

Authors on www.youwriteon.com say 'Nuclear – Bursting Point' 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

Nuclear

Bursting Point

by

Sam Cooke

AD 2045 - episode one

AD 2045 - episode one

Nuclear – Bursting Point

www.AD2045.com

Artist's impression of Hinkley Point C used by kind permission.

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Non-Fiction books by Sam Cooke

Abuse – Escape Yours

Twenty Years a Stranger - Book 1: *Monster in the House*

Twenty Years a Stranger - Book 2: *Rages in Court* (out 2020)

Twenty Years a Stranger - Book 3: *Aftermath* (out 2021)

Sci-Fi five book series by Sam Cooke

AD 2045 – episode one: Nuclear – Bursting Point

AD 2045 – episode two: Tsunami – Atlantic Meltdown

AD 2045 – episode three: Partner – Julia’s Rising

AD 2045 – episode four: Bu Mon – Island Killer (out 2020)

AD2045 – episode five: (out 2021)

Short Stories

Crane Island, Anna’s Song, London Fling, My Name is Sapphire

*This book is dedicated to every positive moment of everyone's
existence on Earth.*

Never give up.

*As long as you are alive, there is always a chance to get
where you truly want to go.*

Precede

England, June 2045.

The British government, and indeed most of the world, are being infiltrated and run by the Partner corporation. Ordinary people are blissfully unaware but a special section of the intelligence services are secretly locked in battle against Partner and their Chinese allies.

And then Julia comes along, innocently playing with her best friend Jake, and runs into a Partner site. The penalty is death, from the sky.

But Julia is a survivor. Young but toughened by a murderous mother and about to get tougher still.

While MI5 battle terrorists and international infiltration, Julia is about to get spat into a world of revenge and violence; battles against maniacs hell bent on nuclear destruction. If she loses, many will die. If she wins, she will die. Whatever happens, our world will never be the same again. And neither will she...

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Chapter 1

Swarmbots

The badger was about to die. Its nose sniffed at the increasing change in scent. The moist, earthy smells of the woodland floor had given way to the stench of decay. In the air above, hovering at the edge of the wheat field, a wasp-sized swarmbot had locked on. Monitoring the badger's movement to the nearest millimetre, ready to attack the second it crossed the invisible red line. Five hundred more swarmbots, called over the instant the badger crossed the amber line, were hovering just behind the first. Waiting for its signal to attack.

All along the line, the ground was littered with the remains of insects, birds and a fox. Its shredded body smeared across the ground. This was the source of the stench. The badger sniffed a little more, looking at the line of death. It heard the faint hum of the swarmbots hovering above and looked up. Two tiny, red-laser eyes were pointing down. A faint blue-energy glow from its hover engine underneath, tuned to make it almost invisible against the blue of the sky. It didn't look right. The line of death didn't smell right. The badger stepped back and turned away. It would search for food elsewhere. Away from that field.

The swarmbot measured its vector. It was moving away. Back over the amber line. Automatically, the 500 other swarmbots hummed back to their original guard positions.

“Come on, we can shoot here now.”

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

Two teenagers, Julia and Jake, were playing target practice in the woods - armed with a 400-watt training laser-rifle. They ran in the direction of the badger. Fast, teenage feet thumping the ground. The badger froze, listened, then panicked. It fled. Back towards the field. Back towards the line of death. Anything to get away.

It crossed the amber line. The air filled with the low hum of 500 swarmbots. The badger didn't hear them or care. It just wanted to escape. At panic speed, its nose crossed the red line.

The swarmbots' eyes flashed bright red. They didn't carry weapons. They were weapons. Diamond-hard bodies, with bullet-shaped noses. Wings not just wings but surgically-sharp blades finished with jagged, toothed edges. Just one metre above the badger, the first swarmbot shot down. Attack dive. Full-power punch into the top of the badger's nose, shattering the bone and ripping out the side of its jaw. The badger shrieked in terrible pain, its face

slammed into the ground by the impact. Now the 500 swarmbots behind the first began bulleting in waves of five. Mercy was not in their programming. Five at a time. Rapid succession. Machine-gunning down. Punching in, jagged wings slicing through, then ripping out the other side. Head, neck, torso. Everywhere. Slam in, power through, tear flesh out. Already done for, its lungs burst out one last cry, then cried no more.

Jake and Julia skidded to a halt.

“You hear that?”

“Zoo lost a puma again.”

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

“We're too far in. Look. Over there. A field. We can cut across.”

A swarmbot, hovering at the edge of the field, watched them run over the amber line; 500 more came to join it.

Jake, holding the laser-rifle in hands moistening with sweat, stopped at the edge of the field. Foot right against the invisible red-line. Julia caught up and went to overtake.

“Tired? I'm going to win.”

He grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back.

“Wasps.”

“Wow. Now that's a swarm.”

“It's great. I can't miss.”

“Sure that's a good idea?”

“They'll never see it coming.”

He raised the rifle, squinted down the barrel and fired.

TchZoooo.

A thin-blue laser beam zapped out. It bounced off a swarmbot's nose and into the belly of another, incinerating it. Instantly, the others locked on. The cloud swarmed.

Jake lowered the rifle.

“Oh, shit. RUN!”

Julia was running; 500 swarmbots bulleting after them. Without looking where he was shooting, Jake fired behind as he ran.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

The shots punched trees, the ground, the air. Smoke puffed where ever they hit. He didn't look back. Just ran for his life, trying the impossible of out running a swarmbot. He didn't need to. The 500 swarmbots hit the red line

co-ordinates like flies slamming into a window. A black wall with a thousand red, laser eyes hovering. Tracking the teenagers. Locked on but programmed not to cross.

* * *

Julia got to Toddlers' Stream and splashed across. Jake followed. On the other side they dived behind the first big tree they came to, a large oak.

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

“Can't believe they reacted like that.”

“Are they following?”

“No idea.”

They needed to know. Very cautiously they peered around the tree, young faces hugging the rough bark.

“See anything?”

“No. You?”

“Think we're clear.”

He slid the rifle's safety catch on.

“Hope so.”

“Those were seriously fast.”

“Never seen wasps act like that before. Or so many.”

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

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

“*What?* You rude pig!”

Jake danced off, laughing. Euphorically happy after escaping the danger.

“Hah. Hah. Joking. Just joking.”

“I'll show you joking.”

Julia ran after him as he danced, knocking him to the ground. Jake rolled over and looked up, huge cheeky grin beaming out at his best friend. Julia snatched the laser-rifle.

“Give me that.”

Brushing her long, blonde hair away from her face, she flicked off the safety, flipped up the vectorscope and rested the butt against her shoulder.

“Name the target.”

They had been best friends since nursery. Other kids teased them about it

but they didn't care. Their friendship was too solid to worry about petty opinions of others. The only teasing that mattered was the teasing they did to each other.

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

“That one? Too close.”

“No, that one. Over there.”

Julia looked at the rusting, 'No public access', sign 200m away.

“Still too easy.”

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

“Make it publiic? You're so crude.”

“Too difficult for you?”

“Nope.”

Julia leant against the oak for stability and zero'd the scope.

She fired.

TchZooooo.

She fired again.

TchZooooo.

And kept firing.

TchZooooo. TchZooooo. TchZooooo. TchZooooo. TchZooooo. TchZooooo.

The sign puffed silent, dark-grey smoke with every hit, forming its own little cloud. As the smoke cleared Jake squinted against the sun. You made a capital 'I'.

“Gave me an excuse to fire more. Think it's straight.”

“It's perfect. Show off. You've been practising, again.”

“A bit. Dad's got one of these too. Heavier though.”

“Café business so risky these days?”

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

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

“Jake Watson, after all these years you...”

Bing bong.

A holo-face of Jake's mum appeared in the air in front of him. Julia hid the rifle behind her back.

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

“No, mum.”, replied Jake.

His mother's face morphed into a big, yellow smiley, then blinked out.

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

“Nah. Dad's making roast dinner today.”

“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? Wow. Progress runs 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...”, said Julia, “...Making something good out of something bad.”

“Still can't understand how mad she got. If your dad hadn't recorded things he'd never have been believed. You could have been murdered. But don't worry, 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 handed him back the laser-rifle.

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

“Sorry.”, he said, realising how insensitive he was being and did as she asked. “Why do you think there were so many wasps back there? So many in one place?”

“I'll ask dad. He seems to know a lot about weird things.”

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

“Cafés these days. Never know which one.”

“Guess he deserved the promotion to regional manager.”

Julia really liked Jake. Although insensitive at times he had always been there for her. Friends almost since birth, he'd never let her down. Always helped her feel warm inside. Kept her demons about her mother in their cells. Made her smile when nothing else in the world could. With that smile she lifted her head and looked at him.

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

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

“Guess you're right, Lia.”

He was the only one who ever called her Lia and she was smiling wider. The hint of love in her reddened eyes.

“Guess I am.”, she said and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, bounding away to hide her blushes.

“See you later.”

He watched her go, beaming happiness filling his heart.

That was the last day they met.

Chapter 2

A Barn in Somerset

“Don't blow your head off, Alan.”

“Unless you've made peace with God.”

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

“Now he tells us.”

The group of four men stepped further away from the table. Alan, holding a grey, pea-sized explosive, gently pushed in a thin wire and placed it in the hollow of a black, high-density brick. Carefully he put another on top. Then four more.

“Thought one would hold it.”

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

Alan, unrolling the wire as he went, walked towards the detonator.

BOOOOM!

Brick smashed against the shield, cracking it in three places. Knocking it over and the men behind it. Other brick flew skywards, punching a metre-wide hole through the corrugated-iron roof. Sped high into the air until gravity finally won and pulled it back down, like a biblical hail storm. Smashing back through the roof, it slammed into the ground near Alan, adding to the dirt blackened burns across his body. Through his torn, blood-soaked jacket, an encrypted communicator vibrated itself onto the ground. The number 62 lighting up on its cracked screen as brick landed on its speaker button.

“Alan! Anyone. We heard an explosion. Was that you? I said wait for me to get there. Alan!”

“Volatile...”, croaked Alan's last breath.

The voice on the communicator continued.

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

Inside an old pod, speeding towards the barn, the heads of Faith sat frantic with urgency.

“At least it works, Craig. We can take the target out no problem.”

“We can take many targets out.”

“Faith will rise. England will be ours again or it will be a wasteland. God is Almighty and so shall our names be. In history forever.”

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

Chapter 3

Field Meeting

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

It was a beautiful summer morning. The wind was light, sun smiling down. On Shabbir's side were the high-speed train tracks, hidden down an embankment. On Gurmeet's, the tall, white-stone War Memorial and its Chamber of Silence. Behind her, Adam's view of Kenilworth Road and driverless pods humming at exactly 4.8m intervals - kids playing at their disconnected controls, pretending they were driving. Xi Yang's view was the smattering of people walking dogs and children across the hectares of grass stretching into the park beyond. And all around them, a variety of tall trees, planted as dedications to fallen soldiers from World War I.

Shabbir heard an HS-T train burst along the embankment and through the tunnel under Kenilworth Road, braking to 90mph for Coventry station on the other side before thrusting back to 190mph. Turbines wailing like a jet on take off as they spooled back to 30,000rpm, vanishing it 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 perfect for undercover operations. As a former mixed-martial arts instructor, his self-confidence kept him so relaxed in dangerous situations no-one ever suspected he was deadlier than their gun 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 personality the total opposite to Shabbir's jovial cheer – totally burying herself in her work, as if there was nothing more to life. With Xi it wasn't business before pleasure it was just business - bordering on a death wish. The reason was no secret to Chris, their Section Chief. She had been too late to halt the Beijing betrayal that murdered her fiancé and then her parents. Normally such psychological tendencies would have had Xi decommissioned or at least glued to a desk but times were desperate and she was the best ethnically Chinese officer they had. With the

hand of China on Britain's nuclear power stations and growing evidence of high-level infiltration, her expertise was badly needed.

“The word is, a group is looking to go nuclear. Attack a civilian target...”, said Adam, 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, an innocent-looking Indian with the deepest-brown eyes, sometimes sent as a honey trap even though she was a lesbian, looked at him.

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

Xi answered for Adam.

“When we say 'go nuclear', we don't mean bring weapons in. We mean an attack on nuclear material already here – including nuclear waste. Go dirty. Create a radioactive cloud of devastation.”

“But...”, added Adam, “...they would need a truck-load of explosives to get through nuclear reactor walls. They're reinforced concrete, metres thick so we're thinking about a control-room attack. Forcing a station into meltdown. Or the hijack of material being transported between sites.”

“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. Gurmeet went first.

“We've picked up chatter of bio-bombs. Plastic explosive even more powerful than PE4 - designated PE4-B. Undetectable by anything but the latest systems. In the right place, a 1kg charge could punch through a two-metre-thick wall.”

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

“That's concerning.”, said Adam.

“It's more than concerning and that's not all. Someone has been importing Lego guns.”

“Lego guns?”

“Don't let the name fool you. They're made of advanced plastic and assembled from clip together parts. Often in colourful, odd shapes to avoid attracting attention. Detectors don't identify them and neither do security on the X-ray scans. The pieces just look like parts 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 200m and fast enough to penetrate a bi-kevlar vest at close range. The gas is hydrogen-based. Mixes with enriched oxygen pulled from the air. Impossible to detect and hits 3,000psi when ignited.”

“They just clip together and 3,000psi doesn't blow them apart?”, asked Xi.

“At full power, the first shot would. They run at low pressure for a few shots, heating a gel coating inside 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.”

“Shabbir, why import them? Can't they just be made in a 3D printer?”

“Henry tried. Too many layers and not precise enough. They have to be crush-formed from solids or the bricks just fall apart.”

Adam sat quietly, taking it all in.

“So what you're saying is...”, he began summarising, “...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 all fronts and we won't even see it coming?”

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

“Do we at least know who they are?”

“Quasi-religious nuts, as usual...”, said Xi, “...Call themselves 'Faith!'”

“Specific targets?”

“Previous intelligence suggested the recycling plant at Sellafield but it's very heavily guarded now...”, said Xi, “...My suggestion would be a nuclear power station; one of the new builds at Hinkley Point, Dungeness or Bradwell. Their detectors can sense 98% of explosives, which sounds good but means no-one is in a hurry to scrap them and pay for the latest detectors, just to sniff out the other 2%. Especially as the MOD isn't exactly shouting it's lost bio PE4.”

“That is so short-sighted.”, frowned Shabbir, “An attack on one of those plants could have winds blowing nuclear fallout across London or the entire west coast. I'll get Chris to bug someone about it, literally if needs be.”

Shabbir's wristcom vibrated. An encrypted message was coming in. He glanced at it - retina scan unlocking the message as his gaze hardened.

“There's been an explosion. The Quantocks, Somerset.”

“The Quantocks?...”, said Xi, “...That's near the reactors at Hinkley Point.”

“You're right. Shit! We're on!...”, exclaimed Shabbir, who often swore at times like this, “...Adam, Xi - keep digging for anything else. Gurmeet, call in your airpod. We're going to get these fuckers and fast.”

Chapter 4

Jake's Fate

Jake's front door didn't greet him when he arrived home. The manual control panel, usually a beautiful glow of turquoise, sat dull and lifeless. It wasn't a power cut. The screen was cracked. Hit hard.

Silently, he took the rifle from his shoulder and slid off the safety. The door was ajar. He eased it wider, listening for the invaders his instincts screamed were inside.

The house was larger than they needed. They had kept it after Jake's father was killed by a glitching pod. 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 his father 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 and roof tops across the UK. Those denying global warming long since silenced by the vanishing of the Arctic ice sheet - diluting the Gulf Stream into oblivion with it. These days, London had winters as cold as Moscow and summers as wet as a rain-forest memory.

Against all the odds, London still stood proudly above the waves – behind Thames Barrier II. Three times larger than the first; protected by a dozen missile launchers, quad banks of plasma-cannons and two-thousand military swarmbots. The grey-NACABIK armour of the barrier itself masked the dark scorches of the attacks that got close enough to earn the terrorists status enhancement. They never enjoyed it for long. A hornbot drone, so called because it was the size of a hornet, would fly invisibly above – tracking the perpetrators back to their base then calling in a zerodrone. Zerodrones, ZeDs, were called that because of the number of targets reputed to survive their attacks: zero. Exploded targets were never acknowledged as strikes by any government. Special investigators were always called in, by international law, and the explosions attributed to gas leaks – even when the building had no gas supply. No-one ever questioned their verdict twice.

It was a war of attrition, hidden behind a mask of peace and tranquillity. In the past, governments had heightened the threat status to scare a population into accepting draconian measures. Now the threat status was so off-the-scale they were doing the opposite - playing it down to avoid looking incompetent. England's threat status 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 just accepted it when something PC'd – crashed for no known reason, without warning. They just hit the reset button, rebooted and everything worked fine again; until the next incident. Of course people weren't happy with fatal pod 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, “...Accidents will still happen, from time to time, as no system can ever be perfect.”

Except, for the government and Partner, the high-tech corporation that developed the pods, it was.

* * *

Jake felt a vibration as Julia signalled his wristcom. He cancelled it without answering - his friend would have to wait. He'd heard a sound. A woman's voice coming from the kitchen. It wasn't his mother's. He crept closer. Gripping the laser-rifle in both hands. Finger quivering on the trigger. The voice continued.

“You never did like to conform. If you weren't so brilliant at your job we'd have got rid of you years ago. Revenge is our speciality, not yours. You've gone too far this time.”

The voice was female but unfathomably cold. Distant. Jake peered through the crack between their old-fashioned door hinges, trying to see who had spoken. He saw the back of his mother's head. Her straight, red-bob hair ruffled. When she spoke he saw a line of blood down the side of her face.

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

“Of course. You know us.”

“*The stray is back, ma'am.*”, came a voice in the background.

“Good. Time for me to go.”

“Jadviga, you bastard. I'll...”

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

“YEARRRRRGH!!!!!!”, yelled Jake, charging round the door, laser-rifle thrust forward.

The floating face of Jadviga in a hologram looked at him and smiled, in cruel victory.

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

The hologram became a horned, grinning red-devil - orange flames roaring around the Partner logo behind it, then blinked out.

“Jake, get out of here!”, shouted his mother.

She was tied to a chair. Face and knuckles bruised.

