

THE YOUNG TRADER STUMBLED FROM THE TREES LIKE A scarecrow running on legs of straw. Her suit was muddy, her blouse torn, her sleek Asian hair matted with pine needles. She ran into the street directly in front of Autumn Reiniger's BMW.

Autumn braked. "Oh, man."

The trader glanced at her but didn't break stride. With one arm she clutched a battered lockbox. The other arm she cradled to her chest, protecting what looked to Autumn like a broken wrist.

This was the place. Fun city.

The trader ran across the street to the driveway of Peter Reiniger's palatial home. She was the last to emerge from the eucalyptus grove at the edge of the Presidio. The others huddled on the driveway. Beside them, Reiniger sat on the tailgate of a Mercedes SUV.

Autumn got out of her car. She took a step, but Reiniger gestured for her to stay put.

The trader swayed to a stop. Nakamura, that was her name—Autumn recognized her from one of her father's glossy corporate brochures. Chest heaving, the woman dropped to her knees.

She set down the lockbox. After long seconds she raised her gaze to Reiniger.

Her silence made Autumn's skin tingle. Nakamura was controlling pain and raw emotion. And she was unintimidated—it was stirring. She knelt on the driveway, black hair falling across her face, and she held Peter Reiniger's gaze. With her good arm she fumbled open the lockbox. Inside, hundreds of multicolored stones glittered like tears.

“I win,” she said.

A hush pressed upon the street. Birdsong, wind through the trees, traffic down the hill along the San Francisco waterfront, all ebbed. Reiniger climbed off the tailgate.

“And?” he said.

She dug her hand into the stones and clutched a fistful. “Ransom my team.”

The people huddled around the SUV cheered. Nakamura let the stones—cubic zirconia, playtime diamonds—cascade back into the box.

Reiniger pulled her to her feet. “You okay?”

She wobbled, but smiled. “You owe me a raise.”

A medic jogged up. “Let’s take a look at that arm.”

Her colleagues thronged her. Autumn grinned and applauded. The woman was tough. From the roof of the Mercedes SUV, a cameraman panned the scene, catching their glee.

And . . . cut. Cue the music from *Chariots of Fire*. Autumn strolled toward her dad, hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

The game runner got to Reiniger first. “We’ll edit the video and burn copies for everybody.”

Reiniger nodded. “We’ll stream it at our board meeting.”

The game runner, a black guy with the hard fitness of a running back, poured antiseptic on a gauze pad and handed it to Reiniger. “Clean up.”

Cleaning up was what Edge Adventures did. Absolutely. Reiniger pushed up the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Scrapes covered his elbow. This kidnap scenario looked to Autumn like it had been rowdier than most.

She took the gauze pad from him and dabbed at the scrapes. “Messy.”

“Realistic,” he said. “The screaming’s all part of the game.”

Only at team-building weekends run for Reiniger Capital.

“It’s how I find out what my people are made of,” he said.

Autumn had heard it from her dad before: Running a hedge fund could be risky and stressful, but Edge Adventures helped people find what was really inside. Toughness.

Spirit. His staff now clustered around a cooler, beer bottles in hand, exhausted and proud. Two of them grabbed the lockbox and poured the fake diamonds over Nakamura's head, as if dumping a bucket of ice on the winning coach at a football game.

Edge Adventures didn't simply sell excitement. They showed clients the light.

Edge created urban-reality games, role-playing scenarios that took clients into an imagined demimonde of crime and rescue. They threw people in the soup.

Edge offered kidnappings, manhunts by bounty hunters, and even a night locked in a morgue—all in all, the chance to face your demons and to act out fantasies of crime and danger. Today, Edge had grabbed Peter Reiniger's team off a street in downtown San Francisco for a simulated heist scenario.

Coates, the game runner, checked Reiniger's elbow. "It's fine."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to ask for a discount," he said.

Autumn saw a quick jab of anxiety on Coates's face and thought: *And he's not going to sue you.*

"We're cool," Reiniger said. "This was what my daughter here calls sick fun."

Autumn rolled her eyes.

