

Masters of Puppets

As I walked into the lobby at Langley, I heard a familiar voice greeting me by the reception.

“Good Morning Peter.”

It was the chief.

“Morning chief,” I replied. “So, why am I being called to work on my day off?”

“We have an emergency and need the extra manpower. I'm taking you off your current case, starting today you're working on my team. I also transferred Derek, William and Ivan over from your old division to work for me.”

“Alright, so what's the emergency?”

“I'll fill you in when everyone is present. We're meeting in conference room B on the first floor. Most of the team is already there so you'd better head over. I'll be there in a few minutes.”

“Sure, I'll meet you there.”

I found my way to the closest staircase leading to the first floor. Just as I was about to ascend the stairs, a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind.

“Hey, Pete.”

It was Edward.

“Morning,” I replied while I turned around in order to greet him, loosening his tight grip on my shoulder in the process.

“So you're finally part of the big boys now huh?” Edward joked.

“So you say. But from what I understand you guys couldn't manage on your own, which is why I got called in to babysit you.”

Edward grinned.

“It's been a while since we worked together, but I see you haven't lost your sense of humour.”

I grinned back at him.

“Who said I was joking?”

“Ouch,” said someone behind me, who had apparently been listening in on our conversation.

I turned around and saw a familiar but sleep-deprived face.

“Hi Derek,” I replied, amused by his clear disinterest in hiding his lack of sleep. “Seems like they got you good, calling you in for work right after your night shift.”

He pulled a face.

“Tell me about it. Seems like I'll need to survive the rest of the day on these babies.”

He lifted a cup of coffee. The steam coming out of the cup suggested it was dispensed only a moment ago by the machine around the corner. Judging from the amount of cups that were stacked underneath the one Derek was drinking from, it wasn't his first coffee either.

Edward gestured somewhat impatiently and said: “I understand that your radius of action from the coffee machine is somewhat limited right now, but we should probably start heading over to the conference room.”

“So be it,” replied Derek.

Edward began ascending the stairs to the first floor and Derek and I followed suit. On our way to the conference room, Derek and I tried to extract some information out of Edward regarding the case, but that turned out rather unsuccessful. Apparently he didn't know what the meeting was about either, nor was he aware of any recent developments.

When we arrived at the conference room we were greeted by James.

“Morning Edward,” said James, then he turned to face myself and Derek. “Welcome to the team guys. Have a seat, the chief should be here soon. And if you'd like something to drink we've got some tea and instant coffee for you in the back.”

I glanced over my shoulder, but Derek was already gone. He had found his way to the instant coffee at the other side of the room and was already pouring himself another cup. I looked at Edward, shrugged, and proceeded to secure seats for us at the conference table. I exchanged greetings with the team members I was familiar with and introduced myself to those I didn't know yet. With a lack of anything better to do, I decided to sit down and wait for the chief to arrive.

Ten minutes later the last team member walked into the conference room and the chief followed shortly after. He locked the door, turned off the lights and asked some people to shut the blinds to darken the room. The chief opened a presentation from his USB drive and everyone in the room fell silent as he started speaking.

"Thank you everyone for coming today. Especially to those who managed to come here on short notice or their day off. We are here today to discuss new evidence that has surfaced on the terrorist bombing case. Most of us should be aware of how little we actually know about the bombings, but since we have four new members joining the investigation I'll give a quick rundown of the situation up until now."

The chief opens a file and a picture appears on the wall; it shows a huge explosion at an airport.

"The 23th of October 2026. The date of the first bombing which took place at the Los Angeles International Airport. The explosion resulted in 183 casualties and 56 deaths. Within one year, three similar bombings occurred: one in a Tokyo Metro station, one on the Mass Rapid Transit in Singapore, and another one at Heathrow Airport in England."

While the chief spoke, a world map appeared on the wall behind him. As he continued his summary, the countries that he enumerated were marked red on the map, presumably to emphasize the scale of the bombings and by extension the importance of the case.

