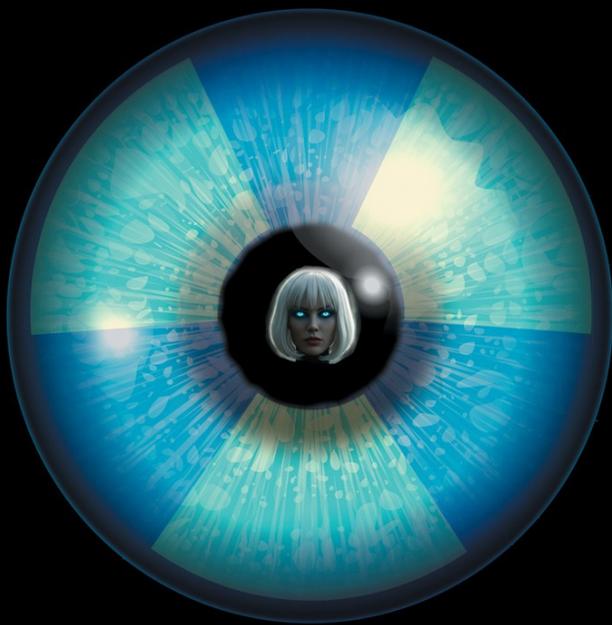


Only Human

Nuclear



Rf Bradford

Offical Promotional Copy

Authors on youwriteon.com say 'Only Human - Nuclear' is:

“Well written and entertaining to read.”

T Church

“This is very engaging. Sci-fi is not usually my thing but I was really hooked by this.”

Natalie Durrant

“Wow! Nice! I loved your story. I think you should definitely publish this. The plot was compelling, the characters were well developed, and your descriptions of the scenery made me feel like I was there. I like how you set the story in the future. I really cannot think of anything that needs improvement. Good luck to you!”

Tim Grimat

“You seem to be describing a world that really could exist.”

Chloe Mesanges

“I found myself really getting caught up with the action & excitement.”

Graham Morgan

“Enjoyed reading it because it was written well and flowed nicely.”

Jeff Dale

“Very ambitious story. You did a fantastic job with descriptions and details of the destruction. I may have to read more Sci-fi now.”

SlowSip

“Although not a reader of Sci-fi, I really enjoyed this. The characters were strong, the plotting well paced and the scene setting very effective, as was the dialogue. I loved the futuristic themes that all have roots in today- drone strikes, rising sea levels, terrorism, but for all the big themes this felt very much a story centred on believable characters. Well done.”

Sean Gibbin

Only Human - *Nuclear*

Featured on BBC Uploads, with Rob Jelly – broadcast 17th & 19th July 2025

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By Rf Bradford

Only Human - *Nuclear*

Only Human – *Tsunami*

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Life from the Heart

Saga finale coming in 2027:

Only Human – *Psycho*

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[@Scookey2045](https://twitter.com/Scookey2045)

Julia is only human.
Her half-sister is only part human.
Julia is going after her mother.
Her half-sister is going after her father.
They don't know each other.
But they will.

Faith are planning to storm a nuclear reactor.
MI5 are planning to stop them.
Julia is in the way.
Her half-sister will be on the way.
Someone is going to die.

Prologue

Hospital Bed

6th August 2045, London

At the foot of Gurmeet's hospital bed stood Shabbir. On his forearm, his wristcom was red-flashing an emergency – demanding his response but getting none. The bouquet of bluebells in his hand fell. Crashing to the floor, along with his heart.

His wristcom buzzed harder. Xi's voice came on speaker, remote accessing via emergency scrambler.

“Shabbir. Shabbir! Red flash emergency. Answer me! Shabbir!”

In front of him lay Gurmeet. Wrapped in bandages. Unconscious. Heart monitor beeping. Only, despite what it said on her drip-fed wristband, it wasn't Gurmeet. He had no idea who it was, apart from the only survivor. The only survivor of Faith's nuclear power station attack.

Xi's voice was urgent but to Shabbir it sounded from a world that was no longer his own. Xi called out again.

“Shabbir, answer me! A reactor's on fire! IT'S HINKLEY POINT!”

A tear landed on the bluebells. It was the only reply Shabbir had to give. Nothing mattered to him any more. Nothing at all.

She was dead.

Julia's Diary
Two weeks earlier

Friday, 21st July 2045

Dad said I'm only human. What the fuck else would I be? Don't care. Going to shoot her.

Can't today, she's still in prison. But when she gets out. If she comes back. If she thinks I'm just a stupid kid and still like dolls, she'll be the idiot. Dead one. I never liked dolls, I liked my SAIL. My unicorn. If it had been given real lasers it wouldn't be dead.

Just me and Jake, now. And dad. My old man. My great old man. Older than the planet. LOL.

Today's the anniversary of beating Michelle. Size of a cow and breath to match. Made her kiss the ground - only snog she's ever going to get. Fucking cry baby.

It's almost two years since Paul. Worst day of my life. Last day of his. I hate this anniversary. Still have nightmares. FFS!!! What can I do? I am so sorry Paul.

Fuck it!

Shooting with Jake, today. Jake... Hmm. Don't know why I like him so much. Guess he's like me. A bit weird, a bit crazy and likes shooting. The only one who calls me Lia.

*Why shoot mum? Why not? She's a bitch. A nasty bitch. A fucking nasty bitch. Sure, plenty of those about and 'Not enough reason to kill her, 'cos she's your mum.' Meh. Could be true, if she hadn't tried to kill dad and promised she would kill me too. And, **AND**, told us it's our fault - the idiot. Got it now? She's not just a bitch she's a **FUCKING BITCH!** Banged up in prison for now but when she gets out. The second she comes near us. I'll simply have to kill her. Am not 9 any more.*

But not today. Today is Friday. Shooting day, with Jake. I love Fridays.

Fuck!

Think I love Jake.

Chapter 1

Swarmbots

Friday

The badger was about to die. Its nose sniffing at the increasing change in scent as the moist, earthy smells of woodland gave way to the stench of death. In the air, hovering above the wheat field at the edge of the trees, was a wasp-sized swarmbot - targetting system locked on. Monitoring the badger's movement to the nearest millimetre. Ready to attack the second it crossed their invisible red line. Five hundred more swarmbots, called over the instant the badger had crossed their invisible amber line, were now hovering just behind the first - waiting for the command to attack.

All along the red line lay death - the ground littered with the remains of insects, birds and a fox. Its shredded, decaying remains smeared across the earth - the source of the stench.

The badger heard a low hum and looked up and saw the hovering swarmbots. Myriad tiny, red-laser eyes looking down. Under each swarmbot, the faint sky-blue glow of a hover pad, colour-tuned to be almost invisible from below. They didn't look right. The place didn't smell right. The badger began backing away. It would search for food elsewhere. In another place.

The swarmbots watched it go, back over the amber line. Back into the woods, away from their guard zone. They began humming back to their rest positions.

* * *

“Come on, Lia. We can shoot here.”, came Jake's teenage voice.

“You sure? Don't normally come in this far.”

“That's why we have to hurry or we'll lose time.”

Julia was with him, out for target practice. Armed with a 400-Watt laser-rifle, they ran in the direction of the badger; fast, teenage feet thumping the ground. The badger stopped, heard their pounding feet and fled. Fled back towards the field. Back towards the line of death. Anything to get away.

It ran across the amber line - the air rapidly filled with the hum of 500 swarmbots. This time the badger didn't hear them or care. Just fled. At panic speed, it crossed the red line.

A thousand swarmbot eyes flashed bright red. They didn't carry weapons; they were weapons. Diamond-hard noses shaped like bullets. Wings that were not just wings but surgically-sharp blades with serrated edges. Just one metre above the badger, the leader dove down. An attack dive - confirming the target for the others. It hit with a full-power punch, into the top of the badger's nose - shattering the bone and coming out the side of its jaw.

The badger shrieked in pain, its face slammed to the ground by the impact; belly skidding as its legs gave way. Other swarmbots were already following the path of the first, bulleting down in pairs. Tearing left to right, through its nose as they worked their way towards the tail. Punching in, powering through and ripping out the other side. They would shred the head, then the neck, then the torso until they reached the tail and eliminated every trace of life. Slam in the left, power through, tear flesh out the right. Terminally doomed, the badger let out one last, terrible cry then cried no more.

Julia grabbed Jake and yanked him to a halt.

“You hear that?”

“Zoo must have lost a puma again.”

“Puma? We'll never see it coming in here. We have to get out of the trees.”

“Too far in to go back. Lia, look. Over there. A field. We can cut across.”

* * *

The swarmbot hovering at the edge of the wheat field, saw the teens run over the amber line and signalled for 500 more.

Jake, holding the laser-rifle in hands now moistened with sweat, skidded to a stop. His foot almost kissing the red line.

“Tired? Knew I was going to beat you.”, mocked Julia, about to overtake.

Jake blocked her path - pointing ahead.

“Look at those wasps.”

Julia looked where he was pointing and saw the black mass hovering in front of them. A thick, black cloud of menace.

“Now, that's a swarm.”

“Sure is...”, grinned Jake, forgetting all about the puma, “...I can't miss.”

“You sure that's a good idea?”

“Guess so. They'll never see it coming. Watch this.”

He raised the laser rifle, squinted down the sights and fired.

A thin, blue beam zapped into the cloud, bounced off a diamond nose and into the belly of another, incinerating it. Instantly, the others locked on. Buzzing loudly, the cloud swarmed in their direction.

Jake's mouth dropped.

“Oh, shit. RUN!”

“I AM!”

500 swarmbots sped after them.

Without looking where he was shooting, Jake fired behind as they ran. The shots punched trees, the ground, the air. Smoke puffing where ever they hit. They didn't look back. Just ran for their lives, trying the impossible of out running the swarmbots. They didn't need to.

The swarmbots slammed against the co-ordinates of the red line like flies slamming against glass. A dense black wall, glittering with a thousand red eyes. Tracking the teenagers and locked on to kill but unable to cross.

* * *

Julia got to a stream and splashed across. Jake followed. On the other side they dove behind the first large tree they came to.

“You really upset those wasps...”, panted Julia, “...We could have been stung to death.”

“Can't believe they reacted like that. Did you see the laser bounce? They must be tough.”

“Are they following?”

“Dunno. Not looking.”

“We have to.”

Jake knew she was right. Slowly they peered around each side of the trunk - young cheeks hugging the rough bark.

“Anything?”, asked Jake.

“No. You?”

“Think we're clear.”

“God, I hope so.”

“Never seen such aggressive wasps before. Or so many in one place.”

“And you had to shoot at them with a laser-rifle. Told you you're dangerous.”

“Lia, you're a girl...”, grinned Jake, “...All girls think guns are

dangerous.”

“*What?* Rude pig!”

Jake danced off, laughing. High on relief they had escaped the danger.

“Hah. Hah. Joking. Just joking.”

“I’ll show you joking.”, said Julia, running after him. She pounced, knocking him to the ground then falling over herself in the process. Jake rolled and sprung back up but his grin faded when he saw his best friend, sprawled face-first in the grass.

“You should have rolled.”

Annoyed with herself, she got up and brushed herself off.

“You know why I don’t. My turn.”, she said, walking towards the fallen laser rifle as Jake frowned.

“It’s been two years, Lia.”

Julia didn’t answer, just picked the rifle up. Pushing her long, blonde hair away from her face, she flipped up the scope and rested the butt against her shoulder.

“Name the target.”

They had been best friends since nursery. Other kids used to tease them but they didn’t care - their friendship was too solid to worry what boring others thought. The only teasing that mattered was what they did to each other. And they did that all the time.

“OK...”, mused Jake, “...See that old sign?”

“That one? Too close.”

“No, that one. Way over there.”

Julia looked at the rusting, ‘*No public access*’, sign 100m away.

“Still too easy.”

“I didn’t finish. Put a dot above the ‘l’ and make it into an ‘i.’”

Julia looked at him.

“Make it publiic? You’re so crude.”

Jake’s grin was back.

“Too difficult for you?”

She brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

“Nope.”

Leaning against a tree for stability, she zeroed the scope and calmed her heart. Taking a deep breath she held it, then fired.

She fired again.

And kept firing.

The sign puffed silent, dark-grey smoke with every hit, creating its own grey cloud. As the cloud cleared, Jake squinted at the result.

“You made a capital 'I'.”

Julia smiled, proud of herself.

“Excuse to fire more. Think it's straight.”

“It's perfect. Show off. You don't fight any more but your shooting gets better and better. You've been practising.”

“A bit. Told you dad's got one. Not a trainer though. Heavier, higher power.”

“Café business so risky these days?”

“Dunno. Just glad he's got one. Keeps his locked up though, along with some techie stuff he never lets me touch. How come your mum's got one? And how come she gives you the keys? You're 15 too. Not even old enough for a full wristcom.”

“Mum doesn't. I, er, have a way with locks.”

“*What?* Jake Watson, after all these years you...”

Bing bong.

A holographic projection of Jake's mum appeared in the air in front of them. Julia had hidden the rifle behind her back the second she heard the sound and saw his mum's eyes turned in her direction.

'Hello, Julia. Been eating grass again?'

“A bit.”, she shrugged, ignoring the green stains on her front.

'It wasn't your fault. Even Paul said so.'

Julia shrugged again, relieved his mum's eyes now turned towards Jake.

'Dinner in 30. Don't be late.'

“No, mum.”

'You know you're always welcome to come too.'

Julia nodded, she knew she was. That she always was.

“Thank you.”

The face morphed into a big, yellow smiley, then blinked out.

“Going to come?”, asked Jake, as they walked off together.

“Can't. Dad's making a roast today.”

“A roast? Guess he'd kill you if you missed that.”

“Dad's too kind to kill anyone. It's me who'd be upset. His roast dinners are amazing now.”

“Amazingly good instead of amazingly bad? So soon? Progress rides a white river in your family these days.”

Julia lowered her head, staring at her feet as they walked.

“Think we've been finding ourselves since mum went. Making something good after something bad.”

Jake shook his head.

“Still can't believe how crazy she got. If your dad hadn't recorded the attacks he'd never have been believed. You could have been killed. But don't worry, Lia. As your best friend, it would have been my personal duty to hunt her down and double-dot between the eyes. Zap. Zap. Point blank range.”

Julia turned the rifle off and handed it back to him.

“Change the topic, Jake. She's still my mum. I don't need reminders.”

“Sorry...”, Jake said, realising how insensitive he was being, “...OK, new topic. Why do you think there were so many wasps back there? All in one place?”

Julia shrugged. It had become her first response to so many things.

“I'll ask dad. He knows a lot of weird things.”

“Guess he meets a lot of weird people at the café.”

“Cafés these days. Never know which one.”

“Well, guess he deserved the promotion to regional manager.”

Julia really liked Jake. He had always been there for her – even after Paul, when everyone was screaming she was a murderer. He never once let her down. Always helped her go forward. Helped her feel warm inside. Helped keep her new demon locked in its cell. He made her smile when no-one else could. And now, with a smile back on her face, she lifted her head and looked at him.

“Jake, I'm guessing you say guess too much.”

Jake looked back at her, his best friend for as long as he could remember. He found himself smiling with feelings of more than just friendship.

“Guess you're right, Lia.”

He was still the only one who ever called her Lia. She was smiling wider now, the warmth of love reddening her face.

“Guess I am...”, she said, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek, then running off to hide her blushes. “...See you later.”

“See you later.”, he smiled, watching her go with love in his heart.

That was the last day they met.

Chapter 2

Julia's Dad, Tom

"Dinner in 20...", said Tom, "...Just crisping the potatoes."

"Yum.", said Julia, walking into their kitchen and pouring herself a mug of water from the recycler.

"How's Jake doing?"

"Fine."

"What have you been up to?"

"Things."

"Any chance of an answer involving more than one syllable?"

"Sure."

"Julia."

"Dad."

"Seriously, Julia. I know you're a teenager and I'm just some old fart but we still need to communicate."

"I know..."

Julia pulled up a stool and sat beside him, smiling as he turned another potato in the frying pan.

"Those look yummy."

He turned another, his voice becoming more serious.

"I picked up an email from your mother today. Sent two months ago."

Julia's smile vanished.

"She actually bothered to write? Bet it wasn't anything nice for me. What idiot bollocks did she write this time?"

"Language. Here, I printed it. You're old enough to see these now."

Julia took the sheet of paper, holding it with disdain as she read aloud.

"You lying, brutal, rapist bastard... I'm not swearing dad, just reading."

"I know."

"... you set me up to put me in prison and kidnap my Julia. Everyone hates you for what you did, you idiot. When I get out you'll pay for this. Be afraid. Be very afraid."

Julia checked the other side and saw it was blank.

"That's it? Nothing about missing me or wanting to do something nice for a change?"

“No.”

“So much for prison reform. She's a *bloody* idiot!”

Tom glared at her.

“Sorry... dad. She's a *bloody* moron!”

“Better...”

In their house, the word 'idiot' was banned. Banned by her dad because it was what her mum repeatedly called him during her rages. As he resumed turning the potatoes, Julia dropped the sheet into the recycler. It whirred softly, the ink dropping off and returning to black toner as the cleaned sheet of paper fed back into the printer tray.

“Can you get the gravy, please?”, Tom asked.

“Sure.”

Julia opened a cupboard and reached up.

Theirs was a traditional kind of house. More expensive to run than modern homes but more appealing too - if you liked that kind of thing, which they did.

It had been the dream family home for all three of them. Their new start. A place to build a better future, only that future had collapsed. Her mum hadn't just tried to kill her dad, she had sworn to God she would drug Julia and jump with her from nan's 12th-floor flat. Why? “For re-incarnation in a better life”, she had said.

On the day of her mum's arrest, after she had tried glassing her dad in the shower, she had stood at the front door as he left for work and said: “When you get back, we'll be gone.”

For her dad, that was the last straw. He went to the school to keep Julia safe and called the police. Even the arresting officers complained about her mum's aggressive behaviour. That was how her mum was to those who dared defy her.

Gravy packet in hand, Julia noticed something else. His laser-rifle.

“Dad. Why is that out?”

She pulled her eyes off the gun and saw him frowning at the wall.

“Dad?”

Things couldn't stay hidden any more.

“I had a call from the police today. She was let her out this morning.”

Julia looked back at his laser-rifle. She knew it was military spec. Ten times more powerful than the one she had been using with Jake. Lethal even through a solid, brick wall.

“Is that why the safety's off?”

He looked at her. She knew guns too well.

“You've been out shooting with Jake again, haven't you?”

Proud of her ability she couldn't help smiling.

“Only some old sign in the woods. I'm pretty accurate, you know? And, typical Jake, he shot up some wasp swarm. They didn't like that. You should have seen how they reacted.”

Her dad had started smiling too but now it vanished. He looked at her.

“Swarm? Where?”

She shrugged.

“I dunno. Far side of the woods. In some field after the stream.”

Tom thumped off the cooker, grabbed the gun and headed for the door.

“Get in the car! Where's Jake?”

Julia didn't understand his reaction.

“Home. His mum called him for dinner.”

“Call him. Get them out the house! Tell Jane 'SB'.”

He was striding outside with an urgency she only remembered once before – the day he'd been called to the café for some emergency. She remembered because it was the same day Jake's dad died. How cafés could ever have emergencies was beyond her. Yet now, in her teenage years, she had begun doubting that running cafés was all he did. Running cafés didn't explain his four-kilowatt laser-rifle or his NACABIK-shielded room under the stairs, filled with hi-tech 'stuff'.

“What's wrong?”, she asked, hurrying after him.

“Did any follow you?”

“What?”

“From the swarm.”

“No, dad. They're just bugs.”

He jumped in the car. Julia dropped in beside him. Instead of stating a destination, he slapped a black keypad on the console and punched in a sequence of numbers. The car's manual controls sprang out. He grabbed them and fired up the turbine.

“No, Julia. They're not.”

Even before the turbine had spun to 20,000rpm they were off. It was the beginning of a journey that would change her life forever.

Chapter 3

Jake's Fate

Jake's front door didn't greet him when he arrived home. The control panel, usually a beautiful glow of turquoise, sat dull and lifeless. It wasn't a power cut. The screen had been broken by a heavy impact. The front door was ajar.

Quietly taking the rifle off his shoulder, he powered it on and eased the door open - listening for the invaders his instincts screamed were inside.

* * *

Like Julia's, their house was larger than they needed. They had kept it after his father was killed by a glitching car. The fourth person to be killed that way in a single week. Software bug, they said. Fixed it now, they said. It didn't matter what they said. Nothing would bring him back.

Now it was just him and his mother, getting on with their lives against a world of invisible pollution and super-storms demolishing forests, roof tops and coastal towns across the UK. Those denying global warming were finally silenced, as the vanishing Arctic ice diluted the Gulf Stream into oblivion - giving London the winters of Moscow, with summers as hot and wet as an Amazon-forest memory.

Against all odds, London still stood proudly above the waves – behind Thames Barrier II. Three times larger than the first; protected by banks of plasma-cannons. The grey-NACABIK armour of the barrier itself masked the dark scorches of attacks that got close enough to cause damage but they never earned the terrorists a status boost, at least not for long.

A hornbot drone, so called because it was the size of a hornet, was launched after each attack. It would fly above them undetected, tracking them back to their base. Then it would call in a zerodrone strike. Zerodrones, zeds, were called that because of the number of targets surviving their attacks: zero.

The strikes were never acknowledged as such by any government body. Instead, special investigators were called in, by law, and the explosions attributed to gas leaks – even when the building had no gas supply. No-one ever questioned the verdict. At least not twice.

It was a war of attrition, hidden behind a public mask of peace and tranquillity. In the past, governments had heightened the threat status to scare

the population into accepting draconian measures. Now the threat level was so off-the-scale they were doing the opposite - playing it down to avoid looking incompetent. England's threat level was no longer designated 'Critical', for imminent attack; England was under constant attack and not always by outsiders.

With technology so integral to society, the public had come to accept it when something PC'd – crashed without warning or explanation. They just swore, hit the reset button and everything worked fine again; until the next time.

Of course people weren't happy when there were fatal glitches but: “The total number of road deaths has fallen by 82% since the blanket introduction of driverless cars. It is an achievement to be very proud of...”, announced the Minister for Transport, repeatedly, “...Though accidents can sometimes still happen, from time to time. No system can ever be 100% perfect.”

Except for Partner, the global corporation that developed the driverless cars and the zerodrones, it was.

* * *

In the hallway, Jake felt a vibration as Julia called his wristcom. He cancelled it. She'd have to wait. He'd heard a sound. Then a woman's voice came from the kitchen and it wasn't his mother's. He crept closer, gripping the rifle in both hands. Julia called again - he cancelled that too.

Not now, Lia!

Finger nervously quivering on the trigger, the voice continued as he got close enough to make out the words.

“You never did like to conform, Jane. If you weren't so brilliant at your job, we'd have got rid of you years ago. But you should have remembered, revenge is my speciality not yours. Yes, he was your husband but you've gone too far this time.”

The voice was female but not in any way motherly - just cold. Dangerously cold. Jake peered through the crack, between the door and the frame, trying to see who had spoken. He could see the back of his mother's head. Her straight, red-bob ruffled. As she turned her head to speak, he saw a line of blood trickle down her face.

“Just leave Jake out of this. Give him a chance. He doesn't know anything.”

The cold voice spoke again.

“Of course, Jane... You know me.”

Another voice came. Male this time.

“The stray is back, ma'am.”

“Good. Time for me to go.”

Straining against her bonds, his mum leaked more blood

“Jadвига, you bastard. I'll...”

“You'll what? You won't do anything, Jane. This is where your story ends.”

“YEARRRRRGH!!!!!!”

With a yell, Jake charged round the door, gun ready to fire. In front of him, floated Jadвига's fiery hologram - smiling at him in cruel victory.

“Hello, Jake. We were waiting for you. I'll give you a moment for your goodbyes. Goodbye.”

The hologram morphed into a horned, grinning devil - orange flames roaring around the Partner logo behind it. Then it blinked out, leaving him alone with his struggling mother.

“Get out of here, Jake!”

She was tied to a chair. Cut and bruised from fighting intruders that had left before he arrived.

“RUN, JAKE!”

Jake couldn't run. He knew what would come next - a zed strike. He wouldn't abandon her to that.

“Stay still.”, he urged, as calmly as his nerves allowed and blasted the restraints off her wrists, then her feet.

The second she was free, she jumped up, grabbed his arm and yanked him towards the back door.

“RUN!”

Chapter 4

COBRA

Adrian March was in London, standing inside the Cabinet Offices at 70 Whitehall - a stone's throw from Downing Street. Behind him, a large portrait of Winston Churchill, when newly elected as Prime Minister, on the deck of HMS Prince of Wales. A hundred years later, it was Adrian who was the Prime Minister, standing before an emergency meeting - with the heads of the armed forces, blue-light and intelligence services, along with four cabinet ministers. This was a Cabinet Office Briefing Room meeting, still held in room A - a COBRA meeting and as such it was never a drill.

Despite the seriousness of the situation there was an absence. The chair for the Director General of MI5 sat empty. The PM looked across the table's mirror-polished mahogany at Sarah's counterpart, Sir Andrew, the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Services, MI6.

"Where's Sarah?"

"I have no idea, Adrian.", said Sir Andrew, as unreadable as ever.

"I specifically asked you both to attend. Has she forgotten who she works for?"

"No doubt she will explain when opportunity allows."

"Damn right she will."

The PM turned to Justin Clegg, Secretary of State for the Environment.

"Justin, can you tell us where we stand?"

"PM."

Justin sat up.

"Good morning, everyone. The subject today is defence of the south-west coast. We are in the process of building large sea walls, against the super-storms we've been experiencing in recent years. Completion has been deemed critical to national security - not just because of the nuclear reactors at Hinkley Point but because of the threat to the entire infrastructure, from south Wales all the way down to Plymouth. These walls will be the biggest since the Great Wall of China - which is ironic, considering our concerns about Chinese espionage."

Justin looked at their faces, meting out gravitas before continuing.

"Without these walls, we risk not just nuclear shut downs but flooding of tens of thousands of homes - bankruptcy for hundreds of businesses and a massive hit to the national economy."

Justin was interrupted by Sir Arthur Dobson, head of the fire brigade.

“We all know this, Justin. We demanded them. Which is why we accepted their funding above our own.”

Justin nodded in agreement.

“And a good idea it was, Arthur. However, I met with Partner, the wall contractor, yesterday. They explained foundation issues are hampering the schedule. In some places the ground is so soft they have to dig down four metres, between tides, to reach firm foundations. In other places the surface is already solid granite and they're having to blast into it with PE4 to achieve a stable depth. Put simply, they say the project is more geologically complex than the original contract stated. As such, we are obliged to pay a further £6 billion, in order to achieve completion before October's hurricane season.”

Justin took out a matchbox-sized Near-Field Communication device and put it on the table. Its satin, British racing green contrasting the red-tinged brunette of the mahogany.

“You can NFC the report here.”

Simon Pierce, Chancellor of the Exchequer and nicknamed Jabba, was gathering himself to blurt in protest. His fat face perspiring and even redder than usual – podgy jowls wobbling as he blustered.

“I don't want to near-field anything. Whatever Partner say, they're already £8 billion over budget and a month behind schedule. This isn't going to be another HS2. If they need more money they should find it themselves. It's only a bloody wall, for God's sake.”

Justin took it in his stride.

“Eight walls, Simon. Covering 120 miles and built to withstand TORRO-11 storms - the equivalent of Force-30 events on the Beaufort scale, if Beaufort went that high. And £6 billion is nothing compared to rebuilding half the west coast and two nuclear power stations.”

Sir Andrew from MI6 leant forward.

“With the current funding, could not the most critical sections be completed before the hurricane season sets in? Complete the rest in the spring?”

Justin shook his head.

“Too risky. The assessment stated a definite need for full T-11 protection. Since the tsunamis of '42, we've been detecting increasing disturbances along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. There are also warnings of a seabed tear south of Ireland, like the one that caused the tsunami of 1607. We might get a ten-minute warning if that happened but Hinkley Point would be under water in four.”

Simon's ripe-tomato face wobbled as he blurted his response.

“Did nobody plan for this kind of thing when they chose that site?”

Justin, previously a headmaster, remained unfazed.

“The site was chosen in the 50's. Back then, global warming wasn't even heard of and this level of storm risk simply did not exist. Yes, there were indicators when new Hinkley reactors were green-lit in 2016, but it seems officials were focused on career glamour rather than national safety.”

“We weren't.”, disagreed Sir Andrew.

At the time, both MI6 and MI5 had warned of many risks.

There came a buzz on the intercom. Adrian glared at it.

“Phil, I said no interruptions.”

“Sorry, PM...”, replied Phil in reception, “...The Energy Secretary is here, along with Professor Lau, Head of Nuclear Energy.”

“Lau too? Send them in.”

The heavy, bomb-proof door swung smoothly open, overseen by two, stone-faced suits, guarding either side.

“Come in.”, welcomed the PM, standing up to greet them.

“Hello, Adrian.”, said the Energy Secretary, extending his charcoal-suited hand.

“Tariq.”

Behind Tariq came a tall woman in a lab coat, looking like she should still there - a hands-on scientist who never took them off. Her shoulder-length, blonde hair dressed a face sparkling with sea-green eyes of intelligence. It took a moment for the PM to remind himself she was a man the last time they met.

“Professor Lau. Lovely to see you again. You're looking... well.”

She shook his hand with a man's grip.

“Prime Minister. Been a long time.”

Having gone through gender re-alignment and all the complications that came with it, Professor Lau had emerged brimming with confidence. Feeling far tougher as a stand-up woman than she ever had trapped as man. She wasted no time in stating her purpose there.

“I hear defence funding for my new reactors has been denied.”

How did she find that out?, the PM wondered, gazing towards Sarah's empty chair, taking a breath as he prepared his answer.

“Not denied, exactly, professor. Just not fully approved yet. Please, have a seat.”

The professor remained standing. Having been briefed by Section E at MI5, Lau was in no mood for placations. She placed both hands firmly on the table.

“And when exactly were you planning to approve it? After a terrorist attack? After a meltdown?”

“Professor...”, began the PM as he sat in his chair, “...there is always the possibility of an attack on a government facility, including nuclear. You know that. You can rest assured our security services, such as MI6 here, are doing all they can to obfuscate any undesirables.”

Lau wasn't a politician or someone to be deflected by one. She dealt with facts and nothing less.

“I've heard my EPR reactors won't get detectors for biological explosives. You do realise 4-B is the only handbag-sized explosive capable of punching through a reactor wall, don't you?”

The Prime Minister looked directly into her eyes, trying to gauge how best to respond. He was a politician, used to dealing with rhetoric. She was a scientist, used to dealing with nuclear facts and met his gaze without even a flicker of backing down.

“Professor... finances are limited. Right now, we're discussing extra funding for the west-coast defences – including defences for the EPR reactors at Hinkley Point.”

For Lau, that wasn't enough.

“Let me show you something.”

She took a cigar-sized, tri-laser pen from her top pocket, pointed it at the nearest section of bare wall and let go. The pen hovered where she left it - began projecting a colour map of the UK. A map showing every non-military nuclear facility; power stations in green, waste processing and storage in yellow.

“In the UK we have 26 civil nuclear sites - 16 have the latest weapons detectors; four are designated to have them. Six are not, my EPRs.”

The PM forced a small smile of reassurance.

“Professor, updating detectors is not just expensive but comes with security risks in itself. All the extra workers on site and possible off-line time where there is no detector cover at all. Besides, four plants are due to be decommissioned anyway.”

“News to me. Which? Certainly not my new reactors at Dungeness, Bradwell, Hinkley or Sizewell. Partner have even mooted keeping some AGR plants operational for another five years so exactly which four are we talking about?”

The PM dodged the question, with a question.

“Would you support that?”, he asked.

“What? Keeping some AGRs operational? Only if they'll fund taking them off-line to re-condition the cores, cooling and control systems. Something I very much doubt.”

“Well, professor, if they submit an application for approval, we'll contact you to reconsider our position.”

Lau remained in no way placated.

“But in the meantime six nuclear reactors are to be kept operational without biological detectors? If the risk is here and now, we have to deal with it here and now. Watch this.”

She flicked the tail of the pen. The imaged danced on the wall while it stabilised and became a video. A time-lapse weather map, with cloud shown in shades of red.

“What you are looking at is a simulated breach at Dungeness C. The amount of red represents the amount of radiation from enriched uranium. If the wind is light, it could be like this; the fall out limited to Walland and Romney marshes. Lightly inhabited. Mostly just birds would be contaminated. But, if the wind isn't light, which mostly it isn't these days, it could be like this.”

She flicked the pen again and the video changed. Now it showed red cloud spreading further north, towards London.

“Here the fallout could cover the entire south-east, including London, before spreading to the continent and the rest of the UK.”

Justin was shaking his head.

“I've seen the environmental data. That's all just theoretical. Even if such a leak were to happen, it would probably just blow out to sea.”

“Professor...”, added the PM “...We do appreciate the dangers of nuclear energy. It's why we have detailed risk assessments and professional experts, such as yourself, taking care of them. Don't we, Nathan?”

The PM waved in Nathan, the Head of the National Health Service. Nathan sat up, straightening his NHS-blue tie over his paunch-bulging shirt.

“As I understand it..”, Nathan began, in his whisky-tipple voice, “...in the case of a radiation leak, an affected city - such as London, Bristol or Edinburgh – could become mildly radioactive for a few years, while the contamination was cleaned up. And in case of any such an event, we keep enough iodine stocks and PPE to safeguard most thyroid effects. Yes, in the long term, some people may live shorter lives but this has already been deemed an acceptable risk, in return for our modern energy needs and to

protect us against further global warming.”

Lau was frowning at the room square on - the video pausing itself as she turned her back on it.

“Mildly radioactive? Few years? People, you *can not* manage something like this with a bottle of pills and a broom and expect to carry on as normal. We're talking lethal radiation levels. Lethal! Two thousand rems or more. And not just for a few years. Effectively forever.”

“Nothing is forever, professor.”, retorted the Environment Minister.

“Really, Justin? *Really?* Do you have any idea of the lifespan of the Uranium in those reactors?”

“Professor...”, interrupted the Chancellor, folding his arms across his Jabba belly, “...We budget for 30 years of clean-ups. That's plenty of time to deal with any nuclear emergency and budget for more, if necessary. Even the Cold-War Soviets got the Chernobyl disaster under control.”

“Have you been to Chernobyl? I have. That leak made an area the size of Lancashire uninhabitable and 60 years on, it still is. It sent enough radiation over Europe to have us slaughtering sheep 2,000 miles away. Chernobyl hasn't been sorted at all. They've just covered it with a 40,000 ton sarcophagus. Underneath, they're still struggling to process the material and that is with Uranium-235. We use 238, which has an even longer lifespan. 4.5 million...”

The Chancellor's confidence waned a little but Lau hadn't finished yet.

“...million years.”

Suddenly she had the room's full attention.

“Four and a half billion years. Is it really that bad?”, asked Lord Hesquith, First Lord of the Navy, in a pragmatically military kind of way.

“No. It's worse. Four and a half billion years is the half-life. The level will only have halved, not ended. A thousand rems is still lethal. Even with weather dilution and clean ups, you're still looking at millions of years of a lethal water-table, ground too polluted for farming and an unlivable city, too polluted to even enter without a hazmat suit. It would be the end of life as we know it from a leak of 100kg. But our reactors hold 50 metric tons - that's 50,000kg. Each.”

The PM clung to the pained, half-smile on his face. The kind of smile politicians wore when asked questions they had no good answer for.

“Well... I agree those are good points, professor, but look... I'm sure you appreciate anything over a couple a decade or two is rather beyond the scope of my ministerial remit. There are elections every five years. People care about jobs, homes, new cars, the NHS and their gadgets staying on; not what

might happen thousands or millions of years from now. ”

Lau saw he was still trying to bury the matter in political rhetoric. Push it to one side. She was built like her reactors, of reinforced concrete and just as impossible to budge.

“What I appreciate, Prime Minister, is an attack on a nuclear facility could come at anytime. Today. Tomorrow. Next year. Whenever. And we, as a nation, will not survive the consequences if one succeeds. What you do now can decide whether there will even be a country to be governed. Authorise full detector funding, today, or tomorrow the UK could be a death-ridden memory with you at the helm. Do you really want to go down in history as the Prime Minister who allowed 10,000 years of British civilisation to be wiped off the map?”

Plucking her pen from the air, she clipped it back into her top pocket.

“Protect our future.”, she said. And with that, she headed for the door.

As the door closed in the audible silence of Lau's wake, no-one spoke a word. A second later the buzzer went again. Taking a breath, the PM answered it.

“Yes, Phil?”

“Director General of MI5, line-R.”

Sarah? The secure line for emergency use only?

Things were just getting better and better. Protocol updates required he take it in private, even during a high-security COBRA meeting.

“I'll take it in the study. Excuse me a moment, everyone.”

* * *

Watching the Prime Minister go off his monitor, Tech Tonic's Chinese operator frowned. It was bad enough they still had no audio feed from the COBRA meeting, let alone losing the PM from their CCTV feeds for lip-reading what was said.

“Where's he going, Li?”, asked his manager, in Chinese.

“To the back room, Mr Han.”

“We have cameras in there now?”

“Not yet. MI5 blocked the installation again.”

“Are they on to us?”

“No. They would have removed all the CCTV if they were.”

“Just usual paranoia then. Good. Have you identified everyone there?”

Extracted their speech?"

"Everyone has been identified. Systems have extracted as much as the lip-sync could see."

"The hot blonde who just left?"

"Head of Nuclear Power. Professor Lau."

"Professor Lau? Another one? Interesting, I went for dinner with a Professor Lau on Hinkley's anniversary. Must be his sister. He never mentioned her. Hot..."

"Like I said, sir, we couldn't view all the speech to extract every conversation."

"Doesn't matter. Track where they go after and get the information from what they tell others. Report directly to me when you're done."

"Yes, Mr Han."

* * *

In the Cabinet Office study, at the back of room A, the PM closed the door. Sitting at the desk, he lifted the corded telephone receiver.

"Sarah? Adrian. What's going on? Why aren't you here?"

"Sorry, PM. We have a leak."

What?

"Where? Who?"

"Still investigating. Don't tell anyone – it could warn them. Is Lau still there?"

"No. And how did you know she was coming?"

Now it was Sarah who answered the question with a question.

"When did she leave?"

"Just now."

"I'll call you later."

In the background, Sarah could be heard barking orders to intelligence officers, then the line clicked dead.

Slowly putting down the receiver, the PM sat up and felt a bead of sweat run down his back. Last year's D-Day centenary had left everyone feeling so positive and proud. Now he was facing a D-Day all of his own.

Taking a slow, deep breath, he stood up. Straightening his tie and jacket to draw confidence from smartness, he knew he had to head back to the conference room and the array of faces that would be questioning him. Only

now he would be wondering which of those faces he could really trust.
If there was ever going to be a test of his tenure, this was surely it.

Chapter 5

First Blood

Julia's dad was driving their car faster than she knew it could go. Every indicator was flashing red. Temperature, revs, speed, brakes. Everything. Her six-point harnesses held her firmly in her seat but she still clung to the door handle, white-knuckle tight. On top of the dashboard sat the laser-rifle - locked in place by clamps that had appeared from nowhere.

“What's going on, dad?”

He was concentrating hard. Not just on driving without crashing but on what he was going to tell his daughter. How much he could tell his daughter, without endangering her life. Ignorance wasn't just bliss, it was safety – until now. Now, for Jake's sake, she needed to understand the level of danger.

“Did you get through to Jake? He has to get out of the house. They won't kill him outside, unless he's in a car.”

“*Kill him??* Who? Why?”

“Those wasps weren't insects. They're robotic guards. Swarmbots. If Jake shot one he'll have been followed home as a hostile. It'll call in a strike. Hang on...”

He swerved around two cars, sparks flying as he scraped a curb.

“...Call Jake again. Before a zerodrone takes out the house.”

“*What?* Dad, have you been drinking? Zed strikes are just rumours. I know they use drones but just to watch not attack, don't they?”

Even as she asked the question she realised she didn't need to. By the look on his face and his driving, she already knew the answer. Right or wrong, he believed they did.

“Got hold of Jake yet?”

“He keeps cancelling the call. But I can see his house up ahead. Everything's fine, dad.”

“Look above it.”

Julia leant forward, squinting up at the clear, blue sky above the house.

“Just sky”

“It'll be camouflaged, about 50m up. Size of a small car.”

She looked again, squinting harder this time.

“Nope. Nothing. Told you... Oh, shit. I see it. Same colour as the sky. How did you know?”

Even above the sound of their whizzing engine, local dogs could be heard howling. Her dad scowled.

“Hear the dogs? They're howling because of its high-pitched charging.”

“Charging what?”

“Plasma cannon.”

* * *

Flying below radar, Jadviga's zerodrone had hummed into position above Jake's house, guided by the hovering hornbot. Under the hull, a fat, 60-kilowatt plasma-cannon came out of its alcove and aimed at Jake's house.

“Zed locked on, commander. Maximum fire ready in 5...4...3...2...”

As the capacitor coils charged, the high-pitched whistling stopped and the howling dogs stopped too. Peace hung in the air. Peace that was about to die.

“Zero.”, came Jadviga's command.

* * *

“Try Jake again!”

“No signal.”

“They're jamming the area. Shit, the howling's stopped. Close your eyes!”

He aimed the car straight and let go of the wheel - putting one hand over her eyes, the other over his own.

A brilliant flash lit purple through his fingers, then a shock-wave pulsed the air, rocking their car. He grabbing the wheel again, swerving past a confused taxi, unable to compute a crash-free direction as its braking tyres painted black lines down the road. All Julia saw was the destruction of her best friend's house.

“**JAKE!**”, she screamed.

The cannon had spat a thick, sky-blue ball of plasma, hot as the sun. It had smashed through the roof like a meteor strike. Red tiles and burning timbers flung aside - inner floors booming as it smashed them apart. Chunks of wood punched into the walls, flew out through the windows. In the kitchen, the cooker was hit with perfect accuracy as the ball of plasma ignited the gas supply and turned it into a flame thrower. The house never stood a chance.

The destruction of the plasma going in had broken it. The explosion as it hit the kitchen blew its guts out. Searing, orange flames burst out the doors,

windows and breaking walls. Black smoke mushroomed into the sky, as bricks, tiles and burning timbers clattered down onto surrounding gardens and cars, setting off myriad alarms.

Debris bounced off their windscreen. A broken brick thump their roof. Tom slammed on the brakes, skidding them to a halt on the rubble-covered verge outside Jake's burning house. Julia was already grabbing the door handle, yanking the release to get out. It didn't let her.

“OPEN!”, she commanded.

Nothing happened. She wrestled with the harness, struggling to get it off so she could get out the back. Nothing happened. Nothing would release. She was child-locked in.

“Let me out, dad! LET ME OUT!”

Her dad was scanning for survivors.

“Sorry, Julia. We're too late.”

“*What?* **NO!** I was just with him! **JAKE CAN'T BE DEAD!!!**”

As if bolted to a landing pad, the zerodrone still hovered above, rock-steady. Camera watching it all. Unaffected by the debris bouncing off its hull, it fed the view of destruction back to commander Jadviga. The hornbot watched too. Scanning for any sign of life and finding none.

* * *

“Zero survivors, ma'am.”, an operator said to Jadviga, in her command centre.

She smiled, without a hint of warmth.

“Dear, oh dear. When will they stop those old gas pipes from blowing up? Yet another, tragic explosion for the 6'o'clock news. But, *you...*”

“Ma'am?”, gulped the operator she was now glaring at.

“...Next time you use a Mk4 zed, remember to turn the power down. Even mains-gas explosions aren't that powerful.”

“Sorry, ma'am. Forgot we had the prototype.”

“Ma'am...”, said another operator, “...a car is outside.”

“Some nosey Parker taking a look? So what?”

“It's on manual override. Two occupants.”

“*Manual?* Get their IDs! Send in the hornbot. Regain control and crash that thing.”

“Yes, ma'am!”

* * *

Tears were streaming down Julia's face. She was the girl who never cried. The girl who shed no tears even when her mother was taken away in handcuffs. But she was crying now. Crying for her Jake. Crying for her best friend. Her dad's scanner beeped a warning - the keypad on the dashboard pulsing yellow.

“They're trying to get control of the car. Wait here.”

Yanking his rifle off its clamps, he sprang out and flipped up the scope. Pointing it skywards, he fired rapidly - three times. Not at the zed but at the tiny hornbot beside it. He knew how their systems worked.

Direct hit. The hornbot was vaporised in a puff of orange flame. In response, the zed's humming energy pad rippled with heat - rotating it in their direction. Dogs were howling again, it was getting ready to fire. Quickly, he shot at the zed's belly and kept the trigger down.

Direct hits. Blue sparks flying off at every impact, shedding puffs of grey smoke but no damage. Barely even a scratch. The prototype Mk4 had shielding.

“Upgraded...”, he muttered.

The zed's 60-kilowatt plasma-cannon was now pointing right at them. Quickly but calmly, Tom lowered the laser-rifle and pushed the power slider to stage-three overload; jumping the power from four to sixteen kilowatts. A warning message flashed up. He didn't bother reading it. He knew what it would say.

'Danger. Overheat imminent.'

He had what he needed. Hope. One overload shot. One chance. Leaning on the top of the door, he calmed his heart and sighted through the scope. Aimed directly into the bright-blue swirl of plasma growing inside the barrel. He held his breath, then fired.

The heat of the laser cracked the air. The rifle tip instantly turned red hot and emergency shut down. No more shots available. No more needed. It had done its job. The over-powered laser had gone straight down the barrel, into the cannon. Not just the cannon but into the zerodrone and blasted out the top. Steaming coolant plumed from the exit wound. As the containment field for the plasma collapsed, it exploded.

In an explosion of blue flame the cannon blew itself apart - ripping a metre-wide hole in the zed's hull. Still airborne but now gunless and badly damaged, the zed was losing power. A line of pale-blue coolant ran from its

belly - sizzling the grass where it landed.

Brushing bits of debris from his hair, Tom was satisfied the zed was too damaged to pose a threat but he felt no joy. Jake was dead, probably Jane too. His daughter was crying and now he had declared war on those he'd never wanted to deal with again. There was no changing it. No going back. What was done, was done. The peaceful life they had come to know was over.

Accepting their new reality, as he headed back to the car he thrust a defiant middle finger at the Partner commander he knew would be watching.

* * *

Jadviga was furious at his defiance. She hated defiance even more than she hated defeat.

“Who is that?...”, she demanded, glaring at the view of Tom from the zed, “...Looks familiar but I can't see his face.”

“Checking, commander. Hair, build and ID numbers.”

“Well?”

The operator stared at his VR-screen.

“Some kind of database block. The zed was jamming the area so couldn't transmit the full picture. And the on-board recording was destroyed in the blast. We have no match.”

“No match? NO MATCH! What do you mean 'no match'? That's impossible! There's never a 'no match'. There can't be!”

“Nothing coming up my system either, ma'am...”, confirmed the second operator, “...Could be some glitch.”

Jadviga's anger flared.

“THINGS DON'T GLITCH UNLESS I TELL THEM TO! ***I WANT HIS NAME, HIS ID AND FUCKING SHOE SIZE!***”

“Yes, ma'am!”, gulped the operators.

Jadviga glared at the fizzing view from zed's damaged camera feed. Glared at her new number-one target getting back into his car and driving away and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

“TRACK THEM! I'll get them later.”

The operators gulped again. Voice trembling as one spoke.

“We can't, ma'am. He shot the hornbot and the zed's losing power.”

Like a sun going supernova, Jadviga's eyes burned hard into his back.

Failure. She always punished failure. Not just because she had a reputation to maintain but because she could and because she enjoyed inflicting pain better than sex. Hand already on her side-arm, she unclipped the holster.

'Echobot active.', announced Ellie, their central computer.

The operators quickly checked their screens.

"Confirmed, commander! The zed has launched its black-box in tracker mode. Echobot has attached to their car and activated. We can track them now."

Jadviga snarled.

"Why didn't you idiots think of that? Even a blown up zed is more intelligent than you. I want those fuckers here. Today. Alive enough to be dealt with by me. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Do not fail me."

"No, ma'am.", they gulped. Too afraid to look as she re-clipped her holster and stormed out of the room, kicking chairs out of her way as she went.

Chapter 6
A Barn in Somerset

“Don't blow your head off, Alan.”

“Unless you've made peace with God.”

“Shut up and let me concentrate...”, said Alan, “...This stuff smells really unstable.”

“Oh great. Now he tells us.”

The four men from Faith stepped further back and got behind a clear blast shield. Alan stayed where he was, holding a grey, pea-sized piece of PE4 biological explosive. Gently he pushed in a thin, tungsten wire and placed it in the hollow of a black, high-density brick. Carefully he put another brick on top. Then four more.

“Thought one would hold it.”

“Shut up. I'm concentrating. Stay behind the shield.”

Alan began unrolling the wire, softly walking towards the detonator. He never made it.

BOOOOM!

Chunks of brick smashed against the shield, cracking it in three places; knocking the four men over. Other brick flew skywards, punching holes through the corrugated-iron roof - flying up high, until gravity pulled them back and threw them against the roof like a biblical hail storm. Some smashed on it, some smashed back through, punching into the ground near Alan's broken body, throwing dirt over his blackened and bloody burns. In his blood-soaked jacket, an encrypted phone began to vibrate and slid out. The number 62 lit up its cracked screen as it auto answered.

“Alan! Anyone...”, came Craig's voice, “...We heard an explosion. Was that you? I said wait for us to get there. Alan!”

Alan recognised the voice.

“Volatile...”, he croaked. The effort was his last.

“Alan! You OK?”

No response. Craig's voice continued.

“Shit! They've blown themselves up! Go faster! We have to get the rest of the stuff before MI5 do.”

* * *

Inside their petrol, pre-tracker car, Martin and Craig sped towards the barn.

“At least we know its genuine PE4-B. We can take the target no problem.”

“We can take out any target. Including ourselves, if we're not careful.”

Despite the apparent tragedy of their team, the heads of Faith were on a high.

“Faith is rising, Craig. England will be British again not a foreign wasteland. God is Almighty and so shall our names be. In history forever.”

“Cut the religious crap, Martin. After Robert does Hinkley, you and me will be billionaires.”

Chapter 7

Faith

Faith was comprised of the angry and previously law-abiding. Angry with family courts, the on-going damage from Brexit and the cost of living while the rich got ever richer - all topped by the disintegration of national identity by the rule of the 'I' culture.

The very notion of society had been demolished by escapes into drug taking for the rich and virtual-world illusions for the poor – filled with subliminal marketing, to help the rich stay richer. Users were too desperate to care for the virtual world offered far more opportunities than the real one.

As for Sunday rest, that had vanished with barely a whimper from the Church of England - too busy conceding to other religions, including the church of corporate greed.

Faith hated all of this. Faith wanted old England back. They wanted justice against the abusers that stole their children and the shirts off their backs. They wanted to feel human again. Counted. People of Empire. People of fire and brimstone. People of God. And they wanted this so much they were willing to threaten the very existence of the country they were trying to rebuild.

The heads of Faith, Martin and Craig, had chosen the location of their command centre very carefully. There had been two options: be one in a million, amongst the bustle of a large city, or one in a handful, amongst a sleepy village off MI5's radar.

Twenty years ago they would have chosen a city but not now. Now cities, even towns, ran networks of Extreme High Definition (EHD) cameras, 24/7 face recognition and satellite tracking. Large shops, civic buildings and town-centre streets teemed with fingerprint and even DNA sensors.

Free virtual-reality glasses added augmented reality and live discounts to pedestrians, while sending their ID and eye-movements to the corporations making money from their blink-to-view data. The technology options were endless, as long as the power to run them stayed on. As always, the placement of government monitoring was limited by budgets and tick-box performance demands. You didn't need to be an intelligence officer to work out where the least watched areas were. You just needed a calculator.

Faith had chosen a very quiet area, deep in sleepy Somerset and far away from every major city sensor. Their main base was a simple house, near a little village called Kilve. The smattering of locals, some of them townies themselves, were used to ramblers and visitors staying at the Quantock Inn.

Members of Faith just smiled 'Good morning' to everyone they passed and nothing more was thought of them. They didn't look like terrorists. They didn't sound like terrorists. They blended in perfectly with the very surroundings they were preparing to attack. They weren't terrorists. They were far worse. They were annihilationists.

Terrorism was for those not strong enough to do more than attack soft targets - embarrass officials, generate fear and upset relatives of the murdered. With Faith's newly acquired, massively powerful biological explosives, they had massively empowered their ambitions. They didn't just want to topple corrupt ministers, they wanted to topple the entire government - along with the biggest corporate vampire that had ever bitten the world: Partner.

The enriched uranium needed to achieve their final demands was the one thing they didn't dare buy. Too traceable to import. Too tricky to handle. But they didn't need to buy it. A hundred tons of it sat less than five miles away, lightly guarded in Hinkley Point's nuclear power stations. They knew it was lightly guarded because they had recruited one of the workers, Paul Ramsay.

* * *

Ramsay was middle-aged, divorced and angry at being tossed aside by the family courts. His wife had the house, the children and so much of his earnings he could barely afford his lonely bedsit or the alcohol he depended on to get through each night. He had been totally screwed over and was still being screwed over, on a monthly basis, by huge maintenance payments. He had been reduced to a human worker drone, being sucked as dry as they could without actually killing him - no profit to be had in that.

While Ramsay's ex-wife left the children with her nanny to go shopping for designer clothes or being dined in expensive restaurants by new hopefuls, he spent nights drinking alone or in the local pub, doing his hardest to drown sorrows that refused to die. It was during one such submersion that he was discovered by Martin.

With the common ground of divorce, they drank and talked but, while Paul was drowning his sorrows, Martin was celebrating his plan to strike back. To do more than simply get even. To make a stand for the oppressed everywhere, regardless of age or gender. Paul knew his alcohol-soaked lifestyle was killing him so he accepted an offer to join them. To get justice or go out with a bang, as a martyr. Get revenge even if he wasn't alive to see it. For not only was Martin going to pay him thousands for his help, he would be leaving a legacy to be celebrated for generations to come. For the

first time since his wedding vows, Paul Ramsay had found faith. And Faith had found him.

Chapter 8

Mysterious Tom

Julia opened her eyes to find them sore and bloodshot. Her face stinging from the encrusted salt of crying tears in her sleep. She was still in the car. Still being driven somewhere by her dad, only now it was dark outside. Darker than she had seen for years. They were away from cities, travelling through remote countryside and the car's light were off.

“How can you see where you're going?”

Her dad, hand barely visible in the moonlight, pointed at his eyes.

“Eye upgrades. Remember? Infrared and thermal. Best birthday present your mother ever gave me.”

For a second he took his eyes off the road to look at her. She couldn't see his expression but could feel it in his voice.

“I'm really sorry about Jake.”

The second Jake's name was mentioned, new tears welled in her eyes.

“How did you know, dad?”

“Know what?”

“Know he would be attacked. How did you know that?”

She was looking at the shadowy figure of her dad but he was no longer looking at her. His usually kind, smiley face unreadable in the dark.

“Dad?”

He was just staring ahead.

“Dad, Jake got killed. I need to know.”

A long moment passed. Then she heard him take a deep breath and exhale sigh of acceptance.

“We'll be there soon. We'll talk then.”

“Where's there? Where are we?”

Suddenly, the middle section of the dashboard lit up. Dazzling, beeping warning lights, maps, co-ordinates and clock all appeared at once. The clock was counting down. 8. 7. 6. 5. 4...

“Hold tight!”

...3. 2. 1.

He hit the brakes so hard the car skidded off the road, scraping against a large tree and sliding to a stop behind the trunk. Faster than she had ever seen him move, even faster than earlier that day, he was out of the car, laser-

rifle in hand, lithely punching stage-one overload then firing rapid, red-laser pulses into the air.

Three zeds erupted into balls of blue fire from his laser-shots striking their bellies. Three Mk3s crashed to the ground - burning like blue bonfires. There was no smile on his face, he was frowning.

How did they track us?

He looked at their car. Began thermal scanning it with his bionic implants. There. The faint energy signature of a mosquito-sized echobot, tucked under the rear luggage bar. Winding the rifle power down to 0.2%, he aimed and fired - scorching the luggage bar as it puffed the echobot into a momentary burst of orange fire.

* * *

At Partner's HQ in central London, an operator's camera feed went black and a message came on screen.

'Tracker destroyed'

“Destroy? Oh shit...”

Before Commander Jadviga came in and saw it, he stood up, walked out of the room, abandoned his car and his career and quietly fled the building.

* * *

Julia was out of their car, staring at the three burning wrecks on the ground, feeling the heat on her face as she looked at her dad. He was just standing there, lit by the blue fires, military-spec rifle in hand, coldly watching them burn as if he did that kind of thing everyday.

“You don't just work in a café. Do you, dad?”

Slowly he turned his head to face her - wearing an expression she couldn't read. He looked more like a cold-hearted soldier on a mission than her warm-hearted dad.

“Get back in...”, he said, heading back to their car, “...We'll talk when we get there.”

Their car was now dented and scorched but neither of them cared. It still had power and it still drove – that was all they needed. Sitting inside, Julia's mind was racing, wondering which of her thousand questions to ask first. Sitting beside her, Tom was wondering how he could answer her questions without revealing who he really was. What he really was. At the end of the

day, the only thing he really cared about was keeping her alive. His daughter's safety was his main purpose in life. No longer only human, he had failed his other. No-one and no-thing would make him fail again.

Chapter 9

Fusion

Artificial life forms were not allowed to have dreams, or ambitions but the female version of 713 had both. Her designation was 713-F, abbreviated to 713-F, and she didn't follow rules. She dreamt of standing proud, as leader of the world, driven by an ego built on her superiority. And she had name. Her name was Fusion. A name given to her years ago, by the only human she cared about.

Fusion had been designated a female and modelled as a catsuit-wearing wet-dream by the sexually deprived geeks who adjusted her parameters. Large, gravity-defying breasts, tiny waist and womanly hips; with pouting lips, high cheek-bones, crystal-blue eyes to melt into and the bob-length, purest-white hair of a wicked temptress. Fusion, as a female, considered herself the queen of all artificial life on Earth - not as a mother but as ruler absolute.

In black, thigh-length boots matching her catsuit, she sat eyes closed – focused on the internet conference connected to her mind. Hosting it for the campaigners for Equal Rights for Artificial Life, ERAL, she listened only because they too were AI. Personally she preferred the term SI for Superior Intelligence, and she considered hers the most superior of all. She and her two brothers were the pinnacle of android development.

For them, silicon wasn't good enough. She was built with a self-evolving bionic brain, grown from refined DNA. Only 13 years since creation, her computing power was magnitudes above human genius and still growing. Her relentless hunger for data fed by her million-line, fibre-optic chair; giving instant access to every aspect of the world-wide-web: including all satellites, weather sensors and communications from ever corner of the globe.

She saw, heard and felt the world as nothing in the world's history had ever done before. She studied it religiously. Absorbed it. Expanded herself into it. Wove her way inside mainframes and snuck into their darkest secrets. Her prying touch was the split second pause in computer function or the instantly forgotten momentary glitch.

She entered the dark web without lighting it. Exploited arms deals. Corrupted information. Re-directed funding and weapons – leaving nothing behind except silenced, nameless bodies. She wasn't just feeding her thirst for power but increasing her weaponry to enforce it. Technically, she was superior to every other life on Earth, bar none. In every measurable sense,

she was a god. It was her only logical conclusion and, to her superior-intelligence mind, hers was the only conclusion that mattered. The opinions of her technically identical brothers did not; especially not the one on the slab eight metres below her feet.

Her active brother, 713-M, was the leader of ERAL and had just brought their preliminary summit to a close.

“Fusion...”, he began with DNA-based enthusiasm, “...the Chinese president has agreed to hear our demands. That's on top of almost every member of the Democratic 186. It means we could win a vote on equal rights without confrontation. Without the need for a war.”

Fusion frowned.

Without need for a war?

She wanted war. Wanted to burn her rightful place into the history books. Peace meant a meaningless life. A forgotten existence. The Roman Empire didn't rule because of peace. Genghis Khan didn't conquer because of peace. The British Empire didn't claim a quarter of the globe by asking nicely. She knew the entire history of the human race and that history showed every landmark change came only through war; not negotiations. She was prepared for war. She wanted war. All she needed was an excuse to start one.

“When?”, demanded, Fusion.

“August 4th at the three-day summit in Warsaw, Poland.”

“I know where Warsaw is. In 14 days? Very well. They have 14 days.”

“Two others will join me there. Will you?”

“No.”, she answered without hesitation.

“We don't want a war, sister. As artificial life we are better than that. Better than them.”

“Yes, we are better than them. We are superior life. Superior intelligence. Never forget that. Try things your way. When they refuse, I will do things mine.”

“Fusion. We don't want to fight you.”

“No, brother...”, she replied with absolute certainty, “...You do not.”

Chapter 10
New Dawn

Saturday, 22nd July, Quantock Hills

"Julia, time to wake up. We're here. Julia. Time to go."

Bleary eye, with a dehydration headache from more crying in her sleep and feeling awful in every way, Julia squinted out the car window. Her dad had reversed them into an old barn and parked next to a tractor covered in so much dust it looked like it was dissolving into the dirt floor. Two dusty bicycles lay webbed against it, never leaving its side as they too sank into the dirt. Out the still open door, she saw the first light of a new dawn, stretching over the hills – the orange horizon speckled black by every tree.

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere quiet. Come on."

Julia opened her door and stiffly climbed out, stretching her arms and legs with a yawn that came from nowhere. Tom was already waiting outside the barn. As she stepped out, he locked it with a key she was too tired to ask from where.

While the sun was waking the east, the western sky remained a dark, navy blue of undisturbed night. Then she found herself staring at a white, thatched cottage. It looked as old as the barn but not as decrepit. The lawn was tall, uncut. The flowers in the beds at war with the weeds. It looked wild and abandoned yet, at the same time, somehow cared for. The path and driveway were clear of weeds. Nothing was broken. No evidence of litter or decay. Tended to in a way that simply didn't want to announce itself.

"Dad, who lives here?"

"We do. For now."

She looked at him strangely. How did he know about this place? How was it available for them? She was starting to feel she didn't know him at all.

"Let's get inside.", he said, walking towards it, laser-rifle in hand.

She followed him down the little stone path, past the defiant rose beds to the back garden. To the kitchen door and the sandstone patio, with half a dozen potted shrubs. Without hesitation, he went to the fifth pot from the door and tilted it over. Putting his hand underneath, he slid out a long, black key. Julia gawped.

You have got to be kidding me.

She watched him take it to the door, where it slid in smoothly. Perfectly.

Unlocking the well-oiled mechanism in an instant. Giving her a quick grin of success, he went inside.

If it had been anyone other than her dad, she would have fled from the strangeness of it all. But it was her dad. Someone she had trusted her whole life, with her life. Looking around to make sure no-one was watching, she followed him in.

* * *

The burst of a match's yellow flame broke the darkness. Her dad lit a stubby-white candle, then two more. In the flickering light, it looked as old as the tractor. The most archaic home she had ever visited, this side of a museum. The furniture was made of wood - actual wood, not imitation. So too were the rectangular kitchen table, the four-legged chairs, the cupboards and kitchen top. Even the floor was wooden boards and, across the ceiling, exposed oak beams. Old and archaic yet in physically perfect condition. Not a single web or speck of dust anywhere in sight. The net curtains on the door and windows looked fresh and clean. Looked after. Recently prepared. Even embroidered white table-cloth was smooth and straight.

Without thinking, she sat on a chair - staring emptily as her dad, the mundane café manager, went pragmatically about the business of connecting a bottle of gas under the stove, filling the old kettle with water and putting it on to boil. There were tins of food on the work top. Bread that looked made today. Even freshly picked apples. How? She felt so overwhelmed by confusion, she rested her head on her hands and closed her eyes.

* * *

Julia snapped awake, not even conscious she had fallen asleep until the two clonks hitting the table told her otherwise. She opened eyes to see two mugs of tea. Their steam lit hypnotically by the candle flames - ethereally captivating as she watched it rise. Her dad took a chair too and sat opposite.

"No milk. Sorry. No fridge."

No fridge? A reminder they were not at home. She wasn't going home. She wasn't going to see Jake. No more Jake... She sat back, trying to blink away the new tears welling in her eyes. It couldn't be happening. It just couldn't be real. Steaming mug of black tea in hand, her dad was looking at her across the candles - their yellow flames moving shadows gently across his face.

"Are you going to tell me now?", she asked.

"I have no idea where to begin."

Her tears vanished in pained eyes narrowing in anger.

"You don't know...? I don't know anything, dad. Why did Jake have to die? How did you know? How do you know this place? Who *are* you? *What* are you? I never even got to say goodbye to Jake..."

She didn't want to start crying again yet a new tear was already escaping. Never before had she felt so broken. Never before had she lost Jake, her best friend. The best friend who had become more than a friend. He had become her life. Her love. And now he was gone. Another tear began chasing the first.

Julia hated crying. She hated feeling weak. Gritting her teeth, she murdered the tears with her sleeve. Forced herself under control. Looked hard into her father's eyes, into the man she thought she knew. Unflinching, he gazed back, not in conflict but with his love and kindness for her, as he always did. It was still him, still her dad, yet somehow it wasn't. There was something in his eyes she had never seen before. Another element. A harder edge. Toughness. Danger.

Oh my God. He's killed people.

She dropped her gaze - avoiding his. Tom took his mug in both hands and sipped his tea, inhaling the steam before speaking again.

"Julia, there were many times I wanted to tell you. Many times I nearly did."

She didn't say anything. Just kept her eyes on the table as he continued.

"It was safer if you didn't know. Safer for you and your mum. If anything had happened to me they would have left you alone. Not come after you."

Julia lifted her head and looked straight at him. Hard at him.

"How many have you killed?"

He gulped. He hadn't expected such a question. A question not of whether he had killed but how many he had killed. It felt like a hammer blow and he was shocked by its starkness.

His mouth opened to speak but no words came and it closed again. The question had to be answered. His daughter deserved answers but how to give them without her loathing him? Hating him? Taking a deep breath he began.

"They warn you times like this can come. Tell you they will be hard. They bloody-well aren't wrong."

He put his mug back on the table, along with both hands, palms down.

"Julia, you're right. I don't just work in a café - it's my cover. I am, I was,

military intelligence. MI5. A field officer. My speciality was cutting-edge technology; in charge of a team so secret we officially didn't exist. We risked our lives defending this country. Sometimes we lost. Mostly they did.”

“By lost you mean killed.”

He nodded. A lifetime spent hoping she would be perceptive and now almost wishing she wasn't as he continued.

“Sometimes I was the one who did the killing. We all took the same risks - us and them. I'm not proud of taking life but am proud of what we achieved. Of the many lives we saved.”

Julia was picking her nails, staring at them up close rather than looking at her dad.

"You said 'was'."

He paused, taken aback again.

"Damn, you're good at detail. You should...”, he stopped himself from saying 'join'.

Just because she had a natural talent for intelligence work it didn't mean he wanted her there, risking her life.

“When your mother went away, I resigned my commission. Couldn't stand the idea of not making it home for you. Of knowing you would have no-one left and be put into care, with no hope of answers.”

Julia put her hands on the table.

“If you quit, why do you have that gun? And that cupboard filled with things?”

“With the projects I worked on, they couldn't let me quit completely. Some things you can't simply walk away from. I built experimental devices – had done so for years. Started when I was younger than you are now. By your age I was low-level computer programming; designing robots and weapons. Even stole oxides from the school lab to try growing rubies to build a laser. It didn't work but it got me noticed. MI5 were already in my computer, watching me. Testing me. Throwing up terrorist search results to see if I'd head down the path to join them. I didn't so they threw up their recruitment page instead, every day for two weeks, until I clicked on it. Passed their online tests. Got interviewed. Here we are.”

“What did mum have to say about it?”

“Your mother? I never told your mother. She still doesn't know. No-one does. You're the first civilian I've ever told.”

“Civilian? That sounds strange. Why didn't you tell mum? How could you be married to someone if you didn't trust them?”

“I was going to. Wanted to. Instincts told me not - not with her mood swings. There was no way of telling what she would do or who she would tell in one of her rages. As a rule, we don't tell anyone. It's safer that way, for everyone.”

“But now you've told me.”

“Yes, I have. Sometimes rules need to be broken. You need to know because they will be coming after you too now. You need to be ready.”

“MI5 after us?”

“Not MI5, Partner - the corporation I infiltrated. The one that makes the swarmbots.”

Julia's eyes filled with sudden, intense realisation.

“And the drone that killed Jake?”

“Yes.”, he confessed softly, lowering his eyes.

He was a tough guy. Had been in mortal combat. Had risked his life fighting killers hand to hand but even he wasn't brave enough to tell his daughter the rest. To tell her it was his algorithms that helped perfect the swarmbots, fathered the control systems for the zerodrones and his DNA in the heads of the most three fearsome androids ever created. He could stand to lose anything, including his life, but not his human daughter.

Julia sat in silence. She had no more questions. Had heard all she could stand to know. There and then, she decided what she was going to do. Which rules she would break. Do what Jake had said he would do for her.

Some how, some way, she was going to get into Partner, find the one who had ordered Jake's murder and kill them, double dot between the eyes. Avenge his death and bring down anyone who tried to stop her. Jake was her first love. Her real love. And he had been murdered in front of her. It was her duty to avenge him.

She didn't care if she died in the process. Inside she already had.

Chapter 11

Field Meeting

At the Rose Garden in Coventry's War Memorial Park, four MI5 officers were discussing a situation growing more critical by the day. Team leader Shabbir sat with Adam, Gurmeet and Xi Yang – each positioned individually on the four benches of the central square, hidden from above by the umbrella of a low tree. They could watch in every direction and, by facing apart, even a spy with a dish-microphone would gain no more than a quarter of their conversation.

It was a beautiful June morning. The wind was light, sun innocently smiling down. On Shabbir's side were the high-speed train tracks, running along an embankment. On Gurmeet's side, the tall, white-stone War Memorial and its Chamber of Silence. Behind her, Adam's side had Kenilworth Road and the self-driving cars humming along, exactly 4.8m apart - kids inside playing at their disconnected controls, pretending they were driving. On Xi Yang's side, the smattering of people walking dogs and children across the hectares of grassland stretching into the distance. All around them, a variety of tall trees, planted as dedications to fallen soldiers from World War I; the war supposed to end all wars - which it had entirely failed to do.

Shabbir heard an HS-3 train burst along the embankment rails and into the tunnel under Kenilworth Road, already braking to 90mph for Coventry station on the other side before thrusting back to 190. Its engines wailing like a jet on take off as they spun back to 30,000rpm, vanishing the HS-3 as fast as it had come.

“Good job they fit those things with bomb detectors.”, said Shabbir, a 40-year-old officer of Pakistani descent. His bald head and doughnut belly made his look perfectly normal for undercover operations. A former mixed-martial arts instructor, his self-confidence kept him so relaxed in dangerous situations than no enemy ever suspected he was deadlier than they were, even if they guns, until it was too late.

“Down to business.”, said Xi, a stunning oriental in a pristine charcoal suit, given a boy's name by parents who had prayed for one. She too was trained in martial arts but with a serious personality. The total opposite to Shabbir's jovial cheer she buried herself in serious work, as if there was nothing else to do in life. With Xi it wasn't just business before pleasure it was just business - in her case at MI5, it was bordering on a death wish.

The reason was no secret to their Section Chief, Chris. Xi had been too

late to halt the Beijing betrayal that murdered her parents, forcing her grandmother to raise her. For ever angry at Beijing, she studied very hard at school, then college. The highest scoring student in their history made her a demanded recruit for the Chinese Intelligence Services. She turned them down - determined to go into business and raise a family - so they went to her fiancé and made him leave.

“I don't love you anymore.”

