

Masters of Puppets

As I walk into the lobby at Langley, I see a familiar face at the reception.

“Mornin’ chief.”

“Morning Peter,” says the chief. “Sorry to frag your vacation, but we need you.”

I nod.

“It’s alright, I had no big plans anyway.”

“Starting today you’re working on my team. I also transferred Derek, William, and Ivan over from your old division.”

“Bringing in the big guns huh? What’s the emergency?”

“Briefing’s in five minutes. Conference room B, first floor.”

“Sure, meet you there.”

Just before I reach the stairs a hand clasps my shoulder.

It is Edward.

“So you’re finally part of the big boys now huh?” he says, grinning proudly as if his son just tied their shoes for the first time.

“I’m here to babysit *you* buddy.”

“Glad to see you haven’t lost your sense of humour.”

“Who said I was joking?”

Edward laughs, almost spilling some of his damping hot coffee. Judging from the multiple cups stacked underneath, it wasn’t his first one.

“You just had your night shift or something?” I say, eyeing the cups.

Edward pulls a face.

“I wish. We’ve been working around the clock for the last few days,” he says, sleep deprivation apparent from the bags under his eyes. “Half the team is running on these babies.”

True enough, the smell of coffee permeates the conference room. Most colleagues have a cup of coffee, or tea, in hand. And those that don’t are standing in line for one. Not feeling like joining the queue, I simply get seated. Edward sits down next to me, his coffee a testament to his foresight.

A few minutes later the last team member walks into the conference room, the chief follows shortly after. He locks the door, turns off the lights, and asks some people to shut the blinds. Then he opens a presentation on the wall behind him and the room falls silent.

“Thank you all for being here today. Especially to those who came in on their day off and those that have not been home at all the last few days.”

Edward and a few others ceremoniously raise their cups of coffee in an orchestrated cheers.

“We are here to discuss new evidence that has surfaced on the terrorist bombing case. We’ve been grasping at straws for years with very little leads. Since we have a few new faces on the team, I’ll give a quick rundown of the situation up until now.”

A snippet of looped security footage is appears on the wall; it shows a huge explosion at an airport.

“October 23th 2026, Los Angeles International Airport. Believed to be the first bombing attack of its kind, the explosion resulted in 56 deaths and 183 wounded. Within one year, three similar bombings occurred: one at the Tokyo Loop, another on the Mass Rapid Transit in Singapore, shortly followed by the bombing at Heathrow Airport.”

As the chief names the locations of the bombings, a world map appears on the wall behind him. On it the countries affected by the bombings have been marked in red, stamps highlighting the exact location of each bombing.

“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, of course, the United States. Evidence gathered so far seems to suggest that a mix of explosive belts and remotely detonated bombs have been used. The bombings were assumed to be an act of terrorism similar to those of al-Qaeda at the start of the 21st century. And although numerous terrorist organisations have claimed responsibility for the bombings, we've been unable to link any of them. We've had some conjectures, but any leads we had lead nowhere. We've had some small victories. We've managed to reduce casualties with preventive measures and even located and defused some bombs. But let's not kid ourselves. We've been in the dark for the last eleven years."

The world map fades away and a picture of a man in his thirties appears. He has short brown hair and emerald green eyes, enlarged by his rectangular glasses.

"But that changed two days ago when Ryan Dyson, CEO of *Emerald Energy*, turned himself in at a local police station in San Francisco in complete secrecy. After he convinced the station chief, they put us in direct contact with him."

Sudden murmur echoes throughout the conference hall.

"In exchange for legal immunity and keeping his involvement strictly confidential, he told us everything he knew about the bombings. We were sceptical at first, but everything seems to add up. According to Dyson the bombings aren't terrorist attacks, they are assassinations."

The room falls silent. Perplexed, I glance at my colleagues who seem as shocked as I am. Although Edward and a few others already seem to be in the loop, judging from their calm demeanour.

The chief continues as names and images of high ranking politicians, successful businessmen, and other important figures appear on the wall.

"Among the victims of the bombings, we've identified these people who held influential positions before their deaths. We expect the assassination targets to be among the people on this list.

According to Dyson, these assassins are disguising their attacks as terrorist bombings in order to hide their existence and prevent suspicion from befalling on their clients. Furthermore, since these bombings attract so much attention from the media, they also conveniently distract from the fact that the client profits from the target's death."

As everything start to fall into place, my eyes dart across the wall searching for the missing link to tie it all together.

"Although we first believed that a mix of explosive belts and remotely detonated bombs were used, the former now seems very unlikely. Instead, we suspect that they are planting bombs in coats or luggage of innocent civilians and detonate them when they get close to the target. Of course, this kind of M.O. requires significant preparations in order to succeed. But considering how long they have managed to conceal their existence from us altogether, I have no reason to doubt their ability to manipulate and use unsuspecting civilians."