"Up until now, bombings have occurred in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, the UK and the USA. The bombings are believed to be an act of terrorism similar to those of al-Qaeda at the start of the 21st century. Evidence gathered so far seems to suggest that a mix of suicide bombings and remotely detonated bombs are used. But the most important and concerning thing is that we have absolutely no clue in regards to the identity of those behind the bombings. Numerous organisations and individuals have claimed to be responsible for the bombings but none of them were actually able to prove it. This quickly caused all investigations into the bombings to come to a halt and no progress has been made in the past eleven years. But now, out of nowhere that has changed."

The world map faded away and a picture of a man in his thirties appeared. The man has short brown hair and emerald green eyes which are enlarged by the rectangular glasses that he is wearing.

"Two days ago Ryan Dyson turned himself in at a small police station in San Francisco."

Sudden murmur echoed throughout the conference hall. As the chief gestured everyone to quiet down, someone I didn't know rose from his chair and asked the question that was also on my mind.

"Chief, are you referring to THE Ryan Dyson? The CEO of *Emerald Energy*?"

"Yes James, that Ryan Dyson. The CEO of one of the biggest energy suppliers on the planet has turned himself in. Of course, this is highly confidential information. As such, the whole thing has been and will be kept under wraps. Right now only a few individuals at the San Francisco police department and we at the CIA know about this. In fact, thanks to Dyson's efforts, nobody should even be aware that he has been missing for the past 48 hours. Even his wife believes he is just away on a business trip."

Murmuring re-emerged in the conference room and Ivan decided to interrupt: "Wait, so you're saying Dyson turns himself in and doesn't tell his wife about it? Not something you can keep hidden for very long now is it?"

"Dyson may have turned himself in, but he made sure that he would never be sentenced for what he did. He knew that we didn't have a faintest idea of who was behind the bombings, so Dyson

proposed that in exchange for information on the bombings he would be pardoned and allowed to walk away as a free man.”

“The bastard,” exclaimed a young man two seats to my left, whose name I believe to be David.

“He may be a bastard,” continued the Chief. “But we’ve accepted the deal, so there’s nothing we can do about that anymore. More importantly though, the information that Dyson was able to provide us with is more helpful than I could have ever dreamed of. In fact, we may very well be on the verge of bringing down the people behind the bombings and end this senseless slaughter.”

The chief briefly inhaled, and then broke the suspense.

“According to Dyson the bombings aren’t terrorist attacks, they are assassinations.”

The room grew quiet. For the first time during the meeting there was nothing but silence in the conference room. I could see the confusion and shock on everyone’s faces, and it took me a while to process the information myself. While everyone was still in disarray, the chief continued with the briefing as a list of high ranking politicians, successful businessmen, and other important figures appeared on the screen.

“Among the victims of the bombings, we found these people who had built up great careers and held influential positions before their deaths. The assassination targets of all the bombings that have occurred to this date are among the people in this list. According to Dyson, these assassinations are being disguised as terrorist bombings in order to prevent suspicion from befalling on the client requesting the assassination. Furthermore, since these bombings attract so much attention from the media, they also conveniently disguise the fact that the client might be making a profit from the death of their target.”

Inside my head everything had slowly started to fall into place. No demands, no verifiable claims of responsibility, no trace of the people behind it. My mind was piecing everything together as fast as it could while the chief continued to supply new information.

“Although we first believed that a mix of suicide bombs and remotely detonated bombs were used, this now seems very unlikely. After all, the people we are dealing with are technically assassins that earn money by killing people. It wouldn’t make any sense for them to blow themselves up. Instead, we believe that they may be planting bombs in bags, coats, or luggage of other people and detonate them when they get close to the target. This kind of M.O. requires significant preparations in order to work, but considering how long they have managed to hide themselves from us I believe that these people are more than skilled enough to pull it off. Furthermore, Dyson told us that these assassins call themselves the *Masters of Puppets*, which seems to refer to their M.O.”

A brief pause falls and Edward takes the opportunity.

“So chief, how did Dyson get all this information? What is his role in all of this?”