Coates slapped Reiniger on the back. "As always, we're happy to have your business."

"However, I do want to speak to you about our run-in with the police. See me inside in five minutes."

Frowning, Coates went to help the Edge staff load their gear into the SUV—ropes, emergency flares, and replica firearms that looked mean as all get-out.

Reiniger turned to Autumn. "You're half an hour late."

"My car isn't working right. There's a light on the dashboard."

"Which light?"

"The one that tells you it's time to buy a new car."

"You mean 'service'?"

Laughing, she stretched and kissed his cheek. "Joking, Dad."

"Sure you are."

Autumn was a month shy of turning twenty-one. She bounced on her toes, knowing he would get the message. *Big birthday. Better think big gifts.*

She nodded at the scene on the driveway. “You wanted me to watch the grand finale *why*, exactly?”

“To see how things work.”

“Work? You’re playing *Ocean’s Eleven*. And *Name That Phobia*.” She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t deny it.”

“I don’t.”

“But you wanted me to sit on the sidelines. And what, cheer?” She crossed her arms. “Put Band-Aids on their boo-boos?”

He crooked his index finger and beckoned her to follow him. Inside, the house was gauzy with sunshine. The view through the living room to the terrace showed windswept Monterey pines and the blue waters of the bay.

Reiniger said, “Hold out your hand.”

Lightness, anticipation, winged through her. *About time*. She raised her hand. And Reiniger slapped a heavy manila envelope into her palm. She eyed him uncertainly.

“Open it,” he said.

Autumn tore open the envelope. Inside was a memo. It was stamped, in red, *Classified*.

From: Edge Adventures

To: Autumn Reiniger

Re: Your assignment

“Welcome to adulthood,” he said.

“You bought me a game?”

OUTLAW is an urban-reality scenario that offers a variety of roles for you and your closest friends. Crime syndicate boss, bounty hunter, prison escapee. Edge employees will take other roles and run the scenario.

“A three-day weekend, for six of you.” Reiniger smiled. “It’s a designer crime spree.”

Her confusion began to clear. *Ultra-deluxe. Outlaw. Prison break.*

“Oh, my God. Do we get a speedboat?” she said.

“If you want one.”

Helicopter rescue.

“Dad—is this for real?”

Hunt down the crime boss, or BE the boss and escape the long arm of the law.

“And this is totally plush, right? No team building. No ‘Get in touch with your inner hero.’” Her voice turned hard. “No ‘fight your demons.’ Just fun. And five star. Right?”

He pointed to the location of their syndicate headquarters: the Mandarin Oriental.

“Happy birthday,” he said.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

AS AUTUMN HUGGED HIM, a Corvette revved into the driveway. Reiniger patted her on the back. “Go on.”

It was her boyfriend. She ran outside, smiling like a cat that had just cornered a mouse.

Fight your demons.

She would know about phobias, Reiniger thought. Too bad hers didn’t include fear of shopping.

His daughter was adorable: quick, clever, winning. And such a pretty girl, with the tumbling brown curls of a Victorian aristocrat. He’d never been able to deny her anything. She always wore him down. Her relentlessness was a quality he admired. So why did he get a nagging feeling of unease when he gave in?

Because he had acquiesced to assuage her heartbreak when he and her mother divorced. And to salve her grief when her mother died. He had lavished her with gifts. And what did that get him? Demands for more.

Autumn had the BMW. She had an apartment he’d bought her in the city. She had a spot at the University of San Francisco, a college to which he gave generous donations. And she regarded classes as a hindrance to her tanning schedule.

No team building. No “Get in touch with your inner hero.”

But heroism was precisely what he wanted her to discover.

Nothing compared to going out on the rim and facing your deepest fears. And Edge offered a red-in-tooth-and-claw experience, rarely found in twenty-first-century America, of feeling truly, deeply, alive. Its full-immersion adventures were the modern world's closest equivalent to primitive initiation rituals.

He paid through the nose, but it was worth it.

For years Autumn had asked to take part in an Edge scenario. And, abruptly, Reiniger didn't want to give her the thrill she coveted. He wanted to give her a wake-up call. She had peculiar fears. She wielded them as a weapon to manipulate him whenever her sense of entitlement was threatened. It was time to quash them.

