Grace Heidtke

Palshaw

English IV

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Amur

It was about twenty below zero that night. The rain had stopped a week earlier and all that was left was a thin sheet of snow and ice that dotted the mountaintops and blanketed the ground. Their campsite was surrounded by a dense forest. Mongolian Oaks and Korean Pines stretched fifty meters up. Past the hanging lichens and up the mossy birches, stars peeked behind the leaves.

The winter brought oaks that posed as skeletons of bark and branches. The rain froze like a glass suit around them. Under bright moonlight and the billions of twinkling stars, the trees twinkled like glitter. The pines bristled with needles, which dropped alongside the pinecones with each gust of wind. Snow dusted the coned tops and gathered around the pine’s roots.

“Gina, you’ll have to run--and I mean run quick--to get to this door.”

“I thought guards would be posted at every entrance to the building.” Gina looked up at the bearded man with campfire-glowing eyes. She was sat on her haunches, gloved hands holding her arms. A faux fur hat muffed her ears.

The man raked his fingers through his beard and groped his pockets before presenting a flashlight and flicking it on. “This is the backdoor entrance. Very well hidden but not very well protected. Every four hours there is a shift change and the door is left unattended for just a few minutes.” He shined the light on his hand-drawn map. “You have less than three minutes to uncover the hole, crawl through, and get through that door.”

The older woman raised her hand and pulled a blue scarf down from her mouth. “Gerald, question. Wouldn’t it save time to just cut through the fence? We’ve got the tools for it. It’d be so much quicker--”

“The moment Gina tries to cut through that fence with a pair of uninsulated pliers, she’ll be hit with 10,000 volts of electricity. We’ve been through this, Marg.” Gerald raised an eyebrow at her and patted her shoulder. “Marg, you and I will be ready outside of the gate for Gina to unlock it.” He pointed at two yellow dots on the map with calloused fingers.

Margie brushed the graying hair out of her eyes and adjusted her earmits and then her glasses. Her glasses glared from the reflection of the smoldering fire as she pressed her hands closer to it. Minute snowflakes flecked down onto her sleeves from the snow-covered trees above her, instantly melting under the heat of the fire. “And then what?”

“If Gina successfully gets inside and to the vault control station which is….” Gerald shined the flashlight to a red *X* on the map. “...Here, then she can unlock both the entrance gate, the building door, *and* the cage.”

Gina sat back in the entrance of the tent, her eyes glimmering like dancing lights. “Killing three birds with one stone.”

“Or one button.” Margie grinned with purple lips.

The cold was like a settling blanket of fog under the skin. Frigid winds from the coast weaved their way between the trees. Raindrop-shaped icicles hung from the thinnest branches of the oak trees, and swung with the wind, some breaking off their branch and disappearing into the snow below.

“It won’t be that easy, but once Gina’s in, then we’ve got the upper hand.” Gerald flicked out his flashlight and stood over the fire. He looked on through the trees at the faint lights of the facility--a cement box of corridors and guarded gates.

With the exception of the fire, their campsite was well camouflaged with the trees. Gerald himself fit right in. With his dark clothing and long beard, he was just a few spots of colors against the pines and the oaks. He stood as tall as the baby birches--just as straight too, with his hands tucked in his pockets and his shoulders squared. His feet shuffled in the frozen snow as he tried to shake the cold that was settling under his skin. His Colt Python was cool against his hip bone.

“What time do we go?” Margie stood up beside Gerald, teetering from foot to foot to get warmer. The woman was getting older, a sign from the wrinkles that wrapped her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

“Soon. I’d recommend you get warm now ‘cause we’re going to be away from a fire for at least a couple of hours.” Gerald crouched down and started to pack up the tent gear, rolling the sleeping mats to stuff into a duffel bag.

Gina wrapped herself in an Indian blanket and tucked her feet into the rocks that circled the fire.

The forest became colder, freezing dirt, yellow grass, and snow into hard ice. The Sikhote-Alin Mountains were framed by the Russian Pacific to the northeast, and had valleys of forests, lakes, and waterfalls. In the winter, the lakes were frozen over, the trees were encrusted in snow, and the waterfalls were curtains of opaque glass. Wild boar and spotted deer roamed the valleys as the black bears slept away in their dens throughout the rough winters.

The forests were thick with trees, every turn was a facefull of branches and leaves and snow. On the days after it rained, the cracks between the trees would seep wisps of fog that settled on the treetops and the heads of the mountains. From any peak, the mountains would stretch on as far as the eye could see.

“You know, when I was younger, I’d camp out here in the forests in Russia--especially during the Spring.”

