

Gyre and Gimble

by Larry Strattner

When Screed called Lonnie and me we knew it was something serious. He never calls us unless he's really up against it.

We were in the middle of making some feta and spinach omelets. We hang out a lot together even when we're not working. We have men friends but they're away a lot. I have a sketchy idea of my guy's job description. Neither of us know what Lonnie's guy does, except that he "travels" and he's a little preppy for my taste, blonde, short hair and always scrubbed and pressed. I think he's CIA, Lonnie thinks IRS. My little sister Iris thinks ATF. She's hot for him.

Mason Screed doesn't much like us. It's not an obviously overt dislike. It's just a pursing his lips at us all the time dislike, sort of a "You have served me peas and you know I dislike peas." kind of lip purse. Like us or not Lonnie and I are good at what we do. We've been hunting and killing guys in caves for the last fifteen years and maybe more importantly thwarting a lot of their plans to kill us first. I've done my part of the job in conservative clothing. Lonnie's done her part looking like Dolly Parton.

When we are seated in his office Screed begins our meeting like he always does "Ms. Browne, Ms. Sanchez. I hope you will be able to take care of a situation for us," nodding slightly in our direction, lips pursed. "We seem to have discovered a small problem that may indicate something much larger and more insidious. We require you look into it." He steepled his fingers and continued to purse. "Yes?" Prompts Lonnie. Lonnie is named after that bubble-headed blonde on WKRP Cincinnati. They still play reruns of that old TV show at three o'clock in the morning and it's still funny even if the clothes are horribly out of date. Today's Lonnie looks good as always. She has an apt name. Some would call her stacked or some other euphemism for curvaceous. I'm a bit sterner looking with my hair pulled back and always monochromatic in my clothing choices. My guy, Artem, likes me just fine though. We met on a project in the Bering Straits. I think I fit into his program. His grandfather was

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Spetsnaz or something they don't have anymore but whatever replaced it Artem is one of those. He doesn't talk much about his work and neither do I. Our relationship is not about conversation anyway.

"Yes." Continues Screed. "Well, we seem to have discovered some kind of Bot or Worm in our system. Until today we weren't quite sure what it might be doing. Now we've reached a sketchy conclusion and need you to carry it further, perhaps all the way back to the doorstep of the perpetrators."

"Yes?" Prompts Lonnie again, brushing back a strand of blond hair.

If I might interject here. You can forget about whatever blond jokes you may have heard. Lonnie made it through SEAL training. After she outsmarts you she will pull your pants down and hang you with your own belt. So don't get any ideas.

Screed continues. "Unlike all the other thrusts hackers make at our system this one does not seem motivated by personnel records, open case files or weaponry. It has concentrated on our geologic and topographic records which is somewhat strange. You will of course earn your regular bonus if you conclude your activities successfully." Purse. As if Screed found the idea of a bonus particularly distasteful. He reminds me so much of that dead guy, William F. Buckley.

"Yeah, well, okay. We'll get right to it. If you find out anything that appears helpful we'll be down in Mainframe Support."

Lonnie and I walk down the quiet, carpeted and picture-hung hallway from Screed's office to Mainframe Support. The pictures are reproductions of John Singer Sargent, Thomas Sully and selected Andrew Wyeths. Screed has done a nice job in this part of the building creating an almost-sense of hominess to his tight-assed little operation. Behind the pursed lips lies the heart of a psychotic grandmother. The hallway is like floating in another world. I feel the same way when I visit the Clark Museum in Williamstown and the Impressionists are on display. Like so many of us with questionable taste I have always loved Monet.

Much of what we do for Screed and his ilk has nothing to do with culture. It involves data assembly or scenario construction if you want to call it something. Lonnie is adept at uncovering and fitting together various pieces of data and I am her enabler which is not as easy as it sounds and I do get some quasi-brilliant ideas of my own on occasion. Our specialty is putting together oblique and sometimes arcane clues to reveal what bad guys are up to before they can get their strategic and tactical elements assembled well enough to proceed. Finding out early lets us get in on the front end when the plotters are most exposed because in order to act they have to come out of, or least unwittingly provide the address of, their hidey-hole as they communicate. With all of the technology available these days that's usually enough of a window to put some explosive device on top of them and bingo, bongo, boingo, problem solved. For this we get a bonus. I laugh every time I picture Screed's lips when he hears the word bonus.

We walk into Mainframe Support and Lonnie is on the tube immediately. It's a big room just like in the movies. Screens are lit up all over the room with pie charts, bar charts, spreadsheets and streaming video. The lighting is soft and there's a lot of sound proofing. You can see the mainframe in the next room through the triple plate, explosion-proof glass window. There's a little frost in each corner of the window. I know that drives the facilities guys bonkers because it's not supposed to be there. The way frost grows it makes each corner look a little like my grandmother's Fostoria wine glasses. The mainframe is not even the size of a small automobile but it is monumentally scary. Even though I know I'm wrong I always tell myself they keep it frozen because if they didn't do something to make it a little sluggish it would eat us all for lunch. Lonnie is speaking softly into her headset. She has her hair pulled back in a pink scrunchie, out of the path of mission critical. Colors and words on the screen in front of her shimmer answers. Without any help from me she shortly says "It's headed specifically for the oceanographic records. What the hell would it want with oceanographic records?"

"Maybe it's planning on taking a cruise?"

"Maybe. But if it is it's going to be a rough one because it seems focused toward currents, tidal patterns and depth charts. What the hell would anybody want with that?"

"Maybe someone's planning a rubber raft invasion? Or an attack by SCUBA Army? Who knows with those yo-yos?"

