

Chapter Eleven, Part Two “Revolution Redux (Remix)”

Friday, March 12, 2038

Nineteen Days Until Interview

7:35 P.M.

The days were getting warmer, but the evening cold was still searing through Vinya’s new camouflage fatigue jacket. This is what she got for attempting to shop at an Army surplus store. She didn’t want to look *totally* out of place at an underground Rev club, and this was the best she could do based on online tutorials.

She’d managed to find a nice little camo cap to complete the ensemble, but the jacket itched like hell and the (real) bullet earrings felt heavier than her dangliest hoops.

“So, how do I look?” She did a twirl as Rat Conlin emerged from the service entrance in the back of *Zuko’s*.

“Honestly?” he took a puff off his vape stick, “You look like Domestic Terrorist Barbie.”

“At least I’m still Barbie,” Vinya brought up the ignition app on her watch, and her Mini sprang to life on the other side of the lot, pink headlights shining through the dark.

“That’s your ride?” Rat scoffed, “I’m not sure I can be seen in that.”

“I mean, I can always toss you off a bridge,” Vinya said as the two of them got into the car, “So, where’s this friend of yours?”

“J.J. said he’d meet us a few blocks from the club,” Rat responded, “If you want to call it a club. It’s in some house way out in P.G. County. I can’t believe I’m even saying that.”

“If you’re just going to complain, you don’t have to come.” Vinya said, pulling out onto MLK Avenue.

“I don’t *want* to come,” he said exhaling a cloud of myrrh-scented vapor.

“Dude! Not in my car.”

“You won’t get a contact high, goody-two shoes. Just nicotine.”

Vinya huffed. “It stinks, and if you think I’m a goody-two shoes, wait about ten seconds.”

Rat suddenly looked concerned. “What happens in ten seconds?”

Vinya rolled up the onramp to the beltway, floored the gas, and merged in front of a speeding Toyota - which responded with a loud honk.

About a half-hour later, they arrived at the address Rat’s contact had provided - a derelict shopping center in the outer reaches of D.C.’s Maryland suburbs. The vacant parking lot was illuminated by the flickering of a single functional streetlight. The entire place was boarded up, other than one scrolling marquee:

Check Cashing! Payday Loans! RACPod Drives!

Rat let out a low whistle.

Vinya looked at him sideways “So, you want to tell me where we are before we both get shot?”

On cue, Rat’s watch beeped.

“He says he’s here, and...you gotta be kidding me.”

“And what?” Vinya prodded.

Rat held his watch up to Vinya’s face so she could read the text.

Get out of car. Keep hands where everyone can see.

“For real?” Vinya asked, eyes wide.

“Your idea,” Rat tentatively opened the door and extracted his lanky frame from the car, putting his hands in the air.

Vinya rolled her eyes, but followed suit. “Mini, lock car,” she shouted into her own watch. “So, where is this J.J. dude?”

“Here,” came a clipped voice from the dark.

Vinya turned to see a black man emerge from one of the darker shadows in the lot - early 40s from the look of him. He wore a tan Carrhart work jacket - the type Vinya usually associated with country singers - paired with baggy camouflage pants and expensive black sneakers. His face was twisted into a scowl.

“Sorry for the entrance, but you don’t loiter in a Rev hood.”

“No worries, J.J.,” Rat said, offering a hand, “Long time no see. What are you wearing?”

J.J. shook firmly but gave Rat a glare. “I should ask you the same thing, grease-head.”

He pulled an olive-green stocking cap out of his pocket and handed it to Rat. “Put this on. No brills out here. And put that vape away.” He turned to Vinya, “This your reporter friend?”

Rat put the cap on. “Yeah, yeah, this is Vinny...sorry...*Vinya* Jain from WWN. J.J. managed a few acts at a club where I interned in college.”

J.J. snorted. “Is that what they call lettin’ a 19 year-old tend bar? Look, the place is about five blocks, but we need to walk. I don’t want anyone seein’ your wheels.”