Coates rapped on the open door. "You got a question about the SFPD?"

Reiniger waved him in. "Yeah. Why did they show up at exactly the wrong moment today?"

Coates was a former Oakland cop. He was Mr. Law-and-Order and always alerted the authorities before a scenario was about to run. If a client was going to be grabbed off the street, Edge wanted the cops to know it was a party, not an abduction.

But the San Francisco police had nearly derailed today's scenario, right at the start. As Nakamura was being dragged toward the kidnap van, an SFPD patrol car had screeched up, lights flashing.

Coates shook his head. "Pure chance. No way to grab people off the street without being seen." He eyed Reiniger warily. "They left. I squared it."

"That cruiser arrived thirty seconds into the kidnap. Almost like they'd had a heads-up."

Coates stiffened. "From Edge? No way. We have zero motive to stall a scenario." He glanced out the door at Reiniger's team.

"It wasn't one of them," Reiniger said. "They didn't know when the kidnap was going down."

"So it was nobody. Like I said—chance."

Reiniger wasn't convinced, but let it go. "I want to ask

you something else.” He checked that Autumn was out of earshot outside. “I want to add a layer to Autumn’s birthday scenario. It needs to be more than a party.”

“You want us to heighten the scenario’s intensity?”

“It will do her good.”

Coates considered it. “We can add a twist to the crime spree. Does she have an issue you want her to work on?”

Reiniger wanted Autumn to learn the value of teamwork. And with her stubborn streak, she would need to be scared into learning it.

“There is something,” he said.

There was a big red button. Push it, and Edge would trigger a childhood loathing that had become a mulish dread.

“You know how some people hate clowns?”

“A not-uncommon childhood fear.”

“Autumn hates cowboys.”

“That’s a new one on me,” Coates said.

“It goes back to when she was little. This guy scared her at a party.”

“Luckily, a cowboy phobia is unlikely to impinge on modern life.”

“But it’s silly, and she’s let it grow out of all proportion. She calls him the Bad Cowboy.”

Reiniger had barely seen him: a staff member at the party venue, corpulent and sweating in his boots and Stetson. He had stopped unruly kids from running in front of vehicles in the parking area.

That, apparently, was the origin of Autumn’s loathing. The man had scolded her sharply—which had shamed and spooked her. And for a dozen years since, she had complained about it, usually at awkward moments. The Bad Cowboy had *scared* her. Naughty children got punished, he said. Careless children got hit by cars and *killed*, he said. He was *creepy*. Why wouldn’t Dad take it seriously?

Reiniger heard the subtext: *Pay attention to me, Daddy. Indulge me.*

“Guy was some ex-rodeo rider. Hefty kid with stitching on his shirt that said ‘Red Rattler.’”

“And he dressed like he was still at the rodeo?”

“Fourth of July party. The staff wore Americana outfits,”

Reiniger said. "Here's my point. If Autumn could confront the Bad Cowboy during the weekend—and defeat him—it would be the icing on her birthday cake."

"Red Rattler—he was a pro rodeo rider? You got a name for this guy?"

"Doesn't matter whether you track him down. It's not the man. It's the boogeyman he's become in her imagination."

"It's what the Bad Cowboy represents," Coates said.

"You got it."

"Psychodrama."

Which Reiniger wanted to kill, dead. "Maybe you could have one of your game runners dress like him."

Autumn came into the living room, chattering to her boyfriend.

Coates nodded to Reiniger. "Leave it to me," he said, and headed outside.

Dustin Cameron, smooth and overeager, held out his hand. "Sir."

"Autumn's told you?" Reiniger said.

She looked giddy and calculating. "A crime spree weekend. And I'm going to play the queen of the underworld." She grabbed Dustin around the waist. "You be the DEA agent who's after me."

"I want a big gun," Dustin said.

Dustin lifted weights and tucked his expensive sunglasses in the open collar of his polo shirt. His aspirations were ill-defined. But Dustin's father was a Washington lobbyist. The boy came from a family with power and swagger. He would do well.