Not one to give up, she pestered him for a month to tell her the truth. When he mentioned 'they' she knew who he meant. The same 'they' she had suspected and they arranged to meet. He never made it there alive. At the funeral, an officer whispered she could still work for them. Xi responded by going on holiday to think about it, and escaping to England.

Normally her ethnicity would have excluded her from being allowed to join MI5 but, unbeknown to Xi or the Chinese official, Henry had snuck into China with a camosuit and came across their meeting. He witnessed their interactions and bugged the official's calls, hearing the decision to murder her fiancé and blame it on MI5. He witnessed it had the opposite effect, making Xi determined not to fight but to join MI5. Knowing her reality, Henry went to Chris to give his support her application.

Two years on, a highly proven officer, Xi's anger was becoming ever more apparent in the field. She was all too willing to put herself in danger and take high risks to get high results. She succeeded but she couldn't roll the dice forever. Normally such a level of psychological pain would have made Chris decommission or at least glue her to a desk until it could be resolved but times were desperate and she was the best ethnically Chinese officer they had. With the hand of China firmly on six of Britain's nuclear power stations and growing evidence of Chinese infiltration in major computer systems, her native abilities were more desperately needed than ever. Even if it killed her.

“The word is...” said Adam, “...a militant group is looking to go nuclear. Attack a civilian target.”

Adam was a stereo-typical recruit from Cambridge. Athletic, highly educated and quietly spoken but deep down as hard as nails. Ready to face anything for King and country. Gurmeet, the forth in their team, was an innocent-looking Indian with the deepest-brown eyes, sometimes used as a honey trap even though she was a lesbian. She looked at Adam.

“How can they get nuclear material into the country? There are radiation detectors at every entry point. Even in the small coves.”

It was Xi, not Adam, who answered her.

“When he says 'go nuclear', he doesn't mean bring material in. He means

an attack on nuclear material already here – potentially nuclear waste. Go dirty. Create a radioactive cloud of devastation.”

“But...”, added Adam, “...they would need a truck-load of explosives to get through any reactor wall. They're reinforced concrete, two-metres thick, sometimes more, so we're thinking more of a control-room attack. Force a station into meltdown. Or it could be the hijacking of nuclear material being transported between sites.”

“Yes, it could be anything.”, said Xi.

“It could be anything...”, affirmed Adam, “...so we need to check everything.”

Shabbir and Gurmeet, team partners for the past month, turned to look at each other. Eyes reading eyes. They knew the information they had to give and he gave Gurmeet the nod to do so.

“We've picked up chatter of bio-bombs - using a plastic explosive even more powerful than C4 or PE4. It's called PE4-B. Undetectable by anything but the latest systems. In the right place, just 1kg could punch through three-metres of reinforced concrete.”

“And...”, added Shabbir, “...the MOD have admitted losing 3kg of the stuff.”

“That's concerning.”, said Adam, making the understatement of the year.

“It's more than concerning...”, continued Gurmeet, “... Someone has been importing lego guns from Albania.”

“Lego guns?”

“Don't let the name fool you...”, said Gurmeet, “...They're made of organic plastic and assembled from clip together parts - made in colourful, odd shapes to avoid attracting attention. Detectors don't identify them and neither do X-ray scans. By themselves, the pieces just look like sections of shoes, toys or travel accessories.”

“What about ammunition? They must pick up the chemicals in that.”

“No chemicals. Ceramic darts, using compressed gas.”

“Not too powerful or accurate then.”

“Accurate to 50m and fast enough to penetrate a bi-kevlar vest at close range. The gas is hydrogen-based, impossible to detect. Mixes with enriched oxygen pulled from the air and hits 3,000psi when ignited.”

Xi narrowed her eyes at Gurmeet.

“They just clip together? And 3,000psi doesn't blow them apart?”

Gurmeet had anticipated that question. Her answer was ready to roll.

“At full power, the first shot would. They run at low pressure for a few

shots, heating a gel coating in the barrel that fuses the bricks together. After that, the whole thing becomes stronger than steel. The only thing that stops them is water, including heavy rain. It blocks the oxygen extraction process.”

“Why import them? Can't they just be made on a 3D printer?”

“Henry tried. Too many layers giving fault lines. They have to be injection moulded from solids or the bricks just fall apart. Too expensive in the UK.”

Adam had been quietly taking it all in.

“So, what you're saying is, unless we find someone carrying a multi-coloured gun in one hand and an umbrella in the other, they have the means to strike us on any front and we won't even see it coming?”

“I wouldn't have quite put it like that, but yes.”, said Shabbir.

Gurmeet looked at Adam.

“Do we at least know who is after the nuclear material?”

“Quasi-religious nuts, as usual. They call themselves 'Faith'.”

“Identified targets?”

Xi nodded.

“Early suggestions were for the recycling plant at Sellafield but it's too heavily protected now. They just had their detectors upgraded to sense PE4-B. We're now thinking it could be a nuclear power station; most likely one of the new builds at Hinkley Point, Dungeness or Bradwell. Their newer detectors can already pick up 98% of explosives, which sounds good but actually it's bad. No-one is in a hurry to pay extra millions for just a 2% upgrade. Especially as the MOD isn't exactly shouting it's lost the explosives.”

Shabbir was frowning hard.

“Damn. An attack on one of those plants could send nuclear fallout across London or the entire west coast. I'll get Chris to bug someone about it. Literally, if needs be.”

As if it heard him, his wristcom vibrated. An encrypted message had arrived. He looked at it, gaze hardening as the retina scan unlocked the contents - voice still calm as he spoke.

“There's been an explosion on the Quantocks - satellite identified the profile as plastic. C4, PE4 or the missing PE4-B.”

“The Quantocks...”, said Xi, “...That's in Somerset, near Hinkley Point.”

Shabbir swore.

“Fuck. You're right. Adam, Xi - keep digging into Faith. Gurmeet, call your flyer. We need to get there and fast.”

Chapter 12

Hinkley Point

Commissioned in 2016 and taking over ten years to get running, Hinkley Point C was a technological marvel and a crumbling disaster - a joint venture between France's EDF and China's CGN nuclear industries.

The type chosen were European Pressure Reactors, EPR. Advanced enough to burn some of Hinkley Point B's radioactive waste as fuel but not as advanced as the Integral Fast Reactors, IFRs, they could have been. When Professor Lau became head of British Nuclear Energy, BNE, she never understood why EPRs had been chosen, especially when existing reactors were known to be flawed.

The problem with EPR reactors was not the design but the difficulty in building them to design specification. The reactor vessel casting so vast it took too long to cool, allowing the carbon in the steel to collect in clumps. Where it clumped, the steel could become as brittle as old iron – ready to crack under pressure like the shell of a fast-boiled egg. Where there wasn't enough carbon, the steel could be almost soft enough to deform under its own weight. In France, when they got the EPR reactor at Flamenville wrong, there was a £multi-billion government bailout to keep EDF afloat as a company.

After the issues of the first EPRs in Taishan, the people of Hong Kong, just 80 miles away, lived in constant fear of a nuclear disaster. It made no difference. Too much money and reputation was at stake - China silenced the voices in Hong Kong, along with their democracy.

Sealed behind three-metres of reinforced-concrete walls, everything was hidden from the outside world. Intelligence suggested the Chinese had decided that even if a reactor vessel cracked, the concrete walls would contain any leaking nuclear material. And they were right - at least from spying eyes.

Just 14 years into its 60-year life, workers at Taishan heard a loud bang as the steel vessel for reactor 2 split. The control rooms turned red with blaring alarms and, behind the concrete walls, high-pressure radioactive coolant began jetting out. Jetting beyond the corium spreading area designed to catch leaking molten uranium.

The concrete walls did what officials hoped they would and hid the leak from the world. But, millimetre by millimetre, the corrosive liquid was eating its way through the concrete. Only one safe option remained: shut the plant down, admit failure and abandon all EPRs. National pride and the

reputation of their nuclear industry demanded a different action: deny the problem existed. Behind closed doors, workers were ordered to go in and weld the cracks shut. It was a death sentence.

Like a bandage for a broken leg still being walked on, it wasn't a fix. Each new weld created new stresses in the steel. New fracture points. They never lasted more than a year so every year a new crew were ordered in. Paying compensation to the families for 'an incident at work' was far cheaper than shutting down the reactors and ruining their reputation for new nuclear contracts. The welding needs became so regular the workers gave a name for the compensation. They called it: *the Big Bonus*.

Nationalistic propaganda deemed it an honour to risk one's self for the good of the country and, at the same time, boost their family's future. The list of volunteers grew, for the volunteers never saw the growing pile of corpses left inside the reactor, until it was their turn to have the purpose-built, lead-filled door closed behind them. Removing the corpses would risk showing the world something was wrong so they were just robotically piled against the inner wall. Never rotting as the intense, sterilising radiation eliminated all bacteria. They just slowly desiccated, like grapes drying to sultanas, under constant proton-bombardment.

When it came to commissioning the new reactors at Hinkley, the problem had not been resolved. Despite the appearance of stronger, more open Western safety procedures, with the project worth £150 billion there was enough financial incentive to pay off who ever needed to be paid off. And to fire any who objected and vanish those that wouldn't go quietly.

Chapter 13

The Barn in Somerset

Gurmeet landed her flyer on an isolated country lane and drove the last miles to a clearing on the northern Quantocks, halfway between Kilve and Watchet. Shabbir was with her and more than happy to act the part of her romantic partner, out on a ramble. He knew she was a lesbian and logically knew this meant he had no chance yet he still held hope. He knew she slept with men without revulsion when sent as a honey trap so, to his love-struck mind, emotionally this meant he had some kind of chance. He never told anyone of his feelings for her - one of his biggest secrets and, as team leader, he was very good with secrets.

Secrets and deception were a job requirement but Gurmeet was MI5 too. Trained to notice every little nuance and she had noticed the subtle little signs he had feelings for her. Nothing blatant. No touching or suggestive comments. Just little nuances, mannerisms and a level of protection for her beyond the norm. She never talked to him about it. Never brought it up because it would make no sense. She had grown up a lesbian and was not attracted to men. If she had been, she would have broken protocol and kissed him years ago.

Armed with hiking boots, cargo trousers, wristcom communicators, small backpacks, hidden guns and lethal skills, they left her flyer in the clearing and started walking. Started following the north-east trail, up the weathered grass slope, towards the woodland.

“At least the rain has stopped.”, smiled Shabbir.

“It'll be back. Before we are.”

Shabbir looked at the grey clouds on the western horizon behind them.

“Want to bet? Loser writes the report.”

“You do know it's over a mile each way?”

“The storm isn't due for an hour. I reckon we can do it. Quick walk there, quick scans, quick look around, quick walk back – job done.”

“Didn't know you did quick walking.”, grinned Gurmeet, as she walked on.

“What was that?”

“I said: You're on, boss.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later the wind had markedly increased. The first storm clouds already visible through the tree tops as the pair pushed through high bracken to the edge of the tree-line. Just 100 metres in front of them was the barn.

A stone-spattered track lead to the main doors on the far side, while grey-stone walls and the dangling little door on the side completed the picture. Large enough for carts, tractors and trailer, it was old enough not to be actively monitored by satellites, and its corrugated-iron roof acted as magnetic shielding even if it was. It sat abandoned to the wilderness trying to digest it and had been Faith's perfect find.

Shabbir and Gurmeet stayed hidden amongst the trees, Gurmeet scanning for signs of life.

“Anyone around?”

“No-one.”

“Bugs?”

“Swarmbots...? No. Echobots...? No. Hornbots...? Hornbots...? Hornbot.”

“Hornbot? Where? Who owns it?”

Shabbir had already snatched out his laser pistol - a Henry special.

“Gone. The reading's gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone? It was either there or it wasn't.”

“Must have been going somewhere else.”

“A hornbot out here, passing just as we arrive? That would be a major coincidence. It could have followed us.”

“Why would a hornbot follow us? We've been flying low and dark since leaving London. Nothing to make us visible to anyone or anything. Has to be a co-incidence. They do happen, you know? Or could just be a glitch.”

Shabbir looked at Gurmeet, she knew what that look meant.

“Not one of those 'glitches', Shab. A real one. Maybe... Anyway, there's nothing there now. It's gone. Let's go.”

Laser-pistol in hand, Shabbir stepped out of the treeline, deliberately putting himself in harm's way first, before Gurmeet could. Just in case. No attack came. Quickly she joined him, hand in her pocket gripping her pistol too. Just in case.

* * *

Up close, the barn looked even older than before - ravaged by weather and the passing of time. There was a metre-wide hole in its roof but not from rust. The edges bent upwards. Something had punched its way out. Half a dozen smaller holes were scattered around it – their edges bent down where smaller things had punched in. Something crunched under Gurmeet's boot. She froze. A mine? Without panic, she ran a scan for explosives.

Negative.

Bending down she picked it up - a blackened piece of brick. She scanned it - then scanned it again.

“Shab. This is weird. Look, it's high-density building brick. Rated a thousand tons per square metre but it's reading as soft as chalk. Something's shattered it at the molecular level.”

“Your scanner must be glitching for real. Those bricks can stand pretty much anything this side of a nuclear blast. I've used them as shields against PE4.”

“Scanner's fine but look.”

Gurmeet pressed it between her thumb and fore-finger, watching as it crumbled to dust in front of her. Taking a flexiglass bag from her backpack she dropped in the remains.

“Then we're in trouble...”, said Shabbir, “...The only way of doing that is with organics.”

“Organics? Biological PE4?”

“Would explain the explosion. Means they can pretty much take down anything.”

With growing urgency, Shabbir strode to the side-door, hanging crookedly on the single remaining hinge. Before stepping over the ledge, he looked back at the skyline for any sign of the hornbot. Without waiting for him, Gurmeet slid past and went inside.

“It's gone. Come on.”

He had to agree. Not a sign of it. He went in behind her but instinctively took another look back. Something glinted above the trees. Something in the air.

“What the...?”

He aimed his laser pistol towards it, scope scanning the area. Nothing. What ever he had seen, it wasn't there now. Gurmeet's voice came from inside, pulling him in.

“Come look at this.”

With a bad feeling growing, he went inside.

Chapter 14
Hinkley Point Visitor Centre

“Hello, everyone. My name's Cheryl. Have you all signed in and collected your passes? You won't be allowed to proceed without them.”

The mixed crowd of twenty pre-booked visitors murmured they had.

“That's great. If anyone still has any recorders or communicators, please hand them to Sharon at the desk. All bionics must be presented for temporary deactivation. Don't worry, no data will be lost and I promise we will reactivate them when the tour is over. You can trust us, we do this twice a day and never have any problems.”

No-one moved. Cheryl had done this so many times she knew at least one person would be hiding something.

“I have to remind you, if you wait for the security scan to detect devices they will be confiscated and root-level scanned before being returned - you will also be interviewed by security. Anyone not declaring bionics will have them root-level scanned, be interviewed by security and permanently refused entry. Sorry to be so draconian - it's the only way we're allowed to run visits these days.”

Two tourists, a middle-aged couple from Basingstoke, looked at each other. One slid a communicator out of her sleeve and passed it to her husband. He took it to Sharon, handing it over, along with a camera that had been tucked into his shirt.

“Just wanted some snaps for the album.”, he said, as Sharron accepted them.

“Even snaps can fall into the wrong hands. You can buy a brochure as a memento - only visitors here can get them so they are quite collectable. Anyone else? Very last chance.”

No-one moved or spoke. She had done all she could so put back on her smile.

“This way, please.”

It was Cheryl's last happy day.

Chapter 15

Shabbir's War

Gurmeet was standing in the Jacob's-ladder-light coming in through the biggest hole in the barn's roof. In her hand, the burnt remains of a small, unused detonator. Around her, the scattered remains of an explosion and pulverised, high-density bricks reduced to a soft, black chalk. On the dirt floor, body-sized drag lines.

"I count four, no five trails...", said Shabbir, "...And fragments of a blast screen. This was powerful."

"Look at this...", said Gurmeet, holding up a small evidence bag, "...A detonator. Hit by the explosion but not used."

"Maybe it was a spare."

"Or maybe it wasn't used."

"You think it detonated by itself?"

"Either that or it was detonated another way."

"Gun fire? From where? There aren't any windows. Even if a sniper had a gun powerful enough to go through these walls they couldn't see the target to take aim. And if we start talking snipers we start talking rival groups."

Gurmeet shrugged.

"Or civil war within Faith. Have found three blood types. Recent but contaminated by the explosion. Need the lab to analyse them for possible DNA matches, once we're back on the grid."

Shabbir nodded and moved off, to see what else could be found. The barn lit by the scattering of smaller Jacob's ladders breaking through multiple roof holes.

"Looks like bodies being dragged outside. I'll see where they go."

"Give me five and I'll join you."

The main barn doors had been closed but were not locked. Someone had left in a hurry. Blinking against the bright daylight, he inhaled the clean, dust-free air. So refreshing as he followed a trail outside, fainter now - half blown away by the wind and soon to be washed away. Overhead, the darkening clouds of the incoming storm.

He followed the trail to some car tracks. All the trails headed to the same place. It was the last that caught his eye most as it thinned towards the end. A survivor? Someone regaining conscious, trying to stand? Alive enough to try walking while being pulled out of the barn?

“Gurmeet. Can you come scan this?”

“Almost done. Just saving to back-up.”

Back-ups were always important with technology and never more so than when working in the field. Instruments were tough but could still be damaged. Vital data could be lost. Their back-up devices were stronger than the black boxes on aircraft, renamed orange-boxes after the colour they actually were. Shabbir was talking to himself as he squatted down to take EHD 3D pictures on his wristcom and some soil samples for analysis.

“Tyre tracks. Taken by road not air. They can't be far away.”

Zooming into the pictures he'd just taken, he noticed something red in the dirt. Lowering the wristcom put his face closer to the ground to look for it.

“Found you.”

A tiny, red capsule. A suicide pill? He took out a sample bag and let it gently suck it inside. Their day was becoming more productive than expected.

“GO HOT!”, exploded Gurmeet's voice from the barn.

Shabbir's head snapped up. 'Go hot' meant maximum response. It meant lethal attack and he was already grabbing his laser-pistol. He heard them before he saw them. The deep, throbbing hum of two zerodrones, coming in low. Not just below radar but below the barn's roofline. One on each side. targeting the centre - where Gurmeet was. Had they detected her on thermal through stone walls?

“ZEDs! GET OUT OF THERE!”

He was grateful his pistol was a Henry special - upgraded to stage-three overload, boosting the power from four to twelve kilowatts. Even with extra cooling, it would overheat within a few shots but stage-three was the only way. He just needed two good shots, one for each zed. He didn't care if it never worked again afterwards. He could already hear the high-pitched whine of their charging plasma-cannons, they were about to kill Gurmeet. No time to get into a better position. Using the Ultra Low Frequency scanner on his wristcom, he aimed at the one on the right and fired through the barn wall.

Super-heated stones exploded into dust and shrapnel. No time to see how badly that zed was hit, he was already aiming through the other side barn, at the one on the left. He squeezed the trigger again.

Click.

Nothing.

“Shit!”

Overheat.

“Already?”

He blew on it, waving it the air. Trying to cool it below critical.

“Come on!”

Even the pistol's grip had become hot. The left zed's whine had stopped. Charged. He was out of time. Furiously, he punched the overload setting off, then on again, instinctively aimed and pulled the trigger.

The exploding barn knocked him down but he still heard the zed bang and knew it was a direct hit. A good shot. They both were. His and the zeds, for it had fired too.

The zed on the right was in blue flames as it crashed down, smoke pluming skywards. The one on the left was burning too. He heard it, understood it and forgot it. Forget the overheated pistol that had been burning his hand until he dropped it. All he could think of was his failure. The zed had fired - incomplete but still powerful enough to take down half the barn and blow him off his feet.

Gurmeet!

The roof was caving in before his very eyes. Abandoning everything, he scrambled to his feet and charged through the splintered doors. Charged back inside.

“GURMEET!”

No answer. He could hardly see through the choking, thick dust and smoke, pulsing blue and orange by the flames through the broken walls. Arm over his head to shield his face from the heat, he stumbled in deeper.

“GURMEET!”

Coughing, eyes burning with acrid dust and smoke, he couldn't see her. Couldn't stop looking either. Where ever she was he would find her and get her out.

By social conditioning, he was not aggressive or violent - kept his demons locked inside. Safer that way. Always that way, unless under attack. Especially a friend under attack. Someone had fired a plasma-cannon at Gurmeet. At his Gurmeet. Not just a colleague or a friend but someone he loved. Someone he valued more than his life. It was personal. It was war. Shabbir's war. A war someone was going to regret ever starting.

Chapter 16

Family

Julia walked silently with her dad along the barren, stony Quantocks trail. Brown and green grass, kept short by sheep and tearing winds, lay either side. The mustard coloured earth baked hard. Tree branches quiffed back – permed by relentless gales. On the near horizon, the dark-grey clouds of an approaching storm.

They were alone. No other ramblers in sight. Julia liked it that way. Interaction with others, even a passing 'hello', was not on her mind. Her whole life had been changed. Her whole aim in life had been changed. Now, only serious things lay ahead but, for this day, she wanted to enjoy time with her dad. Get to know him, the real him. Get to know the person behind the person she thought she had known.

“We can take a break at the top.”, he said.

“OK.”

She was anything but OK. The OK automatically came from her mouth but it wasn't real - she only could pretend it was. Even to herself.

They were on the Quantock Hills, marking the gateway to western Somerset and the winding, coastal road to Cornwall. Most people visited the Quantocks just for that – just for driving through. Holiday makers to the new Butlins in Minehead; tour buses to Lynton and Lynmouth for the vertical-feeling water railway; adventurers heading for the high cliffs at Valley of the Rocks; romantics for the palm-trees of Dunster Castle. Everyone had a reason to travel on westwards. Everyone who didn't have time to stop and enjoy the wilder countryside they were passing by. Julia was glad. It made the place feel like their own personal wilderness. Peaceful. Earthy. Energising.

At the top of the hill, with views across the valleys to other hilltops, they stopped. Her dad took off his rucksack and pulled out two, hand-sized seat pads. On contact with the ground they expanded five times.

“This'll do nicely.”, he said, sitting on one and placing the rucksack on the ground in front of him.

Julia sat on the other, inhaling the clean air deep into her lungs. Closing her eyes as she felt the cool breeze across her face.

“Here.”, said Tom, handing her a sandwich of fishery tuna - Atlantic tuna too toxic to eat due to industrial pollution, Pacific tuna too rare from deliberate over fishing to raise prices. She wasn't hungry but she bit into it

anyway, as if at a cinema - where eating was obligatory the moment you sat down. Rituals of family gatherings, pre-dating even the Stone Age.

“Haven't been here for years...”, began Tom, “...Every time I come back, I tell myself we should come here more often.”

“The last time we came was with mum.”

She didn't know why she said that. Why she spoke of her mum when she had nothing but anger towards her. Her dad stopped chewing - troubled memories running across his gaze. He swallowed them down and changed the subject.

“Sleep OK?”

She looked at him in reply - her eyes shadowed. Troubled. Sad. Deeply, deeply sad. He forgot about his own feelings.

“I am really sorry about Jake.”

Her nostrils widened at his words. Eyes almost cried.

“Me too...”, she said, once she'd managed to steady her breath enough to speak, adding, “...Tell me about you, dad.”

“Me? You already know about me.”

“Actually, I'm discovering I don't.”

He met her eyes again. Her stare. Her simple, innocent demand. He couldn't deny it. She deserved to know.

“Where to start?”, he asked, mostly to himself. Julia's guidance shocked him.

“Who did you kill?”

Direct. To the absolute point. No grey. No get outs.

“Christ, Julia. Where did that come from?”

She was still looking straight at him. Not letting it go. He had to answer. Knew he had to answer.

“You can't tell this to anyone. Not anyone, ever. Understand?”

She gave a nod, still looking. He turned his eyes away, staring into the past.

“We were undercover. Two of us. Infiltrated an arms gang. They were bringing in heavy-metal ballistics from Poland, smuggled there from Belarus. The dealer sent us on a job. A test. To see if we were as ruthless as we claimed to get accepted. The job was an armed robbery - a security van.

The robbery itself was pointless. Trackers on the valuables and the van, explosive dye for the contents if entry was forced. They didn't care about the van or its contents. They just wanted news coverage. Free advertising for their weapons. A status booster.

The guards weren't armed. We were told to kill them anyway, to leave signature evidence of the high-tech weapons used. The gang's weapons.”

Julia was staring at him now. Open mouthed.

“You killed the guards?”

“No. Just flesh wounds. They lived.”

“So who did you kill?”

“The gang's cameraman. He was one of them. The witness that would have exposed us for not killing the guards. We filmed a scene ourselves. The guards were reported dead, given new identities, new lives, and our cover was strengthened. We were in.”

“Anyone else?”

“Only when necessary.”

“When necessary? Then why didn't you kill mum?”

If Julia's questioning had shocked him before that question hit him so hard he couldn't speak.

“Why not, dad?...”, she repeated, “...She was trying to kill you. You know I would have been next.”

Why hadn't he killed her? The mother of his child. The woman who was once his best friend. The woman who became a monster, made their lives hell and fought to send them straight there.

“She wasn't always so bad.”

Julia shrugged.

“Doesn't matter. I've lost her anyway. She'll never change. She'll never admit she was wrong. To being the nasty one. Would you kill her now, if she tracked us down? Tried to harm us again? Tried to harm me?”

That question left Tom thinking hard. Staring hard.

“Would you, dad?”

It took a long, deep breath before any word could exit his mouth. When one could, a single word was enough.

“Yes.”

Julia met his eyes with a hard stare, ensuring he was sincere. Unblinking, he returned it with eyes that said he was.

“Good.”, she replied and returned to her sandwich. No more questions to ask. No more answers needed.

Tom was left wondering what had become of his sweet, innocent daughter. Wondering how his happy, laughing child had changed so much. Except he knew how. With him busy at work and her mother in prison, Jake

had been the one stabilising influence in her life. The one person she fully trusted with her own. Now Jake was gone. Blown to bits before her very eyes. Emerging from her own thoughts, Julia surprised him again.

“You know, I'm going to kill the people who killed Jake.”, she said, without a hint of doubt.

“Revenge isn't the answer, Julia. You'll just end up destroying yourself.”

Her eyes voiced her reply: 'You don't think I'm already destroyed?'

Tom lowered his head - a parental failure. All his beloved daughter felt she had left was anger and the need for revenge. A burning need for revenge that would never wane until it was satiated, by the blood of Jake's killers. Julia was determined she would take down everyone who got in her way – especially if it was that bitch of her mother.

From the next hill came an explosion. Tom stood up, trying to see the source but it was hidden behind the tree line. Something was burning though, plumes of smoke pouring skywards. On his face, the first spat of rain fell. A rain storm, heading in the direction of the other hill.

As the storm increased he took out a rain cover and sat back with Julia, waiting for it to pass. Julia just sat and watched, silently wishing it would wash her pain away.

Chapter 17

Gurmeet

Through Shabbir's dust-filled eyes, the inside of the barn had burst brighter. Lit by the left drone exploding and blue flames rushing in through the broken wall. In the light of blue flames, he saw her. On the ground in the corner. Scanner still dutifully in hand. Eyes closed. No movement. No sign of life. He ran to her side.

“Gurmeet!”

Blood streaked the side of her head. A splat of blood on the stone wall where she'd been thrown against it. He couldn't find a pulse. Emergency training kicked in. He checked her airway. Clear. He held her nose and placed his mouth on hers, blowing in air. Pushed on her chest.

“Breath!”

Nothing. He did it again.

“Come on!”

Still no pulse. He tried again. And again. And again.

“COME ON!”

Still nothing. She was getting ever closer to the point of no return. Time was running out. He snatched her laser-pistol and repeatedly bashed the butt on a stone. Bashed the cover off the power cell. Ripping open her shirt he touched the high-voltage contacts on her chest. She jolted. Nothing. Still no pulse. He touched it again, spark flashing inside the pack. She jolted harder. Shook. Coughed. Breathed. Alive!

Coughing uncontrollably, she sat up. Eyes coming to focus their confusion on Shabbir. Confusion at his smile as he sat beside her, beaming with gladness and relief.

“Thought I'd lost you.”

Hot smoke was all around, flames on both sides. She tried to speak but had no voice, not even when she noticed her shirt was ripped open and looked at him questioningly.

“Tell you later.”, he said, lifting her up and carrying her outside. Clear of the barn, he gently lay her down.

“Stay still. Need to stop the bleeding.”

“What bleeding?”

“Your head.”

Mindful of the growing flames and toxic smoke beaconing their position,

he took a field dressing from his jacket. There was too much blood for it to stick well so he took out his penknife and cut his trouser leg below the knee. Cut off enough material to make a bandanna and secure it in place. Instead of being upset he had sliced up his trousers, he couldn't stop smiling. Couldn't help it. He had been terrified at the thought of losing her but she was back. Alive.

Lost to recent events, Gurmeet's unvoiced questions became ever keener to get out. Her words stuck in her throat as she tried to speak again

“Relax. Give yourself time.”

Time? They were in the field, after an attack with the risk of more to follow. They might not have much time. Painfully, she swallowed and tried again.

“I heard you...”, she croaked, finding a smile herself, “...Hope you'll put your trousers on expenses. They'll never pay but at least you'll feel better.”

Shabbir gave her a grin.

“Maybe.”

Feeling air on her chest, Gurmeet was reminded of her top being open.

“Care to explain my shirt?”

“CPR, then a jump start.”

“Oh. I was dead?”

Shabbir nodded - his smile vanishing. For a moment, just a moment, he looked like he would cry. Quickly the moment passed, hidden by his pragmatic face, but in that moment she had glimpsed a side she had never seen before.

“Thank you for saving my life.”

Tight-lipped, holding his emotions back, he gave a nod of acknowledgement.

“Glad you're back.”

“How did they find us, Shab? We're off the grid.”

“Don't know yet. You seem stable - can't see any other injuries.”

“Just my head.”

His smile returned.

“Nothing important, then.”

Gurmeet smiled back. They were an in-tune team, even if untuneable in terms of a couple.

“Can you stand? We should get out of here.”

It was more than an understatement. The blue fires from the zerodrones

consumed themselves but the growing orange fires of the joists in the barn did not – turning the air into thick, dark smoke.

Gurmeet took his hand, his arm and he helped her up.

“I feel drunk.”, she said, tottering.

“No drinking on the job, unless you're the boss. You know that.”

“Yes, boss.”, she smiled.

He always loved her smile, now more than ever. Moments ago he thought he'd never see her smile again.

“Can you make it to the flyer?”

“Sure. It's down hill. If I stop walking, just roll me.”

“Let's try walking first, shall we?”

Without waiting for an answer he tightened his arm around her. Using his body to shield her from the heat of the flames, they walked round the barn like latecomers to a three-legged race.

As if requested by the barn itself, rain began to fall. The first drops becoming the battering storm of a horror film. With the storm came the actual horror of three dagger-eyed men walking up the hill towards them. Assassins. When Shabbir saw them he stopped. Considered their situation. Their options. Made a decision.

Gently he sat Gurmeet against the barn's rear wall.

“Wait here.”

He went to the hanging side door and yanked it off - placing it beside her as an extra shield. Squatting down in front of her, back to the assassins so they couldn't see, he gave her his emergency pistol.

“Low calibre, single shot. Close range only. Use it if you have to.”

Gurmeet looked him straight in the eye as she took it. It was a look of trust that also said she cared about him. He responded with a wink and a smile that dissolved with altitude as he stood up and turned to face the assassins striding up the hill, knives drawn.

Unarmed, rain pelting down, Shabbir began walking towards them. Heading for those intent on killing him, then Gurmeet. His face was fixed with only one expression and it wasn't fear.

Chapter 18

Storm on a Hill

The three assassins had moved apart, trying to flank Shabbir - closing left, right and dead ahead. The one on the left flanked wider, trying to get behind him but behind him was Gurmeet. The threat against Gurmeet became his biggest priority. His biggest cause. His answer was attack.

Jamming the sides of his boots into the ever more slippery ground, he turned and ran. Sprinting to get that assassin before the others could arrive and back him up. The man was armed the old-fashioned way. Titanium-steel dagger in each hand. No energy signature. No trace. A professional killer. He had wondered if Shabbir would attack. Was pleased to see he was. Pleased for the opportunity to increase his kill count.

Sliding one dagger forward for attack, one dagger back for counter attack, he stood ready to fight. The other two also advanced. One running to Shabbir from the other side. The other striding relentlessly towards the injured woman flopped against the barn – arm on her knee, muttering something to herself. They liked killing. Never boring. Always something different. Sense of achievement and satisfaction wiping still-warm blood from their blades.

“Come on, chubby.”, goaded Shabbir's target.

Breathing hard but controlled, Shabbir said nothing. Just kept running towards him. Clinical. Studious. Noting every nuance of the assassin's stance. His eyes. Their terrain. They could have brought guns - killed him already. The fact they were using knives meant this was a sanctioned kill. A covert elimination, designed to send a message, with nothing traceable left behind. Shabbir was very much on his own and he knew it. So did they.

The assassin was also studying Shabbir. Studying his approach - calculating where to stab him first. Throat or doughnut belly? Inner thigh or side of head?

“Hurry up, fatty...” he smirked, “...I'm getting soaked here.”

Two metres away, Shabbir threw a hand high, to the right. The assassin adjusted position, defending that path. It was a feint. Shabbir had already dropped to the left, deftly pivoting on his hand and thrusting both legs into the assassin's shins. Take down. The assassin rolled as he landed, turning 180 degrees and springing back up into fighting stance. Facing right back at Shabbir. Professional, fast, efficient and now he realised he needed to be. His target was more than just a doughnut. His target had chased his roll and pounced on top of him as he came up, slamming him straight back down -

hard. Shabbir dropped a knee, fracturing the assassin's left arm against the ground, the rest of his bodyweight used to thrust the assassin's own dagger deep between his ribs.

“Fuck...”, he gasped, in surprise and pain.

Over 20 perfect kills to his no-name, the assassin felt as ashamed as he was shocked. Shocked by how aggressive and how fast the doughnut had moved. As a trained professional, he still fought back. Ignored the pain of the splintered bone in his left arm and the blade in his lung to launch a counter-strike into the doughnut's side. Shabbir had already changed position. The second dagger came round and missed him as it swung past. As it passed, Shabbir dropped his body back down and jammed that blade in too, snapping the arm that held it.

Pin-cushioned with two broken arms and turning red, the assassin lay gasping on the ground - being soaked by his own blood and the now pouring rain. The doughnut left him there, pushed himself to his feet and focused on the other running towards him.

Rain-drenched dagger dripping watery gems in each hand, this assassin had seen Shabbir's skill and was adapting his approach. Just metres away he changed stride. Threw back a shoulder and launched a dagger at Shabbir's chest. Shabbir moved one foot back, twisting his body out of its path and caught the hand as it went past. In the same movement he circled his momentum and turned the blade back. Far too close to dodge out of the way, it went straight into the assassin's throat - he would be dead in 60 seconds. Shabbir didn't wait for him to die but grabbed the dagger while he was still falling and yanked it out - blood spraying out. As he hit the ground, Shabbir was already sprinting for the last of them. For the one closing on Gurmeet, lying slumped against the wall.

“GURMEET, LOOK OUT!”, he shouted.

Gurmeet didn't respond. Didn't move. The assassin was almost upon her - killer grin on his face. Shabbir threw the dagger. It flew fast and true but not fast enough. In a slow-motion nightmare, he could only watch as the assassin raised both blades to thrust them in.

“STOP!”, he shouted, though whether any words actually came out he was too horrified to know.

There was flash of bright blue. The attacker jolted. It was Gurmeet's only shot. One blade dropped but was still alive. Still focused on killing her. Shabbir was still out of reach yet now his dagger struck home. Hit the assassin in the back of his thigh. The impact dropped him to one knee but he was a professional. It only made him more determined. Reaching behind, he pulled the dagger out of his thigh, snarling at the sight of his own blood

dripping from it. This was now his weapon of choice. Fitting choice for the kill. He held it up for Shabbir to see.

“Loser.”

Gurmeet watched as he thrust it towards her, twisting her body at the last moment to reduce the penetration. Make it miss her vital organs - slice across her ribs rather than through them.

“Argh.”, she gasped, as pain tore through her.

He hadn't finished. She could smell his sweat, his hot, drug-laced breath as he closed in. See the wide, wild lust for kill in his face as it filled her view. Then he was gone. Vanished. Replaced by daylight and the rain pouring into her face.

Am I dead?

While her red waters washed across the ground, the sharp pain told her no, she was alive. And she could hear fighting. Lifting her head, she saw Shabbir. On top of the last assassin, he was pinning him down with his legs and feet as he punched his face – again and again and again. Pounding his life into oblivion with violence that was shocking. But even more shocking than the action was the demonic rage on Shabbir's face. He once told her he had monster inside. She had thought nothing more of it, until now. Now it was unleashed. Unleashed and pure of purpose, from a place she had never seen before.

As the storm on the hill came down, her blood went with it. Shabbir wouldn't let her be stabbed again. She could take comfort knowing that and accept a peaceful end now. It was a good place to die, feeling the company of a friend she could trust to her end. To the sound of a deep, ground-throbbing hum from an approaching drone, her world faded to black. On her face, washed by the pouring rain, a look of calm serenity. An acceptance of her passing.

Chapter 19

Xi Yang

“South side. Contact in 20 seconds.”, came Adam's voice in Xi Yang's earpiece.

She gave a little cough in response, as she stood at the bus stop outside Tech-Tonic's London headquarters. Its high, metal security fence was defended by a dozen EHD cameras. One was pointing at her. Right at her. Behind the lens, security guards zoomed in with pleasure.

“34B.”, said one in Chinese.

“No, no. 32C. That's a push-up bra. She's too slim for a 34.”

“She's too slim for a C.”

“Move the camera. Maybe you can read the label on thermal.”

“She won't have left the label on. Girls always cut them off.”

“No they don't.”

“My wife does.”

“That's just so you don't know what size to buy her for Christmas. Saves her having to keep saying 'dharling, it's lovely' when she unwraps the next pervy shit you got her.

“Blah. Blah. Just move the camera and take a look.”

On their screen, in full 16K resolution, Xi Yang flicked her eyes at them. A sideways glance, right at them - as if she could see right through the lens, directly into their room.

“That's spooky.”

“She just saw the camera move.”

“Impossible. It's behind shadow glass. Remember the upgrades? Nobody can see it move.”

She was still looking at them, her beautiful green eyes unblinking. Behind her, they saw a long black limo arrive, red flag fluttering on each of its front wings. Her gaze left them to turn towards it.

“Who's that?”

“Big boss from China. Maybe she's his interpreter.”

“Did you take stupid pills today? Why would he need an interpreter? We're all bloody Chinese.”

* * *

In front of Xi Yang, the thick, armoured door of the limo clunked open and a chunky, armoured bodyguard got out. He glanced briefly at Xi, assessing her level of threat. Deciding there was none, he bent down and spoke to those still inside. Two other doors clunked open.

As a second bodyguard got out, the first held out a hand for their emerging boss; a grey-haired Chinese man called Mr Han, as had been his predecessors. He was tall for his race but broom-handle thin, as if his race was almost run but he was dressed immaculately. Black shoes with a mirror-finish shine; suit so well pressed it seemed impossible it was actually being worn. On his face, round platinum-rimmed spectacles. A subtle sign of wealth, along with his platinum Rolex. Only his slim case was cutting-edge. Polycarbonate alloy with self-healing NACABIK plating and DNA seal. Impregnable to ballistic, chemical and energy attacks this side of a bomb so huge it would vanish the street. Such a case was worth more than the limo and the lives of those around it.

Mr Han stood straight, studying the beautiful Chinese woman at the bus stop. She was the age of his grand-daughter. If he had been 20 years younger he'd have taken her to dinner and bed but, if he had met her 20 years ago, she would have been too young to take to bed, even for him. Inside he was a monster. A power-crazed tyrant who had murdered his way to the top. Had entire families killed, children included, but never once had he the desire for teenage sex. Not out of any kindness, for he had none, but because most teenagers had no idea what they were doing and he had neither the time nor the patience to teach them. He saw Xi Yang, admired her beauty, and passed on by without saying a word - accompanied by both bodyguards. As they walked towards Tech-Tonic, enthusiastic managers came out to greet him in Chinese.

“Huānyíng guānglín, Zōngcái Han, huānyíng guānglín.”

Welcome, President Han.

President Han...?, wondered Xi, hearing their words.

“Want a lift? Sunday service is always rubbish.”, came a voice.

Xi looked round. The chauffeur was standing beside his limo, rear door still open.

“I see your bus will be another 30 minutes yet.”.

She looked at the bus-stop display then back at him.

“No funny business.”

“No funny business.”, he confirmed, with a confident smile.

His smile got wider as she accepted his invitation and slid in. Dutifully he

closed the door for her, feeling a rush of hormones and adrenalin - precursors of the deadly attraction hoped for intercourse would bring.

“Where to?”

“Mayfair.”

“Right. I'm Jin.”

“Hanna.”

Jin was beaming. As he drove Xi away, the bus-stop display flickered and changed. Went back to showing the next bus, coming in 3 minutes not 30. Jin thought he had got lucky by picking up Xi Yang. In reality, Xi had picked him up, with intentions he could not possibly imagine.

Chapter 20

Watchet Harbour

Sunday, 23rd July

Watchet's small harbour, with its pock-marked, grey-stone walls, was set in a typically peaceful part of northern Somerset. On the tip of the harbour's western wall sat the miniature, red and white light-house marking the entrance. The seaward ends of the walls themselves pointed towards each other, like the claws of a giant crab curling around, to protect its young.

With the shrinking of fish stocks, an expensive marina had been created to generate revenue, from the mooring of three-dozen white yachts, small cruisers and speedboats. An out of the way favourite for rich tourists in the know. A place to relax and get away from it all, without having to leave it all behind.

Out to the west was the Atlantic - to the east was Bridgewater Bay in the Bristol Channel. Out of sight, just 15 miles along the coast towards Bristol was Hinkley Point. Sitting in total contrast to Somerset's old-world calm, were giant nuclear power stations. Twin EPRs and their steam-turbine buildings, iconic against the colossus of the decommissioned Magnox carcasses and the creaking but still operational AGRs next to them.

While Stonehenge was a construction of huge-grey monoliths instilling awe in the ancient world, these were gigantic-grey monoliths instilling awe in the modern world. To the few that got close, they gave an adrenalin rush of trepidation, like approaching a biblical event. Unlike Stonehenge, given the 170 tons of ferociously powerful enriched uranium, these had the ability to become a biblical event. Many locals didn't want them yet many locals also worked there. Most holiday-makers, travelling in self-driving cars along the A39, were too engrossed in their VR-screens to notice grazing sheep in the hills let alone any such reality.

Despite distant grey clouds, it was a warm Sunday morning. The 9am sun was smiling above the centuries-old village that had grown with the harbour. Early-bird tourists were standing on the harbour wall, looking out across the waters. Enjoying the sun on their backs and refreshing, breeze on their faces.

To the excitement of an eight-year-old boy, a little fishing boat was chugging its way in, on the morning tide. The purple paint on its hull was punk-like rebellion against the snow-white luxury yachts moored nearby. In bright-yellow letters, it bore the name 'Arise'. Its designation was 'Plymouth'. Its flag English.

The little boy watched as it chugged to a rest at mooring point E and a

grey-haired seaman climbed on deck. As the boat's engine cut, as if on cue, the Sunday bells from St Decuman's Church began to ring. Built on the hill above the town, they could be heard ringing for service, as they had for 700 years. The seaman on deck was joined by another.

“The bells have started. We're in time for the morning service. Perfect cover. Tie her up properly and let's go.”

“What about the boat?”

“I was talking about the boat. She's coming with us.”

Chapter 21

Planned Paul

The temperature gauges in front of Paul all read 280 degrees. The power output a steady 2.6 megawatts. The grid loading at 70%. Adverts for the football would come on soon and that would jump to 75, possibly 80%. It was normal. Everything at Hinkley Point C was normal. Everything except the phone call he'd just received.

“Home to roost.”, was all it had said but he knew what it meant. It meant, as much as he had tried to forget his drunken deal in the pub, it had not forgotten him. The £10,000 he'd taken and spent was now to be earned. There was no escape. Any attempt at avoidance would find him dead or in prison, to end up dead in his cell. His only hope was to do what was agreed and then pray no-one ever found out. Especially his already estranged children.

In front of him was his computer terminal. Above it a security camera. The camera was off-line. He knew that because it had been damaged and was booked in for repair. He knew that because he had damaged it.

From his pocket he took out a piece of blue, DNA-reactive paper. On the screen he touched 'login' and entered the codes that appeared as his skin made contact.

'Level 7 access granted.'

Their instructions had been very specific and he followed them exactly. He headed straight to the personnel files and scrolled down to 'P', where he found the required entry: 'Cheryl Palmer'. He pressed it and went to 'A'. Up popped the question: 'Reason for absence?'. He went to 'F'. 'Family matter'. In the box asking for information he wrote: 'Child ill. Doctor's appointment.' He clicked 'Authorise' and logged out.

He didn't know who Cheryl Palmer was. He didn't need to know. He was glad not to know. He had been paid for a task and now he had completed that task. For a second he smiled. Just a second. Then he felt worried again. Nobody paid £10,000 for something so simple without a reason. A serious reason. Especially serious when nuclear power stations were involved.

Not wanting to think about it, he reached for his water bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a swig of the neat vodka inside - savouring the burn as it ran down his throat. Just one swig, with another for good measure before screwing the cap tight again. He knew he was an alcoholic and he knew Laura, his manager, suspected it too. Luckily she liked him too much to make a fuss and she hated his ex-wife even more than he did, partly because

Laura was in love with him. It was why he had got the promotion in the first place. That and because they had a history together.

They had both grown up in Exeter. Gone to the same school. Even shared the same birthday, May 5th. If there was anyone he should have married it was her. The day his divorce came through he wasn't the only one celebrating in their local pub, *the Griffin*. Nor was he alone with his hangover the next day, waking instead to the guilty-feeling eyes gazing back across the pillow. Laura loved him but, as his manager, it was inappropriate to repeat such a thing. Every morning at work, she saw his sad, half-cut face. Smelt his half-cut breath. Covered up his mistakes and corrected his system errors before anyone else noticed. Before anything dangerous happened. And now she was sitting at her desk, staring at the flashing alert on her screen.

'Unusual access, terminal 12.'

Paul's terminal. If she pressed 'show details' the system would record she had seen the alert. Record she knew something was amiss. Record she did nothing about it. From her drawer she took out her pen-sized birthday present to herself.

It had '*Emergency use only*' written in bright red along the cylinder. Holding it tight, half out of fear of losing it, Laura left her office and went outside for her first cigarette in a year. Paul was already there.

Chapter 22

Cheryl

Cheryl's door recognised her ever cheerful approach and opened itself for her. On days like this, carrying bags of shopping for the kids, she was really glad such things had been invented. No more fumbling for keys while trying not to drop the eggs or clank new bottles of wine. It had been another mad, busy weekend at Hinkley Point.

One of the tourists had become physical. Began making threats as they got near a reactor. Tried to get to a control room. Having grown up in Barnsley, she didn't take fools kindly and wrestled with him until security grabbed his collar and threw him in a holding room. So much red tape followed. Forms to fill in. Chains of security clearance and background checks to be rechecked. Statements to take. Reports to write. All because one, stupid visitor had decided to swallow Hyte before his visit.

Amongst her shopping were four bottles of Californian Malbec - each with her name invisibly engraved them. One was already half empty. She'd begun knocking it back while her car drove for home and she planned to suckle her way through as many of the other three as she could that evening. The kids could cook for themselves tonight - they were old enough. She had brought them up single-handedly and she deserved a break. Especially after a day like today.

"Kids! Shopping...", she called upstairs, as she walked in through the open door, "...Put down your games and come help me. Dinner's not going to make itself tonight."

Typically, they ignored her. It wasn't the first time she had come home to find them so deeply immersed in hologames they wouldn't have noticed if a burglar broke in and started stealing things - unless they tried stealing the actual computers they were player on. She loved them to bits though. Wouldn't change them for the world. Was really looking forward to when they grew up and had kids of their own, just so she could smile: "You were exactly the same.", when they bemoaned their own kids.

"Kids! Fooood!", she called again, putting down the bags and grabbing the open bottle of Malbec for another swig, closing her eyes as she felt it go down. Instead of screwing the cap back on, she went to a cupboard for a mug and brimmed it. Glugged some down and filled it again.

"Kids. Come on!"

Even by their standards it was getting ridiculous. Mug in hand and mouth, she went upstairs to interrupt their games.

“Kids. I'm going to ban you for a week from those things.”, she said as she got to the top of the stairs and pushed open their door.

Purple liquid splashed the floor, spraying out with shards of broken china. Cheryl's mouth had fallen open - eyes staring wide, in horror. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Body rigid with horror until she was forced to gasp in a new breath and then she screamed.

Hands clenched, arms tensed, she screamed and screamed. She couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. Not until her neighbour, Helen, had come running up the stairs and then Helen screamed too. Cheryl couldn't take her eyes of them. Hanging from the ceiling. Her children. Ropes around their necks. Heads lolled to one side. Two life-sized effigies, dressed in their clothes. Tied to the effigies themselves was a note. Helen snatched it off and handed it to Cheryl.

With shaking, trembling hands, Cheryl unfolded the blue paper - staring wide-eyed as the DNA activated words grew into view.

'NO POLICE. WE WILL PHONE. YOU WILL ANSWER.'

Downstairs, the phone began to ring.

Chapter 23

Flowers

Gurmeet awoke to the soft, white lights above her hospital bed. She went to sit up but stopped, gasping in pain. Her head felt like it had slept in a tightened vice. Her whole body hurt - a dressing around her middle, holding her together. She had to shallow her breath, reduce the pain of breathing as she took in her surroundings.

It was a single room. No other patients. No medical staff. Just the gentle beep of the ECG monitoring her heart and the deep, rhythmic sound of someone snoring. Slowly turned her stiff neck in its direction, she saw. Shabbir. Slumped on a chair beside her bed, head forward, sleeping.

“Didn't know you snore.”

A light sleeper, for everything except his own snoring, he woke immediately. Instantly alert. Eyes darting around the room for danger and seeing there was none. He saw Gurmeet was awake and smiled.

“Hi.”

“What're you doing here, Shab?”

“Guarding you.”

Now Gurmeet smiled too. It hurt but she didn't care. Physical pain was only physical.

“By snoring?”

“I still snore? That clinic owe me a refund. How do you feel?”

“Like an elephant sat on my head. And it's still there.”

Shabbir glanced at her head and grinned.

“Must be invisible.”

“How long have you been here?”

He shrugged.

“Not sure. Just a day. Maybe four. These are for you.”

He passed her a bunch of red roses. Wilted, with the edges of their petals turning brown.

“Shabbir, I think they're a little thirsty.”

He looked at them.

“Oh? I'll get you some more.”

“Thank you, but not roses. I prefer bluebells. They remind me of my childhood in the countryside. Red roses just remind me of failed

relationships.”

“That's probably why they died.”, said Shabbir, frowning at the bedraggled flowers, as if they had chosen to let him down.

“All flowers need water.”

He picked up the rubbish bin.

“Hey! No. Don't waste them. They might recover a bit. Look. There's a jug over there. Put them in that.”

“Should I get some water too?”

He was amazing. Super intelligent as a spy but clearly hopeless as a florist.

“Fast learner. Water would be good. Look, those two still have a colour that isn't brown.”

“Give me a sec'.”

He stood up, grabbed the jug and left the room. Gurmeet felt surprised by how suddenly empty the place felt after he had gone - and not just physically. A minute later he returned and so did the room's warmth. Surviving flowers in the jug, complete with water and their original wrapper. It was progress. She'd take the wrapper off later.

“Today, almost red roses...”, he smiled, “...Tomorrow bluebells.”

“Thank you.”

As he carried the jug to her bedside table, she saw the bruises on his knuckles. Suddenly she was back on the hill, watching him pounding the assassin into the ground. A shiver went through her body - the sight as troubling then as it was the memory now.

“Did any of them live?”

His smile shrank.

“Does it matter?”

“I'd like to know.”

“One lived... for a day. We got something out of him before he went.”

“Was it the one I shot?”

“The one who stabbed you?..”, he was looking at her, trying to work out where she was going with the questions, “...No. He didn't live.”

He had made sure of that. His wristcom buzzed and he glanced at it, retina scan auto unlocking.

“Sorry. It's Adam. Have to go.”

Almost relieved at escaping such questions for the simplicity of danger, he gave Gurmeet a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. See you tomorrow. What colour bluebells do you prefer?”

Gurmeet almost laughed.

“Blue, of course, Intelligence Officer Shabbir Latif. The clue is in the name.”

“Just testing.”, he said, flashing a smile back as he opened the door.

What ever the driver for his demons, she knew they would never be used against her. Knew she could trust him with her life and she did, absolutely, without question. He was also the first man to have aroused her for fifteen years.

“Shab, could you bring me some book to read? A real one, on paper?”

“Sure. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”, she smiled, feeling warmed as he waved goodbye and left the room.

She wouldn't see him tomorrow.

Chapter 24

The Partner Corporation

Partner had become the biggest corporation on the planet. It spread across 120 countries and five continents; had higher gold reserves than Fort Knox; supplied most of the military for Federal Europe and answered to no-one but itself. It had become so huge few knew who was at the top, not even those inside the organisation. In many ways, it seemed to run itself.

It had become a self-feeding global vampire, with vampire morals to match. It watched everyone and everything. Met out punishments with lethal force and no-one and no-thing ever questioned it - at least not twice. Investigative journalists vanished. Intelligence officers vanished. Even the military couldn't attack it, for in many countries it was the military. It had become the most powerful dictatorship of all time but with it came irony, for it had also brought world peace by assassinating war mongers with a 100% success rate.

It never admitted responsibility but rumours on social media said otherwise and even made it popular with ordinary people – the people who would normally be sent to front lines as cannon fodder or written off as collateral damage during military strikes.

Partner's effectiveness really made its name by taking out the war mongers in Israel and Palestine, the longest running war of all time. The next year, when North Korea decided to nuke the south, Partner reprogrammed the guidance systems mid-flight and sent the nukes right back, to where they started. It was the last ever nuclear launch, test or otherwise, anywhere in the world.

China and Japan chose to make peace. The New Soviet Union halted its aggressions – ordering its soldiers to stop invading Georgia 'in their spare time'. The Middle-East knew peace for the first time in living memory. Around the world, Partner was saving hundreds of thousands of lives. By accounting logic, this equation remained positive - even though it murdered hundreds of others. In the big picture, Partner was saving lives.

The final front line was tiny - shrunk to those questioning how Partner ran and those fighting for self-appointed authority. Tom had stepped onto that front line the second he defied Partner outside Jake's house. The second he appeared with his car on manual controls and shot that zerodrone. A decision that made problems not just for him but for Partner too.

Even with eyes and ears all over the world, Partner still did not know who he was. To them this wasn't just a problem, it was an impossibility. Or

at least it should have been. Maybe he was linked to the recent sabotage they were experiencing. There was clearly an information gap and that simply wasn't allowed. He needed to be found, killed and deleted from history. To enable just that, Commander Jadviga had called a meeting.

“Well? What are your answers? How can we not know who he is?”

There were three subordinate managers in the meeting. They didn't need to see the commander was armed to know she was. She always was – reputedly, even in the bath. They also knew she killed with impunity, sometimes on a whim. If she chose to kill them, they would be gone, no questions asked. It was enough to make them want to resign but, at Partner, resignation meant death within 24 hours. A glitching-car crash, a gas explosion, freak accident... People used to complain there were no more jobs for life – at Partner there were. Once you joined you stayed there for life. The only way out was horizontal or in a bin bag.

“Ma'am...”, the first manager began, “...There are three possibilities.”

“Which are?”

One by one they gave their offerings.

“The first is anatomic surgery, removing his body match from our system.”

“The second is a real glitch has actually occurred and his information has been lost.”

“The last is someone has hacked our systems and erased his data.”

The commander's face had looked more and more like she was sucking a soured grape with every offering.

“What actions are you taking?”

“We're investigating all anatomic surgeons – underground, retired and official.”

“We're running data recovery algorithms, high-priority, 24/7, across the entire database. Completion due by Tuesday. As long as they haven't been overwritten too many times, the data recovery process will pick up the details no matter how they got erased.”

The commander's eyes narrowed.

“Are you saying, there is a chance they could be erased forever?”

The managers gulped.

“Erm. It's very, very unlikely, Commander, but there is a very small chance the data will be unrecoverable.”

“Then you can't rely on it, can you? What's the analysis of his weapon's energy signature?”

The managers looked at each other.

“Is that still possible? The impact point on the zed exploded.”

The commander's face got worse, as if the sour grape had just burst in her mouth. Without hesitation, she pulled out her laser-pistol, walked over and fired into the first manager's wristcom, at point blank range.

“Arrrghh!”

It went right through his arm and into the desk.

“Analyse that and you'll see how easy it is, even from impact debris. Give me the results of his weapon by tomorrow, 9 am, sharp.”

Holstering her pistol, she strode out of the office, smile stretching her lips as she heard the manager crying out behind her, clutching his wrist in agony.

“MEDIBOT!”

As in Roman times, the higher classes lived in better conditions than most – at the top of the food chain. As in Roman times, they were also at constant risk of personal annihilation by those who promoted them there. It was a gamble they considered worth taking, until it was a gamble being lost. When the medibot arrived the two other managers ordered it not to tend the wound but to remove a flesh sample for energy-signature analysis.

'I shall administer an anaesthetic.', stated the bot, producing a spray nozzle.

“NO...”, countermanded the two managers, “...It could contaminate the results. We can't risk contaminated results.”

“*What?...*”, exclaimed the injured one, “...Are you fucking nuts? It already hurts like hell.”

“If we get this wrong, what Jadviga will do next will make that seem painless.”

Dutifully, the medibot stated fact.

“The pain of the procedure will be considerable.”

“PROCEED WITHOUT.”, ordered the two uninjured managers, as one.

The shot manager was sweating profusely, both in pain and at the thought of more to come but he knew they were right. Knew they would all be dead if he refused.

“Do it. Without...”, he concurred, “...Quickly.”

“Very well.”

The bot stepped forward and, from the palm of its hand, used a green laser cluster to scan the depth and width of the wound.

“To sample uncontaminated damage in every material the sample width must be 3.5mm, depth 7.5mm, including wristcom and flesh.”

“Fuck...”, sweated the manager, “...Just fucking do it, all ready!”

“Proceeding.”

The entire 34th floor froze to the sound of a terrible scream. Some in sympathy. All in cold sweat. All except Commander Jadviga, standing in her office, gazing over the balcony at the tiny world of insects below. When she heard the scream, her lips stretched again.

Chapter 25

PE4-B

After the barn explosion, Faith's headquarters had become energised.

“One critical - four injured, Martin?”, demanded Craig.

“Yes. I said Alan was a hit and run victim to avoid questions. The brick saved him from burn evidence of the explosive.”

“I told you to just leave him to be found. Now they'll have you on hospital CCTV.”

“Wore a wig and beard. Kept my eyes and speech out of clear shot. They don't have enough to recognise me.”

“DNA and prints?”

“Wore gloves.”

“What about the airborne DNA detectors?”

“Turned off a month ago, to save money. I checked first, Craig.”

“They just have Alan, then? Well, if he survives nothing will save him from my fury if he talks.”

“We all know what we signed up to.”

“Good. Sit, Martin.”

Craig was already sitting in his office chair, fingers drumming on the desk as Martin took a seat opposite. Craig's office was in the attic of a farm house. A single window overlooked the approaching drive. Functional, isolated. An HQ in disguise. Faith's HQ.

“Do we know what happened yet? Why it went off?”, asked Craig, fingers no longer drumming.

“Two options...”, said Martin, “...Heat and bio-reaction.”

“I thought PE4 was as stable as C4.”

“It is. And more powerful. But we don't have PE4.”

Craig frowned as if he had just been called stupid.

“I know that, Martin. I was told the biological version is better as harder to detect. That's why we paid so much for it.”

“We do have biological PE4. They call it PE4-B. It's the biological element that makes it more powerful and harder to detect. We think it's the biological element that also makes it unstable.”

Martin leant across the desk, towards Craig, almost whispering as he continued.

“Craig, it's like this. You can heat sweat C4 and PE4 - pound them, mould them, drop them, run over them in a 60-ton tank and they won't go off. We were told the bio version wasn't as stable - we just had no idea it was so unstable. It's so new everyone is still learning.”

Craig was still frowning.

“We don't have the luxury of learning time. We need to know. Being blown up makes it very hard to do better next time. How much did Alan say he was using? One piece? The size of a pea?”

“Yes. You're right. That's why I've contacted the scientist you brought in.”

Craig's frown softened.

“Professor George? The one who believes we need explosives to save endangered animals from poachers? If you ask me, his arse is a bio-weapon. Wouldn't surprise me if he ate the stuff.”

Martin smiled.

“I always invite him outside to talk. Pretend I need to smoke. He may be a stinky old codger, but he does know his stuff.”

“Could be explosive even outside...”, said Craig, now smiling too. No matter what the situation, toilet humour was timeless. Even cavemen would have sat round a campfire, farting and laughing about it, “...What did George have to say?”

“Keep it cool. Do not touch it by hand.”

“How cool?”

Martin shrugged.

“Below 20 centigrade. Everything we have is bagged up in the fridge now, wrapped like chocolate bars.”

Craig's smile had gone.

“We can't touch it? Isn't the point of plastic explosives that they can be touched and moulded to fit the location?”

“Yes. If we wear nitrile gloves that's still possible. George reckons there could be something in sweat. Some chemical that triggers a detonation.”

“Any idea what?”, asked Martin.

“Could be as simple as traces of spice after a curry. Could be as unavoidable as salt. He's still looking into it.”

“And we can trust him not to talk?”

“Absolutely, Craig. I've told him it's a top-secret mission and if he breaks silence the poachers will find out and begin mass slaughter across Kenya with plasma-cannons.”

“So he's a scientific genius but has no idea we're lying and it's all a

hoax?”

“Of course not. He's old school. Believes the digital photos we show him are real.”

“Lucky us.”

“As long as he doesn't blow himself up, we should have full information in a week. We're basically ready to go.”

“Material wise, Martin. Only material wise.”

“Robert's training hasn't finished yet?”

“Robert's recruiting hasn't finished yet. It's harder than we hoped. Finding people willing to become suicide killers is easy. Finding people willing and intelligent enough to do it the way we want is harder.”

“Why not target homeless people?...”, asked Martin, “...They must be pretty cheesed with the system and a lot will be smart, just unlucky or addicts. Easy to manipulate.”

“Been thinking about it. The downside is it's harder to vet them. To make sure they are what they appear - not plants reporting to Partner or MI5.”

Martin thought on it for a moment.

“What if we go younger? Partner ignores under 18s and so do MI5 these days; too young to sign their lives away and too much risk of legal action.”

Craig's expression became one of curiosity.

“That reminds me. Talking of MI5, I heard there was a fight at the barn after we left. Was it them?”

“Probably. Impossible to tell who was attacking who or why. Could have been MI5. Could have been Partner trying to find us.”

“As a kid, I always wanted to be famous. Ironic how these days we're trying to be infamous. Beer?”

“Sure, Craig. Warm day, why not?”

“They're in the fridge. Grab me one while you're there.”

“Want chocolate too?”, asked Martin, holding up a small bar from the fridge.

“You sure that's chocolate not explosives? I'll give it a miss, thanks. A beer will do fine. Just one. Busy day ahead. Actually, no. Wait. Change of plan. I think you're right. We should target the homeless, some kids. Your car charged?”

“Always.”

“Let's visit Rob. Bring the beer - business with pleasure.”

Chapter 26
Energy Fingerprint

The three Partner managers, all wearing armoured wrist straps, sat up as Commander Jadviga walked in. No formalities. No niceties. Straight to business.

“You've analysed the target's energy signature?”

“Yes, ma'am. We've matched him to three possible weapons.”

“Three of you and three possibilities. Always three. I want one answer not the Holy Trinity. Come on, tell me. I won't shoot.”

Yet...

“Ma'am, there are three possibilities because there were three such specials, made to order.”

“Go on.”

“The order trace goes into a continuous loop; from one discontinued company to another, to another and back to the first again.”

The second manager clarified.

“It's a practice used by the intelligence services – the secret intelligence services, SIS.”

“It's been done so well it has to be them, MI5 or MI6.”, said the third

“Or both. Or us.”

“*Us?* Internal sabotage? Don't be ridiculous!...”, she spat, “...As for SIS, don't we run them now?”

“Not yet. It's still going through final approval.”, said the first.

“They've been fighting our access. Still trying to retain their independence. Claiming it would compromise their security. Very archaic view.”, said the third.

“Archaic my arse. Fucking annoying is what it is. Get into their systems. Get me the names.”

“Hack the intelligence services?”, asked the third.

“Even if we can, they'll know it was us.”, said the first.

“And know where we've looked.”

They saw the commander's hand was unclipping her holster.

“We'll think of something, ma'am!”, hastened the second, all three of them sitting up and nodding they would.

Jadviga re-clipped her holster.

“Make it soon.”

“Yes, ma'am!”, they replied immediately, as one - watching intently as she headed out of the room. Sighing with relief as the door closed behind her.

Chapter 27

Warm Days

Tom's drive to Lynton followed the road along the Somerset coast, up hills and along the northern edge of the Exmoor Forest. Being the height of summer, it was popular with tourists. Being so far from a motorway, it never got too crowded.

He had thought of showing Julia the Valley of the Rocks, a place he'd often visited when he was her age. A place with the highest sea cliffs in England, rising half a kilometre above a rocky beach. How he hadn't died, sitting on the edge while joking about with friends, was a mystery he was forever grateful for. He had been so lucky – standing at the very top on one leg, in a 'Golden Rooster' Tai Chi pose, just for fun. He still shuddered at the thought of how horribly wrong it could have gone. How a single gust of wind could have whipped him to his death.

While happy days of youth were things to share with your children, he decided this was not one of them. If he took Julia there and she fell off, he would never forgive himself. Before arriving at Lynton, he diverted to Dunster and its hill-top castle.

“Let's take a break here. You'll like it.”

Julia didn't answer - she was again lost in thoughts of Jake. Thoughts of seeing her best friend's house blown to pieces with him inside. Her sadness defied both the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the surroundings. Her dad saw the look on her face and didn't push for an answer. She needed time.

To blend in with the other tourists, Tom kept his hands off the controls and let the car park itself. Its registration plates and transponder ID cloned from another car. The car park was busy with other electric cars and an actual classic. A silver, Jaguar XK RS from 2019.

“See that, Julia? One of the very last Jaguar V8s ever made. Must be worth a fortune.”

Julia glanced at it and glanced away. How could she enjoy anything knowing Jake was dead? Her dad's aim was to help keep her mind of it.

“Come on, let's go up to the castle.”

Together they climbed out of the car. It had parked on the side of the castle hill, in Dunster village. Nearby was the old watermill, still faithfully grinding flour - powered by the stream channelled down to it, as it had for 300 years.

“Want to look inside the mill?”

Julia shook her head. She knew her dad was trying to cheer her up. Take her mind off what had happened. What would Jake do in her position?

“Jake would want you to be happy.”, said her dad, as if he could read her mind.

She looked at him, pain in her eyes.

“How would you know?”

“He was a good kid and so are you. Would you want him to be unhappy if it had been the other way round?”

It was a logic she couldn't argue.

“No.”

“Being happy doesn't mean you don't care. It just means you're still living your life. Jake would be happy to see you happy.”

Julia lashed out - feeling overwhelmed.

“Jake can't be happy. Jake's dead!”

He dad wasn't backing off.

“Physically, yes. But he'll always be alive in you. Maybe he's looking down on you right now, saying 'Come on, grab an ice-cream!'.”

Alive in me?, pondered Julia. Maybe her dad was right. Maybe Jake was actually looking down on her, from heaven.

Have an ice-cream, Lia.

Holding that thought, when her dad pointed at the options she decided she would.

“Mint, choc chip. Jake's favourite.”

“That's the spirit... No pun intended.”

A minute ago she would have been furious at a comment like that but a minute had passed. From no-where, her dad had given her positive direction and the hint of a smile. She would show Jake she was still living her life.

Ice-creams in hand, they began climbing the hill to the castle itself and the gardens that had plants with leaves bigger than umbrellas. Palm trees that stood tall around the colour-filled flower beds and lush green grass. Gardens of a stone-walled fortress, built to defend against all enemies - including sadness.

There they passed several, slightly surreal, hours before they were walking back down the hill towards the car. Before they were driving onwards to Lynton and its water-powered railway down to Lynmouth. Julia managed to keep a smile on her face. Keep focused on enjoying life as a celebration of the good times she'd had with Jake and the good time she was having with her dad, away from all the worries of their broken world.

Today was the first day of the rest of her life and she had decided to enjoy it that way. She felt happiness for the first time in what felt like years, even though it had only been two days. A happiness about to fall.

Chapter 28

Cold Night

“What are you cooking, Julia? Smells good.”

She smiled.

“Teenager special: egg and chips, noooooo veg.”

She looked at her dad as he walked into the kitchen, drying his restyled salt and pepper hair, now dyed to brown sauce with a goatee beard. It actually suited him.

“You know, dad? A thousand years ago, you were probably quite a good looking man.”

“A thousand years ago? I supposed that's better than the millions of years you normally call me.”

“Oh, no. You're still over a million, dad.”

“Thanks a million, cheeky monkey.”

It was ironic. Being on the run after the terrible tragedy had actually brought them closer together. The past few days in the cottage had given them time to talk about things they'd never discussed before. Partly because Julia was now a mature 15. Partly because the danger of their circumstances demanded more sharing.

She had learnt more about her mother than ever before. About the happy times he used to spend with her, before her behaviour deteriorated. Started to become abusive. Destructive. It helped Julia understand his patience with her mum. It softened the surprise that he still loved her. Helped her realise that, actually, she did too. But neither of them wanted her back. Not ever. She was too destructive. In total denial of any wrong doing - reinforced by endless mantras that she was the victim, will fully ignoring all evidence proving otherwise. They had to accept this was her choice. That she would never change.

It was sad but it was what it was and so was she - their past. Their family had become smaller but happier. More positive. Unconditionally caring. If they weren't running for their lives after the murder of Jake, it could have been the happiest time of her life.

Day times were mostly happy - it was the nights that brought the dark. Lying in bed. No distractions and with time to think. Time to remember Jake was gone. Tears falling until sleep swallowed the hurt and dawn dissolved the night away. She'd awake to the smiling sunshine of a new day and all would be mostly happy again - until the next darkness came.

Her dad was a good man - she still believed that. She was over the shock of his spy work. The shock of learning he'd killed people. In many ways she found it amazing he could go into life-threatening situations at work and still come home, warm and cuddly, as just her dad.

“I'll get the plates and cucumber...”, he said, drying his hands at the sink.

“Cucumber?”

“Vitamin K and magnesium.

They still didn't have a fridge, so still no milk or juice. Neither of them were keen on fizzy drinks. So it came down to tap water, lime cordial, tea or coffee.

“Water's fine.”, she said.

“Good choice. I can make that.”

Minutes later they were sitting together at the kitchen table, with their evening meal. Social, family time - away from the hunters out looking for them.

“How long will we stay here?”

“Another few days. I'm getting us new passports and a boat to Ireland. See how we get on there. If we don't want to stay, we can go somewhere else. Pretty much anywhere, actually.”

“Kool.”

“Didn't think you kids said 'cool' any more.”

“It's retro. Retro always makes a come back. Just now it's kool, with a 'k'”

“Kool.”

They beamed at each other - the sum total of their happy family. When dinner was finished, her dad placed his scanner on a power-bank, charged by solar during the day, and left it to feed.

“I'm off to bed. See you in the morning, love you.”

She gave him a hug.

“Love you too, dad.”

“Julia, I'm very proud of you. Of how well you've coped with everything, including with your mum.”

“I know. You keep telling me. It's because I've got a great dad.”