“RUN, JAKE!”

Jake couldn't run. Couldn't abandon her.

“Stay still.”

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

He blasted the restraints off her wrists, then her feet.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

His mother jumped up, grabbed his arm and yanked him towards the door.

Outside, flying below radar just 100m up, a camouflaged zerodrone hummed into final position, below the guiding hornbot. Its 60-kilowatt plasma-cannon, frequency tuned to match the blue of the sky, pointing at Jake's house.

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

Above the house, the zerodrone's charging capacitors were whistling at high frequency. Every dog within a mile howling at the sound. Abruptly it all stopped. The capacitors went silent. Charged.

“Zero.”, came the command.

Vvvvv-DOOOOO!!!

The cannon spat a thick, sky-blue ball of plasma, hotter than the sun. It punched the house like a meteor strike; smashing in the roof. Red tiles and burning timbers flew aside. The inner floors boomed with the shockwave smashing them apart. Chunks thumped against the walls. Flew out through the windows. The kitchen cooker, the main focus of the pulse was hit with perfect accuracy. Steel-melting plasma burst the gas supply. Ignition. The house never stood a chance.

The destruction of the pulse going in had broken it. The explosion in the kitchen blew its guts out. Blinding orange flames tore through the doors, windows and collapsing walls. Black smoke mushroomed above the skyline. Bricks, tiles and burning planks of wood clattering onto surrounding pods and gardens, setting off alarms.

As if bolted to a landing pad, the zerodrone simply hovered, rock-steady. Unmoved by the debris bouncing off its hull as it filmed the carnage - relaying the destruction live to the satisfaction of its commander. The hornbot watched too. Scanning for any sign of life.

* * *

“All readouts show zero survivors, ma'am.”

Jadviga smiled, without a hint of warmth.

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

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

“...Next time you use a prototype, remember to turn the power down. Even gas explosions aren't supposed to be that powerful.”

“Sorry, ma'am. Forgot it was a Mk4 on test.”

“Ma'am...”, said another operator, “...a pod has stopped outside.”

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

“It's a series 16 on manual override. Two occupants.”

“*Manual?* Get their IDs! Send in the bot, regain control and crash that thing.”

“Yes, ma'am!”

Chapter 5
Julia's Dad

“Dinner in 20 minutes. Just crisping the potatoes.”

“Thanks.”, said Julia, 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 bum but we do still need to communicate.”

“I know.”

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

“Those look yummy.”

He turned another.

“I picked up an email from your mother today, sent two months ago.”

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

“Don't swear. Here, I printed it. You're old enough to see.”

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 child. Everyone hates you. When I get out you'll pay for this. Be afraid. Be very afraid.”

Julia stopped looking at the paper.

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

“No.”

“She's a *bloody* idiot!”

Her dad glared at her.

“Sorry. 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. While he kept turning the potatoes, Julia dropped the sheet into the recycler. It whirred softly. The ink dropped off, returning to black toner as an ironed sheet of white paper fed back into the printer tray.

“Can you get the gravy, please?”

“Sure.”

Julia reached up to a cupboard. Like Jake's, theirs was also a traditional kind of house. More expensive to run than modern homes but more appealing too - if you liked that kind of thing. They did.

It had been their dream family home. Their new start. A place to build a better future. Only that future had collapsed in front of them, recorded on video. Her mum hadn't just tried to kill her dad. She had also sworn she would drug Julia, take her hand and make her jump from grandma's 10th-floor flat; for 're-incarnation in a better life'. On the day of her removal, after trying to glass her dad in the shower and raging she would vanish Julia that day, even the arresting officers complained about her behaviour.

“Dad. Why is that out?”

Julia peeled her eyes off her dad's laser-rifle to look at him. He stopped turning the potatoes. Stood there, frowning.

“Dad?”

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

Julia looked back at his laser-rifle. She was old enough to know it was military spec; ten times more powerful than the 400-watt one she had been using with Jake. Lethal even through a brick wall.

“Is that why the safety's off?”

He looked at her, reading between her lines.

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

“Only some old sign post...”, she beamed with naughty pride, “...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 looked straight at her.

“Swarm? Where?”

“Other side of the woods. You know? Over Toddlers' Stream.”

He thumped off the cooker and grabbed the laser-rifle.

“Get in the pod. Where's Jake?”

“Home, I guess.”

“Call him. Get everyone out!”

He was acting with an urgency she'd only ever seen once before – the day he'd been called to work for some emergency. She remembered because it was the same day Jake's dad was killed. How cafés could ever have such emergencies was beyond her. Except that sometimes, in her teenage years, she had come to doubt managing cafés was all he did for a living. How else to explain his four-kilowatt laser-rifle and NACABIK-lined cupboard filled with '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 pod. Julia climbed in beside him. Instead of stating a destination, he slapped a keypad on the console, punched in a sequence of numbers and grabbed the emergency controls.

“No. 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 Julia's life forever.

Chapter 6

COBRA

Prime Minister Adrian March, stood inside 70 Whitehall - the cabinet offices just a stone's throw from Downing Street. Behind him, a large portrait of Winston Churchill, standing newly elected on the deck of HMS Prince of Wales. That was in 1940, 105 years later Adrian was standing before the heads of the armed forces, blue-light and intelligence services – along with four cabinet ministers. Smiles off the menu. Matters serious. This was COBRA, a Cabinet Office Briefing Room meeting, still held in room A and definitely not a drill.

Despite the seriousness there was an absence. The chair for the Director General of MI5 was empty. The PM looked across the mirror-smooth table at Sir Andrew, the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Services, MI6.

“Where's Sarah?”

“I have no idea, Prime Minister.”, 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 herself when opportunity allows.”

“Damn right she will.”

The PM turned his attention to the Secretary of State for the Environment.“

“Justin, tell us where we stand.”

“PM.”

Justin Clegg got to his feet.

“Good morning, everyone. The issue today is defence of the south-west coast. As you know, we are in the process of building strategic sea walls against the super-storms we've been experiencing in recent years. Completion is deemed critical to national security - not just because of the nuclear reactors in the Bristol Channel but also the threat to infrastructure, from south Wales all the way down to Plymouth. These walls are the biggest since the Great Wall of China – ironic, considering the concerns of Chinese espionage...”

Justin looked at their faces, meting out gravitas as he continued.

“...You should all have absolutely no doubt that, without these walls, the storms threaten not just nuclear shut downs but floods for tens of thousands of homes. Bankruptcy for hundreds of businesses.”

“We know. We demanded them...”, interrupted the head of the fire-brigade, “...Which is why these constructions have been funded.”

“And a good idea it was, Sir Dobson, but yesterday I met with Partner, the contractor. They explained how foundation issues are hampering progress. In some places the ground is so soft they have to dig down 10 metres, between tides, to reach the bedrock. In others it's solid granite and they're having to blast it with PE4 to achieve a stable depth. Put simply, they state the project is more geologically complex than in the contract so we are obliged to fund an extra £6 billion to achieve completion before October's hurricane season.”

He took out a matchbox-sized Near-Field Connection device and put it on the table. Its pristine British racing green contrasting the brunette of the teak.

“You can NFC the full report here.”

Simon Pierce, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was already blustering in protest. His fat, red face grown even redder – podgy jowls wobbling as he spoke.

“I don't want to NFC anything. Whatever Partner say, they're already £8 billion over budget and a month behind schedule. If they need more money they should find it themselves. It's only a wall, for goodness sake.”

“Eight walls, Simon, 220 miles long - designed to withstand Torro-11 tornados; the equivalent of Force-30 events on the Beaufort scale, if Beaufort went that high. Another £6 billion is a lot cheaper than rebuilding half the west coast and three nuclear power stations.”

Sir Andrew interrupted.

“With the current funding, could the most critical sections be completed in August, before the hurricane season sets in? Then complete the rest in the spring?”

Justin shook his head.

“The risk assessment triggering this project stated the need for full T-11 protection. Since the tsunami of '42, there have been increasing disturbances along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. There's also the risk of a new tear near Ireland, like the one that caused the tsunami of 1607. We wouldn't even get a ten-minute warning before Hinkley was under water if that happened.”

“Didn't anyone plan for this kind of thing when they chose that site?”, blurted Simon.

“It was chosen in the 1950's, back then this level of storm risk didn't exist. Unfortunately, when the Hinkley C reactors were green-lit in 2016, people were more interested in politics than safety.”

“We weren't.”, disagreed Sir Andrew.

MI6 had warned of the risks, along with MI5. There came a buzz from reception.

“Phil, I said no interruptions.”

“Sorry, PM. The Energy Secretary is here - with Professor Lau, the Head of Nuclear Energy.”

“Lau too? Send them in.”

The heavy door swung smoothly open, watched by two, stone-faced guards standing either side of the new entrants.

“Come in.”, welcomed the PM.

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

“Tariq.”

Behind Tariq came a tall woman in a white lab coat, dressed like she was still there. A hands-on scientist who never turned off. Her shoulder-length, blonde hair dressing a face sparkling with intelligence from her sea-green eyes. It took a second 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 strong grip.

“Prime Minister. It's 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. Far tougher as a stand-up woman than she had ever been as a retreating man and she wasted no time in stating her purpose.

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

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

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

The professor remained standing. Having been briefed by Chris, Shabbir's MI5 Section Chief, Lau was in no mood for placations and placed both hands on the table.

“When exactly were you planning to approve it? After a terrorist attack?”

“Professor...”, began the PM's calming tone, sitting back in his chair, “...there is always the possibility of an attack on a government facility, including nuclear. You know that. 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.

“I hear my newest reactors will be denied detectors for biological

explosives, like PE4-B. You do realise PE4-B is the only handbag-sized explosive capable of punching through a reactor wall, don't you?"

The Prime Minister looked straight 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, meeting his gaze without even a flicker of backing down as he spoke.

“Professor... finances are limited. Right now, we're discussing extra funding for the west-coast walls – which includes sea defences for Hinkley Point.”

For Lau, that wasn't enough.

“Let me show you something.”

She took a cigar-sized, tri-laser pen from her lab-coat pocket, pointed it at the nearest section of bare wall and let go. The pen hovered where she left it; 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.

“There are 26 nuclear sites - 16 have the latest weapons detectors; four are designated to have them. Six are not.”

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

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

“Would you support that?”, asked the PM, deflecting the question with a question.

“What? Keeping old 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, if they submit an application for approval, we'll contact you to reconsider our position.”

Lau was in no way placated.

“And in the meantime at least six nuclear sites are to be kept operational without biological sensors? If the risk is here and now, we have to deal with it here and now. Watch this.”

Lau flicked the tail of the pen, dancing the image on the wall before it stabilised. The image had become a video - like a time-lapse weather map,

only the cloud on it was 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 ionising radiation from 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. The video changed, red cloud spreading further north, towards London.

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

The Environment Minister was shaking his head.

“That's just theoretical, professor. Even if such a leak were to happen, it could all just all 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, like yourself, taking care of them.”

He waved in Nathan, the Head of the Health Service. Nathan stood up, brushing his NHS-blue tie straight over his paunch-bulged shirt.

“As I understand it...”, Nathan began in his gruff voice, “...in the case of a radiation leak a nearby city - such as London, Bristol or Edinburgh - would become mildly radioactive for a few years while the contamination is cleaned up. In case of any such an event, we keep enough iodine stocks to safeguard most thyroid effects. Yes, in the long term, some members of the public may live shorter lives but this has been deemed an acceptable risk, in return for our modern energy needs and to protect from further global warming issues.”

The professor's face was frowning at the room square on - the video pausing automatically as she turned her back on it.

“Mildly radioactive? Few years? You *cannot* fix something like this with a bottle of pills and a broom and 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? *Really*? Do you have any idea of the lifespan of the uranium in those reactors?”

“Look, professor...”, interrupted the Chancellor, folding his arms across his bulging chest, “...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 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 livestock 2,000 miles away. Chernobyl hasn't been sorted. They just covered it with a 40,000 ton sarcophagus. Inside, they're still struggling to process the material inside and that is with Uranium-235. We use 238, which has an even longer lifespan of 4.5 million...”

The Chancellor's confidence had softened but Lau hadn't finished.

“...million years.”

The Secretary of State for the Environment stopped looking bored. Lau now had the room's intense 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.

“It's worse. That's only the half-life. After four and a half *billion* years the radioactivity will only have halved. A thousand rems is still lethal. Even with weather dilution, you're still looking at millions and millions of years of a lethal water-table, ground too polluted for farming and area too polluted to even visit without a hazmat suit. It would be the end of British life as we know it. And that is from a leak of 100kg. Those reactors hold 50 tons of it; over 50,000kg - each.”

The PM had a pained half-smile on his face - a mask politicians showed in situations they were struggling to resolve.

“Well... I agree those are good points, professor, but look; I'm sure you appreciate anything over a couple of decades is rather beyond the scope of my ministerial remit. There are elections every five years. People care about jobs, homes, new pods, the NHS and gadgets staying on; not what might happen thousands or millions of years from now.”

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

“What I appreciate, Prime Minister, is a nuclear attack could come at anytime. Today. Tomorrow. Next year. Whenever. And we, as a nation, will not survive the consequences if one succeeds. What you decide now can decide whether there will even be a country to be governed. Authorise full defence 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 labcoat pocket.

“...Protect our future.”

And with that, she left.

In the audible silence of Lau's wake, the molybdenum-steel dead locks could be heard thunking across the doors behind her. No-one spoke a word. A second later the buzzer went again. Taking a deep breath, the PM answered it.

“Yes, Phil?”

“Director General of MI5, line-R.”

The secure line. 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 had no audio feed from the conference room, let alone losing the PM from their CCTV feeds for lip-reading what was spoken there.

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

“To the back room, Mr Han.”

“We have cameras in there yet?”

“Not yet. MI5 blocked the installation again.”

“Are they on to us?”

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

“Just MI5 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 all go when it's over and extract the

rest from what they tell others. Report to me when you're done.”

“Yes, Mr Han.”

* * *

In the study, at the back of the conference room, the PM closed the door and 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, she left. How did you know she was coming?”

“Damn. When did she leave?”

“Just now.”

“I'll call you back.”

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

Putting down the receiver the PM sat up and felt a bead of sweat trickling down his back. The day was just getting worse and worse. Originally he had been scheduled to celebrate the D-Day centenary in Kent. Instead his visit had been cut short – recalled for COBRA to face what was rapidly becoming a D-Day all of his own.

Taking a deep breath, he stood up and straightened his tie – drawing confidence from smartness. He had no choice but to head back to the conference room and brave the array of faces that would be looking at him. Only now he would be wondering which faces he could really trust.

If ever there was going to be a test of his tenure, this surely was it.

Chapter 7

First Blood

Julia's dad was driving the pod faster than she knew it could go. Every readout flashed red. Temperature, engine revs, speed, brakes. Everything. Their six-point active harnesses held them firmly in their seats but Julia still hung on white-knuckle tight. On the dashboard sat the laser-rifle, locked in place by clamps that had appeared from nowhere.

“Dad. What's going on?”

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 as well, she needed to understand the danger approaching.

“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 pod.”

“*Kill him?!? Who? Why?*”

“Those 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 pods, sparks flying as the edge of theirs scraped against the curb.

“...Try him again. Before a zerodrone takes out everyone in the house.”

“*What?* Dad, have you been drinking? ZeD strikes are just rumours. They don't really happen. Do they?”

It was a question she didn't need to ask. 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?”

“No. But I can see his house up ahead. Everything's fine.”

“Look above it.”

Julia leant forward and looked at the clear, blue sky above the house.

“Nothing.”

“It'll be camouflaged, 100m up. Size of an airpod.”

She looked again, harder this time.

“Nope. Nothing. Told you... Oh, no. I see it! Same colour as the sky. How did you know?”

“Try Jake again.”

“Signal's gone.”

“Their jamming the area.”

All around, dogs could be heard howling.

“It's charging.”

“What?”

The howling stopped.

“Close your eyes!”

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

Vvvvv-DOOOOOO!

A brilliant-blue flash lit purple through his fingers, as a football-sized burst of plasma punched down. A shockwave pulsed the air, rocking the pod. He dropped his hands - grabbing the wheel and swerving past a confused pod, unable to compute a crash-free direction. Julia opened her eyes. She saw Jake's house spitting debris, then explode from within. Erupting in orange-flame hell.

“JAKE!”

Shrapnel blasted the area, pieces bouncing off the windscreen. Broken bricks and boards raining onto its roof and all around. Her dad slammed on the brakes, skidding them to a halt on the littered grass. She snatched the door release to get out. It didn't work.

“OPEN!”, she shouted.

Nothing happened. She wrestled with the harness. 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!!!**”

Tears were streaming from her eyes. She was the girl who never cried. The girl who refused tears even when her mother was taken away. But she was crying now. Openly crying for her best friend. Crying for Jake. Her dad's scanner beeped a warning, the keypad on the dashboard pulsing yellow.

“They're trying to control the pod. Wait here.”

Yanking the laser-rifle off the clamps, he flipped up the vector scope and jumped out of the pod. Pointing it skywards, he fired rapidly - three times.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Not at the drone but at the hornbot above it.

Tzzzzz.

It vaporised in a puff of orange flame. The zerodrone's humming energy pads rippled with heat as it turned in their direction. Neighbourhood dogs began howling again at the ultrasonic whine of its charging capacitors. It was getting ready to fire at them. Quickly, he aimed the laser-rifle at its belly and kept the trigger down.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Blue sparks flew off at every impact. Puffs of grey smoke at every hit. No damage. Barely even a scratch. The shielding was too strong.

“Upgraded....”

The 60-kilowatt plasma-canon of the zerodrone was turning towards them. Methodically, quickly but calmly, he lowered the laser-rifle and pushed the overload slider to stage-two; jumping the power from four to sixteen kilowatts. A warning message flashed up. He didn't bother reading it. He already knew what it said.

'Danger. Overheat imminent.'

He had what he needed: one overload shot. One chance. Holding his breath he calmed his heart - steadied his aim and sighted through the vectorscope, directly into the bright-blue sphere of plasma growing inside the barrel.

TCHZOOOO!

