposed to be using the Agamemnons any more?”

“Oh, we aren't.” said Helena with a smile. “And don't worry, we didn't.”

“What?”

Phase Omega

“Excellent work, Templar.” said Helena, finally. “To accomplish the mission completely unscathed is exceptional in the circumstances. You took out so many of them that the marines barely had anything to do when we breached.”

Devereux shrugged, feeling at her right wrist absently. “I suppose so. I just wish that bitch of a guard commander hadn't triggered the fail-safe and killed the other abductees.”

Helena nodded, sadly. “Agreed. The med-techs tell me that it would have been extremely difficult to stabilise any of them for transport anyway, though. Most of them were missing so many parts...” she shuddered. “These people were monsters. To be so uncaring about human life, to treat people as if they were nothing more than... walking piles of spare parts! Sometimes I almost wish we didn't have rules against torture. I'd love to see the bastards behind all this squirm.”

“Copy that.” agreed Devereux. “Maybe if we manage to catch Shamil he'll provide some leads for the follow-up investigation. That gang brought him the toxin and he was definitely in charge back in Grozny, he must know something.”

A couple of techs had come back, wheeling a body-bag on a gurney between them. Carrying several heavy equipment cases with Office evidence tags on them, the Goliath clumped along in their wake.

“We'll find him.” said Helena, laying a reassuring hand on Devereux's shoulder. “And when we do, I can assure you'll we'll bring the rest of this organisation down around his bloody ears.”

“I hope you're right.” said Devereux. “Some of the things I saw down here.. what they did to those people.. I've already deleted the video footage. I know you took backups, but I don't want to see them ever again.”

Helena nodded. “I understand. I wish we could spare you the memory of what you saw down there as easily as we can delete a few data-files, but you understand that sort of manipulation could be highly dangerous to your psyche. You'll receive a full debrief and counselling session when we get back to base, in any case.”

“Yeah.” said Devereux. “It'll have to do.”

The other Operative smiled. “Don't worry, Amanda. We'll take good care of your mind for you. We've invested far too much in you not to.”

The adventures of Amanda Devereux continue in the books of the Thelenic Curriculum, starting with [The Wake Of Manadar](#).