

griffonrider



a short story by
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GRIFFONRIDER



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“Comfortable, Adam?”

Morrie Gelt, external relations director for the TransMars Collective, closed the door and made a show of placing vending machine coffee in front of his seated subject. “Skim milk and two sugars, right?”

Adam Erden lifted his head from his arms cradled on the table. “Uh-huh—but you knew that.” He seized the cup, tested its contents’ temperature, and drained it.

Morrie bent and laid an arm across Adam’s shoulders. “Look, Adam—I know this isn’t easy for you. You ready?”

Adam rubbed his eyes. “I dunno, Morrie. I’m—exhausted.”

“I know, Adam, I know.” Morrie said, kneading Adam’s shoulder. “There’s still a chance we won’t have to go through with this. Diana could regain consciousness, but her short-term prognosis isn’t good. Every last partner of ours is all in, and the launch window closes in less than six weeks. We have no other option.”

Morrie pressed a switch, which dimmed the lights and pulled away the partition before them. Adam stared at the seated figure on the other side of the one-way mirror for a long moment, and managed a just-audible whistle. “Wow.”

Morrie beamed. “Pretty good, huh? The only enhancements were minor—facial, mostly. Every other external factor is dead-on. Meet ‘Diana 2.0.’”

Adam exhaled. “She’s...thinner.”

Morrie forced a laugh. “You say that like it’s a bad thing!”

Adam wasn’t amused. “You need to explain to me again how it is you think we’re going to pull this off, after three years of buildup around this little fly-by, with Diana and me as crew.”

Morrie frowned. “Like I said: we scrub now, we’re cooked—those *poseurs* at Mars Alpha are the only car on the lot, and we bag groceries and eat Ramen for the rest of our lives. Look: outside the project, practically all anybody knows about you two is at the resumé level. Middle-aged, married, no kids. He: aerospace engineer, with emphasis in system and environment controls. She: medico-psychotherapist. Both screened out the wazoo. Cloistered in training for sixteen months. There’s no reason we can’t keep limiting your availability until you’re both buttoned up in that overgrown Apollo January 5. Who’s gonna know—or, better yet, how they gonna find out?”

Adam, still fixed on the raven-haired Doppelgänger through the glass, folded his arms. “What’s her background?”

“Not as much formal education, but TS/SCI cleared. She’s done a lot of special access stuff for DoD, primarily in weapons and avionics, so she’d supplement your skills nicely.”

“Great! Two gear-heads who’ve barely met, sharing an exaggerated bathroom for 501 days?” Adam cackled. “Man, I’ve been asked to take one for the team before, but this—”

“Wait. There’s one more thing.”

Adam turned his stare to Morrie. “Can’t wait.”

Morrie cleared his throat. “She’s been diagnosed as ‘on the spectrum.’ Just over the line—between high-functioning and Asperger’s.”

Adam stiffened in his chair. “She’s *autistic*?”

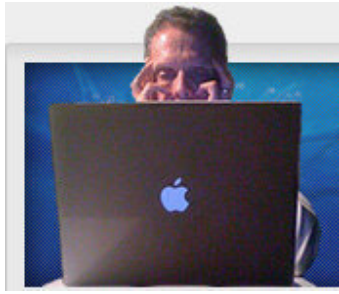
“Don’t get carried away, here. If she ain’t Temple Grandin, she’s close; self-trained and well-developed communication skills. She’s processed the mission; once you’re off, the only social cues she has to worry about are yours. And—outside of looking out a small window once in a while—the only real stimulation she’ll get from anyone but you is from us, via bandwidth, with a built-in delay. Even an engineer should be able to anticipate and prep her for that.”

“All well and good—and, Ha-Freakin’-Ha. What if she...”

“Has an episode? Given the extended isolation and the fact that you’re both starting at zero emotionally, we figure the chances aren’t that much greater than as between a dependent couple. So, worst case, the same sedatives will be available. We can upgrade our pharmacology.”

“Right. Assuming any drugs aboard are worth a damn when we need them.” Adam lowered his voice, and his eyes. “What about...*my* head?”

Morrie touched Adam’s forearm. “We know that’s the worst of it, for you, Adam—having to carry your own water, at least at first. All I can say is that we hope your Diana comes around



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