Gina looked up as Margie spoke. The old woman’s glasses were orange from the dying fire. “Hm,” Gina looked down again at her hands, flexing them against the blanket’s blue pattern.

“I’d come here with my mother and father and they’d boost me up into one of the trees with a pair of binoculars,” Margie smiled at the memory. “I’d always spot the deer and wild cats, squirrels, you know… but one day I saw the most incredible thing.”

Gina looked up from the fire, her arms wrapped around her knees. “What was it?” She already had an idea, but she wasn’t one to interrupt a near-stranger’s story.

Gerald had finished packing up the gear and was sitting on his backpack, leaning his head towards Margie as she spoke, his back straight and his hands clasped in front of him, one hand thumbing the face of his wristwatch.

“A Siberian Tiger.” Margie took her glasses off and looked at them, a knowing smile on her face. “She was quick, and I didn’t get a long enough look at her, but I saw her. She had this bright orange coat….” Margie’s smile grew, and she looked to Gerald, who returned her excitement with a small smile of his own.

“Out here they call them Amur Tigers,” Gerald said.

Gerald and Margie were wildlife experts who spent most of their days nursing animals back to health and releasing them back into the wild when they were stable again. The pair had been working together for quite a few years before they heard about the tiger poachers in northeastern Russia, who were taking refuge in the facility beyond the woods.

“Is that why you want to do this?” Gina took off her blanket when she noticed Margie shivering, handing it to her.

Margie accepted the blanket with a nod. “It’s the right thing to do.” She frowned. “The poaching was supposed to stop after they passed new regulations. When I came back to visit years ago, there were few of the tigers left.

“There’s only five-hundred or so left now, and poachers think the population is stable enough to start capturing them again.” Gerald continued, looking at Gina.

“Capture them for what?” Gina looked between the two.

“Their fur,” Margie said.

“Coats, hats, scarves, carpets, blankets,” Gerald added.

“And people actually buy it?”

“People pay thousands to get genuine Siberian Tiger fur. The animals are so rare that their fur has become a souvenir from northern Russia.” A line had formed between Gerald’s thick eyebrows and he looked to Margie while she shook her head.

Gerald and Margie had contacted Gina the month earlier asking for her help. Gina was well known as a talented hacker--a woman who could crack any computer code, reset any password, and shut down any system. A year earlier, Gina was caught for one of the largest successful hackings in California; for four months, she hacked the city’s signal system and disabled every red stop light on her drive to school, cutting her trip time in half. Others who took the route just assumed that the traffic lights had a glitch. Others didn’t even notice at all. Eventually a complaint was filed, an investigation began, and traffic cameras caught Gina’s familiar Mercedes speeding by just as every light turned green. Surprisingly enough to the public, the charges against her were dropped.

Margie and Gerald contacted Gina about their mission when the story was published.

“Don’t worry Margie.” Gina hesitated before resting her hand on Margie’s knee and patting it. “I’ll set those tigers free.”

“I know you will, dear.” Margie smiled at the younger girl, resting a hand on hers. “Thank you,” she said, almost quieter.

Gina pulled her hand away and it was silent for a few minutes. There was no sounds of insects or birds, save for the distant owl, and the moonlight shone against Gina’s black hair, the whites of her wide eyes, and the ice. The fire burned out, leaving a rivulet of smoke in its wake. Gerald’s watch beeped, signalling fifteen minutes until the next guard shift.

“It’s time to go,” Gerald slung his backpack over his shoulders; Margie follow alongside him with the blanket wrapped around her. Gina followed a few steps behind.

The mobile was hidden closer to the edge of the forest, before the hill that lead to the poachers building. At the mobile, the three loaded their gear, and Gina tucked a bag in her jacket pocket. She re-tied her black boots and then pulled her wool mask over her nose and mouth, giving Gerald and Gina a gloved thumbs up.

“Take this, dear.” Margie took off her blue scarf, wrapping it around Gina’s neck two times, pulling the younger into a tight hug.

The two stepped back, and after a nod from Gerald, Gina turned and started jogging up the face of the hill, turning back once to see Gerald helping Margie on the snowmobile and taking off behind the trees to the other side of the hill.

With icicle lungs, Gina panted as she ran up the hill, her steps becoming lighter and slower as she neared the top. As the fence came into view, she crouched behind the shrubs, quieting her breathing. She tightened her cap, and watched from behind the bushes at the guard who was posted at the back door.

