

Mona

Łukasz Woliński

Mona
Łukasz Woliński
www.scifinarratives.com

Copyright ©2017 by Łukasz Woliński. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to the actual people, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

A duo of soft female voices sang from the wall-mounted speakers: *Do you feel it? Do you feel it? Do you feel that I can see your soul?* Mona sighed; she was lying on the couch, holding a spoon and an open chocolate ice cream container.

Do you feel it? Do you feel it? Do you feel the beat in your heart?

As if unsure of what to do, she kept rotating the spoon in her fingers. After a while, she finally dipped it into the ice cream and raised to her mouth. Savoring the taste, she licked the spoon thoroughly; it felt really comforting. Chocolate was her favourite; she'd always pick it over any other flavor. Earlier today, she'd bought two containers on her way home from work. Now, hidden in her tiny Upper East Side apartment, she just wanted to eat until her stomach was ready to burst. Even if not healthy, it was the easiest way to cope with what Eric had done to her.

Being halfway through the container, she realized that something was happening outside. She reached for her phone, lying on the table, and turned down the music. An emergency vehicle siren sounded clearly, its wail echoing off the urban canyon walls. As it wasn't a rare sound in Manhattan, she would return to eating ice cream, had she not seen a message from Stacy: *Transferring at LAX. Stay strong, hon.* Thinking about what to answer her best friend, she realized that more sirens were wailing. She folded the phone around her left wrist, got up, walked to the balcony door and opened it. Still holding the ice cream container, she stepped outside, to warm September evening air.

Stunned, she stared at the six-story building diagonally across the street. Normally, she wouldn't pay much attention to that old structure with a red-brick-clad facade, so ubiquitous in the area. Now, however, she couldn't look away, immersed in the scene unfolding before her eyes. In the foreground, heavy black smoke pushing from one of the last floor windows and billowing into the sky. At the fire floor level, two quadcopters hovering in air. Below, on the street, several police and fire department vehicles, their emergency lights flashing. Around them, a routine choreography of firefighters taking out their equipment and laying supply hose lines, all moving like parts of a well-oiled machine. Closer to the intersection, cops keeping the bystanders behind the police tape. And in the middle of it all, a group of firefighters entering the burning structure. Mona gazed at them getting inside one by one. Carrying tools and attack hoses, they walked swiftly in their lightweight exoskeletons, followed by a four-legged robotic mule laden with the additional equipment.

She recalled a fire prevention event her company, the Knickerbocker Biotechnology, had hosted last spring. Management gathered all the workers in the auditorium, where a crew-cut firefighter delivered a presentation

about the fire safety. A tall and well-built man, he looked good in his station uniform, and his facial similarity to Eric couldn't escape Mona's attention. Both had that strong jaw and chin, high cheekbones and straight nose. Coincidentally, she'd started dating Eric just few days before the event. At that time, he'd seemed to be an honest man, true in his feelings. To ever suspect that he'd cheat was unimaginable.

And yet it happened, she thought, feeling a sharp lump in her throat. The image of Eric with the other woman in his old expensive car was still fresh and painful.

Her phone vibrated, jolting her out of thoughts; apparently, some emergency management official decided that the fire was serious enough to warrant sending a notification to everyone in the area. She blinked and focused on the scene again. Two aerial ladders were raised and extended: one to the fire floor and the other to the roof. On the street, near the building's entrance, stood another group of firefighters. A Stokes basket was lying by their feet, and a mule was crouched beside them. Mona guessed it was a rapid intervention team, waiting for any *Mayday* call, ready to go inside for a downed colleague. Further away on the sidewalk, she saw a chief, surrounded by aides, pointing at something on the screen before them. Conveniently, the display was built into the table with foldable legs and could easily be carried around and set up anywhere. Mona recalled the name of the device: *Incident Command Board*. She'd seen it last spring at the showcase of firefighting equipment during the fire prevention event.

But that day, there had also been other attractions. After the crew-cut firefighter finished his talk, another FDNY member took the stage. She introduced herself as Lieutenant Ivy Kusanagi, and Mona couldn't take eyes off her. Taller than the average woman, she had an athletic build and a pretty oval face. With short, black hair combed to the left and a head shaved on both sides, she could easily pass for some punk rock band member. Besides, her short-sleeved, light blue shirt was revealing muscular arms, and Mona imagined touching Lieutenant's smooth skin.