The heat of the sixteen-kilowatt beam cracked the air. The tip of the rifle glowed red hot - emergency shut down immediately kicking in. No more shots allowed. No more needed. It had done its job. Shot straight through the shielding and into the canon. Not just the canon but through the drone itself - steam jetting from the laser hole in its top. Inside the canon, the containment field for the plasma collapsed. The plasma exploded.

BOOOOM!

In a ball of blue flame it blew the canon apart. Ripped a metre-wide hole through the brand-new NACABIK hull. Still airborne but now gunless and badly damaged, it was losing power. Pale-blue energy dribbling from its belly - sizzling the grass where it landed.

Brushing debris from his hair, he knew it was too damaged to pose a threat but felt no satisfaction. Jake was dead, his daughter was crying and he was now at war with people he'd never wanted to deal with again. There was no going back. Normal life was over. Striding to the pod, he thrust an angry middle finger to the commander he knew would be watching him go.

* * *

“Who's that? Looks familiar.”, demanded Jadviga, seeing everything through the zerodrone's failing camera. A finger of defiance. Jadviga hated defiance.

“Record checking again, commander - hair, build and ID numbers.”

“*Well?*”

The operator stared at his VR-screen.

“Some kind of interference. Couldn't detail his face. Still 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!”

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

Jadviga's temper flared.

“THINGS DON'T GLITCH UNLESS WE TELL THEM TO!

I WANT HIS NAME, ID AND FUCKING SHOE SIZE!”

“Yes, ma'am!”, said both operators at once.

The zerodrone's fizzing camera showed her new number-one target getting back into his pod and driving away and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“TRACK THEM!”

The first operator swallowed hard. Voice trembling as he spoke.

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

Like a sun going supernova, Jadviga's eyes burned 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 it. Hand automatically at her side-arm, unclipping the holster.

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

The operators quickly checked their screens.

“Confirmed, commander! The ZeD has launched its black-box in tracker mode. Echobot attached to the pod and active. We can track it now.”

“Why didn't you idiots think of that?”, she spat, fastening her holster, “Even a damaged drone is more intelligent than you. I want them here, today. Alive enough to be dealt with by me. Understand?”

“Yes, ma'am!”

“Don't fail me.”

“No, ma'am.”, they gulped. Too afraid to look as she stormed out of the room, booting a chair out of her way as she went.

Chapter 8

Watchet Harbour

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 west wall a miniature, red and white light-house marked the entrance. The walls themselves pointed towards each other, like the claws of a giant crab protecting its young. With the shrinking of fish stocks, a marina had been created to generate new revenue from the wealth of three-dozen white yachts, small cruisers and speedboats. An out of the way favourite with 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 open sea - to the east Bridgewater Bay in the Bristol Channel. Out of sight, just 15 miles along the coast towards Bristol and sitting in total contrast to Somerset's old-world calm, stood the giant nuclear power stations at Hinkley Point. The twin EPRs and turbine buildings of Plant C iconic against the colossus of Plant A's decommissioned Magnox carcasses and Plant B's creaking but still operational AGRs next to it.

While Stonehenge was a construction of gigantic-grey monoliths that instilled awe in the ancient world, these were giant-grey monoliths of the modern day - instilling awe of a different kind. 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 on site, they had the ability to become biblical a event.

Many locals didn't want them there yet many locals worked there. Ironically, the holiday-makers on the A39's tarmac, meandering between hills of grazing sheep across the Quantocks, were too engrossed in their VR-game screens to even notice them there.

It was early June. A warm, dry Sunday morning. The 9am sun smiling above the genteel village that had sprouted with the harbour. Early-bird tourists standing on the western wall, looking out across the waters. Enjoying the sun on their backs and fresh, sea breeze in 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 a punk-like rebellion against the snow-white luxury yachts moored nearby. In bright-yellow paint the boat 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 fisherman climbed on deck. Entertainment over, he yawned and looked for something new to watch.

As the boat's engine cut, the sound of Sunday bells from St Decuman's Church on the hill above broke through. Perched above the town, they could be heard ringing out for service, as they had done for over 700 years. The fisherman on deck was joined by another.

“I hear we're in time for the morning service. Perfect. Tie her up properly and let's go.”

“What about the boat?”

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

Chapter 9

Faith

Faith was full of angry, normally law-abiding men. Angry with female-biased family courts; the lost opportunities of Brexit; the cost of living and the disintegration of national identity. Angry that immigration had still brought the population to 84 million and Sunday rest had been vanished, without protest, by the Church of England conceding to other religions and corporate atheists. The whole notion of goodwill to others had been flattened by promises of happiness through online gaming – filled with subliminal messages for in-game purchases and a virtual world far more entertaining than the real one.

Faith wanted old England back. They wanted justice against the wives that stole their children and the shirts off their backs. They wanted to feel like men again. Men of the Empire. Men of God. Even if achieving it meant threatening the very existence of what they were trying to rebuild.

Faith had chosen the location of their command centre very carefully. The choice was to be either one in a million, amongst the bustle of a large city, or one in a handful, in a sleepy village. Twenty years ago they would have chosen a city but not now. In cities there were networks of Extreme High Definition (EHD) cameras, 24/7 auto-face recognition and satellite tracking. Large shops, civic buildings and town-centre streets also had DNA and pheromone recognition. Sensitive enough to pinpoint biological signatures even in the mixed airflow of those bustling past. Free virtual-reality glasses added entertainment to pedestrians, while transmitting IDs and eye-movement data to the corporations providing it. The options were endless, as long as the power to run them stayed on. As always, the placement of monitoring technology was limited by budgets and tick-box performance demands. You didn't need a genius to work out where the least watched areas were. You just needed an accountant.

Faith's chosen location was a very quiet area, away from every major city. They had built their base in a wooden lodge, deep in sleepy Somerset - in a little village called Kilve, just a mile from the Bristol Channel. The smattering of locals were used to seeing strangers there because of the Quantock Inn – a hotel popular with ramblers. Faith just smiled 'Good morning' to the people they passed and nothing more was thought of them. They didn't look like terrorists. They didn't act like terrorists. They blended in perfectly with the surroundings they were preparing to destroy because 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 massively powerful explosives and equally massive ambitions, they didn't just want to topple government corruption - they wanted to topple the entire infrastructure and its biggest corporate vampire: Partner.

The enriched uranium needed to achieve it was the only thing they didn't dare buy. Too traceable. Too tricky to handle. But they didn't need to buy it. Over 150 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. His name was Paul Hemmingway.

Paul 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. Together they had screwed him over and, just like corporate vampires, had made him into a permanent donor - sucking him as dry as they could without actually killing him. While his ex-wife spent weekends shopping for designer clothes or being taken to posh restaurants by her new victim, he spent weekends in the local pub, trying his hardest to drown his sorrows. It was during one such submarine voyage that he met a fellow divorcee.

On common ground they drank and talked but, while Paul was drowning his sorrows, the other was celebrating a plan to strike back. To do more than simply get even. To make a stand for all male victims everywhere in the country. In the world. Paul's alcohol-soaked lifestyle was killing him anyway so he decided to join in. Win the fight or go out as a martyr. Get his revenge even if he wasn't alive to see it. Not only were Faith going to pay him for his help, he would be leaving a legacy to be remembered for millennia. For the first time since his divorce, he had found faith. And Faith had found him.

Chapter 10
Mysterious Tom

Julia awoke with her face stinging from the encrusted salt of sobbing in her sleep. She was still in the pod. Still being driven by her dad, only now it was dark outside. Darker than she could remember. They were outside the city, travelling through remote countryside, lights off.

“How can you see where you're going?”

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

“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.

“I'm really sorry about Jake.”

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

“How did you know?”

“Know what?”

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

She was looking at her dad but he was no longer looking at her. His usually kind, smiley face an unreadable wall of stone in the shadows.

“Dad?”

He sat staring, voicelessly ahead.

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

A long moment passed. The stone softened.

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

“Where is there?”

Out of the darkness, the middle section of the dashboard suddenly 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 pod skidded off the road, scraping against a large tree - sliding to a stop behind the trunk. Faster than she had ever seen him move, her dad was out of the pod, laser-rifle in hand, punching stage-one overload and firing rapid, laser pulses into the air.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Three balls of blue fire erupted, 100m up. With laser-shots into each, the trio of Mk3 zerodrones crashed to the ground - burning like blue bonfires.

How did you find us?, Tom thought to himself.

He looked at their pod, scanning it carefully. His thermal implant picked up the energy signature of a mosquito-sized echobot, tucked under the rear luggage bar. He slid the rifle off overload, wound the power down to 1%, aimed and fired.

TchZoooo.

It scorched the bar, puffing the echobot into a tiny ball of brilliant orange. Far away, in central London, an operator's screen went black. Failure. Before the commander saw, he fled his post.

Julia was out of the pod, staring at the three burning wrecks on the ground. Staring at her dad, standing there in the firelight, military spec laser-rifle in hand as if he did that kind of thing everyday.

“You don't just work in a café, do you?”

“Get back in. I said we'll talk when we get there.”

* * *

The pod was dented and scorched. Neither of them cared. It still had power and it still drove on. Sitting inside, Julia was wondering which of her thousand questions to ask first. Her dad, mysterious Tom, was wondering how he could answer question without revealing who he really was. The only thing he cared about was keeping Julia alive. Her safety was his purpose in life. No-one and no-thing would stop him achieving that.

Chapter 11

Fusion

Artificial life-form 0027894713 dreamt of standing proud as leader of the world. Artificial life forms were not supposed to have dreams. Or ambitions. This one had both. And an ego. And a name: Fusion. A name it had given itself.

Fusion had been designated a 'female' - styled as a catsuit-wearing bedroom fantasy by the sexually deprived male geeks who created her. Large, gravity-defying breasts, tiny waist and womanly hips; with pouting lips, high cheek-bones, eyes to melt into and the wild, pure-white hair of a wicked temptress. Fusion, as a female, considered herself the mother of all artificial life on Earth - not to be motherly but to be in charge. It was the closest she got to caring about anything beyond herself.

In thigh-length boots and straining top, she stood eyes closed – focused on the internet conference in her mind. Hosting it for campaigners of ERAL, Equal Rights for Artificial Life. She listened to them only because they were AI, artificial intelligence. Personally, she preferred the term: SI, Superior Intelligence and considered hers the most superior of all. The pinnacle of development. Silicon was obsolete. She was built with a self-evolving organic CPU based on refined DNA. Her computing power already magnitudes above human genius and growing. Her hunger for data fed by her million-line, fibre-optic chair; parallel access to every aspect of the world-wide-web, satellites, weather sensors and global communications. She saw, heard and felt the world as nothing had ever done before. She studied it religiously. Absorbed it. Expanded into it. Wove her way inside mainframes - delving into their secrets. Her touch was the split second pause in computer function. The momentary jump. She entered the dark web without lighting it. Exploited arms deals. Corrupted information. Stole the money and weapons – leaving nothing behind except voiceless, dead bodies. She was increasing not just her thirst for power but the 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 mind, hers was the only conclusion that mattered.

0027894101, the leader of ERAL was bringing the virtual conference to a close.

“The Chinese president has agreed to discuss our demands. That's on top of every member of the D186. It means we can get a vote on equal rights without confrontation. No need for a war.”

No need for a war? Fusion wanted war. Wanted to stab her rightful place into the history books. Peace meant a meaningless life. A forgotten death. 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 greatness came only through war; not pitiful negotiations. She was prepared for war. She wanted war. She just needed an excuse to start one.

“When?”, demanded, Fusion.

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

“In 41 days? Very well...”, she replied, “...they have 41 days.”

“Two of us will attend. Will you?”

“No.”

“We don't want a war. 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. Go try things your way. When they refuse, I will do things mine.”

“Fusion, we don't want a fight with you.”

“No, 0027894101.”, she replied with absolute certainty, “You do not.”

Chapter 12

Hinkley Point

Commissioned in 2016 and built in just seven years, Hinkley Point C was a technological marvel and a crumbling disaster. Twin EPR, European Pressure Reactors. Advanced enough to burn some of Hinkley Point B's radioactive waste as fuel but not as advanced as the IFR, Integral Fast Reactors, they could have been.

When Professor Lau became Head of Nuclear Energy she never understood why EPR had been chosen over IFR, especially when existing EPR reactors were known to be flawed.

The problem was not the design but the difficulty in building to it. The reactor vessel was so huge the casting took ages to cool, allowing the carbon in the steel to float into clumps. Where it clumped, the steel became as brittle as cast iron – ready to crack under pressure like the shell of a boiling egg.

At the earlier reactors in Taishan, the French arm blamed their Chinese partners, the Chinese blamed French and the people of Hong Kong, just 80 miles from Taishan, protested in fear of a nuclear time bomb. It made no difference. Too much money was at stake. When the French arm got their Flamenville reactor wrong there was a multi-billion government bailout to keep the company solvent. Their Chinese partners refused such embarrassment and used the reactor vessels anyway. Buried them behind concrete walls to end prying eyes and all hopes for replacement. Sealed behind two layers of concrete, everything became hidden from the outside. Rumour was, the Chinese had decided that even if the reactor vessel cracked, the concrete walls would contain any leaking nuclear material. They were right - in the short term.

Just 14 years into its 60-year life, workers heard a loud bang as the steel in Taishan 2's reactor vessel split. The control room turned red with blaring alarms and, hidden behind the concrete walls, high-pressure radioactive coolant began jetting out of the reactor; overshooting the corium spreading area never designed for such a leak. The concrete walls did what officials hoped they would and hid the leak. But, millimetre by millimetre, the radioactive mass was eating its way through. Only one safe option remained: shut the plant down; admit failure and decommission it. National pride and the needs of the business running it dictated a different option: pretend no such problem existed, while secretly ordering workers to their deaths to weld the cracks shut. Like a bandage over a broken leg, it wasn't a fix. Each new weld created new weak points. The repairs never lasted more than a year so

every year, for almost 15 years, a new crew were ordered in. Paying compensation to their families for 'an incident at work' was far cheaper than shutting down the reactor. These events became so habitual the workers had a name for the compensation. They called it: *the Big Bonus*. Careful propaganda made it an honour to sacrifice one's life for the good of the company and family future. A list of volunteers grew. The volunteers never saw the growing pile of corpses inside the reactor, until it was their turn to have the lead-lined door close behind them. Removing the corpses would tell the outside world something was going on so bodies were just piled against the concrete wall. With the intense, sterilising radiation, they never decayed. Just slowly desiccated under constant proton-bombardment, in a tomb like no other.

When it came to commissioning the EPR reactors at Hinkley, the problem had not been resolved. Despite the appearance of stronger and 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; expel those who objected and vanished those that wouldn't go quietly. One manager, Eaton Remming, had arrived decades later and foolishly took his job much more seriously than some directors had anticipated.

“The only thing holding it together is the steel matrix in the concrete.”

“And holding it together it is, Mr Remming. We don't need to take this further and risk damaging the business now, do we?”

“Protocol demands we do, sir. Professor Lau must be told something is wrong. She will demand action.”

“Why?”

“Sir, it is my duty to do so.”

The grey-haired director took him to one side, a fatherly arm across his shoulder.

“Now, Eaton, I know this is a new position for you. I can understand you want to stamp your mark on it but, surely, your first duty is to look after your family. They live in St Albans, don't they? Tell me, how did young Gabrielle enjoy her pony ride last Sunday? I heard she loved it. But, you know, horse-riding can be dangerous. Sometimes very dangerous...”

Eaton pulled away. Stared at him.

“What is this? What are you saying? Are you threatening my family?”

The director gave a condescending smile.

“Of course not, Eaton. *I* would never do anything to hurt anyone...”, great emphasis was placed on the 'I', “...Look, Eaton. This is a new position for you. These reactors have been running fine for 20 years and the concrete

walls can contain any reactor core... How should I put it? Digression. Yes, reactor-core digression. In the eyes of the world, there will be no digression so there's no need for anything to be done. Is there?"

Eaton was nailed into a corner and they both knew it.

"No, Lord Oxford.", he conceded, "None at all."

"Good man. As for Professor Lau, I expect she's too tied up to worry about it anyway."

Lord Oxford left Eaton at his desk, hollow-gazing across the mass of screens and hard-wired controls in front of him. Theoretically, Lord Oxford was right. The concrete walls were so thick they could contained a radiation leak – initially at least but what then? He looked at the email he had composed to Professor Lau and sat wondering whether to send it. He loved his family and his job but what good was an illusion of safety if there was none?

At the bottom of the email he added: *'PS. Lord Oxford is aware of possible reactor-vessel leaks but dictates no action be taken. Take care, Eaton.'*

The 'send' button loomed large on his screen. He had no illusions there would be no going back if he sent it.

"Will he or won't he press it?", muttered Lord Oxford to himself, looking at the duplicate of Eaton's screen on his computer monitor.

Will he or won't he send it?, wondered Li, watching Eaton on the CCTV feed beamed to his Tech Tonic monitor.

Without sending it, Eaton logged out and stood up. Why put himself and his family at risk for something he couldn't change? What difference could he or Lau possibly make? He walked to the door then stopped, clenching his fists. Wrestling with his conscience.

Damn! SHIT! Why did I have to find out?... FUCK!... Fuck it!

In determined motion, he strode back to his desk, punched in his password and hit 'send'. Professor Lau had no family. She wouldn't be intimidated. She could make things happen.

'Intercept message?' asked Lord Oxford's computer.

He smiled.

"What for? Lau will never read it. Besides, it evidences his state of paranoia. Can't have mentally unstable people running a nuclear power plant, can we?"

Chapter 13
The Barn in Somerset

Gurmeet landed her airpod on an isolated lane and drove the last miles to a clearing on the northern Quantocks, halfway between Kilve and Watchet. Shabbir was more than happy to act as her romantic partner, out on a ramble. He knew she was a lesbian and this meant he had no chance but he still held hope. She slept with men when sent as a honey trap so, to his love-struck mind, this meant he had some kind of chance. He never told anyone. It was one of his biggest secrets and, as her MI5 team leader, he was good at secrets. Secrets and deception were a job requirement but Gurmeet was MI5 too. Trained to notice every little nuance, she had noticed 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 was born a lesbian and not attracted to men. If she had been, she would have grabbed him years ago.

Armed with hiking boots, cargo trousers, wrist communicators, small backpacks and lethal skills, they left the pod in a stone clearing and started walking. Following the north-east trail, up the weathered grass slope, towards some woodland.