And he could take Autumn places. Reiniger hoped she wouldn't tire of him. Dustin needed to emerge from the crime spree weekend a hero. He would ask Coates to ensure it.

Autumn squeezed the young man. "The game's going to be badass. Absolutely Goddamned badass."

"Autumn," Reiniger said.

She laughed. "I'm getting into character. One you designed."

Reiniger's phone rang. He stepped away to take the call. "Dad—"

He put up a hand to forestall her. "The Asian markets are opening soon."

He answered the call. After a moment Autumn pulled Dustin out the French doors onto the terrace. She looked stung. Reiniger walked from the room and closed the door behind him.

IN A COPSE OF TREES down the hill, Dane Haugen adjusted the focus on his Leica binoculars. The laser range finder gave the distance to Reiniger's terrace as 122 meters. Through the hazy sunlight, Autumn Reiniger looked as bright and unaware as a piece of glass.

"Photos," Haugen said.

Sabine Jurgens raised her Nikon and snapped a dozen shots of Autumn and the young man who was groping her.

"My, my," Sabine said. "Mr. Cameron is testosterone personified."

"What are they saying?"

Beside Haugen, Von Nordlinger aimed a parabolic microphone at the terrace. He put a hand to his earphones. "They're talking about the game. She just got the invitation."

"Record the conversation," Haugen said.

Von pressed a button and listened, his slab of a face thick with concentration. The earphones stretched over his pumpkin-sized head.

Haugen watched Autumn. "Does her description of the scenario match the specs Sabine pulled off the Edge database?"

Von nodded. "Prison break . . . speedboat . . . six in the party. Autumn's talking about who to invite."

Sabine snapped more photos. Her face was severe, her red hair cut boyishly short. Though she lacked any hint of softness, she moved with cold fluidity. Haugen found her stunning, in the way of an electric eel: smooth and cunning and purposeful.

Her intrusion into the Edge computer system had found *OUTLAW SCENARIO*—Autumn Reiniger booked for mid-October. But that hack was now twenty-four hours old.

“Get back into the Edge system tonight,” Haugen said. “I want details—the scenario’s starting point, the timing, the equipment Edge is bringing.”

She lowered the Nikon. “Not all Coates’s notes go on the computer system.”

Von said, “I can search their office.”

Haugen turned, removed his sunglasses, and stared at Von without blinking. Von scratched his nose and shrank back.

Haugen continued to glare. “We leave no footprints. We do nothing that could tip Edge to our existence.”

Von looked at the ground. “Forget I mentioned it.”

“Hardly,” Haugen said.

But Sabine was correct: Terry Coates sometimes modified scenarios on the fly. That was why Haugen had shadowed the Edge team on today’s kidnap scenario—to see whether they stuck to the script. And, crucially, to see whether the police stuck to the script when challenged.

Thanks to Sabine’s hack, he had known where and when Edge would grab Reiniger’s corporate team. When Terry Coates pulled up, precisely at noon, Haugen was watching from a coffee shop across the street. He had already phoned the police.

SFPD response time to a 911 call reporting an abduction at gunpoint: three minutes, forty-two seconds.

Time required for Coates to convince the SFPD it was a game: four minutes dead. Once the uniforms confirmed that Edge was running a team-building exercise and that the department had been informed of this in advance, they drove away.

Excellent.

Haugen swept the binoculars and saw, on the driveway, Reiniger Capital’s crew celebrating their escapade. He saw Terry Coates, buff and slick and unctuous. Peter Reiniger stepped outside and was swarmed by his acolytes. Accepting kudos, undoubtedly.

Haugen lowered the binoculars. “Do you understand who Peter Reiniger is?”

“Richer than God,” Von said.

“He’s a pivot point. He’s the fulcrum that will provide

the leverage we need. And, thanks to his daughter, he is going to be”—Haugen savored the word—“pliant.”

“So we’re going to grab her,” Von said.

The air was sharp with salt and with promise. Haugen raised the binoculars and took another look at Autumn. “Happy birthday, Princess. Surprise, surprise.”