Vinya’s eyebrows shot up so hard that it felt like they might fly off. “Oh, *hell* no. It’ll be on cinder blocks when we get back.”

J.J. locked eyes with her. “So y’all really *don’t* know what goes on out here.”

Vinya pulled her jacket shut. “Not really.” The place was deserted, but still, she couldn’t help feeling exposed.

“Look around,” J.J. said with an eye-roll. “We’re in the *hood*, and y’all don’t think it’s weird that no one’s out in the street? This place should be crawling on a Friday night.”

Vinya looked around. There wasn’t much here to do, but it was true that she couldn’t see a single person anywhere.

“Yeah, I guess it’s weird.”

“It ain’t weird,” J.J. shook his head, “it’s patrolled. See that?” He nodded in the direction of a back alley at the edge of the strip mall. Vinya saw an old silver Hyundai with a large dent in the front fender. She couldn’t get a clear look, but it looked like there was a figure in the car, wearing a cap like hers.

“Anyone touches your car, that boy gon’ light him up.” J.J. said, “That’s Rev justice. I can walk down the street carrying a stack of hundreds here, no problem. Patrol might lecture me about capitalism, but they’ll plug anyone who makes a play.”

“So, it’s true,” Vinya exhaled. “Their gangs *do* clean out crime.”

She saw J.J.’s eyes dart back and forth, then he shrugged his shoulders. “Depends on what you call crime. This hood’s still got the highest crime rate in P.G. County.”

“But if it’s so safe?” Vinya probed.

J.J. leaned in. “Look, if a Rev-patrol hunts down a drug dealer and pumps his whole family full of lead, yeah, you scare the drugs off the street. Law still says that’s a quadruple murder. Now, if y’all don’t mind, they don’t like people standing around parking lots after dark – and you don’t belong here.”

He led a stunned Vinya and Rat out of the lot, reminding them to keep their hands at their sides so that nobody in the shadows thought they were carrying contraband.

Eventually, they reached a multi-level house on a residential side-street. Vinya could see flashing strobes through the top-floor windows, and there were cars lined up down the block. It sounded like there was a crowd behind the six-foot privacy fence that surrounded the front yard, and a painted wooden sign on the gate read “*The Safe House.*”

It looked like anything but.

There was a guard at the gate with an AR-15, but J.J. nodded and the gate opened. The front yard was packed to the gills with young people waiting to get into the main house, but J.J. pushed his way to the front door. Another guard - this one sporting a tan muscle shirt and a black beret – let them in without a word.

J.J. stopped at the front steps and turned to Vinya, “You sure you’re ready for this?”

Vinya shrugged, “As I’ll ever be.”

“All right,” J.J. said, “But don’t assume you know nothin’ here. Follow my lead.” He pushed open the door.

Once inside, Vinya was hit by the smell of incense and the type of pounding electronic beat she hadn’t heard in years. It felt a bit like old-school trap music – full of heavily auto-tuned, chipmunky vocal clips that sounded like they had been extruded out of an antique Nintendo. But there was something behind it that she couldn’t put her finger on - a droning tone that made it feel...medieval?

The people dancing looked like a strange, militarized version of the 1970s. Men in fatigues, women in bell-bottoms - and all of them tricked out with berets, jewelry made of bullet-casings, and camouflage. And there wasn’t a dominant ethnicity, which Vinya thought she might find. This joint was clearly drawing from a lot of different places, and some of them looked too well-heeled to be from this area.

People were *driving* to get here.

“J.J.!” came a voice from across the room.

It belonged to a man who looked distinctly older than the surrounding crowd - mid-30s maybe. White, balding, with frizzy hair and an unkempt beard. He was muscular, wearing a leather jacket over a black muscle shirt - but what Vinya noticed first was the flag patch on his jacket.

He was flanked by two men with huge muscles. Approaching J.J., the man cracked a smile. “You decadent pig!” he said with a thick Southern drawl, “I thought I told you never to come in here again.”

J.J. laughed uncomfortably. “Capitalists need business, right?”