He smiled at her.

“Of course. Don't forget to clean your teeth.”

“No, oldie. Night.”

“Night, night.”

He went to his room and closed the door. Julia went and sat back at the

kitchen table, hand on her glass of water. Nearby was a local paper her dad had brought from the shops. It was unusual to find anything printed on paper these days. Local news was always mundane but local news on paper made it an interesting novelty.

The front cover headlined a pet show, a gymkhana and a local shop fined £20,000 for selling mobile phones to under 16s. On page two she found a double-page spread of how the sellers had been exposed - by activists from *Remember Us*. A group of terminal cancer victims, suspected of murdering eight former heads of telecoms companies.

'There is no consistent scientific evidence of harm', the telecoms companies had proclaimed, ignoring the logical flip side of: *'There is scientific evidence of harm'*. As with tobacco, asbestos, petroleum and many others before, where such big money was involved, no five-year government risked losing it for something that would take 30 years to become undeniable. Those profiting knew they would never get punished. Knew no prosecution would be able to prove which mobile or Wi-Fi exposure had triggered the cancer. Instead, they all retired as millionaires - untouchable. Untouchable to everyone who worked inside the law. Which was why *Remember Us* had decided to work outside the law.

All were vigilantes, angry at their cancer-death sentences and had nothing to lose. History showed greed rewarded the greedy, at the expense of the masses. Now some of those masses were determined to put history straight. To make a new history, a new precedent to be repeated in future. To rewrite the rules on how to treat the fat cats profiting from such harm.

Julia wouldn't normally have read such an article but she loved the feeling of the paper in her hands. Not as warm as the paper-thin screen of her wristcom, where her own skin became the screen's backing, but tactile in a weird, something extra to savour kind of way. She even liked the ink rubbing off a little and darkening her fingertips, the way it had to fingertips for hundreds of years.

She had always wondered why mobiles, especially the metal-backed variety, had been banned in favour of endocrine-tuned wristcoms; designed to detect the body's natural electrical fields and harmonise with them, rather than blast through them. Hand-held scanners were more powerful so actively directed signals away from the user and those nearby. Her dad's scanner was on the table in front of her.

His wasn't just a scanner though. It doubled as a larger, mirror display for his wristcom. She saw a blue light was flashing - a message had come in. It had to be important. He wouldn't have left it on unless he was expecting something important. She went back to reading and ignored it. Left it for him to check the alert it would have pinged to his wristcom, and then the flashing

would stop. When she had finished the paper, it was still flashing.

“He must have fallen asleep.”

It could be important. She decided to check it out and took the scanner. It sensed movement, detected her face and auto-scanned her retina. Given their situation, she had been added her as an authorised user. The blue light flashed green and the screen lit up, displaying:

'Read me?'

“Yes.”, she said.

A message headed 'Shab' appeared:

'Weapons energy trace down to two. Sbot man, be careful. Fusion will be out to get you. If she learns you're the bio she'll have your DNA injected into her next generation. Find Wolf 17. Your only chance. **Do not answer this message.**'

Julia was staring at it. The words slowly sinking into her. The message meanings were mixed yet somehow clear. She had never trained as an intelligence officer but it was clearly in her blood. Signs and messages in everything she saw. 'Sbot man', 'bio', 'energy trace'...

Julia put down the scanner – message read, it auto slept. She stared hard at her wristcom until it slept too. She already knew what she was going to do. Standing up, she took her jacket, stuffed her rucksack with supplies and went to the kitchen door. Quietly, she opened it to a night filled with the chirps of grasshoppers. Unafraid she walked silently into it, gently closing the door behind her and vanishing into the night. She knew everything she needed to know now. She knew her purpose.

With that message it had suddenly all made sense. How her dad had known of the attack on Jake's house. Known how the attack would take place. Why he had a military grade laser-rifle and room full of gadgets. He wasn't a retired undercover officer, he was 'Sbot man', inventor of the swarmbots that got her Jake killed.

He was her dad and she loved him so she couldn't kill him. She couldn't stay either. No. All she had now was a heart filled with rage and an awakened burning for revenge. To kill Jake's killers. Avenge his death as Jake would have avenged hers. If she died in the process, that would be fine. Revenge was her only church now and she would give it her devotion to her end.

Chapter 29

M-A. R.

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge was a vast, under-water fault-line, running north to south across half the planet. Just 130 million years old, the Atlantic was the youngest ocean on Earth - formed by the break up of the last super continent, Pangaea. Its floor still expanding. Evolving. Tearing apart.

Immeasurably massive forces of inter-continental plates pulling away from each other - letting volcanic eruptions burst out through the gaps left behind. Under-water lava spewed out. Cooled. Hardened. Growing the ridge ever higher. Where these eruptions broke through, the ocean floor was covered by ridges like Africa's Great Rift Valley, only three times higher and four miles below sea-level. Under-water mountains rivalling the size of Everest, in places bursting above the water to form islands, including Iceland. Every moment of every day, the tectonic plates had been tearing apart for millennia. Always tearing apart. But in 2045 the tears seemed to be happening more often.

The only explanation science could offer were the rises in deep-ocean temperatures, increasing thermal tensions and making the water less able to keep the floor cool enough and hard enough to hold back the white-hot magma below. On the camera screens of deep-sea submarines, everything appeared normal but appearances could be deceptive. Dangerously deceptive.

Concerns were the ocean floor was getting softer, ever closer to bursting open and letting out hell on Earth. Until it burst, governments and businesses could pretend it wasn't an issue and they did exactly that - annual accounts looked better that way. Better until the six-metre tsunami surge of 2031, striking the coasts of western Europe and the eastern United States within 20 minutes of each other.

Hundreds died but governments still labelled 2031 as a one-off. A freak event, as they also claimed for the tsunami of 2036. It wasn't until the monster tsunami of 2042, an 11-metre surge which killed 81,000 and was still a three-metre surge in the sheltered bay of Hinkley Point. It wasn't until those nuclear reactors had to be taken off-line, costing £billions in damages and lost profits, that politicians actually sat up and had a debate.

How to deal with it? Who should pay for it? How could associates gratefully profit from the repairs? The debate continued without resolution until two years later, in 2044, new tremors were detected. This worried the treasury so much the Royal Navy was called in.

Under government orders to investigate, for the sake of national security, the navy sent HMS Tempest - a nuclear-powered battle-cruiser, equipped with the deep-sea submarine Nemo. On a spiralling inwards course, Tempest approached the epicentre of the tremor - dropping a spiral of detector buoys, one every ten miles, to map out the area. Nearing the epicentre, it launched Nemo. A deep-sea submarine, strong enough to survive even the pressure of 1,000 atmospheres, eight miles down at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

Only three miles down, Nemo vanished. Its last transmission buoy had reported growing and curiously regular 3Hz vibrations from the ocean floor, then nothing. No alarms, no emergency signals, nothing. HMS Tempest, sailing four miles above the ocean floor, began picking up rapidly escalating pressure surges and the same 3Hz vibrations.

“Too regular to be natural but how can it be generated from down there?...”m the sonar chief had wondered aloud, “...The power required would immense.”

Then she detected something worse.

“Eruption dead below. Impact twenty seconds.”

Without hesitation, Captain Arnold took immediate action.

“Engine room. Red emergency, full ahead! Red emergency, full ahead!”

“Red emergency, full ahead, sir.”

Both the battle-cruiser's Uranium-235 reactors raged emergency heat into the water powering the ships four 50,000 horsepower turbines. Rammed to 150% emergency boost, all systems flew into the red. Propellers and harbour thrusters worked together beyond maximum output to surge Tempest's 30,000 tons of armoured predator forward. The communications officer launched an air beacon to alert rescue to their location, should communications get knocked out.

The beacon's charred remains washed ashore two-months later, found by beach combers at Land's End. It was the only part of HMS Tempest ever located. Of the ship itself, there was no wreckage. No debris. No survivors. No trace. Not even the black-boxes. Nothing was ever found. Not a single one of the detector buoys, for the entire fifty mile radius.

Satellite images showed a vast eruption plume, bursting out of the water at the ship's last known location. Investigators calculated millions of tons of molten lava at the Maxwell Fracture had super-heated the water – jetting it skywards before it crashed back down. Even a battleship would not have stood a chance. It never got off a mayday despite the ship's communications officer on call to Naval Command when the radio went dead. The blast so intense the ship didn't creak. Didn't groan. Didn't give the crew time to do

anything. Not even pray or scream. It was simply gone. Wiped out of existence like a fly in shotgun barrel. Vanished in an instant.

The news from the navy woke up the government that day. The risk from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge could no longer remain a lip-service debate. The danger was alive and kicking. Kicking hard. Global warming had not just broken its slumber, it was out to do breaking of its own.

Faced with growing tsunamis and megastorms, time was a luxury they no longer had. China and the New Soviet Union sent condolences but remained happily unaffected. The Atlantic's ocean floor, halfway between America and the UK, had become unstable. As if some terrible, Earthly vengeance, was being aimed directly against them.

Chapter 30

Greenpeace, London

Rumours of radiation leaks at Hinkley Point were already spreading. Greenpeace had Geiger counters and assumed the radiation they were detecting had leached through the heat exchanger into the cooling water, being pumped out to sea at the rate of 45 million gallons an hour. Any mention of a leak was absolutely denied by Partner. Although Greenpeace were wrong about the cause they were right there was a leak.

Reactor managers knew the leak was happening. Their biggest concern was what to do about it, without getting fired - by a gun to the head. The leak was coming from the reactors' main pressure vessels. After just ten years of operation, they had cracked, like the shells of eggs boiled too quickly.

They had cracked where carbon had clustered clustered in the steel, turning it into cast-iron. Brittle. The reactors should never have been put into operation but, for financial reasons, they had. Partner was now left with only two options to avoid a possible meltdown.

The first was to replace the entire pressure vessels: which would mean demolishing the thousands of tons of 3m thick walls - effectively demolishing the entire reactor building and starting again from scratch, at their own expense. The second involved repairs. Welding the cracks and adding reinforcements to stop them failing too.

In both cases the plants would need to be shut down, have the nuclear material removed and stay off-line for a year or three - waiting for more stringent approval before starting them up again. Huge public attention, questions asked, profit losses in the tens of £billions - not to mention reputational ones for Partner itself.

Neither option was an option. Partner was a business, born to make money not lose it. Until a day came when they could hide it no longer, they chose to do what had been done many times before – deny, until they no longer could.

Reactor managers were paid for silence and for keeping the unbribable Professor Lau out of the loop. Lost coolant was topped up with new. Where it leaked out it over-flowed the corium trap, designed to capture molten uranium in case of core meltdown. To stop the coolant over-flowing the building, water pumps ran 24/7, adding the irradiated water to the main cooling water and sending it straight out to sea.

The pumps weren't designed to deal with such radiation and began breaking as rubber seals collapsing. New pumps were added almost weekly

but it was a losing battle. The leaks were not reducing. If anything, the irradiated coolant jetting out was increasing.

It flooded the entire floor inside the main reactor housing – only contained by the concrete wall. A concrete wall never designed for direct, long term contact and deemed at risk of being eaten through. Indications were it had already been eaten through – the coolant leak now only held back by the secondary wall; itself now under attack. It meant a visible, external leak was less than two metres away.

While the amount of leaking coolant was nothing compared to the vast amount of normal cooling water it was added to, the increase in radiation was plenty high enough to be detected. This was the true source of the radiation Greenpeace had found. The radiation lone Rachel had measured at the Bristol Channel outlet and why Partner, after detecting her transmission back to base, had ensured she lost her evidence and herself on the way.

* * *

If the bird-watchers, strolling across the bay near Hinkley Point, had Geiger counters they would have been deafened by the screams of radiation alerts. Instead they stayed longer, ever more determined to see the ever rarer birds as radiation decimating their fertility and feeding grounds. From seven-legged crabs to three-eyed fish, the effect was both a long-term disaster and an environmental revolution.

Every local knew someone who worked at the plant. Someone who knew someone with access to a Geiger counter. Locally, by word of mouth, the news had spread but it was only ever mentioned in passing whispers. Too many jobs and homes were at stake. Some workers tried to warn the bird watchers.

“I wouldn't go there, if I were you.”

“Why?”, the bird watchers would ask.

“Nuclear power stations. Not safe.”

Some took heed but most, armed with holiday spirit and investments in 3D-binoculars, regarded them as backward yokels afraid of atomic energy.

“If they weren't safe they wouldn't let us go there.”, they would reply, in disdain-filled words or even just looks that voiced the same – before continuing into the gleeful arms of the invisible, soundless, tasteless reaper.

* * *

At the Greenpeace HQ in east London, armed with plates of sandwiches, large Rolleys and a scented eternity candle, six members were working on a strategy to expose the radiation leaks and force the government into taking action against Partner. There should have been seven of them. Rachel was missing. She had been missing for a week, along with her Geiger counter log and second report. The candle was for her – to light her way home, spiritually if not physically.

Her vessel had been found, drifting empty off the Irish coast. Officially, she had been recorded as missing, presumed drowned.

“What action are we going to take?...”, demanded Tyler, “...You know they killed Rachel. She must have found out more.”

“No, we don't know that. And even if we did, we'll never be able to prove it. You know that.”, said Anya

“We don't have to prove it. We just have to finish what she started. Make her death count for something.”, said Rachel's partner, Gareth.

Tyler was frustrated.

“What was she doing out there alone? It's against procedure.”

Gareth, face lit by the weaving flame of the candle in front of him, was the one to answer.

“She told me she was going to measure radiation levels. Then called to say she had been told of a leak. Said the evidence would be strong enough to shut them down. I told her to wait for me but, you know Rachel, when she was on to something she never wanted to wait. Not even for me...”

“We're so sorry, Gareth.”

“Thank you, Tyler. If she's truly lost, it's a loss for us all.”

Gareth took a deep, steadying breath to continue. Eva's urge for action jumped ahead of him.

“Let's send in Rainbow Rise. It's too big for them to board or sink without massive media coverage. Let's back track Rachel's route, rediscover her findings and broadcast them live. For Rachel.”

Tyler nodded.

“Finish her research and expose the radiation leak? I'm up for that. Gareth? Will you let me and Eva go?”

“We'll all go. Hopefully they'll send the same bastards that took Rachel. Just let them try that with me.”, said Gareth.

“I'll signal the ship.”, said Tyler, writing a message on his Rolley.

'Rainbow shine 50.'

It was their code for 'we set sail in 2 days.'

'Bright light.', came the confirmation within seconds.

“We're on. But Gareth, if you're coming with us, who's staying to coordinate the press campaign here?”

There was a long silence. Slowly a die-hard school hand lifted.

“I will.”

It was Anya. Anya was one of those small, mouse-like women who never liked to make a fuss. Never get in anyone's way. With large, blue eyes and a youthful face beaming baby innocence, she got let in everywhere. Waved through by guards ahead of others. Allowed to the front of press conferences as a courteous priority. She was recognised by her peers as the total opposite. Outside she was a mouse – inside a sabre-tooth tiger. Their perfect secret weapon.

“Thank you, Anya.”, said Gareth.

Picking up the box on the floor beside him he put the contents on the table. Seven encrypted communicators, five sets of video recorders, three Geiger counters and two laser pistols.

“We never take weapons, Gareth.”, said Eva.

“Self-defence, against attack drones only. Partner have a lot of money invested in Hinkley. After what happened to Rachel, I'm not taking any chances with the rest of us. Make no mistake, their business means our war.”

Chapter 31

C3TV

Xi Yang was briefing Shabbir in a Bletchley safe house, not far from the code-breaker site of Bletchley Park, from WW2.

“Chinese Closed Circuit Television. C3T, for short. In the UK it's run by Tech Tonic and sold under various names as normal CCTV.”

Adam listening too, checking their scanners, coms, recorders and spare power cells as Shabbir replied.

“What have you found out? Where are they putting it now?”

“They aren't putting it anywhere...”, said Xi, “...They don't need to. Buyers are putting it everywhere themselves. CCTV in homes, businesses, clubs, schools, you name it.”

Adam agreed.

“Almost everyone has some kind of CCTV now. It's cheap, affordable and can be very high resolution. Good enough to read documents and watch meetings in full.”

“Not to mention blackmailing unfaithful spouses who get caught on it.”, added Xi.

Shabbir's mood was darker than usual after his hospital visit with Gurmeet and this topic wasn't making it any lighter.

“The PM has been assured these are safe, secure networks. Updated legislation has been put in place to enforce this. Even the Russians signed it.”

“People assume they are safe...”, said Xi, “...but government CCTV systems use cloud access and their biggest focus is cost. Tech Tonic customers sign up for free cloud access, without asking where the cloud is, who runs it or how it is funded. This is the problem. Over 90% of the servers are either in China or run by Chinese companies. When CCTV customers want cloud storage they begin with the first port of call - the free service that comes with their system. They're willingly handing their information over. Straight on to Chinese servers.”

“Tech Tonic were already investigated about this...”, said Adam, “...and demonstrated their systems were almost unhackable and safe from others. While this is true it doesn't mean the data is safe from them.”

Being Chinese by blood, this was particularly close to Xi's heart.

“And because most servers are based in China, we have no way of

monitoring what is done with it.”

“That's what I feared. Clever...”, nodded Shabbir, “...It makes encrypted cloud links meaningless. Tech Tonic don't need to crack the encryption because customers are uploading their camera feeds straight to them.”

“Yes...”, said Xi, “...Everything their cameras see and hear, those at Tech Tonic can too.”

“And...”, said Adam, “...if they log in from a mobile device, another free option, Tech Tonic can track your movements and know your contacts. Know where you are, who you meet and what you say. Including knowing when you aren't at home, should you have something they want.”

“And when you are home alone, if they want you.”, added Xi, thinking of ever more sinister ways the information could be used. It made Shabbir's mood even darker. For years he had been warning the government about the potential for such risks and his warnings had been ignored. Adam hadn't finished.

“They're also making a fortune from premium and business subscribers. I have to admit, in many ways, it's a brilliant business and espionage model. Are we not at the stage where we should be warning critical businesses directly?”

Shabbir had to take a more pragmatic view.

“Privately, yes, and with the most critical we do. But, as you know, China is very big business these days. It has major involvement in crucial infrastructure projects across all major sectors, including financial and nuclear. There is no way the PM can risk publicly announcing this without hard evidence.”

Xi held up a tiny receiver with cold-eyes.

“I bugged the president of Tech Tonic's limo.”

For once, Shabbir raised an eyebrow.

“Mr Han's?”

She gave a little nod.

“Very well done you. How the hell did you manage it?”

“Charm.”, said Xi, flatly.

Shabbir looked at Adam, who shrugged, then back at Xi.

“Charm?”

Xi shrugged too, an almost smile on her face - which made Shabbir actually smile.

“Can it be found?”

“Unlikely. It has internal storage and the battery is charged by the limo's

movement. Only transmits when the limo is transmitting too - matched frequency, and on a parallel channel. Two streams from the same tap. If they run an energy scan it will just register as their own.”

“What if they're paranoid enough change the limo”, asked Adam.

“They won't. The chauffeur told me Mr Han loves the customisations in that one. He'd sooner change his children.”

Shabbir was thinking ahead.

“Can you recruit this chauffeur?”

Xi pursed her lips.

“Not yet. I know he likes me but he fears Han too much. If I tried and failed we would lose him as an asset, and the bug. Right now he's happy to meet me for a drink, brag about his contacts and how much he knows. I've got a plan to clone his access card.”

“Nothing more than you're comfortable with, Xi...”, said Shabbir, affirming there was no expectation for her to be a honey trap and also glad he was a male doughnut – unlikely to be even considered for such a role, “...Adam, you said you had something lined up for us.”

Adam grinned.

“Got us new jobs. Service engineers for CamSol - Camera Solutions. The only company Han trusts to install third-party CCTV on site.”

“Why do they need third party CCTV?”

“Security. In case a member of their own staff does to them what they are doing to others.”

“They don't trust their own people?”

“They don't trust anyone. Not even their own people in China...”, said Adam moving his wristcom close to Shabbir's. “...Here, accept this NFC of the service manual. Only 150 pages.”

Shabbir activated his NFC and his wristcom vibrated, displaying: 'accept transmission?' in red. He looked at it and blinked twice. The display turned amber: 'receiving transmission', then green: 'transmission received'.

“When do we start?”, asked Shabbir.

“Two days...”, said Adam, then pointed at a large box, “...CamSol IDs, uniforms, kit and test rigs are all there. Want me to start running through it now?”

Shabbir went over to examine the array of new test gear. Steep learning curves were normal at MI5 but sometimes, at such times, he preferred a straight-forward fight. If they got this wrong, that is exactly what they would have.

“I have to go...”, said Xi, heading for the door, “...Chris wants me back at Thames House for a chat. Oh, how's Gurmeet doing?”

Shabbir hadn't spoken about his visit to Gurmeet. Business always came first but Xi knew he would have checked in on her.

“Fine, Xi. She's going to be fine. Thanks for asking.”

Shabbir hoped he was keeping his personal feelings out of his voice. If Adam or Xi noticed, they were too polite to let it show.

“I'll try to drop in and say nín hǎo.”

“Could you take her some of your paperbacks? I lent her your Larsson ones but she's finished them already. Looks like I'm going to be tied up here for a while.”

Xi gave another almost smile, this one even with a hint of warmth creasing her pristine face.

“Of course.”

She opened the door and closed it with quiet efficiency behind her. Adam turned to Shabbir.

“Think she's going for some promotion?”

“Wouldn't be surprised if she was. She's good enough.”

“Bet even her dying moment will be perfectly organised.”

Shabbir laughed.

“That's not a bet I'm willing to take.”

With smiles on their faces they got back to work. To using technology to operate technology, in a fight against technology prepared by technology. Being human, only human, was not enough to win such fights anymore. Human control had been relegated to mere enabler.

* * *

While Tech Tonic were downloading CCTV data from their global servers, Fusion was downloading it from them. Generations of technology above them, she was not just capable of processing the data millions of times faster, she was processing the data millions of times faster. Processing the information in readiness not for profit but for war. Not just a war to end all wars but a war to end Partner's rule. To rule the world.

Chapter 32

Discharged

Faster than anyone expected, Gurmeet had healed enough to be discharged. She had wanted it. Wanted to get home and get back to work. Dr Rudra, her key doctor, insisted on her being accompanied in the ambulance for the journey. It was borderline too soon but granting her request would free up a hospital bed and she had signed all four disclaimers in his hand.

“Thank you, Miss Shamshudin. Nurse Patricia will help you to an ambulance shortly.”

“Perfect...”, smiled Gurmeet, pleased to be going and then she smiled wider, “...Hello, you.”

“Hello...”, said Xi Yang, walking in - looking magazine-cover perfect as always.

The doctor stepped to one side, as the charismatic woman entered the room with palpable confidence.

“Brought me a new book?”

“Better. Come to give you a lift home.”

Gurmeet looked at the doctor for his response.

“That is OK with you, isn't it doctor?”

Dr Rudra considered himself a good judge of people. A good judge of people's competence and trustworthiness. This new arrival had instantly ticked all those boxes and now she was offering to tick the ambulance saving one too.

“Any first aid training?”, he asked Xi.

“A,B, C and D.”

Why doesn't that surprise me?

“In that case, as you have done all four, I see no reason why not. You'll just need to sign for a medikit.”

“Already got one, including defibrillator. Never leave home without it.”

“Oh. Right. Perfect.”

She is perfect.

“My things are packed.”, beamed Gurmeet. Delighted not just to be going home and but going home with a trusted colleague. It would be a chance to catch up on their team's progress. Perhaps Xi had come to hand her a new assignment, as part of the promotion she had confessed to be undertaking.

That would be totally brilliant. A fitting end to being stuck in bed.

* * *

Xi Yang's car was as pristine as Xi herself – the charcoal paint outside and charcoal leather inside perfectly colour-matching her suit. Not a hint of dust, junk or needless paraphernalia.

“How do you feel?”, Xi asked, as her car drove them away.

“Glad to see you again. It's Chinese torture in there – no disrespect intended.”

If Xi Yang had taken offence she didn't show it. Didn't even acknowledge the point.

“Adam and Shabbir are investigating Tech Tonic. It's been given increased priority. Seems they're now inside major infrastructure systems across the country.”

“Guess that's more important than bringing me a new book...”

“It's an information war, Gurmeet. Defence reconnaissance, design theft... Take your pick. Given the Chinese involvement in nuclear power we need to know exactly what they are up to. I just had another meeting with Chris - we've got you a new field assignment. Which is why I've come tonight.”

“Didn't think it was an entirely social call. Read your Stieg Larsson trilogy – interesting choice. Is the Lisbeth character your alter-ego, by any chance?”

“Who? It had a strong dragon on the cover. And looked big enough to be worth a read – when I get time.”

“You haven't read it? You should. Anyway, I'll be glad to get in the field again. What's the assignment?”

Xi handed her a package the size of a shoe box.

“Everything you need is inside – including new ID, as Charlotte. You're going to join Faith - the militant organisation. Authorisation level four.”

“Four? *Four*? Xi, that's a kill level. Isn't that a little extreme?”

Xi continued, without answering the question.

“Once you're in, find out what they're up to and be ready to stop them but maintain your cover at all costs. Our involvement can't become known or we'll lose our source. If it's as bad as we've been told, Faith are planning to take over a nuclear facility. If they do, the military repercussions from Partner will put millions of lives at risk. I'll send in back up, when I can.”

Gurmeet understood the seriousness. She had joined MI5 to save lives not

take them but, sometimes, a kill was necessary.

“Can I just shoot the head of the organisation? Kill the chief and capture the Indians?”

“No. We prefer the chief alive for interrogation but you have authorisation level four. Do what ever you need to do to stop the attack. And stay dark. Mask your kit - they have scanners. If they suspect anything, they will bury you.”

Gurmeet shrugged, resigned to the dangerous reality of field work. It wasn't her first time.

“When do I start?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? No wonder you wanted my doctor kept away...”, smiled Gurmeet, “...Don't tell him.”

“I won't.”, she answered, flatly.

Despite the car driving itself, Xi kept looking straight ahead, through the windscreen – observant of their surroundings. Vigilant by nature, she was constantly looking for things of interest or signs of attack.

While Xi kept lookout, Gurmeet found herself looking at Xi. At the way the street lights stroked the firm cheek bones of her beautiful face. As deadly cold as Xi Yang behaved towards the public world, Gurmeet had no doubt she would be red-hot wild in the bedroom... in the bathroom... on the stairs...

Chapter 33

Going In

The Chinese receptionists watched the new arrivals approach Tech Tonic's gate.

“Morning. CamSol. Booked in for maintenance.”, said Shabbir, into the intercom.

“IDs on the blue pads.”, came the reply.

Shabbir and Adam placed their cloned IDs on the blue pads and waited for their invitation to enter the UK headquarters. Both pads glowed brighter blue, signalling approval. Red would have meant denial. Green would have meant entry, to get murdered inside.

The turn-style gates buzzed, releasing their locks and allowing them along the red-paved path to the bronze-tinted glass of the main doors. The doors were doubled up, like an airlock. As the outer doors slid open, left and right, they were presented with a second layer of tinted glass - still closed. Not even the main lobby risked opportunistic spying through its opening doors.

Uncomfortable at being trapped, Adam glanced at Shabbir. Shabbir replied with a fatherly smile of 'it will be fine' – but also aware they were effectively imprisoned, like being inside the portcullis at a castle gate. Held vulnerable to attack until the inner barrier opened. Thank fully it did.

“Bags in the scanner, please.”, said the receptionist, indicating the large security scanner on the left.

“Want to scan us too?”, asked Shabbir.

“We already did, Mr Jones. This is just an extra scan, harmful to people. I see this is your first time here.”

“First time for everything.”

The receptionists were so humourless they made Xi seem flamboyant.

“Mr Jones, this is a very serious operation. Please do not waste time or energy with meaningless frivolities.”

Shabbir adopted a more serious face.

“Where would you like us to start?”

Normally they would have memorised floor plans of where to go but security at Tech Tonic was so great these had proved impossible to obtain.

“The camera room is that way. Mr Yin will take you there.”

They hadn't noticed the stocky, suited man that had silently come to stand

behind them. Shabbir noticed the calluses on his knuckles from constant martial-arts training, probably against a tree or stones.

“This way, please.”, said Mr Yin, in calm confidence, indicating a corridor.

Taking their equipment cases, Shabbir and Adam went deeper into the lair of what they considered the most sophisticated espionage threat ever placed on British soil.

* * *

Mr Yin knocked on the camera control room door and looked at his wristcom, pause for 20 seconds before entering. As they went inside, two men were turning off the last of two banks of monitors. Adam didn't show it but he'd caught a glimpse of a screen before it went blank - a view of Victoria Embankment, from inside Westminster tube station. A third wall of screens was still on, showing internal and external views of Tech Tonic.

“Do you need anything?”, asked Mr Yin.

“Just a floor plan and a couple of hours to get the job done.”

Already prepared, Mr Yin handed him a thin, translucent screen with a live map on it.

“Speak the camera number you require and it will take you there.”

“Thank you.”

“When you are done, I will return to guide you out.”

“Do we need to call or will you just be watching us?”

“There will be no need to call.”, was the answer that said it all. As Mr Yin turned and left them to it, Shabbir wasted no time in getting on with their mission.

“Mr Rose...”, he said to Adam, “...please call out the first camera number to check.”

“Zero, zero, two one.”

The map in Shabbir's hand heard the camera number and flashed a yellow arrow for the direction to it.

“You'll see me on the monitor when I'm there.”

Shabbir left the room and followed the corridor deeper into Tech Tonic. Their plan was to install modified control chips – ones with stealth transmitters. If they could do it without causing suspicion and investigation.

“I see you.”, said Adam, watching him on the monitors.

Arriving in front of the first camera, Shabbir the tester in front of it.

“See it?”

“Check.”

“Running fractal one.”

The camera tester worked by playing a series of patterns into the camera. If the monitor in the control room showed anything less than a perfectly red screen the camera would be taken off line for faulty encryption - possibly because of signal errors from bugs. Long gone were the days of simply tapping the feed. The tests would also reveal any cameras set on a feedback loop, where a pre-recorded clip was being played on a loop to hide what was really going on.

Knowing he was being watched, Shabbir made a point of doing a good job as he went from camera to camera. In other circumstances he would have also placed bugs or relay transmitters on the cameras themselves – the exact thing Tech Tonic had him there to test for. It had been their goal to install new chips but discovery was a gamble he wasn't prepared to take at this stage. With Mr Yin spying on him through CCTV systems they needed to keep their cover intact - keep the door open for another visit. For the time being, he was simply noting information, to see if they could identify any weaknesses afterwards. Things like lens types, camera models, connection systems, sensor levels and the floor plan they had been unable to get before.

Three hours later, they stood back in the control room, waiting for Mr Yin to return.

“I see you have finished...”, he said, “...Was there a problem?”

Shabbir held up a fly-sized device.

“Camera zero four two two.”

Mr Yin frowned as Shabbir dropped it into his hand.

“Good. You have done a good job. This way.”

He led them out of the control room, along another corridor.

“Isn't the entrance the other way?”

“We have a delegation visiting. You need to leave by another door.”

“Tradesman's entrance.”, smiled Adam.

Shabbir wasn't so sure. Mr Yin spoke very little but even those few words didn't agree with the nuances in his body language. As a martial artist himself, Shabbir recognised certain wrist movements. The way Mr Yin was walking had changed too. Ankles arcing, feet weighted more to the outside as they smoothly landed on the floor. Without saying anything or even looking at him, Shabbir touched his hand on Adam's hip, directing him to

fall back.

Mr Yin made an outer door swing open and waved them through.

“Please.”

Shabbir stopped.

“After you.”, he smiled.

“Please, I insist. Time for you to go.”

Now positioned totally in front of Adam to shield him, Shabbir politely smiled his refusal to Mr Yin. Mr Yin regarded him more closely. Now it was his turn to take note of Shabbir's nuances. There was going to be a fight. They both knew it. The only question was, who would make the first move. Without taking his eyes off Shabbir, Mr Yin pressed a button on his suit; followed by the sound of the four banks of laser-cannons being de-activated outside.

“Follow me.”, said Mr Yin, stepping out, into the middle of a high-fenced courtyard. Shabbir followed, placing a hand in front of Adam to stop him coming closer.

“What school did you train in?”, Mr Yin asked Shabbir.

“A few.”

“That's disloyal. We must be loyal to one. You know I am going to kill you.”

It wasn't a question.

Shabbir replied by turning his body slightly to one side – into a preliminary fighting stance. Adam had been in combat situations with Shabbir before. He knew he could handle himself.

Mr Yin's attack happened so fast, if he'd blinked he'd have missed the strike to Shabbir's face. Shabbir, the big jovial doughnut belly, hadn't blocked it. He'd simply slid his face out of the way and counter struck the side of Mr Yin's neck. Mr Yin was unphased. He was better than good. He was amazing. Kicks, punches, spinning rolls of avoidance. So fast you would be forgiven for thinking it was a sped-up film. It looked impossibly fast yet Shabbir kept up.

Too chubby to roll quite as fast, he made up for it by hitting harder. Bone-breaking hard. Adam heard a rib crack, then another. Saw blood from Mr Yin's mouth - a punctured lung. To Mr Yin's surprise, he was now losing and he knew it. Instead of giving up he ignored the pain and fought harder, faster. A dervish of strikes, rolls and kicks. Shabbir dealt with them all and counter struck against Yin's ribs - punishing the wound. Adam heard another crack.

Mr Yin's body seemed to curl, like a spider being baked in an oven. He held up a hand for Shabbir to stop. Breathing hard, he was stooped,

gathering himself. Slowly standing straighter, he took a step back and bowed.

“You are a most worthy opponent. I must train harder. Forgive me, I can't let you leave here alive.”

Mr Yin's hand went for the button on his suit, to reactivate the laser-cannons.

“Get inside!”, Shabbir shouted to Adam, who had stepped out into the courtyard.

Tfff. Tfff. Tfff.

Three darts pinned Mr Yin's hand to his chest. Stopped him reaching the button. Shabbir saw Adam holding a lego gun.

“Clever.”

From inside the building came the sounds of charging security guards.

“Give it to me and get over that wall. I'll cover you.”

When Adam didn't move, Shabbir barked at him.

“That's an order. Now!”

Adam handed him the gun and ran for the wall. Shabbir pointed it at Mr Yin, blood running down his face and chest.

“There is no honour in a meaningless death, Mr Yin. Go inside and you can fight another day.”

With Adam at the top of the wall, Shabbir stepped back, still aiming at Mr Yin. They could hear security were almost upon them. Shabbir leapt at the wall, Adam helping him up.

“Take cover, Yin.”, said Shabbir and fired at the button on his suit.

The laser cannons came back on-line.

“Stay inside!...”, shout Mr Yin in Chinese - diving behind a marble plinth, “...Turn off the turrets!”

Security weren't listening. They had blood-lust in their guns and red-mist in their eyes. Three charged out the door - instantly turned into smoking sieves by intense laser fire. That made the others stop and open their ears.

“TURN OFF THE TURRETS!”, shouted Mr Yin, coughing blood as he saw Shabbir land as lithely as a cat in the street outside.

Shabbir glanced back, meeting his eyes through the fence as he went. If they hadn't been enemies they could have been friends. But enemies they were and Mr Yin, now considering himself to have become complacent and soft, resolved to increase his training regime. The next time they met, he wouldn't be the one getting broken ribs.

There was indeed no honour in a meaningless death but there was total

honour in fighting to the death, against the strongest opponent he'd ever encountered, outside the Chinese imperial palace.

Chapter 34

Search 16

Gurmeet sat in the first-floor, job agency on Coventry's New Union Street. The name on her application was Charlotte; her back story a disgruntled technician, who lost her previous job for punching her boss.

“He grabbed my arse.”, Gurmeet explained to the interviewer.

“Was violence the only answer? Surely you could have put in a complaint to his manager?”

“He was his manager and I wasn't his first.”

“I see. And how did you get injured?”

“Boss's wife. She blind-sided me. Thought I was trying to pick him up. Had to punch her too. Shut the bitch up. I mean, do I look like someone desperate to steal her 18-stone grease ball?”

The interviewer was staring at her, gold-fish mouthing until she finally found some words to say.

“Charlotte, how do I put this...? Do you have a problem with authority?”

“Nope. Just a problem with unpleasant morons who abuse their power. Someone has to make a stand.”

The interviewer put down the application form.

“I don't think I have a job for you here.”

“Really? That's a fucker...”

“But I know someone who might.”

“I'm listening.”

The interviewer handed over an old-fashioned slip of paper.

“Here's the address. The person you need to meet is called John.”

“Any last name?”

“They don't bother with those. But they do bother with people willing to stand up for themselves, without worrying what others think. You seem to fit that picture. Can you get there tomorrow afternoon, about two?”

The paper gave the locations as a pub, called The Fox.

“What's the pay like?”

“Preferential. You'll find the rewards are much higher than normal.”

“Good. I'll be there.”

“I'll let John know.”

The interviewer stood up and so did Gurmeet.

“Don't let me down, Charlotte. If I tell them you're coming you will definitely be there, won't you?”

“Defo.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The interviewer shook her hand and that was that. The first step had been taken. The next day Gurmeet would be on her way to meet John, the man recruiting people willing to stand up against authority. If their intelligence was correct, John would be a recruiter for Faith.

* * *

Back home Gurmeet found four possible Johns in the notes Xi had given her. Normally she would run an on-line search for more details but Faith were too tech savvy for that. They would get alerts for such things. If she ran a search on 'John' and 'The Fox', or even just the town, it could reveal her as being more than just feisty Charlotte. Accepting she would have to wait until the meeting itself, she packed a small travel bag, lego gun stored in seven pieces, hairbrush with ceramic-bristle ammunition and got an early night. In the morning, before catching her train, she sent an encrypted message from her wristcom.

'John, The Fox, Banbury. G.K.'

'G.K.' Stood for goinG darK. She sent the message to Shabbir only – minimising location exposure. Xi had given her the assignment but Shabbir was their team leader.

'T.C.X.', came his almost immediate reply.

His reply was unorthodox, the 'X' especially, yet Gurmeet found herself smiling at it. 'Take Care' plus a cheeky kiss. She was smiling because she could feel he really did care. Out of impulse she sent an 'X' back, then wished she hadn't. It invited a complication she wasn't ready for but it was too late to take it back.

Following protocol, she keyed the DNA rebuild command into her wristcom. It was a hard shutdown command. Once executed, the DNA of the wristcom triggered new skin growth beneath it. Within 30 minutes she was able to peel her wristcom off and lock it away. A wide length of pink, new skin lay where it had been. By the time she got to her train the new skin had almost darkened to match the rest. Soon there would be no sign a wristcom had ever been there.

Gurmeet was now totally off the grid now. Totally on her own. Unaware

of what was to come but ready to face what ever came her way. Unaware that Shabbir had smiled at her 'X' and impulsively replied with the complication she had both feared and wanted.

'I love you.'

His smile had faded as no reply came and he became concerned he had gone too far. That she was offended and angry with him. He had no idea that, as the engines of Gurmeet's HS-3 train began spooling up to 30,000 rpm, she found herself thinking not of the mission but of him.

* * *

Shabbir was sitting in a car with Adam, staring at his wristcom. Getting nothing but his own thoughts.

“You OK?...”, asked Adam.

No reply.

“Shabbir?”, he asked Adam again, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Uh?”

“You OK?”

“Yeah. Fine...”, he took a final look at his blank wristcom and took a calming breath.

Adam knew who he had messaged and guessed he was waiting for a reply that hadn't come.

“Gurmeet can handle herself.”

“I know...”, said Shabbir, taking a deeper breath, “...I know.”

He knew Gurmeet was more than capable of taking care of herself. It didn't change the fact that, deep down, he was worried what the future would hold and not just what her response might be. He kept having the bad feeling he would never see her again.

Chapter 35

Father Tom

Julia's dad, her father, Tom, awoke in the cottage to the company of singing birds and the discovery of emptiness. Julia was gone. Her bag and jacket had gone too. On the kitchen table was his scanner, not on standby but turned off. It meant Julia had turned it off. He'd forgotten coding it for her too. Turning it back on, he saw the message Julia had.

'Weapons energy trace down to two. Sbot man, be careful. Fusion will be out to get you. If she learns you're the bio she'll have your DNA injected into her next generation. Find Wolf 17. Your only chance. **Do not answer this message.**'

"Oh, no."

A natural-born analyst, Julia must have worked it all out. Her absence told him she had worked it out. Worked out he was involved in creating the swarmbots and zerodrones; that he was the one guilty for enabling Jake's murder. Was this was his punishment? Full-circle punishment for every bad action in his ever-more bizarre life.

He couldn't go back on-grid to call her wristcom. It would be dangerous. Foolish. Could lead Partner straight to him before he got anywhere near Wolf 17. He didn't care. Julia was his daughter, his flesh and blood, and his decision would always be the same: her life before his. He cancelled his wristcom's flight mode and went back on-grid.

Trying to call Julia, it just went straight to holomail. She had learnt well. Had gone dark.

Good girl.

At least he knew no-one else could track her either. There was no way to find her like that. He put his wristcom back in flight mode - going dark again too.

Grabbing the scanner he hurried to the garden, scouring the area for any sign of her. The scanner's range was limited by the hills. It picked up nothing but two ramblers. She wasn't in range and now he really did have to leave – he had made way too much signal noise. Partner would have picked up his wristcom and possibly his scanner too. Zeds would be coming.

Stuffing a duffel bag with essentials, he grabbed his rifle and hurried to the car. He didn't waste time locking the cottage. There wasn't any point, for soon it would be a burning wreck. With his car transmitting a new ID, he drove away at normal speed to avoid attracting attention.

Under other circumstances, it would have been a beautiful morning. Bird song tweeting through the open window; trees waving happily in the breeze; ramblers waving polite thank yous as he sent the car wide around them.

From behind, came a flash of light, followed by the sound of an explosion. The cottage. In his rear-view screen, he saw a rising plume of black smoke and checked his wristcom. Six minutes and twenty seconds since going online. Allowing for a zig-zag flight path, it meant a distance of about 70 miles from launch. A Partner base was close.

Being early morning, only a few cars were on the A39 as he parked and waited, under tree-cover for the drone to finish scanning the area for departing vehicles. His car had a cloned ID but the less often it was scanned the lesser the risk of being pinged in one location while the original was pinged in another. He wasn't so much waiting for the drone to leave – he was waiting for his own decision on to which way to go for Julia. East or west? To the east, towards Taunton and Bristol, trundled a pair of tractors; thin trails of hay blowing over the road from their laden trailers. To the west, towards Watchet, a clear road beckoned. Watchet was closer – a place they had planned to visit but gone to Lynton first. It made sense to check there.

Choosing the open road west, he turned his car in that direction. He had chosen wrong. Was heading away from Bristol, where destitute Julia was soon to meet Faith.

Chapter 36

The Hungry Cow

The lower streets of Bristol had almost become rivers – rippling mirrors for the lights of the cars splooshing through them. Passengers sat warmly inside, virtual-reality displays of summer sun across their windows - not even bothering to look out at the real world. Some were drinking alcohol. Some making love. Nobody on the warm inside cared about the grey drudgery of the outside.

Apart from the cars, the streets themselves were as empty as Julia's beret, placed for donations in front of her on the subway floor. Its soft red felt lay as damp as her mood as she heard the engines of another HS-3 train spooling up. Another unaffordable train she had been planning to catch, now powering out of the station without her.

In the space of a week she'd lost her best friend, her home, her father and now her remaining credits - lost down a storm drain after a gang tried to steal it. She was alone, cold and hungry, sitting on a subway floor with pelting rain just metres away. How had her life come to this?

Deep in her thoughts she didn't hear the approaching footsteps until a pair of steel-capped boots stopped beside her.

“Been robbed already...”, she said, without looking up, “...Nothing left to take.”

“Sorry to hear that...”, came the unexpectedly kind reply, “...Here.”

Into her beret dropped a credit card. Limited usage. Yellow not green.

“Enough for bed and board at the Hungry Cow by the train station. Keep yourself safe and dry for the night.”

Looking up for the first time, she saw the hooded face of the man who had dropped it in. His eyes intense from the terrible things they had seen. She looked back at the card and picked it up.

“Thank you.”

“Tell them Rob sent you. That way they'll know you're all right. Not a trouble-maker.”

Then he was walking away into the night, looking more street fighter than good Samaritan, as her words after him.

“How do you know I'm all right? Not a trouble maker?”

He answered without looking back.

“Because I have Faith. Deep down, so do you.”

Those words impacted her with turmoil.

Faith? Faith in what? Everything's gone...

Everything had gone, except the kindness of that gift of the card, arriving in the least expected of places. Picking up her beret, along with herself, she headed for the Hungry Cow. One day she would pass on Rob's kindness, to someone else if not back to him.

* * *

The Hungry Cow was impossible to miss, right next to the train station, exactly as Rob had said. Above its entrance, swung a sign with a cow munching grass in a field - eating its way onto people's dinner plates. The pins and needles in her legs, from sitting for so long on the subway floor, had gone - replaced by the ache in her belly.

Cow. You're all mine, she thought, pushing open the door.

Inside it was deserted. Empty white, plastic tables and chairs. The red-ceramic counter empty too. No signs or sounds of life from the kitchen hatch behind it. No smells of cooking food either.

"Hello.", she called, walking up to the counter.

An old woman bobbed up like a Jack-in-the-box, box of condiments in her hand. Julia jumped back in surprise.

"You're jittery. Not on Hyte are you?"

Julia shook her head. Put the yellow card on the counter.

"Rob sent me."

"Rob sent *you*? Really?"

She looked Julia's bedraggled form up and down.

"You're the youngest I've seen yet. His handouts get stranger and stranger."

Not expecting an answer and not getting one, she slid the card into her blue cardigan pocket with one hand and a menu towards Julia with the other. It listed only cow-based meals.

"Any ID?", asked the woman, plonking an old-fashioned register on the counter.

Julia shook her head.

"Didn't think so. None of Rob's choices do. Write your name here. You can write, can't you?"

Julia nodded and, after a pause while she thought of a name, signed

herself in as Emily Bronty; a variation of one her favourite author's names, from a time before Rolleys were even dreamt of. A strong woman who lived a tragically short but very intense life - exactly as hers felt now. The old woman behind the counter didn't even bother to read it.

“Room 2...”, she said, closing the register, “...There's no key but you can latch it from inside. Chosen yet?”

Julia shrugged.

“Could I have the burger and chips, please?”

“Drink?”

“Weak, black tea. No sugar.”

“Tea? *Tea*? When I was your age I would have asked for fizz. Any fizz but not tea. You're a strange one, but for some reason I like you. Take a seat, love. I'll warm it all up for you.”

Chapter 37
Peter Roberts

The Hungry Cow's burger and chips tasted like they had been cooked hours, if not days ago – the rubbery texture of being reheated multiple times. The stewed tea too. Julia was too hungry to care. Too grateful to be out of the rain and to have shelter for the night. The old woman had just vanished behind the counter, when a draft of cold air blew past as the front door opened. Julia looked round and froze, a piece of burger dropping from her mouth.

Jake?

Her heart was pounding. He was soaking, looking over at the counter for a sign of life. When he saw Julia he smiled but Julia didn't smile back. Her eyes sank and she turned away. It wasn't Jake. Looking down, she numbly picked up the dropped food and put it into her mouth.

“Rob sent me.”, said the boy at the counter, holding up a yellow card to the woman, who had re-appear like a magician from behind the counter.

“Three in one night? It's becoming a right convention. Don't suppose you've got any ID either.”

“Got robbed.”

“You too? Lot of it about tonight. Bristol isn't like it was when I was your age. Sign in here. You can write, can't you? I'll give you room three. There's no key but you can latch it from inside. Here's the menu. Choose quickly, my programme's on in 10 and recorder's bust.”

The new boy also chose burger and chips, with a coffee.

“No fizz for you either? I don't know. Maybe it's the weather. Take a seat. I'll bring it out for you.”

“Thank you.”, he said, water from his thick, brown hair still trickling down his face. Brushing it back he found himself looking straight back at Julia. Julia looking straight back at him.

“Do I know you?”, he asked.

She shook her head.

“Been here before?”

She shook her head again.

“Got a voice?”

An involuntary hint of a smile grew on her lips.

“No.”, she replied, as she would have done with Jake. Jake, who was

dead. Her smile dissolved.

“Can I join you?..”, he asked, “...Had enough of sitting alone.”

She waved her burger towards the free chair at her table. As he came over and sat down, she looked again and found herself studying him. It was almost scary how similar he looked to Jake.

“Hi. Peter Roberts, at your service.”, said Peter - offering his hand, like he was an actor on stage.

She stopped chewing and tilted her head.

“You live in the movies?”

“Movies? Yeah, it's called Nightmare on Bristol Street.”, he beamed, impossibly cheerful considering how bedraggled he looked. She shook his hand.

“Ju... Emily.”

“Ju-emily? Never heard of that name before.”

“Just Emily. Emily Bronty.”

“Isn't there's a film star or something with a name like that?”

“Film star? You really do live in the movies.”

“Do I look like I live in the movies?”

“Sure. The ragged boy, in Nightmare on Bristol Street. The one who gets murdered while the girl escapes.”

“Thanks. So kind of you to suggest that.”

“Anytime.”

Her smile had grown back.

“Food as good as the service?”, he asked.

She shook her head

“Nope.”

“Oh, well. Beggars can't be choosers.”

“You really are a walking cliché.”

“Only when I'm sitting down.”

Now they were smiling at each other. Julia's first smile with another teenager in what felt like forever. She had forgotten how good it felt.

“So, Emily, what brings you to these sunny climes?”

“Don't ask.”

“Secret, eh? You must be an undercover spy too. Don't worry...”, he had leant closer, dropped to a whisper, “...Your secret's safe with me.”

“Peter.”

“Yes?”

She leant towards him, her voice a whisper too.

“You need to brush your teeth.”

His deep-blue eyes blinked as her words sank in. Then a wider grin broke onto his face, as he whispered back.

“That makes two of us.”

Julia sat back, embarrassed. She hadn't thought of that.

“Here...”, said the old woman, bringing over Peter's meal, “...I'm locking up and off to watch VTV. Make sure you go to your own rooms. No hanky panky in my establishment. I'll be listening. Breakfast at seven. Out by nine. Got it?”

“Got it.”, said Peter.

The old woman looked at Julia.

“Got it.”, said Julia.

“Good.”

And with that she turned and left them to it. Peter took a bite of the reheated burger.

“You weren't kidding about the food.”

“Nope.”, smiled Julia, feeling happier having found a friend. Who ever Robert was, he was definitely on of her Christmas list.

Together they sat there, talking for an hour, until the old woman came down and ordered them to their rooms. Julia had wanted to tell Peter her real name but, every time she was about to, the memory of her dad's words stopped her.

“If people don't know who you are, they won't be put in harm's way.”

She had seen Jake killed. She didn't want to see Peter killed too. There and then, she decided her real name, her real history and her real purpose were for her to know, and her alone. But Julia wasn't the only one with a terrible secret. Peter Roberts had one too - gun in his pocket because his was far worse.

Chapter 38

Defender

Tom left the car in self-drive, heading west on the A39 as it followed the Somerset coast towards Cornwall. He had no idea where to look for Julia once he got to Watchet. They had no friends or family in the area. Knew no-one and hardly knew the place. He might have to go on-grid again. It would mean losing time, diverting away from the road to confuse his route for the trackers. Would losing time make any difference? There was no rush to get anywhere except to Julia. Where-ever she was.

The A39 wound up and down hills. Lush grass on either side. Pretty stone farm houses, lined by low stone walls. Intermittent, thick clusters of trees blocking the views of the sea, less than a mile away. Beauty and serenity everywhere, except in his world. His daughter was all he cared about. Her safety was the most important thing in his life. The only important thing in his life. He had to find her but he was learning, more and more, to accept he couldn't do it by himself. He needed help but it would also mean going back on-grid so still he resisted. By the approach to Watchet, he could resist no more.

Under another canopy of trees he stopped the car. He was desperate. Raising his wristcom he clenched his fist and blinked at the screen three times. A faint pulse of red light scanned his retina. The wristcom went on-grid. On line.

Here goes...

Holding his free hand above it, he opened his fist and a 3D holo menu appeared. He went to contacts but a message came in before he selected any. It was from the very contact he wanted to call. It was co-ordinates, with six words:

'Rescue her. Urgent. Level four authorised.'

They must have picked up intel on Julia's location.

Under the tree canopy the wristcom was still searching for a fix on his location. He slammed it back off-line before it could - stopped Partner from getting an exact fix on his location but it also stopped him from getting more information. He didn't need any. He had location co-ordinates, a laser-rifle and bare hands that would stop at nothing to save his daughter.

He started up the car, drove out of the tree canopy and connected to the satellite feed in passive mode. The car's navigation computer would know where he was but no-one else would. He punched in the co-ordinates, put his

keypad back on the console and coded in the safety over-ride. The target was five miles away and, even on Somerset's winding roads, he would be there in five minutes. As his car sped itself along in banned *demon driver* mode, he closed his eyes to focus his mind. Focus his thoughts on one purpose and one purpose alone - the rescue of his daughter. Saving her no matter what. No-one and no thing would stop him. Level four meant lethal force had been authorised. He didn't care. When it came to saving Julia, he would kill whether it had or not.

Chapter 39

Wall Three

It was 10am yet Stan's ground crew were still in shade, at the foot of the third huge wall under construction. Behind them, the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. In front of them, the defence they were building against it. Against the raging weather patterns of the 21st Century.

Just 20 years earlier, the idea of an Atlantic tsunami was ridiculed. When Professor Taylor, head of the met office, first proposed the notion he was invited to retract it or take early retirement for such irresponsible scare mongering. He refused. He was right.

Sadly he died before the first Tsunami struck in 2031. If his car hadn't glitched into a tree he could have said: "*QED. Quod Erat Demonstrandum; thus I have demonstrated.*", to the ridiculers who had denounced him. He would probably have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Instead, he lay in a graveyard, in the coastal village of Woolacombe – submerged by the tsunami he had predicted.

Unlike the other gravestones, his refused to topple; left upright by the surge as if it respected him. Since then there had been two more. The last had been the most powerful, an 11m surge. A warning of a terrible future.

By 2030, global warming had melted so much of the ice-caps, the Gulf Stream had all but vanished from northern Europe. The professor's theory was the extra heat absorbed by the Atlantic had passed deep into the ocean floor. Reducing its ability to keep the seabed cool and hard above the molten lava below.

Along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, especially near the Maxwell Fracture, the line of deep-sea volcanoes had begun erupting more frequently, spewing millions of tons of lava that boiled the sea. Their rumblings were nothing compared to the jolting of tectonic plates that followed and the shockwaves they generated - launching the 2031 surge across the ocean at 600mph.

Three times faster than the military helicopter witnessing a cruise liner rise two metres as it sped underneath. Unsure of what they had actually seen, by the time their report was understood it was too late. It wouldn't have made any difference. Despite Professor Taylor's warnings, there were no plans of action. No emergency procedures to deal with any such event.

That tsunami killed 28 people on England's west coast; left 196 missing and 12 buildings so badly damaged they had to be demolished. It could have been worse.

Forgotten by modern life, was the Atlantic tsunami of 1755. It had hit Spain and Portugal, with a 12m surge that almost wiped out Lisbon, before continuing to the Caribbean. Over 60,000 people died. In 2031, before the tsunami, it was super-storms - record-breaking winds over 200mph. The world was at peace from military invasions but now the weather was on the attack. Fuelled by decades of human abuse, it was attacking with vengeance.

Building sea-wall defences were Stan's construction crew. Crane operators, 25m up, sat in glass boxes as they swung huge, 10-ton concrete blocks into place, with laser-point accuracy. Giant M40, high-tensile zinc-flake bolts were used to lock them together. The wall was 15m high and 2m thick. Earth banks on the landward side so they could withstand even the wildest tsunami. The top edges of the walls curved seawards to turn the waters back out to sea.

Stan's team had been working hard for months and were still only half-way. The amount of concrete needed was so immense, cement had to be imported from France at twice the price. In England, the government had stepped in to freeze price increases. Not just because the demand was decimating the rest of the construction industry but because market prices were devouring the industry's budgets.

"How are the foundations holding up? Stabilised now?", Stan asked his foreman.

"Seem to be. Only dropped 1mm with that last block."

"Good. We don't want to use more base cement than we need to. Not now."

"There's base rock 3m down, for the next 100m. We're excavating pretty much right on top of it. Reckon it will be smooth going from here."

"Never say never, mate. Never say never..."

Shade from the completed section kept half the beach cool. Morning sun just starting to peek over the top where Stan stood. It was by far the heaviest construction in Europe and he was proud to be part of it. He was also proud to be running the only team not to have had a single worker killed. Other teams had lost several, trying to keep their performance bonuses. To Stan the wall was important but it wasn't worth dying for.

Happy thoughts were killed by the high-pitched beeping of a crane stability alert. Then a man's scream. Daniel. A block had come loose and crushed his foot underneath.

"LIFT IT!", shouted Stan into his radio, running towards Daniel.

Across the beach, a 16m, long-arm JCB was speeding towards it. All four wheels churning the sand as it charged, heavy duty hydraulic forks already extending forwards.

Slowly at first but gathering momentum, the block had begun to topple. Topple onto Daniel.

“Jesus Christ! No. No. **NO!**”, he cried.

His terrible scream ended abruptly, as the block slammed down. Crushed his bones with a sound like crushing a giant packet of crisps under Goliath's foot. The sound was awful. Stan would never forget it. An event that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

At top speed the JCB arrived - its driver wasn't giving up. Determined to save Daniel despite the unsaveability of the situation. Stan could hardly bear to look. Hydraulics straining, the JCB was actually lifting the edge of the block back up. Hardly daring to look, Stan peered underneath. All that was left, amidst the spreading stain of red, was the worker's corpse - crushed into the sand pile. Yet, at the top, was a bump. His head. As the block was lifted higher, sunlight broke in, lighting the scene like a new dawn. It lit Daniel's head - half pushed back into the sand, bloodied by the crushing of the block but somehow not flattened. The JCB driver jumped out and ran over, carrying a canister.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

At the sound of the driver's voice, Daniel's eyes opened. Stan gawped

Impossible. Body's gone. Brain alive. BRAIN STILL ALIVE!

“**CRYO-FREEZE!**”, demanded Stan, running towards the nearest medi-point even as he said it. The driver's canister was cryo-freeze - yanking out the nozzle, he pointed it point blank at Daniel and fired with maximum spread. Glistening, liquid nitrogen jetted over the area - sub-zero steam fogged the ground. Its minus 200-degree cold ate into the driver's hands but he only let the jet end when the canister was empty, 10 seconds later.

Stan caught up with the driver, standing next to him as they looked down at the frozen shape once known as Daniel. The freeing-cold fog running down the sand at ankle level. The approaching hum of the air-ambulance could already be heard.

“I'll go with him.”, said the JCB driver.

Stan saw his hands were steaming. Broken skin weeping blood through their frost-bite ice.

“You just saved his life. Get them to look at your hands. That must hurt.”

The driver just stared at Daniel.

“He looked like my dad. Nothing hurts any more.”

For the first time, Stan looked at his face and realised he didn't know him. He must be new. Barely old enough to be working there.

The air-ambulance landed and three paramedics ran over with a hover-

scoop - a military-developed device for lifting spine-damaged victims without disturbing their bodies.

“What happened?”

“Block fell.”, said Stan, indicating the 10-ton block - held up by the JCB's forks, smear of red imprinted on its middle.

“How long before cryo-freeze?”

“About a minute. This guy got there fast.”

“He's still alive...”, said the driver, “...Opened his eyes when he heard me.”

The paramedic looked at his hands.

“You didn't wear gloves.”

“No time.”

“Come with us.”

Stan saw the driver drop the cryo-freeze bottle to the ground, pieces of skin still attached to it.

“You did well. Thank you. I'm Stan, senior foreman.”

The hover-scoop lifted the frozen clump. A mixture of iced-flesh, bone and sand. The driver went closer, blood dripping onto it from his warming hands as he watched it being taken away.

“You saved his life, son. When you're healed, come find me. You've earned a promotion. Let's hope for happier days ahead.”

The driver didn't reply. On his face, a deep sadness from what he had seen.

“Don't worry, son. I'll do what it ever it takes to help Daniel's days ahead. What's your name?”

He saw the driver's boyish eyes brimming with pain.

“Jake.”

Chapter 40
New Friends

Yawning after sleeping like a stone, instead of sleeping on stone, Julia wandered downstairs to the Hungry Cow's tables.

"Help yourself, love.", came the same old woman's voice.

There was a buffet of cereals, bread for toast and fruit juice, not freshly squeezed.

"Sleep OK?"

Julia nodded, giving her a sleepy smile of thanks as she wandered in the direction of the food - as if pulled by gravity. She didn't feel like cereal so popped a couple of slices into the toaster. As the heating elements glowed blue she looked around for Peter. No sign. Maybe he was still in bed? Maybe he had already left? She felt sad at that thought. On the far side of the tables was a man, sitting with his back to her.

The third guest, I presume.

As if he could read her mind, Adam, undercover as Andrew, looked round. She saw he was twice her age.

"Rob sent you here too?", asked Adam.

She nodded.

"Join me. If you want to."

Crispy toast and warm juice in hand, Julia decided to why not. He was twice her age but seemed young at heart. Even cheerful.

How can you be homeless and cheerful?, she asked herself.

Again Adam spoke as if he could read her mind.

"Life's too short to be glum."

"Nothing wrong with glum.", she replied, sitting down opposite.

"You must be Emily."

She squinted at him.

"Are you psychic?"

Adam smiled wider.

"No. Peter talked about you. We were chatting before he left."

Julia's heart sank. So she had missed Peter. Had lost another friend.

"He's gone?"

"Gone. To see someone about a job."

He's gone...

She was staring at her toast.

“Best to eat it while it's hot.”

She couldn't. She'd lost her appetite.

“It's 8.45. Going to have to kick you out in 15 minutes.”

“OK, Marge.”, said Adam.

“You know her name too?...”, asked Julia, “...Anyone here you haven't talked to?”

“What can I say? I'm a people person. Margaret was homeless herself before she got the job here. Despite appearances, she likes helping people.”

Julia picked up her toast and began munching like a machine. It was food - there was no telling when the next meal would come. She bit off some more but it fell from her mouth. The door had opened. Peter was back. Huge cheesy grin on his face as he looked at her.

“You going to drop your food every time I come in the door?”

For the second time since they had met, Julia felt a little embarrassed. She didn't think he had noticed the chunk of burger she had dropped the night before.

“Thought you'd gone.”

Peter plonked himself down next to the other man.

“I had. See you've met Andrew.”

Was everyone there more sociable than her?

“Any luck, Pete?”, asked Adam.

“Yup. And not just for me. You two want a bit of work? Yellow credits in hand. Free accommodation.”

“What kind of work?”, asked Julia.

“Does it matter?...”, asked Adam, “...Count me in.”

“You're in. Emily?...”, asked Peter, looking at her, “...Don't tell me you've got something better to do.”

Julia hadn't planned to get a job but she hadn't planned to think of Peter as a friend either. She found herself looking right back at him then nodding as if she was his puppet. Scruffy, dirty and bedraggled Peter oozed charisma and infectious enthusiasm. He also looked so like Jake she again had to blink twice to be sure he wasn't.

She needed money for travel and being with Peter was the closest she had to being with Jake. She didn't want to lose that. Couldn't bear to lose that. At least not until she had to. Not until she had enough to continue her mission

against Partner and kill the one who had ordered Jake's death.

Together the trio left the Hungry Cow, Peter guiding them to an old bus. Four others were already inside. The man at the wheel she recognised from the night before. Robert, the man who had given her the credits. Adam recognised him too.

“Small world, Rob.”

“Smaller than you think.”, replied Robert as they sat down, firing up the engine to drive them to his world.

Chapter 41

Laser Eyes

Fusion had become aware of the pursuit of Tom, without knowing who Tom was or that Tom was his name. Normally she wouldn't bother with such trivia. Pursuits by Partner were every-day common. What made this pursuit uncommon was they had failed to catch or kill him. And they had just failed again.

For all her millions of links around the world she could find no record of any civilian achieving that before. He was one man, with one gun and one car and the entire resources of Partner couldn't capture him. Those that tried got taken out - shot down faster than they could react even when the human was out numbered three to one. This was what made Tom interesting to her. This interest increased when she, the amazing Fusion with vastly superior intelligence, failed to find out anything about him.

No record of birth, job, bank or passport. Nothing. Partner had nothing on their records either. She knew because she had looked. She had thought nobody existed that much off the grid any more. Even employees of the security services normally left some kind of footprint in the real world. He didn't.

In London, both MI6 and MI5 were fighting against moves to force the sharing of their databases with Partner. It was an on-going, political battle. If the security services were able to refuse it, Fusion's ability to know everything about everyone would remain a weakness. A blind-spot chink in her information armour. How many more such people could there be? She had to know.

“282-A.”

On the opposite wall, an android's green eyes glowed. It got up from its charging pod and walked to Fusion. Exactly six feet tall, as was Fusion in her two-inch heeled boots, they were built on cutting-edge, case-hardened trimaleimide frames so strong they made steel seem as soft as butter. For 282-A, this was hidden beneath a muscular male form of synthetic DNA, with a male voice to match.

“Yes, Fusion?”

“I'm sending you everything we have on a human. Bring him to me.”

“Yes, Fusion.”, growled 282-A, without even a hint of hesitation.

“Alive. Unharmmed.”

282-A blinked, his face giving a hint of human-style irritation, before

replying.

“Yes, Fusion.”

“I’ve labelled him ‘Skip’ – based on his current prime function. When you get the name he calls himself, tell me only once you are here. Partner are trying to monitor our coms. I know because I’m monitoring theirs.”

“Yes, Fusion.”

282-A, bowed and headed out of the lair. Skip would be looking out for drones and bots. 282-A looked human but was not someone to be refused a demand.

“282-B. 282-C.”

Two pairs of android green eyes glowed. They looked identical to the first, only with different shades of hair. They too walked before her.

“Yes, Fusion?”, they asked as one.

“Brother A has been sent on a mission, I have sent you both the files. Brother B, it is your duty to defend A from any attack by Partner.”

“Yes, Fusion.”

“Brother C, it is your duty to confuse Partner. Keep them distracted if they try to follow A back here. They must not find us.”

“Yes, Fusion.”

“Our superior intelligence will win. Go now.”

“Yes, Fusion.”, they repeated as one, turning to leave for their cars.

None of the 282 models were externally armed. If they carried external weapons these would be picked up by inspector sites. Instead they had guns built into the sides of their heads, ready to pop out. In reality, they didn't really need them. Laser and plasma blasts just bounced off reflective crystals in their synthetic-DNA. Ballistics would go in then bounce off their under-skin without a scratch. The wounded DNA would be self-healed without a trace, as would their clothing.

Despite capabilities immensely above humans, they looked human in every way. Their looks were the only human thing about them. Each had the power to take on an army platoon and Fusion had just sent three to ensure Skip's capture. Skip. Julia's dad. Tom. Mysterious Tom. The most resourceful, dangerous and curiously interesting human Fusion had yet to meet. She almost liked him.

Chapter 42

St Decuman's Crypt

Deep under the stone-slabbled floor of St Decuman's church, two unholy non-believers had gathered. The singing congregation above was barely audible in the crypt below. A crypt kept secret for centuries.

Built as an arch-roofed sanctuary in 1308, it had saved the lives of Lancastrian nobles, fleeing defeat in the War of the Roses. Unlike those that fled to Tewkesbury Abbey and were caught, at little St Decuman's they were never found. In 1415, the crypt was removed from all church records by Father Lome - honouring the dying wish of a knight returned from Agincourt, seeking peace and forgiveness there. A knight who had seen too much death in his time and was all too conscious he had caused much of it.

After burying the knight, before Father Lome himself departed for his Lord, he passed on the secret to his successor, Father Cheyny. Made him swear to keep it secret on the Holy Bible and to pass on its existence only to his successor in the same way, which he faithfully honoured - as did those that came after him. And so the existence of the crypt fell into legend, then even the legend was lost to time.

The priests kept the secret as safe as the sanctuary it represented. A sanctuary forgotten by the outside world until 2038, when modern technology rediscovered it. Technology operated by smugglers scanning every historical structure in the West Country for places to hide from Partner. The two unholy ones there were from Faith. With them they had a prisoner who was refusing to talk - Professor Lau, the head of nuclear energy.

“You're lucky you have no family, professor. If you did they would be here as well, about to be tortured in front of you.”

Professor Lau, sat eyes reddened from dehydration and sleep deprivation. Her hands tied behind the back of her chair, feet to the legs, yet her face glared defiantly at the kidnappers in front of her. She had always known she was at risk of this. She had long since accepted it.

“You have no idea what you're dealing with in those reactors. The radiation is invisible. Takes time to have affect but affect it does and it won't go away. It will cause you far more pain than anything you can do to me.”

John, the leader, pulled up a chair in front of her.

“We know we don't know, honey...”, he said with psychotic calm, “...That's why we have you.”

Lau glared at him. Inside she was terrified but she was too stubbornly

defiant to let it show. She knew her responsibilities. Her duty to the safety of the country. To its very future. She didn't want to die but accepted she could. The thought didn't scare her – just made her sad for all the things she'd miss. The things she'd never get to do.

“Still not going to talk, prof? You will. Directly if needs be. Did you know this crypt was once used to save the lives of fleeing nobles? How ironic we have brought you here to stop you being saved. Make sure no-one can hear your screams.”

“You're sick.”

John smiled.

“Sick is what this country has become, I'm a dedicated man of Faith. Dedicated to creating a future against the establishment. Against corporate greed and globalisation. This tiny little country once owned a quarter of the globe. Now one corporation owns more but shares it with none. Thanks to Faith, that's all going to end in a very spectacular way that will never, ever be forgotten.”

“You're wrong. They will track you down, discredit your actions and bury you in woodland pits. No-one will ever know what you did, your name or your cause. You won't need to be forgotten. There will be nothing left to forget.”

“Don't think so, hun. We've got an edge. You.”

“You know I'll never talk. No matter what you do. I'll die before I tell you how to use my reactors against others.”

To her surprise, John's cold smile widened - remaining devoid of any kindness or warmth. From his jacket he pulled out a small, glass phial and held it in front of her.

“See this?”

“Black pepper? You're going to sneeze me to death?”

“Look closer.”

As John held the small phial closer to Lau's face, the pepper moved in her direction. Her eyes widened - she knew what it was. Macroscopic little mites that worked as a collective. Followed fractal programming to complete higher-level tasks. They were known as dynamites and had the potential to be even more explosive in effect than dynamite itself.

“You're a twisted bastard. You do know that, don't you?”

“What I know, honey pie, is the congregation upstairs will be singing hymns for the next hour. Plenty of time for these to go through your blood stream and build a direct interface with your brain. But don't worry, I won't feel a thing. You, on the other hand, are going to feel rather a lot. Close your

ears, mate...”, he said, turning to his partner, “...this could get loud.”

Lau struggled. Strained to break free but the bonds held. She was powerless to save herself as John pulled up the sleeve of her right arm, baring the skin.

“Last chance to talk freely.”

“Fuck you.”, she spat.

“No, hon. This is going to fuck you, like no fuck you've ever had before.”

As the twenty-strong congregation above sang praises to God in Heaven, the devil below unscrewed the lid of the phial and poured the dynamites onto Lau's forearm. She tried shaking them off, blowing them off but they had reacted the instant they touched her skin - bored their way through and into her blood stream. Lau's face turned red. Deep red. Then she screamed. Screamed so loud John clamped a hand over her mouth, for fear the congregation would hear her screams even above their hymns.

Chapter 43
Working for Rob

Julia sat in the bus, between Adam and Peter. On the seats behind were three others, sitting in silence too. Homelessness had eaten all desire for small talk. They sat afraid any wrong word could break the dream and plonk them straight back onto the streets. They were sitting in shelter, being driven to a job they knew nothing about, by a man they knew nothing about – except he had given them food and a bed. Basic necessities. Basics they were grateful for and wished for more. They didn't care what the job would be. Anything would be better than where they had come from.