My eyes rest on the wall as I notice the face of a middle-aged Japanese businessman. As my gaze slides down to the name beneath it, I realise the link.

"This is further reinforced by the name they operate under. According to Dyson, these assassins call themselves the *Masters of Puppets*, which seems to refer to their M.O."

A brief pause falls. Which Derek, seated in front of me, capitalises on.

"So, who did the assassins kill for our pall Dyson?"

I lean forward, flip out my laser pointer, and mark the Asian millionaire on the wall.

"Watanabe Takeshi. The previous CEO of the Japanese *Denkami*, one of the biggest competitors of *Emerald Energy* on the global market."

I receive a nod of confirmation from the chief.

"Correct Peter. Impressive as always."

I give him a brief smile before I push for the heart of the matter.

"So, what's the plan of action? Dyson must have some concrete leads or a way to contact them right?"

An unsettling frown appears on the chief's face.

"Unfortunately, we don't know."

"What do you mean?" I say, confused.

"Last night a gas truck drove into the police station that held Dyson in custody. There are no survivors."

I stare blankly at him.

Slowly, I can feel my stomach turning as I realise what kind of people we are dealing with.

And I'm not the only one. Everyone, even Edward and the rest of the core team, fall completely silent.

"These people are not to be underestimated," says the chief.

"Despite Dyson's best efforts to keep his visit to the police station secret, they managed to track him down and kill him before we could finish our interrogation. They demonstrated once more that they have no qualms about killing any innocent bystanders in the process. We don't know how far their intelligence network reaches, but one thing is certain; it is something to be feared."

The chief inhales.

"Which brings me to following point. Listen closely. We don't know if they are aware of the information that was leaked by Dyson or where that information went, but we cannot take any unnecessary risks. We will operate in absolute secrecy. Nothing regarding the investigation will be discussed with anyone outside our team. Nothing will be communicated over phone or e-mail. The investigation does not exist outside of this room. Have I made myself clear?"

The room is dead silent.

"Have I made myself clear!?" the Chief stresses.

Some murmurs and nods of confirmation emerge around the table.

"Good," says the chief. "We have already compiled a long list of potential clients and targets, which should give us a good starting point. We will be keeping an extremely low profile during our investigation. Like Dyson, the other clients must have paid a substantial amount of money for the assassinations. Such big transactions are bound to leave traces. And once we find those, we find the *Masters of Puppets*."

The chief's confidence seems to loosen the tense atmosphere ever so slightly.

"Now that we're all on the same page, let's get started on our list of suspects."

The faces of two people and their personal details and appear on the wall behind the chief.

"First up we have Martin Lamero. CEO of Texas-based *Fangar Incorporated* and key figure in the development of military focused Artificial Intelligence. He is our primary suspect for the death of Veronica Aigner, the Austrian machine learning specialist and lead architect on--"

A knock on the door interrupts the chief. He gestures everyone to keep quiet as he turns off the projector and walks to the door to unlock it. On the other side stands the new receptionist holding a plastic bag.

"Good morning chief," says the girl. "Your wife just came by to deliver your lunch."

She seems a bit uncomfortable with all the eyes in the dimmed conference room directed at her.

"Thank you for the trouble Alice," says the chief, as she hands the bag to him.

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

As Alice turns around, she nearly bumps into someone from IT who was passing by with a cup of coffee. I can almost feel the conference room holding their collective breath as the two nearly bump into each other, then sighing in relief when they regain their balance. Alice profusely apologises while the startled man is desperately trying to keep his cup levelled. When she realises that the entire conference room witnessed the incident, she turns red and makes off to the lobby as fast as her legs can carry her.

"Cute girl," I say.

Edward grins.

"Oh, the ignorant youth. They may seem cute at first Peter, but just wait till you get married."

Laughter emerges around the table.

"Hey, don't assume all marriages are like yours Edward," I say. "Just look at the chief. He's been married for more than twenty years now, and his wife still makes him lunch!"

The chief laughs as he locks the door.

"The darling sure does. And apparently she even brings it to work for me," he says, as he triumphantly raises the bag.

"It's a painful reminder that I'm getting older though. I was pretty sure I packed my lunchbox this morning."

The chief puts down the bag on the conference table and, as if to check whether it really contained his lunchbox, glances inside.

Instantly, I see all colour drain from his face. His hands, still holding the bag open, start to shake.

It takes a split second before I realise.

I rise from my chair and scream as I dash for the door.

"Everyone, get ou-"

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