The man laughed – too hard, Vinya thought - and patted J.J. on the shoulder. “Sure enough, piggy - and business needs music.”

Then he looked past J.J. at Vinya. “She the proppo b*** you told me about?”

“Excuse me?” Rat retorted, an audible crack in his voice.

J.J. shot him a glare that said ‘shut up,’ then whispered to Vinya, “It’s short for ‘propagandist.’ They don’t trust reporters.” He turned back. “Yeah. That’s her.”

The man ignored J.J. and looked straight at Vinya, “You got a name, proppo?”

Normally, she would have responded by telling him to go screw himself, but right now he was a story. That, and she didn’t want to know how many of the guns in the room were real.

She replied as calmly as she could. “Vinya Jain, *WWN Lifestyle*.”

The man cocked his head as he sized her up. “Jain, huh?” he said with a menacing smile. “You ain’t gonna like what we blowin’ downstairs. Ain’t no *Ahimsa* non-violence up in here.”

Vinya’s ears perked up. That was the first time she’d ever heard Jain doctrines cited by a non-Indian – let alone one with a Confederate flag on his chest.

The man saw her reaction and broke into a laugh. “Oh yeah, we read, proppo. We read a *lot*.”

J.J. tried to regain control of the situation. “Vinya - this is Yezhov. He’s the owner here.”

“Commander.” Yezhov corrected without looking away from Vinya. “We all own this. I just manage the business affairs.”

“And collect the money,” J.J. said under his breath.

Yezhov shot him a side-eye but continued. “Well, proppo, I guess you want to see downstairs. That’s the live s***. Come on.”

Yezhov turned and started walking, revealing an even larger rebel flag embroidered on his back. Vinya and J.J. followed, a bug-eyed Rat trailing behind

She leaned over to J.J. and blurted, “What the hell?” under her breath.

J.J. snorted. “Which part?”

Vinya felt her voice rising to confront the din of the music as she pointed. “He’s wearing a giant Confederate flag in a room full of black people with *guns*.”

“Hey!” One of Yezhov’s escorts, an African-American, yelled at her, “Respect his colors, proppo!”

J.J. tried to speak up but Yezhov wheeled and gave Vinya a menacing smile. “You really don’t know what this is about, do you?”

Vinya stopped in her tracks. “I -”

“Yeah,” he said, “You got no clue how I got these colors. You wanna see this s*** or not”.

Vinya felt herself shiver, but mustered, “Sure.” Then added, “If there’s music, I’m down.”

“I doubt that.” Yezhov led her down a stairwell to a cavernous, unfinished basement. Rat and J.J. struggled to follow but disappeared from view as the crowd closed behind Yezhov.

As they descended the stairs, the same drone from upstairs pounded against her ear, this time punctuated by live drums and rap lyrics - something about a beheading.

Vinya tried to resist the urge to vomit and focus on the instrumentation. The drone was echoing through her skull, a single loud note attacking her senses without any breaks.

“So,” she asked Yezhov, “I hear a lot of trap elements and electronic distortion. That’s been out of mainstream hip-hop for at least a decade – are they SlamBoarding?”

Yezhov reached the bottom of the stairs and looked back at her with probing eyes. “What do you know about that?”

“I was a DJ for like seven years.” Vinya stammered, “Boards, pegs, kinetics - any way they wanted it.”

“Really?” Yezhov seemed momentarily thrown off guard, then put his angry face back on. “That don’t mean you know nothin’. What’s your game? EDM? CyberPunk? Some other rich-kid s***?”

Vinya rolled her eyes. There wasn’t much use in lying, “EDM, retro 2010s pop. I had the best SlamBoard-Kinetics in L.A. – and I know my hip-hop.”

“Hip hop’s dead,” Yezhov barked, “We killed it, took the body, built something useful out of it.”

That was worth hearing, and Vinya punched on the mini voice recorder on her lapel. “Care to elaborate on the record?”