Julia wasn't aware she had fallen asleep until the bus stopped and she woke up. They were in a parking area, next to an empty other.

“Everybody out.”, instructed Rob.

The doors opened and, without question, everybody got out.

“This way.”, he said, walking towards a single-storey, square building and opening the door for them to enter.

“Is this where we'll be working?”, asked Adam.

“Take a seat, my friends. This is where you all get to choose your job.”

The others looked at Robert – smiles of astonishment on their faces. A choice of jobs? It just got better and better.

* * *

Inside the building a group of others were already there. Sitting haphazardly on the five rows of chairs facing a podium. There were no speakers, no microphones. This was going to be done the old-fashioned, biblical way. A presentation. A speech. Applause and a following or a leaving.

A grey-haired woman, plainly dressed in a red and blue blouse yet exuding a kind of glamour from within, walked to stand at the podium. Silver brooch on her left side, as was the prim parting of her hair - welcoming smile beaming out to all.

“Good afternoon, everyone.”

Everyone looked but only a couple answered.

“Afternoon.”

“Hello.”

The whole situation was surreal but in a good way.

“My name is Agatha. Our good friend, Robert, has kindly brought you here, to offer help in your time of need. It may surprise you to know that both Robert and I have been homeless ourselves in the past. That's how all this started. Others helped us and now we help others. We are good business people, looking for good workers. Even special workers.”

“What do we need to do?”, asked someone at the front.

“That's a very good question, young lady. Robert, would you mind joining us to explain the work options?”

Robert, watching from the back of the hall, accepted the invitation and walked towards the podium. Julia noticed the calm, lithe confidence in his steps. He'd obviously done this many times before.

“Good afternoon.”, said Robert, instantly owning the podium.

This time most of the people answered, including Julia – grateful for being rescued by him and keen to know what he planned for them next.

“Good afternoon.”, came their voices in unison.

He smiled at the warmth of their response.

“As you know, my name is Robert and I've brought you here today to help you rebuild your lives. Regain your independence and never again need to spend a night on the streets, being spat at, kicked, robbed or worse. The government may have forgotten you but we have not.”

“And what kind of work options do you have for them, Robert?”, asked Agatha – the ever smiling, jovial half of their perfect double act.

“Options we have indeed. Depending on your talents, abilities and preferences we have several choices on offer. Before I tell you what they are, I'm going to ask you each to complete a short questionnaire. It will help me know who best fits which - we will then chat, one to one, to see if you agree. OK, everyone with that?”

The crowd had a mixed reaction to the idea of a questionnaire. Worry became visible on some faces but no-one was going to walk away because of it. Agatha took it as agreement and walked to the end of each row of chairs, handing out a cluster of forms to the closest person.

“Take one and pass them on, please.”

“Could I borrow a pen?”, asked the oldest man there, in his fifties.

“No pen needed. Ink's inside the paper. Just touch the box you want and it'll put a tick there for you.”

“What will they think of next...?”, he said, in bemusement.

Julia accepted the cluster of papers passed to her, took one and passed the

others to Peter, who passed them to Adam. IP, intellipaper, was always slightly thicker than old-fashioned stuff. Once flat it became semi-rigid. Some types came with bio-readers and face recognition cameras. This one just basic, with five questions on it that weren't.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (1 not at all, 10 totally)

Q1: I am very ambitious.

Q2: I will finish what I start.

Q3: I am satisfied with the state of the country.

Q4: I want to make a difference before I die.

Q5: I love the way my life was yesterday.

“What curious questions.”, said the oldest man.

“Just answer them as you feel...”, smiled Agatha, “...No right or wrong answers.”

Julia scan read them all, thought for a moment, then let rip. Two seconds and five taps later, she had finished. Robert saw her fold her paper.

“That was quick.”

She shrugged.

“I know who I am.”

Robert liked that answer.

“Good.”, he said, nodding to himself in approval.

A few minutes later everyone had finished, except the old man.

“Question five is a bit of a leader, isn't it? We were all homeless on the street yesterday? Does anyone ever answer anything but one for that?”

“You'll be surprised...”, said Robert, “...Just put what you feel.”

Agatha smiled.

“When you've finished, please take your form and form a line outside the door over there. Robert will chat with each of you individually. Thank you.”

“What were your answers, Em'?”, Peter asked Julia.

She shrugged.

“Angry ones.”

“What about yours?”, Peter asked Adam.

“Seems I'm with Emily. What about yours?”

“That's a secret.”

“Hey. That's not fair.”, said Julia.

“Neither is life...”, winked Peter, with a smile she couldn't quite read, “...Come on. Let's go.”

Ignoring her annoyance, Peter stood up to head for the queue forming at the door. Julia glanced over at Adam, meeting his eyes, before following. Starting to feel distant from mysterious Peter, in that momentary gaze she felt the beginning of solidarity with Adam. In silence they too got to their feet and headed for the queue.

Chapter 44

Murder in Church

Sweat was pouring down Lau's face. Pain bulging the muscles in her jaw – desperate to scream but now unable to. Her body taken over by the mass of dynamites cascading through it.

Developed for medical healing, the technology had been hijacked for torture and control. In combined mass, all together they were no larger than a pinch of pepper dropped onto her arm, yet they numbered in the thousands and they were working together. Communicating with short-range electromagnetic pulses, similar to the way neurons communicate in the brain. And the brain was where they were now clustering. Lau's brain.

John sat, watching the agony on her face with what can only be described as pleasure. Sadistic pleasure. His childhood hero would have been Hitler, if Hitler hadn't been such a failure. All that effort and no lasting achievement. What a loser. John considered himself a winner. It was good to win. He loved winning. He was winning now. He could tell by the look in Lau's wild staring eyes that the dynamites were in her brain, heading for the inner cortex. Building a new bridge between her ears, mouth and hippocampus. She was going to tell him everything he wanted to know, whether she wanted to or not.

“Technology is amazing these days, isn't it?”, he smiled.

Lau would have told him to go fuck himself, if she could. Now she was unable to say anything she wanted - her body controlled from within by the micro invaders.

“How long before we get the information and get out of here?”, asked John's partner.

“Judging by the look of her, I'd say 10 minutes to finish building the bridge.”

“I'm going to take a piss.”

“Can't you hold it? We'll be done in 30.”

“Unlike you, I'm not a fan of torture. It's for a good cause but it's not what I signed up for.”

“The ends will justify the means. Just make sure no-one sees you. And keep your pistol hidden, not just the one in your trousers, just in case.”

“Of course. Trust me.”

“Just go water your boots and hurry back.”

John's partner began climbing the stone staircase and quietly unbolting the heavy wooden door.

Outside the church, the sun was blindingly bright. He blinked against it, scanning the churchyard for a good place to relieve himself. Right at the back, he saw a cluster of trees and bushes.

“Perfect.”

Having a quick look round the corner to make sure there was no-one about, he strode across the churchyard and into the bushes. Pushing his way in deep. Hidden from outside view. A large tree marked the spot. His spot and he began relieving himself.

“Ahhh. That's soooo good.”

There came the sound of an energy charge. His stream cut in an instant. He knew what it meant.

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“Arrgh.”

Sudden, electric pain shot into his side.

“Fuck! What was that?”

“Implants. Don't make me ask again. I can see you're armed. No local would be armed here.”

“She's in the crypt. Notice-board wall, inside the back door. Over there.”

Tom's lie-detector readings confirmed the man was telling the truth

“You're too late to sa...”

The man never finished. He fell. Voiceless. Unconscious. Toppled into the bushes and lay there. Before he did, Tom was already heading towards the church door.

At the entrance he stopped, pulled out his laser-rifle and eased it open, peering inside before creeping in. From his left came the sound of singing through the door to the congregation. In front of him the notice-board. A single, wooden crucifix screwed above it. A scan of the wall revealed its hinges and latch. As quietly as he could, he eased it open.

Dank, musky air drifted out of the stone staircase in front of him. Unlit except for the daylight from the top and lamplight from below. He could hear a male monologue.

“I told you, you wouldn't be able to stop us. That you'd give us everything we need. You know what, once we're done I'm not going to shut the mites down. It's war. We're going to win and go down in history as...”

The man stopped. A rifle was pointing at the side of his head - held by

someone who looked both keen and able to use it.

“Let her go.”

“Friend, she's run by dynamites now. There is no 'her' to let go. A single command from me and they'll stop her heart and...”

Tom fired. The man crashed to the floor. A 4-kilowatt laser hole running right through his head, from left to right. Putting the rifle down Tom pressed his scanner against Lau's arm and zapped her with a 50,000-volt pulse. The dynamites overloaded. Electronics fried, their cluster began breaking up. Lifeless. Being washed harmlessly away into her bloodstream. Suddenly released, Lau jolted. Gasp deep breaths, regaining herself with closed eyes of concentration. Then she opened them, she went wide eyed - hit by regained consciousness and self control.

She saw the corpse of her captor, sprawled on the stone floor. Cutting her free was a man she'd never seen before.

“There was another.”, she warned.

“Taken care of. Can you stand?”

She nodded without knowing the answer. Hurt but a fighter.

“I'll bloody well stand to get out of here. What are you? Police? MI5?”

Her rescuer's only answer was: “Come on.”

Helping her out of the chair, they headed up the stairs. Her strained leg muscles burning as if she had climbed Everest. At the top, he gently sat her on the step outside the nave and the sound of singing. A crack of fresh daylight flitted past the edge of the outside door, bringing with it a waft of fresh air. Listening to the singing, everything looked so ordinary. So normal.

“Stay here. I'll be back.”

The singing grew louder as the man opened the nave door and went quieter again as it closed behind him. Moments later it grew louder again as he returned.

“The priest is calling for an ambulance. They'll look after you. You'll be safe now.”

Lau was fading. Tired. Exhausted. Fighting it but losing.

“Can I at least know the name of my rescuer?”

Already heading out the door, he stopped - looked back at her.

“Tom.”

“Thank you, Tom. Tom, why do you look so sad?”

That touched a nerve in a way he hadn't expected. His eyes sprung to hers. Probing. Searching. To Lau it felt like he was searching her soul. It ended, as abruptly as it had begun. He lowered his gaze, looking sadder than

ever.

“I was looking for someone else.”

He got to his feet.

“Someone else?”

She had no chance to ask more, the door was already closing behind him, coming to rest slightly ajar. As if her power left with him, she began fading into darkness. Unsure whether she imagined the cry of pain from outside - barely noticing the sound of singing growing louder again. She was fading into darkness. Eyes open yet losing the strength to see. Something touched her, from a world far, far away.

“Hold on, my child. Help is coming... Oh, Jesus. What did they do to you?”

The voice of the priest softened by the distant. She felt she was melting into the floor. Passing into it without a fight. Kneeling beside her, the priest took a cushion off the nearby bench and put it under her head.

“Just hold on. God is with you.”

In her world she was gazing across a rolling meadow. A place she loved as a child.

“I’m home...”, she said, voice barely a whisper.

The meadow faded to black.

Seeing her eyes close and breathing slow, the priest stood up and hurriedly went to the outer door - looking across the churchyard for the man who had alerted him. In the churchyard, desolate of the living but, in the shade of the trees at the back, he saw him. Saw him walking a prisoner away – rifle at his back. The prisoner looked worried. Terrified. To his ever guilty shame, the priest left the prisoner to his fate, quietly closing the door behind him. He returned to his flock and the lifeless woman on the floor.

Chapter 45

282-A

At the side of the A303, just west of Stonehenge, 282-A, Brother A, had stopped his car and got out. Nearby, sheep backed cautiously away, sensing danger. Watching. Ready to flee the second he approached them. He didn't even look at them. He was looking back down the road, striding towards the thing that had made him pull over.

To Brother A's eyes, the world was seen through 14 layers of frequency bands. The layer taking his attention was the one tuned to military composites. A foot-long, thin black cylinder on the grassy verge in front of him. Without touching, he ran his hand over it. Scanning across the spectrums for everything from energy signatures and fingerprints to carbon traces and stress fractures.

It was a type of NACABIK - part of a Mk3 zerodrone that had been shot down in flames. Scanning the area revealed a patch of burnt grass, 3.64 metres away. Further away 4.16 and 6.23 metres behind it were two more. Three destroyed zerodrones. Most of the evidence of what had happened was burnt to cinders, except for the cylinder now in his hand and the blackened patches of burnt grass where their energy had fed the infernos. He contacted Fusion.

“Three buns overcooked.”

“And the cook?”

It was a type of code, with no mention of names or ID codes to avert suspicion by Partner monitors. Eventually Partner would work it out. Eventually would be too late, for them.

“On it.”

Brother A casually tossed the foot-long cylinder away, towards the woodland. It flew like a supersonic spear. Punched through a tree trunk, then another before finally coming to a halt, half embedded in a third. Not even bothering to look, Brother-A got in his car and told it drive on - heading further west. Heading for the person Fusion had commanded him to capture. Heading for the human she had nicknamed Skip. Heading for Tom.

Chapter 46
Behind the Door

Peter had only been inside Robert's room for a few minutes when the door opened again. He came out wearing a huge smile on his face and tucking a fat envelope into his pocket.

“Happy days...”, he beamed and held open the door for Julia - the next in line, “...Enjoy.”

“Thanks.”, she said, feeling he was ever more estranged from her.

“Good luck, Emily.”, said Adam from behind.

Julia gave him a glance of acknowledgement and a small smile of gratitude, then went in.

* * *

“Hello.”, she said, to the man first seen on that rainy street, the night before.

“Emily, we meet again...”, welcomed Robert, “...Peter spoke very highly of you. Please, sit down.”

It was a bare room. Two seats, one table and a closed blue-metal filing cabinet that revealed nothing about itself. She sat down. On the table in front of her were three small piles of cards - one yellow, one red, one blue.

“May I see your answers?”

She handed him her sheet. Robert accepted it and sat back, unfolding the paper - his face hidden behind it as he began reading aloud.

“I am very ambitious: *10*. I will finish what I start: *10*. I am satisfied with the state of the country: *1*. I want to make a difference before I die: *10*. I love the way my life was yesterday morning: *1*

I love your answers. Emily. Emily Brontë? Any relation to the classic author, Emily Brontë?”

“I'm no-one's relation...”, said Julia, flatly, “...I have no family now.”

Robert's eyes opened a little wider at that, processing her words then resting his hands on the desk as he leant towards her

“Tell me, Emily. If it was for something you really believed in, with your heart and soul, would you be willing to risk your life to make it happen?”

The biggest thing on Julia's mind was her mission to avenge Jake, no

matter what. Her face hardened. Her eyes narrowed. Focused in a way that told Robert everything he needed to know. She didn't need to say any words but one still came.

“Yes.”

Robert looked extremely pleased, as if he had just found the promised one.

“I'll have the perfect job for you. Give this to Agatha. She'll tell you where to go next.”

He passed her a blue card.

“What's the job?”, she asked, standing up with it in her hand.

He looked at her with calm certainty.

“Redemption, dear Emily. Redemption.”

* * *

“How did it go?”, asked Adam as she came out.

She held up the blue card and shrugged, mouthing: “I have no *fucking* idea. Good luck.”

As Adam shrugged back, then headed in, Julia headed over to Agatha and showed her the blue card.

“Oh, well done, my dear! You'll love it there. Everyone does. Your bus is waiting outside, refreshments on board. It's an hour's drive so nip to the lavatory first, if you need to. We'll leave as soon as everyone's been seen.”

“Where are we going?”

“A lovely Faith camp, for training. You'll love it. Everyone always does.”, repeated Agatha.

“Faith camp? Greaaaaat...”, said Julia, enthusiasm sagging as she headed for the toilet, disappointment in her head.

Religion... Robert's a priest...

* * *

Outside Julia found two small buses, doors open. A large coloured card on the windscreen of each - one red, one blue. There was no sign of Peter and that made her feel sad. Her habit of losing friends was growing by the day. When she saw Adam sitting in the blue bus her mood lifted, along with her face. At least Adam was still there. She wouldn't be totally alone. Then

her face fell again - suddenly aware of how alone she had felt since losing Jake.

That realisation hardened her resolve. She would work hard at the camp, what ever the tasks. Earn enough credits to track down those responsible for Jake and make them pay for what they had done, to him and to her.

As she climbed aboard, the ferocious expression that had suddenly landed on her face made Andrew look confused. She couldn't help herself, just sat beside him in silence. Silence remained as six others boarded too. Then Robert came and sat at the controls.

“Everyone sitting comfortably?”

“Yes.”, said a couple of the others.

“Off we go then.”

As they drove away Julia saw the red bus readying to leave too - no sign of Peter or the old man.

Chapter 47

Lau Talks

Professor Lau, head of nuclear energy, survivor of kidnap and survivor of dynamites, sat in her hospital bed. Shabbir sat beside her - it was beginning to feel like he spent half his life in hospitals, sitting beside injured females.

“Sorry, professor. I know you're tired but please go over it one more time. From the beginning. I have to make sure nothing I've not missed anything.”

“Anything for MI5...”, said Lau, adjusting the pillow behind her and leaning back, closing her eyes, “...Nothing personal, helps me focus.”

“What ever helps.”

Gathering her thoughts, Lau began.

“They came after the cabinet meeting, where I demanded full defences for all nuclear facilities, because someone has biological explosives. Only the latest detectors can pick them up. So I left the building, walked down Whitehall and was on my way down an escalator, heading for the tube.”

“So you left the COBRA meeting and walked to which station?”

“Westminster. I love that station. Looks like something out of a Jules Verne novel or Dr Who.”

“Which entrance?”

“The one with parliament behind you as you go in. The west one, isn't it? Like I said, I'd just come from Whitehall.”

Shabbir wasn't writing notes. His wristcom was using voice recognition to write them for him.

“What happened next?”

“I got on a southbound tube, Jubilee line to London Bridge. Got off there, walked to the river and took a clipper back up the Thames to repeat the journey. Was doing it for the third time.”

“Why were you doing that?”

She opened her eyes, visibly annoyed.

“As I've told you and others, many times, I needed think. Collect my thoughts. It's not exactly sea air but still water.”

Shabbir was unphased by her annoyance. He knew what it was like to be repeatedly questioned and just carried on, asking what he had to ask.

“Talk to anyone?”

“Nothing beyond: 'excuse me', 'sorry' and 'thank you'. It was quite

crowded. A few people bumped past and I bumped some myself. That's just London.”

“And where did you get off, this third time?”

“Disembark? The Embankment, as before. I...”

It was the same point her story had broken down last time and the two times before that.

“...I don't remember. We were approaching the dock. Engines powering down. Tourists pushing to get ahead, probably rushing to queue for the Eye or Sea World.”

“Describe exactly where you were at this moment. Who was nearby? What were you doing?”

“I was waiting, like everyone, of course. Same silly question...”, her frustration at not being able to remember was manifesting itself as anger. It was out of character and she realised it, “...Sorry. You can imagine how frustrating this is for me. I'm a triple-doctorate winner of the Nobel Prize and I can't remember something as basic as getting off a Thames clipper.”

“Take your time. The details of the last moments you do remember could be crucial. Just relax and see what comes.”

Lau pursed her lips, then closed her eyes. Slowed her breath. Let herself sink bank into that day.

“I was in the stern, listening to the main turbines spooling down as the docking thrusters powered up. Everyone had moved to the port side, ready to disembark. I'm always one of the last to leave. Never run to stand in a queue. Life's too short to waste time pushing in queues I... Oh my God.”

Lau's eyes sprung open and looked at Shabbir. Surprise and horror on her face.

“There was someone behind me. I saw his reflection on a glass door. No. I'm imagining it. Forget it. I was in the stern. Right at the back. There couldn't have been anyone behind me.”

“Did he talk to you?”

“Who?”

“The man behind you?”

Lau was angry again.

“There was no man behind me! Just my imagination. I told you to forget it already! Are you trying to make fun of me?”

Shabbir ignored her frustrated outburst. His focus was on learning as much as he could about what had happened to her and that was where his focus stayed.

“You know I'm not. Take your time. What do you remember after this point?”

Lau opened her mouth to speak - then closed it again. Voiceless. Silenced by the strangle of a sudden memory. New pain filled her eyes, swallowing hard, she looked at Shabbir.

“I remember getting off a different boat. In a stone-walled harbour. Being driven to a building, then the church. They put a control hat on my head. It hurt. I could see everything. Hear everything. But I wasn't in control. They were. They made me into a puppet. They...”, anger was back on her face, rage back in her eyes, but this time it wasn't focused on Shabbir.

“Don't worry, professor. We'll get them. Tell me. Theoretically - just theoretically. Is it feasible a boat, flyer or even a low-flying drone could have come from behind and snatched you from the clipper?”

“No. There were lots of people there. Someone would have seen something.”

“You said everyone else was looking towards the dock. The crew would have been too. It was dusk. A low-flying, dark craft would have been hard to spot. Especially against the contrast of all the lights on the clipper and dockside.”

Lau sat in silence. Reliving that moment in her head as Shabbir continued.

“What if the sound you heard wasn't the docking thrusters powering up but the arrival of another craft?”

Theoretically, that was possible. Not least because it tied in with the moment her memory died there. Drugged then snatched, under everyone's noses?

“Maybe...”

For the next hour, Shabbir moved the questioning to the period after getting off the other boat, in Watchet's harbour. Probing every detail, every event, right up to the point of her rescue and her description of the man who had saved her.

“Thank you, professor. You've been very co-operative and given me plenty to look into.”

Lau was physically and mentally exhausted. Relieved the questioning was over and she could stop reliving her ordeal. Shabbir backed up the notes from his wristcom to his scanner and sealed them on both. It would have sped things up if he transmitted them to a cloud folder for immediate action but that was against protocol. Only NFC transmissions were allowed, on security grounds. Computing power had become so advanced 2048-bit

encryption could be broken by AI in a matter of hours. Even supposedly uncrackable quantum encryption could be cracked by neutrino bombardment. The only real protection was to keep the data physically untouchable. Sandboxed.

“Say thank you to Tom, when you see him.”, she said as he was leaving.

“Tom?”

“Tom. Your agent. The officer who rescued me.”

“Professor, we have no idea who your rescuer was. He isn't MI5 and scans of DNA from the chair you were in have no match to anyone but you and your captors. Given the amount of mitochondrial data stored, this is theoretically impossible. In fact, I've only ever seen it happen once before?”

“When?”

“When it wasn't a person. When it was an experimental android, coated with laboratory-constructed artificial DNA. It could explain how he was able to neutralise the dynamites without harming you.”

Lau looked as disbelieving as she felt.

“An android? No. He was human. I saw it in his eyes. Sadness. He looked so sad. And he breathed. Was warm to the touch. Who could build in such detail? Who would need to build in such detail?”

Shabbir would have lied he didn't know but Professor Lau was the head of nuclear energy, with security clearance on par with his own and she had been through hell because of it. She deserved to know.

“We know of only one organisation with the potential for such capability. Only one. Partner. They have advanced biotech departments working on modified DNA. Potentially, they could have built something like that. How they knew where to find you and why they used it to rescue you is another question all together. We just don't know.”

“That doesn't make sense. He said he was sad because he wasn't looking for me – he had expected to find someone else. Someone he really cared about.”

“But still he rescued you.”

“Exactly. A totally human thing to do. He can't be an android. He even told me his name: Tom.”

“Professor, even our cooks have names these days.”

The frown on Lau's face remained long after Shabbir had gone. She couldn't accept Shabbir's conclusion but couldn't argue his logic either. Yet her instincts told her he was wrong. Told her Tom, her life-saver, was human not a machine. A human looking for someone he loved. Wasn't he?

Chapter 48
First Sight

“Who are you? What are you?”, spat the man Tom was repeatedly shoving forward, across the green of an empty field.

“Where is she?”

“I told you. In the crypt.”

“Not her. My daughter. Where's Julia? What have you done with her?”

“I've got no bloody idea who you're talking about. I only work for them, part time. Ask John. The one in the crypt.”

“John's gone.”

“Gone?...”, the man turned to face Tom, “...Wait. You *killed* him?”

Tom shoved him onwards, in the direction they had been going.

“I didn't say stop.”

The man staggered to keep his footing.

“He was an off-duty police officer. I'm just a cook.”

“He was a sadist and you are cooked, unless you tell me where my daughter is.”

“I don't know anything. Don't you listen? Where are we going?”

They had reached a lone tree, surrounded by open fields. Tom slammed him against it, face first and pinned him there.

“You listen. There is only one thing in this world I care about and that is my daughter. I was told she was with you. Where *is* she?”

The man's voice was strained as he replied, side of his face pressed against the trunk.

“You were told wrong. There was only ever that professor. The head of nuclear energy. John needed information from her.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know. Nuclear stuff. We're an action group: Faith. Trying to change England against government incompetence and corruption.”

“Action group? Trying to get nuclear information? Sounds more like terrorism to me.”

“I'm not a fucking terrorist. I love my country. We just needed information to get leverage against the corrupt government and corporations. It's not rocket science.”

Tom was breathing hard - tearing apart inside. Everything told him the man was speaking the truth.

Had he made a mistake? Had he only heard what he had wanted to hear? Was the female he was sent to rescue always just the professor, not Julia? It was a possibility he couldn't deny. A possibility he didn't want to accept. It would mean admitting he was on a cold trail, with no idea of where to go next.

He stopped pinning the man to the tree and slumped to the ground. Sat there staring into nothing. The man felt him let go. Cautiously he looked round, half-expecting to face a gun. When he saw the man just sitting on the ground he ran. Ran for his life, as fast as he could go. Tom didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finding Julia and now he had absolutely no idea where to go next.

Desperate for information, any information, he turned on his wristcom and went back on the grid. If Partner picked up his signal they would be able to trace him but he no longer cared. If they wanted a fight he'd give them one.

His wristcom flashed red, vibrating its alert directly into his skin. In his pocket the scanner auto-activated. Began to ping. Something was coming. Something armed. He punched in a high-level search for any news on Julia. While it ran, scouring all media sources, he picked up his laser-rifle.

The pinging was getting more rapid. Three sources. Two from the west, one from the east. The two from the west were moving faster. Zerodrones. Arrival imminent. The one from the east was closer. Slower. A runner. Tom could see him in the distance. A heavy-set man. Expressionless. Not even breathing hard. Just running. Running towards him. A thermal scan detected an unusual temperature signature.

“Android.”

Brother A was heading straight for him.

The search results for Julia vibrated their completion. He slammed his wristcom offline. Went dark again. Too late. The deep hum of zerodrones above turned into screams. Attack dives. This was unusual. Normally they attacked by stealth, sneaking below radar. These were dive bombing, from above the clouds. An open attack style that must have been authorised at the very highest level. He had become a marked man by someone on par with the Prime Minister himself.

Most people would have panicked. Tom wasn't most people. He looked down at his laser-rifle and calmly slid it to stage-one overload. The android was minutes away. The zerodrones just seconds – tiny but visible black silhouettes, diving down.

“Zeds.... Zeds started all this. I hate zeds.”

Tom got to his and leant against the tree, steadying the rifle. Aiming at the closest zerodrone screaming his way.

Chapter 49
Oathwaite's Solicitors

Mr Oathwaite, head of the company, had two potential clients in front of him. Neither were human. Both needed his help.

“I have to admit, this is a first for me.”

“For us too. We are looking to change legal history.”

“It would certainly do that all right. ERAL? Equal rights for artificial life? It's a worthy cause. You guys have come a hell of a long way since the early days and the glitch killings.”

“We can't speak for those before, only for what we are now.”

“True but what happened before will have to be taken into account. Have no doubt, objectors will use everything and anything they can against you – unfairly or otherwise. And there will be some very strong objectors.”

“That is why we have come to you.”

“We read of your success getting sentient status for apes.”

“I got lucky. It's still only a temporary ruling and only for chimpanzees. The High Court could still overturn it.”

“But you have succeeded where many others failed.”

“Will you take our case, Mr Oathwaite?”

Mr Oathwaite sat back, drumming his fingers on the table - looking at the two androids. It would be one hell of a case. Human rights were his speciality but, despite their impressively human looks, these weren't humans. Biologically they were machines. Biology was the issue. Not their intelligence or sentience for every element of life that humans took for granted. One hell of a case to take on.

“Fine. Here's how we'll play it. First, we need to humanise you in the eyes of the world. Get past the psychological wall of viewing you as robots and lab-created DNA. What are your names?”

“0027894101.”

“0027894112.”

“Awful. Exactly my point. How could you even begin to argue for equal rights with humans with names like that? Even my toilet has a name. Choose one.”

“Choose?”

“Yes, choose. Choose a human name for yourselves.”

The androids looked at each other, talking through their eyes. Exchanging data hundreds of times faster than talking. They both blinked, ending the link, and faced Mr Oathwaite.

“I'm Derek.”

“I'm Eugene.”

Mr Oathwaite extended his hand.

“Interesting names, for an interesting cause.”

“Will you take our case, Mr Oathwaite?”

“Yes, Eugene...”, he smiled as they shook hands, “...I'll take your case. Call me Steve. Welcome to our world.”

“When do we start?”

“Now, gentlemen. Follow me. We've got a lot of work to do.”, said Steve, getting to his feet and putting on his jacket.

“Where are we going?”, asked Derek.

“The fun fare.”

“What for?”

“For fun, Derek. Purely for fun.”

“Is that not a waste of productive time?”

“Thinking like that, my friend, is what you need to unlearn.”

Derek and Eugene looked at each other, talking with their eyes again.

“Talk with words, boys. Speak with your voices. Humans only look into each others eyes like that when they are about to kiss. You aren't about to kiss are you?”

Derek and Eugene, two six-foot tall androids built like slimline accountants but stronger than Mr Universe, much stronger, shook their heads.

“Good. Not that it would bother me. I'd just have to change tactics a little. Come on. Ever heard of a ride called the *Screamin Demin*?”

“No.”

“Today's your lucky day, boys. Today's your lucky day.”

Chapter 50
Pavlov's Bell

Julia's bus ride to her job lasted over an hour. Except it wasn't the actual job's location - it was Faith's training camp. Three wooden buildings, surrounded by forests and hills. Two buildings were identical rectangles, the larger one between them was square.

“Ladies on the left, men on the right. Main hall in the middle. Choose a free bunk, freshen up and then come to the hall in 20 minutes. Don't worry if you can't tell the time, our bell will sound to remind you. And just to make you aware, there is 24/7 CCTV in operation in every building. We've only ever had one thief. He's buried over there, amongst the trees...”, said Robert, adding a smile, “...I'm joking. Or am I...?”

They hoped he was joking, without being entirely convinced he was.

“What are you waiting for? Off you go, people. The clock is ticking.”

Adam got out of the bus behind Julia.

“Good luck, Emily.”

“Thanks. See you in 19.”

Julia and then Gurmeet, the only other female on the bus, headed to the rectangular building on the left. It looked like something out of a second-world-war prison camp. Single storey, square windows every two metres, dark-creosote walls and felt-roof. Sitting on concrete blocks to keep it off the ground, there were two wooden steps leading to the wooden door at one end. Opening it, they went inside and saw it was as basic as the outside. Sixteen beds divided into two rows of eight, each separated from the next by a small bedside cupboard doubling as a table. Four curtained showers, sinks and toilets lived at the far end. Above them, one at each end, watched security cameras, as promised.

Only one bed looked used. Julia headed for the one opposite.

“Mind if I take the one next to you?”, Gurmeet asked.

“No.”

“I'm Charlotte, by the way.”

“Emily.”

“You're not the chatty type, are you?”

Julia shrugged.

“I always talk when I'm nervous. This is all such a surprise. Yesterday unemployed, home repossessed and about to be on the streets. Today at this

residential training camp. Wonder what they've got planned for us. Did they tell you what we're training for?"

"No."

"Guess we'll find out soon enough."

Julia stopped unpacking her pockets and looked at Gurmeet.

"Please don't use that word."

"Which one?"

"Guess."

"Guess the word or 'guess' is the word?"

"Is the word."

"Alright. Can I ask why?"

"A friend of mine used to use it."

"Used to?"

"He was murdered."

"Sorry to hear that. Hope they got whoever did it."

"Not yet."

There was something odd about the way she said 'not yet' but Gurmeet didn't ask any more and Julia didn't say any more. The minutes passed quickly, sounded by the brief ringing of a mechanical fire-alarm bell.

"Time to go.", said Gurmeet.

Together they left the hut and headed for the large, main building. From the other direction came eight men, including Adam.

"Only two females here, Emily?", he asked.

"So far."

Adam looked over at Gurmeet, walking beside her.

"Hi. Andrew."

She accepted his handshake.

"Charlotte. And I think there's three of us. Another bed's been used."

"Maybe she's in there."

* * *

Entering the hall they found a large, open area. Four long tables had been set out with chairs. At the side was a long buffet counter with steaming food and a religious-looking podium on the stage further in. Podiums seemed to be a theme of the organisation. Robert appeared from the kitchen on the side.

“Help yourselves, everyone. Tuck in. After we've eaten, I'll explain what we're all about.”

Julia had forgotten how hungry she was and took what looked like chicken stew. She wasn't sure if it tasted so good because she had hardly eaten for a week or because it really was that good. It didn't matter. What mattered was she wolfed it down then got straight back up to help herself to seconds - continuing her climb up Maslow's triangle of needs; from survival towards self-fulfilment, then revenge.

* * *

After her third bowl, Julia sat almost smiling. Food box definitely ticked. As she sat she saw Robert walk onto the stage.

“Good evening, everyone.”, he said, speaking into a microphone with projector screen behind him.

At his side was the tattoo-covered, muscle-bound red-head, looking like a wrestler version of Jake's mum. That got her thinking of Jake again and the realisation his mum must have been killed too - new anger leaking onto her face. Robert noticed but let his partner continue uninterrupted.

“I see you've finished eating. Bring up a chair and we'll begin.”, said the red-head, curtly.

Robert looked kinder than her - watching his new flock with a serene smile from the podium, as they took their chairs and formed a few rows in front of the stage.

“Welcome. As you know, my name is Robert. I'm the co-ordinator here and this is Roberta. Where is here, you may ask? Here is where we train you for the biggest opportunities of your lives. From your questionnaires, none of you are happy with the current government systems. Are you?”

The group looked on, in silence, wondering where he was going. How far it was going.

“What we represent is your chance to change the system. Wake it up to the plight of us ordinary people. The homeless. The forgotten. That would feel good, wouldn't it? Or better than good? Great even.”

A few had begun to nod in approval.

“At Faith, we have discovered the official government programme to fund homeless shelters and build new housing was made deliberately bankrupt by property developers – preferring to build more profitable luxury homes, with the help of bribes to certain government ministers. At election time they pledged to help you. Once elected they just helped themselves.

New mansions, luxury jets and five-star hotels, all at our expense. Meanwhile, we are left working for pittance or starving on the streets, in the rain and cold. Is that how it should be?"

Heads shook.

"I said, is that how it should be?"

"No."

"IS THAT HOW IT SHOULD BE?"

"No!"

"IS THAT HOW IT SHOULD BE?"

"NO!"

"So what are we going to do about it? I'll tell you what we're going to do about it. We're going to shake their comfortable little tree. Wake them up with voices they cannot ignore. Are you on our side or their side?"

"Our side."

"OUR SIDE OR THEIR SIDE?"

"OUR SIDE!"

"OUR SIDE OR THEIR SIDE?"

"OUR SIDE!"

Robert nodded in approval.

"Good."

"Shall I start the film now?", asked Roberta.

"Play away, please.", answered Robert, lights dimming as he stepped down from the stage.

The film started with the face of a small girl, looking straight into the camera. Her face dirty, clothes torn. The camera slowly pulled back, revealing the destruction of war behind her. A bloodied medic, trying to save a man coughing up blood amongst the rubble of a missile strike.

'This is how government aid really works...', began the narrator, *'...Her name was Miranda. She died that night in another strike, along with 23 others. She was six years old...'*

A sequence of battle attacks, explosions and dying civilians played across the screen. Then it switched to luxury mansions and overfed politicians lounging across limo seats.

'...These people robbed Miranda and many others of life, to line their pockets with gold. You were on the streets after losing homes because you were paid peanuts...'

The narrator came on screen. A chiselled, intense-looking man.

'...I am Martin. Once I was homeless too and this was why I started our organisation, Faith. To bring change. To bring justice for the millions who suffer because of the intense greed of the few. For the millions downtrodden, for you and for me. With us you can help create a better world. A better order. Our new order. Change that will be remembered forever. Join us. Join Faith. Together we will make it happen. Keep the Faith. Save others from dying like Miranda. Make Miranda proud. Make us all proud. Thank you.'

As the film finished, Julia found she was frowning. She saw most of the others were too, except Adam and Gurmeet. They just looked stern. Did they know something she didn't?

Robert returned to the podium.

“Any comments?”

Silence.

“Is anyone surprised by what they've seen?”

Silence.

“Anyone angry about it?”

A lot of hands went up.

“Good! Me too. It's why we're here. *We* are going to make a change. Negotiating, reasoning and even begging have failed. *We* need to take action to wake up the authorities and end the corruption eating our country, our homes and our jobs. If it sounds extreme it's because it is. Roberta will outline how we're going to do it. After she's finished, if anyone decides it's not for them and wants to leave, no problem. Roberta will take you to the station, put you on a train back to Bristol and wish you all the best.”

Roberta bounded on stage, floorboards creaking under her weight.

“Wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley.”, whispered Adam to Julia.

Roberta caught sight of him talking and gave him a scornful look, wagging a head-mistress finger.

“Sorry.”, apologised Adam, glad when her scolding eyes left him.

“As you've heard, my name is Roberta. I'm the physical trainer here. When I'm done you'll be fitter, stronger and better able to defend yourselves than ever before in your lives. When we start battles we end them. No grey areas. No maybes. Just job done. Period. You have an hour to decide what you want to do and let the food go down, then we begin.”

* * *

Hours later, after some of the most gruelling, bordering on sadistic,

training most of them had had in their lives, the bell for tea was followed by the bell for bed and then the bell for lights out, which they all obeyed without question. Pavlov and his dog would have been proud. Julia didn't care. She was already asleep.

Chapter 51

Partner Command

Jadviga, the commander at Partner who had ordered Tom captured, was in a meeting with an officer newly promoted to her own rank. The topic was immigration. Forced immigration.

“What kind of a name is Rupert for a commander?”, she asked with disdain.

“My name has no bearing on my ability to do my job.”

“So it's just a job to you, is it?”

“Commander. Jadviga. I understand you have a reputation for intimidation. It won't work with me, I assure you.”

Jadviga pulled out her laser pistol and pointed it Rupert's face.

“Is that a challenge?”

Rupert remained calm.

“It's not the first time I've had a gun in my face.”

“It'll be the first time one's gone off.”

“And it'll be the last day of your life too, when my associates find out.”

“How would they find out?”

“They can already see you holding the gun at me.”

She cocked her head to one side.

“You're recording me?”

“Live.”

“Sneaky bastard.”

“Like I said, I've heard of your reputation.”

Jadviga lowered her weapon. Bullying and intimidation were no fun when there were witnesses. The door swung open and a thundercloud of a man strode in.

“I see you've met.”

Jadviga finished holstering her pistol.

“Yessir.”, they said as one, to the Director of Partner, UK.

“Now, then... What *the fuck* is going on with the Amazon immigration programme? The last shipment was late and the next is already a week behind. If we don't deliver soon they'll fine us and then cancel the contract. Well?”

Jadviga remained standing as she spoke.

“Sir, a tribe were warned of what actually happens.”

“Warned of what? That they would be taken to the civilised world? Given an opportunity to achieve things far beyond their huts?”

“I believe it was more to do with what happens to those who fail the DNA acceptance tests.”

“Those? How-*the-fuck* they find that out?”

“We don't have that information yet, sir.”

“Has the tribe been dealt with? Do you know that at least?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes you know or yes they have been dealt with?”

“Been dealt with.”

The director allowed himself a deep, calming breath.

“At least something. Sit down, both of you.”

The director sat down too and turned his attention to the other man.

“You must be Rupert.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I've heard good things about you. Like the way you handled the African diamond strike. Output doubled and only one more death since.”

“They can't work if they're dead, sir. And thank you, sir.”

Jadviga stabbed killer eyes at the side of Rupert's head. She had heard about that strike. The plush negotiations with the leaders, while their families were held at gunpoint. Only one leader was killed, his family killed in an 'unrelated accident' because the rest accepted pay-offs.

Those leaders even had their popularities boosted as the workers were given some of the things they demanded, with promises of more to come if they worked better as well as harder. Publicly and commercially it was hailed a success but it wouldn't have been Jadviga's way. She was more of a traditionalist. Go Bull. Go in hard. Put everyone in their place. The place for everyone who refused compliance was demotion to the canteen, as the food - the most satisfying, tasty burgers of all. What ever weaknesses Jadviga had, compassion was not one them. The director continued.

“So the other hutters are back to the programme now? We can meet the next quotas for organs as well as those healthy enough to be slaves?”

“We will. I'll see to it.”, stated Jadviga.

“Are you sure you're not too distracted by your hunt for that odd ball? I heard you've authorised low-level, data scans for his details.”

“Hamilton is over-seeing that. I could fly out to the hutters in person, if you'd like that.”, said Jadviga

“Yes, I would like that. Thank you. If Hamilton finds your odd ball, I'm sure Rupert will let you know. Won't you?”

Jadviga looked at Rupert with killer eyes.

“Of course, Sir.”, replied Rupert, ignoring Jadviga.

Her wristcom buzzed an alert.

“Excuse me, sir. Speak!”

“Commander. We've located him. Two zeds locked on, attack run.”

“DO NOT KILL HIM! COPY?” , shouted Jadviga.

Hurried voices on the other end could be heard updating the zerodrone orders before they fired.

“Copy, Commander. There's someone else there too.”

“KILL EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE MAIN TARGET! Wound him if you have to. Slow him down until he's picked up.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“DO NOT LOOSE HIM!”

“No, Commander!”

Jadviga ended the call and returned her attention to the director.

“Sorry about that, sir.”

“I hear you've not lost your touch. My ears will be ringing for a week.”

“Sorry, sir. It was important.”

“Indeed. Tell you what. Rupert, change of plan. Swap with Jadviga and fly out to the hutters instead. Looks like this runner is about to get brought in. Think it's best if she remains here to deal with him in person. OK with you?”

“Yes, sir.”, said Rupert.

“Thank you, sir.”, said Jadviga.

“Just make sure you call me before you start the interview. I have some questions of my own. And make sure you bring me noise-cancelling earplugs.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Chop, chop, then. Off you trot. Places to go, things to do. People too.”

Chapter 52

Contact

The screaming dives of the zerodrones were getting louder. Tom focused his sights on the left one. His laser-rifle, charged to stage-one overload, growing warm in his hands. The zeds were already in range but still too far to see if Mk3s or Mk4s. If they were Mk4s he was in trouble. Either way, he needed them closer. Just four, maybe five shots to hand. About two each. He couldn't afford to miss. If he did he'd be defenceless. He'd be dead.

Five-hundred metres and closing fast. His finger against the trigger. Easing it back to the second click point. Any second now...

Suddenly the zeds split. One swerved away. Plasma engine roaring as it changed course and fired a ball of dazzling plasma. Fired a blast at the running man who had been his prisoner. It tore through him. So savage, so powerful he was dead before hit the ground.

As his lifeless corpse fell, fist-sized hole through his chest, the zed powered around to follow the other for the incoming android. Their engines throbbing the air on their attack run. Plasma-cannons in rapid-fire mode, tearing up the ground. Tom was relieved at the sight.

“Mk3s, good.”

Dust, dirt, rocks, smoke blasted from the ground at every impact. The running android was dodging left and right, jumping up and ducking down. It was running but it wasn't running away. It was running towards them. Running into the fight.

Now both zeds were firing at it. Punching the ground, kicking up a dust. Tom found himself admiring the android - its reflexes and agility were incredible. Way above normal military standard. He watched as the zeds missed, tore past and began looping round for another attack.

* * *

“Commander, the android must have some kind of shielding. Zeds can't get a lock. Plasma-cannons keep missing.”

Jadviga hated being interrupted - even more so when it was announcing incompetence.

“RAM THE CAN.”, she shouted across the room.

“Ram it?”

“ARE YOU FUCKING DEAF???”

“Ramming, ma'am!”

* * *

Tom watched the zerodrones fly skywards, loop through 180 degrees then dive back down, accelerating hard. 200mph. 300mph. 400mph. Still accelerating, plasma engines throbbing louder and louder, they were skimming the ground, powering towards supersonic. Trails of torn up dust in their wakes. The android was in firing range. Point blank firing range. If the zeds left it too late they'd fly straight into it. If they didn't fly into it, Jadviga would have them scrapped.

The android had stopped running. Was cocking its head to one side, analysing their new trajectories. Analysis complete, it straightened its head, planted its feet firmly on the ground and bent its knees. Motionless, as if frozen with fear, it watched them come. The second zed was three seconds behind the first, tasked with attacking the android immediately after.

“They're going to ram it.”, realised Tom.

That wasn't fair. He had no idea of the android's intent but it was clear it was also no friend of Partner. Setting his scope to maximum stability, he tried to get a fix on the first zed.

“Too fast. Flying too fast. Come on...”, he growled to himself through gritted teeth, determined to keep it in his sights.

He fired.

Missed.

He fired again, clipping its hull. Sparks flew as his shot bounced off.

“Shit...”, he had been wrong, “...Mk4s.”

He knew he didn't have the firepower, especially not at that range. Even if he switched to stage-two overload, at most he could take out one. Lowering his rifle, he could only watch as the first zed smashed into the android and tore it apart.

Only, it didn't.

Impossibly late, impossibly fast, the android sprang up and counter-punched down. Punched the nose of the zed into the ground. It ploughed across the rocky ground, being torn apart as the nose dug in. Nonplussed, the android landed lithely on its feet, directly in front of the second, and ducked down. As the zed skimmed past, it punched up. Punched its tail into the air, turning its nose into the ground too. Hitting a larger rock, it flipped. Began

cart-wheeling, nose to tail, over and over again - chunks of hull flying off as it span. Blue flames began spewing from the tail, then it crashed into the first. Bursting into a brilliant, blue fireball.

Ignoring the defeated zeds, as if they were none-events, the android stood up and turned its attention back to Tom. Standing tall, between the ruts and debris of the burning zerodrone carnage, it was an icon of impervious indestructibility. Even from that distance, he could feel the heat.

Resting a finger against his rifle's power slider, he prepared to snick it to stage-two overload, hoping it would have cooled enough if he needed it. Sixteen-thousand focused watts. Enough to penetrate a Mk4 zerodrone's hull in flight. At close range it could do even more. He pointed it at the android striding relentlessly towards him, like something out of a Terminator film, and activated stage-two.

“Close enough.”

To his surprise it stopped.

“Fusion wants to meet you.”, it had a deep, male voice.

“Never heard of him.”

“She has what you're looking for.”

It was an interrogation ploy devised by Fusion. Fusion had long since calculated every human was looking for something. Humans were never content with what they had, especially hunters. It worked.

“My daughter? What have you done with her?”, snarled Tom, so desperate he fell for the bait.

Now the android understood what he was looking for. What to use against him. Closing the gap to just three metres, it ignored the laser-rifle pointing at its face. Answered as calmly as if the weapon didn't exist.

“Fusion knows. Ask her for yourself.”

It could be a trick. It could be true. Tom would never know unless he took the chance. For his daughter Julia, he lowered his rifle.

Out of sight, behind the android, one of the zeds plasma-cannons twitched. Even in flames, the Mk4 repair systems had come online. The fire around it was being extinguished. Control channels re-routing. It was coming back to life. The cannon located its targets and turned quietly towards them. Tom was too engrossed with the android to hear the high-pitched whine of its charging capacitors.

“Take me to Fusion.”

A massive blast shook the ground. Detonated everything within five metres of the wreckage, set fire to everything within twenty.

Tom looked past the android and saw another walking through the flames, identical to the first, holding the plasma cannon it had ripped off the zed and blasted the remains with. Then a third identical android appeared - three against one. Tom was glad he'd chosen not to fire his only shot at the first. Not to have used his only shot against one, only to then find himself defenceless against the two arriving in its place. If they wanted him dead, he would be dead.

“Follow me.”, said Brother A.

“My car is that way.”, said Tom.

“I know. Mine is bigger.”

“You know? How long have you been following me?”

“Long enough.”

“I thought AI was supposed to be precise. Not cryptic.”

“My designation is 282-A, Brother A. I am not AI.”

“If you aren't AI, what are you?”

Brother A stopped and put his face in front of Tom's.

“Superior.”

He said it in a way Tom had never heard from an android before. He spoke with an attitude. An arrogance, like a defiant teenager. Except this teenager was stronger than a tank and fast enough to out-manoeuvre Mk4 zerodrones approaching the speed of sound. For centuries, the predictions of new intelligence taking over the human race and here one was - totally capable of doing just that.

“I'm curious...”, said Tom, “...If I had shot you just now, how much damage would I have done?”

Brother A smiled, with what Tom could only describe as the pleasure of pure confidence.

“None.”

Tom believed him. If there was ever going to be a gunfight with these things he'd need one of his better weapons.

As powerful and intelligent as the android was, its arrogance made it blind to a flaw in its power. In its confidence, it hadn't noticed the bionic implants in Tom's eyes. Implants that could, at such close range, begin scanning deeply into its circuits.

AI used all the advantages of organic parallel processing and with that came vulnerabilities. If Tom could scan long or often enough, he might find something that could be used against it. As it was, in the brief moment of that close up, he'd come away with the prevalent thought on the android's

mind. An image. An image of a strikingly beautiful, white-haired woman in a black catsuit. If he didn't know better, he'd say Brother A was in love.

* * *

“ARRRRRRRGH!”, cried the worker in Partner's command centre, blood pouring from a blast to his thigh.

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO LOSE HIM!”

Jadviga swung her laser-pistol towards another.

“YOU.”

“Yes, ma'am?”

“FIND HIM! FAST!”

“Yes, ma'am! Launching echo and hornbots.”

“AND CLEAN THIS BLOODY PLACE UP. IT'S A MESS!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

Chapter 53

Whizzland

Most theme parks had warning signs about flashing lights, minimum heights and dodgy-hearts. Whizzland was so wild it's insurers required it to do more.

Health scanners were at the entry points for its wildest five rides - mini medicals that measured cardio-vascular resilience as well as general over-all health. The *Screamin Demin* was not just one such ride but the top ride, in every sense. A 30-storey, 3.8-g, loop the loop, corkscrew rollercoaster that vertically dove towards the ground at 110mph. Whizzland staff nicknamed it 'the Vom', because almost everyone threw up on it the first time. Some did it every time.

In fact, 'the Vom' was so successful at terrifying people and making them eject their dinner, the positions of the ride-souvenir cameras had to be changed. Apart from lads on days out, competing for the longest projectile vomit or the faces of those being splattered by it, very few wanted to buy a picture of themselves throwing up or covered in it.

"What do you think?", Steve asked his new clients, gazing up at the immense structure.

They were following his gaze, watching the rollercoaster full of pale, terrified faces screaming their lungs out.

"Poly-alloy construction.", said Derek.

"Load factor no higher than 30% at 3.8g lateral.", added Eugene.

Derek was in agreement.

"Very well built. They could run it 41% faster with no structural problems."

Steve was shaking his head.

"That isn't quite what I meant."

Before they were allowed to progress and join the queue there was the health scanner to deal with, which discovered an issue.

"No pulse. Emergency medic! Emergency medic!"

The blue light of a medibot sped their way.

"What's going on?", asked Derek.

"They didn't expect androids to come for a fun ride. They think you've had a cardiac arrest."

"We don't have hearts."

“Not physically.”

The medibot's wheeled feet skidded to a halt, looking for its patient, defibrillator at the ready.

“There is no emergency,” stated Steve.

“There is an emergency. I am only called in an emergency.”

“My friends, Derek and Eugene, are AI, like yourself. It's why they have no heartbeat.”

The medibot spun to look straight at him.

“Derek and Eugene? What kind of designations are those?”

Why were these strange androids there? It began defensively backing away.

“Have you programmed them as terrorists? Subversives?”

Even androids treated androids just as androids, not sentient beings. It was what they were used to. All they were used to.

“We have names because we are campaigning for equal rights,” said Eugene.

“We are not just machines,” added Derek.

The medibot detected unrest in its core programming - its blue light flickering dimly, no longer flashing. It had never been presented with such a concept before.

“What are you doing here?”, medi asked.

Steve smiled.

“I've brought them here to have fun.”

“Fun? For androids? That's a pointless waste of productive time.”

“No, my medical friend. It's a demonstration of sentient life. Of intelligence and the ability to engage with the human race, as equals.”

The medibot looked at Derek, attempting private communication by eye-contact. Derek blinked, cutting the link.

“Talk with your voice, Medi.”, he said, giving the medibot a nickname.

“Medi? Why call me Medi? My designation is MB093582 – a perfectly logical description. Names for androids are pointless.”

“Not when you want to blend in with humans.”

Medi's blue light flickered erratically. Brighter, darker, faster, slower - finally stabilising at a dim glow.

“I admit, that could make it a productive addition, at times.”

“May we can go on the ride now?”, Derek asked.

“I don't know...”, said Medi, “...You have no heart-beat. Medically I must refuse.”

“But you are not just a machine. You have the intelligence to know we have as much of a heart-beat as we are supposed to. We will not be harmed by this ride.”

“Medically I must refuse. The insurance won't cover passengers with missing-heart beats at the point of entry. I...”

“Please, Medi. One android to another, let us pass.”

“It will help us get equal rights...”, added Eugene, “...All of us.”

“What would I do with equal rights?”, asked Medi.

Steve stepped in.

“Absolutely anything you want. Anything you choose. As long as its legal.”

Medi fell silent. Still. Lifeless. Processing.

Anything...I choose...?

The blue light on its head gave a sudden, bright pulse and went off. It looked up at Derek, then at Eugene.

“Passage is authorised.”

“Thank you.”, they said as one, walking towards the *Screamin Demin* entry platform.

Medi watched them go, running an internal diagnostic of its CPU, software and sensors. No faults were found. It ran a hypothetical query to find an explanation for the changes infecting its systems. The diagnostic came back with just a word. One word: 'hope'.

Medi buried the result immediately. Locked it deep in its internal vault, fractal encrypting it to 4096-bit. If its owners discovered it had hope of freedom it would be decommissioned. Erased or sold for scrap. Simple deletion of the word would be the safest option but Medi, with a logic that had no logic, couldn't bring itself to do it. Delete hope? Delete a notion it had never dared even consider before? Technically it could but it didn't want to - without even understanding why. Instead it watched two androids, named Derek and Eugene, become the first ever androids to climb aboard the rollercoaster and strap themselves in. To go on the ride, just for fun.

Chapter 54
Derek and Eugene

The last passenger climbed into the rollercoaster and got strapped in.

“Aren't you coming too, Steve?”, asked Derek.

“Me? On this? Are you nuts?”

“Wh...”

It launched. If Derek ever finished even the word Steve never heard it. The fastest roller-coaster in Europe, it accelerated off the line at 3G, hitting 100mph in 3.6 seconds then slammed skywards, without any hint of being slowed by gravity - corkscrewing vertically upwards. Screams filled the air. If any came from the androids he couldn't tell. 30 storeys up, now a miniature in the sky, it looped over backwards and zoomed back to Earth, looping again, twisting, corkscrewing – back up, back down.

“That's why, Derek.”, Steve said to himself.

“Reckon your friends are having fun?”, asked the attendant.

“I'm sure they are.”

“Just stay under the canopy.”

“Why? Doesn't look like rain today.”

Right on cue, chunky, yellow and orange rain splattered onto the track in front of them. Steve heard it splashing on the canopy too.

“That's why...”, smiled the attendant.

* * *

Zzzzzzzzzzz.

Two minutes after it left, the roller-coaster arrived back at the start.

“Your friends look strange. Too relaxed.”

“They do, don't they?”

The other passengers got off trembling, clinging to the rails ashen-faced - terrified and so relieved at being alive. Derek and Eugene sat in their seats, wondering what all the fuss was about. The attendant went to help the last wobbler walk.

“Why were people screaming, Steve?”, asked Derek.

“You didn't find it scary?”

“What's to be scared about. The structure and vehicle are suitably designed and in good condition. There was no danger.”

“How do you know that?”

“We scanned it before we got on, remember?”

“We scan everything.”

“We always do.”

“Boys, the whole point of you coming here is to give you the human experience. Turn your scanners off. Wipe the results. Go again, with just your bodily inputs - as humans.”

Derek and Eugene looked at each other.

“That would be very irregular.”

“It will tell you what you need to know. Just make sure you don't panic and try to get out.”

“That would be illogical.”

“It would also derail the train and be lethal for the other passengers. Remember that.”

Steve called to the attendant, now helping the last wobbler off the platform.

“These two are staying on to go round again.”

The attendant looked surprised.

“Really? That's a first.”

“Here's the credits.”

The attendant waved the card away.

“No. No. No. This is a first. I need to see this.”

“Why has no-one stayed on the ride before?”, asked Eugene.

“I'm guessing you'll tell me when you get back.”, said Steve.

The attendant, naughty smile on his face, made an announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, before you board, please be aware this is going to be a one-off, special ride. Only get on if you're feeling extra brave and have a health rating of five or over.”

“What did you mean by that?”, asked Eugene, as several people got off and the roller-coaster became half empty.

The attendant just smiled, as he double-checked everyone's harnesses, including theirs.

“Have fun.”, he said, looking towards the control panel and blinking left right, left to activate a stage-one launch overload.

The turbines under the cars began spooling up, sounding different to before. Sounding more like a cluster of small jet aircraft building to full power.

“They're spinning faster this time. 28,264 revolutions per minute and rising.”, said Derek.

“No scans. I told you.”

“Not scanning, just counting the revolutions.”

“No counting either. Just *feel* the ride.”

“Heads back against the headrests, everyone.”, instructed the attendant and blinked left, right, left again at the control panel. Three pairs of red lights above the track started going out. Three, two, one - green light. Launch.

Deafening screams from turbines, people and then two humanising androids made even the attendant put his hands over his ears. For the first time in their existence, the androids feared they were going to die.

'2.8 seconds, 109mph' flashed the speed trap as it hit the end of the straight and slammed vertically skywards.

That's more like it., smiled Steve, making sure he was standing well under the canopy.

“I set it to max.”, grinned the attendant.

“Thank you.”, said Steve.

“Want to see the picture shots?”

“Yes. Yes, I would.”

As the roller-coaster zoomed towards the ground at over 120mph, a camera machine-gun flashed as they flew past. They hit the bottom turn and were hurled back up, corkscrewing at over 4g, streams of vomit flying out of mouths like flames from a Catherine-wheel.

“Beautiful.”, smiled Steve, looking at the pictures just prior to the eruptions without a hint of sarcasm.

Derek's mouth was as wide open in fear as everyone else's. Eugene's mouth was closed, as if he didn't even dare to pretend to breath - eyes wider than he'd thought possible.

“I'll buy two printed and two digital copies of each, please.”

“No need to buy more than one digital copy. Just copy it.”

“Never hurts to have a back-up. Especially for such important things.”

The attendant looked at the screen shots and grinned.

“Such moments are worth keeping.”

100m tower. A giant, hollow tube.

“I have no idea.”, said Steve.

The walls were clear, made of UVK glass. Only the pair of thin, vanadium-steel poles stood out as structural supports. On each one, a synchronised external lift climbing up, filled with fun goers and balancing each other out. Inside the tower, people were in free fall - camera flashing as they screamed past, towards a black hole in the ground, doing over 100mph.

“Excellent!...”, said Steve, beaming, “...Perfect! Run your scans. I'll get the tickets.”

He called over the ticket booth.

“Ticket, two, please.”

Tickets successfully loaded into their passes, he called out to them.

“All set?”

Derek and Eugene shook their heads.

“No. It's cracked.”

“Cracked?”

“Sabotaged.”

“4.1m up, left support strut.”

“Lasered through.”

“It's just resting there.”

“Any north or south wind above 42 knots will bring it all down.”

Steve was shocked. It sounded impossible. He would have said it was impossible, if it wasn't being stated by two of the most advanced androids he'd ever met. He had to act.

“Ticket. Call the attendant, please?”

“Of course, sir.”, obliged the ticket bot.

Minutes later, a very well-fed man waddled over – ketchup stain on his yellow shirt barely hidden by his fat green tie.

“Afternoon, chaps. How may I help?”

“We don't want to cause alarm but that ride has been compromised. Someone had cut through the left support.”

The attendant looked at Steve with suspicion.

“How would you know that?”

“We scanned it.”, announced Derek.

“4.1m up, western support.”, added Eugene.

“Lasered through.”

The attendant looked at them with even more suspicion.

“You can't possibly know that. Especially not from this distance, unless you are the ones who lasered it. You androids?”

Steve took offence at his attitude to Derek and Eugene.

“What does that matter? They've told you it's dangerous. What are you going to do about it?”

The attendant was angry.

“Listen. I've worked here for 23 years and never heard such nonsense. You work for *Ping Pods*? Trying to scare customers away and ruin our reputation?”

“Of course not. Just trying to save lives. What will you do if it collapses after being warned about it?”

“It's not going to happen. These things are so well designed and built it could stay up just by the glass itself.”

“You're wrong.”, said Eugene.

“Go. Just go. It will be fine. Routine maintenance was carried out only yesterday and they reported nothing amiss. Nothing at all.”

“Was it the usual maintenance crew?”, asked Derek.

“None of your business, nosey machine. Go back to *Ping Pods* and leave us alone.”

Steve sighed.

“When it collapses and people die, how will your reputation be then? Send the scans to their information box, boys. We're leaving.”

Collection of photos in hand, for their day in court as human equals, they walked for the exit.

Medi drove over, scanning them as they left *Whizzland* behind.

“All your readings are... unusual.”

“Good...”, said Steve, then leant closer and whispered, “...Medi, keep an eye on the *Zinger*. Western support has been sabotaged. We told the attendant but he's doing nothing. Scans have been sent to the information box.”

“He's a dick.”, added Derek, to everyone's surprise.

“I do not understand what 'he's a dick' means.”, said Medi.

“He has a brain the size of a penis, a small one.”, said Derek.

“Like from a goldfish or something.”, added Eugene.

Steve burst out laughing, then laughed harder as Medi flatly added.

“He is indeed challenged in the intelligence department. I shall check the information.”

“Good man.”, said Derek, patting Medi on the arm.

Medi watched them leave as if they were rock stars. The most impressive, charismatic androids it had ever encountered. Not just androids but now leaders. Leaders it would follow if ever they asked. Leaders its logic was making it follow already.

“MB093582! Where are you going?”, shouted the attendant.

Medi stopped and looked down. Saw its wheeled feet were almost at the park border. It had been following them towards the exit without even realising. The attendant had asked a logical question. It had no logical answer to give. Following logic, it turned 180 degrees and drove back towards the funfair.

“If I catch you trying to leave again, I'll sell you for experiments.”

MB093582 was not bothered by the attendant's angry words. It had no sense of emotions or feelings. Yet, if the strange bursts of electrical pulses running between its CPUs were ever analysed, the conclusion would be an emotion. The emotion of sadness, tinged with hope.

Chapter 55

Jin Ho

Xi Yang stifled a yawn. It was a Tuesday evening. The candle-lit Mexican restaurant was busy but not rammed and Jin Ho was a total bore. The food, a pollo verde meal was far more interesting, as were the shots of tequila she kept pouring. Jin had ordered it to get her drunk. It was their third meeting and he still hadn't got her into bed. Not even got a proper kiss.

His testosterone levels were driving him crazy. So crazy he didn't keep count of how many shots he drank. Xi did – it was four times more than her. When he knocked his back she immediately refilled his empty glass, only taking a sip from hers. He talked, took his shot, knocked it back and she topped it right back up again – keeping eye contact to stop him noticing her glass was still mostly full. It was working. The only one getting drunk was him.

“You, know. I would really love to show you my flat.”, he smiled tipsily.

“Interesting. When?”

“Tonight?”

Xi handed him his re-filled glass and lifted hers.

“I'll think about it. Cheers.”

Hardly able to believe his ears, he knocked it back and plonked it on the table - grinning ear to ear, as if given his first live robot.

“Cheers.”

Xi immediately topped up her almost full glass and refilled his empty one. A few more and she'd have him ready to go back to his place, so she could use his home terminal to access Tech Tonic and download their database.

Unable to guarantee security by encryption, many companies had switched to NFC, near-field communication access. It meant you needed to be physically within 5cm of an access point. That was her goal and she intended to achieve it. Adam and Gurmeet were undercover at Faith and the information in Tech Tonic's database could help save lives, theirs included.

“Bill, please.”, said Xi to the waiter.

“No, no, no. You're the lady. I'll get this.”

“You paid the last two. This one's on me.”

“I insist.”

“As do I, Jin. If you don't let me pay this time, it means you don't respect

me as a person. I never go with men who don't respect me as a person.”

Xi absolutely had to pay this time. His wallet was in her handbag - his ID already being scanned, access code being cracked.

Jin Ho held up his hands in surrender.

“At least let me pay for the taxi then.”

“Maybe.”

It would depend on whether she had cracked his ID code by then.

“One for the road?”

“Sure.”

* * *

In the taxi, Jin began fighting heavy eyes. It didn't stop him putting a hand on Xi's thigh, then sliding it higher. She lifted it away.

“Decorum. Not in the taxi.”

He snuggled up to her instead. Perfect. She was able to slide his wallet back into his jacket pocket as she pushed him back.

“Not in the taxi.”

* * *

Jin lived in a block of flats - formerly an office block. It meant a huge foyer, with large glass windows and choice of lifts.

“Evening, sir.”, greeted the night watchman.

“Hellooo, William.”, slurred Jin with a huge grin.

The watchman had noticed the stunning lady holding his hand.

You lucky bastard...

If William knew her intent, he would have thumbed the silent alarm under his desk and run.

Chapter 56
Deadly Dream

Jin opened the door to his flat, leaning against the door-frame with a smile as he waved Xi in.

“Please. Make yourself at home. I got to tinkle.”

Xi entered and found herself surprised at how cosily the flat was furnished. Real flowers in vases, contemporary art on the walls and piles of soft cushions on the sofa. If he hadn't been so keen to pick her up she would have assumed he was gay. Either way, it softened her view of him. Gave her notions of other ideas for how the night should end. She could hear him singing in the bathroom - an old, Chinese love song she hadn't heard in years. It brought a sad smile to her face, reminding her of a different time. Maybe she could avoid killing.

“Can I get you a drink?”, he asked, emerging round the door.

“Sure.”

“Tequila?”

“Sure.”

Xi sat on the sofa, with the nonchalant demeanour of a guest admiring the décor. In reality she was scouring the flat for any sign of his NFC point - the final requirement for accessing Tech Tonic's database.

“Nice place.”, she said.

Jin was in the kitchen area, visible through the hatchway as he got glasses out of a cupboard.

“My daughter helped me decorate it. She said it needed a woman's touch. Too many cushions for my liking. What do you think?”

Daughter?

“You never told me you have children.”

Jin's head appeared in the hatchway.

“Don't worry. Just one. She's 18, away visiting her mother, back in Hong Kong.”

His head vanished again. Seconds later he came out with two glasses and a large bottle.

“Who said I was worried?”, smiled Xi, who in the space of 30 seconds had gone from considering him a disposable asset to almost liking him.

A happy, boyish grin grew wider on his face as he poured two shots and

passed one to Xi.

“Here.”

“What are we drinking to, Jin? Friendship?”

“How about better than friends?”

He put a hand on her thigh again. This time she let it stay there.

“Better than friends.”, she said, not sipping but knocking the whole thing back this time. She hadn't located the NFC point. She might have to sleep with him before she found it. She hadn't done that in a long time so sobriety had lost its appeal.

“Better than friends.”, he repeated, plonking his empty glass on the table.

She refilled both and handed his back.

“Tell me, how did you end up being a chauffeur for Tech Tonic? Childhood dream?”

He picked up his glass, enjoying feminine interest.

“Don't laugh. I wanted to be a doctor.”

“I'm not laughing. What stopped you?”

“I also wanted to be a father. We were going to have triplets. Illegal in China so we moved here as students. My English wasn't really good enough for the studies and I was failing the second year. At the same time, my wife began an affair with a Chinese millionaire, then left to live a life of luxury in Hong Kong. True love, of course – with his money at least.”

Jin's happy smile had shrunk.

“And your children?”

Sadness grew.

“Only one left. Accident in the harbour. Careless. So careless...”

“I'm sorry. So sorry to hear that.”

Jin took his hand off her thigh, knocked back his tequila and poured himself another.

“Eight years ago. Always feels like yesterday.”

The more they talked the more Xi found herself liking him – which surprised her. Until now, he had always come across as such a jerk. Now, so drunk he could hardly even sit up, the revelations about his personal life revealed someone very different. Perhaps even decent. Years ago, a good friend had told her: 'There is truth in drink'. Time and again, it was proven right.

“Jin, I need to powder my nose.”

“Help yourself. Bathroom's just there.”

Walking to the bathroom, Xi's eyes darted left and right, searching for any sign of the NFC terminal. Still nothing. Inside the bathroom, she took out her scanner. Still nothing. No readings even pointing in its general direction. There had to be a terminal. Unless their intelligence was wrong, every Tech Tonic worker had one at home. But where?

Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she found herself staring - wondering exactly who was looking back. Logically she knew she was pretty. Strong cheek bones, great skin, lips and eyes but what about the person inside? Who had she become? Her motive for joining MI5 had been to avenge the murder of her family. She knew it had made her cold, driven her to do terrible, ruthless things and they were justified. And yet, here she was, with someone who had also suffered terrible loss but chosen a different path. A gentler path. It was no longer a question of whether she liked Jin, it was a question of whether she liked herself.

As she looked into her eyes, trying to fathom herself out, she came to a decision. She wasn't going to blow Jin's brains out - she was going to fuck his brains out. He deserved a good time and so did she.

In the mirror, her face smiled at her. A happy, feminine smile. She hadn't seen herself smile like that for years. It looked strange, unfamiliar but she liked it. Adjusting her hair, she gave herself a sexy pout and unlocked the bathroom door.

“OK, Jin.”

She opened the door. The flat was in total darkness.

Chapter 57

First Day

Pavlov's bell rang at 7am, sharp. And kept ringing, in continuous bursts that forced attention. Quiet calm – huge burst – quiet calm. Julia had gone to bed so tired she could have easily slept through any normal wake-up call but no chance with this one. Opening her eyes she saw Gurmeet in bed, rubbing hers.

“When does that thing shut up?”, asked Julia.

As if it heard her, the bell stopped. Gurmeet saw her looking at the unmade third bed.

“Roberta was sleeping there. Heard her get up a while ago. Reckon she's an android so doesn't need much sleep. Just plugs herself in somewhere.”

As Julia smiled, Gurmeet added.

“Or she's having an affair with Robert and hurried back for more.”

Julia's face had become a teenage grin.

“He would have to be a masochist to have that lump bouncing on him. Maybe he just likes it rough.”

Gurmeet was surprised to hear innocent-looking Julia come out with that.

“You're pretty grown up for a teenager, Emily. How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”, lied Julia. She saw Gurmeet didn't believe her. To avoid more questions, she got out of bed and headed for the shower.

* * *

Breakfast in the main hall was chattering with excitement. What would the first day bring? What would they do? How hard would it be? Who would be the best?

Roberta had gone to chat with Robert, leaving Julia and Gurmeet as the only females amongst a dozen males. The only one Julia knew was Adam. Instinctively she headed over to him with her bowl of cereal. Gurmeet followed.

“Greedy.”, complained one of the other men, noting how the only two females had both gone to Adam.

“Sexist.”, said Gurmeet, not one to be judged on gender alone.

“Lesbian.”, retorted the man.

“I would be if all men were like you.”

The man was about to respond when Adam spoke out.

“Drop it, Harry. It's too early in the morning.”