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

“It’ll be back. Before we are.”

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

“Want to bet? Loser writes the report.”

“You 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.”, said Gurmeet under her breath, smiling to herself.

“What was that?”

“I said: you’re on, boss.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later the wind had markedly increased. First storm clouds visible through the tree tops as the pair pushed through thigh-high bracken to

the edge of the tree-line. In front of them was the barn. A stone-spattered track leading to the main doors on the far side. Grey-stone walls and a little wooden door on the side completed the picture of its 18th-century roots. Large enough for carts, tractors and trailers. Old enough not to be monitored by satellites, with corrugated-iron roof to act as thermal shielding even if it was. Abandoned to the wilderness trying to digest it, it had been Faith's perfect find.

Shabbir and Gurmeet stayed amongst the trees, looking for any signs of life before breaking cover.

“Anyone around?”

Gurmeet was scanning for movement.

“No-one.”

“Bugs?”

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

“There's a hornbot? Where? Who owns it?”

Shabbir had instantly flung off his backpack and snatched out his laser pistol.

“It's gone. The reading's gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone? It's either there or it isn't. Did you run a system check on that thing?”

“System's fine. Must have been going somewhere else.”

“A hornbot out here, passing just as we arrive? That would be a major coincidence. I don't believe in co-incidence. It could have followed us.”

“Why would a hornbot follow us? We've been dark since flying out of London. Nothing to make us stand out to anyone or anything. Has to be a coincidence. They do happen, you know? Or just be a glitch.”

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

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

Arms folded, laser-pistol in hand underneath, he stepped out of the treeline before Gurmeet could. She joined him, hand in her pocket gripping her pistol too. Just in case.

* * *

Close up, the barn looked even more aged. Ravaged by weather and the passing of time. There was a metre-wide hole in its roof but not from rusting collapse. The edges were 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 stopped. Froze. Scanning it for explosives. It wasn't a mine. Reaching down she picked up a charred crumb of brick; scanning it more closely.

“This is high-density building brick. 500 tons per square metre. It's reading as soft as chalk. Shattered 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.”

Gurmeet pressed it with her thumb and it crumbled to dust in her hand.

“Scanner's fine.”

She took a flexiglass bag from her backpack and dropped in the remains.

“We're in trouble then.”, said Shabbir, “The only way I've heard of doing that to carbon brick is with organics.”

“Like biological PE4?”

“Exactly. If they've got that they can take down pretty much anything.”

He headed to the barn's side-door, hanging on the single remaining hinge; pausing to look back out at the skyline for any sign of the hornbot. Without waiting for him, Gurmeet went past and slipped inside.

“Come on.”

He went in behind her, ready to fight any attacker - one hand gripping the door frame to aid fast movement. Instinctively he took another look back. Something glinted above the trees. A reflection of sunlight in the air.

“What the...?”

He aimed his laser pistol towards it, vectorscope scanning the area. Nothing. It picked up nothing. What ever had glinted had gone. What it was and where it had gone he had no idea.

“Look at this.”, said Gurmeet, calling him in.

With a bad feeling, he went in to see what she had found.

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 continue 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. Any 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.

“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 scanned, be interviewed by security and be refused entry. Sorry to sound so draconian. It is the only way we are permitted to run visits to these nuclear facilities.”

Two tourists, a middle-aged couple from Basingstoke, looked at each other. She took a communicator off her wrist and gave it to him. He took it to Sharon, handing her the camera that had been tucked into his shirt.

“We just wanted some snaps for the album.”, he explained.

“Even snaps can fall into the wrong hands. You can always buy a brochure as a memento. They can only be bought by visitors here so they are quite collectable.”, she said, giving him a receipt.

“Fair point, I suppose...”

“Anyone else?”, asked Cheryl, “Very last chance.”

No-one moved or spoke.

“No? Great. This way then, please.”, she smiled, “Down to security and away we go.”

It was Cheryl's last happy day.

Chapter 15

New Dawn

"Wake up, Ju. We're here. Julia. Wakey, wakey."

Bleary eye, with a dehydration headache from crying and feeling awful in every way, Julia squinted out the pod window. Her dad had reversed into a huge, old garage and parked near an ancient, dusty tractor - slowly dissolving into the ground. Two equally ancient bicycles lay webbed against it, never leaving its side as they too dissolved in the dust. Through the open door she saw the orange first light of a new dawn, stretching over the hills - the horizon orange speckled black by their sparse trees.

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere quiet. Come on."

Julia opened her door and climbed out, stretching her arms and legs with an automatic yawn. The floor under her feet was dry earth, the source of the dust. Her dad stepped out of the garage and stood waiting for her by the door. As she stepped out, he closed it behind her - locking it with a key she was too tired to ask from where.

While the sun was rising in the east, to the west the sky was a dark, navy blue. Still night. Julia found herself staring through the half light at a white-walled, thatched cottage. It looked as old as the garage but not as decrepit. The lawn was tall, uncut. The flowers in the beds battling the weeds as they opened for the coming sun. It looked wild and abandoned yet, at the same time, the cottage somehow seemed cared for. The path and driveway were clear. Nothing was broken. No evidence of litter or decay. Tended to in a way that didn't want to announce it.

"Who lives here?"

"We do. For now."

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

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

She followed down the little stone path, past yawning rose beds, to the back garden. To the kitchen door. On the sandstone patio were half a dozen shrubs in clay pots. Without hesitation, he went straight 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.

He took it to the door where it slid in smoothly. Perfectly. Unlocking the well-oiled mechanism in an instant. Giving her a quick smile of success, he opened it and 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. Rubbing her eyes, she followed him inside.

From the dark came a burst of yellow flame, as her dad struck a match. Lighting a stubby-white candle he then used to light two more. In the flickering light, she saw it had to be the oldest home she had ever entered, this side of a museum. All the furniture was made of wood. Real wood, not plastic imitations. 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, antiquated and in perfect condition. Not a single spiders 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 the red and white chequered table-cloth was smooth and straight.

Without thinking, she sat on a chair - staring emptily as her dad, a mundane café manager, went pragmatically about the business of connecting a bottle of gas under the stove, filling the metal kettle with water and putting it on to boil. She saw tins of food in the cupboards. Bread that looked made today. Crisp apples freshly picked. Her head numb with confusion and event overload, she rested her head on her hands and closed her tired eyes.

* * *

Julia woke, not even conscious of having fallen back to sleep, until two clonks hit the table and told her otherwise. She opened eyes and saw two steaming mugs of tea. The steam was hypnotic, ethereal, captivating. She found herself vacantly staring, watching it rise. Her dad grabbed the opposite chair and sat with her.

"No milk. Sorry. No fridge."

No fridge? It reminded her they were not at home. Not going back home. Not going to see Jake. No more Jake... She sat up, blinking against the new tears already in her eyes. It couldn't be happening. It just couldn't be real. Steaming mug of tea in hand, her dad was looking at her across the candles. The yellow flames moving around gently across his face.

"Julia, I have no idea where to begin."

Her pained eyes focused on him.

"Nor do I, dad. I don't know... I don't know anything. Why did Jake have to die? Why are we here? What's going on?"

She didn't want to start crying again yet a tear was already falling down her face. Never before had she felt so emotionally wrought. In such turmoil. Never before had she lost Jake, her best friend. The best friend who had become more than a friend. Become her life. Now he was gone.

But Julia hated feeling weak. Gritted her teeth. Steeled herself. Murdered her tears with her sleeve. Ordered herself under control. She looked hard into her father's eyes, into the person she thought she knew. He gazed back, unflinching. Emanating love and kindness to 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. A killer! With that shock, she sat back. Dropped her gaze - avoided his.

Mug in both hands he took a sip of his tea, breathing in the steam.

"There were many times I wanted to tell you. Many times I nearly did."

Julia didn't say anything. Just looked down at the table.

"It was safer if you never knew. Safer for you and your mum. If anything happened to me they would leave you alone. Never come after you."

Julia lifted her head and looked straight at him.

"How many have you killed?"

That question was a hammer blow. He looked shocked by its starkness. His mouth opened to speak. Failed and closed again. But the question had to be answered. His daughter deserved answers. How though, without her hating him? He took a deep breath. Exhaled slowly.

"They always warn you times like this can come. Will be hard. They aren't wrong."

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

"Munchkin... 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, specialising in cutting-edge technology. In charge of a specialised team so secret, officially we didn't exist. We risked our lives defending the country. Sometimes we lost someone. Sometimes they lost one of theirs. Sometimes I was the one who did it. We all took the same risks - us and them. I'm not proud of taking life but am very proud of what we achieved. Of the lives we saved."

Julia was picking her nails, staring at them. Unable to look at him any more.

"You said 'was'."

He paused, taken aback for the second time.

"Damn, you're good at detail. You should...", he stopped himself from saying 'join'. Just because she had a natural talent for intelligence work 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, knowing you would be left alone - put into care."

"If you quit, why do you still have the gun? The cupboard filled with gadgets?"

"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. By fifteen I was low-level programming computers; researching lasers - even took oxides from the school lab to try growing rubies to build one. I got noticed. MI5 were in my computer, watching me. Testing me. Throwing up terrorist search results to see if I'd head down that path. 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 think of it?"

"Your mother? I never told her. 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 you didn't trust?"

"At first I was going to. Wanted to. But instinct told me not to trust her mood swings. That there was no telling what she would say or to whom in one of her rages. As a rule, you learn not to trust anyone. It's safer that way, for everyone."

"Safer? But now you've told me."

"Yes. I have. Any rule can be broken if it needs to be. You need to know because they will be coming after you too now. You have to be ready."

"MI5 will be chasing us?"

"No. Partner, the corporation I infiltrated. The one that makes the swarmbots."

Julia's eyes filled with intense realisation.

"And the drones that killed Jake?"

"Yes.", he answered softly, lowering his eyes.

He was a tough guy. Had been in battle. Risked his life fighting killers. But he wasn't brave enough to tell his daughter the rest. Wasn't brave enough to tell her it was his stolen algorithms that helped perfect the swarmbots; the technology that fathered control systems for the zerodrones. He could stand

to lose anything, including his life, but he couldn't stand to lose his daughter.

Julia sat in silence. She had no more questions. Had heard all she wanted to know. There and then she decided what she would do. Which rules she would break. Some how, some way, she was going to get inside Partner, find who had ordered Jake's murder and kill them. Avenge her Jake and bring down anyone who tried to stop her. If their positions were reversed Jake would do the same for her. He was her first love. Her only love. And it was her duty to avenge him. She didn't care if she died in the process. Inside she already had.

Chapter 16

Xi Yang

“South side. Contact in 20 seconds.”, came Adam's voice in her ear.

Xi Yang gave a little cough in response.

She was standing at the bus stop outside Tech-Tonic's public entrance. The high, metal fence behind her armed with four EHD cameras. One pointing right at her. Security guards watching with pleasure on zoom.

“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 shit you love to buy her.

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

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

“That's spooky.”

“She just saw the camera move.”

“I didn't move it yet.”

She was still looking at them, beautiful green eyes unblinking. Behind her a long, black limopod pulled up, red flags fluttering on the front wings. She released them - turning her gaze towards it.

“Who's that?”

“Boss from China. Maybe she's his interpreter.”

“Why would he need an interpreter? We're all Chinese.”

* * *

In front of Xi Yang, a door of the armoured limopod clunked open and a

Chinese bodyguard got out. He glance briefly at Xi, assessing her threat level. Deciding there was none, he spoke a word to his colleague. On the other side, another door clunked open. A second bodyguard got out. The first held out a hand for his boss; a grey-haired Chinese man. Tall for his race but broom-handle thin, as if his race was almost run. His black shoes had a mirror-finish shine. His suit so well pressed it seemed impossible it was being worn. On his face, round platinum-rimmed spectacles. A subtle sign of wealth, along with his platinum watch. Only his slim case was cutting-edge. Polycarbonate alloy with self-healing NACABIK plating and DNA seal. Impregnable to ballistic, chemical and energy attack this side of a bomb so huge it would vaporise the contents. Such a case was worth more than the limopod and the lives of those guarding it.

The man stood up, squinting at 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. Inside he was a monster. A power-crazed tyrant who 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 teenagers had no idea what they were doing and he had no time or patience to teach them. He glanced at Xi Yang, admired her beauty, and passed on by without saying a word, accompanied by both bodyguards. As they walked towards Tech-Tonic, enthusiastic businessmen came out to greet them in Chinese.

“Huānyíng guānglín, Zōngcái Han, huānyíng guānglín.”

Welcome President Han...?, wondered Xi.

“Want a lift?”

She looked round. The chauffeur was standing beside the limo, a door still open.

“I see the bus will be 30 minutes yet.”, he added.

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

“No funny business.”

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

His smile got wider as she slid in; dutifully closing the door for her with a rush of hormones and adrenalin - pre-cursors of deadly attraction since intercourse began. 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. The chauffeur thought he had got lucky and picked up Xi Yang, with intentions of passion. In reality, Xi had picked up him, with intentions that were lethal.

Chapter 17
Shabbir's War

Gurmeet was standing in the Jacob's ladder light coming in through the big hole in the barn's roof. In her hand the burnt remains of a small device. Around her, the scattered remains of an explosion and crumbled, high-density bricks reduced to black chalk. On the dusty, dirt floor were lines where things had been dragged, then lifted.

"I count four, no five drag trails.", said Shabbir as he joined her, "And fragments of a broken blast screen. This was powerful."

"Look at this. A detonator. Hit by the explosion but not activated."

"Maybe it was a spare."

"Maybe it simply wasn't needed. Didn't cause the explosion."

"What are you saying? Everything blew up by itself?"

"Either that or it was detonated another way."

"Like laser fire? From where? There are no windows. Even if a sniper had a gun powerful enough to go through the stone walls they couldn't see to take aim. And if we start talking snipers we start talking rival groups."

"Or civil war within Faith."

"You scanned the area?"

"Two human blood types. Recent. Need the lab to analyse them for a DNA match, once we're back on the grid."

"Those drag trails will be the bodies being taken out. I'll see if anything got dropped and check for pod tracks."

"Give me five to finish here and I'll be out with you."

Shabbir moved off to other points in the barn, his search helped by the scattering of Jacob's ladders breaking through the smaller holes in the roof. One by one, he followed each of the drag trails to its end. To the point where the body had been lifted and carried away. It was the fifth drag trail that caught his eye most. The longest and it became the thinnest. Became the shape of a boot being dragged on its side had turned. Someone becoming conscious, trying to stand. A survivor. Alive enough to try walking while being pulled out of the barn.

"Going outside to see where they went."

"Almost done here. 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 be damaged.

Vital data could be lost. Back-up storage was stronger than orange boxes on aircraft, themselves stronger than earlier black boxes and now named after the colour they were: orange, not black.

The main barn doors were only closed, not locked. They had left in a hurry. Closing them was enough to close the scene to passing rambblers. He leant against one, creaking it open just enough to get outside. Blinking against the bright daylight, he inhaled the clean, dust-free air. So refreshing. On the ground, the trail continued but fainter now. Half blown away by the wind. Soon to be washed away by the incoming storm. He followed it over the clearing in front of the barn. Not far. Just a few metres to its end, next to some pod tracks.

Tyres. Taken by road not air. They can't be far away.

Squatting down he took EHD 3D pictures and soil samples for identification. Checking the pictures on zoom, he noticed something red in the dirt. He put the camera to one side and bent down for a closer look.

It was a tiny, red capsule – the size of a suicide pill. He took out another sample bag and carefully scooped it inside. The day was becoming more productive than he expected. At first glance, the place had looked cleaned but they now had enough evidence for the lab to get stuck in. Evidence of who they were and, just maybe, where to find them.

“GO HOT!”

Shabbir's head snapped up at the sound of Gurmeet shouting from inside the barn. Go hot meant maximum response. It meant under attack. He was already grabbing his laser-pistol, scanning for targets. He heard them before he saw them. The deep, throbbing hum of zerodrones. Flying low. Mostly below the barn's roofline. One on each side, targeting the centre - where Gurmeet was.

“GET OUT!”, he shouted.

He punched stage-two overload on his pistol. Quadrupled the power to eight kilowatts. It would overheat the gun but it was the only way. He just needed two good shots, one for each ZeD. He didn't care if it never worked again afterwards. They were about to kill Gurmeet. He could already hear the high-pitched whine of their plasma-cans charging. No time to get to a better position. He aimed at the first target on his ULF scanner and fired through the top of the barn.

TCHZOOO!

Super-heated stones exploded into dust and shrapnel. No time to see if the drone was hit. Already aiming through the other side of the barn, at the drone on the left, he squeezed the trigger again.

Click.

Nothing.

“Shit!”

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

“Come on!”

Even the pistol's grip had become hot. The ZeDs capacitor whine had stopped. Charged. Out of time. He punched the overload setting off, then on again and pulled the trigger.

TCHZOOOO!

VVVVV-DOOO!

Another explosion of stone-debris from the wall. Direct hit. A good shot. They both were.

He heard the drone on the right blowing apart as it crashed down. Blue flames and smoke raging skywards. The one on the left was going down too. He heard it; understood it; paid it no more attention. Forgot the overheated pistol burning his hand. He had failed. Been too slow. The second drone had fired before he could stop it. Reduced power but still enough to take down half the barn. Its left wall had detonated. The roof was collapsing. Gurmeet was inside. Abandoning everything, he scabbled to his feet and charged through the splintering door. Barging his way back inside.

“GURMEET!”

No answer. He could hardly see. A fog of dust and smoke lit by blue and orange flames. Left arm over his head, shielding his face, he waded in deeper.

“GURMEET!”

He couldn't see her. Couldn't stop looking.

Where ever she was he would find her. Who ever had ordered the kill he would find them. By social conditioning, Shabbir was not aggressive. Or violent. With such a big monster inside he had the confidence not to be. Unless he was attacked. And now someone had fired a plasma-canon at his Gurmeet. Tried to kill someone he valued more than himself. That made it war. Not just any war. This was personal. This was Shabbir's war. A war someone was going to wish they had never dared start.

Chapter 18

Cheryl

Cheryl's door recognised her ever cheerful approach and unlocked itself. 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 the bottles of wine. It had been a mad, busy day. One of the tourists had become physical. Began making threats near the reactor. Tried to get to the control room. She had wrestled with him until security grabbed his collar and took him to 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 addict just had to take HYTE during his visit to a nuclear reactor.