“Nah,” Yezhov said. “Nice device though. That’s some spy s***.” He stopped for a second, “So, you said SlamBoard, right?”

“That’s right,” Vinya wasn’t sure where he was going.

“And you think you can come in here and figure us out?”

“No. Just describe.”

“All right. Let’s see.” He led her to the front of the room where the band was playing. Vinya noticed that one of them was playing a 2035 model Apple iBlaster SlamBoard. It was two years ahead of the one she had in storage, but the elements were the same - a four-foot by two-foot touchscreen with piano keys on one side, mounted on a stand.

Boards had replaced most other DJ equipment in the 2020s, combining a laptop, turntable, pegboard, and a few other functions into what was essentially a giant iPhone with a piano keyboard. They were hard to find now, though. The Brill crowd thought anything digital was ‘too artificial’ - never mind how much distortion their retro analog systems created.

Yezhov caught the attention of the lead singer and made a slashing motion across his throat. The music stopped cold, and he mounted the stage, grabbing the wireless microphone.

“Is the struggle alive in here tonight?” He bellowed into the mic.

He was met with thunderous hollering from the crowd.

“Now, I have a special request for y’all,” he began, “Y’all need to be on y’all’s best behavior - ‘cause the establishment is all up in our business tonight - in our own club!”

Booing. Lots of booing. What the hell was he talking about?

“The people who killed the world,” he almost screamed, “are here to report on how baaaaaad we are - and we got one of their lying proppos in the house! Y’all, say hello to Vinya Jain from *WWN Lifestyle!*”

He pointed to Vinya and grinned as the crowd booed, a few of them hurling beer bottles that Vinya had to duck to avoid.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Yezhov praised them, wiping the sweat building on his brow. “Now, this proppo b*** told me that she used to be a DJ back before she went to work for the devil. Thinks she knows somethin’!”

The crowd jeered, and Yezhov chuckled theatrically. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too, but then I thought – y’know - I never really heard how them rich girls SlamBoard, have you?”

The crowd shouted “No!” in almost perfect unison.

Vinya felt like the top of her head was about to blow off. She hadn’t come here to be publicly shamed – and she was having fantasies about gouging his eyes out with her acrylic nails.

Yezhov’s maddening smile seared into her as he walked back in her direction. “I reckon, if she wants a story, we should get us a demonstration.”

He flipped a switch on the SlamBoard, and Vinya saw the screen blink.

“You know how to FlyMix, proppo?”

The crowd roared in approval.

Vinya hadn’t been in a FlyMixing contest in five years. She’d been good at it - really good - but she was retired.

Everything inside her wanted to run screaming out of the room – but then Yezhov smiled again, and whatever was bubbling in her brain boiled over.

“Give me the board!” she shouted back at him.

Yezhov fiddled with the controls, still talking into the mic. “You said you like old stuff, right? All right, plug your ears y’all!”

He pushed another button, and the sound system sprang to life. “The Monster” by Eminem and Rihanna. He must have thought he’d stump her with the golden oldies.

Vinya ran up on stage and grabbed board's wireless headphones, desperately trying to loosen up her old DJ brain. FlyMixing was a battle sport, and she was out of practice. In a battle, DJ's started with random a song playing on a blank board, then remixed it "on the fly" using the SlamBoard's Internet connection to download effects. It was not easy – and the song was already playing.

Vinya scanned the board. The touch screen was in good shape. Were there kinetics? Revs probably didn't see the use in them but if they were there...

She ducked down and checked the bottom of the unit. There they were. Velcroed to the bottom of the board were two sensor-laced, open-fingered, black leather gloves. She put them on. They felt brand new and needed serious breaking in, but they would work. The song was nearing the end of the first verse, and another bottle shattered on the stage near her feet.

The screen had been pre-loaded with a bunch of stock sound-effects and popular tracks. She should have expected that – East Coast style.

She punched the pause button - a total FlyMixing faux pas - but this was going to be fun.