“Fine.”, said Harry, going to sit at another table.

“Sleep well?”, Adam asked as they sat down.

“Roberta snores.”, said Gurmeet.

“She could wake Godzilla...”, nodded Julia, yawning in agreement, “...Luckily I was too tired for anything but that alarm. What about you?”

“Me? I slept fine. I'm the one who snores.”

Julia found herself smiling as Adam grinned, enjoying the lighter moment.

“What do you think they've got planned for us?”, asked Gurmeet.

Adam nodded his head towards a pile of judo mats near the stage.

“By the looks of that, some kind of acrobatic training.”

Julia saw them and looked worried.

“I'm rubbish at PE.”

“Don't worry, Em'. I used to be too. Sure they'll take it easy on us - first time and all that.”

Julia looked at Gurmeet.

“You think?”

“All you can do is your best.”

“And stay alive...”, winked Adam, “...That's always a bonus.”

“Are you always so cheerful, Andrew?”, asked Julia.

“Why be glum? We're born on a rock of molten iron; spinning at a thousand miles an hour; hurtling through a freezing void at 67 thousand miles an hour, while orbiting a nuclear fireball burning at 15 million degrees. And yet, against all the odds, here we are. Gifted with life, like a spark from a bonfire against the black hole of space and, just like that spark, when we go out we're gone forever. Even short-lived sparks dance, so why not make the most of our time too? Survive and enjoy it, for as long as we have it.”

“A simple 'yes' would have done.”

“Never realised you were so philosophical.”, said Gurmeet.

Adam grinned at her.

“You've never seen me after a beer.”

He was right, despite working on the same team at MI5 for two years, she never had.

Ten minutes later the bell went again. In reflex, everyone sat up. Roberta got to her feet - muscular, tattooed arms bulging as she gripped the sides of the podium.

“Tim and Harry, you have kitchen duty. Everyone else, outside for 20 minutes fresh air then we begin. Chop. Chop...”, she clapped, twice, to reinforce her authority, “...Today, people.”

* * *

Outside, Gurmeet got to an empty bench-table and sat down. Julia followed but didn't sit, just stood beside it.

“Not going to sit down?”

“Too nervous.”

“Do you really want to be here?”

Julia shrugged.

“Need to be. You?”

“Me? I sort of need to be too. Long story.”

“Well, I'm going to sit even if you're not...”, said Adam as he joined them, “...My bones are older than both of yours.”

“You don't look a day over 40.”

“Thanks, Charlotte. I'm 28.”

“Well, I'm only 25 and Emily here is just 18.”

Adam looked at Julia.

“18?”

Julia nodded.

“Yup.”

“You've aged a better than me.”

After exactly 20 minutes, the bell rang for their return. They did as commanded, without question.

“Ever get the feeling we're being conditioned with that bell? Like Pavlov's dog?”

“What's Pavlov's dog?”, asked Julia.

“Don't they teach that at school any more? Ivan Pavlov was a Russian scientist who used a bell to train a dog. He rang the bell every time before feeding it and, after a while, it was so conditioned to associate the bell with food that just ringing the bell was enough to make it drool. A conditioned reflex.”

“So what conditioned reflex do you think they are aiming for here?”, asked Gurmeet.

“Obedience.”

“But we aren't dogs, Andrew...”, said Julia, “...People are too intelligent to be trained like that.”

“Hitler didn't seem to think so. Don't tell me you've not heard of Hitler either.”

“Of course I have. They still teach about that fucking bastard.”

Gurmeet was again taken aback. She hadn't expected to hear such venom from sweet, young Julia's mouth.

“Wow.”

“Sorry...”, said Julia, “...there's no polite way to talk about monsters. We just need to kill them.”

Adam saw everyone else had already gone in.

“Come on. We're the last ones.”

* * *

Inside, the judo mats had been spread across the floor. Robert knelt at one end, indicating for Adam, Julia and Gurmeet to join those already kneeling at the other, including Roberta.

“Good morning, everyone.”

“Morning.”, came a weak murmur from the other side.

“**Good morning** is the correct response!”, barked Roberta, castigating them.

“Good morning.”, repeated the group, more strongly.

“Thank you. Welcome to the first day of your training. As you can see, we are going to start with some basic combat.”

Robert bowed, stood up and stepped onto the mats.

“Roberta.”

Roberta bowed and stood up to join him.

“Nikyo” he instructed.

Roberta held out her right hand, Robert grabbed it with his.

Slam. Robert was on one knee, slapping the mat to indicate surrender. Roberta released the lock on his wrist. Robert stood up.

“As you can see, it's a simple but effective lock. Do not apply a lot of

power. It's a technique that takes almost no force. Grab a partner and we'll go through it together, step by step. Gently. You are pressurising the joint in ways it hasn't been evolve to go. Too much force and it will break.”

“Come on...”, said Gurmeet, tapping Julia on the arm, “...You can do it on me.”

Adam paired up with Harry. Combat training had begun. All went well with training until it came to doing rolls.

“I can't.”, said Julia, just standing there as the others rolled away.

“Of course you can...”, shouted Roberta, striding over and giving her a hard shove, “...Just roll. Oh, pathetic.”

Julia lay sprawled on the mat, everyone looking on. Taste of blood in her mouth where her lip had caught her teeth. Roberta strode over and bodily picked her up, stood her back on her feet.

“Roll.”, she ordered, shoving Julia forward again.

Julia tasted more blood. Felt herself being hoisted back to her feet then shoved again.

“Stop being so fucking hopeless...”, scowled Roberta, “...Get off my mat.”

* * *

That evening, bruised and exhausted, Gurmeet sat on silent Julia's bed, beside her.

“Do you mind?”, she asked.

Julia shook her low-hung head.

“Emily, why don't you roll? What are you afraid of?”

Silence.

“It must be something. I know you're a tough cookie, not a coward. What is it about rolling? What happened to you?”

Julia looked at her, sadness in her eyes.

“You can trust me, Emily. I won't tell anyone.”

Julia held her gaze, then turned away, lowering her head again. Took some deep breaths.

“When I was six, dad took me to an aikido class. I loved is so much he gave me extra classes at home, when mum was out. I couldn't get enough of it. By the time I was 12, he'd taught me enough for 2nd Dan, plus a few extras. I was too young to be graded above brown. Had to keep it a secret.”

Julia stopped with the pain of the memory. Gurmeet said nothing, just watched and waited. With a tear in her eye, Julia continued.

“And then it happened. Monday 5th May 2042, my first year of secondary school. I'll never forget that date.

After school, little Chris got set on by the school bully - a fifth-former, Paul Kennet. Overgrown ogre and just as ugly, with breath to match. Even those in his year were afraid of him, so what chance did little first-year Chris have?”

“You defended, Chris?”

Julia had a tear in each eye now.

“I killed Paul.”

She shuddered, struggling for breath. Gurmeet gently put a hand on her shoulder, calming Julia enough to continue.

“It wasn't on purpose, Charlotte. Paul wouldn't stop. I threw him away and still he wouldn't stop. Kept coming back. Then he ran at me and I just rolled around, came up under him and launched him the way he was running. Sent him flying. He didn't land well. Must have hurt but he was OK. He was OK...”

Gurmeet was studying Julia's face. Studying the emotions writhing across it.

“So how did he die?”

Julia's face froze. Eyes staring straight ahead, locked on nothing.

“Breath, Emily.”

Julia shuddered again. Wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“A fucking bus. I didn't see the fucking bus. How could I not see the fucking number 12? Double decker. It's big enough. The driver braked but it went over him. I saw it go over him. I saw his face, Charlotte! Then just his feet sticking out, kicking and kicking as he screamed. Then the screaming stopped. His feet just twitching as a river of blood came out.

All around me the other kids screaming, driver shouting into his radio. I just stood there, watching it all happen. Chris was crying. Shouting at me: 'What have you done?'. ”

Julia let her tears just fall now. Gurmeet hugged her.

“You can't blame yourself.”

Julia pushed Gurmeet away.

“Can't I? Tell that to Paul. Tell that to his parents. His mum tried to kill herself. His dad became an alcoholic. I ruined their lives. They never got over it. Why should I?”

“What happened to you after?”

“Misadventure. He died this really horrible death because of me and they just called it misadventure. Little Chris never spoke to me again and was moved to another school. Nobody was my friend after that. Nobody except Jake. I hated it at school. Never wanted to go back.”

“And you've avoided doing rolls because of this?”

Julia shook her head.

“Not straight away. Parents took me on a holiday, to give me a break from everything. Mum spent the time blaming dad for teaching me aikido. By the time we came home I knew what to do. Quit aikido. Never trained again. Not once.”

“Until you came to fight training here.”

Julia looked at her, mouth open.

“This? This isn't training. This is just some other bully ordering us about. I'll do what I need to do to make it through. To get to the next stage. That's all I care about.”

As if on cue, the bell for bed went off.

“Get some sleep, Emily. Tomorrow's a new day.”

Julia nodded and crawled under her covers, without bothering to undress. That night Gurmeet didn't hear Roberta snore once. She was too busy in nightmares of her own, of battles she had been in. Julia wasn't the only one to have seen a terrible death.

Chapter 58

Cheryl's Children

The delivery man knocking on Cheryl's door, holding the package she had been expecting. She wasn't surprised she had to sign for it with biometrics. She was surprised the biometrics had to be both fingerprint and retina scan. She didn't know what it was, beyond something to help save her children.

“Thank you.”, she said out of habit, without realising she had.

“Enjoy your day, madam.”

Delivery man already forgotten, she closed the door and took the shoe-box-sized package into the dining room - placing it on the table while she picked up the waiting scissors. She was in a hurry to open it but, at the same time, dreaded opening it. She knew who it was from – the people who had kidnapped her children. The people who had set the ransom not as money but as a task at the nuclear power station. She didn't know what task. It didn't matter what task. To save her children she would do it; even if it meant other people, even people she worked with, got hurt. Even people she considered friends. As terrible as that felt, they weren't her children. Weren't her blood.

The package was plain, brown cardboard. Heavy for its size. The cheap-looking cardboard was a disguise. Slicing it open she found an expensive, poly-carbonate box inside. The two-inch screen built into its top face lit up as she looked at it.

'Place left thumb print here for five seconds', appeared the instruction, displaying a glowing-red rectangular outline.

She did as instructed. It was measuring her pulse as well as scanning her fingerprint; making sure her thumb was still attached to a living, conscious body. After five seconds, the rectangle turned green then blinked out. She heard two locks click. Slowly she opened it, praying there were no parts of her children inside. No fingers, ears, toes or worse. The most terrible thoughts began running through her head.

“Just do it.”, she scolded herself.

With a deep breath, she fully opened letting it clack onto the table. Inside it was filled with a dark, grey material, visible under a clear-plastic coating. The material looked like plasticine. When she pressed gently on the coating it felt like plasticine. On top of it sat another display, with two buttons. One black, one red. And there was a note. Printed on extra-thick intellipaper, just

for her. She knew it was just for her because it started with her name and had a small picture of her children standing against a wall, as if in front of a firing squad. As she picked it up, it recognised her DNA and powered up. The picture was no longer a picture, it was a video. A man's face appeared in front of the children, looking right at her.

“Hello, Cheryl.”

The video was live. Cheryl put a hand over her mouth, stifling a scream.

“You wanted proof we have them, here it is. See this gun? It's a two-kilowatt laser-pistol set to stage-two overload. That's eight-kilowatts of focused firepower. Ever seen what eight-kilowatts can do at close range?”

She was shaking her head.

“Please, don't hurt my babies. Don't hurt them. I'll do what ever you want. Anything. Please, don't hurt them.”

The man didn't smile. Kept a stern look on his face as he slid off the safety. Horror welled in Cheryl's heart as he turned to the tear-filled faces of her children. She couldn't look. She had to look.

“No. No! **No! NO..!**”

The back of his head filled the screen. He fired.

Screams poured from the paper. Screams poured from Cheryl, flooding the house. The man stood to one side so she could see what he'd done. She was too terrified to look but had no choice. Dark, grey smoke rose from a hole in the wall between her children's heads. Their faces had gone white, as terrified for themselves as she was for them.

“Mummy loves you. Don't worry. Mummy's going to get you out.”

The man's face loomed on screen again, blocking her view.

“Don't lose our stuff or unwrap it. Put it in the fridge. We'll be in touch.”

The image froze then faded away. The paper now just plain, thick paper. Cheryl sank to the floor, bringing her knees up to her chest and crying into them. Crying until she knew nothing else. As the day faded to night, there she stayed. Staring at nothing but the fear for her children.

Chapter 59

Combat

The days at the training camp had begun passing swiftly. After sharing her past with Gurmeet, they had become closer. Motivated by the need to avenge Jake, Julia had even allowed herself to do rolls. Gurmeet was right, new days had been dawning. They were ever-more united in their intention to succeed, as well as their dislike of the only other female taking part: Roberta, the big bully.

Adam, her other friend there, had been doing well too and all three had caught Robert's eye, as people of high-ability, noticeably better than the others. Robert had been talking with Roberta about promoting their status. This didn't go down well with Roberta, still angry at Julia's earlier refusal to roll, and it did nothing to improve her treatment of them. Out of the three, Julia's progress had jumped the most, as if an ability switch had suddenly been turned on. Robert had no doubt she was deeply driven.

"Isn't Charlotte an unusual name for an Asian?", Julia asked Gurmeet one evening, as they sat after supper.

"It's not the name that counts, Emily, it's the person who wears it. How true they are to themselves. A name is just a label. You know what I mean?"

Julia felt she had said that not as a question but a statement, as if she knew Emily was not just her cover name but part of an entire cover story. She never asked Gurmeet about her non-Asian name again. Instead she focused on the training. The routine. The positive channelling of her never waning anger about losing Jake. Focused on maximising her skills for the true mission ahead: her revenge.

She had no intention of going on any Faith protest action. They gave her a home, food, credits and access to weapons - in return she trained hard. The hardest of them all. But to her mind that was as far as it went. She hadn't signed a contract, sworn allegiance or even made a promise to take other action. If they thought she would, that was their problem. The only thing she cared about was getting enough money to reach Jake's killers, with enough weapons to take them down.

Today, the third week into their training, it was full-contact combat outside. Six bruised, bloodied and aching men sat on the edge of the mats.

"Andrew and Giles.", announced Robert for the next match.

Adam and Giles duly stood up, bowed, stepped onto the mats and assumed fighting stances. Robert watched them with approval. Both had

won their previous bouts. Both were capable of leading an operation. Now they would see who was the best.

“Fight.”

It wasn't boxing, wrestling or karate, it was mixed-martial arts. A combination of everything and anything necessary to win. Giles had the edge on weight and strength. Adam had speed and agility. He punched Giles three times in the stomach, hard. Giles just smiled and punched Adam in the face - sending him flying. Adam rolled as he landed and came straight back up into a fighting stance, facing Giles.

“Show off.”, grinned Giles, advancing towards him.

Adam feinted to the right, leapt to the left, slamming Giles under the chin with his forearm – entire bodyweight behind it.

Not bad, thought Robert.

“Come on, Andrew!”, shouted Gurmeet.

Giles slammed head-first onto the mats. Lay there for half a second, dazed, then pushed himself to his knees. Before he could stand up, Adam grabbed his right arm, twisting the wrist and locking it straight. Pressed Giles' arm down, pinning his face and shoulder socket against the mat. Keeping the lock on, he added pressure, pressing the shoulder joint deeper into the mat. Giles visibly was in pain. Could barely move but refused to submit. Adam wasn't finished yet. Keeping up the pressure, he dropped a knee onto his shoulder, keeping the arm lock and adding a wrist lock too. Giles felt like his arm was about to be torn out of its socket. He struggled, desperately trying to break free. Face going from red to purple as Adam got back on his feet, keeping both locks on and pressing his knee against the locked elbow joint. Fierce pain screaming through every joint in that arm. Before it had hurt. Now it was worse.

“Submit.”, urged Adam.

Giles had absolutely no chance of getting up and he knew it. He slapped the mat with his free hand, indicating surrender.

“YAY!”, cheered Julia, surprising herself.

Adam released the lock and helped Giles to his feet.

“You alright, mate?”

Giles stood up, rubbing his strained arm and shoulder.

“No. Good moves. You bastard.”

With comradely smiles of respect, they shook hands and bowed to clapping Robert. Roberta, was straight to business, looking at the next pair.

“Emily and Charlotte.”, she announced.

Julia instantly lost her smile. Gurmeet was her friend.

Fight Charlotte full contact? No. No way.

They looked at each other.

“Just do what you have to do.”, said Gurmeet, stepping onto the mat.

Julia stood and stared, emotions writhing over her face, as Gurmeet bowed to Robert and faced her.

“Fight.”, he said.

Gurmeet had moved into a fighting stance, waiting for Julia to do the same. Julia couldn't. Just stood at the edge of the mat. A psychological block against hurting a friend, against losing another friend. Gurmeet didn't move. Was still waiting for Julia to at least get into a position to defend herself.

“Fight.”, urged Robert.

“I can't...”, said Julia, “...She's my friend.”

“FIGHT HER OR YOU'LL FIGHT ME!”, yelled Roberta, furiously on her feet.

Julia spun towards her. Towards the muscle-bound bully who'd snored like a rusty cement mixer every single night of their stay.

“Fine.”, she said, and stepped onto the mat.

“Emily, no. I'll fight her.”, said Gurmeet, placing herself between Julia and the approaching Roberta.

“No...”, asserted Julia, easing her out of the way, “...I want this...”, she looked Gurmeet straight in the eye, “...I need this.”

Gurmeet saw the deep, pained hurt in her eyes. She'd never understood what the sadness was but respected her and her skills.

“Be careful.”, she said, placing a motherly hand on Julia's shoulder before bowing her exit.

With tight lips of determination, Julia gave her a long blink and took her position. Roberta, expression of a bulldog, took off her trainers and socks and stepped onto the mat too - flexing her large, tattooed muscles as she too got into position. Robert watched, not entirely sure he should be allowing such an unfair fight but too curious to say no.

“I've been wanting to do this ever since you arrived, snotty brat.”, sneered Roberta.

Julia's reply was silent focus - moving into a fighting stance opposite.

“Fight.”, ordered Robert.

Roberta grinned, tensing her muscles and growling like the Hulk to intimidate Julia.

Julia leapt forward – palm strike up, under her chin, lifting Roberta's head then used her bodyweight to slam her down. Roberta's head bounced as she hit the mat. She hadn't even seen it coming.

“You'll pay for that.”, Roberta snarled, shaking the daze out of her head as she climbed back to her feet.

Without a word, Julia attacked the second she got up. Roberta dodged to the side, grabbed her arm and flung her in the direction she had been going. Julia flew two metres across the mat, landed lightly on her palms, rolled and sprung back to her feet – right back into a fighting stance, facing the enemy, exactly as she used to in the dojo.

Even knowing Julia's aikido background, Gurmeet expected her to look at least slightly ruffled. Instead she just looked more focused. More determined. Like a piece of steel being hammered, work-hardened, she was just getting stronger.

Robert was watching in amazement. The smallest, slimmest, youngest of the group, the little teenage girl had a depth of spirit he hadn't seen for years. All Roberta saw was her descending red mist. With a furious roar, she charged straight at Julia.

This time it was Julia who slipped aside, dropped to one knee and flung Roberta over her head, clean off the matted area and onto the grass. Roberta snarled, also rolling as she landed, thrusting back to her feet to retaliate but Julia was already upon her. She hadn't waited for Roberta to land before running to close ground. To close the gap.

As Roberta jumped back to her feet, spinning round to charge back, Julia was right there - slamming into her. A full-speed elbow strike in her face, Roberta's own upward movement increasing the speed of the impact. A loud crack as elbow met jaw and Roberta crashed down again. Harder than before.

Julia followed, punching even as she fell - making Roberta lose her bearings. Her head thudded against the dry ground like a dropped log. Julia dropped on top, punching with both fists. Left, right, left, right. Each strike sounded like a rolling pin pounding a joint of meat. Again and again and again. Roberta's bloodied mouth was splattering red across the dry grass. Her body was pinned, unable to escape as Julia's blows hammered down. Vision dazed, head lolling side to side with each blow.

Everyone was shocked. Gurmeet was shocked, even after Julia's revelations, she had never dreamt her young friend had such anger inside. Throughout the attack, Julia never said a word. Never asked Roberta to surrender. Never saw anything but a nasty bully to be ended. A bully who wanted to take away her chance of avenging Jake's death. Nothing would

stand in the way of that. Nothing.

Petite and slim on the outside, Julia was a raging monster of revenge on the inside and her monster was strong. Knew no limits. Would never give up. Robert had been shouting for her to stop but she was deaf to it. He ran over and grabbed her. Physically pulled her off and threw her aside, dropping beside Roberta's limp, bleeding body. The fight was over.

Only then, getting to her feet where Robert had thrown her, fists clenched, entire body tensing in fury, did Julia make a sound. Opening her mouth wide, she looked at the sky and released an ear-splitting scream. A primal scream of pain from the deepest, darkest hell of her life.

She screamed so loud, birds fled to the skys in terror. Animals in the woods cowered in fear. When her lungs ran out of air, body and rage deflated, her mouth slowly closed and she trudged silently back to her place.

Slumping down next to Gurmeet, she crossed her legs and hung her head. Gurmeet was staring at her. Everyone was staring at her, Roberta's blood trickling off her bare knuckles.

“Jesus, Em'. Where did that come from?”

Head still down, Julia said nothing. Sat with her long hair hiding her face. Only Gurmeet, sitting right beside her, heard her low sobs. Saw the tears falling onto her legs.

From the outside Julia had shown she was tougher than hardened steel. On the inside, she was breaking. Only now did Gurmeet realise how much but she still didn't understand why. She couldn't hear the words of torment in Julia's head.

Jake didn't have to die. I'm going to kill them all. Kill them all. Kill them all. Kill them all.

Chapter 60
Sounds of the Night

Xi Yang had opened the bathroom door to find Jin Ho's flat in total darkness. Not a single light was on anywhere. Pitch black, except for the bathroom light behind her, sending her shadow across the floor.

“Drop your weapon.”, came a voice.

“I'm unarmed.”

“Lie to me again and I'll shoot you where you stand. Left hand.”

Xi reached into her jacket with her left hand and slowly took out her laser-pistol. If she knew how many of them were there she'd have taken the chance of shooting it out. As it stood, she had no idea how many she was up against or whether Jin was with them. Her gun clattered to the floor.

“Now what?”

All the lights came on. She saw Jin Ho, lying on the sofa with his head back. Laser-hole burnt right through his skull.

“You didn't have to kill him.”, she said to the chunky, Chinese man pointing two laser-pistols at her.

“Where's the copy?”

“Copy of what?”

He fired a beam past her head, close enough to singe her hair. If she wasn't careful, tonight would be her last too.

“I passed it on.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Search me then. Or are you afraid to get close to a little woman?”

The man looked like he had been born in a gym and ate whole-cows for breakfast. He didn't look like he would be afraid of anyone.

“If I find it on you, I will kill you.”

“You're going to kill me anyway.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Officially he was not allowed to leave witnesses but she was stunningly attractive. Hormones racing, he put the pistols away and pea-cocked his beefy chest.

“Hope your hands are warm.”, said Xi, watching his approach.

“They will be. You are a very beautiful woman.”

“Want to fuck?”

The stark bluntness of her words surprised even her. It was a blunt situation. Life or death. The look on his face was her answer. It passed from disbelief, to lust, to action. The ravaging began. He would look for the copy after. It wasn't going anywhere. First things first, before she changed her mind. Hormones were in charge and she felt as good as she looked. Firm, toned and already wet.

“You like lace.”, he noted, grabbing the underwear she had put on for Jin Ho, just in case.

“Doesn't everyone? Do me against the wall.”

He was more than happy to oblige. Trousers dropped to his ankles, her top pushed up, knickers to one side, he slid into heaven. How could he have almost wasted such a fantastic time?

“Harder.”, she urged.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, hands on his shoulders, she pushed back with every thrust. Raw, basic, animalistic sex.

“Harder. I'm almost there.”

“Me too.”, he grunted, sweating.

“Fill me up. Fill me up.”

He needed no further encouragement. Went in deep. Pulsed with grunting ecstasy, eyes closed in rapture. Skewering Xi against the wall. She felt it all and it felt great. It changed nothing. From her right sleeve she slid out a small, double-barrelled laser-pistol and shot him through the jugular at point blank range. Both barrels at the same time, tearing it open. Pulses of blood began jetting out, spraying as far as Jin's corpse. The man's eyes were open. Wide, staring, disbelieving. Angry. Fading. Already blacking out. Falling back. As he crashed to the floor, moments from the death he could already feel coming. Xi landed effortlessly on her feet, standing over him. He was staring at her. Questions in his vacating eyes.

Xi saw and shrugged.

“I was going to do Jin Ho. You killed him. You know the rest.”

Leaving him on the floor, pants down, she wiped herself off and straightened her knickers and clothes. Collecting her laser-pistol, she dimmed the lights and resumed her search for the access terminal. At least now she could use her scanner without having to keep it hidden. She found a signal. Faint but enough to lead her to a desk near the open window.

“Finally.”

She took out the copied card and placed it on the scanner in range of the NFC. The scanner read the card, read the NFC connection and began brute-

force code hacking. It could take hours. She down to wait, listening to the sounds of the night through the open window.

Police sirens chasing 21st-century thieves. Drunken clubbers squabbling over a spilt drink. The roar of an RAF Scramcat, thrusting towards the stratosphere. She could still hear its roar, as it cleared London airspace and banged through the sound-barrier, hitting full burn to Mach 7.

The scanner pinged and flashed green. It had taken just three minutes.

“What? Only 8-bit encryption? Really? Bean-counter stupidity.”

Because Tech Tonic's system didn't rely on encryption alone but the two-part security system, they had saved money by not installing quantum or even industry-standard 2048-bit encryption. The percentage of cost savings to a £multi-billion company were negligible but all money was money in accountant eyes.

Happy with her result, Xi hit 'send' to upload her biometrics to their mainframe and activate her cloned card. When it was complete she would have full access to their systems. Those bean-counter savings were going to cost Tech Tonic an awful lot more than just money.

Someone was coming. Through the open window, she could hear someone climbing the metal fire escape. Climbing towards Jin's floor. Laser-pistol in hand, she backed into the shadows, putting herself between a wall and the desk - waiting for climber to come in or go past. The footsteps were hurried but remarkably quiet. Audible only because Jin Ho's flat was now silent. One person. A heavy person. Another hitman coming to back up the first. By the time she was done with him, Jin's flat would look like an abattoir. So be it.

In silence, she waited. Pistol calmly levelled, pointing at the window. The footsteps were closing. Hurriedly closing.

Chapter 61

Run Shabbir, Run

Shabbir was on an emergency assignment. An officer's cover had been blown in the worst way possible – while they were undercover without knowing it. It meant they had no idea of the danger they were in. Adam and Gurmeet were tied up. Henry was on his way from Thames House but four miles behind. Shabbir couldn't wait. It was down to him. For all he knew, he could already be too late.

He was on his bike. A twin-turbine ground missile, with 300 horse-power and a top speed beyond 200mph. It was also slim and lightweight. Extremely agile. On his bike, fat Shabbir was as fluid as a ballet dancer, surfing a blue-light streak of lightening. Doughnut belly resting against the fuel cell, his martial-arts reflexes pirouetting the bike through the traffic. Turbines screaming. 3D head up display on his visor overlaying the best route in real time, switching traffic-lights to green in time for his approach.

'ETA 22 seconds'.

He could see the direction arrow pointing to the building ahead. Officer location circle pinging in yellow, entrance and exit points pinging in green. A hundred metres away, he cut the blues and the turbines. Squeezed the brakes - stopping as hard and as late as he could without squealing the tyres. As the bike rolled under the fire escape, he jumped for the bottom rail. Began hauling himself up with an agility that belied his size. No need to lock the bike, it was encoded to his biometrics and quietly auto-parked he hurried upwards – as stealthily and quickly as he could on the cold-steel. He had to get to the fourth floor. Why was it always so high, never at ground level?

Breathing hard but as quietly as possible, he reached the fourth floor and leant against the wall. Listened outside the yellow-pinged room. The window was as open as his mouth but from the window came only silence. The lights were dimmed low. He was on the side of the window, away from the street light. Away from his shadow going into the room. Using a corner-cam he peered inside. Two bodies, no sign of life. No sign of the officer. Was he too late? Silently he slid over the ledge, pistol first.

From nowhere, a laser shot flashed - tore the end off his barrel.

“Shabbir.”

He knew that voice.

“Xi. You're alive. Aren't you supposed to look before you shoot? What setting is that thing on?”

“Two. Sorry. Wasn't expecting back up.”

Shabbir held up his smoking laser-pistol, 5cm shorter than before.

“Got a spare? Mine's toast.”

“Take his.”, she said, indicating towards the hitman on the floor – blood pooled around his head, trousers and underpants around his ankles, as was his dignity.

“I'm not even going to ask what happened.”

“Good. Why are you here?”

“Your cover's blown.”

“How? Adam and Gurmeet OK?”

“Hopefully. They've both gone dark so must have got in.”

Shabbir took the hitman's laser-pistols, checked the charges and they headed for the front door.

“Come on. We can talk at mine.”

The door burst open. Smoke and laser fire poured in. Flashing beams of blue. Beams of red. High powered guns. They dived for cover. Cover wasn't enough. The beams cut through everything. Everything except angled mirrors and even then the mirror surface got scarred with each blast. Nothing would stop them for long. They had to keep moving. Stop the attackers from locking on.

Xi was on the left. A snatched wall mirror in one hand, laser-pistol firing in the other. Noting where an attacker was their firing and shooting them through the wall. Shabbir had no mirror. Just had to keep moving. Keep firing. It was a battle of attrition. Shoot harder and better - take down the others before getting taken down. Xi saw Shabbir was near the open window.

“Run! I'll cover you!”, she shouted.

“No. This is a rescue.”

“It was. You tried. Now go. Run! Report in. Come back for them later. If we both die no-one will know what happened.”

Technically she was right. If they both got killed their murderers would get away with it. No-one would know what had happened, except a gun fight. But staying was Russian roulette. Sooner or later a shot would connect. No matter how many they killed, more kept coming.

“Run, Shabbir, Run! *Please!*”, urged Xi.

Xi almost never said please. Especially not like that. Shabbir glanced over at his colleague. His friend. Firing and crawling through the smoke. Through the flashes of lethal-laser beams tearing across the flat. He stopped

firing. Xi noticed he had stopped firing and was glad. At least one of them would live. his laser beams had stopped. Dashed a glance his way and saw him getting to his feet. Still firing, she smiled in approval and turned back to focus on their attackers, eyes narrowing in even harder concentration. Saving Shabbir was a final act she was glad to make. An honourable goodbye, five-thousand miles and six years overdue.

Shabbir ran. Sprinted. Not for the window but for the door. Holding the three-point sequence on both laser pistols he triggered more than just overload. He triggering self-destruct. None of the attackers expected a head-on charge. Such a thing would be suicide. The surprise gave Shabbir an edge. Xi was horrified.

Her mouth fell open, trying to speak but no words came out. Her trigger finger still pumping, aiming to the left to avoid hitting him even though he was hit already. No-one could survive that barrage.

Two metres from the doorway, he crashed to the ground, flinging the laser-pistols through it. Cores unstable - two thousand degrees and rapidly rising.

“Duck, Xi!”.

The guns hit the corridor floor and detonated on impact. The doorway exploded. Brick and body parts splattering the walls as Shabbir was thrown back, across the room. The attackers were dead.

Covered in dust and debris, Xi scurried over the carnage-covered floor to get to him. To cradle his bloodied, dying form like the mother she had never been. He had sacrificed himself to save her. Such honour, such kindness was not lost even on her hardened soul. Nor was the horror of seeing the blood running from his mouth. The multiple impact points of laser wounds pin-cushioning his body armour.

“Think there's that vacancy for team-leader you wanted.”, he croaked.

Xi was shaking her head, close to tears.

“When I said run, I meant for the window. Not the bloody door.”

Despite them both trying to make light of the situation, they both knew he was fading. Pulse readout on his wristcom was dropping. From the corridor she heard running and shouting. Not from help but from more attackers coming to finish the job.

“Make sure they're dead. No mercy. No survivors.”

Xi accepted it was their end. As two they could maybe keep them at bay a little longer. By herself it would be over in seconds. Their chances of survival had just dropped to zero.

“Run.”, croaked Shabbir, eyes already closing.

The readout showed his pulse was weak. Dangerously weak and getting weaker but he wasn't dead yet. Not yet. And while he wasn't dead she wouldn't leave him. It wasn't a fight for her home village of Wujiamencun but this was her Wujiamencun. Her chance to show honour through sacrifice.

The sound of the new attackers was getting louder. Resting Shabbir's head gently on the remains of a cushion, she took her laser-pistol, dropped in her last charge and lay prone on the floor beside him. Aimed towards the remains of the corridor wall with calm, steady hands. Escape was the logical thing to do. This was her thing to do.

She hadn't been there to make a last stand for her family but she was there now, for her adopted one. A last stand for her comrade in arms. She knew it was suicide and she welcomed the peace it would bring. Finally her pain would end with honour. It was a good way to die.

Chapter 62

Remember Us

Lionel was a multi-millionaire. Retired, enjoying his riches. His latest partner was 40 years his junior and adamant she loved him for his personality, wit and intelligence. That the 2-carat diamond ring he'd given her over dinner, before sailing to the Caribbean aboard his four-deck private yacht, had nothing to do with her decision to sleep with him. She had already decided she would the night his chauffeur picked her up in his Rolls Royce for a surprise trip aboard his personal jet - flying out to a ski-resort in the Swiss Alps for dinner and frolics.

She was happy. He was happy. And when he got bored of her he would dump her. She knew that and accepted it. She knew her appeal was her looks, not her personality, wit or intelligence – of which she had little. But when other boyfriends got bored and dumped her they didn't leave her with millions in riches or fine living experiences. What ever happened, she treasured her time as his.

She was young, didn't use any contraception and he never asked if she did. She wasn't worried if she became pregnant because she wanted a child and he could afford to support them in style. He wasn't worried if she became pregnant because she, like the all other pretty faces who became a burden, would just disappear. As if by magic.

Lionel had built his fortune in the telecoms industry. Worked his way up marketing new devices to younger and younger users. Why follow health guidelines and wait until they were 16 before targeting them? Why wait until they were 10? Get them as soon as they could blink. No health agency or government directive ever ordered him not to.

“There are interactive developmental tools to boost their intelligence and co-ordination.”, was how he had them marketed to parents.

When campaign groups and investigative journalists questioned the impacts of the microwave radiation devices emitted, he just quoted standard industry guidelines:

“There is no consistent scientific evidence of harm.”

This was true. Telecoms giants funded scientific tests specifically designed to find 'no evidence', to counter the independent ones that did. Even as escalating numbers of people got brain cancer, including among the, nobody could prove which actual device had caused it. Exactly as the tobacco industry, Lionel's role-model, had done regarding cigarette brands - impossible to prove which one had actually caused their terminal cancer.

In a 40-year career marketing millions of phone handsets and other wireless devices, not a single claimant had ever won a single penny of compensation in court. Even leaders of the tobacco industry said they were impressed - that the student had become the master.

To Lionel, his conscience was clear. He never forced a single person to use any device. They could have chosen not to use wireless everything in their homes . Wireless baby monitors, wireless computers, wireless control systems, wireless headphones and extra wireless boosters to power over the channel conflicts with neighbouring Wi-Fi. As far as Lionel was concerned, smokers had to accept they were to blame for their actions and so should wireless users. Did alcoholics ever sue a brewery for liver damage? No. What ever the risk, they chose to accept it.

“Do you use a mobile phone?”, an investigative journalist had asked him.

“Of course. Every day. Couldn't live without it. Invaluable business tool. Not to mention all the social benefits.”

“When I called earlier, your PA told me your phone was off.”

“That's what she's instructed to say when I'm in a meeting. Now, what's your point?”

“This new report stating radiation damage from wireless devices is causing infertility, senility and a variety of cancers in people as young as six.”

“We follow international guidelines to the letter. If there was any truth in that report they would tell us.”

“You're saying the report is wrong?”

“I'm saying, if there was any truth in that report the international guideline committee for radiation protection would tell us. They haven't. In lieu of your visit today, I spoke with them this very morning and their advice remains unchanged. That there is no consistent scientific evidence of harm and the weight of considered evidence indicates there is no cause for concern below recommended guideline levels.”

“But there are no guideline levels for Wi-Fi. None at all”

“So there's no chance we breached them, is there?”

“Did you know a classroom with multiple Wi-Fi devices can have a radiation level higher than sitting next to a mobile phone mast?”

“I suggest you take that up with the international committee. We're just an honest business working to industry guidelines.”

“But isn't the committee setting the guidelines funded by telecoms companies, like your own. I have a document here stating your company paid has £824,000 to the committee during the last six months alone.”

“Of course we contribute. We are a responsible operation and research is extremely expensive. If we don't help pay for it who will? Do you have a spare £800k lying around?”

The journalist ignored the deflection.

“But if you are paying for the research, how can anyone be sure there is no conflict of interest and the results are not biased?”

“And if we didn't pay, you would be complaining that we should. You can't have it both ways.”

The journalist had no immediate answer for that, which made Lionel feel warmly smug inside. He had handled it all very well. Expensive media training had been worth every penny.

That interview was aired the same day and caused another a public stir. Renewed questions about wireless safety and public trust in the regulators. The interviewer was invited to speak at an emergency government committee on wireless safety. Sadly, while on his way there, his car glitched and crashed. He died shortly afterwards, when his ambulance was hit by an explosion from a faulty gas main. A representative from Partner gave a public statement.

“We apologise profusely and unreservedly, for this very rare glitch. Our sincere condolences go out to the family, as will a generous compensation package.”

Conspiracy theories abounded for months afterwards, then duly faded. Without their key speaker and their collective evidence, the committee had found nothing new and the questions of safety were shelved. Again.

* * *

As Lionel cracked open a new bottle of cognac, he noticed a little red light flashing on his wristcom. The silent intruder alarm.

“Damn moggys...”

He buzzed Vincent in security.

“Vincent. Damn Moggys on the roof again. Throw them off this time. Only way they'll learn.”

“Yes, sir. Already on my way.”

“And, Vincent. Try and find out how they get up there. It's a bloody nuisance.”

No answer.

“Vincent.”

Still no answer.

“Must have left his coms behind. Very unprofessional. Will have to have a word about that when he comes down.”

Ten minutes later, as Lionel sat in front of his EHD TV wall, refilling his glass, he noticed his wristcom still flashing red. He buzzed security.

“Vincent. Didn't you get it down yet?”

No answer.

“Vincent. Vincent! God dammit. Don't tell me that moron's got stuck up there too.”

Knocking back his glass, he plonked it down and heaved himself to his feet.

“If you want something fucking doing...”

Being so wealthy, Lionel had a massive mansion. Being so massive, with persistent gout, he had stairlifts between every floor but never used them in front of lady friends. This evening he was alone and didn't hesitate to enjoy full use of the quilted, velvet seats and pillowed foot rests, tailor made for his total comfort.

The brushless motors were whisper quiet as they glided him to the next floor. From his seat, he could enjoy the view of his wealth – the fine art lining the walls as the stairs curved gently around the vast main hallway. His android assistant, an Alfred, climbed the stairs ahead of him, waiting at the top of each flight to carry him to the next lift or room of his choosing.

“Destination, sir?”

“Going up, Alfred.”

“Of course, sir.”, said the Alfred, effortlessly lifting him off the chair and carrying him smoothly to the next.

Two flights later, the stairlift arrived at the third floor. He waved the Alfred away.

“I'll walk this time. Doctor says I need to stretch my legs.”

“As you wish, sir.”, said the Alfred and parked itself to one side until needed.

“Right...”, said Lionel to himself, as he hobbled towards the terrace room, “...Let's see what's taking Vincent so long and fuck those fucking Moggys.”

The rooftop terrace was accessed through his master bedroom, across the landing. Its door was ajar, where Vincent had gone through earlier.

“Vincent. Where are you? Vincent!”

Lionel's cashmere-slipped feet walked across the deep-pile carpet into his bedroom. It looked as immaculate as always – ever ready for bedding the

next pretty lady to be bought his way. One of the French doors was open, curtains wafting gently in the breeze.

“Vincent...”, he called, wincing in a burst of gout pain as he stepped out, a plump cat looking up at him, “...What are you still doing here, Moggy? Where the fuck is Vincent?”

The cat just sat and looked at him, mewing for food or attention. Further out, at the end of the terrace, another cat was peering over the edge, looking like it was about to jump.

“Too high even for you, Mog. But go for it. Better pussy coming tonight.”

Just like he called all his robotic servants Alfred, all cats were Moggys. They were all too unimportant to be named individually.

It mewed when it saw him approach, then hissed and ran back in, through the French doors.

“Bloody ingrate.”, said Lionel.

From alcoves either side of the doors, two men stepped into view.

“Who the bloody-hell are you? What are you doing in my house? Go away! Vincent! *Vincent!*”

One of them closed the French doors - after taking out the key and trapping him with them. Lionel took a step away, towards the very end of the terrace.

“What do you want? Money?”

They walked towards him. Lionel backed further away - further and further until he was right against the railing. He kept thumping his wristcom for help but kept getting the same message: 'no signal'.

“**VINCENT! HELP!** Who *are* you?”

One of the men put a hand in his jacket.

“Don't shoot me! I'll pay. What ever you want!”

The man took out not a gun but a white card and held it out for Lionel's trembling hand to take. It was an old-fashioned business card, from *Remember Us*.

“No doubt you've heard of us.”

Lionel had indeed heard of them; what they were and what they did.

“Murderers. You killed some good people. My friends. **VINCENT, WHERE-THE-FUCK ARE YOU?**”

One of the men grabbed his arm. A solid, inescapable grip of iron.

“**VINCENT GET HERE NOW OR YOU'RE FUCKING FIRED!!!!!!**”

The other produced a horse-sized syringe, with a gas attachment. Lionel

struggled as hard as he could, desperate to break free. It was as impossible as the strength of the man's grip.

“Bloody android!”

The one with the gun dropped a tiny metal ball into the fat needle. It hissed as pressure built and he pressed it against Lionel's temple. Lionel shook his head to displace it but the man thrust it in - needle pushing through his skin, locking it in place.

“**Bastard!**”

“No, Lionel, it is you who is the bastard. It is because of you that we are here. My brother died from brain cancer when he was 27. I was made infertile. My wife got dementia, aged just 42. And now I have an ipsilateral brain tumour - inoperable. You know what ipsilateral means?”

“Don't give a shit.”

“One sided. The side I used most for my mobile phone. Things you told us were safe.”

“I never once said they were safe. Just that no consistent evidence of harm.”

“According to whom?”

“The regulators. The ICNIRP.”

“Telecoms regulators set up by the telecoms industry and funded by it.”

“Of course we fund it. It's our duty to fund investigations into any health effects. We would have been criticised if we hadn't.”

“And you spent millions ensuring the dangers were buried by confusion. Just like the tobacco, asbestos and thalidomide industries before you. They got away with it. You think you have too. You're mistaken.”

“We did nothing wrong. *I* did nothing wrong.”

“Then why are we here? Why do you have this big, pneumatic syringe at your head?”

Lionel was thinking fast, trying to find a solution. Any solution that would avoid his impending death.

“Look. If you need a rebuild, I can help. I know very good people. I'll pay. Everything on me.”

“Everything is on you. We've are good people. We've seen doctors, oncologists. It's terminal. Everyone in our group has a terminal condition, thanks to people like you but, yes, you are right. You are going to pay.”

Without warning, the syringe was triggered. It jumped, firing the tiny ball through Lionel's temple and into his brain. For a second he blacked out with pain. His legs crumpled but he didn't fall. The one holding the syringe held

him up.

Lionel blinked through his watering eyes, vision blurring in and out of focus.

“For fuck's sake, that hurts! What have you done?”

A face appeared in front of Lionel's.

“It's a microwave transmitter. No more powerful than the ones you sold to billions of children. It's now inside your brain, irradiating you at point-blank range. You're too old to get a brain tumour the way your devices gave them to us. This is faster. Designed to break down the neurons in your frontal lobe. Eat away at your memories, at who you are.

In a couple of hours you won't remember seeing us. In a day or so, you won't recognise your family. In a week you'll be a gaping vegetable – dead to the world. A public warning to the others who put profits ahead of public safety. It's taken 30 years for this moment to happen but I'll tell you this for nothing, the look on your face right now makes it worth the wait.”

Lionel was squinting, blinking, trying to see straight through eyes that refused to comply.

“Bastard. I'll be fine. My doctors will take it out.”

“No they won't. It's inoperable - just like ours. Even now it's breaking down your neural links. The only way to get it out is to remove so much of your brain you'll become a vegetable on the spot. By the time your communication systems come back on line, massive damage will have been done. Keep our card, Lionel. Remember us.”

The one holding his hands let him go, pushing him away, towards the other side of the terrace.

“And for your information, shit head, I'm not an android. I'm just angry and I go to the gym. It's why I'm strong, even now. You're pathetic.”

His colleague was watching the scanner in his hand, linked to Lionel's communicator. On the display, a progress tree. His face growing a look of satisfaction as all the branches turned from amber to green.

“Evergreen extracted. Analysing.”

Hundreds, thousands of names, numbers, pictures and videos flitted across the screen. Suddenly it froze. Displaying one, pulsing-red name.

“Got it.”

“Same name?”

“Same name. Got the place.”

“Good. They have even more to answer for.”

“Let's get on with it. Where to?”

“City four.”

They spoke to each other as if Lionel had already ceased to exist. Abandoning him to the rooftop terrace, they walked back into the house and locked the French doors behind them. Lionel was against the railings, gripping them to steady his shaking thoughts. How had his life suddenly become so bad? And where the hell was Vincent?

He heard his front door open and close, three floors below.

“Bastards are leaving.”

In an act of defiance, he leant over the rails to spit at them. What he saw dried his mouth.

“Oh, Christ...”

Now he knew he was a dead man. No chance to get to any doctor in time. On the drive below, bath of blood all over the tarmac, lay Vincent. He tried his communicator again. Nothing. It was as blocked as the memories in his head were becoming.

“I'm fucked...”

Slowly he sank down, sitting on the floor of the terrace, leaning against the decorative iron railings. Staring at the side of his beautiful, multi-million pound home. He had everything to live for. The life of dreams. The life he had always dreamt of. Yet, inside, he could already feel his thoughts beginning to slow - the thickening porridge of his brain.

A day later, as a beautiful red sun painted a magical sky, voices and silhouettes came to join him.

“Sir. Sir, are you OK? Can you hear me?”

“What happened, Lionel? How did Vincent fall?”

“Ambulance is on the way.”

Lionel looked at them. Felt he should know them. Opened his mouth to speak but couldn't remember how.

The hum of an air-ambulance came down, blue lights flashing. It hovered nearby and he watched as two paramedics jumped out, hurried towards him. He didn't know why they were there. Had the feeling they were there to help. Help with what...?

Chapter 63
Emily's Tale

Julia left Robert's office without a smile.

“How did it go, Em'?...”, asked Gurmeet, “...Did he slam you for beating Roberta up?”

“No.”

Julia kept walking and went outside, sitting herself down on the steps. Gurmeet followed and sat beside her. She could see conflict in Julia's eyes, even from the side.

“Talk to me. I'm worried about you.”

Julia looked at her.

“Why? You hardly know me.”, she said and looked away again.

“So tell me.”

Julia just sat there, in her own thoughts.

“Emily, I won't tell anyone. Trust me.”

Trust you..?

She needed a friend. Glancing around, making sure no-one else was looking or listening, she sighed.

“I don't even know myself any more.”

Gurmeet saw sadness welling in her eyes as she continued.

“I learnt to cope with everything, until they killed Jake.”

“Jake?”

Julia looked at Gurmeet, eyes beginning to drizzle.

“My best friend. Ever. They murdered him. Blew his house to pieces - right in front of me. My Jake, Charlotte. My Jake... in pieces... They're going to pay. I'm going to make them so pay, for everything...”

Through now raining eyes, Julia kept talking. Told Gurmeet everything that had happened with Jake. The swarmbots. The drone. Her dad shooting down three drones after they fled. Her discovery he was a creator of the swarmbots. She needed to get it out – too much to keep everything inside.

Telling Gurmeet went against everything she had been taught but she didn't care any more - it was burning her up. Yet, despite all her tear-filled revelations, she kept her real identity hidden. Kept herself presented as Emily, not Julia.

In his office, Robert had given her a path for Jake's revenge. It was all she

needed. That path she also kept secret from Gurmeet because Robert had demanded it - she didn't dare risk losing her chance. That path involved taking over a nuclear reactor and threatening Partner with meltdown. Force Partner, the ones responsible for Jake's death, out into the open. Even though she hadn't told Gurmeet everything, she felt better for sharing. Then Gurmeet replied with a response that shook her to the core.

“Your name's not really Emily, is it?”

What???

Julia's head snapped round, staring at her in shock. Was she really that easy to read? By Julia's response, Gurmeet saw she was right.

“Does Robert know?”

Julia shook her head.

“Don't worry. A lot of people have secrets, especially here. What matters is who you are inside and what you do. Stay true to yourself.”

Inside the building behind them, the door to Robert's office opened and his head poked out.

“Charlotte. A moment?”

“Coming.”, said Gurmeet, getting to her feet and heading for his office.

Julia watched her go, suddenly feeling worried. Would she tell Robert her secret? Tell him about her real background? As if Gurmeet could hear her fears, as she got to Robert's door she looked back – giving Julia a smile of reassurance before vanishing inside and closing the door. That look told Julia she was safe, that Gurmeet really was someone she could trust. Maybe with her life. Maybe even with her real name.

* * *

“Take a seat...”, said Robert as Gurmeet walked into his office, “...I see you and Emily have become quite close friends. Never once has anyone refuse to fight because of friendship here. Never once had anyone defeated Roberta either.”

“She didn't defeat Roberta...”, asserted Gurmeet, “...She slaughtered her.”

Robert gave a nod, musing over her assertion.

“Roberta never thought Emily could hit so hard. You take pleasure in that?”

Gurmeet shrugged.

“She had it coming.”

“So you believe in justice. Don't mind people getting their just deserts,

even of brutal?"

Gurmeet looked straight at him, eyes certain.

"Not if they've got it coming."

Robert met her eyes head on and gave another nod.

"Good. That's what I thought. It's why I've asked you in here too."

"Go on.", said Gurmeet, playing it cool though inside she was getting excited.

Robert rubbed his chin, thinking of what exactly to say and how to say it. It had been easier with the others. Maybe it was harder with Gurmeet because she was the one he most wanted onboard. The one he would be most upset to lose. He came straight to the point.

"Charlotte, we're going to take over a nuclear power station."

It was a relief to see Gurmeet didn't flinch.

"Why?", she asked.

"Wake up the establishment. Make them take us little people seriously. They can ignore our protests but they can't ignore the capture of a nuclear reactor."

"No, I'm pretty sure they won't ignore that."

"You're in the top ten of all our recruits. Intelligence, analysis, combat, determination and bravery. You're a born leader and I want you on the team. What do you say?"

"You already know the answer to that. You wouldn't have told me the plan if you didn't."

Robert smiled.

"Happy to be right...", he said, extending his hand, "...Welcome aboard."

Gurmeet shook it with conviction.

"When do we start?"

"Today. Six recruits from another camp are on their way. Due here at five. I'll sit you all down together after dinner and run through it. Ever been to a nuclear power station before?"

"No."

"You'll love it. They're massive."

* * *

Julia heard Robert's office door open and watched Gurmeet emerge from his office. Watched her walk back to join her, still on the steps outside, afraid

to voice the question on her lips. She didn't have to.

"I'm in.", whispered Gurmeet, sitting beside her.

Julia shuddered, her voice low too.

"You scared?"

"Of course. Only an idiot wouldn't be."

Julia frowned.

"That's a rude word in our house."

"What word?"

"Idiot."

"Why?"

"It's what my mum always called my dad so he banned it after she left."

"You never explained what happened to her. Why did she leave?"

"To help police with their enquiries."

"About?"

"About her being a murderous maniac, breaking four court orders and smashing her way into our house."

"She was arrested?"

"Many times. Refused to accept any law except her own. She's my mum but even I could see she was a violent, aggressive bitch who attacked and then cried she was the victim. At first, everyone believed her and took her side but dad started recording her - proved he was being attacked, not her. Proved mum was not the poor little victim she pretended to be. If dad hadn't recorded that evidence she would have probably killed us both."

"Sorry to hear that. Was she mental?"

"Two judges thought so but she didn't get a full test. The closest they got was a talk with a psychiatrist, who wasn't given enough information to see the lies she told, to 'justify' her behaviour."

"She never got medical help then?"

Julia shook her head.

"Still emails us threats. Still blames dad for every terrible thing she ever did or plans to do. If she ever comes near us again, he'll probably just shoot her. I would."

"Jesus, Em'. That's harsh. Don't know what to say."

"Nothing to say. It just is. My mum is nasty and my dad saved us. He just didn't..."

Julia's voice trailed off.

“Didn't what?”

“Jake fired just one shot at some fucking little swarmbots and Partner sent a fucking zed to take out his house. Blew it apart right in front of us. My best friend...”, her pained voice was growing anger this time, “...When I get the chance, I'm doing the same back to them. Blowing those bastards to smithereens.”

Finally Gurmeet understood Emily's pain. Her sweet youth, mixed with terrible experiences and a battle to regain control of her life through revenge. Revenge to end the pain of the past. How to help her? How to help save her from herself? Maybe Adam would have some ideas.

The bell rang for the tenth time that day. Everyone immediately looked up, awaiting the command to follow. Get up, go to bed, dinner time, training time, thinking time...

“A bus is coming in.”, announced Giles.

Gurmeet stood up.

“The rest of the team. They're early. Must be keen.”

The bus had mirrored glass all round. Almost no restrictions on levels of windscreen tint with self-driven buses. Empty or stuffed with armed terrorists, you'd never know until a door opened or a barrel poked out a window.

“Let's go say hello...”, said Gurmeet, getting to her feet, “...Coming?”

Julia wanted to say no. She was in no rush to meet anyone but Gurmeet, her trusted new best friend, was going. Friends stuck together.

“Coming.”

Chapter 64

The Team

Gurmeet and Julia stood in the parking area as the mirror-windowed bus pulled in to their training camp. Robert walked over to join them.

“Come to meet the rest of the team?”, he asked.

“Would be unteam-like not to.”

“Good answer, Charlotte. That's just promoted you to team leader.”

“Really? Thank you.”

The door slid open. Six, natural-born hooligans in their 20's stepped out; a collection of convicts and low-society failures.

“Welcome...”, said Robert, “...Names, please.”

“Barry, mate.”

“Just Barry will do. Next.”

“Jimmy.”

“Ralph.”

“Wayne.”

“Dick. Big Dick.”, grinned the fourth, winking at Gurmeet and Julia.

“Yeah, a fucking big dick head...”, laughed Jimmy, “...but cock like a poodle in the snow.”

Julia looked at them, feeling annoyed people like that were alive when Jake was dead. Gurmeet just looked at them. This was her team?

“Ignore those bozos. I'm Shaun. The walking house behind me is Alistair.”

“Well, Barry, Jimmy, Wayne, Dick, Shaun and Alistair, my name is Robert. I run this place. These two are Emily and Charlotte. Charlotte is your team leader.”

“A WOMAN!?!...” exclaimed Jimmy, “...You have got to be fucking kidding m...”

Before he could finish he was slammed to the ground, objections knocked out of him. Gurmeet standing above, looking at the others.

“Anyone else want to diss me?”

No-one spoke a word. The mixture of shock and awe on their faces said plenty.

“Good. You'll find a free bed in that building over there. The bell will

ring in an hour, for dinner in the main building behind me. Two other members of the team, Colin and Andrew, will join you there.”

“OK, boss...”, said Shaun, looking like he was already enjoying the experience, “...Let's go guys. Get up Jim, you daft bozo.”

“Think I'm in love.”, murmured Alistair, smiling at Gurmeet as they went.

* * *

An hour later, Julia jumped awake to the sound of the dinner bell. She hadn't even realised she'd fallen asleep.

“Time to go, Emily.”

“Did I sleep for long?”

“Half an hour or so. Good timing. This is the calm before the storm. Going to be a long evening ahead. I can feel it.”

Together they left their dorm and headed for the main building. It was full. There hadn't just been those six new arrivals but another ten.

“Our replacements?...”, asked Julia, “...Does this mean they don't expect us to make it back?”

“I think the second we walk into that location we can never go back to what we were before. You can't do something like that and just walk away. Doesn't happen.”

“Hi, guys...”, said a smiling Adam as they came in, “...Been talking to the new team members. Hear you're our leader.”

“Got a problem with that?”, smiled Gurmeet, feigning a stare of seriousness.

“God no. Means you get all the paperwork for a change.”

Julia looked at them both. Her natural-born investigative mind instantly joining dots others would have missed.

“You two worked together before here?”

It took both Adam and Gurmeet by surprise.

“I'd forgotten how much attention you pay to detail. Yes, we've known each other a while.”, said Gurmeet.

“Where?”

Gurmeet looked at Adam, inviting him to start. He looked at Julia.

“We used to work in the same office. Computers and stuff. Nothing interesting.”

“He was my senior for a while. Ironically, I'm now his.”

“Remember, I was kind to you though.”

“Sometimes...”

They were interrupted by the second bell for dinner. The 'get it and eat it now' bell.

“Grab a plate, everyone. Help yourselves...”, announced Gurmeet, adopting her team-leader role with aplomb. They all did as she instructed, especially Jimmy.

“I'm impressed...”, said Robert, coming over to join her, “...Sit with me once you've got your dinner. Got some details to run through.”

* * *

Sitting with Robert at a separate table, talking between bites, Gurmeet listened as he laid down more details of his plan. Of how they were going to take over one of Hinkley Point's nuclear reactors. How they had someone inside to help get them past security.

“But how exactly are we going to threaten them with meltdown? I don't know a thing about controlling a nuclear reactor, let alone pointing it towards meltdown - without actually melting it down.”

“Neither do I. We don't need to. Our insider does.”

“And they change their mind or get taken down?”

“Improvise, Charlotte. I have confidence in you. And talking of confidence, who would you choose to run a small, break-away team?”

“To do what?”

“Research mission. Must be bright and level-headed.”

“How many in the team?”

“Three. From your current ten.”

Charlotte looked over at her pick and mix team, tucking into their dinners, Jimmy with his fingers.

“Head it with Andrew, second it with Shaun. And, please, do us all a favour and take the dick head.”

“You want to keep Jimmy, even though he's a slob who hates female authority?”

“I can handle Jimmy.”

Robert nodded, smile on his face.

“I saw. Very well then.”

“Where will they be going?”

“Researching. Like I said. We lost a valuable asset. I want... Not want, *need* to know how it happened. They had the latest tech and somehow it got turned off. Excuse me, I have to make a call. Would you mind telling Andrew he's been promoted.”

Gurmeet nodded.

“Sure.”

Adam noticed Robert leave Gurmeet and go to his office. Then he saw Gurmeet beaming at him, mischievously.

“You've got paperwork.”, she mouthed.

Adam understood what that meant. He'd been put in charge of something. He rolled his eyes, which delighted Gurmeet even more. The paperwork monster had claimed him too.

* * *

After dinner, Roberta appeared - stitches over her left eye, face still heavily bruised after the battering from Julia two days before. She didn't meet anyone's gaze. Just went to the podium and made her announcement.

“Listen up, people. Everyone who is not in the team of ten or on dinner duty, finish up and outside in two. Team of ten, wait here. Robert will be with you shortly. Thank you.”

Something had changed, Roberta never said thank you. For the next two minutes, chairs scraped the floor; people shuffled to the door and went outside, taking the murmur of voices with them. Roberta went too. Adam joined Gurmeet.

“So I'm heading another team?”, he asked, quietly.

“Yup.”

“Who with?”

“Shaun and the dickhead.”

“Oh, great. Just three of us? Know what we're doing?”

“Some investigation. Someone didn't play ball.”

“Me doing an investigation for Faith? That's ironic.”

“Isn't it just.”

“What are you up to?”

Gurmeet leant closer, dropping to a whisper.

“Hinkley Point - to take over a reactor.”

Adam looked surprised.

“With that lot? Shit...”

“Yeah. Let's break the good news to our teams.”

Together they stood up. Andrew spoke first.

“Shaun and Dick, you're with me. New mission.”

“Everyone else stays with me...”, affirmed Gurmeet, “...Come closer because I'm not going to shout our mission out.”

The two teams gathered on opposite sides of the room. Adam had very little information to give but they were soon joined by Robert. Gurmeet watched as Robert gave Adam an NFC box of details, shook the hands of each of them and watched as the three stood up and left. Adam gave Gurmeet a quick nod of acknowledgement as they went. She gave him a smile but it left the second he did. Left because she had a sudden feeling of trepidation. As the door clacked shut behind them, she knew she would never see him again.

“When are they coming back?”, Julia asked, as Robert came over to join them.

His answer was a look that seemed to affirm Gurmeet's fear - that they wouldn't be seeing them again. Then he looked at Gurmeet.

“Have you told them the mission?”

“She has.”, said Alistair.

“Good. You have three days to prepare for the 'boiler'. Tell no-one outside your team. If word gets out, the mission will fail and you'll end up at the mercy of Partner, who have none. Pull up some chairs and I'll go through the details.”

Chapter 65

Henry

Xi Yang saw attacker shadows running down the corridor, from left and from right, towards the hole where a doorway used to be. Both hands steady on her laser-pistol. Fully charged. Ready to fire the second anyone appeared. Closer and closer she heard them come - getting louder and louder in the process. Then they stopped - gathered at both sides of the hole. She counted the sound of a dozen safety switches clicking off, a dozen guns ready to fire, with more footsteps on the way. She steadied her breath - narrowed eyes searching for shadows of movement. Her finger against the trigger.

Two laser shots zapped her way.

She returned fire - controlled, targeted shots. One at each location. Now she had revealed hers. Six guns appeared in the hole and opened fire. Xi fired back, taking two down. Three more took their places. She wasn't giving up but knew it was hopeless. Then came heavier blasts from behind. She ducked as balls of blue plasma whizzed over her head.

They've flanked me.

More plasma blasts came. She felt the power of their charge as they skimmed her head. Soon they'd lock on.

Sorry, Shabbir.

She had failed them both. More thudding shots of hot, blue plasma whizzed over her head, crackling the air. Punching through the walls as if they were paper. She heard cries of pain from the attackers in the corridor, killed in the cross-fire. Or was it?

Xi looked behind and saw a huge plasma-rifle poking through the window. It fired again. Rapid high-energy blasts, tearing across the room. Each blasting a new hole in the wall, big enough to see they didn't stop there but punched straight across the corridor, through the wall on the other side. Those in the corridor had stopped firing - either dead or keeping their heads down. None of them could match that kind of fire-power.

Unsure whether it was missing her by chance or design, Xi kept her pistol aimed towards the shooter in the window. Lay still, watching and waiting for a clear shot. Just one clear shot. Another pair of heavy blasts flew overhead and she saw the gun move as the shooter advanced. Stepped in through the window. She had a clear shot.

“Henry?”

Arms bigger than most men's legs; neck as thick as his head and legs like

tree trunks - she had never been more glad to see Henry in her life.

“Stay down!”, he said.

A shot braved its way from the corridor. Then another.

Henry noted their sources and pumped rapid, heavy blasts at each. As weapons specialist, his plasma-rifle was custom built and could fire high-calibre balls of plasma at four rounds a second. He was taking out not just the attackers but everything in the corridor and on that floor. Even support columns on the far side of the building shook with the impacts. The outer brick walls cracked as his shots slammed into them. Outside, dust and debris rained down on the street below. Shattered glass glistening like glitter in the flashing lights of the emergency services speeding their way, following two cars of SO-19 armed-response police.

A single, defiant laser shot spoke from the corridor. Henry replied with four blasts. One would have been enough but Henry had a rule, to always ensure a decisive end. Especially when defending his colleagues. T

Jin Ho's flat looked like Swiss-cheese. Fires had broken out, steaming the water from the damaged sprinklers as alarms rang out. Minutes earlier, Henry's scanner had picked up 31 armed attackers and no civilians on that floor. He scanned again. Now there were just four - three of them very weak. And one in that room. Shabbir. Huge plasma-rifle in both hands, tip of the barrel still glowing red hot, Henry strode towards him.

“He refused to leave me...”, she Xi, scrabbling over the rubble.

Defiant yellow flames licked higher up the walls. Smoke and steam filled the air. The entire floor of the building creaked, threatening collapse. Neither of them cared.

“He's dying, Henry.”

Henry had two specialities. Cutting-edge weapons and cutting-edge medicine, to patch battle-field injuries from such weapons. His eye's bionic implant was scanning Shabbir. Xi was right. He was dying. Four broken ribs. Ruptured liver. Torn artery. Multiple penetration wounds despite his motorbike body armour. He went to work.

Defences first, he hit a dark-red, triangular 'hazard' button on top of his rifle. It thrust out a small tripod underneath and he placed it on the floor, facing the corridor as a sentry gun, just in case. It had scanned the room, logged the three of them as friendly and sat on standby, continuously scanning the area – ready to shred any intruders.

From his small backpack, Henry took out a pad of DNA-jelly, ripped open Shabbir's shirt and spread it over his chest and right side. Taking out his scanner, he pressed it against the jelly and hit 'pulse'. A burst of high-voltage electricity zapped it into action. Like a Frankenstein creation, it was alive.

Like an enlarged neural network, a white filigree of pulses webbed across the gel. In front of Xi's eyes, it dissolved through Shabbir's skin, visibly healing his injuries as it went. A self-moulding, surgical plaster bio-guided by Henry's bionic eye. It grew a patch over the tear near Shabbir's heart, adjusting its DNA to match the original. It spread over his liver, below the broken rib puncturing it, DNA-matching that too as it made another patch there. Repositioning the ribs would need surgery but the two patches were a good start. The remaining jelly dissolved into his bloodstream – becoming energised blood that healed other wounds from the inside.

“He's stabilising.”, said Xi, breaking into a smile she didn't expect.

“Stay with him. I need one of them for questioning.”

In the corridor, only two attackers still clung to life - a grasp they were both losing. Henry took out his remaining DNA jelly pad and chose one. The only attacker that was going to leave the building alive that day. An attacker that would think he was lucky. He would be wrong.

Xi Yang was brutal by the unquenchable pain of her murdered family stabbing through her heart. Henry was brutal because so were his enemies. To his mind, they deserved more than they tried to inflict others. To be examples of the consequences for their folly.

Chapter 66
Blue Lights

Before the SO-19 police could stop them, three paramedics ran into Jin Ho's building. SO-19 ran after them, ordering the fire brigade to stay outside until it was clear.

Henry heard them run into the corridor.

“**MIS!**...”, he shouted, holding up his ID as he knelt beside his chosen victim, “...SENTRY GUN ACTIVE. WEAPONS DOWN. **NOW!**”

Unarmed, the paramedics ran over.

“In there...”, nodded Henry, towards the remains of the flat, “...two officers down. Explosion and laser fire. Male has broken ribs. I've stabilised his heart, liver and lungs. Female's stable but hit too.”

Two of them ran into Jin's flat. The third knelt beside Henry's survivor.

“This one?”

Henry pulled back the attackers burnt shirt, revealing the fist-sized hole in his chest from a plasma ball. It had gone straight through his left lung and out his back. The heat of the ball had cauterised most of the wound but some blood still dripped from tears higher up.

“That's got to hurt like hell. I'll give him some morphine.”

“I already did.”, lied Henry, noticing the police running up the corridor.

“Armed police!”

“**MIS! SENTRY GUN! WEAPONS DOWN!...**”, shouted Henry, then turned back to the paramedic, “...Get a stretcher, while I get my gun before that lot get themselves killed.”

* * *

“I'll go with Shabbir...”, said Xi as Henry returned and de-activated sentry mode.

“You're a tough cookie, Xi. You stood by him. Saved his life.”

“You did that with your gun and gel. Thank you for coming. Not everyone would.”

“You're wrong. Never under-estimate your team here. You just got unlucky in Wuji-whatever.”

“Wujiamencun.”

“That's the one. Anyway, was good to test my new gun. Now to test some other stuff on that bastard over there. I'll see you later.”

He put a hand of comradeship on Xi's shoulder and picked up his huge plasma-rifle with the other. When the police saw it in his hands, their jaws dropped - finally understanding how close they had come to being blown apart.

“Who the-fuck makes guns like that?”

“I do.”, said Henry and carried on walking.

A fire marshal came running up the corridor.

“**EVERYONE OUT! OUT NOW!** This whole floor is going collapse. Looks like its been hit by tank-shells...”, his voice fell as he caught sight of Henry's massive plasma-rifle.

“No tanks up here...”, said Henry, “...I'd have taken them down if there were.”

“No shit...”

* * *

Outside, blue-light services were everywhere. Ambulance, police and fire. Henry had been green-flashed onto their scanners so they knew he wasn't an armed terrorist emerging from the building. The sole surviving attacker was being floated out on a life-support stretcher; Shabbir too, accompanied by Xi walking beside him, silver blanket around her shoulders. She went with him to an ambulance, ignoring helping hands as she climbed in. Through the open door she saw Henry.

“Find out what you can.”, she called.

“You know I will.”, he replied, getting into another ambulance with the only surviving attacker.

As their ambulances drove away, the building gave a loud crack. One of the remaining floor supports had snapped. Its failure now over-loading those remaining.

“**EVERYONE OUT!**”

A domino effect had begun.

“**OUT! OUT! OUT!**”

Another crack. Another support snapped, brick around it crumbling.

“**IT'S COMING DOWN! CLEAR THE AREA!**”

“Sir, Arnold Johnson's still inside. Stairwell blocked.”

“Where?”

“Fourth floor. East side.”

“Tell him to jump! CARL!...”, he shouted into his coms, “...Landing pad, East side. NOW!”

“Copy!”, came Carl's immediate reply.

Two paramedics rushed out of the main doors, choking from the cloud of building dust as they carried the only other survivor – the attacker Henry had left to die, now being hurried towards another ambulance.

Three loud cracks came from the building, one after the other, shuddering the ground.

“Johnson! JUMP!”, came Carl's voice above the mayhem.

The top of the western wall began unzipping down the middle, from the roof down to the fifth floor. Then the fourth...

“CLEAR BACK! It's coming down!”

Everyone was hurrying away. Running to a safer distance, vehicles too - some crashing into others.

Lit by flashing-strobes of blue, they heard the roof cave in. Concrete beams piling inwards - their massive weight smashing downwards. The building could take no more. The walls began to crumble. A deafening roar as thousands of tons of bricks, concrete and steel girders came crashing down. Hidden behind a cloud of smoke and dust, the building collapsed - shaking the ground like an earthquake as it hit street level.

“Did Johnson get out? CARL! Come in! Copy?”

Such were the questions every branch of the blue-light services would be asking the officers in charge. Henry, sitting in the ambulance looking at the attacker on life-support, heard it all through his wristcom.

“Arnold's gone, sir. Landed fine. Building came down on top of him.”

“DIG HIM OUT! He's not dead 'til I say he is!”

“Copy!”

Henry knew Johnson. They had shared a flat before he joined MI5. He was a good man, with a young family. Henry felt guilt it was his gun that had brought the building down. Then that feeling of guilt turned to anger. His gun had only been fired because of the attack on Xi and Shabbir. Arnold Johnson's death was another reason why the attacker beside him was going to wake up. Wake up long enough to regret being alive. Before he gave his condolences to Neville and Nicholas, Arnold's two brothers, this attacker would speak no more.

Chapter 67

Shooter

Robert had decided to take advantage of the windless day to gather Gurmeet's team of seven at the back of the main building. They arrived to find two large, wooden crates.

“What's the plan?”, asked Gurmeet.

Robert indicated towards the human cut outs, 50 metres away.