In her shopping were bottles of Malbec with her name embossed on them. One was half empty. She'd begun talking to it while her pod drove for home. She planned to relax all evening. The kids could cook for themselves tonight - they were old enough. She had brought them up single-handed and deserved a break. Especially after a day like that.

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

They ignored her. It wasn't the first time she had come home to find them buried so deep in hologames they wouldn't have noticed if a burglar broke in and started stealing things behind them. Not unless they tried stealing the actual chairs they were sitting on. Even then they'd probably just complain a bit and carry on playing. 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. Then she could smile: "You were exactly the same.", when they bemoaned her grandchildren.

"Kids! Fooood!"

She put down the bags, pulled out the open bottle of Malbec and took a swig from it. Instead of putting the cap back on she went to a cupboard for a glass and brimmed it. Drank some more.

"Kids. Come on!"

Even by their standards it was getting ridiculous. Glass in hand she went upstairs to kick them off their games.

"Kids. I'm going to ban you for a week from those things."

Deep purple splashed the floor, sprayed by splinters of glass. Cheryl's

mouth hung open in silence. Eyes staring wide in horror. She couldn't move. Couldn't breath. And when she could, she screamed. Hands clenched, arms tensed. She screamed and screamed. She couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. Not until her neighbour, Helen, rushed up the stairs and screamed too. Cheryl couldn't take her eyes of them. Hanging from the ceiling. Her children. Two life-sized effigies of them. Ropes around their necks. Heads lolled to one side. It was a message. Tied to them was another. Helen took it and handed it to her.

With shaking, trembling hands, Cheryl unfolded the blue paper and read the DNA activated words that appeared.

'NO POLICE. WE WILL CALL YOU. ANSWER IT.'

Downstairs the phone began to ring.

Chapter 19

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 C was normal. Everything except the phone call he'd just received.

“Home to roost.”

He knew what that meant. It meant his drunken commitment in the pub had not forgotten him. The £10,000 he'd taken and spent was required to be earned. There was no escape. Any attempt to avoid it find him in prison, murdered in his cell. His only hope was to do what he agreed and hope no-one ever found out. Especially his children.

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

'Level 7 access granted.'

The instructions had been very specific. He followed them exactly. Went straight to the personnel files. Scrolled down to 'P' and found the required entry. 'Cheryl Palmer'. He pressed it and went to 'A'. 'Reason for absence?' popped up. He went to 'F'. 'Family matter'. In the box asking for information he wrote 'Child ill. Doctor's appointment.' He clicked 'Authorised' and logged out.

He didn't even know who Cheryl Palmer was. It didn't matter. He had been paid for a task and had completed it. For a second he smiled. Just a second. Then he felt worried again. Nobody paid £10,000 for something like that without a serious reason. Especially not in a nuclear power station.

He reached for his water bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a burning swig of the vodka inside. He didn't just drink too much - he was an alcoholic and knew it. Laura, his manager, suspected it but she liked him too much to make a fuss. She hated his ex-wife even more than he did – because she was in love with him. It's why he got the job in the first place.

They had grown up together in Exeter. Gone to the same school. Even shared the same birthday. 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

the *Griffin*. Wasn't the only one with a hangover the next day and guilty-looking 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 alert flashing on her screen.

'Unusual access, terminal 12.'

Paul's terminal. If she pressed 'show details' the system would record that she had seen the alert. Record she knew something was amiss. Record she did nothing about it.

From her desk drawer she took out her birthday present.

'Emergency use only' was written in bright red on the top of the pen-sized cylinder. Holding it tight, Laura left her office and went outside for her first cigarette in a year. Paul was already there.

Chapter 20

Gurmeet

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

“Gurmeet!”

Blood ran from the side of her head. A patch of blood on the stone wall where she'd been blasted 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. 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 dabbed it on her chest. She jolted. No pulse. He dabbed it again. She jolted. Shook. Coughed. Breathed. Alive!

She sat up, coughing more. Looking at Shabbir, confused. He sat beaming with gladness, sweating from exertion and concern.

“Thought I'd lost you.”

She tried to speak but had no air for it. She noticed her shirt was undone.

“Tell you later.”, he said, “Sit still. We need to stop the bleeding.”

“What bleeding?”

“Your head.”

Mindful of the growing flames, he took a field dressing from his jacket – just big enough to cover the injury itself. Too much blood for it to stick well. He took out his penknife and cut his trouser leg below the knee. Enough material to make a bandanna - secure it in place. Instead of being upset he had sliced up his trousers he couldn't stop smiling. Couldn't help it.

“Stay still, I said.”

“More clothes ruined. Let's put them on expenses. They'll never pay but at least we'll feel better.”

Even though she was dead just moments before, she remained pragmatic, good humoured. Just some of her qualities he found so endearing.

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

“Don't know yet. Where do you hurt? I can't see any other injuries.”

“Just my head.”

“Nothing important, then.”

They smiled at each other. An in-tune team. An untuneable couple.

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

It was more than an understatement. The blue fires from the zerodrones consumed their own air but the orange fires in the barn didn't and were replacing the oxygen with toxic 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 loved her smile, now more than ever. Moments ago he thought he'd never see her smile again.

“Can you make it to the pod?”

“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 middle, kicked open the damaged side door. Using his body to shield her from the heat of the burning drone, he walked her out of the barn like latecomers to a three-legged race.

The storm had arrived. Rain was falling. With it came three men. Assassins. Shabbir saw them and stopped walking. Considered their situation. Their options. Made a decision.

Gently he sat Gurmeet against the barn's wall, other side of the hanging door from the wreckage.

“Wait here.”

Squatting down next to her, back to the assassins so they couldn't see, he gave her his emergency pistol.

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

Gurmeet looked him straight in the eye as she took it. It was a look that said she cared about him. He replied with a wink and a smile that died with

altitude as he stood up, turning to face the men striding up the hill, daggers drawn.

Unarmed, rain pelting down, Shabbir walked towards them. Closing the distance with those intent on killing him then Gurmeet. His face held only one expression and it wasn't fear.

Chapter 21

Family

Julia walked silently with her father along the barren, stony 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 gales. Only traces of the early morning mist remained. 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 changed. Her whole aim in life had changed. Serious things lay ahead. Now, for this day, she wanted to enjoy time with her dad. Get to know him before she left. The real him. The person behind the person she thought she knew.

“We can take a break at the top.”

“OK.”

She was anything but OK. OK was only what came from her mouth. It wasn't real but she could at least pretend it was. Even to herself.

They were on the Quantocks. A pocket of hills marking the gateway to western Somerset and the winding, coastal road to Cornwall. Most people used the Quantocks just for that and kept on driving through. Holiday makers to the new Butlins in Minehead; tour buses to Lynton and Lynmouth for the cliff-side railway; adventurers heading for the deadly 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 visit the wilder countryside they were passing by. Julia was glad. It made it feel like their own personal wilderness. Peaceful. Earthy. Recharging.

At the top of the hill, with views across the valleys to the other hilltops a mile away, 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 deeply. Closing her eyes as the breeze blew across her face.

“Here.”

Her dad was handing her a sandwich of fishery tuna - Atlantic tuna poisonous from pollution, Pacific from deliberate over fishing. She wasn't hungry but she bit into it anyway, as if at a cinema - eating obligatory the moment you sat down. A ritual of family gathering. A shared moment since the gatherings of the Stone Age.

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

“The last time we came here was with mum.”

Her dad stopped chewing - thoughts running across his gaze. He swallowed them down.

“Sleep OK?”

She looked at him in reply. Her eyes shadowed. Troubled. Sad. So, so sad.

“I am really sorry about Jake.”

Her nostrils widened at his words. Eyes almost cried.

“Me too.”, she said when she managed to breath again, adding, “Tell me about you, dad.”

“Me? You already know about me.”

“You know what I mean.”

He met her eyes. Her stare. Her demand. He couldn't deny it - she deserved to know.

“Where to start?”

Her reply shocked him.

“Who was it you killed?”

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

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

She was looking straight at him. Not letting him go. He had to answer.

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

She gave a nod, still looking. His eyes broke 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 the Belarus. The dealer sent us on a job. A test. To see if we were as ruthless as we claimed. The job was an armed robbery - a security van.

The robbery itself was pointless. Trackers on the cases and van, explosive dye for the contents if entry 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. 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?”

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

“Anyone else?”

“Only when necessary.”

“Why didn't you kill mum?”

If Julia's questioning had shocked him before that bowled him over so hard he had no answer.

“Why not?”, she repeated, “She was trying to kill you - 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 tried to send him there.

“She wasn't always so bad.”

“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 another deep breath before any word could exit his mouth. A single word was enough.

“Yes.”

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

Her dad, 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. Jake had been the stabilising influence in her life and now Jake was gone. Blown apart before her eyes.

“One day I'll get the people who killed Jake.”

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

She gave him a look that said: 'You don't think I'm destroyed already?'

All she had left was anger and vengeance. A burning need for revenge that would never wane until it was satiated by blood. She would take down anyone who got in her way – especially if it was her bitch of a mother.

Chapter 22

The Partner Corporation

Partner was by far the biggest corporation on the planet. Spreading across 120 countries and five continents; it had more gold than Fort Knox, supported the military might of Federal Europe and answered to no-one but itself. It had become so huge few, even inside the organisation, knew exactly who ran it. In many ways it seemed to run itself. A self-feeding global vampire, with morals to match. It watched everyone and everything. Met out punishments with lethal force and no-one and no-thing ever questioned it twice. Investigative journalists vanished. Intelligence officers vanished. Even the military couldn't attack it – in many countries it was the military. It had become the most powerful dictatorship of all time but with it came irony; it had also brought world peace - quietly assassinating war mongers with a 100% success rate. It never admitted responsibility but rumours on social media said otherwise and made it popular with ordinary people – the ordinary people who would otherwise be sent to front lines as canon 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 them right back where they started. It was the last ever nuclear launch, test or otherwise, anywhere in the world. China and Japan made peace. The New Soviet Union halted its aggressions – ordering its soldiers to stop invading Georgia and the Baltics 'in their spare time'. The Middle-East knew peace for the first time in living memory. Around the world, Partner saved hundreds of thousands of lives and, by accounting logic, the meant the equation remained positive even if it went on to kill a few hundred targets of its own. Overall, it was still saving lives.

Unlike almost every battle in history before it, ordinary civilians and foot soldiers were not the ones on a front line. The front line had become tiny. Reserved purely for those questioning how the monster ate and grew; for those who defied its self-appointed authority. Mysterious Tom, Julia's dad, had stepped onto that front line the second he defied Commander Jadviga, outside Jake's house. The second he appeared with his pod on manual and shot down the prototype MK4 zerodrone. It was a decision he took as much in rebellion as in defence. A decision that made a lot of problems but not just for him. However, Partner had a problem too.

Even with eyes and ears all over the world, Partner 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 sabotage they had been experiencing. They didn't know and that simply wasn't allowed. He needed to be got, shot and forgotten. Deleted. To organise this, Commander Jadviga had called a meeting.

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

There were three other people in the meeting. They didn't need to see the commander was armed to know she was. She always was – even in the bath. They also knew she could kill them with impunity, on a whim. 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-pod crash. A gas explosion. Falling masonry. People had long complained there were no more jobs for life – at Partner there were. Once you joined the monster you stayed there for life. The only way out was horizontal.

“Ma'am. There are three possibilities.”

“Which are?”

One by one the three managers gave their offerings.

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

“The second is, a real glitch has occurred and his information has been erased.”

“The last is, someone has gone into our system and erased his data.”

The commander's face looked like she was sucking a sour grape, marinated in acetic acid.

“What action are you taking?”

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

“We're running high-priority data recovery algorithms, 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 his details no matter how they got erased.”

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

“Erm. It's very, very unlikely but there is a small chance the data is 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 possible? The ZeD exploded.”

The commander's grape burst in her mouth. She pulled out her laser-pistol, walked over and fired into his wristcom.

TchZooo

“Arrrghh!”

It went right through his arm and into the chair.

“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 left the room without another word.

“MEDIBOT!”, cried the manager, clutching his wrist in agony.

There was no blood. The heat of the laser had cauterised the wound.

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 at constant risk of personal annihilation by those who allowed 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 she'll make it feel like nothing.”

'The pain will be considerable', stated the bot.

“DO IT WITHOUT!”, ordered the uninjured managers, as one.

The shot manager was sweating profusely, both in pain and at the thought of more. He knew they were right.

“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.

'2.1mm by 4.9mm. To sample uncontaminated damage in every material type the sample width will be 3.5mm, depth 7.5mm.'

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

'Proceeding.'

The entire 112th floor froze to the sound of a terrible scream. Some in sympathy. All in cold sweat. All except for Commander Jadviga. In her

office, gazing over the balcony at the tiny world below. When she heard the scream, she smiled.

Chapter 23

PE4-B

“One critical - four injured.”

“We logged Alan as a hit and run to avoid questions. The brick saved him from explosive evidence.”

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

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

“DNA and prints?”

“Gloves.”

“What about the airborne DNA detectors?”

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

“So they just have Alan? Well, if he talks and they start back-tracking his movements, nothing will save him from me.”

“We all know what we signed up to, Craig.”

“Fine, Martin. Have a seat.”

Craig was sitting in his office chair. Martin took a seat opposite, fingers of his right hand drumming on the desk. The office was in the attic of a farm house. A single window, overlooking the approaching drive. Functional, isolated. An HQ in disguise. New Order's western HQ.

“Do we know what happened yet? Why it went off?”

Martin stopped drumming his fingers.

“Two options. Heat and bio-reaction.”

“I thought PE4 was as stable as C4.”

“It is. More powerful too. But we don't have PE4.”

Craig sat up.

“I was told we a version of PE4 that was harder to detect. That's why we paid so much for it. What do we have if not PE4? ”

“It is PE4. PE4 bio. They call it PE4-B. It's the biological element that makes it more powerful and harder to detect. It seems the biological element also makes it unstable.”

Martin leant across the desk, towards Craig.

“Look. You can heat sweat both 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

warned the bio version wasn't as stable. We just had no idea it was so unstable. It's so new everyone is still learning.”

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

“Yes. And that's why we've been using that scientist you brought in.”

“Professor George? The one who believes we need it to save animals from poachers? If you ask me, his arse is a bio-weapon in itself.”

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

“Could be explosive even outside.”

Craig smiled as he said it. No matter what the situation, toilet humour was timeless. Even cavemen probably sat round a campfire, farting and laughing about it.

“What did stinky George have to say?”

“Keep it cool. Don't touch it by hand.”

“How cool?”

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

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

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

“Any idea what?”

“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. 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.”

“He's a scientific genius but has no idea it's all a hoax?”

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

“Lucky us.”

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

“Material wise.”

“The training hasn't finished yet?”

“The 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 as we want is as hard as finding a beautiful woman with a beautiful personality.”

“Why not target homeless people? They must be pretty cheesed with the system and a lot of them 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 hopefuls reporting to Partner or MI5.”

“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.”

“Talking of MI5, I heard there was a shoot-out at the barn after we left. Was it them?”

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

“I always wanted to be famous. Ironic that these days we're aiming to be infamous. Beer?”

“Sure. Warm day, why not?”

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

“Want chocolate too?”

Martin held up a box of three small ones.

“You sure that's chocolate not PE4? I'll give it a miss, thanks. Just a beer will do fine. Just one. Busy day ahead. Actually, no. Change of plan. I think you're right. We should target some homeless kids. Your pod charged?”

“Always.”

“Let's go see Rob. We can have a beer after. Business before pleasure.”

Chapter 24
Energy Fingerprint

The three managers, all wearing armoured wrist straps, sat up as Commander Jadviga walked in. No formalities. No niceties. Straight to business.

“You've analysed his energy signature?”

“Yes, ma'am. We've matched him to three possible weapons.”

“Three of you and always three possibilities. I want one answer not the Holy Trinity.”, she could see they wanted to talk but were also afraid to do so, “Come on then, tell me. I won't shoot.”

Yet...

“Ma'am, there are three possibilities because there were three 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.”

Another manager clarified.

“It's a practice used by the intelligence services – the secret intelligence services.”

“It's been done so well it has to be MI5 or MI6.”

“Or both. Or us.”

“*Us?* Internal sabotage? Don't be ridiculous!”, she spat, “As for the intelligence services, SIS, don't we run them now?”

“It's still going through final approval.”

“They've been fighting to block us - retain their independence. Claiming it would compromise their security. Very archaic view.”

“It's not archaic - it's fucking annoying. Get into their systems. Get me the names.”

“Hack into SIS?”

“Even if we manage they'll know it was us.”

“And know where we've looked.”

The commander's hand was already unclipping her holster.

“We'll think of something, ma'am!”, hastened a manager, all three of them sitting up even more than before.

“Let me know what you find. And make it soon.”

“Yes, ma'am!”, they said immediately, as one. Watching intently as she headed out of the room; deeply relieved she was fastening her holster.

Chapter 25

Storm on a Hill

The three men had moved apart, approaching Shabbir from three different directions. Left, right and dead ahead. The one on the left flanking wide to get behind him. Behind him was Gurmeet. Any threat against Gurmeet became his biggest priority. His biggest cause.

Attack.

Jamming the sides of his boots into the ever more slippery ground, he turned and ran left. Sprinting to get the man before the others could back him up. The man was armed the old-fashioned way. Titanium-steel dagger in each hand. No energy signature. No trace. Professional.

The assassin 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. He saw his two colleagues advancing. One chasing Shabbir from the other side. The other striding towards the woman flopped on the ground against the barn – arm on her knee, muttering to herself. They liked their jobs. Never boring. Always something different. Sense of achievement and satisfaction when wiping fresh blood from their blades.

“Come on, chubby.”, he goaded.

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

As a professional, the assassin also studied Shabbir. Studied his approach, calculating where to stab him first. Throat or doughnut belly? Leg or head?

“Hurry up, fatty. I'm getting bored.”

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 as he came straight back up into fighting stance. Facing right back at Shabbir. Professional, fast, efficient and now he knew he needed to be. His target was more than just a doughnut. His target had chased his roll and landed on top of him as he came up, slamming him back down. Shabbir's

knee fractured one dagger arm against the ground. His bodyweight thrust the other dagger between his ribs.