I had already worked out most of the missing pieces while the chief was still talking. So I decide to answer the question for him.

“Edward, do you remember the news regarding the latest bombing? Among the victims was the CEO of *Denkami*, a Japanese company which is one of the biggest competitors of *Emerald Energy* on the global energy market. In other words, Dyson has hired these assassins to eliminate the most powerful man in a company that heavily competes against his own.”

I received a nod of confirmation from the chief.

“That is correct Peter.”

I hesitated slightly but then decided to push for more information.

“So chief, what else do you have for us? Dyson has had contact with these assassins so he should be able to give us a pretty good idea of where to start looking right? Once we do, we should be able to get to the assassins by following the money and investigating their line of communication with their clients.”

A concerned frown appeared on the chief’s face.

“Unfortunately, the information we currently have does not help us much in that regard. And to

make matters worse, we won't be getting any new information either."

This time Ivan spoke up.

"What do you mean?"

"Last night a gas truck drove into the police station that held Dyson in custody. There are no survivors." It took me a brief moment to understand what the chief meant. When I looked around I saw the same realisation dawn on the faces around me.

"These people are not to be underestimated," continued the chief. "Despite Dyson's efforts to conceal his visit to the police station, they managed to track him down and then killed him before we could get all the information we needed out of him. And just like their assassinations, they had no qualms about killing any innocent bystanders in the process. We have no idea yet how far their intelligence network reaches but one thing is certain, it is something to be feared. We are unsure if they know how much information was leaked by Dyson and where that information went, but we shouldn't take any unnecessary risks. We will operate in absolute secrecy. No one but us will know about this investigation, not even a single detail will be known to anyone else in this building. And most important of all, nothing will be discussed over the phone or e-mails. Because one slip of the tongue could mean a bomb in your mailbox. Have I made myself clear?"

A brief silence hung in the conference room, followed by murmurs of confirmation from the team.

"Alright then," said the chief. "As long as we keep a low profile we should be fine. We have a lot of info on these *Masters of Puppets* and a long list of candidates who may have been their clients. Once we have found the clients we can use them to get to the assassins. We've got them cornered, it is only a matter of time before we bring them down."

I could feel the mood in the conference room lighten up from the chief's encouragement. The team had just started to converse amongst each other, discussing the chief's briefing, when someone knocked on the door. The chief gestured everyone to keep quiet as he walked to the door and unlocked it. On the other side stood the new receptionist holding a plastic bag.

"Good morning chief, your wife just came by to deliver your lunch," said the girl. She seemed to feel a bit uncomfortable with all the eyes in the conference room directed at her.

"Thank you for the trouble Alice," responded the chief as the bag was handed to him.

"You're welcome," said Alice. "Now if you'll excuse me."

As the receptionist turned around she nearly bumped into someone from the IT department passing by with a cup of coffee. I could feel the conference room holding their collective breath as it happened and then sighing in relief once both of them had recovered their balance. The girl profusely apologised while the startled man was desperately trying to keep his cup levelled. When the receptionist realised that the entire conference room witnessed the incident she turned red and made off to the lobby as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Cute girl," commented Derek.

Edward grinned. "They may seem cute at first Derek. But just wait till you get married."

"Don't assume everyone has a marriage like yours Edward," defends Derek. "Just look at the chief. He's been married for fifteen years now and his wife still makes lunchboxes for him. Right chief?"

"The darling sure does. Apparently she even brings my lunch to work when I forget to take it with me. Although I was pretty sure I took my lunchbox with me this morning. I guess I'm just getting older."

As if to check whether the bag really contained his lunchbox, the chief put the bag on the desk and took a look inside. Suddenly he turned pale while his hands, still holding the bag, started to shake. In a split second I understood what was happening. I didn't know how, but there was no doubt about it.

I rose from my chair and screamed at the top of my lungs: "Everyone, get out!"

But the sound of my voice, along with everything else in the room, was swallowed by a blinding white blast originating from the chief's lunchbox.