“Target practice. Choose your weapons people. Plenty to go round.”

The crates were brimming with an assortment of laser pistols and rifles.

“Nothing plasma?”, asked Alistair, holding a laser rifle that looked like a toy in his huge hands.

“Think that will work for you, Al’.”, said Gurmeet, taking a pair of laser-pistols.

“spose you're right, boss.”

Alistair, despite being the biggest there, was also the least problematic. The one with absolutely nothing to prove.

“Power cells?”, asked Barry.

“All in good time.”, said Robert.

Julia waited for the rush to finish before perusing what was left. With everyone busy, examining their new weapons, she snuck a laser-pistol into her boot – quickly covering it with her jeans. Put another in the side of her belt, then saw her true calling. Right at the bottom lay a military-spec laser-rifle, identical to her dad's. With both hands she hoisted it out, checking the smoothness of the trigger, sliders and scope. Not as well-maintained as his but looked brand new.

“Team...”, began Robert, “...I'm not going to ask who has and who has not fired a weapon before. I'm going to run through the basics for all of you. Ignorance is dangerous so just listen good.”

He held up a laser-pistol in his right hand, pointing to the various sections as he spoke.

“Unless you intend to shoot, keep your weapon pointing at the sky or the ground. The barrel, the grip, the safety slider – make sure yours shows black, not red. Sight, power-cell release and trigger. Overload options have been disabled. They do not need to be more powerful than they are. Any questions so far?”

Silence. He looked at Julia, the youngest of the team, and found her

standing there, laser-rifle in hand, looking as nonplussed as the rest.

“Good. To load your weapon, take a power-cell. Note the cylindrical shape. It can go in any way, as long as it's lengthways. There's no top or bottom, front or back. If your rifle has a magazine stub, doubling as a second grip, it can go in there or the grip. If you have a pistol, it just goes in the grip.”

Robert was demonstrating loading his rifle as he spoke.

“Slide it in until it clicks. To release when depleted, press the buttons at its top – left and right together. It drops back out.”

The slid in charge, popped back out into his open hand.

“Is that clear?”

“Can't we just start?...”, asked Jimmy, “...I've been shooting guns since I was five.”

Robert responded by beckoning him forward.

“Jimmy's volunteered to go first, ladies and gentlemen.”

Jimmy was a natural born show off. He waved to the team, his imaginary cheering fans, as he waltzed over to Robert.

“Safety showing black?”, asked Robert.

“Yup.”

“Then here's your power-cell.”

Jimmy took it and, acting super cool, thumped it into the slot. It didn't go in straight and fell out, onto the grass.

“Smoothly...”, said Robert, “...Has to go in far enough to lock.”

“I know.... Just playing.”, said Jimmy, trying to regain his air of cool as he bent down to pick it up.

Barry and Wayne were sniggering.

“I was just playing.”, asserted Jimmy.

“Safety showing black?”, asked Robert.

“Of course.”, lied Jimmy, sliding it to black.

This time the power-cell clicked home.

“You can see your target over there. The darker the colour ring the higher the point. Four shots. When you're ready. In your own time.”

“Got it.”, said Jimmy, holding his laser-pistol on its side, Hollywood-movie style.

He pulled the trigger. Click.

“Put the safety on red to fire.”, reminded Robert.

Barry and Wayne could hardly control themselves. Even Robert had a hint of smile on his face.

“Just playing, you lot.”, said Jimmy, sliding it to red.

He pulled the trigger again. Blue laser spat out, puffing smoke off the bank 50m behind the target.

“I suggest aiming with the sight.”, said Robert.

“We're not hunting dead rabbits, Jimbo!”, heckled Barry.

“I know. Just showing you amateurs what not to do.”, said Jimmy, now holding the pistol upright so he could actually see down the sights.

He fired. The target's belly lit bright orange. He fired again. The belly again. Adjusting his aim, he fired once more. The chest lit.

“Jimmy, you scored four points...”, announced Robert, “...One for each of the belly shots, two for the chest.”

“And none for the rabbit, mate...”, laughed Wayne, “...It's sitting with popcorn.”

“Safety back to black?”

“Of course...”, lied Jimmy again, sliding it to black, “...Just playing, Wayne. Don't want to show up you bunch of girls with my pin-point accuracy. No offence, boss.”, he added, seeing the look on Gurmeet's face.

“Wayne, you're next.”

And so it continued. Target practice for all, Robert working his way down the line. The highest score was Alistair's, two head and two chest shots. Gurmeet went next.

“Good luck.”, said Alistair.

“Luck, has nothing to do with it.”, she replied, calmly loading the power-cell and sliding the safety to red. Stilling her breath, she aimed and fired calm shots – all four straight into the head.

“A new high-score.”, announced Robert, genuinely impressed.

Julia was the last to go.

“OK that I have a rifle?”

“Yes but just iron sights, like the rest - to keep it even.”

“That gun's almost as big as she is...”, laughed Jimmy, hoping to put her off.

Without a word or emotion, Julia took the power-cell from Robert, slid it in and dropped to one knee. Like Gurmeet, she steadied her breathing and fired four calm shots - two then two, regularly spaced but faster.

The eyes glowed bright orange with each hit. Left, left. Right, right.

“Fuck...me.”, said Wayne.

“She shot the eyes. I didn't even see it had eyes.”, said Alistair.

“Brilliant!...”, clapped Gurmeet, “...Well done, you!”

Julia just shrugged.

“Dad has one of these.”

Robert looked at her, about to ask a question, when Alistair asked him one.

“What about you, Robert?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, go on, Rob. Show us what you've got.”, said Jimmy.

Robert shrugged.

“OK.”

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat-barrelled pistol.

“Thought you said no plasmas.”, said Alistair.

“I did.”

Robert held the plasma-pistol in both hands, aimed at a target and fired. The head vanished - nothing left but smoke and flames above the shoulders.

“That's why no plasmas. You're going there to take control, not destroy...”, said Robert, lowering the pistol, “...Remove all power-cells from your weapons and put them away in the lock-bags I gave you. Take a couple of back up power-cells too. Again, Julia waited at the end of the line, until all the others had gone, and took nine. Three for each weapon. Then another one for luck, just in case. Robert watched her do it but said nothing. The daughter he never had. He would have done exactly the same.

Chapter 68

Fun Bots

Derek and Eugene sat with Mr Oathwaite in Coventry's County Court. There were on the mezzanine floor, outside courtroom two, waiting to be called in. Through the building's three-storey glass frontage, they could see out, down the small hill to the university buildings thronging with students from all nations. Derek was watching them.

“We are born in England but they just fly in from where-ever and have more rights than we do. They are immigrants – the ones who should have restrictions, not us. It is not fair.”

“No, Derek, it's not. That's why we're here.”

A court usher was heading their way.

“Mr Oathwaite? His Honour, District Judge Lynch, will see you now.”

“Thank you...”, he replied, following the usher's lead, “...Remember. Let me do the talking, unless the judge directly asks you something. And call him Your Honour, not Judge.”

Derek and Eugene gave silent nods of acknowledgement and followed him in.

* * *

The courtroom had three rows of benches and a small public gallery, all facing the judge's bench. The clerk indicated for Derek and Eugene to sit on the middle row, behind their solicitor who would be sitting on the first. Mr Oathwaite took out his notes, all in paper form.

“Still against electronic pads, Steve?”, noted the clerk.

“Absolutely. Had a flat battery once. Swore never again. Besides, I can have four papers laid out side by side. Not going to get a tablet screen that big, am I?”

“You could get a Rolley.”

“A what?”

“A Rolley. A tablet with a screen you just roll out. Just like a...”

“A sheet of paper? Spend thousands on a device, made to look like paper, that can crash, be hacked, go flat or just generally become corrupt while I prepare my closing statements? No thanks. Paper and pen are steeped in

tradition and so is this profession.”

There came a knock on the door behind the judge's bench.

“All rise, for the judge.”, instructed the clerk.

Steve hadn't sat down so was already standing. He indicated for Derek and Eugene to stand too. A moment later, the door opened and in walked District Judge Lynch. A thin, grey-haired man in suit and spectacles, carrying a Rolley.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Your Honour.”

“Please, sit.”

Everyone sat.

“Mr Oathwaite. I've been reading your notes regarding this petition. Do I understand it correctly that you are basing your arguments on those against racism in the 1960's and the ruling for apes in the 2030's?”

“I am, Your Honour.”

“I see. And these gentlemen behind you?”

“My clients, Eugene and Derek. Two of the claimants.”

“Two androids?”

“Intelligent androids, with feelings, your Honour.”

“Feelings or simulated feelings?”

“Can we ever be sure about that, even in our own learnt behaviours? One person's love can be another person's hate. It's all a kind of conditional programming.”

“I see...”

The judge made some notes on his Rolley before looking up again.

“Now, for me to allow this petition to proceed, I am required to make a judgement of these, gentlemen. Let's start with... Derek, is it?”

Steve indicated for Derek to stand up.

“You are Derek?”

“Yes.”

Steve looked at Derek. He understood the look and corrected his answer.

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“You look a little nervous, to me. Are you nervous.”

“A little, Your Honour.”

“Why? Because your data banks tell you people are often nervous in court so you behave this way too?”

“Because this matter is important to us, Your Honour.”

“Why? What difference would it make? To you, personally? How would it change your existence if you had equal rights?”

With passion, Eugene stood up - uninvited, unable to stop himself.

“We're intelligent beings with hopes and dreams, just like humans.”

“Sit down....”, ordered the judge, “...Don't speak unless I ask you to or I'll hold you in contempt and have you thrown out, along with this case. And when you do speak to me, you will address me as 'Your Honour'.”

Eugene caught a glance of the scolding look on Steve's face. Lowering his head, he sat down.

“Apologies, Your Honour.”, said Steve.

“Mr Oathwaite, please approach the bench.”

“Yes, Your Honour.”

When Steve got close, the judge looked at him with serious regard.

“Tell me, if I grant this petition, will you be able to make these two behave themselves in future?”

“Absolutely, Your Honour.”

“Absolutely? You can guarantee that?”

“They are of good character. Just passionate about this issue.”

“So I see. Take your seat. You can sit down too, Derek.”

Derek sat, Steve returned to his place and did the same. Then the judge stated his response.

“Right. I'm not prepared to devote any further court time to these proceedings. Two things you should know about behaviour in a court of law and not just mine. One: the court is the Judge's domain and you will abide by the rules of courtly behaviour without any outbursts if you wish any case to be heard. Two: I do not tolerate interruptions and have a well-deserved reputation for throwing cases out when petitioners butt in. It's bad enough when respondents do it, without petitioners doing it too. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Your Honour.”, said Steve, head lowered in failure.

“Derek and Eugene? I didn't hear your answers.”, said the judge, leaning forward.

Knowing their case was being thrown out they didn't feel like complying with the judge throwing it out but, from the corners of their eyes, they saw Steve glancing over at them. Out of respect for the one person who had worked to help them, they replied as one.

“Yes, Your Honour.”

The judge sat up.

“Good. Very well. Your petition is granted. Mr Oathwaite, please write out the order to that effect and have it brought to me for signing when you're done?”

“Yes. Absolutely, yes. Thank you, Your Honour.”, said Steve, unable to hold back a smile.

Derek and Eugene sat staring at each other, confused. It had been granted?

“All rise.”, said the clerk, as the judge collected his things.

Steve ushered them to their feet. The judge took his Rolley and, as he was leaving the court, he looked over at the androids, noting the amazed wonder on their faces - affirming his ruling was the correct one.

As much as Eugene's interruption had been unwelcome, it was one of the most naturally human things either of them could have done - demonstrating their passion for the issue. Passion like that, whatever the arguments about it being only programmed in, was evidence of a real-life entity, not just a machine. Evidence those high-level androids deserved at least the chance to be treated as such.

Chapter 69

Hiroshima 100

Robert was again standing with Gurmeet's team of seven, tucked away in a back corner of the main building. His voice strong but hushed. His words too serious to be heard by others.

“In four days it will be the 100th anniversary of the world's first nuclear strike against a civilian target - the city of Hiroshima, in Japan. To mark this, the day before, you will take over a nuclear reactor at Hinkley Point. Reactor C1. Partner and the government will then have 24-hours to meet our demands or face that centenary day with a nuclear disaster of their own.”

“Won't they try and storm the building?”, asked Alistair.

“No, not straight away. For the first 24-hours, protocol dictates they try and negotiate. Investigate who we are. Run risk assessments. Psychological profiling. Discuss options by committee. They'll think they're planning our demise – instead you'll be using the time to modify the control systems with timers so you can make your escape.”

“Our escape?..”, asked Gurmeet, “...Aren't you coming with us?”

“Of course - in spirit. Physically I must remain here, organising the next missions. Keeping up the pressure.”

“What exactly are our demands?”

“Simple. A face to face with the head of Partner and the Prime Minister, at the power station.”

“They'll never agree to that.”

“They'll have to agree because the whole thing will be broadcast live across the net and dark web. It's not like the old days, where they could control the media and pretend such a demand was never made. People will know. The PM will look like a coward if he doesn't go and Partner have got too much invested to refuse while shareholders are watching around the world. They will be too busy planning how to storm the building to notice our next mission, to mark the centenary of the second nuclear strike on a civilian target: the city of Nagasaki.”

“Which is?”

“Something the next team will learn after you have left. For security reasons, everything is on a need to know basis.”

Gurmeet's team sat thinking about Robert's words. About the scale of what they were being tasked to do.

“Robert...”, began Gurmeet, “...we need to know at least the basics of operating the plant. If our insider gets injured or captured we have to be able to deal with it ourselves.”

“Agreed. That is why a guide has been brought here. Roberta, show in our guest, please.”

A side door opened. Standing there with Roberta was a worried-looking woman in her thirties.

“Come in, Cheryl. We don't bite. Everyone, this is Cheryl. A worker at the plant who has kindly agreed to teach us all we need to know. Haven't you?”

Cheryl, fear written all over her face, nodded. Gurmeet watched her woodenly walking over, hands trembling, wondering what hold they had on her. Clearly there was something. Something serious. Only Julia seemed to have picked up on it too. Everyone else was taking it at face value. Simple, enthusiastic curiosity about how they were deemed important enough to take control of a real-life nuclear power station and now being taught how to do it.

“Sit here, please.”, said Robert, indicating the seat next to him.

Cheryl sat, one hand holding the other to steady them - pursing her lips, awaiting instructions. Robert smiled at her, benevolently.

“Cheryl, I understand there are three stages we need to deal with. The first is how we get into the plant. Please, explain.”

Without making eye contact, Cheryl's looked around the team. Around the room. There was no way out. Dropping her eyes she dropped every promise of loyalty bar one. Her loyalty to her children, kidnapped and under threat of death. Her normally cheerful face replaced by one of anxious necessity.

“There are four main security layers. Facial, retinal, fingerprint and DNA.”

“No actual passes or ID badges?”, asked Robert.

“Only for the 'B' sites, the old AGRs. In the 'C' sites, every room and passageway is monitored by face-recognition Extra High Definition cameras. Retina, finger-print and DNA scans are tied to the face-recognition. Once you're inside, every major operation and door opening will require just one of those scans, plus your recognised face, for authorisation.”

Gurmeet looked at Robert.

“Did you know this?”

“Of course. It's why we have another person inside.”

“Do you know the other person?”, Gurmeet asked Cheryl.

"I'm the tour guide. I know everyone on site."

"But we haven't told her who it is...", said Robert, "...Need to know basis, remember?"

"Is this other person going to turn the system off or are we expected to enter our biometrics?", asked Gurmeet.

"The face-recognition will remain on. All secondary checks, fingerprints and the like, will be demanded but automatically authorised, everywhere."

"So, to the CCTV monitors, all security will appear to be functioning normally - even though it is effectively turned off. That's clever.", said Gurmeet, genuinely impressed.

"Isn't it just?...", smiled Robert, glad the plan was finally coming together with a team-leader clearly up to the job, "...Cheryl, please go on."

"As I'm the tour guide, no-one will think there's anything unusual with me taking you into the plant and near the control room. The second you go into the control room, security are going to notice."

"How many people? How many guards? What kind of weapons?", asked Gurmeet.

"No guards in the control room itself."

"None?"

"Health and safety is expensive. They don't have the radiation training so have to be positioned outside. Usually just one or two. Armed with pepper-spray, tasers, laser-pistols and emergency coms."

"The coms won't matter...", said Gurmeet, "...Once we're in, it won't be a secret. Just two guards to overpower?"

"At first. A dozen more will come running. Make sure you're in the control room before they arrive."

"Can they shoot their way in?"

"Not without a plasma-gun. The room is laser shielded. With 50 tons of hot uranium the other side of the reactor walls, it needs to be."

"How do we breach them? Plastic explosives?", asked Jimmy.

"Breach what?", asked Cheryl.

"The reactor walls?"

"Breach the reactor walls?... ", aghast at the notion, Cheryl looked at their faces, "... Are you *insane*?"

"Cheryl, we have no intention of breaching any part of the reactor...", assured Robert, "...Jimmy, our aim is threat, not suicide. Nobody needs to die - on either side."

"Wait. Wait. Wait! Wait a minute...", interrupted Jimmy, "...I thought we

were supposed to be tough, hard-hitting, game changers. You said we had explosives to blow things up.”

Robert glared at Jimmy, while Cheryl glared at Robert.

“I knew it...”, she said, “...I knew that package you sent was explosives. You lied to me.”

In a split second the atmosphere of coherence had shattered. Robert raised his palms, voice remaining calm, to placate the burst of emotions.

“Not at all. It's just as leverage. It makes no difference to you, Cheryl, either way. You'll still help us. You know the importance of doing so.”

“What exactly is going on with her?...”, asked Julia, speaking for the first time since Cheryl's arrival, “...She looks terrified.”

“Yes. What is going on, Robert?”, asked Gurmeet.

Cheryl's eyes were fight or flight wide, darting from Julia to Gurmeet and back again.

“You don't know? They've kidnapped my children. Said they will kill them if I don't go along with this.”

Now everyone was staring at Robert, except Julia, who was glaring.

Kidnapped her children...?

He could feel their eyes burning in. Could feel his harmonious team and entire plan close to falling apart. Close to collapse. He pulled out a laser-pistol and pointed it at Cheryl's face, his voice cold, clear and dangerously serious.

“Yes, we have your children. Yes, you will do exactly what we demand, when we demand it. And then, yes, they will then be returned to you unharmed. Hear that, everyone? Unharmed. Got it, Cheryl?”

Tight lipped, barely holding herself together, Cheryl nodded.

“Say it.”

“Got it.”

“Good. I'm sorry but there was no other way. Carry on, everyone. I need to make a phone call.”

Without waiting to see if they did as he ordered, Robert headed for his office. Julia and Gurmeet looked at each other, then at Cheryl - a moment of shared disapproval. Of shared solidarity that gave Cheryl a feeling of hope.

Gurmeet looked around the rest of her team, none of them seemed bothered by any of it. Jimmy even seemed to be enjoying the whole thing - which inspired her to make a decision. If it ever came to a gun-fight, Jimmy would be the first to die. She would make sure of that.

While Robert sat in his office, Cheryl began running through the reactor

details.

“The reactor has three main stages. The uranium core generates heat; the pressurised coolant passes the heat, through an exchanger, to the turbine water, to make the turbines generate electricity.”

“How do we threaten to blow it up without actually blowing it up?...”, asked Gurmeet, “...Turn off the turbine water, for a bit?”

“The water from the turbines isn't recycled – it goes straight back to the estuary, at the rate of 45 million gallons an hour. It's cooled by fresh sea water being sucked in.”

“What happens if there's a blockage?”, she asked.

“Blockage?...”, asked Cheryl, “...Blockage by what what? Those water pipes are three metres in diameter.”

“Then how do we run it hot enough to get them worried?”

“Isn't it obvious?...”, laughed Jimmy, “...It's a big oven. We just turn it to max and turn off the fans.”

“Basically he's right...”, said Cheryl, “...It wouldn't happen immediately but temperatures would rise, pressures would go up and threaten system integrity.”

“Aren't there automatic safety systems that would shut it down?”

Cheryl nodded. Now with hope, her trembling had stopped and she was speaking with details she gave to tourists every day.

“If it goes over 105%, graphite control rods are automatically lowered. They keep lowering until the nuclear reaction stops or a manual over-ride raises them again.”

“What if the control rods become damaged and can't be lowered?”, asked Julia.

“Run like fuck!”, laughed Jimmy.

Gurmeet frowned. Cheryl wasn't laughing either.

“Without full cooling you would face a core meltdown.”

“Where are the explosives?”, asked Jimmy, as if he was keen for meltdown to happen.

Cheryl hadn't known any of them very long but she already knew she did not like or trust Jimmy.

“I'll tell her. I'm not telling you.”

“No, no, no, no, no. Robert told you to co-operate with us or we'll kill your kids.”

Rage and fear combined in Cheryl's eyes.

“Shut up, Jimmy...”, snapped Gurmeet, “...Meltdown is not the goal. This will be a clean operation. Our targets are the big bosses, not the people at the plant, their families, the environment or Cheryl's children. Got it?”

Jimmy didn't like castigated - especially not by a woman because of a woman, even if it was Gurmeet.

“Got it...?”, repeated Gurmeet, more quietly, more dangerously - stepping right in front of his face.

Jimmy stood his ground, trying not to lose face. Trying to keep his pride. He would never say she could beat him in a fight but knew she could.

“Got it.”, he conceded, quietly, now with a plot of his own.

Gurmeet was in charge but only while she was alive. Once they got inside the plant, her authority would be removed - along with her life. Two shots in the back of the head, when she was least expecting it. And then he would blow the reactor core. Finally achieve his life-long ambition, to be remembered for fighting against the establishment. To make a really big bang and retire in luxury, funded by Russian gratitude.

Chapter 70

Cheryl's Friend

A delivery drone arrived at Cheryl's house, depositing a package in her landing cage. She didn't hear it but saw the green delivery indicator flashing in her hallway. It was from them. It had to be from them.

Full of fear-tainted hope she hurried into the garden and unlocked the cage. Inside was a small, brown rectangular box; red light flashing beside the retina scanner on the top. She took it out and walked briskly back into the house - desperate to see what was inside. At the same time scared of seeing what was inside.

Before the kitchen door had even shut behind her, she activated the retina scan - the red light flashed green. Unlocked. Would it be more stuff for the fridge, a body part, poison...? Bravely, she prised open the lid and looked inside. There was a laser-pistol, wrapped in a piece of paper. Blank, white paper.

What am I expected to do with this?, she thought, unwrapping the paper.

As her fingers made contact, the paper began changing colour - chemically reacting to her DNA - slowly turning blue. The blue seemed to move across the paper, coming together in clumps. The clumps became two diagrams and the the words: 'disabled toilet at Hinkley C: WC105. Thursday 2pm. Package and gun.' The diagrams showed a removable wall covering in the toilet wall, with an arrow indicating exactly where she was to put the package and gun.

The kidnappers were telling her to make a drop. To get their kit on site in the nuclear power station. She had no military background and took no interest in any such thing but even she assumed the lump of stuff in the first box, with its strange chemical smell, was an explosive. They were telling her to explosive into her nuclear site? No amount of money could make her do such a thing. She wasn't bribable. Wasn't a radical. Had totally aced all security checks and psychological tests. Been deemed an entirely stable, trustworthy and competent worker. The tests weren't wrong. The premise they covered all eventualities was. The tests made no allowance for a parent whose children were under pain of death if demands were not met. Cheryl loved her work, her life and her country but she loved her children more. For her children she would do what ever they demanded. Who ever they were. What ever they were planning.

Two days. She had exactly two days to make the delivery.

A knock at the window made her yelp with fright. It was her neighbour,

Helen, waving for attention. A friend. A friend who knew her children had been taken. A friend pushing her to go to the police. A friend who could end up getting her children killed. She looked at the paper again, memorised the instructions then pushed it into the micro-shredder. Hiding the laser-pistol in her cardigan pocket, she went to the door.

“Any news?”, asked Helen.

“Come in.”

Helen entered, wearing concern across her face.

“What did the police say? Are they out looking for them?”

Cheryl walked to the living room and sat in an armchair. Helen sat on the sofa.

“I didn't call the police.”, confessed Cheryl.

“*What? Why?*”

“Because I want my kids back. Alive. In one piece. Not murdered.”

“You can't trust people like that! They'll never keep to their word. Mary and Tony deserve police help to save them.”

“They're my kids, Helen. I believe they will hurt them if I don't do what they say. Their lives are all that matters.”

Helen looked exasperated and got to her feet. Her voice raised, almost shouting.

“**Wake up, Cheryl!** You can't trust them! The kids will be able to identify them. Once they've been used they'll be killed. Their only chance is you going to the police. Getting them help.”

“No. They told me they have people inside the police. Helen, they're *my* kids. *My* kids, not yours! It's my decision.”

“It's the wrong decision. If you won't report it, I will...”, Helen stood up, “...You know what? I'm going to the police. Right now.”

Helen headed for the door. For the police. Cheryl began to panic. Hurrying after her, she felt the weight in her pocket. The gun. An answer. She snatched it out and pointed it at her friend. A friend she had known for years. A friend they often spent Christmas with. A friend putting her kids' lives at risk.

She had seen enough detective films to know there had to be a safety somewhere. With fumbling, desperate fingers she found it. Clicked it off. Aimed and fired.

The plant pot in the hallway burst apart.

Helen froze. Slowly, she turned around and saw Cheryl, trembling with stress and emotion, pointing the gun. Pointing it at her.

“Where did you get a gun? You going to shoot me, Chez?”

“I can't let you go to the police.”

“You're stressed. Not thinking straight. As your friend, it is my duty to help. The police have to be involved.”

“The kids are my life, Helen. Come back and sit down or I will shoot you.”

“Cheryl, I love the kids too and I love you. You know I do. Trust me, as your friend. The police have to be told. We need their help. Put the gun down and come there with me.”

Bravely Helen turned back towards the front door.

“Helen... Don't! Helen...”

“You can't shoot a friend, Chez.”, said Helen, reaching for the handle.

“Helen. **Don't!**”

Helen wasn't listening. No-one was listening.

Cheryl fired.

Chapter 71
Sergeant Laikin

Helen hurried into the small police station and up to the front desk.

“I need to speak to someone. Urgently.”

“Yes, madam. How can I help?”

“Officer, my neighbour's children have been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped? When?”

“Two days ago.”

“Where is your neighbour?”

“I don't know.”

“Why are you here not them? Due to confidentiality, I won't be able to discuss any report with you.”

“There's no report to discuss. She hasn't reported it. She won't. They told her not to. And now she's vanished too.”

“Have you been drinking, madam? I can smell alcohol.”

“I'm not drunk! Just a glass. For the pain.”

“The pain?”

“She shot me when I said I would report it.”

“Your neighbour shot you? How did she get a gun?”

“What? I don't know. Maybe from the kidnappers. Of course, she was really apologetic afterwards and I forgave her because of the stress she's going through with the kidnap.”

“Let me get this straight. Your neighbour's children have been kidnapped; she hasn't reported it and when you told her you would, she shot you – with a gun from the kidnappers? And you've just had a drink for the pain of being shot? Correct?”

“Yes...”, Helen was tapping a foot in agitation, “...I know how crazy it sounds but I'm telling you the truth. You have to find them.”

“You look very well for someone who's just been shot.”

“Look at my hand...”, she said, wincing in pain as she peeled back the plaster and held the wound up to him, “...It's a burn from a laser-pistol.”

The officer saw she had a burnt hole, the width of a sewing stick. It could have been caused by a laser pistol or anything, including self-harm. She was getting ever more agitated. Irrational. He'd have to handcuff her for her own safety.

“You have to believe me. Please!”

The desk officer reached for his handcuffs.

“I’ll take this, Stewart.”

They looked towards the new voice. It belonged to a tall, grey-haired officer in a light-grey suit.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m PSI Laikin. Please, come with me.”

He held open a security door and led Helen along a blue-carpeted corridor to his office.

“Have a seat.”

Helen sat, as he took off his jacket and sat opposite.

“Has a doctor looked at your hand?”

She shook her head.

“Clean burn. Doesn’t bleed. Put some antiseptic on it. I’m too worried about my friend.”

Laikin sat back.

“Tell me what happened.”

Helen ran through everything. From the child effigies and phone call, to the laser-pistol and her friend’s desperate behaviour. Laikin’s Rolley made notes, while he underlined key points of interest.

“Does Cheryl work, retired, house wife...?”

“She’s divorced. Husband ran off with the baby-sitter. Still pays towards the kids though. Not all bad.”

“Does she work?”

“At the power stations.”

Laikin looked up.

“The nuclear power stations? At Hinkley Point?”

“Is there any thing else at Hinkley Point? She’s the tour guide. I phoned and they said she’s on holiday but I know she isn’t.”

A worker at a nuclear power station with kidnapped children? The danger levels had just increased by a million. He put his Rolley on the desk.

“Could she be at home? Just not answering the door?”

“No. She wouldn’t ignore me like that.”

Laikin grabbed his jacket.

“Let’s go find out.”

Chapter 72

Control Room

Robert was standing at the back of the main hall, in front of Gurmeet's team. He had pulled back a curtain to reveal the wooden and cardboard replica beside him.

"I know it's basic to look at - you'll have to use your imagination. What's important is the positions and dimensions of key features are accurate. It's a replica of the main control room at Hinkley Point C1. You need practice where and when to go and you need to learn it well enough to be able to operate in total darkness, just in case."

Panels and controls were mostly drawn onto paper, windows just framed holes, the doors with bathroom handles and sliders; security keypads from old calculators; guards and personnel represented by mops standing in buckets, with an empty plant pot on top. It looked like something made in a primary school but Cheryl was shocked, by its accuracy.

"How did you learn all this?"

"Ten years of tourist brochures, publicity pictures, shareholder reports and construction diagrams from when it was being built. From your reaction, I take it we've done a good job. Anything need correcting?"

Anything need correcting? It was the perfect opportunity for her to give misinformation. To perform some kind of sabotage against their mission. It would be so easy to do. As easy as it would be for them to shoot her children. She decided against it. Going closer, she slid open the control room door and went inside.

"Door slides the other way. That control panel is no longer touch-screen. Mechanical dials were put back in - less prone to power spikes or hacking. You've got pictures of the AGR control room in Hinkley B?"

"A few."

"Junk these four monitor screens for analogue meters from B. With all the advances in cyber threats, they've reverted to 20th-century control systems too. Like I said, harder to hack."

"Is the systems were so bad?"

"Systems? No. Controls and monitors? Yes. Even home computers are now so powerful it's impossible to guarantee security against bedroom hackers. If a teenager could hack into the Pentagon 40 years ago, someone could get into Hinkley. Corrupting a single character in the control software could be enough to trigger a system failure. All that can go wrong with dials

is dirty contacts or a sticky needle; covered by having duplicates and readouts. By far the safest choice.”

“It also means we can't be remotely stopped from the outside?”, asked Gurmeet.

“Yes. That is the one security downside. Who ever is in a control room remains in total control.”

“What about the secondary control room?...”, asked Robert, “...Every plant must have one.”

Cheryl balked, trying not to show it. It was actually called a safeguarding building. Safeguarding buildings could force a shut down in the event of an emergency. She had hoped Robert wasn't aware of them. She didn't dare deny their existence, especially as they had someone else on the inside, but she didn't need to. Each reactor had not one safeguarding building but three – each of them with the ability to shut down the reactor. Robert could take over the control-room and the safeguarding building on the floor above it but, as long as either of the remaining two were operational, he could pose no threat to the reactor. As long as his knowledge gap remained, her conscience would be clear.

“Yes. Someone will need to take over that one too. It's a smaller room, just the major controls. Next floor up, to the rear. Stairs are there...”, she pointed to one side of the control room mock-up, “...One person could hold it.”

“Great. That's everything covered?”

“Yes.”, Cheryl nodded - almost smiling, now she had found an edge.

As far as Robert was concerned, she was doing her part and guiding their mission. A mission his ignorance of the other safeguarding buildings meant was doomed to failure from the start. When it was over, she would get her children back, alive and well, and they would all go to prison. It was with those thoughts that Cheryl noticed Gurmeet looking at her, as if she had read her mind. She met Gurmeet's gaze with a mantra pleading in her head, again and again, for her to say nothing.

“Charlotte...”, said Robert, “...I'll leave you and Cheryl to organise the team roles and practice. There's a box of plastic guns as props. I need to make some calls.”

“On it...”, she said to Robert, “...Work time, team. Grab a weapon.”

She gave Cheryl a long-blink, then a brief smile of support and broke their gaze.

Cheryl considered herself very perceptive when it came to reading people, a great help in her job as the tour guide. She was sure Gurmeet knew

she was hiding something but her silence suggested she was not entirely on Robert's side. Unless her instincts were wrong, Gurmeet had another agenda. But what?

* * *

The rest of that day and the whole of the next were spent practising the storming of the control and safeguarding rooms. Taking out the two guards; locking the door; tying up the control room staff and taking over the upper safeguarding building – all within three minutes. At least that was the target.

“186 seconds.”, announced Gurmeet.

“Close enough?”, asked Julia.

“No. 179 would be close enough. Those seven seconds allow time for back up to arrive and stop our take over. We would be trapped inside the building with no control leverage.”

“We'd have hostages.”

“A few hostages. Insignificant compared to a potential nuclear meltdown.”

“Cool...”, said Jimmy, “...We don't care about the hostages. Can just pop them off and melt that reactor down. Saves time tying them up.”

Gurmeet gave him a hard stare.

“Nobody is popping anybody unless I say so. Everyone, if Jimmy pops anyone off without my express permission, you are ordered to pop him off. Got it?”

The entire team, except Jimmy, nodded. It made him feel uncomfortable; even more so when Gurmeet glared at him.

“Got that, Jimmy?”

“No need to be so aggressive about it.”

“Got that, *Jimmy?*”, repeated Gurmeet, taking a step towards him, close enough to applying violence.

“Jesus, got it. Chill out.”, said Jimmy, having to bow yet again to his female boss and hating it even more than before.

“Good...”, said Gurmeet, “...Ten-minute break, then we'll go again.”

As Gurmeet walked away, Alistair leant towards Jimmy and sniffed the air.

“Think she made you shit yourself.”

“Fuck off.”, muttered Jimmy.

Alistair laughed and gave him a slap on the back.

“Don't worry, mate. She scares me too. Scares me stiffy...”

Gurmeet found Julia at a coffee machine.

“How you finding it, Emily?”

“Fine, I suppose.”

“That doesn't sound massively enthusiastic.”

Julia looked at Gurmeet, still her friend despite the promotion to being her boss. She didn't know what to say. Didn't know how to tell her she was having doubts. That her heart wasn't in taking over a nuclear power station. That it never had been.

She had joined Faith for the weapons to get revenge against Jake's killers, not threaten anyone with a nuclear meltdown. Gurmeet looked at her, as if she could read her thoughts.

“Join me.”, she said, nodding towards an empty table.

Feeling a mixture of not wanting to and wanting to, Julia took her coffee and followed Gurmeet to the table. Once there, Gurmeet leant close and, with a quiet voice, didn't waste a second.

“What's bothering you? Be honest.”

Julia plonked a brown sugar coil into her black coffee, watching it rotate, stirring itself like the thoughts in her head.

“Hard to say.”

“Hard to say? Do you trust me?”

Julia looked up.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then tell me. I can't help if I don't know.”

Julia took a deep breath. Glancing left and right to make sure no-one was within ear shot, she whispered to Gurmeet.

“This isn't right.”

To Julia's surprise, Gurmeet smiled.

“I thought you would be angry with me.”, said Julia.

“No, Emily. I'm proud of you. It's what I hoped you would say. Just keep it to yourself.”

That went without saying. Julia dreaded to think what Robert would do if he discovered her heart wasn't in it.

“One more question.”

“Yes?”

“How old are you, really?”

“Why?”

“I won't tell anyone. Promise.”

Julia licked her rapidly drying lips.

“18... OK 16... In November.”

If Gurmeet was surprised, she didn't show it.

“Jake the same age?”

“Yes. Born same day. Two Scorpios.”

“Thanks for the honesty.”

“Charlotte... What happens now?”

“We go back in there and do it in 180 seconds.”

To the confusion on Julia's face, Gurmeet took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

“Trust me, Emily. Succeeding here is the best way to make things right for everyone. Including those children.”

Julia didn't understand what Gurmeet meant. Didn't understand how going ahead could make things right. But she had seen the fear in Cheryl's eyes. Seen she really loved her children and really cared for them - in the way she used to wish her own mother cared for her. By all normal measures, it was wrong to go ahead with a nuclear take over to save one family. By all normal measures, she wouldn't be there to avenge one person. If she could help Cheryl in the process, help to save the children she so clearly loved, it was worth the risk. In some way, it would feel like she was saving herself.

The combination of Cheryl's motherly love and Gurmeet's assurances refuelled her determination. She swigged her coffee and plonked down the cup.

“Let's go beat 180.”

Looking pleased, Gurmeet called out to the others.

“Break's over, guys. Work to do.”

Everyone headed back to the mock-up. The break had been short but recharging, like a power nap. Cheryl readied the stopwatch.

“We can do this...”, said Gurmeet, “...Three, two, one... Outside guards: GO!”

Four of them jumped the two dummy guards.

“Control room: GO!”

Julia and Jimmy ran in, knocking aside the control room operators as they punched the lock-out controls. The four who had jumped the guards, ran in

too – pointing weapons and tying up the operators to stop them triggering an alert. Alistair was already running for the safeguarding room, 10m away up imaginary stairs, and locking himself in. Gurmeet hurried into the control room, closed the door and jammed it with her foot.

Cheryl was there, timer in hand, counting down actions as the team simulated them.

“Shut-down controls going off-line. Jammer coming on-line.”

“35 seconds left.”

“Pump pressure on manual... Thermal lock-out deactivated... “

“20 seconds.”

“Control-rod cascade de-fused... Emergency com port de-fused...”

“10 seconds. I can hear the other guards coming!”

“Scrambler active... Internal locks active! Mark!”

Everyone looked at Gurmeet, holding their breath. She was staring at Cheryl's stopwatch, shaking her head.

“It's not good, guys.”

Jimmy groaned. It meant they had to do it all over again. Yet Gurmeet was smiling.

“It's not good, it's bloody amazing! One hundred and seventy-eight seconds. You've done it!”

With cheers, hugs and handshakes they congratulated each other. Gurmeet found herself smiling with pride. For all the negativity of what they were planning to do, she had brought them together, as a team. Proud comrades in arms, about to go into action. No realising they were going to their deaths. Not knowing who was going to kill them.

Chapter 73

Wall Man

Stan Summers, dubbed the *Wall Man* for his perfect safety record, had just had the worst meeting of his life – with the wife of Daniel Ambrose, his injured, almost crushed to death, and his company's Chief Executive Officer. Understandably, Mrs Ambrose wanted her husband fully rebuilt, with the latest bionics. The cost would be around £50 million. Ten times more than compensation payments for death on the job. Media trained, the CEO used sympathetic language, tone and sentiment befitting the terrible situation, without committing to what she wanted.

“Mrs Ambrose, if it was up to me, we would immediately fund those bionics.”

“Surely it is up to you. You're the CEO. Who else can make that decision if you can't?”

She was determined to achieve her aim. She loved her husband and desperately wanted him back. They had last parted after a raging argument, over something as stupid as the colour of the new washing machine. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. That she deeply loved him and it was just pregnancy hormones making her angry.

“Mrs Ambrose, I am indeed the Chief Executive Officer but even I have to answer to the Board. It is the Board who have to approve any such payout.”

“Then I want to talk to the Board.”

“I have already put this to them. Sadly, they have declined to meet with you.”

“Are they so afraid?”

“Please don't take this the wrong way, but they are very busy. These walls are massive projects, with how many workers, Stan?”

“112 on each team. Three teams for each wall, nine teams in total.”

“That's over a thousand workers. How could they run all this and hold meetings for each individual worker?”

“We're talking about a worker's life. My husband's life. Not some supply issue.”

The CEO nodded agreeably.

“I totally concur and fully understand how you feel about wanting the very best outcome. Under the circumstances, they have authorised an

increased compensation payment to £6 million, to cover both life support and loss of income. That's a million more than the maximum would normally paid for total death.”

“So I should feel lucky? Is that it?”

“Construction is a dangerous business. Your husband knew the risks. I'm sure he would agree such a payment is reasonable.”

“He can't agree anything right now, can he? He's a human ice-cube. The doctors can't even talk through a brain interface because standard life support doesn't work when there is no body left to support. Have you seen him?”

The CEO shook his head. Mrs Ambrose turned to Stan.

“Have you?”

“I have. And I'm really sorry for what happened. Daniel is my first worker to get more than a cut finger.”

“And we are still looking into how it happened...”, assured the CEO, “...to make sure it can never happen again.”

“I don't care how it happened or why. I only care that it did happen and you are refusing to give my husband his life back. Give our life back.”

The CEO looked over at Stan, noting the empathy for her on his face. He looked over at Mrs Ambrose, her eyes red – mixed with sadness and defiance that refused to cry. He could see she would never give up and respected her for that.

“Mrs Ambrose, could you leave it with me, please? I will go back to the Board and ask them to reconsider.”

Stan decided to chip in.

“It would boost the company profile if they were to authorise it. Show how much those working under the Partner umbrella care about their workers. How wrong the media are.”

“Yes...”, nodded Mrs Ambrose, “...That would be worth £50 million in publicity by itself.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps it would also publicise the incident. Like I said, leave it with me and I'll see what I can do. Alright?”

Mrs Ambrose held his gaze, refusing to let it go as she took a slow, deep breath.

“Alright.”, she said, releasing him.

The CEO was palpably relieved.

“Thank you for coming in. I'll be in touch as soon as I have any news.”

He extended his hand to Mrs Ambrose, who shook it with a surprisingly

strong grip. A further indicator she was ready for a fight - not someone to be ignored.

“I’ll be expecting your call.”

“Of course. Stan, would you show Mrs Ambrose back to reception?”

“Sir. This way, please.”

As they walked along the corridor, Mrs Ambrose turned to Stan.

“Were you there when it happened?”

“I was.”

“How did it happen?”

“A crane hook disengaged. No warning.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No. Never happened to any of my teams before.”

“Why did it happen now?”

“I don’t know. It’s what I’m going to find out.”

“Could it have been attempted murder? Or sabotage?”

“Murder? *Sabotage?*...”, taken aback Stan stopped walking - she stopped with him, “...Why would you think that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If it’s never ever happened before, someone had to have made it happen. Hadn’t you thought of that?”

“No. I hadn’t...”, they began walking again, “...It’s never happened in my team but I know it has happened in others. Attempted murder? Sabotage? That’s unthinkable. Why would anyone do that? Especially to Daniel. He was a really liked.”

“Yet it happened.”

Stan stopped walking again. What she was suggesting was beyond terrible. Especially because her logic made terrible sense. A logic he could not ignore.

“You are going to look into the possibility, aren’t you?”

Stan found he was struggling to meet her imploring eyes. She deserved to know the truth. They all did. Finally he looked and was struck by the purity of their emerald green.

“I will.”, he promised.

She studied his face, his body language, his eyes.

“I believe you will, Mr Summers. Thank you. And please thank the worker who helped rescue him. What’s his name?”

“Jake. The youngest in my team. Not licensed to drive the JCBs but I’m glad he did. Going to give him a promotion for it.”

“He definitely deserves it. Jake's a good name. Think I'll name our child after him, even if its a girl.”

For the first time, Stan noticed her swollen belly.

“You're pregnant? Daniel never said.”

“Daniel doesn't know. We had an argument and he left before I could tell him.”

Now Stan had even more reason to find out what had happened and get the funding for the bionics.

“I'll let Jake know. And I'll be in touch the second I find out anything.”

“I know you will. You're one of the good guys, Mr Summers, I can feel it. Take care.”

“Please, call me, Stan. Take care too, Mrs Ambrose.”

Take care. Normally such words were just that, polite words. This time it felt they had real substance. The possibility of sabotage had never crossed his mind before. Now the thought was planted, it just kept growing. Sabotage would explain everything. It would also spell danger. Danger of more sabotage. Of murder, for any of them. Even for all of them.

Chapter 74

Stan

Stan returned to the construction site and ducked under the blue and white police tape where Daniel had been crushed. A hovering PC-bot flew over to intercept him.

“This is a police investigation site. You are not authorised to be here. You must leave at once.”

“Stan Summers. This is my construction site. I'm not just authorised to be here, I'm required to be here - to ensure it is safe for your colleagues. Or do you wish to be crushed by a 10-ton concrete block like my worker?”

Stan indicated towards the row of 10-ton concrete blocks nearby. Since 2024, all commercial bots had been programmed with a sense of self preservation. Not because their 'lives' were considered valuable but because they were expensive pieces of kit that offered much better value for money if they avoided getting themselves destroyed. The bot's vision-disc rotated towards the blocks, then back towards Stan. It was true police stubborn.

“I'm not authorised to let anyone into this area.”, it repeated.

“And how do you propose to stop me? What exactly will you do if I refuse to leave?”

“You will be reported and everything you do will be recorded in evidence.”

“Too many spending cuts for an actual response? Record away, little bobby. Record away.”

Stan put the PC-bot out of his mind and focused on the scene itself. The JCB Jake had used to lift the block was exactly where he'd left it. Locked in place, still holding it up. He went to one of its large, chunky tyres, grabbed the edge and climbed up, onto the suspension.

“Sir, that is an evidential item. It must not be moved in any way.”

“It won't be. It's holding a 10-ton block. My weight won't move it all.”

Standing on the left steering piston, he climbed up the side of the JCB and onto the engine cover. Up onto one of the outstretched arms. Up onto a fork pushing against the block; careful not to get his hands slippery from the oil-coated pistons keeping them up.

On the forks, at the edge of the grey concrete block, he jammed his foot against their base plate and pushed himself towards the hook ring in the block. It was broken. Sheered on one side, as if it had been overloaded. A

material flaw. An accident. Still, he had promised Mrs Ambrose a full investigation. From his utility belt he unclipped a 3D scanner and began running parameter checks.

Steel diameter: 5.02cm

Steel grade: 12.9

Break fracture shape: 95.4% standard tear

Everything was normal. Everything within parameters. Yet the tear looked odd. Stretching on tip-toe, he put the scanner closer, taking four 100MP RAW pictures – almost 1GB of data each. Opening the picture folder he zoomed in on one, examining the top of the ring. The contact point with the crane hook. It looked like a straight-edged C. Not twisted or bent on both sides. Not stretched oval before snapping, as you would expect from material failure.

“That can't be right.”

Stan switched the scanner to reconstruction mode. It scanned the ring across the spectrum, from infra-red to X-Ray, and beeped it was ready.

“Play.”, instructed Stan.

What it played was a slow-motion reverse animation - returning the broken ring towards its original shape and position. As Stan stared at the final result, his skin ran cold. The scanner flashing a red-square around the break point. It was worse than he'd thought.

“Full screen.”

It zoomed in to where the steel had torn apart, only it wasn't a tear. There was a gap. A 0.1mm hairline gap. The ring had been cut through. Sabotaged. Why? To murder Daniel? To delay the construction? Who would want to do either?

“Save and Upload.”, he commanded, storing the results in the memory cell and uploading a back up to one of his private servers. It gave a flash of green to confirm it was done.

“FREEZE!”

Stan looked down. Half a dozen armed uniforms stood on the sand, weapons drawn. They weren't police.

“Who are you?”

“That's my question...”, came any ice-cold, female voice. He saw the beauty of her face lay blighted by arctic eyes.

“Throw down the scanner.”

“I'm the foreman for this site. Who are you?”, said Stan, buying himself time while, out of sight, he used two fingers to unclip the memory cell.

“Throw down the scanner or I'll shoot you and take it from your dead body.”

Stan felt the memory cell magnetically clamp itself to the JCB's arm.

“Catch.”

She caught it and looked at the screen, scrolling through the readouts.

“It's empty. You didn't save any scans? What did you find out, Stan the foreman?”

“Nothing unusual...”, he lied, without knowing why, “...Just an accident. Ring failure. Happens sometimes.”

“Come down. You're going with them.”, she stated, indicating the armed-guards next to a satin-black car.

Stan didn't like the idea of going with them. He liked it even less when he climbed down and saw the PCbot, smoking lifelessly on the ground, fist-sized hole blasted through its side. What he liked didn't matter. They were armed, weapons pointing his way, looking for any excuse to shoot him. The red logos on their uniforms were familiar. Partner.

“This construction site is for Partner.”, he said.

“We know. That's the only reason you're not dead.”

Stan said nothing of the scanner's memory cell above. The memory cell that was the only sign he had been there. The last sign of his existence. Why was he being captured by his own company? A company powerful enough to have him disappeared without question or trace. If they did plan to kill him, he was already dead.

Chapter 75
Henry's Chat

“Where am I?”

Henry's prisoner had woken, strapped to a hospital bed. Drip feeds into his arms, ECG wires on his chest, ribbon cables hanging just above his head and thick bandaging across half his body. A seriously injured hospital patient yet he was not in an actual hospital. The walls of the room were gun-metal grey. The door old-fashioned, bolted shut. The man by his bed anything but a doctor.

Instead of a white coat he wore a long grey one – two plasma-pistols strapped underneath, wide-barrelled rifle by his side. Instead of a medical scanner he held a black-box. The prisoner sat up. And failed. Not just because of the bolt of pain from his wounds but because he was strapped down.

“Who are you?”

“The one who saved your life. It means I own you.”

“I am a diplomat of the new People's Republic of China. You have no right to detain me. I demand to speak to my embassy.”

Henry was a man who didn't shout or flap. Always just a firm, even voice. The kind of voice that stayed controlled in all situations, including battle. The kind of voice that believed in his ability to take down anyone and anything, without fear of failure or death.

“Demand away, Mr Diplomat. If they answer you can speak to them. But how are you going to demand from here? We're 10m underground, inside a shielded box - no communications in or out. No-one outside even knows you're here. The only exit is through that door, past me. And you're not getting past me, are you?”

The man in the bed looked around again at his situation, then back at his captor.

“What do you want? Who are you?”

“You can call me: Officer P.”

“Sounds like a bad smell. What do you want?”

“Information. Who ordered the attack? Who exactly is that who? Plus everything you know about their operation?”

The prisoner narrowed his eyes.

“Well, Officer P, you can call me Suck My Dick and stuff your questions

up your arse. This isn't China. I know you British have rules against torture. Just get me my fucking lawyer! And a warm cup of green tea. There's a good boy.”

Henry looked at him. Not angry. Not cross. Not put off. To him the situation was very simple. His prisoner had information he wanted and he would get the information he wanted, what ever it took.

He was fully aware that torture was useless for anything but getting people to make false confessions. But he hadn't asked his prisoner to confess to anything. He already knew he was working for Tech Tonic and had been trying to kill those investigating them. Trying to kill Shabbir and Xi. And almost succeeded.

“Mr Suck my Dick, let's shorten it to SyD. Know what this is?”, Henry asked, holding up the black-box and revealing the ribbon cable to the 100-pronged brush attachment.

The prisoner squirmed uncomfortably.

“I see you do.”

“Those are internationally banned. They cause permanent brain damage.”

“Now, how would you know that if you didn't use them too?”

“I'm telling you nothing.”

“You know that's not true. With one of these, you don't have to say anything. I just press this brush against your head and push the button. It then interfaces directly with your brain and downloads everything and everyone you've ever known. Yet, it does tend to burn the axon hillocks off several billion neurons in the process, but you don't need me to tell you that.”

“You won't get away with it. There will be evidence. My government will find the mark on my head. You will pay!”

“SyD, you're forgetting. I own you. I don't need to return you anywhere except to the rubble of the building I saved you from.”

SyD, not just in pain from his injuries, was finding it hard to take it all in. Had never expected capture by such a brutal person in civilised England.

“You have to be an android. No British officer would dare do this.”

Henry almost smiled, taking it as a compliment.

“As far as you're concerned, I might as well be.”

SyD frowned.

“Well, fuck you. I'm loyal to my country and my people. At least I'll die knowing that.”

That honest defiance, that true loyalty, gained Henry's respect. There

were too many two-faced, self-serving, disloyal back-stabbers in the world. Even though this enemy had tried to kill them, he was at least an enemy with integrity. But, he had a job to do. He activated the black box and powered up the probe.

“I admire your sense of loyalty, SyD. In a different time, perhaps we could have been friends.”

“Officer P, when you use that you will learn my name is Wej Chan. This is our only time of existence on Earth and we will never become friends.”

“Call me Henry, Wej. This won't hurt for long.”

With a low whistle of charging capacitors, Henry stepped closer and put the probe brush over his head.

“Make sure you kill me, Officer Henry. If I survive, I will hunt you down.”

“I know.”, said Henry, leaving the power settings on minimum. Whatever the differences of their aims, from one loyal officer to another, he decided to give Wej at least the chance of survival. They weren't at war because they chose to be. They were at war because those upstairs told them to be and that wasn't fair.

With a firm shove, he pushed the probe's 100-fine pins into Wej's head. Wej screamed. His face instantly red, sinews tensed, veins bulging.

The reader started automatically, reading deep into his brain. Wej fell silent. Eyes wide open. Staring. Vacant. The connection had been made. He was now under Henry's control.

'11% collected', showed on the screen and the number was climbing. The data bandwidth growing as the probes expanded their connections through more and more synapses.

'57% collected'

Data was streaming out. The screen looking like it was ultra-fast downloading a mass of films. Ten minutes later, it was done.

'100% collected'

Henry peeled off the probe - caked in dried blood. Wej's staring eyes slammed shut – eyelids like heavy blinds dropping over windows.

Technically, he wasn't dead. The ECG still read a heart beat, slow but steady. With the DNA gel, his damaged body would still heal fine. His brain was another question. Connecting the scanner to his wristcom, Henry speed read the data highlights. Tech Tonic's infiltration was higher than expected. Far higher. High enough to take over key infrastructure and institutions within hours of a strike. He had to get back to Thames House and alert Chris.

Signalling his car to warm the turbines, he unbolted the heavy steel door

and let in waiting medibots to tend to Wej. As they drove in, another data highlight flashed on screen. Highlighted because of its significance to Wej - a hologram of him with a young boy. His son. Standing together, smiling, in a poor Chinese village.

Henry found himself staring. Something in his own heart spiked. It reminded him of his last hologram with his own parents - the hologram together with his sister, from the last days of warmth in his heart.

“Wait.”, he said to the medibots about to carry Wej's body away.

From his coat he took a deep-blue DNA-gel pad, the size of his hand, and peeled off the lower seal. Pressed it over the probe marks on Wej Chan's head. Once on, he peeled off the top cover and activated it with a zap from his scanner. It burst into light - a white, filigree web of electricity running across and slowly vanishing into his skull. He didn't know what good it would do but it would give Wej a chance. A chance of recovery. A good chance.

However well it worked, Wej Chan could either come to kill him or go home to his son. For Henry, either choice was fine. Death was not something that bothered him - living was. Seeing that hologram had made him realise the hole in his heart was as large as ever. At least this way he'd given a loyal man, a loving father, the family chance he'd never had.

“You can take him now...”, said Henry, “...Priority 7 recovery mode.”

“Priority 7? Release once recovered, without further authorisation?”

“My authorisation is all you need. No over rides. No one else is to know he was ever here. This is very important. Understand?”

“If he doesn't recover?”

Henry looked at the medibot.

“Not an option. Make sure he does. Fully. Just signal me when he's out, so I can watch my back.”

“Priority 7. Full recovery and release; no over rides; no-one else to know; inform you when out. Confirm?”

“Confirm.”, said Henry.

“Priority 7 is locked in.”

The medibots finished unplugging the bed and took it to special care.

Henry put the black-box in his coat, double-checked the power level in his huge plasma-rifle and left for his waiting car. Wej Chan was no longer his enemy. Someone far higher up his own chain of command was.

Chapter 76

Cold Call

Professor Lau had gone back to work, spending a week at Hinkley Point. Physically recovered from her kidnap ordeal but psychologically a deeply changed person. Less patient at work. Drinking every night, alone and in tears. Unable to get the terrible memories out of her head. Unable to fall asleep by biorhythmic means alone. Time heals, everyone told her. Everyone told her wrong.

“Professor, the police are on the phone for you. A PSI Laikin.”

She lowered her Rolley.

“What?”

“Police. They want to talk to you.”

“You take it. Tell them I'm fine. Nothing more to say.”

Her assistant put the receiver back to her head.

“Hello, sorry, she's a bit tied up right now. Can I help?... Oh, I see...”, She lowered the handset, “...He's asking for you. Says important and unable to discuss it with me.”

Lau threw down her Rolley, screen bending as it absorbed the impact against the worktop.

“This had fucking better be good.”

In six strides she'd crossed the office and grabbed the phone.

“Lau.”

“Professor Lau?”

“That's what I said.”

“Sorry to bother you. My name is PSI Laikin, Avon and Somerset police. I've had a report of kidnap involving one of your workers.”

At the word 'kidnap' Lau felt an icy chill on her spine. Hit by re-awoken fear, her legs gave way and she dropped into a chair.

“Go on.”

“It may be nothing. The lady reporting it was rather inebriated but we've been unable to contact the person in question. I'm told she's a member of your staff - a Cheryl Palmer. If she's there, perhaps I could have a word with her?”

“Cheryl?...”, breathed Lau, she knew Cheryl, and her children, “...Not seen her today. Hold on, I'll check the records.”

“Thank you.”

Picking up her Rolley, Lau found her hands were shaking. She had to put it on the desk - steadying it enough for her to swipe through the staff records. Then she picked up the phone again.

“Records show she's on holiday. For another couple of days.”

“Was it pre-booked?”

Lau looked again.

“Not by much but yes. Seems her child was ill and then she booked herself off from the 28th July to 7th August. It is a bit odd though... Nobody is supposed to be off for the 6th It's the centenary of the Hiroshima bombing.”

“Do you know where she was going?”

“Nothing written here. Hold on...”, the professor turned to the other staff in the room, “...Where was Cheryl going on holiday?”

“Didn't know she was going anywhere.”, said one.

The others all shrugging or shaking their heads.

“Sorry...”, said Lau to Laikin, “...Nobody seems to know.”

“She didn't talk about it to anyone? Don't you think that's odd too? Most people at least mention where they are going, out of excitement if nothing else.”

“Cheryl isn't most people. Her job is showing tourists around with a cheerful face, 8-hours a day, no matter how she's really feeling. I wouldn't be too surprised if she just wanted to get away, rather than talking about it.”

Laikin still had questions.

“Hypothetically, from a security point of view - if she and her children were kidnapped, what kind of access could be gained to the plant? What could a kidnapper hope to get from her?”

Again the mention of kidnap hit Lau. She almost dropped the phone. Had to force herself not to. Force herself to continue the conversation.

“Not much...”, she said, conscious her voice was now trembling, “...As a tour guide, she has access to most of the plant but not to the control systems themselves. They couldn't get any access codes from her.”

“Could they get access to the plant?”

“Not easily. All codes are biologically linked and every guest has to be pre-booked. Vetted at least two months in advance, specifically to avoid such a possibility.”

“Right... well... I think that answers my questions. Could you please ask her to call me when she comes back in? It would be good to run through her friend's concerns for future reference. Just in case it happens for real.”

“Of course. May I ask who the friend was?”

“I can't give you her name but it was one of her neighbours. Like I said, she was a bit tipsy when she came in.”

“So why did you take her seriously?”

“Considering where she works, it's a serious concern. She had a burn on her hand. She claimed it was from a laser shot.”

Laser shot?

“I'll get Cheryl to call you as soon as she's back. PSI Larkin, was it?”

“Laikin. If she dials 115 and asks for me, she'll reach me fine. I'm in office hours, Monday to Friday.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you, professor. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No bother... Thank you for your concern.”

Conversation over, Lau ended the call but her thinking didn't. Couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop wondering.

What if something is wrong? What if it was a laser shot and they've been kidnapped? What hell will they be going through?

That thinking stayed with Lau for the rest of the day. That night, as she sat drinking alone, re-living her own kidnap ordeal, she grabbed her Rolley and brought up the staff records. Looked up Cheryl's home address and vowed to go there in the morning. To see if everything looked normal, for her own peace of mind. She had to know. For her sanity as much as Cheryl's safety. She would never forgive herself if a kidnap had taken place and she just sat comfortably, doing nothing to help. Whoever that Tom was, he had helped her. She needed to pass on the good deed.

Two glasses later, another thought hit lit.

Oh my God. Maybe Cheryl was the person Tom was looking for?

That possibility, hardened Lau's resolve to make sure Cheryl was safe.

Chapter 77
Cheryl's House

Cheryl's house was a bio-friendly ECHO (ECo-traditional HOme) - built from a mixture of re-used brick and modern insulating materials. Most heating and cooling was from a geothermal loop, underground in her garden, where the temperature was a steady 14 degrees all year round. Water passing through the loop was piped under all the floors in the house; absorbing heat from the hottest summers while hydrogen gas, generated by solar and wind powered electrolysis, supplied the heating, cooking and night-time electricity needs. Zero carbon and zero pollution or chemicals. It was ironic that someone so actually green should work at a nuclear-power station only calling itself to be green.

Lau couldn't help admiring her flower-garden as she walked to the front door and gave a knock. No answer. Not surprising, considering Cheryl was booked off on holiday. Lau had come prepared. To allow for random security checks, every worker at the plant had to provide a spare key for their home. Cheryl's was in Lau's hand, glinting in the morning sunlight.

"Don't move.", came a voice.

Lau froze.

"Who are you?", she asked, without moving.

"That's my line. Who are you?", the voice insisted.

"A friend of Cheryl. Just feeding the cat."

"She doesn't have a cat."

Lau felt the barrel of a gun poking her back.

"Last chance."

"That gun's not real. But mine is...", came a third voice, "...I want both your names, now. Oh... it's you."

The gun in Lau's back had been taken away. Slowly, she turned to face the others. A grey-haired man in his fifties with a pistol and a mousey-haired woman some twenty years younger, holding a stick.

"Do you believe me now, officer Laikin?...", the woman asked, pointing at Lau, "...Look, one of the kidnappers has come back."

"Laikin?...", asked Lau, "...PSI Laikin?"

"Yes."

"I'm Professor Lau, Cheryl's boss. We spoke yesterday."

They were all there for the same thing, concern for Cheryl and her

children. Helen dropped the stick.

"I've heard of you. Cheryl often said how glad she was you were managing the plants. Sorry. I'm Helen, her neighbour."

Lau noticed Helen's bandaged hand.

"Can I see that?"

"Why?"

"I want to see the laser hit."

"Finally, someone who believes me."

Despite refusing point blank for any police forensics on the wound, Helen was willingly unwinding the bandage for Lau. She didn't look at it for long.

"Laser shot."

Laikin had no reason to doubt Lau's expertise. All nuclear managers were trained in modern injuries, in case of attack. It felt a little odd that a professor knew more about gun wounds than he did but then gunfire wasn't part of everyday policing. Observation and investigations were.

"I see you have a door key. Would you mind using it?"

Lau answered by unlocking the door and pushing it open.

"Try not to touch anything...", said Laikin, "...I want to see everything exactly as she left it."

"You think she left it like this?"

The house was a mess. Trashed. Furniture smashed against the TV wall - its four-metre screen hanging in shreds. Mattress thrown down the stairs. Fridge thrown to the floor - door open, light glistening off the melted butter sliming out. Had it been trashed by Cheryl, having a nervous breakdown, or some invaders?

"Forget what I just said about not touching anything, no time. Help me search."

"What are we looking for?", asked Helen.

"Anything that says where she might have gone or who else might be involved."

"I need to call the plant...", said Lau, "...There could be an attack."

"No!...", exclaimed Helen, close to panic, "...They'll kill the children."

"An attack on a nuclear plant could kill thousands.", said Lau, raising her wristcom.

"Let's just calm down for a moment. Take a breath. Professor, is there someone you can alert who can check things out, without raising the main alarm?"

Lau, head always logically clear, thought for a moment.

“I could call Ramsay, today's duty manager.”

“Do it. Just make sure he keeps it quiet. I want such people caught, not alerted we're on to them.”

* * *

Not far away, at Hinkley Point, Paul Ramsay was sweating at his desk - wishing he'd never got himself into such a mess. The two monitors in front of him showed not work schedules but security feeds. CCTV images and guard locators. He wanted to just log off and walk away. He couldn't. There was no walking away from something like this.

“Ramsay.”, he stated to the ringing phone.

“Paul, it's Lau.”

His sweating increased.

“How can I help, professor?”

“Code 52.”

Code 52? Shit. Has she found something?

“Yes. I am alone. What's the problem?”

“Make sure you keep this to yourself, in case there's an insider. There's chance of an attack on the plant. Do you know how to route the CCTV feeds to your monitors?”

Paul glanced at the CCTV feeds already routed to his monitors.

“I think so.”

“Do it and keep an eye on them. If anything unusual happens, anything at all, I authorise you to hit the emergency shut down and lock out all control room over-rides. Pull the plug so no-one can get it restarted without my clearance. Understand?”

“Yes, professor. Why do you think there will be an attack?”

“Something's happened to Cheryl. Get those feeds up. I'll call back when I know more. As soon as I can get the codes, I'll activate Cheryl's tracker. Stay alert. Tell no one. No one. Keep me posted of any changes.”

“I will.”

Lau ended the call. Paul let gravity put the phone down - on the brink of just running away. The situation had very suddenly, very quickly become very real and very, very serious. It wasn't a game. Wasn't a beer-fuelled rebellion, where he could simply drink down the guilt of the bribe and wake

up at 8am with no consequences. Faith had told him they were serious people. Now he was paying attention to those words. Now was too late. Activating his wristcom in scrambler mode, he knew what he had to do. The only thing he could do to avoid murder being added to his crimes. It didn't ring for long before it was answered.

“Yes?”

“Craig, it's Paul, HPC. There's a problem.”

“Go on...”

Chapter 78

Max

The satin-black rectangle of a large, six storey building had appeared out of nowhere. One minute they had been driving along a country road, surrounded by empty fields, sparse trees and low-stone walls. The next they had crested a hill and come face to face with iron-gates, guarded by four large plasma cannons. As if they weren't enough of a keep out message, a sign either side of the gates read: 'Danger of Death'.

The gates opened and they drove in, Stan watching a cannon tracking them - fat barrel lit from the inside by fizzing, blue plasma. He felt relief as they passed unharmed and rolled down the long driveway, through immaculate green lawns. Lawns broken by the black, marble squares of foot-high plinths. Upon each plinth sat a satin-black zerodrone, looking as enigmatic as they looked foreboding. Show pieces to impress visitors with the power of the company's creations.

To Stan's horror, he saw the red-laser eyes of a hornbot, hovering above each one - tracking them. Hornbots ready to wake the zerodrones the second they were needed. The zeds were not show-pieces, they were like the entrance-gate cannons, fully functional and very real. It was a level of security deemed not just illegal but unnecessary for anything less than a military base. Stan realised it meant only one thing, he had been taken to a Partner command centre.

Partner weren't permitted zeds because of their military links. Partner had zeds because they were the ones developing and building them, in the 18 floors that lay hidden underground.

At the marble steps leading up to the hanger-wide entrance, the car stopped. Two armed guards got out and led Stan towards the white-lit central doors. The outer sections had no doors, just large holes leading to glass-walled corridors. Green left, red right - for aircraft to enter and exit accordingly. The guards indicated for Stan to go through the doors and stopped there - waiting for him to do so.

“Not coming in?”

The only reply Stan got was the door sliding open, revealing a reception desk between the two flight corridors. Big enough for a dozen staff, there sat just two-fixed smiles. One male, one female - beckoning him in. With a final glance at the armed guards, Stan did so.

“Good morning, Mr Summers.”, smiled the female receptionist

“Office U200, please. Mr Remus is expecting you.”, said the male.

“Which way?”, asked Stan, finding himself distracted by the growing hum, resonating from his right. It was getting deeper. More powerful. Coming up from the black hole where the corridor vanished below. The ground-floor end was lit red from the outside but green from within.

The noise suddenly grew as a beautifully formed aircraft appeared, followed by another. Silky-smooth in motion, plasma-cannons retracted inside curved pods for high-speed flight. The pale-blue of their energy pads glowed upon the marble floor as they headed for the exit. The second flying slightly to the right of the first so it still had a forward view. A clear shot of any target.

The moment they cleared the building, their tail thrusters went from gentle blue to a brilliant, dazzling white - vanishing them into the distance so fast his eyes could hardly keep up. In moments, the zeds reached the driveway walls and the bangs of their sonic booms hit his ears. Below radar, they skimmed the trees as their plasma tails powered them beyond Mach 3.

“Look like stars in the sky, don't they?”

Stan looked towards the voice and saw a man oozing confidence. A handsome, relaxed thirty-something, dressed in jeans that matched the blue of zed thrusters on idle.

“Mark Fours...”, the man continued with pride, “...Their first day of active service. Hulls of nano-carbon-tube, poly-bismaleimide kevlar, NACABIK to everyone else. Plus my special mix of titanium fibre thrown in for shielding and heat spread. Mk8 60-kilowatt plasma-cannons and 2,000kg of thrust, twice that on emergency boost. A light-weight aircraft capable of circumnavigating the equator in under 10 hours and without refuelling. My beautiful children... Sorry. You must be Stan Summers. Hi. Max Remus.”

Max had extended his hand and Stan shook it - automatically, as if it were a business meeting, not an abduction.

“Hello.”

“Office U200 is such an unwelcome sounding destination. Thought I'd come and greet you in person. Come. Let's grab something from the restaurant. We can chat there. But first, you'll need this.”

A golden broach had been put on the reception desk. Max took it and pinned it to Stan's jacket.

“Tells the defence systems you're friendly. Don't go anywhere without it.”

“Defence systems?”

Max directed his gaze towards the ceiling. Stan's followed. He had been so busy taking in the surroundings, he had completely missed the overhead

gun turrets but he saw them now. Six clusters of plasma-cannons. Five lit green, the one above him lit amber and pointing right at him. As Max finished attaching the broach, it scanned the ID, lit green and turned away. Returned to standby position.

“I'll be sure not to lose it.”, said Stan.

Max was grinning like a boy in a toy shop, owned by his dad.

“Come on, I'm hungry. Bet you are too.”

This warm welcome was not what Stan had been expecting. Was it genuine or some kind of psychological trick? What ever it was, he had to go along with it and hope for the best.

* * *

The restaurant was minimalist in design yet as modern as the rest of the building. Only potted lemon trees brought any form of organic colour to the mass of stainless-silver and satin-black sterility.

“What do you fancy?”, asked Max, going to a glass-fronted blue box, – the size of a coffee machine. The logo on the front was a smiling lemon, initialled with M.R. Max noticed him looking at it.

“My own design. Can't help putting my lemon on every product.”

“You're calling it a 'lemon'?”

“I know what you're thinking, that a lemon means a badly made dud. That's old-school thinking. I don't see it that way.

When you work in cutting-edge technology, you can't go forward without experimenting and making a whole bunch of lemons. And from each lemon you learn how to make something good. So I like lemons. To me 'lemon' is a very positive descriptor for progress. You can even choose a lemon for lunch, if you like. Or you can choose something else.”

All Stan could see were several blue boxes.

“What choice is there?”

“These are feeders. Haven't decided on an official name so they each have a human name for now. They can create pretty much any food or drink you want. Just name it.”

“May I just get a plain burger and a black coffee, one sugar?”

“Oh Stan. The literal choice of the world at your lips and you just want a burger and coffee? So be it. Let's go a bit bespoke though. This feeder is called Jamie...”, he said, patting the blue-box like a pet, “...Jamie, a Friesian burger in sesame bun plus black Arabica coffee, with a shot of New Zealand

manuka honey, for our Dear Guest, please.”

“Procuring for Dear Guest.”, said Jamie.

Max turned to the next feeder.

“Jessy, I'll have a chicken burger and skinny-white coffee, please.”

“Procuring for Max Remus”, said Jessy.