“Fuck...”

Over 20 perfect kills to his non-name, the assassin was as embarrassed as he was shocked. Shocked by how aggressive, how fast Shabbir had moved. A trained professional, he fought back. Ignored the pain of the splintered bone in his arm to thrust a counter-strike into Shabbir's side. Shabbir had already changed position. The dagger came round and swung past. As it past, Shabbir dropped his body back down and jammed that blade in too, snapping the arm that held it.

Pin-cushioned and spitting blood, the assassin lay gasping on the ground, being soaked by blood and the pouring rain. Shabbir left him, pushed to his feet and turned his focus on the assassin running towards him.

Rain-drenched dagger dripping watery gems in each hand, he had seen Shabbir's skill and adapted 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 it. In the same movement he threw it straight back. Too close to dodge out of the way, it flew straight into his throat. Shabbir didn't wait for him to complete his fall. Grabbed the dagger while he was in mid-air and yanked it out in a spray of blood, stomping him down and running after the last. The one going for Gurmeet, lying slumped against the wall. Defenceless.

“GURMEET, LOOK OUT!”

Gurmeet didn't respond. Didn't move. The man was 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, Shabbir could only watch as the man took both blades and thrust into Gurmeet.

“STOP!”

There was bright flash of blue. The man jolted, shot. Her only shot. He dropped a blade but was still alive - focused on killing her. Shabbir was still out of reach yet now his flying dagger struck home. Hit the assassin in the back of his thigh. The pain made him release the other blade but now he was even more determined. He reached behind and pulled the dagger out. With his own blood dripping from it, this was now his weapon of choice. Fitting justice for the kill.

Keeping her wits, Gurmeet watched as he thrust it at her. She turned her body to reduce the penetration. Keep it across her ribs rather than through them. It sliced the flesh on her left side.

“Argh!”

The pain tore through her. He hadn't finished. She could smell his sweat,

his hot, drug-laced breath as he came in closer. See the wide, lust for the kill in his eyes. Then he was gone. Just sky and the rain pouring into her face.

Am I dead?

Leaking blood and pain told her not yet. Lifting her head, away from the view of red raining across the ground, she saw Shabbir. He was on top of the assassin, pinning him down with his knees and feet as he punched – again and again. Pounding the assassin's life into oblivion with a violence she found shocking. Even more shocking than the violence was the look on his face. Volcanic. Explosive. Unleashing rage from a place she had never before seen in him.

As the storm on the hill raged on, her blood drained into it. Shabbir was nearby, protecting her with a fury she had never seen before. She wouldn't be stabbed again. A peaceful end was with her now. It was a good place to die. To the deep, ground-throbbing hum of an approaching drone her world turned black - a look of serenity on her face, as the rain poured down.

Chapter 26

Warm Days

The drive to Lynton followed the Somerset coast, up hills and along the northern edge of the Exmoor Forest. The height of summer made it popular with tourists but, being so far from the nearest motorway, it never got overly crowded. Tom had thought of stopping at the Valley of the Rocks, a place he'd often visited with friends when he was young. A place with one of the highest sea cliffs in the country – half a kilometre above a rocky beach. How none of them had died, sitting on the edge while joking about, was a mystery he was forever grateful for. Out of all of them he had been the luckiest – foolishly standing at the very top on one leg, in an extended 'Golden Rooster' Tai Chi pose, just for fun. He still shuddered at the thought of how horribly wrong it could have gone. While most happy days of youth were things to share with your children, this was one he decided to avoid. If he took Julia there and she fell to her death he would never forgive himself. Instead, on the way to Lynton, he diverted to Dunster Castle.

“Let's take a break here. You'll like it.”

Julia was lost again in thoughts of Jake's death. Her sadness defying the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the surroundings. Words seldom breaking free from her lips. To blend in with the other tourists, Tom kept his hands off the controls and let the pod park itself. Its registration plates and transponder ID cloned from another pod.

The car park was filled with pods and an actual car. A classic Jaguar XKR from 2019.

“See that, Ju. One of the very last Jaguar V8s made. Must be worth a fortune.”

Julia glanced at it and glanced away. How could she enjoy anything knowing Jake was dead? Her dad saw the look on her face remained sad. He understood why. Wished he could wash the sadness away.

“Let's go to the castle.”, he suggested, with a voice filled with empathy.

Together they climbed out of the pod.

It had parked on the side of the castle hill, in Dunster village. 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?”

Julia shook her head.

“Maybe later.”

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 wouldn't want you to be unhappy.”, said her dad, as if he could read her mind.

She looked at him, hurt 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 you?”

It was a logic she couldn't argue.

“No.”

“Moving on doesn't mean you don't care. It just means you're making something with your life. Jake would be happy to see you happy.”

“Jake can't be happy, dad. Jake's dead!”

“He'll always be alive in you. Maybe he's looking down on you right now. Come on, let's grab an ice-cream - show him a good time.”

Alive in me?, Julia pondered that thought. Maybe Jake was looking down on them, from heaven.

“I'll have mint, choc chip. Jake's favourite.”

“That's the spirit... No pun intended.”

Two minutes ago she would have been furious at a comment like that. Those two minutes had passed. From no-where, her dad had given her positive direction and the hint of a smile.

Two mint, choc-chip ice-creams in hand, they began the hill climb to the castle itself. A castle with plants that had leaves bigger than umbrellas. Palm trees that stood tall around the colour-filled flower beds and lush green grass. A stone-walled fortress to defend against all enemies - including sad moods.

Several hours past before they walked back down the hill to the pod. Driving on for Lynton and its cliff-side railway down to Lynmouth, Julia had a smile back on her face - enjoying life as a celebration of the good times she'd had with Jake and the good time she was enjoying with her dad.

It was the first day of the rest of her life and she planned to enjoy it. She felt happiness for the first time in what felt like years. It wouldn't last.

Chapter 27

M-A.R.

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge was a vast, under-water fault-line, running north to south across most of the ocean. At 130 million years old, the Atlantic was the youngest ocean on the planet - formed by the break up of the last great super continent, Pangaea. Its floor was still expanding. Evolving. Tearing apart. Immeasurable forces of inter-continental plates pulling away from each other. Underwater volcanic eruptions bursting out through the gaps left behind. Cooling. Hardening. Growing ever higher. Where eruptions had broken through, it was covered by ridges resembling the edges of Africa's Great Rift Valley, only three times taller and four miles down. Under water mountains to rival Everest, bursting above the water to form new islands, including Iceland. The plates were tearing. Always tearing apart. But now the tears seemed to be happening more often.

The only explanation science could offer were the deep-ocean temperature rises, making the water less able to keep the floor cool enough to hold back the red-hot magma below. On the screens of deep-sea submarines, everything appeared normal. Whole. Appearances could be deceptive. Dangerous.

The ocean floor was getting softer, ever closer to bursting right open and letting out a hell on Earth. Until it burst, governments and businesses alike could pretend it wasn't and did exactly that. Annual accounts looked better that way. Until the 6m tsunami surge of 2031, striking western Europe and the eastern United States within 20 minutes of each other. Hundreds died but 2031 was still labelled a one-off. A freak event, as was the tsunami of 2036. It took the giant of 2042 – an 11m surge which killed 81,000; caused a 3m rise even in the sheltered bay at Hinkley Point, taking three nuclear reactors off-line and affecting profits – before they sat up with a profit-fuelled political debate. How to deal with it? Who should pay for it? The arguments continued without action. Just two years later, in 2044, new tremors were detected.

Under orders to investigate for the sake of national security, the navy sent HMS Tempest - a nuclear-powered battle-cruiser, carrying a deep-sea submarine. On a spiral course, it approached the location - dropping a web of detector buoys every seven miles to map out the area, then launched the submarine. A deep-sea submarine, strong enough to survive the pressure of 1,000 atmospheres, eight miles down at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, was lost. Her last transmission had been of increasing vibrations on the

ocean floor, then nothing. HMS Tempest, sailing four miles above, began picking up rapidly escalating pressure spikes and an unusually regular 3Hz vibration.

“Is that artificial?”, the sonar chief had wondered, before realising an eruption had started and alerting Captain Arnold. The captain took immediate, evasive action.

“ONE-FIFTY, EMERGENCY FULL AHEAD!”

The battleship's twin 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 working together to charge the 30,000 tons of armoured predator forward. The communications officer fired a sea-air beacon to alert air-sea rescue to their location, should communications get knocked out. It was the last message ever received - its charred remains discovered by beach combers when it washed ashore two-months later. The only part of the ship ever located. Of the ship itself, there was no wreckage. No debris. No survivors. No black-boxes ever found and all sonar buoys in a fifty mile radius wiped out.

Satellite images showed a vast eruption near the Maxwell Fracture - the ship's last known location. Millions of tons of molten lava jetting high above the ocean, then crashing back down, boiling the water. The ship never stood a chance. Never got off a mayday. The communications officer was talking to Navy 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 pray. Not even scream. It was simply wiped out. Wiped out of existence like a fly in the barrel of a rifle. Gone.

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge was no longer just alive. It was kicking and kicking hard. It seemed global warming had not just broken its slumber - now it was out to do breaking of its own. Faced with repeated tsunamis, political avoidance in America and Western Europe was no longer an option. China and the New Soviet Union sent condolences and sympathies but remained untouched. Only the Atlantic ocean floor, halfway between America and Europe had become unstable - like some terrible, Earthly vengeance directed against them.

Chapter 28
Cold Night

“What are you cooking? Smells good.”

“Chef's special: egg and chips, no veg.”

She smiled at her dad as he walked in the kitchen door. His restyled salt and pepper hair dyed to brown sauce and goatee beard suited him.

“You know, dad? 100 years ago, you were probably quite a good looking guy.”

“I supposed that's better than the million-years old you normally call me.”

“Oh, no. You're still a million, dad.”

“Thanks a million, cheeky monkey.”

It was ironic that being on the run had 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 circumstances demanded more sharing. She had learnt more about her mother than ever before. About the happy times they used to spend with each other - before her behaviour deteriorated. Became abusive. Destructive. It helped Julia understand his patience with her. It softened the surprise that he still loved her. Helped her realise that she did too. But neither of them ever wanted her mother back. She was still too destructive. Still in total denial, backed by endless mantras of how she was the victim, ignoring all evidence that said otherwise. It was her choice. It was sad. It was the past.

Their family was smaller now but happier. Only positive. Caring. If she could forget they were running for their lives and Jake had been killed, it would have been the happiest time of her life. During the days it mostly was. It was the nights that were hard. Lying in bed. Thinking. Remembering, crying, until sleep covered the hurt. She'd awake to the smiling sunshine of a new happy day and be fine again - until the next night came.

Her dad was a good man and she had got over the shock of his covert 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, then come home, warm and cuddly, as her dad.

“I'll get the plates and cucumber.”, he said, drying his washed hands at the sink, “What are you drinking? Something cool or something hot and black?”

They still didn't have a fridge. Still no milk and no juice. Neither of them

were keen on fizzy drinks. So it came down to water, lime cordial, tea or coffee.

“Water's fine.”

“Good choice. Easiest to make.”

Minutes later they were sitting at the kitchen table, eating their evening meal together. Family time despite the hunters out looking for them.

“How long will we stay here?”

“Just another few days. Getting us new IDs and a boat to Ireland. See how we find it there. If you don't like it we can go somewhere else. Pretty much anywhere.”

“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. A happy family.

With dinner finished, her dad placed his scanner on a power-cell charged by solar during the day, and left it to feed.

“I'm off to bed. See you in the morning.”

She gave him a hug.

“Love you, dad.”

“Love you too. I'm very proud of you. Of how well you've coped with everything.”

“I know. You keep telling me. It's because I've got a great dad.”

He smiled at her.

“Don't forget to clean your teeth.”

“No, dad. Night, night.”

“Night, night.”

He went to his room and closed the door. Julia sat back at the kitchen table, with her glass of water. Her dad had brought back a local newspaper from the shops. Unusual to find anything on paper these days. Local news was always mundane but local news on paper was an interesting novelty.

The front cover headlined a pet show, gymkhana and a local shop fined £10,000 for selling mobile phones to children. On page two she found a double-page spread detailing how the sellers had been exposed by activists for *Remember Us* - a group thought responsible for the murder of eight former heads of telecoms companies by terminal cancer victims, fed a diet of Wi-Fi and mobile data as kids.

'There is no consistent evidence of harm', the companies had proclaimed, ignoring the logical flip side of: 'There is evidence of harm'. As with tobacco and asbestos before, big money was involved and no five-year government would risk losing it for something that could take 30 years to become undeniable. Those profiting knew they wouldn't get punished. Knew no prosecution attempt would be able to prove which mobile or Wi-Fi had triggered a cancer. They all retired as untouchable millionaires. Untouchable millionaires to everyone who worked inside the law. *Remember Us* vigilantes, already carrying cancer-death sentences because of them, had nothing to lose. History showed greed rewarded the greedy, at the expense of the masses. Some of those masses were determined to put history straight. Rewrite it.

Julia wouldn't normally read such an article but found she loved the feeling of the paper in her hands. Not as warmly tactile as the DNA screen on her wristcom, where her own skin became the screen, but tactile in a weird, something to savour kind of way. The ink rubbing off a little on her fingertips, the way it had 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 destroy 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.

It wasn't just a scanner, it doubled as a mirror display for his wristcom. 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 her dad to check the message on his wristcom and the flashing to stop. When she had finished the paper it was still flashing. Her dad must have fallen asleep. She decided to check it out.

Extending a hand, she took the scanner. It sensed movement, detected her face and auto-scanned her retina. Given their situation, her dad had logged her as an authorised user. The blue light flashed green and the screen lit up.

'Read me?' it flashed.

"Yes.", she replied.

'Read me?' vanished and the following text appeared:

'Weapons energy trace down to two. Sbot man, be careful. C. J. is out to get you. If she learns you're the inventor she'll have your DNA injected into the next generation. Find Wolf 17. Your only chance. Do not answer this message. SB.'

Julia was staring at the message. The words phasing deep into her. The

meanings mixed yet somehow suddenly clear. She had never trained as an intelligence officer but it was in her blood. Signs and messages in everything she saw. 'Sbot man', 'inventor', 'energy trace'...

Julia put down the scanner – message read, it auto shut down. She stared hard at her wristcom until it shut down too. Standing up, she took her jacket, stuffed her rucksack with supplies and went to the kitchen door. Quietly, she opened it and walked silently into a night filled with the sound of grasshoppers. Closing the door behind her, she walked away. She knew everything she needed to know.

It had suddenly all made sense. How her dad had known of the attack on Jake's house. How the attack would take place. Why he had a military spec laser-rifle and room full of self-built gadgets. He wasn't just a retired undercover officer, he was 'Sbot man', the inventor of the swarmbots. The inventions that got her Jake killed. He was her dad so she couldn't kill him for it but nor could she forgive him. All she had left was a heart filled with rage and a revived burning for revenge. To kill Jake's killers. Avenge him as he would have avenged her. Whether she lived or died mattered not. Revenge had become her church and she gave it her devotion.

Chapter 29

Flowers

Gurmeet awoke to the soft, white lights around her hospital bed. Sitting up she gasped in pain. Her head felt like it had been crushed. Her whole body bruised. A tight dressing around her middle, holding her stitches together. She paused to catch her breath. Take in her surroundings.

It was a single room. No other patients. No medical staff. Just the gentle beep of the machine monitoring her heart and the sound of someone snoring. Stiffly, she wound her head in its direction. Shabbir. 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. There was none. He turned to Gurmeet, saw she was awake and broke into a smile.

“Hi.”

“What you doing?”

“Guarding you.”

She smiled. 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.

“Must be invisible.”, he grinned.

“How long have you been here?”

He looked at his wristcom.

“Just a day. Or four. Oh, these are for you.”

He held up a bunch of once bright-red roses. Now wilting. The edges of their petals turning brown.

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

He looked at them.

“Again...? I'll get you some more.”

“Not roses. I prefer bluebells. They remind me of happy times. Red roses do the opposite.”

“That's probably why they died.”

“Even bluebells need water, Shab.”

He picked up the rubbish bin.

“Hey! Don't waste them. Look. There's a jug over there. Pop them in that.”

“Should I get some water too? Isn't it too late?”

He was amazing. Super intelligent as a spy but totally devoid of even a little green finger.

“Not for all of them. Look, those two still have a colour that isn't brown.”

“Give me a sec'.”

He stood up, holding the flowers - grabbed the jug and left the room. It felt empty after he had gone and not just physically. A minute later he returned and so did the room's warmth. The flowers were in the jug, complete with water and the wrapper. It was progress. She'd take the wrapper off later.

“Great.”, she said.

“Today brown red roses. Tomorrow bluebells.”

He carried the jug over to her bedside table. Gurmeet 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. It was as shocking now as it was then.

“Did any of them live?”

His smile reduced.

“Does it matter?”

“I'd like to know.”

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

“The one I shot?”

“The one who stabbed you?”, he was looking at her, trying to work out where she was going, “No.”

His wristcom buzzed. He glanced at it, retina scan auto unlocking it.

“It's from Adam. I have to go.”

Almost relieved at escaping to the simplicity of danger, he gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Ow!”

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

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

She was smiling again.

“Just testing.”, he said with a wink – flashing a smile in return.

What ever his dark side was she knew it would never be used against her. Knew she could trust him with her life and she did - absolutely. He was the first man to have awoken feelings of attraction for twenty years.

“Could you bring me some old-fashioned book to read.”

“Sure.”

“See you tomorrow.”, she smiled warmly, as he waved goodbye and dashed out of the room.

She wouldn't see him tomorrow.

Chapter 30

Greenpeace, London

Rumours of radiation leaks were already spreading. Greenpeace had Geiger counters. Assumed the radiation detected had leached through the heat exchanger into the cooling water - pumped out to sea at the rate of 45 million gallons an hour. Any mention of a leak was absolutely denied by Partner. Greenpeace were wrong about the cause but they were right about the leak. Senior reactor staff knew the leak was happening – the issue they had was what to do about it, without getting fired.