"Yo, Yezhov!" she shouted into the microphone next to the board, "New York Rules? That's not how we mix in L.A., baby. You mind if I wipe this thing?"

Yezhov gave her a slack-hawed look, and she punched the 'wipe' button before he could respond. The list of pre-loaded samples disappeared, increasing the degree of difficulty.

The crowd went silent, except for one big dude in the back. "She called you out, fool!"

Yezhov glared at her as she restarted the music.

She had three custom mixes of *The Monster* in her GoogleCloud - not counting the Christmas mix. She downloaded all three onto the board and faded into the most recent one as Eminem rapped the first verse. That would have been cheating in competition, but it changed the entire sound of the song to make it seem like she was mixing while she was really downloading effects. Then she stripped out

everything but the drums and replaced the background with a Bhangra drone she'd clipped out of an old M.I.A. track. That sounded a little Rev. Then she quickly imported a bunch of her favorite stock explosions and machine gun noises to add some extra color.

The timer on the SlamBoard said it had only been 30 seconds - but Vinya already felt sweat starting to pool on her brow. One minute left in the verse - enough time for a few fireworks. She checked some stock machine gun sounds in her headphones - they needed to be slowed down and deepened. A few quick button punches and they sounded a bit better. She let them loose into the main mix. That got a few cheers, so she cloned the effect, and used the echo on repeat in the background.

She looked up for the first time, feeling a few drops of sweat fly off her face. She saw a few heads bobbing along with her beat, but most of the crowd still looked unimpressed. She threw in some metal guitar riff to make give the sound some heft.

The verse faded into Rihanna's chorus, which she let play while she worked. She synced the kinetic gloves and programmed a shotgun blast into the index finger of her left hand. Then she assigned a machine gun into the middle finger and a huge explosion to the pinkie.

Time for the real fireworks.

She'd told Yezhov she was a DJ, but she'd left out the part about her 130 IQ and the fact that she'd memorized most of the 10,000 songs in her library.

She took a deep breath as she let the anger seep into her, she needed to be mad as all hell to pull this song off.

She let most of the second verse play, acting like she was mixing and centering with her eyes closed. Halfway through the verse, she snapped her eyes open and punched the button marked "Strip Vocals." She activated the small microphone on the back of her right glove, stepped out from behind the board, and cut Eminem off mid-sentence with her own vocals.

A few mouths had dropped open in the audience. They hadn't expected that out of the glitzy Indian girl – but she wasn't done. Most high-end board DJ's could do rap parts in songs like this. Very few of them had the singing chops to pull off the big pop licks. Vinya, on the other hand, started belting Rihanna's soaring chorus at the top of her lungs.

The crowd roared to life. Apparently, they'd never had someone rap *and* sing. Vinya drank in the energy and kept moving.

She strutted across the stage, high-fiving a few extended hands in the front row - then it was time for the big guns. She used her left thumb to depress the button on her left index finger and punched the air. The gloves did their job, and the sound of a shotgun blared every time she pumped her fist. She let out a few more blasts, then walked back to center stage as the third verse cued up.

She depressed the pinkie button and raised her fist high in the air - unleashing a huge explosion effect. Then retreated behind the SlamBoard. Rapping was great, but she had a bunch of complicated effects to throw into the last verse.

She was about to unlock the vocal track when a voice came through the sound system without her permission.

Vinya looked up to see that Yezhov himself had grabbed a mic. He knew this one as well as she did.

For a second, she couldn't focus on mixing out of surprise. But Yezhov gave her a grin and a nod as he rapped Eminem's lyrics. She'd cracked him.

She brought the gloves back to her lips and rapped a few bars. Then Yezhov took back the vocals and moved in on the board, rapping straight into Vinya's face before letting her have the last chorus.

Vinya could feel her chest heaving up and down from the workout. She saw sweat glistening on her arms, but she'd done it - and the old rush of adrenaline was still there. She missed this.

She let a final round of explosions into the system, then looked over at Yezhov as the sound stopped. He gave a big toothy grin, and Vinya knew she was going home with a story.