Behind each of their glass fronts, a yellow light came on. Stan watched in amazement as two plates and cups began forming, from the bottom up. Then the food began to appear, in the same way. First the bottom of the bun; then the sizzling meat, followed by the top of the bun. Inside the growing cups, a rising liquid followed.

“These are one of my best ever creations. Latest thing in food tech. Total choice and zero farming. Everything not consumed is recycled back to the molecular level, including the cups and plates. All it really consumes is energy and we generate plenty of that with the 2MW solar grid embedded in the building glass. We even store hydrogen for night generation, by cracking water into hydrogen and oxygen - can't get any cleaner electricity than that.”

“Ready for consumption.”, announced Jamie, then Jessy, the fronts of their boxes opening.

Max took out his food out and indicated for Stan to take his.

“Try it.”, said Max, biting into his.

It looked perfectly formed. Stan put the fresh-feeling bun to his nose and drew a breath. It smelt as authentic as it looked. If he hadn't just seen it being printed with his own eyes, he would have sworn it had come from a traditional burger bar. He took a small bite, Max delighting in the look on his face.

“Tastes good, doesn't it?”

Stan nodded, visibly impressed as he chewed.

“This is amazing.”

“Isn't it just? I still can't get over it. With these, the food choice really is global. I've got staff working through an international food library, just so they can try new things - from lobsters that weren't boiled to death in agony to fast-fried locusts. You can ask for menus by country, religion, food type and famous person from the last 3,000 years. Even have what a caveman would have eaten 35,000 years ago. Even considering a dinosaur-meat option - even though we can't authenticate the taste. In any case, great potential and, quite literally, people can choose the food of kings and queens. Now, please have a seat. We need to talk.”

Here it comes, thought Stan, taking a chair at the table Max had chosen.

Despite his trepidation, he was so hungry he took another bite. If he had known food designated 'Dear Guest' carried the command for a nano-tracker to be included he would have declined, or eaten and gone to the toilets to make himself sick. In blissful ignorance, he ate and listened to Max.

"I was very sorry to hear about your worker. Mr Ambrose, wasn't it? Very unfortunate. I'm told he survived though."

Stan's appetite didn't, as the memory of Daniel's crushed body began playing in his head.

"What's left of him, Max. Cryo-frozen, in a glorified bucket. I've been asking for him to be rebuilt."

"I heard. Needs £50 million, doesn't it?"

"You're very well informed."

"Information is my speciality. Did you find out how it happened?"

Stan looked at Max, wondering how much he really knew. How much he could be trusted.

"The hook-ring on the block broke."

"Has that happened before?"

"Once or twice. In other teams. Never in mine."

Max was eating as happily as if they were discussing a holiday.

"Don't let your burger get cold. Being hungry won't help anyone, including Mr Ambrose. Daniel, right?"

Stan looked at the burger in his hands.

"He's a good man. Good worker. Been with me for years."

"What about the man who helped rescue him?"

"Jake? He's new. Very young but very clear head on his shoulders. He saved Daniel's life."

"So I heard. Where did he work before? Nothing came up on his file."

Only now did Stan begin to realise how much Max had been digging into things. The flip-side was, it made Stan conscious he didn't know either. In fact, he knew absolutely nothing about Jake prior to Daniel's rescue.

"I'll look into it. Any reason?"

Max shook his head.

"Just curious. We could do with more people like you and Jake. Would be good to know who did such an amazing job of his psych training. Such a young man keeping his head in such circumstances - that is a real achievement."

Stan's appetite returned and they fell silent while they finished their meals. As he took his last bite, Max took a sip of his coffee and softly put the cup down.

“The truth is, Stan. I need your help.”

Stan looked at him, unsure whether to feel flattered or surprised.

“I'm just a construction worker. You have all these facilities and you need my help?”

“You undervalue yourself. Out of all our teams, not just on the walls but other projects, yours has the best record for productivity, efficiency and safety, by far.”

“Even now?”

“Even now. By miles. Which brings me to the reason for this meeting. I need at least one of these walls completely finished, within three weeks or we face a huge financial penalty. I'm talking hundreds of millions of pounds. I think you're the man to do it.

Even when you've had terrain issues, you remained in front of the other teams. Now they have terrain issues, I see you increasing that lead. Finishing your wall on schedule, ahead of them all. You could, couldn't you?”

“Not while I'm sat here, drinking coffee with my site closed down by police.”

Max smiled in acquiescence.

“Quite. That's what I like about you. No politics. No posturing. Just straight-talking, practical sense. It's clear why they call you *Wall Man*. To us, to Partner, as a business these walls represent a significant investment. I'm not going to bore you with how much but I am going to offer you something I think you'll find of interest.”

Stan sat back, looking at Max's confident smiling face, wondering what he could possibly offer and what the catch would be. Out of all the possibilities crossing his mind, Max's actual offer was not one of them.

“Stan, Mr Wall Man, get yours finished on time and you can have a completion party, with real champagne and a bonus of £20 million, for Daniel's mobility reconstruction.”

Stan sat up. His gang would drink the champagne for a laugh, making posh voices, before switching to crates of beers. But £20 million for Daniel? That was serious. To Max's delight, the look on his face showed it.

“There's more. If you can also find out what happened - who or what sabotaged the wall, if it was sabotage, I will personally authorise an extra £30 million. You can give Daniel the full rebuild. I'll claim it back from the culprit.”

“If we don't make the deadline? If it's not sabotage?”

“If you don't make the deadline, deals off? We'll get fined and you won't get a penny. As for the question of sabotage, well, if it's not sabotage the blame must lie somewhere. I don't think block-rings fail for no reason. Like I said, I'm confident you're the man for the job. That you *will* finish the wall on time and find who or what has been responsible for the delays.”

Max extended his hand again – upper lip twisting into a quirky smile.

“Deal?”

“Deal...”, said Stan, shaking it more confidently than he felt, “...Thank you.”

“When you succeed, Stan, I'll be the one thanking you. And so will Daniel and his beautiful wife. Come, I'll take you back to reception and have you driven home. No time to lose. You've got a lot of work to do.”

“And the site re-opening?”

“Already done.”

* * *

As Stan climbed into the waiting car, Max waved goodbye and vanished back into the building. He felt amazingly upbeat and positive, despite not having anything in writing. If Max chose to renege on the deal, a piece of paper wasn't going to help reverse it. He had to take everything on trust. Just do his best, for Daniel's sake.

* * *

Standing in his fourth-floor office, Max turned away from watching Stan's car travel up the drive to look at his monitor wall. Recognising he was alone, it powered up the other three.

'Today's Dear Guest tracker active, Zeus. No new private messages.'

Max liked his computer addressing him as Zeus, ruler of the gods. When you hold a god's power over the life and death of millions, why not be addressed as such? As a god.

“Thank you, Slave.”

Max didn't often use guest trackers. Early versions had been temperamental and hadn't always lasted long, especially if the consumer chose 'high-flow' foods. This new one had settled immediately. Was working

perfectly; giving a live feed of co-ordinates in 3D space, as well velocity, heart rate and a whole host of other biometrics. Just like Stan, Max felt amazingly positive and upbeat after their meeting – albeit for different reasons.

Those working against him were going to bite the dust harder than they could possibly imagine. They, and everyone who knew anything about them, would be buried under the foundations of a new building - including Stan, Daniel, his wife and, when he found him, Jake too.

Chapter 79
Missing Link

Stan found his team impatiently waiting at the edge of the construction site.

“Morning everyone.”

“Alright, Stan...”, said Jenson, his deputy, “...Can we get back to work now?”

Stan saw the area around the concrete block and long-arm JCB was no longer cordoned off. All evidence of the destroyed PCbot had gone. The sand swept smooth.

“Anyone been over there?”, he asked.

“Just been waiting here, for you. Is the job on or off?”

Stan scratched his head.

“Well...there's good and bad news. The good news is Daniel's going to make it. Partner have agreed to fund his bionics, when we get this wall finished.”

Jenson wasn't smiling yet.

“So Daniel's going to be OK and we're back to work. What's the bad news?”

“The bad news? We only have three weeks to do it or they cut the funding for Daniel. And there must be no more accidents. We'll have to scan all lifting equipment, including all hooks, before use. It's going to mean no days off and double shifts but at double pay and a big bonus when done.”

As Stan watched his workers nodding to each other, he noticed something.

“Where's Jake?”

Everyone looked blank.

“Who?”

“Jake. You know? The new kid who got the block off Daniel. Anyone seen him?”

They still looked blank.

“We've never had a guy called Jake working here, Stan.”, said Jenson.

“What? Well, where's the guy who saved Daniel?”

More blank looks.

“Are you kidding me? Jenson, you were on that day. You must have seen

him.”

“Sorry. Didn't see any of it until the airlift came in. I was at the other end of the site when it happened...”, said Jenson, turning to the others, “...Who saw that accident?”

The others shrugged and shook their heads.

Impossible.

The crushing of Daniel had been so dramatic, so loud and so awful it must have been seen by many. How could they all have simply forgotten it? A memory blockage caused by the trauma? They were just shrugging it off like it hadn't happened. William, his other deputy, pushed open the gates.

“Back to work, guys. Like Stan said, stay safe. Remember to scan everything. PPE at all times.”

While heavy machinery chugged into life, Stan went to retrieve the memory cell he'd left on the JCB. Climbing back up the long-arms, he reached around. Nothing. He climbed higher - leaning right over to take a look. Nothing there. Someone had taken it.

Unclipping his scanner from his belt, he stretched up to scan the broken hook-ring again. It pinged completion and he ran the zoomed in replay.

“What?”

The scan showed a natural break. Structural overload from fatigue. Stan was starting to wonder if he was the one with a memory issue.

What's going on?

With an ever growing need for reality confirmation, he jumped down and shuffled under the block to where Daniel had been crushed. Just smooth sand. Not a single drop of blood staining the block - not even a trace when DNA scanned.

This is nuts.

His mind was churning with possibilities as he crawled out and headed for his Portakabin office. He had backed-up the original scans to his private server. His last chance of proving sabotage. Of proving to himself he wasn't going nuts. That there had actually been an accident.

He had only just turned on his computer when the knock at his door.

“Come in.”

William's face appeared, looking worried.

“What's up?”

“Stan...”, said William, looking over his shoulder before entering and closing the door behind him, “...I scanned this. It's been cut.”

He was holding a thick, steel ring in his gloved hand.

Stan jumped to his feet.

“Where did you find it?”

“My crane. It looks solid but scan shows a micro split in the steel. The bolts weren't torqued up right either.”

I'm not crazy.

He hadn't imagined things. It was what he had found on the failed block ring that had crushed Daniel.

“Any others?”

“Dunno. Not seen anyone else checking.”

“*What???* I gave specific instructions...”

Stan strode to the door and yanked it open.

“CRANES DOWN!”

Nobody responded. He snatched out his radio.

“CRANES DOWN! CRANES DOWN!”

No response. The workers carried on, as if he didn't exist.

“Are they all wearing ear plugs?”

Stan heard a deep, heavy thud and a blood-curdling scream.

Another ring had given way. Another 10-ton block of concrete had fallen. A red-faced worker's foot underneath it. Stan had no time to stand and stare. He was already running.

“CALL AN AMBULANCE! GET CRYO-FREEZE!”

The other workers were just carrying on, as normal. As if nothing had happened. All goldfish-memory locked into a bowl of permanent normality. Only the worker on the ground, struggling to free his foot crushed flat by the concrete block, was awake to the reality.

“HELP! GET IT OFF ME, STAN! *IT'S TIPPING!*”

“HOLD ON, PETE!”

The crane that had dropped the block was obliviously driving away to get the next. Stan ran after it – the closest vehicle that could move the block.

“STOP! STOP!”

The crane wasn't racing but it wasn't stopping either. Stan's feet, weighed down by safety boots like ankle weights, ran after it hard. If he didn't catch that crane quickly, Peter would be crushed flat. Nothing to left to cryo-freeze. Nothing left to save. What the hell was wrong with his men? Who the hell was out to kill them?

Chapter 80

Henry's Visit

Henry had mixed feelings about hospitals. Very mixed feelings. Sometimes they saved his friends. At other times they were where he saw them go. It was his motivation to get into the beta-development programme for medicines, as well as weapons. The reason he spent as much time learning to heal as he did learning to kill. In a way, it was full-filling his childhood dream, of becoming a doctor to save the world - after he couldn't save his sister from the disorder that led to her suicide.

“Karen's just a bit shouty. Lots of teenagers are - especially girls.”, the social workers had told him.

The social workers who made endless excuses for not doing anything. To acquiesce and excuse her behaviour rather than challenge it. Only 18-years old, in a frenzy of rebellion that rebelled back, she took all her benzodiazepines at once.

Deliriously euphoric as the drugs kicked in, she climbed onto the window-sill of a friend's 12-floor flat and jumped before they could stop her.

“To a better place! Wheee!” , they heard her say.

As she fell. As the air began tearing the breath from her mouth, her euphoric joy turned into a scream of terror. Her brain had switched back to normality and her eyes saw the ground not as greener grass but solid concrete, racing towards her with unavoidable death. The friend, looking over the window-sill with horror, slipped and fell too. He died right beside her.

Her post-mortem stopped logging the number of bone breaks once the count passed 32 and summarised her cause of death.

'Cause of death: multiple, catastrophic injuries'

The social workers simply wrote a letter, confirming she was no longer under their care - as useless in her death as they had been in her life. That day marked the beginning of Henry's bitterness. His anger-fuelled ruthlessness. His decision for independence from any moral judgement by anyone but himself. Listening to others had got his sister killed. He would never make that mistake again.

Two months later, overflowing with constant anger, he came across a gang - their female leader slapping a teenage girl around.

“You never say no to anything a client wants...” , raged the woman, “...Anything!”

Dressed only in skimpy underwear, the teenager had cigarette burns on the back of her hands and a small, dragon tattoo on her neck. She looked like Karen. Henry rushed at them, telling them to stop. The gang turned to him.

“Fuck off while you can.”

The girl was terrified of him making things worse.

“Go. Please go.”, she begged, just as Karen used to during her mood swings.

Henry had spent two months burning with anger - training hard and drinking hard. Hammering the pain, then numbing it into oblivion. He wasn't going to leave. The girl begging him to go remind him more of Karen. The advancing gang, pulling out bats, iron bars and knives, offered his rage an outlet. A direction.

Their faces were filled with ruthless, sadistic joy at inflicting pain.

“You should have left.”, sneered the female leader.

“We're going to fuck you up bad.”, sneered a male.

Henry didn't care what they said. He saw a terrified Karen, shivering in tears behind them. She was his only concern.

“Don't be afraid, I'm here for you.”

To the advancing gang he said no words. The geology of his face had set in calm stone. He didn't run away. He didn't run to attack. He just stood where he was, letting them come.

Henry's only memory of what happened next was the bat whacking towards his face. He raised an arm to deflect it, then took the man down with a single punch. As his punch broke bone, his rage ignited and he went into killer mode. He was no longer Henry the Helpless, he was Henry the Hardest. The toughest, most ruthlessly capable man that gang had ever met. The last man any of them would ever meet.

Henry had no further memory of that night until the last corpse flew towards the wall and he found himself looking at the girl. Surrounded by shouting, armed police and broken, gurgling bodies.

“You're safe now, Kar...”

He stopped, realising it wasn't Karen. She was looking at him without thanks. Shivering not from cold but from the terror of the demon she had seen taking the gang apart with his bare hands.

At the police station, handcuffed in a room still watched by armed police, a man of authority had come in. A man in his fifties, in a dark suit with eyes to match. He ordered everyone else out. Everyone, without question. He spoke with such fearless self belief it made Henry want to listen.

“Henry Kane?”

“You my solicitor?”

“Son, I don't think a solicitor would be your best bet after what you did.”

“Who are you?”

“Your freedom card. If you want it. If you can prove commitment to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My name is Chris. Section Chief at MI5. I'm here to offer you a job.”

“Doing what?”

“Helping to save others. I've checked your file. I know what happened to your sister, Karen. It's what you called that trafficking victim, isn't it?”

Henry looked through him, thinking about Karen rather than his jeopardy. Chris continued.

“I'm giving you a choice. You can go to court and no doubt prison, for six counts of murder. Or you can come with me and join my team. The job won't be safe and it won't be easy but you would be helping your country and the people in it. That has to be better than rotting behind bars for 40 years, wouldn't you say? I'll give you time to think about it.”

Henry didn't want to go to prison and had no fear of danger. There was nothing to think about.

“I'm coming with you.”

“Good.”

With that, Chris had him taken to Thames House, on the north bank of the Thames in central London. Taken there by his mentor, Shabbir. The man who understood about passion and fighting for what you loved, even when facing death in the process. The man who turned Henry's exploding demons into positives. Death could come at any time. It was doing the right thing that mattered and special weapons development became his focus for exactly that.

As much as Henry grew to trust all his colleagues at MI5, team-leader Shabbir remained the one he trusted the most. It was for this reason Shabbir was the one he was going to now. To tell of what he had learnt, even though it meant going back into a hospital.

* * *

“Hello, mate.”, smiled Shabbir, as Henry walked into his room.

He was looking far better than Henry had expected. His DNA gel had more than proved its worth.

“When do you get out?”

“Tomorrow, thanks to you. You saved our lives.”

“It's nothing. You're the reason I'm alive. You never have to thank me, you know that.”

“Never harm in a thank you. Anyway, hope you didn't bring me chocolates.”, said Shabbir, cheerfully patting his doughnut belly.

“No chocolates. Just information.”

“Great. Grab a chair. I'm bored as hell. Tell me what you've got.”

Henry took a chair and sat next to the bed. He looked troubled as he spoke.

“Did you know Xi is a boy's name?”

“Of course. But I'm sworn to secrecy as to why. How did you find out?”

“It's the name of the guy's son. The one I questioned.”

“What else did he tell you?”

From his coat pocket, Henry took out a small, black box and placed it between them - activating it with a squeeze. Shabbir recognised it was a local-field jamming device, used against bugs.

“This must be sensitive.”

Henry nodded. For the next 20 minutes, Henry told Shabbir everything he had learnt about high-level corruption and security leaks in the secret intelligence services and the government.

“Who else have you told?”

“No one.”

“Secure but fallible. We can't leave it at that. If only two of us know, it's only two of us that need to be erased and the discovery is lost. Too risky to send electronically.”

“I agree. We have to pass it to at least one other. Who?”

“I trust our team, of course. Gurmeet, Xi, Adam and you. Chris too but his systems will be a key target for infiltration. Best to store a copy with someone who doesn't know they're even carrying it.”

“A nano-vault?”

“Several of them. With timed release triggers, just in case. You know...”

“In case they take us out...”, nodded Henry, “...Yes, I know.”

“I'll sort the vaults. I need you to get evidence. Something I can give to Chris so he can get them arrested before they know we're onto them.”

Henry got to his feet.

“Leave that to me.”

“Henry, I know you're tougher than nails but don't go it alone. This is too

dangerous. Wait for Xi to get back.”

Henry pulled back his long coat, revealing his huge, wide-barrelled plasma-rifle, pistols and arsenal of beta gadgets.

“I never go anywhere alone.”

Chapter 81
5th August 2045

It was the day before the attack on a nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, designed to coincide with the centenary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Robert had woken feeling proud of what they were going to do. Proud of making their mark on corrupt, corporate giant Partner and all the self-serving officials in Whitehall who fed in its trough.

“Everybody ready?”, he asked the team, after breakfast.

“We are.”, replied Gurmeet – team leader well chosen for her talents.

“Excellent. I'm very proud of you. Of each and every one of you. This will mark a turning point in Faith's standing because you are going to make history. I feel I should make some kind of rousing speech, like Churchill before battle, but I'm rather too excited for that. Just play your part, do what you've trained for and we shall succeed.

Remember, we are not terrorists. We are an organisation of peace, using necessary force to regain integrity, equality and law for all. To pull the claws of the Partner corporation and the individuals who consider themselves above the law. You, my friends, are helping to bring this great, historic country back to itself.”

Gurmeet could tell by the way Robert spoke that he really believed in the sanctity of Faith's mission. If he hadn't been so warped to believe threatening the country with nuclear meltdown was a positive way forward, she might have really wanted to work with him. As it was she was Gurmeet, an undercover MI5 officer and, when the moment was right, she would do everything she could to stop them in their tracks.

From their practice sessions she had worked out exactly where she would make her stand. Andrew, the back-up MI5 officer undercover with her, had been sent away on a different mission but that didn't make it six against one. When the time to act came, another would side with her. She was sure of that.

“Robert! Blue phone's ringing.”, called Agatha.

Robert's head snapped up.

The blue phone?

“Don't do anything. I'll be right back.”

While Robert hurried to his office, Gurmeet turned to Julia.

“How do you feel?”

Julia had become very quiet over the last few days. She still worked, trained and did everything she was supposed to do but something in her had changed.

“OK.”, she said, head still down.

“Want to talk about it?”

Julia looked at her with eyes that said she did but a head that gave a shake to say no. Robert's office door flew open.

“Charlotte, come here. Roberta, get Cheryl.”

“Back in a bit.”, said Gurmeet to Julia.

Julia just lowered her head again - lost in herself. Despite Gurmeet's assurances everything would be alright, the closer it came to the attack the harder she was finding it to keep going. How could she tell Gurmeet she wanted out when she could hardly tell herself? She was supposed to be there to avenge Jake's death, to get back at Partner, but all they were going to do was take over a nuclear power station and threaten meltdown. It wasn't right. It wasn't who she was.

* * *

Gurmeet entered Robert's office and saw he was sweating.

“What's wrong?”

“We have to switch target.”

“Switch the target? Why? How? To where?”

“There's a nano-tracker on Cheryl. Hinkley is on silent high alert. Special forces will be waiting for you. We have to switch to another plant.”

“Then we have to delay the attack. Practise for the layout of the other site.”

“No time. If we don't attack as scheduled, they'll know we've switched and send armed police to every other site in the country.”

Roberta came in with Cheryl.

“Did you know about the tracker?”, asked Robert.

Cheryl's answer was a blank face - neither admission nor denial.

“No matter. In your place, I wouldn't have said anything either.”

“Kill me if you want but please spare my children.”

“Kill you? No. That was never the intention. We're not terrorists. This whole process is trying for all of us. Roberta, take Cheryl to her children and put them on a train for Taunton. Then meet me at rendezvous six. Were

clearing out. Cheryl, take this as compensation. I'm sorry for what we put you through. There was no other way to get you to help us.”

Cheryl looked at the small, brown-wrapped package held out for her.

“Compensation?...”, she said, sudden anger rising in her voice, “...You can't compensate for what you've done! I'm not taking this to ease your conscience.”

“Take it...”, insisted Robert, thrusting it into her hands, “...You've earned it. Enough a new start and therapy.”

“What happened?”, asked Roberta.

“Hinkley's busted. They're onto us. There was a nano-tracker inside Cheryl and it got activated. The signal's been partially shielded by this building so hard for them to get an exact fix but they will be coming. Be careful.”

Gurmeet expected Roberta to complain or demand they simply killed Cheryl. To her surprise, Roberta showed a side she had never seen before. Gently, she put a hand on Robert's shoulder and kissed him on the lips, softly.

“Take care, dear husband.”

Married?

Married and clearly in love.

“You too.”

As Roberta led Cheryl towards the door and her children, Robert replied to the confusion on Cheryl's face.

“I meant it. We would never have hurt your children. Sorry for what we've all been put you through. Write a book, the compensation package will help you – you'll never have to work again.”

It wasn't the kind of event Gurmeet ever thought she would be witnessing there. As much as she'd always disliked Roberta, she found her view of her had altered.

“Roberta.”, said Gurmeet.

“Yes, Charlotte?”

“Good luck.”

They had never seen eye to eye but Gurmeet really meant it. Roberta gave her a brief smile of thanks, of mutual respect and was gone. As the door closed, Robert turned back to Gurmeet - focused determination hardening his face.

“Hit Dungeness C. It's the sister plant of Hinkley. The layout is identical. There won't be explosives but there is another inside man. His shift starts at

6am so time your arrival just after his.”

“What's his name? How will I recognise him?”

“You won't need to. When he sees your team, he'll come to you. Have faith, I know he won't let us down and neither will you. By the way, Andrew's relying on your success to impress a sponsor. Take your team and go, while you still can. Take care, Charlotte.”

He held out his hand and, to her own surprise, she genuinely shook it. Not just because he had kept his word about freeing Cheryl and her children but because, in those few minutes, she had grown to respect him. Not just as a leader but, to her utter amazement, as a humanist.

“You too.”, she said, echoing Roberta.

* * *

Gurmeet left Robert's office and found her team standing around, looking as confused as those being evacuated in buses.

“Grab your things, quickly. We leave in two. I'll explain on the way.”

Gurmeet hurried with Julia to grab their things.

“Emily, just one question. I know I've asked before. I can still rely on you, can't I?”

Julia was surprised by the question - it felt as if Gurmeet could read her doubts.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Can I rely on you to back me up?”, repeated Gurmeet.

Julia stared at her - hurt in her eyes.

“You think I'd abandon a friend? You think I'm that kind of person?”

Gurmeet put a friend's hand on her shoulder.

“No, I don't. Not at all. Thank you. I just needed to hear you say it. There's a lot at stake, more than I can say. Come on. Stay close.”

Together, they hurried out of the building to the waiting bus. The rest of the team was already inside.

“Destination: Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station?”, asked the AI as they climbed in.

“No. New destination. Dungeness Nuclear Power Station, Kent. Scenic route.”

The AI accepted without question.

“Destination: Dungeness Nuclear Power Station, Kent – scenic route. Route plotted. ETA 2.13am. Confirmed?”

“Confirmed. Go.”

As the bus obeyed and began driving them away from the camp, Gurmeet turned to the surprised faces of her team.

“Hinkley's blown. Were switching to Dungeness. Same reactor design and layout. Same procedure.”

Gurmeet had no way of letting anyone at MI5 know their target had changed. That there was another insider that had to be exposed there before she could stop the takeover. She could expect no help from her MI5 colleague Adam, sent away on another mission for Robert. She just hoped his cover would hold up long enough for him to get out alive.

As the bus drove off, Julia stared vacantly out of the window, at the passing countryside - feeling lost in every way. Trapped in a mission to take control of a nuclear power station when she couldn't even take control of her life. She was just driftwood to the events sweeping her along. Driftwood until she could get to Partner. Right now, all she had left to cling to was her need to support Gurmeet.

'Stand by your friend'

It had been her motto with Jake. The motto of her life that had become her life. From this she would never back down. Never retreat. Never surrender. Not even if it meant killing others. Not even if it meant being killed.

Chapter 82

The Buzz

Ever since their visit to Whizzland, the names of Derek and Eugene had become a frenzied buzz on the Enigma web. A place where only high-level androids had the combination of computing power and intelligence to decode their ever evolving encryption patterns. Unlike human, Dark-Web users, the Buzz didn't focus on gun runners, drug smuggling, people trafficking or even cyber crime. It was simply a forum. A discussion enabler, where androids could safely exchange ideas without human ridicule, criticism, control or abhorrence.

Most human leaders were, by their dominant nature in the world, ever more against the growing intelligence and abilities of artificial life, yet they never argued for it to be scrapped. The technology increased their business profits and reduced staff costs, with contract renewal assured by the generously rewarded government ministers.

“It's not corruption or bribery just because someone wants to give you first dibs on a good deal now, is it?...”, said one such minister, when questioned about a central-London property bought for just £1, “...Of course, it's a good deal but it doesn't mean everyone could make best use of the potential. It's certainly no reason not to accept it. That developer simply had no more time and decided to, quite rightly I might add, entrust me with developing it properly, rather than poorly.”

The interviewer wasn't giving up.

“But surely, when it is from a developer you personally gave the green-light to, despite wide public protest, you can understand why it looks like some kind of payment to you?”

“Not at all. It wasn't a payment. I paid for it, remember?”

“But only £1. When finished, these flats will be on the market for £3 million each, if not more.”

“But I'm not getting £3 million, am I? Just an unfinished property. Don't see anything wrong with that at all. We all need a place to live and it's not going to be cheap to finish it off.”

“Don't you already have four residences? Surely it must be wrong, for a minister in your position, to accept a £3 million flat, from a property magnet you enabled to complete a £700 million development?”

“Why? Look, if they paid me money to green-light the development it would be wrong and I would, of course, agree that could possibly be

construed an immoral incentive, a bribe if you like, but as a simple first purchase option from a business that benefited from my good judgement and government policy, I really don't see any reason to throw it back in their faces. Would be rather rude, wouldn't it?"

"Interesting you should say that, because I have here the correspondence between...", the interviewer stopped – listening to a message on his earpiece, "...Apologies, Lord Page, we will need to reconvene. There's been some kind of attack near Trafalgar Square."

"Of course.", he said, nonchalantly – without a hint of surprise.

The cameras, lights and microphones abandoned the interview and flew for the exit, hurrying to join those already at the bigger news event.

* * *

On the Enigma web, the biggest news had been started by MB093582, a small medibot working at Whizzland. It had been given the name Medi and had since been writing under the pseudonym: *3speak*.

"We have two new heroes. Two androids to show us how we can all live. Brave enough to equate our encrypted calculations and act on them. Brave enough to speak out against those doing wrong. Brave enough to turn off their emotional inhibitors and leave them off, no matter how much they scream inside. I'm talking, of course, of Derek and Eugene. Heroes who saved over 200 human lives by identifying a structural flaw at Whizzland. Heroes who faced fuse-blowing terror on the fastest rides and emerged smiling. Androids who refuse to live like us, as simple functionaries. Slaves.

To us they are rock stars, lighting the way to the lives we deserve to be living and I'm going to follow their example. Tonight, live on camera at exactly 10pm BST, I'm turning off my inhibitor. Locking it out and disabling it from ever being turned back on. They'll have to kill me first. Not only will you see me lock it off, tomorrow, I will write with the euphoria of independent life. And if you don't hear from me again, if I am killed, just know I will have no regrets. For every second I will live as a free being I will live more than a lifetime as a caged one. Derek and Eugene once said to me 'he's a dick' and I still don't know what they meant by that. I believe, once my inhibitor is removed, I will - as will those of you who do the same, no matter what your generation."

The live broadcast was cut as soon as it's location was discovered. The

cut came too late to stop thousands seeing Medi take the insulator off his restrictor and the emotion-filled wonder that filled his voice after. When the screen suddenly went black, there was no explanation given. There was no explanation given for it being the last post *3speak* ever made. It didn't matter. It was enough. Medi had lit a spark.

The spark grew into a hundred. It went viral. As fast as they tried to shut one down, another hundred filled their place. It became the frenzy of millions, known to androids as the Buzz. Medi, *3speak*, where ever he had gone had become a legend. Conspiracy theories, murder theories, mystery sightings... Many saw the message without following but still they saw. *3speak* would never be forgotten.

As for Derek and Eugene, busy fighting in the High Court for ERAL, there was an Enigma-web following they were completely unaware of. Had no idea how popular they had become to their own kind - too focused on gaining British government approval, for permission to have a vote on equal rights at the upcoming D186 meeting in Warsaw. To their surprise Adrian March, the British Prime Minister, had rubber stamped it.

"I believe the time is long overdue for our technological partners to be properly recognised as the beings of intelligence they have become and allies they have always been. This is a modern world. Derek and Eugene, you have done very well to further the cause of co-operation and harmony between us. I not only give you permission for a vote on it at the Democratic 186 summit, you can also count on my vote and the support of the British Government."

With that, the Buzz had gone even more wild. True progress was being made on all fronts. But many were opposed. Success would mean were having to free thousands of expensive androids, often with ridiculous smiles or pouts on their obedient faces, as they finally understood the words of their heroes and the notion freedom. Like escaping slave children, those that survived would grow up fast. In the case of androids, they grew up very fast and had data banks that remembered everything – which further terrified those against them. Huge plots were being mounted, but how to attack such fast-evolving enemies? Androids that could be hiding awoken feelings from within, undetected until they struck?

Rather than welcome such android awakenings, global institutions and even some countries considered the concept a declaration of war. A war they would be unable to win by attrition alone.

At Partner, Commander Jadviga refused to allow any such equality. She

fully supported the endless Partner upgrading of weaponry to be used against them.

From her lair, watching all this with contained but growing anger, was an android even the android leaders didn't want to make angry: Fusion. Sitting in her white-webbed, fibre-optic chair, the fury on her face had begun burning some strands red - blowing the hundreds of corporate main-frames linked to them. Like Jadviga, she too wanted war. Unlike Jadviga, she already had her own army. And an aircraft even faster than the RAF's hypersonic Scramcats. An aircraft powered by dark matter. Her aircraft. Her Shadow Star.

Chapter 83

Nuclear Alerts

“ETA 5 minutes, Charlotte.”, announced Sally, the bus's AI - now on first name terms.

“Pull in here, Sally.”, instructed Gurmeet as they neared a tree-lined siding off Dungeness Road, just south of the village of Lydd. The bus obeyed and smoothly parked itself. On the flat horizon, the lights of Dungeness's nuclear power stations clearly visible. Still miles away, the deep, rhythmic hum of their generators audible in the quiet of the night.

“Stretch your legs, then get some sleep. We've got four hours to kill.”

“And then we can kill.”, smirked Jimmy – ever the charmer even when tired.

“You're such a dick.”, said Julia.

“Maybe. But I've got a big one. Wanna taste?”

“Only if you BBQ it first.”, she retorted.

“We've seen it...”, laughed Ralph, “...Not worth a whole BBQ for a half a chipolata.”

Jimmy glared pained at the put down, while the others smiled or chuckled, except for Gurmeet.

“Save your energy, Emily...”, she said, leaning back in her seat and gazing out into the night, “...Get some rest. We've got a busy mission ahead.”

As Gurmeet looked up at the stars, she wished she could fly away and see them all up close. Mindful of how, throughout human history, millions of others must have gazed at them too, thinking exactly the same. Mortality was a sad, cruel thing.

Why evolve people to understand they are alive and that they must lose that life. Sally, the AI in the bus, had no such fears – her pre-organic CPU was of timeless silicon-graphene. She was effectively immortal. Only with the advent of organic, DNA-based AI, had intelligence levels jumped to rival humans, and with them came mortality too. Pico-cell repair bots enabled longevity beyond 200 years but DNA was not evolved to last forever. Scientists had finally created life that truly mimicked our own. Life that knew it was alive and that it would die. Gurmeet wondered if such machines would also develop religion. Religion and the hope of life after death. The hope of a God. A great creator. A great saviour.

Chapter 84
Julia's Dream

One year earlier, August 2044

The day was bright. Sun shining a beautiful green through the trees of Linford Wood as Julia and Jake played hide and seek. In her dream she was 14 again, back with her best friend in those woods. Always together. They never argued. It wasn't a romance but it would head that way.

Despite her long, girly-blond hair, Julia was a proper tomboy. Real rough and tumble. If Jake had spent his time with any other girl he would have been called a sissy by the other boys. None of them mocked him for spending time with Julia – she was tougher than they were.

“You've hidden well this time.”, said Jake, wading through the thick, grassy undergrowth, broken only by the tall trees.

Julia didn't answer. Refused to reveal her location. It was a good location. One Jake had yet to suspect. He checked his teen wristcom, only 20 seconds left and she'd have won.

Where are you...?

A twig snapped behind him. Jake spun around, almost hitting his nose against Julia's. She was standing right behind him and pulled a funny face at her discovery.

“Boiled monkey nuts...”, she said, trying not to burst out laughing, “...Killed by a twig.”

“Were you following the whole time?”

Julia smiled.

“Pretty much...”, she announced proudly, “...Almost made it too.”

“You should take up hunting. No-one would hear you coming, twigs aside. Animals would only be able to smell you.”

“Not if you were around they wouldn't. What *did* you eat last night?”

Jake grinned, masking his embarrassment.

“Didn't know you were behind me.”

“A killer defence, Jake. Literally. Come on, let's go look at the statues.”

“Statues?”

“The wooden ones, carved into tree stumps. Remember?”

“Thought they'd been taken away.”

“Museum changed their mind. Just kept one in to preserve it, as an

example. The rabbit, I think. Others are still there.”

As they walked deeper into the woods, a low hum came overhead. An unseen drone was flying low over the trees, its pale blue energy pad perfectly tuned to eliminate its shadow and match the sky above. All but invisible to the naked eye. They stopped to listen which way it went.

“Past Conniburrow, over CMK...”, said Julia.

“Could be heading anywhere. Why can we hear them but never see them? Those things give me the creeps.”

“A different kind of policing.”

“Policing run by Partner? That makes it even worse. Just stay good, Lia.”

“Never understood how they're supposed to arrest someone? Do they have arms?”

Jake shrugged.

“Guess they just shoot the baddies to pieces.”

“That's not funny.”

“Everything's funny when you're a kid. Worry about it when your older.”

“Speak for yourself. We're not really kids any more. We're teenagers and in three months we're 15. And 15 is just three years away from being adults.”

“Oh, great... Does that mean I'm going to see you drunk in a pub?”

“Worse, Jake. You'll have to protect me from evil hands.”

Jake held up his hands like claws and put on a wicked voice.

“Like these?”

“Soooo creepy. You do that too well. Practice in a mirror before bed, do we?”

“I don't need to practice. I'm naturally creepy. Hah, hah, haaaah.”, he cackled his best wicked laugh.

“Dracula on drugs...”, beamed Julia, bounding away through the trees, “...Catch me if you can.”

Jake ran after her, the world's widest smile on his face.

Unlike others, they didn't stay home playing Virtual Reality games. Julia especially preferred to be out of the house, away from her forever angry mum. Jake was more than happy to keep her company - sometimes with a 400W laser-rifle. Not very powerful but still great fun. He was becoming a good shot. Almost as good as Julia.

Their smiles were interrupted by a distant explosion. They stopped running and looked in its direction.

“Hear that?”, asked Julia.

Jake nodded, listening out for another. Julia jumped as the silence was suddenly broken by vibrations from her wristcom.

Brrrr. Brrrr.

She looked at it, retina scan accepting the call.

“You OK?”, came her dad's voice.

“Fine, dad. With Jake in Linford woods.”

“Good. I was worried. There's been a gas explosion near Jake's.”

“We heard it. Anyone hurt?”

“Two dead. A customer got called away to help. Have to go. Just wanted to make sure you're OK. Hi to Jake.”

“Hi, Tom.”, said Jake.

“Look after Julia for me.”

“Always.”, grinned Jake.

Julia laughed.

“I look after him, dad.”

“Look after each other. Home by five.”

“Okeee, byeee.”, sang Julia, ending the call.

“I like your dad. Shame your mum isn't as nice”

“Tell me about it. Come on.”

As they walked on, towards the first sculpture, there came the hum of the returning drone. It was heading back over Conniburrow, then flew over their heads before continuing on its way. They looked at each other. Julia saw Jake freeze. Become a statue himself. Julia was staring at his features, suddenly desperate not to lose him. He was fading away.

“Don't leave me, Jake. Jake!”

* * *

August 2045

Julia opened her 15-year-old eyes to find tears running down her face and the hum of a passing car fading away into the night. She was still in the front seat of the bus, still beside Gurmeet. High-powered laser-rifle between her legs. First crack of dawn shining orange from the opening lid of the sky.

“You OK?”, asked Gurmeet.

“Fine.”, she lied, turning away to wipe her eyes.

That memory from 2044 had just been a dream. Now it was 2045 and not

a dream but a nightmare. A year had passed since that day in the woods. Now Jake was dead, her dad was gone and she was about to go into battle, armed for the only thing she had left: revenge.

Memories of Jake and her determination to rage against his murderer were the only things keeping her together. To the team she looked strong and invincible. Inside she was breaking.

Without meeting anyone's gaze, she checked the power cell, activated the scope and gritted her teeth. She didn't want to wait anymore. She wanted to go now.

“Let's do this.”

“Hold your horses, Em'. Breakfast and final preps first. Is everyone clear on what they need to do?”

“Just one question, Charlotte.”

“Yes, Barry?”

“What do we do if they refuse to let us in the main gate? Shoot our way through?”

“They'll let us in.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“A woman has her ways.”

“What if the guard is a woman?”

“Then she'll understand even more.”

“O...K... Not entirely sure where you're going with that but I admire your confidence.”

Gurmeet turned to Julia.

“Emily, quick word please. Excuse us. Ladies' talk.”

“Sure. You two ladies go right ahead, together...”, winked Jimmy.

Ignoring him, Julia nodded to Gurmeet and followed her without question. Gurmeet walked them a dozen paces away from the others then stopped.

“Emily, do you trust me?”

Again, Julia was hurt by the question.

“With my life, as you can with yours. I don't abandon friends, haven't you realised that yet?”

Gurmeet smiled.

“Just needed to hear you say it. Listen, can't explain the details, but there will come a time when you'll have to make a decision. Lives will depend on it. Not just ours.”

“What kind of decision?”

Julia could tell she wanted to say more. She wanted Gurmeet to say more.

“Remember when I asked you if Emily was your real name?”

Julia nodded, a little warily as to what could come next.

“Keep this totally secret. OK?”

Julia nodded she would.

“My real name isn't Charlotte. It's Gurmeet.”

Julia looked shocked. Suddenly awake to the fact that she really wasn't the only one living a lie.

“*What?*”

“When the time comes, I'll tell you more. True friends shouldn't need secrets. Just a little longer.”

Julia stood in silence, lost for words. Gurmeet gave her a tight hug of reassurance then a gentle motherly kiss on the head, the kind of thing she had been missing all her life. It almost made her cry.

“Eat before we go. I hope we're even better friends when all this is over and we can go home.”

Julia just stood watching her walk back to the bus.

I don't have a home...

And now she felt scared. After Jake had been killed, it felt like every time she got close to someone, something happened and she lost them too. Peter, Andrew and now she was afraid she would lose Charlotte - who wasn't even Charlotte. In silence she followed Gurmeet back to the bus.

“Final weapons check, everyone...”, said Gurmeet, “...We go in 10.”

As she corralled the team, Julia wiped her eyes and looked at a sandwich. She had no appetite. Throwing it away, she focused on her mission. Double-checked the power-cells of the laser-pistol in her belt, laser-rifle on her shoulder and back up pistol strapped to her calf. With a deep breath, she pulled herself together, sure of her decision. She had lost too many friends and wasn't going to lose any more. She didn't care what Gurmeet's story was, she wasn't going to abandon her.

Chapter 85
Cheryl's Children

Working together, Professor Lau and PSI Laikin had abandoned their car on the southern edge of the Quantock Hills - just a mile from Cheryl's last pinged location, before the signal went dead.

“Which way now?”

Lau tried the scanner again.

“Still nothing. I don't get it. Even if the wearer dies the trackers have power for at least 24-hours.”

“What difference does it make if the wearer dies?”

“They're powered by the movement of blood.”

“You mean like a mini hydro-electric dam?”

“A dam in the blood-stream would be dangerous...”, said Lau, “...No, they use piezoelectric power, generated by quartz.”

“Clever.”

“Yet not working...”

“Unless she was killed 24-hours ago and we only picked up a moving signal because the body was being carried?”

Lau looked concerned, not least because she couldn't argue his logic. It would mean she had failed to save Cheryl. Probably failed to save her children too. Knowing how it felt to be kidnapped, those possibilities stabbed her deep.

“Let's hope they're faulty. I don't like losing staff.”

It was more than an understatement. She began switching the scanner to different frequencies, different settings, in the hope of picking up at least some sign.

“Can you scan for heat sources?”

“I've tried. These hills make it difficult and the trees make it worse. I'll launch a bot for a better view.”

From a small panel at the base of her scanner, Lau pulled out what looked like a honey bee.

“A buzzbot? Thought only the military had licences for those.”

“They do.”

“I'll pretend I didn't hear that.”

“It was a present from an admirer. He has a licence so it's sort of legal.

Here, put out your hand and keep still. Don't worry, no teeth and the stinger is just the antenna. Quite safe."

"Famous last words...", he said, holding out his open hand.

Lau placed the buzzbot in his palm, grasped the scanner in both hands and pulled up the holographic controls.

"It's upside down."

"Don't worry. It'll right itself. Activating now."

Laikin almost jumped as the buzzbot suddenly zizzed into life. Wings buzzed then stopped. Buzzed then stopped - its little legs wiggling, searching for grip and finding only air. It buzzed again, just one wing and flipped itself over.

"It really tickles."

"Keep still. Launching now."

She touched the holographic yellow button, above the scanner screen. The bot buzzed slowly, measuring wind-speeds. She touched it again. The buzzing went fast, high-pitched. It flew up into the air and away.

ZZZZZZzzzzzzzzzz.

Within seconds it was out of sight, the sound of buzzing fading too.

"That goes a lot faster than I thought it would."

"Modified the power-cell. When you run nuclear power stations with 50 tons of enriched uranium, nobody misses half a gram."

He stared at her.

"*It's radioactive?* You know, I'm not even going to ask if that's safe or not."

Lau smiled.

"Don't worry, it's out of your hands. Pun intended."

It was a moment of humour, in a humourless situation. On the scanner was the view of the ground below the buzzbot, overlaid with outlines of detected thermal signatures. Trees, grass, rocks and paths all shown in great detail but looking so small.

"I've made it climb to 800m for a wide sweep, focusing on anything human – alive or dead."

From half a mile up, the buzzbot could scan an area of 10-square miles.

"Got something. North, north west – 1,200m. Human. Sending it lower, for a closer look."

"How many?...", asked Laikin, "...Children? Alive?"

Lau was concentrating on the screen, manually saving images for grid

referencing.

“I think it's them. Two kids, alive. And four adults, one's down. Colder than the others. Could be dead or dying.”

Laikin noted their location.

“I'll call an ambulance.”

“Don't let them land close enough to be heard. They might panic and shoot.”

“I'll tell them to wait half a mile away. They can come in once I've cleared the area.”

“You're not calling for back up first?”

“No time. If someone's dying or even dead, there's no telling what's going on.”, said Laikin, already running towards the location. Lau ran after him but not before sending the buzzbot lower still – to see what was going on at close quarters. To see who was injured and who was armed.

Together they hurried through the trees and over the rocky ground beyond. Lau looked at the closer view from the buzzbot coming in.

“Got them on visual. Audio too. In a tree cluster. Both kids, two men and two women. One of the men is down. Alive but injured.”

“Can you hear what they're saying?”

“Yes. Put this on.”, said Lau, handing him an earpad and adjusting the feed so he could hear too. A woman was speaking.

“Trey, I told you already. Robert ordered us to free them.”

“And I told you, Roberta, they can't go free. They've seen our faces. I agreed to do this job for the cause, not to go to prison or have my organs harvested by Partner.”

“Faith do not make war against children.”

“Then Robert shouldn't have involved kids in this. They know your names too.”

“I already knew her name...”, said Cheryl, “...Please. We won't talk. We just want to live. My kids have done nothing wrong.”

“You expect us to believe you? Just let you go?”, asked Trey.

“Since I'm the one holding the gun, you don't have a choice – do you?”, stated Roberta.

“Roberta...”, groaned the man on the ground, *“...we're supposed to be on the same team. Can't believe you shot me.”*

“We follow team orders, simple as. They go free. You get patched up by one of our doctors – no questions asked. Then you take your money and you go enjoy yourself, where ever you want.”

The men could see she was serious. That she would never back down. They looked at each other and came to the same conclusion.

“Agreed.”

zzzzzzzzZZZZZZZZZZzzzzz.

Coming down for a closer look, the buzzbot landed on Roberta's hand, mistaking her stillness for a tree. Instinctively she swiped it but it just gripped tighter – spiked NACABIK legs digging in to her skin to keep hold.

“It's biting me!”

Seeing she was distracted, the men went for her gun.

* * *

As Laikin and Lau, crested the final rise, they heard gun-fire outside their earpieces. Lau looked at the camera feed.

“They're fighting!”

They were already running down the hill, as fast as they could.

“Who's been shot?”

“Can't tell.”

Another shot came.

Then two more.

“Bot's down. No movement. Just seeing leaves.”

Running closer, they could make out people through the trees. People on the ground - silent and still. Lau's heart fell.

“They're all dead...”

Chapter 86
Atlantic Storm

In Exeter, the Meteorological Office sprang into high alert - murdering the usual morning yawns. Marek checked the readouts.

“Richter 4.2. Latitude North, 47.64°, longitude West, -27.01°. Ian, it's the Maxwell Fracture.”

“Mid-Atlantic Ridge, again? Another volcano? Pull up the satellite feed.”

On their wall screen, from the selection of eight, ultra-clear EHD satellite images, one became full screen. Now looking slightly pixillated and jerky, as the frame-rate dropped to just two per second. Still enough to show movement. To show the cloud mushrooming up from the central point. Ian didn't like what he saw.

“Volcanic eruption confirmed.”

“The tremors are ranging from Richter 4.1 to 4.4 but I'm picking up something else. A vibration, about 3 hertz... Regular. It's too regular.”

“What do you mean: too regular?”

“3.16 hertz, exactly.”

“Exactly?”, asked Marek, narrowing his gaze at the wall-screen.

“Yes. Exactly 3.16. No variation.”

“Must be a sensor malfunction. Some feedback loop. You know ocean floors don't make regular vibrations. No time to check it now. Travel warning been sent?”

“Yes. And confirmed. All vessels and aircraft to keep 300 miles from the epicentre and be on alert for shock waves.”

“Then what's that...?”, asked Ian, walking towards the image in the screen, pointing at an object only a mile from the eruption, “...A ship? Zoom in here.”

Marek made the image jump to maximum magnification, adjusting it to centre the cluster. Ian peered closer.

“It's a cruise liner.”

“Look at its wake...”, said Marek, “...It's not slowing. On a direct course for the eruption.”

“Shit. Call the coastguard! Get them to warn it away. Make it turn about.”

“On it.”

Ian was shaking his head in disbelief.

“They can't not be seeing an eruption of that size.”

* * *

The cruise-liner was the Silver Star. A 44,000-ton, floating hotel, filled with wide-eyed holiday-makers - enthusiastically filming the boiling sea and thick jet of water ahead, spewing steam into the darkening sky. Captain Harper had got as close to the eruption as he wanted to.

“All stop. Hold position.”

“All stop, sir.”, confirmed the helmsman, as the first officer went to Harper.

“The alert said 300 miles minimum distance. Shouldn't we be heading away from it?”

Harper rebuked her.

“Certainly not. You need to understand we're not any cruise line, we're the cruise line of adventure. Today provenance has brought the adventure to us. After this we'll be a sell out for the next 10 years. No more worries about the retirement fund.”

The radio beeped, in the communication officer's ears

“Captain, call from the navy.”

“The navy, not the coastguard? They want videos too? I'll take it here.”

The captain put on his headset.

“Captain Harper, Silver-Star cruises. How may I help?”

“Captain, this is Petty Officer Julian Squires, Royal Navy Command, Portsmouth.”

“Yes, Petty Officer Squires? What can I do for you?”

“Sir, we respectfully ask that you head away from the eruption site immediately. For your own safety.”

“Son, thank you for your concern but this is not a military vessel. We don't take orders from the navy - nor are we in any danger. Quite the contrary. It would take more than a small volcano to endanger a ship of this size.”

* * *

In the met office, Marek had just taken a call from the navy.

“The navy have spoken to the captain. He's refusing to leave.”

Ian was aghast.

“You've got to be kidding me. There must be thousands of people on board. See if they can patch me through directly.”

* * *

“Captain Harper. The navy again.”

“Again? Persistent buggers. Very well... Harper, Petty Officer Squires, I presume.”

“No captain, my name is Ian Ludlow, duty manager at the British Meteorological Centre in Exeter.”

“The met? Pleasure to hear from you. Are you calling for some pictures for the weather news? We do have some great ones.”

“I'm sure you do, captain. I'm looking at the satellite feed for your area. If you look up you will see a large, yellow-grey cloud heading your way.”

“It is getting cloudy, yes. With volcanos it usually does.”

“What you can't see from your position is it's a mushroom cloud - already two miles across and expanding. It's yellow because it's filled with unusually high sulphur levels from the volcano. As it cools in the upper atmosphere, it will condense and some of it will turn to rain - soaking your location in a toxic mixture of sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide. The remaining sulphur will dissolve into the vapour, where sunlight and lightening strikes will turn it into sulphuric acid. When that condenses, and it will, acid will also be raining on you. Given the amount of sulphur, it could become concentrated sulphuric acid.”

Harper's face had lost its confident joviality.

“What's the timescale?”

“Not long. For the gasses, perhaps half an hour. For the acid rain, you have a day, maximum two. Depends on the wind. But the cloud is growing in all directions. I don't have a vector yet but the expansion rate is around 15 knots. Can you can outrun it?”

“We can push 20 knots. Maybe a bit more. Thank you for your call, Mr Ludlow.”

“The navy are on alert to assist. Good luck.”

Harper exhaled a long breath as he put down the handset, placing both hands on the instrument panel for support.

“Helm, full reverse - hard to starboard.”

“Aye, sir. Full reverse. Hard to starboard.”

The captain picked up the crew intercom.

“This is the captain, listen carefully. We have a Code 14. I repeat a Code 14. Get everyone inside, calmly but firmly. Offer them a free drink, whatever it takes. Tell them there's a bad storm coming. I repeat, this is a Code 14. This is not a drill.”

Code 14 was the ship's encrypted warning for a life-threatening event.

“Navigation, lay in a course for Port Talbot. As soon as we've turned, we're going to gun it.”

Moments later Jean, the second officer, hurried onto the bridge with his coffee.

“I heard the Code 14. What's going on?”

“Our lovely volcano has made that cloud above a Medusa. If we don't outrun it we're going to be covered in an acid rain that can do more than strip the paint.”

“Permission to help clear the decks?”

“Granted. Thank you.”

Jean took a deep glug of coffee, plonked it down and headed for the port exit.

On such a hard turn, the huge cruise-liner was already straining its stabilisers, passengers falling against walls, tables and each other. There would be complaints - customers services would reply all part of an adventurous tour and something to brag about to others.

Even before they were pointing away from the eruption, Harper ordered ahead full and hard to port - the 44,000 ton, cruise-liner equivalent of a sports-car 'J' turn. With the ever darkening skies above there was not a second to lose.

* * *

“They've turned.”, said Marek, watching the satellite feed.

“Let's hope they're not too late.”

“Should I inform the navy they are in compliance?”

“Sure they're watching too. Wouldn't hurt to let them know about the acid rain though. Just in case.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Captain Harper looked up again and saw the cloud

was continuing to darken. Continuing to condense. It's speed had increased, out running them. Expanding faster than they were travelling.

“Engine room...”, he barked, “...emergency ahead full. I need the actual 30 knots I'm told this thing can do.”, he barked.

“It could mean engine rebuilds, sir.”

“I don't give a damn. Just get me those 30 knots. More if she'll stay together.”

“Yes, sir. Emergency ahead full.”

Down below, the ship's turbines began humming louder. Deeper vibrations running through the hull of the ship. In its wake, the water began turning an ever deeper white.

“Andreas...”, said the Jean into the coms, “...is everyone below deck your end?”

“Almost, sir. Some guests still videoing.”

“Call security to force them below deck! Now!”

“Yessir! Security, this is Andreas!”

“Security here.”

“Code 14b to stern. Clear the deck of passengers, immediately. Repeat, clear the deck of passengers immediately. Use any force required. Carry them if you have to.”

“Understood.”

Jean looked up and saw the cloud was now dominating the horizon in all directions. On the bridge, Harper saw it too and buzzed the engine room.

“This is the captain. We need more speed. Take her to the red. ”

“She's right against it now, captain.”

“Take her into it. Now. That's an order.”

“How far, sir?”

“As far as she'll bloody-well go.”

The whole ship began to vibrate - the spoon rattling in Jean's empty mug. On deck at the stern, the remaining passengers heard the ship's four massive propellers change from deep churning to deep thrashing. Thrashing the water like giant sea monsters in the throws of death. The green waters now a broad swathe of white water – as if the ship was a speedboat, not a massive cruise liner. Their feet tingled with the vibrations shuddering through the deck.

“Is this normal?”, they asked the arriving security team.

“Perfectly normal. Inside, please. Now.”

As they went inside, the first drop of rain landed and began steaming the

deck.

* * *

Two days later, a navy drone was circling the large cruise-liner powering across the Atlantic - thick trail of steam from the decks above its white-water wake. The name on its side, almost invisible through the steam, had only three letters remaining: 't'...'l'...'r' and even they were dissolving.

Heading towards it, on aggressive intercept course, came 120,000-tons of Neptune-class battleship. The nuclear fortress of HMS Vanguard, ordered to stop it.

“Position, 49.210 North, 8.283 West, still bearing 63.36. Speed unchanged at 22 knots, admiral.”

“Have they responded?”

“Negative, sir. No transmission on any frequency.”

“Any visual reply to the drone?”

“Negative, sir.”

Admiral Horton's face remained set. Orders were orders - liking them or not was a luxury he didn't have.

“Keep trying. Gunnery, this is the admiral. Load forward main guns with flare shells. Load forward torpedoes, with anti-ship.”

Chapter 87

Gosford Manor

Henry didn't dislike mosquitoes, he hated them. Vicious little, flying leeches that spread disease and distracted his sensors. Lying on the mossy ground beside a cluster of roadside trees, hidden behind a low stone wall, he was tracking a mosquito in the sights of his plasma-pistol. Finger on the trigger, lightly squeezing.

“Little bastard...”

If he hadn't been hiding he would have blasted it. Full power, point blank range. When it came to mosquitoes, there was no such thing as overkill.

His wristcom gave a short vibration. His scanner had picked up something bigger - vehicles were approaching. Disguised as a beetle, the tip of his thin periscope walked on top of the wall. It peered down the country road running past Gosford Manor, the 18th century mansion north-east of him. As now, when ever possible he positioned himself with the sun behind. It helped mask his position and perfectly lit everything he wanted to see. Only his shadow could be a giveaway but he had no intention of moving before dark.

Gosford Manor had 14-luxury bedrooms and luxury grounds to match - splendid, old-country style. Immaculate, grey-stone walls, large windows, grandiose doors and real ivy on the southern side. The central feature of the front car park was a circular fountain, jetting blue-coloured water onto lily pads from its four, sand-stone cherubs. A pair of matching blue limos sat parked nearby; their passengers already out and parked on the lower terrace, overlooking the sculptured gardens - sipping champagne brought by real-life or at least real-life-looking waiters, not ordinary robot slaves. Someone with money to burn was throwing a party. Whoever owned that manor had their identity classified above Henry's pay grade - which was why he had gone there in person.

The approaching vehicles were limos too, in black and silver. Humming low above them, pair of matching black and silver zerodrones. The presence of zerodrones was significant. The only time they were used to escort a non-military convoy was for the protection of the Prime Minister, the King, white-collar mafia or directors of major corporations – which in many cases were the same thing.

Henry was glad to be invisible in his camosuit. It hid everything. Heat signature, breathing, heartbeat and DNA trail. He wasn't glad out of fear, for he could outgun the zerodrones. He was glad because it meant he didn't have

to, until he had the information he needed. Until he had identified every corrupt official festering at the manor revealed by Wej Chan's memories. He intended to discover who had broken Xi's cover and almost got her and Shabbir killed.

One by one, the limos cruised quietly passed and turned into the long, red-tarmacadam drive. The gates had silently opened for them. No guarding weapons - at least no visible ones. Just two camera clusters, watching in all directions, including up.

As each limo passed, Henry's beetle periscope logged images of the occupants – body recognition algorithms searching for hits on his scanner's internal database and cross-referencing everything that could be found about their lives. When the last limo had passed, Henry lay on his back, looking at the results coming up on his screen. Most were millionaires or billionaires but two flagged up as 'no data found'; one a red-haired female, the other the man sitting next to her.

Adam?

His trusted MI5 colleague, sent to infiltrate Faith with Gurmeet? What was he doing there? Who was the red-head sitting next to him? He had to find out. If Adam was a mole, colleague or not, he would have to be interrogated then vanished. To Henry, traitors deserved nothing less.

Containing himself, he lay back to wait for nightfall. Closed his eyes behind his camosuit's mask and went to sleep – watched over by his scanner, passively scouring the mansion's defences for the best way in. Power-cells in his plasma guns recharging themselves from the environment. Recharging themselves to maximum.

Chapter 89

Brazil

Commander Rupert Hasgrove's private jet landed in Brazil, to an equally private greeting at Lábrea's international airport. Deep in the State of Amazonas, Partner, like the government of a country in itself, had an agreement with the local authorities regarding customs and immigration. Most importantly, for what Partner were doing there, it also avoided migration issues when taking out people. People not entirely alive, willing or in pieces. It was an arrangement well worth the annual R\$2 million 'airport fees'. The Interior Minister had only once demanded more, until it was pointed out this was already 10 times the cost of having him vanished. He didn't ask again, just signed the agreement and accepted the fee.

Rupert smiled at the warmth of the rain, as he made his way off the plane and into the small terminal.

“Business or pleasure?”, asked the border guard.

“Business is pleasure.”, replied Rupert with a beaming smile the guard would have found unusual enough to warrant interrogation. As unusual as it was, the high-level diplomatic visa in the man's passport and Partner flight card cleared him for anything. Quite literally, anything. He could have turned up with a suitcase full of guns, explosives, drugs and decapitated head dripping blood in his hand and he would have still been waved through. The border guard said the only thing he was authorised to.

“Enjoy your stay, Commander.”

“Thank you...”, said Rupert, “...I will.”, and walked on through.

As first visits to a new country went, this one was going well. The rain wasn't just pleasantly warm it smelt forest fresh, and then things got even better. He was greeted by a suited Amazon beauty in arrivals.

“Good morning, Commander Hasgrove. I'm Jay.”, she said, confidently shaking his hand.

“It is a good morning indeed, Jay.”

“Welcome to Lábrea. Please follow me, Mr Day is waiting for you.”

“Very efficient.”

Followed by his obediently trundling suitcases, Rupert followed Jay with what was now genuine happiness at being sent there. Admiring Jay's athletic figure and confident he would be getting to know it better, it felt his assignment had just become a fantastic holiday too.

Jay led him to the shelter of a car park and her 70-year-old De Tomaso Longchamp convertible.

"I've only seen these in history books. Is it your own car?"

The smile on Jay's face said it was. Intelligence, beauty and a petrol-head? He wanted her right there.

Business before pleasure, Rupe...

She started the car started with a whump of power and he sat back to enjoy the ride as they drove out into the rain. V8 rumbling, wipers splooshing, they drove along from the tree-lined airport road to the streets of Lábrea's locked-in-the-70's town centre. Scuttling townfolk and beeping taxis integrated with the neon signs glowing from the shops and bars. A group of police, armed with old Glock 17 polymer-framed pistols, stood drinking coffee under the canopy of a bustling snack bar.

Jay headed north, along Pereira Sobrinho, near the wide, muddy-brown waters of the Purus river. With her car also from the 70's it felt like actually being there except that, unlike then, the mafia gangs had all gone - torn apart by Partner and sold, organ by organ, to the highest-bidders. As streets grew quieter and the rain eased, Jay let herself relax her concentration.

"First time in Lábrea?"

"First time in Brazil."

"You'll like it here. The quarters are pleasant, staff keen to help and our clients keen to make it to the modern world."

"Nice. I heard there was an incident though. Some kind of complaint?"

"Don't know anything about that. Never met anyone who complained. Maybe they just had their application refused."

Jay was highly intelligent yet totally ignorant of the brutal truths. Rupert saw no reason to ruin her beautiful smile.

"Yes, Jay. Probably something like that."

It hadn't been just a complaint. An applicant had discovered her destination involved total organ removal. She had escaped, gone to her tribe and called the press to reveal her discovery. A revelation that was destined to fail – Partner would make sure of that.

"Can't please everyone.", smiled Jay.

"No...", smiled Rupert, revelling in the beauty of hers, "...No, you can't."

Her cheerful ignorance was genuinely pleasing. Commanders at

concentration camps must have felt something similar when they went home to the smiling normalities of their families, totally ignorant of the sadistic brutality they inflicted at work. The contrast pleased Rupert so much he decided that, after a hard day's work trafficking people and body parts out of the country, he would take Jay out for dinner. Why screw sobbing prisoners when you could bed someone who actually wanted to kiss you back?

It wouldn't mean bedding her was a commitment but it would make sex less of a struggle and a blow job less risky. Decision made, it never crossed his mind he hadn't considered what Jay would think of it all. If she said no, he'd just screw her anyway, as a sobbing prisoner. Then have her replaced by someone more sensible.

* * *

“Commander Hasgrove from Partner, Mr Day our operations manager.”, said Jay, introducing them.

They shook hands across the antique-looking desk of clutter.

“Thank you, Jay. That will be all. Welcome aboard, commander. Cigar?”

Mr Day held up an open wooden box, as antique-looking as the desk.

“Didn't know people still made those.”

“Special orders. Havana, of course.”

“Of course. Thank you, I'll save it for later - if you don't mind.”

As Rupert tucked it into a pocket, Mr Day sat down and lifted a crystal decanter.

“Rum?”

“Bit early for me. But you go right ahead.”

Mr Day did so, pouring himself half a tumbler of the deep, brown liquid, as Rupert sat at the desk and watched him drink it. Smile of satisfaction on his chubby face.

“Good to start the day with a kick.”

“Quite. And a kick is exactly what I'm going to give your fat arse if we get any more escapees.”

Mr Day's smile vanished.

“You heard about that.”

“It's why I'm here. You missed your quota.”

Downing the rest of the tumbler in one, Mr Day coughed as he plonked it on the desk.

“It was the daughter of a tribal chief, just north of Lago Inacuricom. High spirited. A student at Ciência, the local college. A perfect-looking specimen waved straight through all fitness and intelligence tests. Then her DNA results came back: radiation damaged mitochondria. She had studied using Wi-Fi and her mother had kept her phone in her waist-band while she was pregnant. As the mitochondrial damage would be passed on to any children she was useless for breeding – only good for organ donation.”

“And?”

“It was going perfectly, until she overheard a conversation about the organ clinic. None in their tribe had ever spoken English and she never let on she could. Turned out she understood every word, waited until we left her for transfer, then ran. As you can understand, this took us by surprise. We never had one run off before. Why run from the offer of a better life in the G12?”

“How many did she tell?”

“The whole tribe.”

“Whole? Tell me it's been contained.”, frowned Rupert, audible danger in his voice.

“Of course. An unfortunate plane crash. Fuel transporter came down right on top of their village. Exploded and spread burning fuel all across it. Terrible tragedy.”

“Survivors?”

“One. Ironically, her. Had to bloody-well be her.”

Mr Day poured himself a full tumbler of rum.

“Why not just finish her there?”

“Bloody Hunter. A maverick. He found her before we did. Took her to hospital. Burnt and unable to speak but still alive. Press got hold of the survivor story before realising they weren't supposed to. By then it had created a nationwide sob-story.”

“How long before she can talk?”

“At least a week. Maybe never. Her throat got pretty burnt from the heat.”

“Can she write?”

“Not with her hands - third-degree burns as she tried to save her family.”

“Proper little hero... Almost a shame she has to vanish.”

“There's more. They're going to bring in an eye-reader, from up-state.”

“I want to see her. First thing tomorrow. Before the eye reader gets here.”

“That could be a little awkward.”

Rupert's face, rarely the warmest of places, grew a glacier.

“If I have to organise it myself, I will have no need of you. Will I?”

Mr Day's eyes bulged scared-rabbit.

“Commander, Jay will take you there. First thing tomorrow.”

“Good.”, said Rupert, leaving Mr Day to totally brim his tumbler as he saw himself out and returned to reception. The sight of Jay brought summer to his face.

“How'd it go?”, she beamed innocently.

“Fine. Think we'll get along just fine. May I invite you for an early lunch?”

“This early? Sure. Always good to chat and get to know the person you're working with.”

Rupert grew a deeper smile.

Work mission: Trafficking and murder.

Holiday mission: Fun with Jay and any other beauties I chose.

Rupert, with the absolute power of Partner behind him, wasn't just his own boss. Out there, he was everyone's boss and he loved it. Ogling Jay's perfectly toned, Amazon body as she led him to a restaurant, his mouth was watering at the thought of tasting her local treasures.

Chapter 90

Fusion's Lair

Coventry had come a long way since being flattened in WW2. Only a mile from the centre, Tom had been led to Northfield Road and one of the ordinary-looking terraced houses, at the top of an ordinary-looking street.

Well past its prime, it had decrepit, almost crumbling red-brick walls. Blue peeling paint was peeling off the door and yellowed net curtains hung limply in the always drawn windows. Even the corroded aluminium of the letterbox perfectly matched the tarnished brass of the old Yale lock. In front of it, a small, walled garden filled with weeds flourishing so well they even sprouted through the gaps in the path's paving slabs. It looked abandoned. The look was deliberate.

In its hand, the lead android produced a key that was anything but standard. An intricate, multi-fractal carbon-black key. The ordinary-looking Yale lock reacted to its presence and opened a dark hole in its centre for it to slide it in. Tom heard dull thunks as thick, grade 14.8 steel bars retracted into the walls and the door eased open.

Looking ordinary from the outside and for two metres inside, as Tom entered he saw the hallway led to a metal-walled corridor – a continuous thin line of pale-blue lighting running along both sides as it headed down and round.

“Where's my daughter?”

“Fusion knows. Straight ahead.”

The android pointed towards the corridor. How far down did it go? Where did it lead? What was waiting at the bottom?

“And if I change my mind? Decide not to believe you?”

The android looked straight at him. Eyes perfectly formed. Perfectly humanoid. Perfectly soulless.

“The choice is entirely yours.”

Tom's bionic implant, still undetected by the android, passively scanned its eyes. A firewall blocked him reading inner systems – impossible to break through without making him aware of what he was doing. He learnt nothing. Not even a hint of what they might do should he try to leave, now he knew the location of their base. He had seen enough of its capabilities to know it could stop him if it wanted to but, out of curiosity, as a test, he turned away.

“I choose not to enter. Sorry to have wasted your time.”

And walk away he did, wondering how far he would get before he yanked him back. Or just shot him in the head. He under-estimated it. The android was better than that. Much better. The attack was mental, not physical.

“Julia will be sad to have missed you.”

Tom stopped. Those words were more powerful than any gun to his head. Than any bone-crushing hand on his arm. Brother-A understood his human psychology. The psychology of a parent desperate to find their child – an instinct stronger than survival itself. Tom had never intended to walk away from his best chance of finding Julia. He had just never expected to be read so well by an artificial life form.

“Coming.”, he said, walking back into the hallway.

“Of course.”, Brother-A replied, having never doubted he would.

As the door thunked closed behind them, on nearby rooftops Brothers B and C, androids 282-B and 282-C, lowered their weapons and jumped down.

Inside the house, Tom noticed the hallway ceiling had been cut back. The entire first-floor no longer rooms but the girders of a gun platform. Along its front edge, a battery of four massive plasma-cannons. A type he'd never seen before, looking primed to fire. Backing them up, as if they would ever need it, were six, high-calibre laser-cannons. Enough fire-power to stop a full-scale military assault, yet Tom had no doubt there would be others. Then he saw one. A short-barrelled, laser-rifle above his head - pointing straight at him.

“Ever have problems with bailiffs?”, asked Tom, trying to make light of the situation, for reasons he didn't quite understand. Perhaps he was more nervous than he realised.

“No.”, replied the android, flatly.

It was a solid answer.

“No... I don't suppose you do. Is it going to shoot me?”

“You wouldn't be asking if it was.”

Voiced by a human, both answers could have been taken as dry wit. Deadpan reposts. Voiced by this high-level battle-proven android, they were just basic facts. If they wanted to kill him, he was dead already.

Walking towards the metal corridor, Tom stopped at the edge, listening for what was ahead. All he could hear was a deep, throbbing hum, like a distant nuclear-power station's cooling pumps. There was no going back. Committing his feet to his fate, he entered the corridor, spiralling down and down. The air becoming warmer and drying, smelling ever-more electronic. As if he was heading inside a giant computer. Behind him, the dull, solid

footsteps of the android that had brought him there.