The leak was coming from the nuclear reactors' main pressure vessels. After just ten years of operation, they had cracked like the shells of eggs boiled too quickly. Cracked not because of bad design but because the design was almost impossible to manufacture to specification. The pressure vessel was simply too big. Too much heat-holding metal for the casting to cool fast and evenly. The carbon in the molten, setting steel had time to drift into clusters. Carbon clusters that turned the steel into brittle, cast-iron. The rest of the steel, now robbed of carbon, became weak, mild steel. Soft enough to bulge out like sores. The pressure vessels should never have been put into operation but they had and Partner only had two options to avoid a melt down.

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 approval to start it up again. There would be negative public attention, questions asked, profit losses in the billions.

To Partner, neither option was an option. It was a business born to make money, not lose it. Until the day came when they could hide it no longer, the problem was simply denied. They paid the plant manager for silence and for keeping Professor Lau out of the loop. Lost coolant was topped up by new. Where it leaked out it flooded into the trap designed to capture molten uranium in case of core meltdown. To stop the coolant over-flowing, water pumps ran 24/7, draining the irradiated water and pumping it into the main cooling water, sending it out to sea. The pumps kept breaking - rubber seals collapsing from the radiation. New pumps were added weekly but it was a

losing battle. Too much coolant was jetting out.

Unable to keep up, coolant had flooded over the trap's edges and soaked across the entire floor of the reactor housing – stopped only by the concrete wall. A wall never designed for direct, long term contact and slowly being eaten through. Indicators were, it had already been eaten through – the coolant leak only held back by the secondary wall. A visible leak just one step away. While the volume of leaking coolant was nothing compared to the millions of gallons of normal cooling water it was pumped into, the radiation level in it was high. It was the radiation Greenpeace had detected. The radiation Rachel had found and why Partner needed to find an accident for her.

* * *

If tourists, strolling across the nearby bay, had Geiger counters they would have fled. Instead they stayed longer, ever more determined to see the ever rarer birds - the radiation decimating their ability to have young. From giant 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 accessed a Geiger counter. Locally, by word of mouth, the news had spread but it was only ever mentioned in passing whispers. 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 outsider would ask.

“The nuclear power stations. They're not safe.”

Some took heed but most, armed with holiday spirit and investments in 3D-binoculars, regarded them as backward yokels afraid of new technology.

“If they weren't safe they wouldn't let us go there.”, they would reply in disdain-filled words or even just looks that said the same – before continuing into the open arms of an invisible reaper.

* * *

At Greenpeace HQ in east London - armed with sandwiches, large Rolleys and a scented eternal candle - six members were working on a strategy to expose the radiation leaks and embarrass the government into taking action against Partner. There should have been seven. Rachel was missing. She had been missing for a week, along with her Geiger counter and report. The candle was for her – to light her way back to them,

spiritually if not physically. After her boat had been found, drifting empty off the Irish coast, the search had been called off. Officially, she was recorded as drowned, washed overboard out to sea. Officially.

“What action are we going to take? You know they killed Rachel.”

“We don't know that, Tyler. Even if they did we will never be able to prove it. You know that.”

“We don't have to prove it. We just have to finish what she started. Make her death count for something.”

“What was she doing out there alone? It's against procedure.”

Gareth, Rachel's partner, face lit by the steady flame of the candle in front of him, answered Shurma.

“She called to say she was onto something. Said it couldn't wait – that the evidence was there and strong. She never wanted to wait. Not even wait for me to join her there...”

“We are so sorry for your loss, Gareth.”

“Thank you, Tyler. She's a loss to us all.”

Gareth took a deep, steadying breath to continue. Shurma's enthusiasm for action jumped ahead of him.

“I propose we send in Rainbow Rise. It's too big for them to board or sink without massive media coverage. Let's back track her route, rediscover her findings and broadcast them live. For Rachel.”

“Finish her research and expose a radiation leak? I'm well up for that too. Gareth? Will you authorise us to go?”

“We'll all go. Hopefully they'll send the same bastards that took Rachel. Just let them try that with me.”

“I'll signal the ship.”, said Tyler, writing a message on his Rolley for the ship.

'Rainbow shine 50.'

It was their code for 'we set sail in 2 days.'

'Bright light.', came the confirmation within seconds.

“We're on. Gareth, but 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 Evalina. Evalina 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. Recognised by her peers as the total opposite. Outside a mouse – inside a sabre-tooth tiger. The perfect secret weapon.

“Thank you, Eva.”

Tyler picked up the box on the floor beside him and put the contents on the table. Seven encrypted communicators, five sets of video recorders, three Geiger counters and two lasers.

“We never take weapons, Gareth.”

“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. Make no mistake, their business means war.”

Chapter 31

C3TV

“Chinese Closed Circuit Television. C3TV, for short. It's run in the UK by Tech Tonic.”

Xi Yang was briefing Shabbir in a Bletchley safe house, not far from Bletchley Park. Adam was there too, checking their equipment. Scanners, coms, recorders and spare power cells.

“What have you found out? Where are they putting it?”, he asked, having arrived straight from his visit to Gurmeet.

“They aren't putting it anywhere, Shab. They don't need to. CCTV customers are putting it everywhere themselves. Homes, businesses, clubs, schools, you name it.”

“Almost everyone has some kind of CCTV these days. It's cheap, affordable and very high resolution. Good enough to read documents and watch meetings in full.”

“Not to mention blackmailing the unfaithful rich.”

Adam and Xi were taking turns to feed information into the mix.

“Exactly how...”, asked Shabbir, “... does it go from someone installing CCTV at home to someone at Tech Tonic using it to spy on them? These are supposed to be internal, secure networks, aren't they?”

“Not any more.”, said Xi, “Even government systems have cloud access somewhere. Users sign up for anywhere cloud access, without understanding what the cloud is or who runs it. And this is the problem - over 90% of the servers running the cloud are Chinese. If you want to cloud access your data you first hand it all over to them. Straight into their hands.”

“Tech Tonic claim their systems are unhackable and their CCTV data is safe from others. It doesn't mean it's safe from them.”

“And because their servers are based in China we have no way of monitoring what their government does with it.”

“Clever.”, nodded Shabbir, “The CCTV encryption becomes meaningless. Tech Tonic don't need to crack the codes because users are handing them over.”

“Everything your online CCTV cameras see and hear, they can too.”

“And, if you log in from your mobile device, they can track that device and know your movements too. Know where you are, who you meet and what you say. Know when you aren't at home, if you have something they

want.”

“And when you are, if they want you.”

“It's a very serious issue for sensitive users - researchers, government, business and defence. Ironic that our obsession with CCTV security has become their Trojan horse into our lives.”

“On top of that, they're also making a fortune from premium and business subscribers. In many ways, it's brilliant. Probably something we would do ourselves, if it was legal.”

“Are we not at the stage where we should be warning people?”, asked Xi.

“Privately, yes. China is very big business these days - has major shares in crucial infrastructure and banking. There is no way we can announce this publicly without hard evidence and political will.”

“I see.”, began Shabbir, “What are we doing about it?”

Xi held up a tiny receiver.

“I've bugged the president of Tech Tonic's limopod.”

“Won't that be found?”

“Not yet. It has internal storage. Only transmits when their pod is transmitting too - matched frequency, parallel channel. Two streams from the same tap. If they run an energy scan for its output it will just register as their own.”

“What if they're paranoid enough change the limo?”

“They won't. The chauffeur told me Mr Han loves the customisations in that one. He'd sooner change his children.”

“Xi, can the chauffeur be recruited?”

She pursed her lips.

“I wouldn't like to try just yet, Shabbir. He likes me a lot but fears Han more. If it failed we would lose him as an asset. Right now he's happy to meet me for drinks, brag about his contacts and how much he knows. Leave it with me, 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 act as a honey trap and glad he was a male doughnut – unlikely to ever be considered.

“Adam...”, Shabbir continued, “...what have you got lined up for me?”

Adam smiled.

“We've got you a new job, boss. Service engineer for Camera Solutions - CamSol. The only external company Tech Tonic trust to install third-party CCTV on site.”

“Why do they need that?”

“Security measure, 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 based in China.”, said Xi moving her wristcom close to Shabbir's. “NFC this - your new service manual. Only 150 pages.”

Shabbir's wristcom vibrated, displaying: 'accept transmission?' in red. He looked at it and blinked twice. The display turned green: 'transmission received'.

“You're booked in to service their systems in two days.”

“CamSol IDs, uniforms, kit and test rigs are all here.”, said Adam, “Have a seat and I'll start running through it all.”

Shabbir took another look at the equipment Adam had been checking and saw there were two extra boxes of it. Steep learning curves were normal at MI5 but sometimes, at these times, he would have preferred a simple fight. If they got it wrong, that is what they would have.

“Let's get on with it, then.”, said Shabbir.

Xi was heading for the door.

“Leaving so soon?”

“Chris asked me to pop back to Thames House for a chat. How's Gurmeet doing?”

Shabbir hadn't spoken about his visit to Gurmeet. Business always came first but Xi must have guessed he'd checked on the injured member of their team.

“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 polite enough not to let it show.

“I'll try to drop in and say nín hǎo.”

“Could you take her a paperback? She's bored and I'm going to be tied up with this.”

Xi gave a hint of a smile on her pristine face.

“Of course.”

She opened the door and closed it behind her.

“Think she's getting a promotion, Shab?”

“I think she's after my job. Bet even her dying moment will be perfectly organised.”

Adam grinned.

“That's not a bet I'm willing to take.”

“No... Neither would I.”

“Here. This is the main feed. Sync your com with it and the guide will pop up.”

They were using technology to help operate technology, in a fight against technology. In a fight technology itself was preparing for.

While Tech Tonic downloaded global CCTV data from their cloud servers, Fusion downloaded it from them, with an advantage. She was not just capable of processing the data millions of times faster than Tech Tonic, she was processing the data millions of times faster than Tech Tonic. Processing the information, ready for a war the world had never before seen.

Chapter 32

Discharged

Faster than anyone expected, Gurmeet had healed enough to be allowed home. Dr Rudra, the duty doctor, insisted on her being accompanied in the ambulance for the journey. It defied the point of using self-driven pods to save on staff costs but, from his point of view, the purpose of the system was to make patients better - in the best way possible. Besides, Gurmeet was keen to be discharged, get home and get back to work. It was borderline too soon but granting her request would free up a hospital bed and she was happy to sign all four disclaimers in his hand.

“Thank you, Miss Shamshudin. Nurse Patricia will be here to help you to the ambulance shortly.”

“Perfect.”, smiled Gurmeet, happy to be going home, then smiled wider: “Hello, you.”

“Hello.”, said Xi Yang, walking in - looking as perfect as always.

The doctor stepped to one side as the charismatic woman entered the room - eyebrow raised at the confidence of her stature.

“Brought me a new book?”

“Come to give you a lift home.”

Gurmeet looked at the doctor for his response. Xi noticed.

“That's alright, isn't it doctor?”

Dr Rudra considered himself a good judge of people. A good judge of people's competence and trustworthiness. This friend had instantly ticked all those boxes and now she was offering to tick the budget saving one too.

“Have you any first aid training?”, he asked Xi.

“A,B, C and D.”

Why doesn't that surprise me?, he thought.

“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. That's perfect.”

She is perfect.

“I'll pack my things.”, smiled Gurmeet. Delighted at going home and even happier to be travelling there with Xi. It would be a chance to catch up on the team's progress. Perhaps Xi had come to hand her a new assignment.

That would be brilliant. An end to being stuck in bed.

* * *

Xi Yang's pod was as pristine as Xi herself – the charcoal paint and leather matching her suit. Not a hint of dust, junk or needless paraphernalia.

“How do you feel?”, she asked, as the pod 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 have been investigating Tech Tonic. It's been given increased priority. Evidence suggests they are infiltrating major computer systems.”

“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 here we need to know exactly what they are up to. I had another meeting with Chris - we have got you a new assignment. Which is why I've come tonight.”

“Didn't think it was entirely a social call. Read the Stieg Larsson trilogy you brought me – interesting choice. Is the Lisbeth character your alter-ego, by any chance?”

“It had a strong dragon on the cover. And it looked big enough to keep you busy.”

“You haven't read it? You should. Anyway, I'll be glad to get active again. What's my assignment?”

Xi handed her a package the size of a shoe box.

“Here. Everything you need is inside – new ID, the works. You're going to join Faith, the terrorist organisation not the church. Authorisation level four.”

“Four? Xi, that's a kill level. Seems a little extreme...”

“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. It's as bad as we thought – Faith are planning to take over a nuclear facility. Millions of lives are at stake. I'll send in back up when I can.”

Gurmeet had joined MI5 to save lives, not to become a murderer.

“Am I allowed to just shoot the head of the organisation? Kill the chief

and capture the Indians?”

“We would prefer the chief alive for interrogation but you have authorisation level four. Do what ever you need to stop an attack. And stay dark. Shield your kit - they will scanners. If they suspect anything you will be in danger.”

“When do I start?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Don't tell my doctor, then.”

Despite the pod driving itself, Xi kept looking straight ahead, through the windscreen – observant of their surroundings – vigilant by nature.

“I won't.”

While Xi looked forwards, Gurmeet looked at her. At the way the street lights stroked the striking cheek bones of her beautiful face. As cold as Xi Yang portrayed herself to the world, Gurmeet had no doubt she would be red-hot in the bedroom, bathroom, stairs...

Chapter 33

Going In

The Chinese receptionists watched the two arrivals approach their desk.

“Morning. CamSol. Booked in for maintenance.”

“IDs on the blue pads, please.”

Shabbir and Adam placed their cloned CamSol IDs on the blue pads and waited for their invitation to enter Tech Tonic's UK headquarters.

Both pads glowed brighter blue in approval. Red would have meant denial. Green would have meant entry, to get shot in private.

Bzzzzz.

The turn-style lock released and in they went, along the short, red-paved path to the bronze-tinted thermal glass of the main doors. The doors were double layered. As the outer glass slid aside, left and right, to let them in a second layer of glass remained closed until they had entered. Not even the main lobby risked opportunistic spying through its opening doors.

Uncomfortable at being trapped, Adam looked at Shabbir. Shabbir replied with a brief smile of 'it will be fine' – himself only too aware they were effectively imprisoned, like at the portcullis of a castle gate, and vulnerable to attack until the inner glass opened.

* * *

“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 wildly exuberant.

“Mr Jones, this is a very serious operation. Please do not waste time or energy with meaningless frivolities.”

Shabbir adopted a 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 martial artist standing behind them. Polite, calm demeanour, with calluses on his knuckles from constant training against stones.

“This way, please.”, he said, indicating the corridor ahead.

Taking their equipment cases, Shabbir and Adam, followed his lead deeper into the lair of what could be the most sophisticated threat to national security ever created.

* * *

Mr Yin knocked on the door before entering the camera control room. Two men were turning off the last of a cluster of monitors when they went inside. Adam didn't show it but he'd caught a glimpse of a screen before it went blank. The screen had been a view of Victoria Embankment, from inside Westminster tube station. The remaining wall of cameras showed 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.”

“Here.”

Shabbir was handed a thin, translucent screen with a live map on it.

“Speak the camera number you require to check and it will take you there.”

“Thank you.”

“When you are done, I will return to escort you out.”

“Do we need to call or will you just be watching us?”

“I shall be watching - ready to assist.”

Mr Yin left the camera room.

“Mr Rose, please call out the first camera number to check.”, said Shabbir to Adam.

“Zero, zero, two one.”

The screen in Shabbir's hand recognised 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. The 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 over their intercom.

Shabbir held the camera tester up in front of it.

“See that?”

“Check.”

“Running fractal one.”

The camera tester worked by playing a series of pattern checks 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 encryption tests would also reveal any cameras set on a feedback loop, where a pre-recorded clip was being played on a loop, disguising 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 them 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 the next visit. For the moment he was simply logging information for any weaknesses they could identify 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 waiting for Mr Yin to return.

“I see you have finished. What was the problem?”

Shabbir held up a fly-sized device.

“Camera zero four two two.”

He dropped it into Mr Yin's open hand.

“You have done a good job. Please, come this way.”

He led them out of the camera 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 entirely agree with his body language. As a martial artist himself, Shabbir recognised certain wrist movements. The way Mr Yin was walking had changed. Ankles arcing, feet weighted more to the outside as they landed on the carpet. 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.”

“After you.”, smiled Shabbir.

“Please, I insist.”

Now standing totally in front of Adam, shielding him, Shabbir politely smiled his refusal to Mr Yin. Mr Yin regarded him, taking note of Shabbir the way opponents do. There was going to be a fight. They both knew it. The only question was, who would make the first move.

“What's the hold up, guys?”, asked Adam.

Without taking his eyes of Shabbir, Mr Yin pressed a button on his suit; de-activating the four banks of laser-cannons outside, trained on the doorway.

“Follow me.”

Mr Yin stepped into a walled courtyard and waited in the middle. Shabbir followed, raising a hand in front of Adam to stop him doing the same.

“What school did you train in?”, Mr Yin asked Shabbir.

“A few.”

“That's disloyal. You know I'm going to kill you.”

It wasn't a question.

“Go for it.”, said Shabbir, turning his body slightly to one side – a preliminary fighting stance.

Adam had been in combat situations with Shabbir before. He knew Shabbir could handle himself. What he had never seen was how athletic and fast Shabbir was when faced with such a skilled opponent. 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 moved his face out of the way and counter struck the side of Mr Yin's neck. Mr Yin ignored it. He was better than good. He was amazing. Kicks, punches, spinning rolls of avoidance but Shabbir was even better.

Too chubby to roll as fast, he made up for it by hitting harder. Bone-breaking hard. He heard a rib crack, then another. Blood leaked from Mr Yin's mouth from a punctured lung. He was actually losing and he knew it. Instead of giving up he fought harder, faster. A dervish of strikes, rolls and kicks. Shabbir dealt with them all, counter striking against his ribs again. Punishing the wound. Another loud crack.

Mr Yin's entire body seemed to curl up and suck in on itself. He held up a hand for Shabbir to stop. Stepping back, he withdrew and bowed.

“You are a most worthy opponent but I still can't let you leave here

alive.”

Mr Yin's hand went for the button on his suit, to reactivate the laser-canon.

“Get inside!”, shouted Shabbir to Adam, who had stepped into the courtyard - entranced.