She had never done this before: hacking right from a control station. She had hacked video games, school websites, and cameras before, but they were all from her own computer and at her own apartment. Even her traffic light hacking was just a few taps on her phone. Never had Gina broke into the central source of power, taking control from the inside out.

The guard was dressed in an dark green winter uniform, an AK-47 strapped to his back and a black cap tilted over his eyebrows. Shadows cut the edges of his face under the minimal light outside. Gina watched him check his watch for a few minutes--crouching her body lower behind the shrubs--before opening the door and entering the building, the door locking behind him.

Gina sprinted to the fence, dropping to her knees once she got there, quickly patting the snow around the edge of the fence for the hole that her and Gerald had been religiously digging for the past two days during the short periods that no guard was in sight. They had planned to dig a hole through the powder that Gina could uncover the day of the mission, but the snow had frozen over into an impenetrable layer of ice.

“Fuck!” Gina cursed, standing and stepping back to look up at the electric fence. The nerves kicked in as she thought, “I’m gonna have to climb it, aren’t I?”

The only way Gina could get fried was if she touched the fence while her feet were still touching the earth below her. If she could jump and grab hold of the fence without maintaining contact with the ground, she could avoid 10,000 volts of electricity passing through her. Without the ground, the current couldn’t shock her.

She had less than two minutes to get inside the door without running into a guard. Gina took a few steps back and closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. She took another breath, opened her eyes, and ran towards the fence. She jumped against it, frantically grasping the wires as her legs dangled. Her arms shook as she pulled herself up and let her feet find footing before continuing to climb.

Her hands felt slippery in her gloves, forcing her to grip the links tighter. She sucked hard breaths of air through her nose. She blinked her eyes rapidly from the biting wind.

As she got to the top she turned so her back was to the fence, and her heels were hooked into the metal linkings, and her hands were curled over the edge of the fence. Below her feet, she could see the facility’s white yard--a powdering of snow, lacking any disturbances of footprints, dressed the ground. Carefully she bent her elbows and knees and then pushed herself as hard as could from the top of the fence, falling hard on the ground below, a few feet from the base. She scrambled up and ran to the door, her hands fumbling with the zipper of her pocket.

At the door, she pulled out a thin metal wire and bent eye level with the lock. She inserted the wire and fumbled with the end, jingling it up and down. Outside on the other side of the building, Russian talking could be heard over a guard’s radio.

Gina glanced behind her quickly and ripped off one of her gloves, holding the door handle with one hand and bending the wire in the lock with another. Another few seconds went by and Gina’s hands began to sweat. Except for a single overhead lamp at the top of the building, the building side was dark, deserted, and quiet.

As the sounds of talking became louder, Gina’s jingling became more frantic and she squatted down even further, desperately trying to unlock the door.

Suddenly, Gina heard a click and she stood abruptly, gripping the door handle tight as she turned it. The radioed voice sounded inches away from her. As quiet as a mouse, she stepped into the building, closing the door behind her and scoping the long hallway in front of her. The lights were dim; the overall building was dark--the hallways stretching into blackness--and smelled of mold. She sprinted down the hallway and came to a fork in the hall, one hallway continuing on straight and the other turning to the left. Gina turned quickly and sprinted down the left hallway just as a uniformed guard came around the corner. The hallway was dark and Gina hid in the shadows as the sounds of heavy footsteps echoed against the concrete walls. Gina watched as the dark green uniform passed the hallway opening and she waited a few beats, holding her breath as she listened until the sound of the door closed.

She felt around in the dark for the walls, stood up, and ran from the hallway around the corner. As she wandered, she pressed herself up against the walls whenever she heard footsteps or a radio in echoes of the building.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” she remembered Gerald saying about the control room. The room supposedly supervised all the doors with motion-detecting cameras and had access to the locks on the automatic doors.

As she ran, Gina saw a faint blue light from a passing hallway. She lined the walls of the halls with stealth, listening through them for a sound from the room. Her chest heaved up and down with each breath, and with her body pressed flat against the wall, she gave the hallway a subtle heartbeat. Her hands felt clammier with each inhale of the molding air. As she crept to the door, she peaked through the corner of the door’s window. The room was flooded with blue light, and a blue square painted the wall across from the door.

Peering in, she saw a single man in a chair, facing a dozen black and white screens that showed the activity of the inside and the outside of the facility. The screens flicked, showing guards posted at the closed doors and empty hallways. As Gina stared longer, she took note of his headphones, the open magazine, and a cup of coffee in his hands. With the same wire, she crouched in front of the door and jingled the lock to find the door was already open.