"As Firefighter Miéville mentioned," said Kusanagi, her voice loud and clear, "smoke detectors give you an early warning, and sprinklers control the fire until our arrival – in many cases they can even extinguish the flames. Unfortunately, the sprinklers are still not as widely adopted as they should.

"Nevertheless, even if the fire is quickly knocked down, we still have to make sure that there aren't any trapped occupants nor any remaining sources of heat which could re-kindle the fire. That's why we perform searches. I'd like to show you an example of a primary search, that is, a quick search for victims we perform just after our arrival, starting near the seat of a fire."

As she was saying this, another crew-cut firefighter, carrying a rescue

manikin on his shoulders, walked in front of the podium. Miéville, waiting nearby, opened the door to the room behind the auditorium, and they both stepped inside.

"You saw Firefighter Mutabi with that two hundred pounds dummy. He and Firefighter Miéville will hide it somewhere in that storeroom, and it'll play the role of a victim overcome by smoke."

Two firefighters dressed in bunker gear entered the auditorium. With the air bottles strapped to their backs and faces hidden behind masks, they looked ready for action.

"That's our search and rescue team: Firefighters Case and Gavin. Please note that their facepieces are covered with aluminum foil to simulate the lack of visibility in the smoky environment. Let's see what they see." Kusanagi turned to the big empty screen on the wall which Miéville had used earlier to show his slides. "Oh, right."

She grabbed her radio and called someone outside.

"We need visuals, Frank," she said when she got a response.

"Ten-four, Lieu."

"So," Kusanagi said to the audience, "this will be a typical training scenario. As a senior member, Firefighter Gavin is responsible for his partner, whereas Probationary Firefighter Case is obliged to learn from her more experienced colleague. Okay, we have visuals."

The screen was split in half, showing feeds from two HUDs. In each video, the field of view was filled with grayscale shapes, while few simple icons were lurking at the edges.

"What are you seeing right now," said Kusanagi, "are the live streams from the thermal imaging cameras installed on our rescuers' helmets."

Case and Gavin were facing the crowd, and after a while Mona recognized her full figure seated among the coworkers.

"The ability to see through smoke is one of the greatest technological advancements available to us. It's truly a game changer."

Kusanagi continued by briefly summarizing the capabilities and limitations of thermal imaging; she also mentioned the use of gas and heat flux sensors, radars and various other devices, but Mona wasn't paying attention to the details, mesmerized by Lieutenant's big dark eyes.

"Lots of scientists and engineers worked on the issue of the data fusion, believe me. But enough of this technospeak," she said, and Mona noticed Mutabi and Miéville waiting near the podium, the latter glancing at his wristwatch. "It's time to start our demonstration."

Without hesitation, Case and Gavin walked to the door and knelt before it.

”Sensors on the personal protective equipment of our rescuers don’t pick up any deadly conditions around them, so they can proceed with their objective. By the way, as an additional layer of safety, other sensors monitor their physiological parameters.”

Gavin held the door handle while Case reached with both hands into her shoulder bag. He opened the door a little and for only an instant, allowing her to throw something inside. Immediately, two new markers showed up on each HUD video stream.

”Mobile sensors determined that there isn’t a death trap in the room, so the search can be performed,” said Kusanagi as the firefighters went inside.

The door closed behind them; a wooden chock placed by Gavin prevented it from slamming shut. Now the only way for the audience to follow the events was by looking at the FPP videos on the screen. Fascinated, Mona watched how the firefighters navigated gracefully through the cluttered room, guided by their infrared vision and reconnaissance robots deployed by Case.

In a short time, they found the manikin, curled under the steel table and hidden behind some boxes. At once, they pushed the obstacles out of the way and kneeled by the dummy. Carefully, they rotated it onto its back and pulled from underneath the table. Then, with a few quick and precise movements, they put a hasty harness on it. After securing the manikin, they split up, with Case dragging it to the exit and Gavin staying behind to double check the room. Mona couldn’t believe everything was happening so fast; the level of effort these firefighters were putting into their job impressed her.

A round of applause started when Case emerged from the storeroom, pulling the manikin. Gavin joined her shortly after, and they both removed their helmets, hoods and masks, revealing no sign of fatigue on their faces.