"Let's get down into it." I say. "Why don't you read me a list of all the subheads for data sets in the oceanographic records? I'll get on this screen over here and log on to the dictionary and we'll look up the exact meaning of every word. That'll give us a methodical approach and we'll be able to talk about what the word may mean if you're in the chaos business."

Lonnie starts reading to me. There doesn't seem to be anything meaningful in "A" as in "aquamarine" or "B" as in "beach." Then we get to "C" as in "current" and I read. "A steady flow of water in one definite direction..." I can hear Lonnie clicking on the keyboard. "What the hell is a gyre?" She says. "It says something here about a gyre." I type it in the search box. "Gyre," It comes back. "A circular or spiral motion."

"Hey" says Lonnie. "Did you know there are about ten or eleven gyres in the oceans? They're all mapped out here in the database. Currents that always flow in the same circle. It's all "message in a bottle" gobbledygook. If you know where the gyre is in the ocean you drop a bottle in it and the bottle shows up on the beach down the gyre some day. They even have current speeds calculated for each gyre."

I'm thinking "Uh Oh." Anytime I hear the word "calculation" when we are looking at the cave creeps I get goose bumps. "Why would anyone in their right mind want to know about the ocean gyres?" Of course the first answer is none of these assholes are in their right minds. But what's the second answer? "Where are the gyres?" I ask.

"Well, there are a couple in the North Atlantic. One in the South Atlantic. One in the Indian. A few in the Pacific and a few at the North and South Poles."

"So what else is in the data?"

"Orbit time, meaning how many days, weeks, months to go around the Gyre. Total circumference of the gyre. Rough speed per day of the item carried. What kind of gunk gets carried in different gyres. That looks like all the key info."

I'm getting a really bad feeling now and working fast to get my finger on why. "What do you mean, what kind of gunk gets carried in the water?" I ask.

"It says here the gyre currents each variously carry beer bottles, wooden casks, hockey pads, lobster pots, messages in bottles, a few Nikes and some Legos."

"Or a goddamn bio-weapon or a Nuke." I'm thinking now and not having too difficult a time making the transition from Legos.

"So let me get this straight. I drop a fifty gallon drum in the ocean at the right spot with just enough buoyancy to float sub-surface. I arm it with some bad WMD stuff and you can tell me how many days it'll take to get to the next beach on the Gyre where my preset timer activates it and blows up most of that particular coastal world? Not only that, if I have good charts you can tell me where to drop different drums based on the Gyre's current speed so they all show up on the beaches I chose on, or very close, to the same day which is close enough for total chaos?"

"Theoretically, yes." Says Lonnie and then almost simultaneously, not in exactly the same words, we both say "And theoretically is always more than close enough for these assholes."

"What'll they have if the Bot gets to the specific data base?" I ask.

"Maps of the Gyres. The rough data I gave you on contents and flow..."

"What about detailed maps with coordinates? Longitude, latitude. Data like that?"

"The stuff in this database is specific to the gyres but general to any coordinates. If you wanted to get right on top of a gyre at sea or know exactly where it skirted a shoreline you'd need the hard charts. Those are all classified. The hard maps are in Washington. Charts in Washington detail a lot of ocean where there've been issues with piracy and smuggling. For instance there's hardly any

data here for the Sulu Sea and the Southern Philippine archipelago where they still have a lot of piracy. Washington hasn't wanted to make it any easier for those clowns than it already is."

"Can anyone get those maps if they go to Washington?"

"Looks like it. If they fudge a little ID and paperwork."

"Will they have to get a specific set of maps to see the Gyres and build up some LORAN-E charts or whatever GPS they need for other coastal waters?"

"Yep."

"OK. We know they've got people with connections in the shipping business who can probably get the maps for them. What can we do in the way of interdiction?"

"Well it says there have not been any requests for the maps containing gyre info for ten month's and that was from a researcher in Sweden. We can take a look at him but I suspect we can also rule him out. Before that, no requests for a year. So we're probably still lying in wait for the map rat."

"It says here the map sets are kept in archive and a duplicate set is what is provided the buyer. Why don't we just print up a set of the maps and earmark them to a profile we provide the map guys. Likely their next buyer will be the map rat. It's not like these maps are Platinum sellers."

"OK...Then we know the guy. What if we loose him somewhere? Wait." And this is what I do for Lonnie. "How about if we print each map sheet with a solid block with GSM SIM imbedded. That way wherever those nutcases go it'll be like they have a cell phone with them. We can get a GPS fix on them wherever. For insurance we'll irradiate another corner so they show up like the lighthouse in Boston Harbor on our surveillance equipment. We can print a trap-line border around each map to carry that new circuit board battery powder stuff to power the GSM. Wherever they carry those maps we'll be able to see them like they're on network TV. When they unroll them they'll show up like they're the Lighthouse in Boston Harbor. Let's give the Predator guys a call and probably the Cruise missile guys too, just for insurance. We can have them both fit up

some penetration warheads. We'll be able to do surgery on the biggest mountain in creation if we need to."

"Booyah!" Says Lonnie. Some SEAL thing I've always thought was stupid. Oorah, Hoorah, Booyah. Sounds like a Hungarian smorgasbord. But I have to admit. I'm feeling pretty cocky by now too. This took a lot less time than whacking your average groundhog. Lonnie is a genius with that computer.

"And in the meantime," I say. "Let's go on down and pay a visit to Pruneface Screed and have him start setting up our bonus check for processing."

"Booyah!" Says Lonnie, shutting down her monitor with her best WKRP smile.

"Will you please quit saying that?" I request

In the hall, walking down the soft wine colored carpet I'm pulling at the front of my slacks a little where my underwear got bunched up in the excitement. Lonnie looks unruffled, as always. I flip open my cell phone and punch a speed dial number. The phone on the other end rings once. "Da?"

"Are you free for a little tussle this evening?" I ask.