Gina almost let out a chuckle under her breath as she turned the knob, staying crouched so as not to project a shadow on the screens. She crawled slowly on the floor behind him--so slowly, it was like time had stopped, and she watched his hands flip a page of his magazine in slow motion. One of Gina’s knees popped from her crouched position, and she stopped suddenly, the cracking sound almost ringing through her body. She held her breath and didn’t dare move her head, keeping her body still.

But the man just took a sip from his coffee and thumbed the edge of his magazine. His legs were folded and his body was leaned back in the wooden chair, his cap off and resting on the table. His skin shone slightly blue from the color of the room--his bald head shiny under the light; as Gina watched him, his actions were like a silent movie, with only the buzz of the machinery in the air.

Once Gina was directly behind the man, she leapt up fast, grabbing the coffee out of his hand and dumping the entire steaming cup on his head. The man screeched out and Gina tore the blue scarf off of her neck and gripped the ends of it, pulling the fabric over the man’s face and pulling his head back. The man waved his hands and shook his legs wildly in confusion. Just as the man tried to move his hands towards the scarf, Gina kicked out the legs of the man’s chair and he fell back hard against the concrete floor, head first, his body going limp. His head lolled to the side and his limbs bent awkwardly on the ground.

When Gina was sure that the man was out cold, she wrapped the blue scarf back around her neck and turned her attention to the screens. The table had a control panel and a keyboard, and she examined the keys. Leaning over the panel, Gina pulled out her bag and her fingers fumbled for the USB drive. Blindly, she plugged the drive into the computer and pressed the power button off and then back on. A window popped up on the computer screen and Gina tapped at the keys, overriding the entire security system.

As Gina typed, the monitors showed the opening doors. One by one, each screen flickered;

First she turned off the electric fence, and the front gate lifted. Another screen flicked on to show Gerald and Margie on the snowmobile, driving full speed up the hill and through the opened gate. After hacking the very last digital lock, a loud siren went off across the entire building and a screen flickered to show a metal cage door sliding open to reveal the face of a large Siberian Tiger. As the cage door widened, more tigers revealed themselves from behind the first and one by one, they stalked out of the cage, a quilt of stripes. The animals were large--longer than ten feet--with wide faces and thick fur. Stripes lined their bodies and face. With a realization of freedom, they raced down the hallways. The screens flickered as the cameras caught the tigers running towards the open doors, flashes of stripes shone through the blue light of the room across the monitors. Gina watched as each screen flashed like a wave, almost as if the tigers were running around the walls of the control room.

Gina pressed the power button to the computer, ejecting the USB. Every screen in the room shut down by the time Gina could tuck the USB into her pocket. With one last sweep of the room, Gina raced out, the alarm still blaring but the blue light no longer behind her. She sprinted as fast as she could through the hallways, following the same path that the tigers took to the front entrance. She could hear footsteps, radios, and yelling amongst the sirens and they followed her through the walls and the winding paths of the building. Shouts from the guards could be heard and Gina followed them to the entrance, her heart pumping and the lights overhead flickering with each violent ring of the alarms. As Gina ran, it felt as if the entire building was shaking under the weight of the blaring sirens and the chaos that was beginning outside.

Gina found the open entrance with not a single breath left in her lungs, guards were seen running in every direction around the snowy lot outside. Gina could see flashes of orange and ran even faster. Once she was outside, the alarm screamed in the open air, and she whipped her head back in forth with the wind, looking for Gerald, Margie, and the snowmobile. A few yards in front of her, a tiger was laid in the snow, red splotches against the white ground below its head.

“Gina!” The sound of the snowmobile called from close in front of her and Gina looked up to see Margie waving at her from the side sled of the mobile.

Gina ran to the mobile and climbed on behind Gerald, looking back at the lifeless tiger before the mobile started into action and Gerald drove them through the open gate. Guards ran behind them and out into the forest after the tigers, flashlights swinging with the beat of their pumping arms. Gerald drove the mobile into the forest, behind the tigers and far from the poachers, following the massive animals through the dense pine and oak trunks.

Snow began to sprinkle from the sky like salt from a shaker, catching on their eyelashes and their hats. Gina and Margie looked on through the tree branches and snow and darkness to see flashes of orange that caught in the light of the snowmobile. Stripes danced in the forest and all around them.

Margie looked on with bright and wide eyes as the tigers raced the mobile in fire-like flashes before turning to Gina, the wind whipping her graying hair over her face and fogging her glasses. With the snow kicking up behind them and the cold air rushing past them, Margie set a gripping hand on Gina’s knee.

“Thank you,” Margie said.

Gina couldn’t hear her but she understood.