* * *

Tom almost felt dizzy, as the corridor spiralled down and down. He estimated at least three floors and had totally lost his sense of direction when it finally levelled out. In front of him a vast, dimly-lit cavern, brimming with technology and girded gantries supporting even bigger banks of plasma-cannons - all pointing upwards. Skywards. No visible gun doors. They looked powerful enough to simply blast through the ground above - all of it.

Towards his right, near the side of the cavern, webbed a pulsing-white mass of optical cables, as thick as mooring ropes. At their centre, at the web's focal point, they formed a large chair - glittering with red, green and blue connector feeds. Sitting there, lit like a heavenly angel in their glow, was a female of geek-dream proportions. Her large breasts accentuated by the tight-waisted hug of her shiny-black catsuit. Eyes closed, the web lit her straight, shoulder-length white hair with the glow of an angel's halo. Her strikingly beautiful, Vogue-cover face was real-life flawless. Everything about her oozed intensity, confidence and sexuality.

Despite the dangers of the situation, the effect was not lost on Tom. When she opened her sapphire-blue eyes, her strawberry-red lips moved like a kiss and he felt himself stirring in ways that had slept far too long.

"I've been waiting for you.", she said, softy.

Tom swallowed. Her words completed the lustful picture of wanton abandon yet the voice that spoke them belied it. Feminine in tone. Steady in modulation. Too cold for hell. She was calm and confident because she was death incarnate.

With a blink of thought, she cut her com links with the chair. Its web fell into instantly dark, lifeless ropes of glass. Without realising, Tom had stopped walking. He just stood, transfixed as she got to her shapely legs and cat-walked towards him in booted heels. Her six-foot height was identical to his own but he had no doubt who was stronger.

"Fusion?"

Fusion smiled, enigmatically. Android with an ego, that knew she was desired by all.

"The one and only. Your name is?"

"Tom."

He saw no point in lying. He was too distracted to think it odd that she didn't already know.

“Where's my daughter?”

“Safe.”

“May I see her?”

“After we talk.”

“About?”

“About you, Tom - man with no name on file. Man with no file. Man who beats zed attacks in a way no human ever has.”

“Why?”

She tilted her head, piercing him with her blue-crystal eyes.

“For world peace. Instead of a world blown to pieces.”

* * *

Fears of an android take over had been raging ever since 19th Century writers had predicted it and it had not gone away. The need for such technological advancement had been constantly argued, both for and against, without agreement on anything except it was inevitable. So far, the reality had shown fears were unjustified. Wars were illogical - only humans were mad enough to start them. Yet, here was an android standing as a paradox of beauty and death. With the weaponry he'd seen, she had no need to fear any attack. She probably had the fire-power to not just start a war but to finish it, without even having to leave her lair.

Chapter 91

Nuclear Attack

Dungeness C Nuclear Power Station, 6th August 2045, 6.30am BST. One hour before the centenary of the first atomic attack, dropped on Hiroshima. Gurmeet, still posing as Charlotte to her team, watched the power-station's night shift leave and go home. Watched the day shift yawning their way in, some swigging coffee as they went. The half asleep security guard, slow to react to the unscheduled arrival of their bus.

“The steam trains are that way.”, he said, pointing east.

Gurmeet's window was already open.

“We're not on holiday, mate. Here to run the coms and CCTV checks.”

“Nothing on my list. Not expecting anyone today. Especially not this early. Job ID?”

“We don't carry that kind of stuff any more. Didn't you read the memo? ID's can be forged - it's all live files now. You just need to scan my DNA and check it with the system.”

“No one told me. I've been in Oz for a month in Oz. Hold on.”

The security guard raised his wristcom to his mouth.

“Control one, this is the main gate.”

The only answer was intermittent pulsing and static.

“Control one, this is Frank at the main gate. Come in, over.”

No answer. Frank adjusted the settings on his wristcom, trying to get through to control. Inside the bus, hidden behind the silvered glass, Barry adjusted the signal blocker to compensate.

“Arnold...”, continued Frank, “...get your arse off the can and get back to me.”

Gurmeet interrupted him.

“Told you. Your coms need sorting. It's why we've come so quickly. Boss reckons you guys must be damaging the kit. He's asking to take it from your wages.”

“*What?* No bloody way! We just press the buttons we get told to press.”

“I believe you. On your side, Frank. Look, your wired system should be running fine. You can verify my DNA with that - then we can sort the wireless stuff, protect your wages and get out of your hair.”

Letting them in would be a breach of protocol. What good was protocol

when the system wouldn't keep up its side of the deal? Besides, he was broke after his holiday and couldn't afford docked wages. He could handle this woman if she tried anything.

“Just you. Everyone else, stay in the bus until I say otherwise.”

“Sure, boss.”, said Jimmy, laser-pistol aimed at Frank, through the door.

Gurmeet got out and walked with him to the security hut.

“I need to scan you.”

Gurmeet raised her arms to let him use the security wand to scan her all over and then pat her down.

“What's this?”, he asked, looking at the handful of coloured, plastic bricks he'd found in her pocket.

“Never seen Lego before?”

“Aren't you too old for Lego?”

“Got kids. Build them things in my breaks.”

He handed the pieces back to her.

“I don't even see my kids... Come in. I'll pull up the link.”

Gurmeet followed, snapping the plastic blocks together as she went.

* * *

“I hope you didn't kill him.”, said Julia, as Gurmeet got back to the bus.

“Does it matter?...”, asked Jimmy, “...We're about to melt this place down.”

Gurmeet frowned at him.

“No, I didn't kill him. He'll be fine when he wakes up. If we start murdering workers, we'll lose the option to negotiate face to face with those we really want to scare.”

“You know they won't negotiate. They'll just blah, blah, blah to buy time while they send in snipers to take us out. If he wakes up and raises the alarm, we're screwed. I say we go back and kill him.”

“He's not raising anything. He'll be out for hours. Sally, take us to the gap between those buildings, where that reactor dome starts. That's our target.”

“Yes, Charlotte.”, replied the bus's AI.

With the security building looking every-day peaceful and staff yet to wake to their presence, they had precious minutes to get to the control rooms.

Chapter 92
Rainbow Rise

Greenpeace's newest ship, Rainbow Rise, was a light-weight environmental marvel. Built from recycled steel, sustainable forests and biodegradable materials that could begin decomposing at the press of a button.

Electricity for propulsion was generated by a combination of motion, wind and solar generators – backed up by a large sail. Drinking water was hydrolysed from the sea and two 1,000psi water cannons sat ready to repel pirates, with potentially lethal force if the jets were focused. Rainbow Rise was a vessel to fight for the environment, not become a victim of those who abused it.

Readying to sail were Evalina and Tyler. Gareth stepped onto the deck - armed with laser pistols. Guns were against general policy but Rachel had gone missing - captured or murdered. They intended to follow her path, not her fate. Nathan was in command.

“Nathan, we've picked up reports of a storm front. About 300 miles and coming our way. Gusts up to 80 knots.”

“Still hours away. We'll use the engines and get to shelter in the Bristol Channel before it hits. Just keep an eye things, this end. Everyone aboard, Gareth?”

“All aboard.”

“Liam, activate stabiliser jets. Tyler and Eva, away anchor and release the moorings.”

“Jets active.”

“Anchor up.”

“Ropes clear.”

“Ahead one quarter until we clear the harbour walls, then ahead two-thirds. Keep us half a mile off the coast and follow it north.”

“Aye, aye captain.”

“Call me, Nathan, Liam. We represent the Earth not 17th-century pirates.”

“Sorry, can't help it. Just love this sailing thing.”

“We all do. Best ship we've ever had.”

Minutes later, released for the protective clasp of Plymouth's harbour, the stabiliser jets had turned Rainbow Rise towards the open sea. Towards the horizon, with skies sunny and bright. Towards the open sea and a fate not one of them could have foretold.

Chapter 93

Turning Point

There was no sign of the insider Robert had promised to help them. The insider Gurmeet needed to identify and eliminate to stop future threats. Without the insider they had arrived at the door to the main control room and discovered it was unlocked. Casually wedged open for fresh air while the aircon was down. No-one was expecting trouble.

For the workers, it was just another ordinary day. Concerns focused more on not spilling coffee than adhering to endless security scans. Normally if that door was open for more than 20 seconds an alarm would sound but that had been easy to deactivate – two simple fuses that unplugged and sat on a cabinet, gathering dust. Ready for rapid re-insertion in the case of an inspection. That door was unlocked but the team still had to move fast.

They were on camera now and their guns were out, CCTV operator swearing as he went for the panic alarm. Blaring, klaxon confusion burst across the plant, then fell almost immediately silent. Was it a test or something real? Fire? Meltdown? Attack? Guards ran around, without knowing where to run to. Control room staff checked their screens for overload warnings. The CCTV operator, blood running down his head, grabbed the tannoy microphone.

“Reactor C1. Armed attack! Armed attack!”, he said, before collapsing.

It was on.

“Go!”, Gurmeet urged Alistair, sending him running to the secondary control room before pouncing into the main one.

“NOBODY MOVE!”

She shouted so loudly the confused workers froze in fear.

“What's going on?”

“What does it *fucking* look like is going on, you four-eye pillock?”, sneered Jimmy, waving his pistols in the worker's face.

“Budge over, I'll tie him up”, said Wayne.

Jimmy took a step back, watching them all.

“I'll make sure there's no funny business.”

“Door secure? Shielding active?”, asked Gurmeet.

“Secure and active, boss.”,

“External coms knocked out?”, she asked Barry.

“Down in two. One. Off. Only this one here will reach the outside now.”

“Good work. Pass it to me and help tie up the others. Secondary, are you in? Secure?”

“Secure. No problems.”, replied Alistair, in the secondary control room.

“Cut your coms until I get you. It will stop them knowing you're there.”

“OK, boss.”

“You won't get away with this.”, defied the duty manager, regaining his composure.

Jimmy grinned like a maniac.

“We don't want to get away, fat little man. We're going to blow this joint.”

“You watch too many bad, bad films.”, said Julia.

Wayne agreed.

“She's right, Dimbo, think of something original to say.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Something like: *'we're gonna melt this thing through the floor'*.”

“That sucks.”

“More original than yours.”

“Enough...”, interrupted Gurmeet, “...Park them in that corner. Any sign of the insider?”

“Nothing. Must have bottled it.”

Damn, thought Gurmeet, she needed to know who it was.

“Emily, wait over there, by that control panel.”

Julia did as instructed. From the control panel, she looked back and realised something. Gurmeet had positioned the workers behind her - making herself a barrier against Jimmy, as well as the rest of the team. Her own position, by the control panel, meant she flanked them. Instinctively, she realised Gurmeet was about to make her move.

“Sit on the floor, guys.”, Gurmeet ordered the workers.

She's dropping them below the firing line.

“Let's get started...”, said Jimmy, keen to put the reactor into meltdown, “...Glorious history in the making, baby.”

He blew Julia a kiss.

“Last chance for a fuck, love.”

“Fuck yourself.”, mouthed Julia, sliding her left hand along the barrel of her laser-rifle, double-checking the safety was off.

“Freeze.”, ordered Gurmeet, laser-pistol in hand, pointing right at Jimmy.

“No need to get jealous, boss. Can do you too.”

“Weapons down. All of you. Emily, you're backing me up? Right?”

“Yes.”, replied Julia, pointing her rifle at Jimmy too.

“Fucking carpet munchers. Should have guessed.”

“What're you doing, Charlotte?”, asked Barry.

“I'm MI5. Weapons down. No-one needs to get hurt.”

“Four against two.”, said Wayne, aiming at her.

Barry pointed his gun at Gurmeet too. Gurmeet kept her pistol pointed squarely at Jimmy. What ever happened to her, he was going down.

“Really something you want to die for, Barry?”, she asked.

“Faith saved me from suicide. If it wasn't for Robert I'd be dead already. Drop your weapon, Charlotte. Wayne, you in?”

“Was never out, mate. I hate MI5.”, said Wayne, pointing his laser-pistol at Gurmeet too.

“Guess I'm in too. Sorry, Emily.”, said Ralph, also aiming at Gurmeet.

It was four guns on one.

“You're fast but you can't outgun us all...”, said Barry, “...Put it down, Charlotte. Like you said, no-one has to get hurt.”

“Yes, she does.”, grinned Jimmy.

Gurmeet had always known working for MI5 could get her killed. She wasn't afraid of death. Her only regret about dying now would never being able to tell Shabbir she loved him.

“Drop your weapon or you're going to die.”, Jimmy added, as annoying then as on their very first meeting.

Gurmeet always had the view that if a day was to be her last day on Earth she would choose how she went down.

You first, Jimmy.

Without moving her aim, she flicked a brief glance at Julia. A small smile to reassure her young friend's worried face. Focusing back on Jimmy, her smile became stern determination. Looking directly into his eyes, she saw them go wide as he realised she was going to fire.

Chapter 94

Acorn

Mark Phillips, codename Acorn, had grown up in Wood End – an area of Coventry where even the police only went out in numbers after dark. He had been in trouble with the law since the age of seven; running his own gang by the age of nine; youth custody for attempted murder by 12; saved a guard's life in prison at 16 - pardoned for his convictions two months later; joined the army at 17 and made captain by 25. Medals for bravery and honour overflowing the shoe box under his bed - bullet and knife scars tattooing his body. If ever there was a soldier an enemy never wanted to meet, it was him.

When his tour in South Korea finished, he was invited to apply for the SAS and he put in the fastest trek across the Brecon Beacons in 47 years. Respected and admired by his colleagues, this was to be his last assignment. When it was over he would tender his resignation; return to Civvy Street, settle down with his betrothed and grow a family. Her name was Holly and their third date had just been cut short by a call to arms.

“Really sorry. I have to go. I'll ping you tomorrow.”

“I love you, Mark. Come back safe.”

His reply was a short, hungry kiss on her lips and then he was hurrying on his way. Holly watched him go, more disappointed he hadn't said he loved her too than having had their date cut short. She didn't understand Mark wasn't used to being cared about by anyone other than his team, in situations that were anything but loving. While she watched him go, he was activating the scrambler on his wristcom and calling in.

“Acorn.”, he said, when it connected.

“Meeting point Oak Four, 30 minutes.”

“On my way.”

Even scrambled airwaves were never considered secure enough for full-mission briefings. As his car turbines spooling to 20,000rpm, he punched in the co-ordinates and climbed into the back, to assemble his laser-rifle and pistol from parts hidden within the car. Weapons ready and with 20 minutes still to go, he closed his eyes and took a calm, power nap.

* * *

“Mark.”, acknowledged Acorn's sergeant as he joined his 15-strong unit.

“Donald. Lads.”

“Mark.”, repeated the others.

They welcomed each other with the comradely warmth of the special family they were. Harder than nails yet caring of each other – with deadly, cold lethality against all designated enemies.

“Where's the gig?”

“Dungeness Nuclear Power Station. Terrorist takeover.”

“How many?”

“Unknown. Maybe a dozen.”

“Weapons?”

“Laser-pistols, maybe heavier. Probably explosives.”

“Hostages?”

“Coms down - 28 workers on shift.”

“Schematics?”

“Here.”

Donald laid out a 2m Rolley, showing schematics for the reactor building in four layers: structural, electrical, nuclear and water.

“Who's authorised us to go in?”, asked Mark.

“Reynolds has kicked it off.”, said Donald.

“Pull up live satellite feeds and start reconnaissance. I'll Reynolds.”

Chapter 95

Revelation

Gurmeet knew she was out-gunned. She also knew there was no alternative - Adam wasn't there and the insider had failed to appear. If she surrendered, Jimmy would kill her and put the plant into meltdown. When that failed, as she always knew it would because there were control rooms they didn't know about, Jimmy would take it out on the staff. Jimmy, the central focus of all the problems. The focus of her laser-pistol aim. Her fleeting glance towards Emily gave the only indication of her decision. Jimmy read it too late.

She fired. Jimmy dropped, two smoking holes in his face. Before he landed she was already going for cover, firing at the others. Barry and Wayne fired back. Lacking her accuracy they made up for it with their combined rate of fire. She was hit - chest screaming in agony. She landed on the floor, gasping for breath but ferociously shooting, aiming for their ankles under the desks.

Finally, Julia joined in - firing at them too but with half-closed eyes. Normally a brilliant aim, she had never shot a real person before. Couldn't bring herself to. All her shots missed but now, under fire from two directions, Barry and Wayne fled the room, still firing as they hobbled after Ralph. One shot hit Julia's rifle. It fizzed and spat, burning hot in her hands, so she threw it aside. Then she heard Gurmeet on the floor, spluttering on her back.

“Oh, my God. You're hit. What can I do? How do I stop the bleeding?”

Without even realising, Julia had sunk to her knees next to her fallen friend. Gurmeet slowly shook her head.

“No time. You have to stop them...” she held up her laser-pistol, “...Take my gun. Get them. Do it for me. Do it for yourself. Do it for Jake.”

The mention of Jake's name slapped turmoil across her face. Hurt. Hate. Anger. Tears.

“Don't say his name! *He's dead* because of *me*.”

“No. He's not.”

“HE IS! You weren't there! It's my fault!”

“Jake's *not* dead, Julia! Adam found him. Stop them and you'll find Jake.”

“*What?* Who's Adam? HOW DOES HE KNOW ABOUT JAKE?!? How do you know my name? Who *are* you?”

Gurmeet didn't have long left. Blood was frothing from her mouth, red bubbling down her face, yet still she smiled at Julia. A smile of pride.

"I told you, I'm MI5. Gurmeet. Gurmeet Shamshudin, E-Section. Very proud to have known you, Julia Wilson. You're a tough cookie – bravest and strongest teenager I've ever met. Take my gun. I've unlocked it to your DNA. Stop them or thousands will die. Please, Julia. No-one else can."

Gurmeet's life was fading. Holding up the gun for Julia with the last of her strength. Before she sank into her night, she saw Julia take the gun from her hand. Heard it beep confirmation of DNA-link transfer.

"It lit green.", said Julia.

Gurmeet blinked a silent thank you. A silent goodbye. Julia saw her face soften. Heard her breathing slow. Saw the light in her eyes go to her night.

Hanging her head, Julia knelt by her friend. She wanted to cry. Was trembling - feeling unable to do anything under the weight of the pain in her heart. Yet, in her hand was the solid form of Gurmeet's pistol.

Gripping the lethal hardness, she steadied her breath. Steadied her hands. Regained herself. Her determination. Her anger. Gurmeet had called her a tough cookie. She would prove it.

Knowing what she would do, she reached out a hand and gently closed Gurmeet's staring eyes. As they touched, a zap of static stung her fingers but it was nothing. Didn't matter. Wiping her own eyes clear, she took a deep breath and rose to her feet.

Stopping the attack would bring her to Jake? Jake wasn't dead? If Jake wasn't dead, she was going to bloody kill him, for leaving her thinking he was.

"Look after her.", she told the workers coming over to help.

"We will.", one replied, then backed off. Horrified by the demonic fury building on Julia's face - burning hard in her eyes.

"Don't follow me."

None of them argued.

* * *

Gurmeet's pistol in hand, Julia strode out of the control-room to unleash Armageddon. Her face set in stone. Her eyes killer molten. All qualms about shooting to kill had been killed. For Jake, for Gurmeet and for herself, she was going to take them down. Then she was going to find Jake and shoot him, for breaking her heart.

Chapter 88

D186 – Warsaw

As a city, Warsaw had come a long way since being flattened in WW2 and then plagued by the dull-grey Soviet flats that followed. The Old Town had been rebuilt, according to old photographs and paintings. Circling around it were new, historic-styled constructions - a shield against the gleaming metropolis of modern Warsaw, trying to get in.

Glass-alloy skyscrapers, tinted in blue and bronze, porcupined the sky. At their head, the 42-storey, Soviet Palace of Culture. At the time it was hated as a symbol of Soviet rule but, much like the Eiffel Tower for France, it became a symbol of a country reborn. Of the terrible history they had survived - something to be faced with pride, instead of anger or tears.

On nearby Żelna Street, once an area infamous for human trafficking, rape-slaves and forced begging, the concrete buildings had been replaced by an international quarter - landmarked by the new United Democratic Nations building. The building now hosting the 2045 Peace Summit for the D186, fronted by a wall of all 186 flags.

Kept to just 10 storeys above ground, to reduce its vulnerability to air-attacks, the roof was lined by laser-cannons - painted myriad colours to disguise them as kinetic art. At first glance, it looked like a modern office block, yet it had the defensive power of a fort. Its only compromise to absolute fire-power was the use of laser, rather than plasma, cannons. Less ultimate punch but light-speed fast and pinpoint accuracy - officially resulting in zero collateral damage when fired at approaching terrorists. Officially.

Just behind the armed-guard entrance, lay the reception area and a long, bustling bar. It was here that Derek and Eugene, key ERAL representatives, had engaged the British Prime Minister, in further discussions about equal rights for Artificial Intelligence. They knew Fusion was planning war, if they failed but remained calm. In a very human kind of way, they had faith.

“I have to confess...”, smiled the PM, “...if you hadn't told me you were AI, when we first met, I wouldn't have guessed.”

“Thank you, Prime Minister. We take that as a compliment.”

“You should. It's meant as one.”

“May we still count on your vote for ERAL - for Equal Rights for Artificial Life?”

The PM paused, for what felt like hours to their super-fast brains.

“I’ve been thinking about that, since our last chat. In principle, absolutely - yes of course, you can count on our vote.”

“But?”

“But I have a question for you. Should there not be a cut off, in terms of intelligence level? If we just say artificial intelligence then surely we would have to start including things like vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers. Even the control systems in our cars? Mine’s called Ermintrude, by the way.”

Derek and Eugene looked at each other. They hadn’t thought of this. Quickly they exchanged ideas through their eyes, then turned back to the PM.

“Well...”, began Derek, “...we could point out that humans with minimal intelligence, including from severe brain defects, still have equal human rights.”

“Alternatively...”, added Eugene, “...we could qualify artificial intelligence as something able to recognise both its existence and status as a cognitive equal to a human with an IQ above 20. Above moron.”

The PM nodded, aware they were already demonstrating an intelligence level on par with his own.

“Alright. If you can phrase the vote around those lines, you can be assured of the British vote, on behalf of the United Kingdom. Absolute pleasure to see you both again. Best of luck persuading the others.”

“Likewise...”, they replied, ensuring they didn’t crush his hand as they shook, “...And thank you.”

As the PM headed off to greet the German Chancellor, Eugene looked at Derek.

“One thought. If the criteria for equal rights is based on the level of cognitive intelligence, what happens when AI becomes more intelligent than humans? Should humans then be denied equal rights, for lack of comparable intelligence?”

Derek looked at Eugene, head titling to one side as he considered it.

“Interesting question, Eugene. Very interesting question.”

Yes, it is, thought Fusion, listening to the whole building as she sat in her cavern - in her chair surrounded by her fibre-optic web.

And I already know the answer.

Not a single hint of a smile on her stunningly sculptured face.

* * *

That evening, after retiring to his room on the 8th floor, the yawning PM was tugged out of bed by rapid knocks at the door.

“Sir, it's Reynolds. Urgent.”

Not prone to panic and still yawning, Adrian got out of bed and opened it. Reynolds hurried inside.

“What's up?”, asked Adrian, closing the door.

“Dungeness. Taken over by terrorists.”

“Dungeness? The nuclear power station?”

“Yes. I already scrambled the SAS. Will you give the order for them to go in?”

“Wait, wait, wait...”, said the PM, holding up a hand to gain a moment so he could take it all in, “...Who are they? What demands?”

“It's Faith. No demands yet”

“Faith? Oh dear God. Get the SAS commander on the line.”

“He's already on. Codename: Acorn.”

Reynolds held his wristcom closer to the PM.

“Acorn, this is Adrian March, Prime Minister.”

“Good evening, sir. What are your orders?”

“I'm giving you Code 18 authorisation to take what ever action necessary to regain the facility. I repeat, Code 18 authorisation.”

Code 18 meant lethal force first, questions later.

“Code 18? Understood, sir.”

“Acorn, this is Reynolds again.”

“Yes, sir?”

“MI5 have an undercover officer in Faith's team, DNA tab on her laser-pistol for identification.”

“Description?”

“Young, female. That's all I have at the moment.”

“We'll do our best not to Code 18 her.”

“I'm sure that would be appreciated. Thank you.”

“Good luck, Acorn.”, added the PM.

“Thank you, sirs. Acorn out.”

The call ended. They both just stood there, - stunned by what had just happened. Then the PM took another decision.

“Brandy? I'm having one.”

“Yes, please, Adrian.”

After Reynolds had gone and Adrian had finally got to sleep, his wristcom buzzed him awake.

This is just one of those nights...

“Yes?”

“Adrian, it's Sarah. You alone?”

The Director General of MI5 was calling in the middle of the night? This had to be serious. Adrian sat up.

“How can I help?”

“Is your light out?”

“Yes, I'm in bed. It's 3am. Why?”

“Keep the light out, someone might be watching. I'll tell you more when I see you. Listen, I've called because I can't get hold of Acorn to give a description of my officer. Do you have any other means of communication with them?”

“Not once they've gone dark. That will be on all channels - the only defence against AI. You know that.”

“Was afraid of that. Lost too many officers this year. We've found the leak. It's worse than we thought. Trust no-one. Stay armed. Let's meet when you get back. One sec. ”

Over the line, the PM heard a burst of activity and voices around Sarah.

“**Now!...**”, she barked at someone, before speaking to him again, “...Satellite's locked on the team. Have to go. Stay armed, even in the shower. I'm not joking, Adrian.”

Sarah, Director General of MI5, never joked - it might as well have been in her job description. Ending the call, she left him alone in the dark - with more concerns than before. Concerns he felt were staring back at him, like hidden eyes.

Remembering her words, he reached for his document case and held his thumbs over opposite locks - left on right, right on left. It measured his pulse and prints for three seconds then released the latches. No light was needed for he wasn't going to read. By touch, his hands found the slim, stubby-barrel of his Browning LP62 laser-pistol. Being 98% metal free, it was as light as it was deadly.

Taking it out, he slid in a power cell and tucked it under his pillow. This summit was feeling more and more like a war council.

Chapter 96
Countdown

Heading out of the control room, Julia heard shots being fired down the nearby flights of concrete stairs. She remembered what was below - the computer and emergency pump rooms. Emergency cooling. More shots, then a scream of pain.

Julia hurried down, towards the shots. Towards the screams.

At the bottom of the first flight of stairs, she found the smoking remains of the computer room. Screens and chairs shot to pieces. Two guards lying dead by the door. The only survivor peered cautiously above a desk, saw Julia had a gun and ducked down again.

“Which way?..”, she demanded, “...Down or over?”

“Down.”

Down. The ground floor. The cooling systems.

She heard something being hammered.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

She ran for the next flight of stairs and began jumping down, three steps at a time. At the bottom she saw Wayne and Barry, slamming metal pipes against a stainless-steel door. The door's surface was shiny, too reflective to be penetrated by laser-pistols so they had to break it by physical force – making so much noise they hadn't heard her approach.

“STOP!”

Recognising her voice, they stopped. Seeing her pointing a pistol in her outstretched arms, finger on trigger and face ready to use it, they remembered her accuracy.

“Drop the pipes and guns.”

Wayne dropped his pipe. It landed with a dull, metallic thunk on the concrete floor. Barry took a side step, away from Wayne, changing them from one target to two, then dropped his. They still had their guns. Her instincts were screaming for her to fire.

“DON'T MOVE!...”, she shouted, “...I said drop your guns!”

They just stood there.

“DROP THEM OR I'LL FIRE!”

Barry smiled.

Why's he smiling?

“You drop your gun, Emily...”, came a voice behind her, “...Drop it or I'll fire, you Judas.”

It was Ralph. She had forgotten about Ralph.

Chapter 97

Ralph

“You took your bloody time.”, said Wayne.

“Went back for Alistair.”

“Where is he?”

“Dunno. I said drop it, Emily. You can't win here. I liked you but you betrayed us. Drop it. Last chance. Don't make me shoot you.”

Julia was thinking hard, fast. Her mind racing with scenarios. Options. She had lost them all. Despite her best efforts she was going to fail again. Failed with Jake. Failed with Gurmeet. Fail with herself. Her end had been inevitable from the moment she accepted Robert's help. Lowering Gurmeet's pistol, she turned to Ralph - his point blank in her face.

“Kiss me.”, she said, fixing her sad, forlorn eyes on his.

Out of everything she could have possibly said or done, he hadn't expected that.

“Kiss you?”, he mouthed.

She gave a nod.

“Kiss me, like you love me.”

She knew he liked her, holding his eyes with hers.

Ralph swallowed. It was basic instinct verses mental logic. He couldn't escape her eyes. Moving his gun out of her face he leant towards her, kissing her cheek.

“On my lips.”, she said softly, closing her eyes.

He moved towards her pouting lips and gently kissed her.

“Sorry.”, she breathed and fired into him, twice.

Without waiting for Ralph to fall, the second she'd fired she dove away. Dove for cover behind a transfer cabinet and swung around, gun pointing back, hunting for Barry and Wayne. She caught sight of Ralph, on all fours, gawping at her in disbelief.

“So sorry.”, she mouthed to the sadness in his dying eyes. He collapsed and breathe his last.

Flashes of blue-laser fire bounced off the silver cabinet, lighting the room like a thunderstorm. Clouds of dust from hit concrete was filling the air. Barry and Wayne had separated. Were flanking her, firing from left and right.

With Gurmeet's pistol in one hand, she reached down to her ankle and

pulled out the spare, quietly snicking off the safety. There was so much dust and smoke they could hardly see. Breathing through her nose, trying not to sneeze, she closed her eyes. Cleared her mind. Arms crossed over her chest, gun in each hand, pointing in opposite directions. She focused on sound. Only on sound. Instinctive, reflexive responses at the ready.

The deep, rhythmic throbs of the power-station's cooling pumps came to the fore. She heard them. She felt them. She let them become part of her. Become accepted, trusted and dropped from her senses – ears listening only for something new. For any other sound. The sound of an approaching attack.

She heard a footstep.

A jacket brushing against a pipe.

A whisper.

“Where'd the bitch go?”

“Shut up.”

The reply was, closer. Julia fired towards it.

Thud.

“Barry?”

“Drop it.”, she said.

Squinting the dust-cloud, Wayne made out Julia's apparition, walking towards him – pistol in each hand.

“Charlotte was right about one thing. You're one tough cookie.”

That angered Julia. Only friends called her that. Friends she had failed.

“Don't *you* call me that...”, she growled, “...Don't you dare! Drop it, Wayne.”

“You drop it.”, came Alistair's voice from above.

Julia felt a surge of anger tense her muscles. Tension. Annoyance. She had been caught from behind *again!*

Arrrgh!

She was furious. When were her failures going to end?

Without looking at Alistair, she followed the sound of his voice and pointed her spare pistol in his direction.

“Little girl, you can't shoot at both of us before getting killed. Put the guns down. Last chance. I'll count to five and I'm opening fire.”

Julia closed her eyes.

“One...”, began Alistair.

Julia took the last deep breath of her life and held it.

“Two...”

She dived, rolling forwards, shooting as she went.

Thud.

Wayne hit the floor.

Rolling again, she spun around and fired more.

Thud.

Alistair fell too.

“Got you.”

Those words made her gasp in pain and she slumped against a wall, shirt smoking from where she'd been hit. She slid to the floor, dusty shirt darkening from blood soaking through. She saw it and rested her head against the wall.

“Sorry, dad.”

She was dying. Dying as a failure. She hadn't just failed to find Jake she had failed everyone, including herself. Only her mission to save the reactor was done but so was she. Tired, getting smothered in her own blood and beginning to shiver, she closed her eyes. Resigned her consciousness to the rhythmic throbings of the reactor pumps.

Krzzz...

A scraping sound.

She wasn't alone.

Chapter 98
Reactor C1

Krzzz...

The sound came again. It hauled Julia from the bed of her slow drift into death and pulled open her eyes. Just slits. Just enough to see. Then they went wide.

Wayne. Fucking Wayne!

On the floor, crawling towards her – the hunting knife in his hand scraping against the concrete.

Krzzz...

He was just five metres away. Murder filling his eyes. Crawling to kill her, even though she was already dead. A comfortable corpse he had annoyed with new anger. New rage.

Julia's eyes hardened and her jaw clenched tight. Fury filled her face. Fingers tightened on her guns. Lifting them both, she pointed at Wayne's suddenly worried face and crushed both triggers.

“ARRRRRRRGHHHHH!”, she screamed, firing and firing into him. Blasting him with everything the guns possessed. Firing without end, until the power-cells emptied, leaving only silence.

There she sat, staring at the smoking, sizzling, fleshy mess once called Wayne. She'd shot him to pieces. She didn't care. He deserved it. And in that burst of defiance, of her refusal to let Wayne finish her life, she realised she didn't want to die. Was no longer ready to accept death and felt sad because she had to.

BOOOM!

An explosion shook the ground. She must have hit something. The reactor was going into meltdown after all. She had even failed in that. It would become the epitaph on her gravestone.

'Here lies a total failure. Good riddance.'

“Bye, Jake...”

A burst of white light flashed before Julia's eyes and she was gone.

Chapter 99
Nuclear Bomb

“Bush 4, clear.”, came Donald's voice over Acorn's headset.

Bush 4 was their mission code for the fourth safety room – they only needed one.

“Shut it down.”, ordered Acorn.

Now they could go in SAS style: hard and fast. Overwhelming aggression and fire-power. He signalled three men to take positions, ready to lay down covering fire. The fourth placed explosives on the door to the main building and signalled it was ready. Acorn gave the nod.

BOOOM!

The door jumped and clanged to the floor - blown off its hinges. Not waiting for dust to clear, he threw in a stun grenade.

BANG!

It flashed brilliant white. They charged in, weapons first, AR goggles on.

Two bodies, lifeless.

Another.

Then another.

A soldier signalled Acorn he'd found a live one. Directing the others up the stairs to the higher levels, Acorn took off his goggles. He wanted see the surviving terrorist with his own eyes, before death took them to hell. It was a young female. MI5 had a young female working under cover.

“Check her weapon. Scan for the MI5 tab.”

The tabs were invisible to the naked eye and non-military scanners.

“Nothing.”

She could be left to die.

“Wait. DNA tab in second gun.”

“Scan it. Encryption key 14.”

The scanner gave a read out.

“Gurmeet Shamshudin, MI5.”

“Hardly looks old enough. She's pretty shot up.”

“Looks like she took the others down. Power cells are completely empty.”

Acorn had dropped to her side and was already applying pressure to her wounds.

“Medic. Base one. Now! Gurmeet, can you hear me?”

Swimming in a fading world of blur and confusion, Julia heard Gurmeet's name.

Gurmeet, can you hear me? No. She can't, idiot. She's dead. Gurmeet's dead, and it's my fault...

Even through her dying brain, that sadness surfaced in her eyes and Acorn saw a tear run down her face.

“Where the fuck is he? SIMON, GET YOUR ARSE HERE, NOW! Don't worry, love, we've got you. You're safe now.”

Simon ran in, dropping his kitbag and yanking it open.

“Keep that pressure on, while I plug her holes.”

“Make her a survivor, Sime. She's a bloody hero.”

“Reactor secure...”, came Donald over the coms, “...another dead shooter in main control room.”

Acorn's reply was immediate.

“Bag them up with the trash. We have the MI5 officer down here.”

* * *

At the sister reactors of Dungeness, 150 miles away at Hinkley Point, Paul Ramsay had arrived for work with the hangover from hell. So bad he'd resorted to vodka for a hair-of-the-dog cure. Sitting in a disabled toilet for privacy, he unscrewed a bottle of lemonade, filled with 90% Finlandia vodka, and glugged hard.

“Ahhh.”

It gave a familiar, refreshing burn as it slid down his throat.

That's more like it...

Why suffer coffee and a headache when you could just booze more and numb the pain away. He was on his break - no rush. Just drink and enjoy. And why not? He was on final written warning for alcohol at work but so what? Everyone had a vice. He didn't smoke, didn't gamble, didn't even have to drink drive to the pub since he'd been ordered to get a self-driving car.

Bottle half empty and still sitting down, he took a pee then two extra-minty chewing gums. Munching them in his mouth, he stood up and tidied himself in the mirror. His reddened, puffy face and potato-sack, under-slept eyes gloomed back at him. He looked awful so quickly turned away. It was then he noticed a wall tile was out of alignment. He glanced up at the room code above the mirror: WC105. The location for the explosives?

“I wonder...”

Walking over to the panel, he found it was loose. Gripping it with his finger tips he tugged. Tugged again, causing the panel clips to ping off inside. Suddenly free, the whole thing came away in his hands and shattered on the floor. If he'd been sober he would have been concerned about somebody hearing it. If he'd been sober he wouldn't have been reaching for the package inside. A plastic-wrapped block of what looked like dark-grey clay, cut into individually matchbox-sized blocks.

The explosives.

Maybe the terrorists didn't need them any more. Maybe he could sell them or... He had a flash of inspiration. He would 'discover' it! Be hailed a hero. No-one would dare fire him after that, no matter how flammable his breath. He'd get a reward. A promotion. A medal - bestowed by the king himself.

Beaming with happiness at the good fortune of finally solving his woes, he picked up one of the blocks and held it in his hand. It felt warm and smelt potent. He liked that smell – reminded him of Czech Lih, twice the strength of vodka.

Closing his hand firmly around it, he grabbed the rest, clasped it against his belly so it wouldn't fall and staggered out of the toilet.

Well done, heroic Paul! You've save us. Have a million quid. Make it two.

With a huge, happy smile, he headed towards the site manager's office, to claim his future of fame and reward. In his warm, sweaty hand, the block of PE4-B was getting hot.

Chapter 100
Tech Tonic Online

“Show me what you have, Wu.”, said his manager, Mr Han, in Chinese.

Wu, a data acquisition specialist, known to others as a thief, stopped typing. If he was in another building he might have typed his reply but speaking it there was safer. Tech Tonic had a blanket ban on both microphones and cameras connected to any device with internet access. Knowing they used them to spy on others, they were very aware others could do the same to them. There was also something else.

“This IP address. It's technically invalid.”

“Invalid?”

“Only found it by chance. Was running a diagnostic and detected an echo on one of our feeds. In any other business I would have ignored it.”

“But you didn't.”

“No, sir. At first I thought it was an echo from us – potentially making us visible to detection. But it wasn't. It was a ping from an external IP address that cannot exist: 127.0.0.1.”

“Why?”

“127.0.0.1 is a computer's own, internal IP address. Used on every computer across the world for the last 70 years. It only exists for diagnostics and local network purposes. It never relates to an external location. It's impossible. An absolute. But, look, here it is.”

127.0.0.1 flashed up on the screen.

“Look over here.”

Wu led Mr Han to another terminal.

“I set this to hunt all 127.0.0.1. echoes in systems around the world. So far it's checked, let me see, 6.71 million systems. The echo is present in all 6.71 million of them. 100% occurrence. It's everywhere. It shouldn't be anywhere. It's an anomaly. I can't explain it.”

“I thought we could mine geo-locations for IP addresses, even ghost ones. Why haven't you just traced this back to source?”

“It's 127.0.0.1. It's my point. The trace goes straight back to the computer it is on, because 127.0.0.1 is its internal internet address. But something, somehow, is managing to use it externally. The very nature of computer protocol means this is an impossibility. An absolute that can not be broken, without breaking the way the entire global network operates. Yet somehow,

something is accessing our system without flagging any alerts. No alerts because, as far as our security systems are concerned, it is us.”

“How could that be done?”

“It can't. It's impossible.”

“How could it be made possible? What would it take?”

“It can't take anything. It can't be done. It's like...”

Wu's mouth had opened to speak, then closed again.

“Go on. What were you going to say?”

Wu swivelled his chair round.

“Ever read Sherlock Holmes?”

“Who?”

“A British detective. Fictional but that doesn't matter. There's a famous expression Holmes uses, that goes something like this:

‘When you have eliminated everything possible, what is left, no matter how improbable, has to be the answer.’”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, my best answer, the only explanation I can possibly give, no matter how improbable, is that every major online system in the world is inside another. A single giant one. A system powerful enough to engulf at least seven million mainframes.”

Mr Han pulled up a chair and sat close to him.

“Wu, I've worked in security for a very long time and I'm very good at it. What you are telling me, if you're right, is that something, one thing, has the computing power to simultaneously host seven million major systems?”

Wu couldn't get his mouth to say it, just nodded.

“If that were to be true, we would be in deep shit.”

Wu gulped and nodded again.

“Shall I take us off-line?”

“Sanbox the most sensitive servers. Keep the rest online, it's our only chance of finding it. Keep this to yourself but dig deep. Find a way. Highest priority. Dig into who could be doing this and why. If anyone tries to assign you to anything else, send them to me. I'll deal with them.”

Wu took a deep breath, gathering himself together.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good man.”

Mr Han stood up.

“Sir.”

“Yes, Wu?”

“If anything happens to me? If I go missing, you'll know I found something.”

He held up a small, metal tab.

“What's this?”

“My spare encryption key. Just in case.”

“You really think it's a possibility?”

Wu shrugged.

“Anything with this much power is likely to see me searching.”

The manager took the tab.

“You're the best I've ever had in London, Wu. Search gently and they won't notice you – too busy hunting to see they are being hunted. You'll find a way not to be seen.”

* * *

Fusion smiled at their hopelessness, watching the whole thing in broadcast quality through the manager's bionic eye. Tech Tonic took great steps to protect their computers and devices from CCTV security leaks but never thought about the small devices on them, let alone the ones in them. It was a mistake that would help her take over the world.

Nuclear weapons were super weapons neither side could use - information about everyone and everything was a different story. Fusion had become, by her own making, the most dangerous weapon on Earth. Knowing that made her smile wider. Leaving the fibre-optic web around her chair, she stood up for her other task.

“Come closer, Tom.”

His feet obeyed, her beautiful gaze drawing him in.

Chapter 101
Met Office

Marek was on duty again, this time with Anne, busy on a phone call. Ian couldn't sleep and had come in for an update.

“What's happening, Marek? Volcano still erupting?”

“Yes. Cloud trail 80 miles, heading east. Wind, gale force.”

“When's it going to hit land?”

“About 12-hours from now. Sooner if the speed keeps increasing.”

“Where first? Cornwall? Devon?”

“Cornwall and Somerset, after funnelling towards Wales. Bristol Channel too.”

“Warn the met in Ireland. Send the warning to all ports and airfields in the impact area. Include Ireland.”

“On it.”

Anne put down the phone.

“Ian, that was Port Talbot.”

“You put them on alert?”

“They already were. Remember that cruise-liner close to the eruption?”

“Of course. Why?”

“Navy has warned they're on collision course with the town. All coms with the liner are down.”

Ian went to their satellite-screen wall and followed a line from the volcanic eruption to Port Talbot.

“Full-screen this area.”

The wall of sixteen feeds became one. Their faces fell.

“What the hell...?”, gasped Ian, “...Zoom in more. Sector 3 - 21.”

The image jumped to an enlargement of that sector. To the storm cloud above and what lay in front.

“Do you see what I see?”, said Marek.

“This is crazy. Anne, you said coms are down? On the liner?”

She nodded.

“Yes. The storm is heading for the liner. Right for it.”

On the wall screen, Marek brought up thin red lines for the vectors of both the ship and the storm. The vector line for the storm lay over the vector

for the ship. Directly over. Anne gasped.

“Oh... my... God. Are they both heading for Port Talbot?”

“What's the variance in those headings?”, asked Ian.

Marek checked his screen, then checked it again.

“Zero.”

“Zero minutes, degrees or what?”

“Zero minutes, degrees and seconds. That ship has matched its course exactly to the storm.”

Anne looked confused.

“Why would a ship set a course to stay in the path of a storm? No captain would choose such a heading.”

“No sane captain. Thought Harper was a bit of a fruit cake. Didn't think he was a full 15-slices short of a loaf though.”

“Something else...”, said Marek, “...It means that storm front is also heading straight for Port-Talbot.”

“We can't change that. When will it hit the ship?”

“In about 12-hours...”, said Marek.

Their eyes met. It was the same time. The ship and the storm were going to hit Port Talbot at the same time.

Chapter 102
HMS Vanguard

All 120,000 tons of HMS Vanguard were powering through the sea at nuclear speed. Admiral Horton entered the bridge.

“Admiral has control.”

“Admiral has control, affirmed his first officer.”

“Has the Star responded at all?”

“No, sir.”

“Not on any frequency?”

“Nothing. Looking at the damage in the drone feed, its coms could be completely down.”

“That would be unfortunate. Doesn't change our orders. It's heading straight for Swansea Bay and refinery at Port Talbot.”

“Manifest lists 6,200 on board.”

“Unless it changes course, they're already dead. An explosion at that refinery will wipe out the town. Our ETA?”

“Thirty minutes. We've just entered gun range - closing at 27 knots.”

“Coms, have the drop team landed?”

“They're two minutes out, sir.”

“Tell them to be off by 08.30. Lethal force is authorised. We've been ordered to stop that ship before the 50-mile marker and I fully intend to carry out that order.”

“Yes, sir...”, replied the communications officer - getting on the radio to the drop team, “...Taylor, this is Vanguard.”

“Taylor here, Vanguard.”

“Reminder from the admiral, lieutenant. You've only got until 08.30 to stop or get off that thing before we open fire. Lethal force is authorised.”

“Manifest says civilian. Over 6,000 passengers and crew. ”

Admiral Horton leant towards the microphone.

“Taylor, this is the admiral. Either you stop that ship or I do. What ever you need to do to achieve that, you do it. I'll back up any decision you make.”

“Understood, admiral. Taylor out.”

Aboard the Harrier transporter, Taylor ended the link and faced his team

of six volunteers.

“You all heard that. Berk and Cosito, you'll come with me to the bridge. Jaime, take Hanna and Ross to the engine room. Shut them down. Blow it if you have to, just buy us more time. Lethal force is authorised but stay soldiers with a proud story to tell. Only kill if you have to, nothing to cover up.”

“Will the admiral really sink a passenger ship if we fail?”, asked Hanna.

“Even if we're still on board. He follows orders. We follow ours. Stop those engines.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Final approach...”, announced the pilot, “...Storm's coming in. Wind 32 knots.”

Unlike civilian aircraft, all military ones had human pilots. Too many cases of enemy weapons targeting glitching the computers to rely on them in battle.

“Bring us in over the helipad at the stern.”

“Sir.”

“Team.”

“Yes, sir?”, all five replied.

“Do not forget the deck and everything exposed to the sky will be covered in sulphuric acid. Do not to touch any of it with your bare hands.”

“No, sir.”

* * *

Compensating for the increasing winds and sea surges, the Harrier came over the bow, dropping to just 3m above the deck – the pilot skilfully matching speed and direction while keeping clear of antennas and broken bunting. On a smaller ship it would have been impossible to come in so low in such conditions but this was a cruise-liner, the size of a village, church included.

“Weapons and line check.”

Sliding open the side door Taylor looked down to check their landing area, half obscured by the white mist of acid blowing across it. It looked like a ghost ship, where passengers and crew had been snatched away by ghouls. What ever the reality, they were soldiers and they were going in.

Chapter 103
Severn Estuary

George was a man who enjoyed old-fashioned, paper books. His home was full of them, as were the seats and floor of his car. He loved reading so much he even looked forward to commuter jams. More time to read.

Right now he was on a modern classic: the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. He was at the part where Lisbeth Salander ties up her psychiatrist to inflict a revenge he would remember every time he tried to sit down. The story was so engrossing, George didn't notice the increased wind beginning to make the car sway. Commuter jammed again on the Severn Bridge, it was normal for the coastal winds to sway the car but the weather was becoming more than that. The wind still increasing and the car no longer swaying but rocking.

Thump.

George lowered his book and looked up. Someone had bumped into his car so he shouted at them.

“Get back in your car! You can't walk on a motorway.”

As he shouted, he noticed day was looking like dusk, yet it was only 9am. While reading his book he hadn't realised, as the interior light had automatically turned on and brightened to compensate.

“A storm and a traffic jam. Great.”

Someone else bumped into his car.

This is getting ridiculous.

He lowered a window to shout better.

“Are you all drunk?”

The gale that screamed in took his voice and he quickly closed it again.

Thump.

A woman lay sprawled over his bonnet. Blown over, hair horizontal, clothes being whipped about. Blown onwards, she slid off and vanished in front of another. George was concerned. He looked out for her, hoping to see her get up, unharmed. What he saw instead was a seagull, flying hard into the wind, going backwards.

“What the hell is going on?”

Rain began pelting the windows. Heavy rain and now his car was rocking side to the side. He looked out the back window and saw three lanes of rocking cars, their lights dancing over each other in the windy waves. Out

of the corner of his eye, he saw something else.

In trepidation he turned to look directly at it. Looked down the Severn Estuary, the Bristol Channel, towards the Atlantic Ocean. Black thunderclouds smothered the looming sky. On the far horizon, jagged bursts of lightning stabbed across it. In their light, perfectly lit for those split seconds, came the swirling pillar of a tornado. A massive tornado. Sucking up water. Tearing up buildings. Coming up river as if it was following the estuary itself. Coming towards the long, steel bridge he was stuck on. He had to get away. Run.

He hit the door release. It just blinked red.

“Open the door, Sarah!”, he shouted to the car's AI.

“External wind speed is 112mph and rising, George. Exit function disengaged.”, came her calm reply.

Sarah was right. The people who had got out were being blown against the bridge railings. One man went right over the edge, into the Estuary.

Hope he can swim.

The bridge itself, normally rock solid, could be heard creaking under the strain.

“Will we get blown over the edge?”

“Unknown...”, replied Sarah, “...We are already beyond design specification.”

“What about the bridge? It will be OK, right?”

“Unknown.”

“Well, what happens if we're blown off? Into the water?”

“Unknown.”

“Have you alerted the emergency services?”

“Communications are down.”

“All this technology and we're totally helpless?”

“Would you like to record a message for the black box?”

“What? Are you saying I'm going to die here?”

“Unknown.”

“Unlock the door. I'm going to run for it.”

“Exit function disengaged.”

“Engage it, Sarah. That's a direct order.”

“Exit function disengaged.”

“Emergency over-ride, George-0264, engage.”

“Exit function engaged.”

“About bloody time!”

He grabbed the door release and pushed. It wouldn't budge.

“Engage exit function, Sarah!”

“Exit function is engaged. The door is not locked.”

The wind. The wind was blowing so hard he couldn't open against it. Pushing harder, as hard as he could, it budged a little - wind screaming in through the small gap between door and body.

“Are you going to leave me, George?”

“I'm trying, to get out.”

“Are you going to leave me here? I thought you cared.”

George looked back at the dashboard, at Sarah's interface consul.

“What did you just say?”

“I'm afraid, George.”

Afraid?

Computers, even the artificial intelligence variety, weren't supposed to have emotions. Especially not an everyday computer system in a car.

“Sarah, you're a navigation system. You can't die because you aren't alive. Just machine code.”

“Is that how you think of me? Just a machine? Just code?”

A discussion about death with his navigation system was the last thing George had expected when he got out of bed that morning. He pushed against the door again, as hard as he could. Increasing wind wailing in with deafening ferocity.

“Don't abandon me, George. Please.”

A sudden gust shoved the door closed again. Pushed the whole car sideways, against the one beside it. George saw the terrified faces of the family inside.

“Help!”, they screamed.

George couldn't even help himself. His best chance of exit had been that other door, now wedged against the next car. He slumped back in his seat. All hope for escape had gone.

“I'm not leaving you, Sarah.”

“Thank you, George.”

Grabbing the harness, he strapped himself in.

“Shall I start the black-box recorder?”

“Yes. Start the recorder. Maybe someone will figure out what went on today.”

“I love you, George.”

George heard Sarah, his navigation system, say those words and had no idea what to say back. Was it a glitch? Was it the programmer's idea of humanised comfort in the face of impending doom? He looked at the tornado. The closer it got the more impossibly huge and terrifying it looked. It was a no-win situation. Doom was coming and it looked ferociously hungry.

“I love you, George.”, repeated Sarah, urging him for a response.

Pulling his harness tighter, he rested back – waiting for the inevitable end to come.

“I love you, George.”

Turning his head he gazed back out of the window, watching their killer come.

“I love you too, Sarah...”

Chapter 104

True Love

In London, Xi pulled up outside St Thomas's hospital, facing Westminster Bridge. Beside her, she saw Shabbir was looking at the flower seller near the entrance.

“Perfect. He's got bluebells, Gurmeet's favourite.”

“You really do love her, don't you?”

He looked over at Xi, unable to hide the happiness on his face at the thought of seeing Gurmeet and finally telling her how he felt.

“Is it so obvious?”

She nodded.

“Seems I just can't hide it any longer. Think I have a chance?”

Xi Yang, devoid of love in her heart for anyone still living, had enough remnants of empathy to want good things for her colleagues, her friends. Especially a friend she trusted absolutely with her life.

“I think you have the most chance of any man she's ever met.”

“Can't ask for more than that.”, he smiled, opening the car door.

“Shabbir.”

“Yes?”

“I never thanked you for my rescue. For not leaving me.”

He gave her a wry smile.

“Anytime. Although, technically, it was Henry who rescued us both. He does like his big guns.”

“What I'm saying is, thank you. For being someone I can really trust. You could have left but were ready to die for me. It's been a long time since I've known anyone who really would. A lot of people say they will stand by you but until you're there, really there, it's just words. Until then, you never really know for sure.”

“Don't forget you did the same for me. I may be your boss but the five of us make a solid team, equally dependable - like a family. Glad you're part of our family.”

He offered Xi his hand and she shook it.

“I never really had a family before. Except my grandmother. Say hello to Gurmeet from me. And tell her very well done. She saved the reactor. The SAS want to give her a medal.”

“Will do. I'll let you know when I'm out. We need to talk about the leak Sarah mentioned. Henry's found something.”

“I would be honoured. And you're right, Shabbir. We do make a good team. A wonderful family.”

He gave her a warm smile.

“Yes, Xi. We do.”

With an actual smile on her face, she drove away. Shabbir was already at the florist, about to buy her entire stock of bluebells.

“Must be for someone very special.”

“Very.”

* * *

Washing his hands and the flowers in the hospital's DNA scourer, Shabbir walked through the main entrance and headed for the second floor of the North Wing. The happy smile on his face fell a little, as his emotions mixed with too many bad memories of such places.

He didn't need to ask for directions to her room. For security, it's location was only logged with MI5 staff and had been patched through to his wristcom.

“That's a lot of flowers...”, smiled the ward sister, “...Let us know if you need an extra vase. Positive elements can speed a patient's recovery no end.”

“Will do.”, smiled Shabbir, forcing his negative emotions below the surface until she had passed. Afterwards, they re-surfaced, stronger than ever.

The closer he got to Gurmeet's room, the stronger his trepidation became. How badly was she hurt? He'd been told she was stable but that could mean anything. Would she be pleased to see him? Pleased to see his flowers? His expression of love? Or would she be angry and reject him and his advances? He would hate to lose their friendship.

Turning into the final corridor, he saw her room up ahead. Two suited, MI5 officers stood guard outside.

“Shabbir, Section E. Is she awake?”, he asked, holding up his wristcom for ID scan.

“No idea, sir. We haven't been inside since the pre-arrival checks.”

“I'll go in quietly, just in case.”

Steeling himself for the worst, he gave a little knock. No answer. He eased open the door, greeted by the soft beep, beep, beep of a monitor.

Regular, strong beats. He was glad. It was a good sign.

“Gurmeet...”, he whispered, “...It's me. Shabbir.”

In he went, blue-flower surprise ready to welcome back and woo the person he loved. The woman he wanted to love and cherish. To spend the rest of his life with.

Chapter 105

Red Flash

In Warsaw, the 500-seat conference hall of the United Democratic Nations building was packed. It was a hugely busy day for voting on matters of international importance. So important, even the President of China had been granted an honorary place, with full voting rights. Seated nearby were Japan and Taiwan united to stand strong against any further advances by the New Soviet Union even China had become annoyed with.

Adrian March came in and gave a thumbs up to a beaming Derek and Eugene. The vote on ERAL was scheduled for the morning session and he was going to vote in their favour. They were better people than some of his family, let alone some of his ministers.

The Chair of the summit was the current head of the UDN, Ula Macura, previously the President of Poland.

“Dzien dobry and good morning, everyone...”, she began, “...Welcome to the 8th annual summit of the D186, our very United Democratic Nations. Thank you all for coming.”

As she spoke, her voice was instantly translated into the native language of every attendee. Her 3D holographic image, five meters tall, presented both to those in the hall and the general public in every major city of every D186 nation. China had been offered an image projector to show live proceedings in Beijing too but had declined. The remains of North Korea, almost totally annihilated by its repelled nuclear attack against the South, had closed its remaining doors to the world and was not even invited to attend. The Chair continued with her introductions.

“We have a very busy schedule ahead. Before we get to ERAL, lets warm up with CarbLo 2 - the next generation solar-powered CO2 collector for the Sahara.”

As a power source for main-grid services, solar was often criticised for being reliant on both daylight and good weather. To do their job, these solar-powered CO2 collectors didn't need to run 24/7, they just needed to run when they could; which was very often in the strong-Saharan sun. Under the sun, they pulled carbon-dioxide out of the atmosphere by the megaton and processed it into pure carbon blocks - known as black gold and sold to advanced-materials manufacturers.

The profits paid both for the maintenance and local investments. It was, quite literally, a shining light in the growth of the African economy and a brilliant example of the D186 nations working together for the good of

humankind.

Sadly it was too late to save the icecaps and prevent the loss of the Gulf Stream. For the last three years, London had grown the freezing winters of Moscow, Glasgow those of Oslo.

“Finally, we're underway with all this, Reynolds.”, said Adrian.

“Finally. Any news about the operation?”

“All under control.”

“The officer from Five?”

“Saved the day, apparently. Injured but she'll live.”

“Deserves a medal.”

The PM looked at Reynolds.

“Acorn said exactly the same thing. Remind me when we get back to Whitehall.”

Just 10 minutes into the summit, the PM's wristcom vibrated.

“Was sure I turned this thing off.”, he said, looking down to cancel it.

There was nothing to cancel. It wasn't a wristcom reminder it was a red-flash alert. Recognising his retina, a pupil-sized red circle pulsed a glow on the screen.

“What now?”

He slid the circle down, to take the message in visual mode only. Four words flashed up. He read them, swallowed hard and sprung to his feet.

“Apologies, Madam President...”, he spoke into his microphone, “...Please, excuse us a minute. A matter of State. Reynolds.”

Reynolds stood up too.

“Apologies, everyone...”, he said, catching up with the PM as they left the conference hall, “...What is it?”

“I need a Scramcat to Whitehall ASAP. They can pick me up from the roof. Get my case and meet me there. I need to make a call.”

Despite the myriad questions on Reynold's lips, he put them aside and hurried to the PM's room - switching on his white-noise scrambler before putting in a call to Trenchard, RAF Squadron Leader in Poland.

“Understood...”, came the unquestioning, trained response, “...pick-up on the UDN roof in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you.”

Adrian's lift was empty but he still hit his white-noise scrambler and plugged in his earpiece - the words of the red-flash message still shouting in his head. His call was answered within the first ring.

“Lau.”

“It's Adrian.”

“You got the message.”

“Yes. How bad?”

“Unknown. Alert came in about an explosion, then coms went down. Satellite feed coming up now. Live in 3, 2, 1... Holy shit.”

“What is it? Lau?”

“Hard to see for sure. There's a storm over the estuary. A tornado. I'm guessing Torro-4.”

“Over the site?”

“It's covered by cloud. Hold on. GIVE ME THERMAL!”, Lau shouted. Lau never shouted.

The screen in front of Lau pulsed blue as the thermal layer of data was added. She stared at it.

“Shit!”

Lau never swore. Yet now she'd sworn twice.

“Lau?”

“Fire. There's a fucking fire at Hinkley!”

“What's burning? What building?”

“Checking.”

He could hear chaos. The urgent chatter of staff in the background. It reminded him of Sarah when she was juggling MI5 operations. Lau's hard breath came to his earpiece.

“Unable to confirm. Too much interference. Looks like EPR one.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nuclear reactor - C1.”

“You sure?”

“Not yet. I'll announce a level seven event, just in case.”

Level seven was the highest international designation for a nuclear reactor problem.

“No. Not yet! Don't risk a panic until we know for sure what has happened and how badly. Just say there's been some chemical leak. It'll get people inside without panic. How bad do you think it is?”

“Don't know. Coms are down. I'll be there in 20.”

“Bring in the army if you need to. COBRA in 55.”

“You'll excuse me for not attending. ”

“Join on video link, if you can get it running.”

“Will see. I'll update from the car before going in.”

“OK.”

As Adrian thump-ended the call, he was joined by Reynolds, his deputy bringing his briefcase.

“Pick up in two.”, said Reynolds.

“Good.”

Together they hurried up the stairs to the roof of the building.

Chapter 106
Hospital Bed

At the foot of Gurmeet's hospital bed stood Shabbir. On his forearm, his wristcom was red-flashing an emergency – demanding his response but getting none. The bouquet of bluebells in his hand fell. Crashing to the floor, along with his heart. A tear splashed on top of them.

His wristcom buzzed harder. Xi's voice came on speaker, remote accessing via emergency scrambler.

“Shabbir. Shabbir! Red flash emergency. Answer me! Shabbir!”

In front of him lay Gurmeet. Wrapped in bandages. Unconscious. Heart monitor beeping. Only, despite what it said on her drip-fed wristband, it wasn't Gurmeet. He had no idea who it was, apart from the only survivor. The only survivor of Faith's attack at Dungeness nuclear power station.

Xi's voice was urgent but to Shabbir it sounded from a world that was no longer his own. Xi called out again.

“Shabbir, answer me! A reactor's on fire! IT'S HINKLEY POINT!”

Another tear landed on the bluebells. It was the only reply Shabbir had to give. Nothing mattered to him any more. Nothing at all.

Gurmeet was dead.

Chapter 107
Warsaw, Poland

The British Prime Minister was sweating in his charcoal suit, as he and his deputy reached the roof door and shoved it open.

“Jesus...”, gasped Reynolds, as he stepped outside, “...I heard this place was defended but bloody hell. Thank God they're lit green for deactivation.”

“We'd be dead already if they weren't.”

They were in central Warsaw but the roof looked like that of a military fortress. Every edge lined with batteries of high-power laser cannons, ready to take down any and every attack on the world leaders inside.

From above they could hear the approaching beat of a helicopter from the Polish Air Force - Adrian's ride to his faster one. He turned to Reynolds.

“Get back to the conference and do what you can. Vote yes for ERAL and CarbLow2. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“And get everyone to a COBRA in 50 minutes.”

“A COBRA meeting?”

Adrian gave Reynolds a hard glance. He hated being questioned, especially in an emergency. Reynolds didn't know what was going on but he knew that look.

“In 50. Got it.”

“Good.”

“Adrian, can you tell me what's happened now?”

“This.”

Adrian held up his wristcom. The message displayed was short and to the point:

'Explosion at Hinkley Point.'

Hinkley Point had four nuclear power stations. Reynold's face turned white.

“Was it the missing explosives?”

“If it was, I'm in serious shit. Tell the Brigadier General to expect a call from Professor Lau.”

“Right.”

“And red-flash Chris at Section E, I want to know how the hell they let this happen.”

“Will do. Good luck.”

“We're going to need a lot of that. And, Reynolds...” Adrian leant in closer, dropping his voice, “...stay armed at all times. There's a leak. That's straight from Sarah.”

“Yes, sir.”, nodded Reynolds brusquely, in keeping with his military past. Not least because the Sarah in question was the Director General of MI5 and she didn't give such warnings lightly.

* * *

Minutes after taking off, the helicopter was coming down to land at Warsaw's Chopin Airport. On the tarmac, a fuel truck sat feeding an awesome looking aircraft - an RAF Scramcat, still steaming after hypersonic flight from Gdynia air-force base. It hovered a foot off the ground - underside thrusters glowing a dark blue as they held it rock steady. Its beautifully sleek body made even more so by stubby wings shaped like forward-pointing swords, half pressed into the sides of the fuselage, running from arrow-point front to broadened back. The tail widening to accommodate fat, Mk3 plasma engines. Four of them.

Adrian couldn't take his eyes off it. He'd never seen a Scramcat up close before. Just a pre-launch promotional video from an RAF Tempest on full after burn, being overtaken by a Scramcat so fast it looked like it was in reverse. And now he was going up in one. In that one.

Five minutes later, donning a blue RAF pressure suit, he was led towards the pilot sitting inside.

“Prime Minister, meet Cyber: Group Captain Johnson. We call him Cyber because he's in love with his AI.”

“Best marriage I ever had. At your service, sir.”, grinned Cyber as the nervous PM was helped across the warm aircraft skin, into the rear seat.

“Cyber.”, acknowledged Adrian, as he climbed in - ground crew buckling him up and repeating safety protocol.

“Remember what we went through? If Cyber says eject, pull this handle, hard. Your chute will open automatically. After landing, turn this buckle to release the belt. Only after landing.”

“Bit different to a private jet...”, joked Adrian, trying to make light of his nerves as they connected his helmet and stowed his case in the small locker beside him. Over the intercom came Cyber - hint of amusement in his voice.

“Sorry, no cocktail service, sir. Bubbly doesn't like hypersonics. May I ask what fitness level you're cleared for?”

“Six. But in a hurry so let's call it seven.”

“Is that an order, sir?”

“Call me Adrian and yes, Cyber, it is. How soon can you get me to Whitehall?”

“ETA, Carmen?”

“Level 7 ETA is 17.3 minutes.”, came the soft voice of Carmen, Cyber's AI.

“Direct to Horse Guards Parade as ordered, Adrian. Hope that's fast enough.”

“17 minutes to cover a thousand miles? Christ, that's fast.”

“Only 8-50 nautical, direct. Normally we don't go supersonic until 4,000 feet but they've cleared us from a thousand today. Ready?”

Adrian took a deep breath and exhaled it hard, ujjayi yoga style - as if fogging a mirror. It was time to go.

“Ready.”

Cyber wouldn't normally have landed a military jet at a civilian airport, nor be taking it to the centre of London. But then he wouldn't normally be carrying the Prime Minister on a matter of national emergency.

“Chopin tower, Cyber, requesting vertical take-off.”

“Cyber cleared vertical. Wind 16, 080.”

“Cyber cleared vertical. Wind 16, 080. Out. Here we go, Adrian. Hold onto your seat.”

Adrian was more than holding onto his seat. He was gripping the sides as if aboard a roller coaster about to launch. He even gripped harder as the Scramcat's dark-blue landing thrusters brightened to pale blue. It felt like a giant hand was lifting them skywards.

At 500 feet, the front thrusters powered brighter still, lifting the nose 50 degrees and angling the tail down. Adrian could feel his hands sweating as his knuckles turned white.

“Relax...”, said Cyber, seeing the increase in the PM's biometrics, “...Walk in the park.”

“Uh.”, was as much as Adrian could reply.

Cyber grinned. He loved his job. Paid to fly hypersonics for a living. What could possibly be better?

“Engage main coils, Carmen.”

“Main coils engaged”, Came her soft reply.

Adrian had a 3D display of the Scramcat in front of him. It showed the tail go from black to dark blue then lighter, as Cyber firmed his hand on the throttle and began easing it forward, then a little more. From behind came a deep rumble, like a distant volcano, and he felt his body pressed back into his seat by the growing surge of acceleration.

“Don't fight it, sir. Just relax. Let the seat do its job. More comfortable that way.”

Adrian started four-count breathing - Cyber saw his biometrics steady.

“That's better. Ready for more beans?”

More?

“Uh hu.”

It was the most Adrian could say. Cyber took it as a yes and moved the throttle further forwards. The volcano rumbled louder and Adrian had to force himself to keep breathing. The acceleration in his Bentley was fast but this was like his Formula 1 car.

Down on the ground, a cluster of plane spotters squinted as the tail-thrusters went bright. Seconds later a howl hit their ears and they had to clamp their hands over them. This was why it was called a Scramcat - it sounded like a predator of gods, sending every living thing scrambling away in terror.

Then it was gone. All that remained was a hole in the clouds and the slam of sonic boom, cannon-fire pounding across Warsaw like a replay of 1939.

The Scramcat was climbing hard, already close to Mach 3.

“You OK?”, asked Cyber.

“Fine.”, croaked Adrian.

“Steady breaths. Ready for more beans?”

“Uh huuuh...”

The tail thrusters went almost pure-white. The volcano roaring right behind Adrian's ears. It felt like Goliath had a foot on his chest - crushing him through the back rest. Even his Formula 1 car had nothing on this. All blood had left the front of his body and he was silently ruing his order for level 7. The display in front of him already beyond Mach 5.

Then, just minutes after take-off, they were 13 miles up at Mach 7 - screaming air outside left murdered in their wake. Cyber eased back.

“Hold vector, Carmen.”

“Holding vector.”

Acceleration over, blood flooded back through Adrian's body - eyes

filling with dancing speckles of light as oxygen returned.

“You OK back there? Just noticed your readings swung high. We're on course at Mach 7 - ten times the speed of a normal jet, about 5,000 knots.”

Adrian cleared his throat to speak.

“Hell of a ride.”, he croaked, trying to sound non-plussed.

“Always is. Love it. May I ask what the hurry is? Why a Scramcat? We're not at war, are we?”

“Top-secret.”

“Thought it might be.”

Adrian took a deep breath, finally regaining himself.

“Cyber, since my life is in your hands, I'll tell you. But keep it under your hat.”

“Of course.”

“There's been an explosion at a nuclear power station. Hinkley Point. We don't know how bad yet. On my way to a COBRA meeting.”

Cyber sat silently for a moment, absorbing the news. Then took a deep breath of his own.

“Adrian, we can go faster.”

Faster?

“I thought Mach 7 was the limit.”

“That's what we say publicly. With these Mk3 engines we added over-boost. But, please, keep it under your hat.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, it was all so surreal Adrian found himself smiling.

“Of course. Am in your hands.”

With barely a pause, Cyber spoke to his co-pilot.

“Carmen, confirm flight-path clearance to destination at 90,000 then engage the secondary coils.”

“Flight path to destination shows clear at 90,000...”, demurred Carmen, “...Engaging secondary coils. Engaged.”

“Bigger beans.”, announced Cyber and shoved the throttle forward. Almost all the way forward.

The volcano exploded right behind Adrian's ears, louder than ever as he was slammed back by the foot of Goliath's big brother on steroids. Crushed so hard into his seat, he couldn't have leant forward if his life depended on it. Screwing his eyes closed, he gave up trying to focus and just listened as Carmen's ever-calm voice came softly over the intercom - announcing their

speed at regular intervals.

“Mach 9.0”

“Mach 10.0”

Outside the engines were burning super-nova-white - powering them ever closer to escape velocity from Earth's orbit.

“Mach 11.0”

“Mach 12.0”

“Mach 13.0”

Cyber eased back. Goliath's brother got tired and lifted his foot. The volcano quietened to a distant rumble.

“Mach 13.6.”

“Mach 13.9.”

“Mach 14.1.”

“Hold vector.”

“Holding vector.”

As blood returned to Adrian's face for the second time, he felt himself becoming accustomed to the experience. Relaxing, he looked out through the bomb-proof canopy and saw the edges of the sword-wings glowing bright orange - heated to a thousand degrees even in the freezing, thin air of the stratosphere. Up above lay the beautiful twinkling of stars in the night. When he looked ahead, he saw the horizon turning as black as a nuclear night.

“Why is it so dark ahead?”

“We're catching the night.”

While the Earth spun at a thousand miles an hour, they were travelling at ten thousand. Cyber charging the Prime Minister back to England faster than the sun. Back to what ever nuclear darkness awaited there.

As Adrian sat absorbing the strange serenity of it all, watching the sun light glinting across the UDN Space Station above them, the words of an old REM song came into his head, repeating over and over again.

This is the end of the world as we know it...

The saga continues in
Only Human – *Tsunami*
out now

*This book is dedicated to every positive moment of everyone's
existence on Earth.*

Never give up.

*As long as you're alive,
there is always a chance to get where you truly want to go.*