”Please note that our rescuers aren’t wearing exoskeletons as this exercise was also a small fitness test,” said Kusanagi to an even bigger round of applause. ”In the unlikely event of you becoming trapped in a burning building, you’ll be rescued by the dedicated professionals. Please, thank Firefighters Case, Gavin, Mutabi and Miéville for the demo.”

The four stood on the podium, smiling politely, as the audience gave the third and final round of applause.

”But that’s not all for today. We have more attractions waiting for you outside.”

Later, in the square at the center of the life sciences campus where the Knickerbocker Biotechnology was located, Mona had a lot of fun. It was a bright sunny day, and she was playing with fire. Equipped with a pair of gloves and safety glasses, she was holding a pressurized water extinguisher and facing a burning waste paper basket.

"When you're ready," said a firefighter standing at her side.

She pressed the lever, and a narrow stream of water from the nozzle hit the burning paper, raising a small cloud of white smoke. Amused, she stepped closer and continued dousing the flames until the fire was extinguished. Then she returned the equipment to the firefighter and looked around.

A couple of vehicles were parked in the courtyard: two firetrucks, a battalion chief's SUV, an ambulance and a minivan; their compartments were open and all the tools were on display. Her coworkers were gathered around the exhibits; some were chatting with the firefighters, and everyone seemed to have a good time. Choosing the next attraction, she turned around and almost collided with Lieutenant Kusanagi.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Hey." Kusanagi smiled. "It's alright."

"So..." said Mona, her heart pounding faster. Being so close, she could smell Kusanagi's sweet and delicate scent. "It's great to have you here – I didn't know that you're visiting private companies."

Kusanagi nodded. "Well, we usually do presentations in schools and community centers or during various public events. Reaching out to the citizens and visitors, especially the seniors and disabled, is very important to us. This, however, is, uh, some kind of a pilot program aimed at corporations. As I was told..." She paused and then recited in a monotonous voice: "Engagement with the private entities is as important as with the public. Everyone is a part of the community."

"I guess so," Mona said promptly. "I wanted you to know that I enjoyed the search and rescue demo. Your narration was really good, Lieutenant."

"Why, thank you." A smile played on her lips. "But there is no need for the *lieutenant*. Call me Ivy."

"Oh, okay Ivy. I'm Mona."

"Nice to meet you Mona." They shook hands; Kusanagi's grip was strong and firm yet gentle. "I'm glad that you liked our small demonstration. By the way, have you seen our paramedics and EMTs? They set up a couple of training manikins behind that car, and they're teaching CPR," she said, pointing at the white minivan. "You should pay them a visit, and then you can also check what's inside the ambulance."

"Oh yes, I'll do that. I have one question, though."

"Go ahead."

"How did you become a firefighter?"

"Oh dear, *that* question." Kusanagi gave Mona a wide smile. "I don't want to disappoint you, but it's rather a short story. Previously, I'd been in the Army, and when I returned to my civilian life, I was offered a chance to serve my city. Curious, I signed up, even though I was still interviewing

for other jobs. Eventually, I passed the entrance exam, went through the Academy, graduated... Fast forward a decade, and here I am, still on the job. So, as you can see, it wasn't my childhood dream and a lifelong plan; I just happened to get recruited. Only then did I realize that I love it; it's the best job I could've ever imagined."

"That's wonderful," said Mona, her eyes fixed at Kusanagi. "Ivy, thank you for your service."

"Don't thank me, Mona. Go to our EMS members and learn CPR. Take care." She patted Mona on the shoulder. "And always abide by the fire safety rules."

During the next few months, Mona had nearly forgotten about Lieutenant, but now, standing on the balcony with her eyes closed, she could almost feel her presence. Not for long, though, as the smoke smell carried by the wind broke the immersion.

Opening eyes, Mona realized that the fire was already put out. Some window frames were empty – their panes completely knocked out – and soot was spread on the wall around them. On the street, firefighters were rolling up hoses, packing away the equipment and cleaning their bunker gear with pressure washers. Seeing that her ice cream container was empty, Mona blushed and retreated into the living room and then into the kitchen. She threw the spoon into the sink and the ice cream container into the trash can; afterwards she stood for a while gathering thoughts.

Her stomach was bloated, and she felt slightly nauseous, but her sadness was gone. So was the feeling of helplessness. Something changed; deep down, she felt the will to act. The plan had yet to form in her mind, but she knew it would involve paying Eric a visit. Improvisation is the key, she thought and went to the bedroom.

Opening the closet, she said, "Molly, what's the weather forecast for the rest of the day?"

"No rain is expected, but the air temperature might drop below sixty degrees in the coming hours," replied the Assistant from her phone. "Are you going out?"

Glancing at the contents of her closet, she said, "Yes. Yes I am."

"Would you like me to call a taxi for you?"

"No, I'll take the subway."

"Would you like me to plan your travel?"

"No, thanks. Just tell me if the southbound trains on Lex and Second are running without delays."

"4 and 5 have good service. 6 experiences delays because of the police activity on the 51st Street station. Q and T have good service."

"Thanks. Cue the music."

As the playlist went on, she took off her sweatpants and T-shirt and threw them on the bed. Sifting through the clothes on racks, she recollected her breakup with Eric. Two weeks ago, she'd bumped into him in Coney Island; sitting in the front seat of his mid-twentieth century convertible, he'd been kissing with some tall, skinny woman. Busted, he'd just said, "I've never explicitly told you that I wanted to be with you forever," before driving away and leaving Mona in shock. Since then, that scene had haunted her; only now was she able to think about it dispassionately. She shook her head, remembering how Eric's new lover had just laughed at the whole situation. They're both worth each other, she thought and wondered how long he'd been cheating on her.

She recalled a summer evening when she'd taken Eric for a walk. They strolled along the levee wrapping around the southern half of Manhattan, one of her favourite places in the city. It was hot, humid and rainy, and the grassy slopes of the East River Park were nearly empty. Hidden under the transparent umbrella held by Eric, they walked a winding path, submerged in their own world.

As they were approaching a big mortar building bristling with smokestacks, the elevated parkland morphed into a dull concrete wall separating the FDR Drive from the river. And just as they walked past the old power plant, heading toward the Midtown skyscrapers, the rain stopped. Eric folded the umbrella and stepped aside, as though to look at the water taxis and USVs cruising the river. Then he told Mona to lean on the railing and took a few pictures of her, capturing in the background the Williamsburg Bridge and apartment towers on the Brooklyn waterfront. He complimented her looks: her dark red hair flowing in the breeze, her lovely yellow dress, her legs and curvy hips...

It'd felt great then, but at present she couldn't help but wonder: was it all a lie, a game to gain her trust and ditch her when no longer needed? Did she miss any red flags during the few months of their relationship? Eric seemed to know well how to protect his privacy, but maybe there was something that should've warned her? If Stacy hadn't left for her postdoc overseas, would she see something suspicious?

She shook off her thoughts; it was all irrelevant now. The only thing that mattered was to show Eric that she's stronger than he'd assumed. And in order to do that, she wanted to attain a special look. Focused on her goal, she grabbed the black faux leather pants which she'd not worn in a long time. With an effort, she pulled them over her wide hips; to button them, she had to suck her belly in. A roll of flesh formed around her waist; not discouraged, she looked for some loose T-shirt to cover it. The first one she found was white and sported a simple drawing of a cat face with the *2023: A West*

Coast Story written underneath it – a reward for her pledge in crowdfunding a B-class retrofuturistic movie. Smiling, she put it back and chose a plain red blouse instead; it fit perfectly. Gazing in the mirror, she applied the lipstick and fixed her hair. She was almost ready to go, but she needed a plan.

For all his smarts and strengths, Eric had one weakness: being attached to his cars. As they were usually parked by the curb in front of his West Village brownstone, they made easy targets. Being aware that the cars were most likely insured, Mona knew that she wouldn't hurt Eric financially, but nevertheless he would get the message.

An elegant, easy-to-understand *don't fuck with me* note.

Knowing where to strike to achieve her goal, Mona had still to find the right tools for the job. For a moment, she contemplated buying a lighter and some propellant; the idea was tempting until an image of angry Lieutenant Ivy Kusanagi crossed her mind. Resigned, she stared into the closet.

Then she saw it: a smooth wooden club, resting on the top shelf. An old cosplaying item from the college years, it instantly brought her memories of the cons she'd attended with Stacy.

With a grin on her face, she put on a jacket and boots – all black faux leather, matching the pants.

I wasn't born for lovin', I was born to raise hell, came from the speakers as she was swinging the baseball bat in front of the mirror.

Time to set things right, she thought and left the apartment.

February – March 2017

I quoted the songs: Do You Feel It? by Chaos, Chaos and Born to Raise Hell by Cheap Trick.