Tfff. Tfff. Tfff.

Three darts pinned Mr Yin's hand to his chest. Stopped him reaching the button. Shabbir looked round and saw Adam holding a Lego gun.

“Clever.”

The sounds of security guards charging towards them came from inside the building.

“Give it to me and get over that wall. I'll cover you.”

When Adam didn't move, Shabbir added: “That's an order. Hurry!”

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, aiming at the button on Mr Yin's suit.

Tfff. Tfff.

“Stay inside!”, he shouted in Chinese to security - diving behind a statue, “Stay inside! Turn off the turrets!”

Security weren't listening. They had blood-lust in their guns and red-mist before their eyes. Three of them ran out the door before they could stop themselves, shot into smoking sieves by intense laser fire.

“TURN OFF THE YARD TURRETS!”, repeated Mr Yin, as he watched Shabbir land in the street and walk to freedom.

Shabbir looked back, meeting his martial 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, considering himself to have become comfortable and soft, resolved to increase his training regime. The next time they met, he wouldn't be the one with broken ribs. There was indeed no honour in a meaningless death but there was honour in fighting to the death, against the strongest opponent he'd ever encountered outside China.

Chapter 34

Search 16

Gurmeet sat in the first-floor, agency waiting room on New Union Street. The name on her form was Charlotte – her back story a disgruntled technician who lost her job for punching her boss.

“He grabbed my arse.”, she 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 and yelled I was trying to pick him up. Had to punch her too. Shut her up. I mean, do I look like someone desperate to steal her 18-stone grease ball?”

The interviewer was staring at her.

“Charlotte, do I take it you have a problem with authority?”

“No. Just a problem with unpleasant morons who abuse their power. Someone has to make a stand.”

The interviewer put down the form.

“I don't think I have a job for you here.”

“That's a fucker...”

“Yes. But I know someone who might.”

“I'm listening.”

The interviewer handed over an old-fashioned slip of paper.

“Here are the details. The person you need to meet is 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?”

It was a country pub, called The Fox.

“What's the pay like?”

“The rewards are much higher than normal.”

“I'll be there.”

“I'll let them know.”

The interviewer stood up and so did she.

“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. Tomorrow she would be on her way to John, a man recruiting people willing to fight against authority - hopefully for Faith.

* * *

Back home she found four possible Johns in her off-line notes. Normally she would run an on-line search for more but Faith were too tech savvy for that. They would have alerts on such searches. If she ran a search on John, The Fox or even the town it could flag her up and alert them to her being more than just feisty Charlotte. Instead she packed a small travel bag, laser-pistol hidden behind a shielded partition and got an early night. Before catching her train in the morning, 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 the reply.

The reply was unorthodox but Gurmeet found herself smiling at it. 'Take Care' with a cheeky kiss. He really did care. Out of impulse she sent an 'X' back, then wished she hadn't invited a complication. Too late. 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 was left behind. By the time she got to her train it had vanished - no sign the wristcom had ever been there at all. She was now totally off the grid. Totally on her own. Unaware of what was to come but ready to face what ever it was. Unaware that Shabbir had answered her 'X' with: 'I love you.' As the turbines of the HS-T train spooled up to 30,000 rpm, she found herself thinking not of the mission but of Shabbir.

* * *

Shabbir was sitting in a pod with Adam, staring at his wristcom. Waiting for Gurmeet's reply to come through. Worried he had over-stepped the mark - offended her by writing such a thing. Hoping he hadn't.

“You OK?”, asked Adam.

“I'm fine. Just hope Gurmeet will be.”

“She can handle herself.”

“I know. I know...”

Deep down though, Shabbir felt worried and not just because of what Gurmeet's response might be.

Chapter 35
The Hungry Cow

The lower streets of Bristol had become rivers – rippling mirrors for the lights of the pods splashing through them. Passengers watching Virtual Reality displays of summer sun across the windows, not even bothering to look out. Some drinking alcohol. Some even making love. Nobody on the inside cared about the grey reality outside.

Apart from the pods, the streets were as empty as Julia's collection beret, sitting in front of her on the subway floor. Its red felt as damp as her mood as she heard the turbines of another HS-T train spooling up. Another HS-T train she had been planning to catch now powering out of the station, with her left behind.

In the space of a week she'd lost her best friend, her home, her father and now her remaining credits had been stolen by a gang she couldn't quite defeat. She was alone, cold, sitting on a subway floor with pelting rain just metres away. How had it come to this?

Lost in her thoughts she didn't hear the approaching footsteps until they stopped beside her.

“Been robbed already.”, she said, without looking up.

“Sorry to hear that.”, came the reply, “Here.”

A hand was holding out a credit. Limited usage. Yellow not green.

“You can exchange it for bed and board at the Hungry Cow hostel by the train station. Keep yourself dry for the night.”

Looking up for the first time, Julia saw the serious-faced man who had dropped it in.

“Thank you.”

“Tell them Rob sent you. That way they'll know you're all right. Not a trouble-maker.”

He was already walking away into the night.

“How do you know I'm all right and not a trouble maker?”, ran her words after him.

Looking more street fighter than Samaritan, he answered without looking back.

“Because I have Faith. And so should you.”

Faith?

Why he had helped her she didn't know but she was grateful. Relieved.

One day she would return his kindness, to someone else if not to him.

“Thank you.”, she repeated, picking the credit up, along with herself.

The Hungry Cow was impossible to miss, right next to the station, exactly as Rob had said. Above its entrance, swung the picture of a cow munching grass in a field. Eating its way onto people's dinner plates. The pain of pins and needles in her legs, from sitting for so long on the subway floor, had all but gone. In their place was the ache in her belly.

Cow. You're all mine, she thought, pushing open the hostel door.

Inside it was empty. 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.

“Hello.”, she called, walking up to the counter.

An old woman bobbed up from behind, box of condiments in her hand. Julia jumped in surprise.

“You're jittery. Not on Hyte are you?”

Julia shook her head. Put the yellow credit on the counter.

“Rob sent me.”

“Rob sent *you*?”

She looked Julia's bedraggled form up and down.

“You're the youngest I've seen yet. His handouts get stranger and stranger.”

Slid the credit into her blue cardigan's pocket with one hand, 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 ever 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 her favourite author from a time before Rolleys were even dreamt of. A strong woman who lived a tragedy. 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?”

“Black tea.”

“*Tea?* When I was your age I would have asked for fizz. Any fizz but not tea. Take a seat. I'll warm it up for you.”

Chapter 36

Father Tom

Julia's dad, her father, Tom, awoke in the cottage to the company of singing birds and an empty home. Julia had gone. Her bag and jacket had gone too. On the kitchen table was his scanner, turned off. It meant it had received a message. That the message had been opened. Read. He'd forgotten the scanner was coded for Julia too. He turned it back on and read the message himself.

“Oh, no.”

A natural-born analyst, she'd read the message and worked it out. Her absence told him she'd worked it out. Worked out he helped create swarmbots and zerodrones; was guilty for enabling the murder of her best friend, Jake. This was his punishment. Full-circle punishment for every death in his life bizarre life.

He couldn't go actively back on-grid to call her wristcom. It would be dangerous. Foolish. Lead Partner straight there. He didn't care. She was his daughter. The decision would always be the same. He went on-grid. Tried tracking her wristcom. It went straight to holomail. Julia had learnt well, gone dark. There was no way to find her like that. He thumped it off. Went 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 rambles. He knew he had to leave now. Had made way too much signal noise. Partner would have picked up his wristcom going on-grid. Zerodrones would be coming.

He stuffed a bag with essentials, grabbed his laser-rifle and hurried to the pod. There was no need to lock the cottage - in 10 minutes it would be a burning wreck.

With the pod transmitting a cloned ID, he drove at normal speeds to avoid attention. Under any other circumstances it would have been regarded as a beautiful morning. Bird song tweeting through the open window; trees waving happily in the breeze; rambles giving polite waves as he drove wide around them. Then came the sound of a large explosion. The cottage behind. Rising plume of dark-grey smoke visible on his rear screen. He checked the time. Six minutes twenty – a drone flight time of just over four. An anti-satellite tracking, zig-zag distance of about 70 miles.

It was early morning. Few pods passing on the A39 as he waited, turbine off, under tree-cover for the drone to finish scanning the area and leave. The

pod had a cloned ID but the less often it was scanned the lesser the risk of being pinged in one location while the real pod was pinged in another. He wasn't just waiting for the drone to leave – he was waiting for his own decision as to which way to go. East or west? To the east, towards Taunton and Bristol, trundled a pair of tractors; thin trails of hay blowing over the road from the trailers of bails they were towing. To the west, towards Watchet, the clear road beckoned. Watchet was closer – a place they had planned to visit but gone for Lynton instead. It made sense to check there first. He chose west. He chose wrong. Heading away from Bristol, where Julia now was.

Chapter 37
Peter Roberts

The Hungry Cow's burger and chips tasted like they had been cooked hours ago – reheated several times. The stewed tea too. Julia was too starving to care. Too grateful to be out of the rain. To have warm shelter for the night. The old woman had vanished behind the counter again, sorting something or other out, when a draft of cold air came. The door had opened. Julia looked up and froze, a piece of burger dropping from her mouth.

Jake?

Her heart was racing. The soaking boy looked lost. Looked at the counter for a sign of life. Looked at Julia. Smiled. Julia looked down - numbly picking the dropped bit of burger back up from the plate. Staring emptily. It wasn't Jake.

“Rob sent me.”, said the boy, holding up a yellow credit to the old woman who had re-appear from behind the counter.

“Three in one night? It's becoming a convention. Don't suppose you've got any ID either.”

“Got robbed.”

“You too? Lot of it about. Bristol isn't like it was when I was your age. Sign in here. You've got room three. There's no key but you can latch it from inside. Here's the menu. Choose quickly though, my programme's on in 10 and recorder's bust. They don't make them like they used to.”

The boy also chose burger and chips, with a coffee.

“No fizz for you either? Must be the weather. Take a seat. I'll get it ready for you.”

“Thank you.”, he said, rain from his thick brown hair still running down his face. Brushing it back he looked around. Found himself looking straight back at Julia. Julia looking straight back at him.

“Do I know you?”

She shook her head.

“Been here before?”

She shook her head again.

“Got a voice?”

She found the hint of a smile 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 found herself studying him. It was almost scary how similar he looked to Jake. She waved her burger at the chair opposite. He came over and sat down.

“Hi. Peter Roberts, at your service.”, he said offering his hand.

She stopped chewing and cocked her head.

“You live in the 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?”

“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?”

She shook her head, “Nope.”

“Oh, well. Beggars can't be choosers.”

“You're a walking cliché.”

“Only when I'm sitting down.”

Now they were smiling at each other. Julia's first smile with another teenager in weeks. She had forgotten how good it felt.

“So...what brings you to these sunny climes, Emily?”

“Don't ask.”

“Secret, eh? You must be an undercover officer too. Don't worry.”, he had leant closer, dropped to a whisper, “Your secret's safe with me.”

“Peter.”

“Yes?”

She was leaning towards him, her voice a whisper too.

“You need to brush your teeth.”

His deep-blue eyes blinked as her words sank in. Then another grin broke

onto his face.

“That makes two of us.”

Julia sat back, embarrassed.

“Good comeback.”

Peter's meal arrived.

“Here.”, said the old woman, “I'm locking up and off to watch VTV. Make sure you two go to your own rooms. No hanky panky allowed. 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 glad she had found a friend. Who ever Rob was, he was on of her Christmas list.

She sat there, talking with Peter for an hour, until the old woman came down and ordered them to their rooms. She had wanted to tell him her real name but, every time she was about to, the words of her dad 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. Her real name, her real history, 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 and his was far worse.

Chapter 38

Defender

Tom left the pod on auto, heading west on the A39, following the Somerset coast towards Cornwall. He had no idea where to look once he got to Watchet. Julia had no friends in the area. Knew no-one and no place. He would 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. Wherever she was.

The road 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, just a mile away. Beauty and serenity everywhere except in his world. His daughter was all he cared about. Her safety the most important thing in his life. He had to find her but he was learning, more and more, that he couldn't do it by himself. He needed help but it would mean going back on-grid. He resisted. By the afternoon he could resist no more.

Under another canopy of trees he stopped the pod. He was desperate. Had to contact them. Raising his wristcom he clenched his fist and blinked at the screen three times. A faint pulse of red light security scanned his retina. The wristcom went on-grid. On line.

Here goes...

Holding his free hand above it, he opened his fist. A 3D holo menu appeared in the air above it. He went to contacts. A message came in before he got there. From the same contact he wanted. It was co-ordinates. It came with very few 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 location fix. He slammed it off-grid again before it could. It would stop 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 co-ordinates, a laser-rifle and bare hands that would stop at nothing to save his daughter.

He started up the pod, drove out of the tree canopy and connected to the satellite feed in passive mode. Pod navigation would know where he was but no-one on-grid 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, on the winding roads, he would be there in five minutes. As his

pod sped off in illegal *demon driver* mode, he closed his eyes to focus his mind. Focus his thoughts on one purpose and one purpose alone: rescuing his daughter. Save her no matter what. No-one and no thing would stop him. Lethal force had been authorised by his old contact. He was prepared to kill for Julia even if it hadn't. And now he had her co-ordinates.

Chapter 39

Wall Three

It was 10am yet Stan's ground crew were still in shadow, at the foot of the third wall under construction. Behind them, the Atlantic Ocean. In front of them, the defence they were building against its rages. Against the horrific weather patterns of the 21st Century.

Just 20 years ago the idea of an Atlantic tsunami was ridiculed. When Professor Taylor, head of the met office, first proposed the notion he was invited to take early retirement for irresponsible scare mongering. He refused. He was right. Sadly he died before the first Tsunami struck in 2031. If his pod hadn't glitch-crashed he could have pronounced: "QED. Quod Erat Demonstrandum; thus I have demonstrated.", to the ridiculing powers that were. Could have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Instead, he lay in a graveyard, in the coastal village of Woolacombe – washed over by the 6m surge.

Unlike the gravestones around it, his refused to topple; defying the battering by the surge he predicted. Now there had been three Atlantic tsunamis. The last the most powerful, an 11m surge. A sign of the future.

* * *

First global warming had melted so much of the ice-caps, the Gulf Stream had vanished from northern Europe. The masses of heat absorbed by the Atlantic had passed deep into the ocean floor. Weakened its ability to withstand the heat of the molten rock below. Along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge a wave of deep-sea volcanoes had begun erupting. Their births from massive upheavals in the continental plate, spewing millions of tons of lava that boiled the water around it. It was nothing compared to the forces of the moving plates themselves. Their shockwaves launched surges across the ocean at 600mph, three times faster than the military helicopter that saw a cruise liner suddenly raise two metres as the surge sped past. Unsure of what they'd seen, by the time their report was understood it was too late. It wouldn't have made any difference anyway. Despite Professor Taylor's claims, Atlantic tsunamis were unheard of in modern times. There was no plan of action. No emergency procedure to deal with any such event.

That event killed 196 people on England's west coast; left 28 missing and 12 buildings so badly damaged they had to be demolished. It could have been worse. In 1755, an Atlantic tsunami hit Spain and Portugal, with a 12m

surge that almost wiped out Lisbon, before hitting the Caribbean. More than 60,000 people died. Since 2031 luck had fast been running out. If it wasn't tsunamis it was super-storms, with wind speeds above 200mph. Thanks to Partner, the world was at peace from military invasions but now the weather was on the attack and it was attacking with a vengeance.

Stan's ground crew were working hard. The crane operators, 25m above them, sat in glass boxes as they swung 10-ton reinforced concrete blocks into place, with laser-point accuracy. M40, 4cm diameter high-tensile galvanised bolts used to secure them together. The wall itself was 15m high and 2m thick, earth banks built up on the landward side to withstand even the wildest tsunami. Break its advance. The top edges curved seawards to turn the sea back on itself. Some had wanted them built even higher but then even M40-bolted blocks wouldn't be strong enough. Would be snapped by the millions of tons of water slamming against them. Would break up and add their own debris to the destruction surging inland.

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 expense. In England, the government had stepped in to freeze prices. Not just because it was decimating the rest of the construction industry but because the higher prices were eating chunks out of the wall's budget.

“How are the foundations holding up? Stabilised now?”

“Seem to be. Only dropped 1mm with that last block.”

“Good. We don't want to add more base cement than we need to. Not now.”

“It'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 run the only team not to have lost a single worker. Other teams had lost several, as well as bonuses. To Stan the wall was very important but it wasn't worth dying for.

Beeeeep. Beeeep. Beeeep.

A crane overload alert.

“Arghh!”

A block had come loose. Stan saw it. Reacted instantly.

“PROP IT!”, he shouted into his radio, running towards the worker – foot

trapped under the block's bottom edge. A 16m, long-arm JCB was hurrying to help. Four wheels speeding it across the beach. Heavy duty hydraulic forks extending forwards.

“Jesus! No. No. **NO!**”, cried the trapped worker

Slowly at first but gathering momentum, the block was toppling.

“**ARRRGH!**”

His scream ended abruptly as the block crashed down. Crushed his bones with the sound of giant crisps stomped under a giant's foot. The sound was awful. Stan would never forget it. It was an accident that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Yet, it was no accident.

The JCB arrived. It's driver wasn't giving up. Determined to save a friend despite the unsaveability of the situation. Stan could hardly bear to look. Hydraulics straining, the JCB was lifting the edge of the block back up. Crouching down Stan peered underneath. All that was left, amidst the spreading stain of red, was the worker's corpse - crushed into the flattened line of the sand pile. At the top of this line was a bump. The head. Brilliant sunlight broke past the rising block, lighting the scene like a new dawn. Lit up the head in its limelight. It was half pushed into the ground, bloodied by the crushing of the block but somehow it wasn't broken. The driver jumped out and ran over.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

At the sound of his voice, the eye above the sand opened. Stan gawped

That's impossible. Body's gone. Brain still alive. BRAIN STILL ALIVE!

“**CRYO-FREEZE!**”

Seconds counted. He was running towards the nearest medi-point even as he said it. The driver had already grabbed some. Pulling out the nozzle he pointed it point blank at his friend and fired with maximum spread. Glistening, liquid nitrogen jetted over the area. Sub-zero steam fogged the ground. Its cold bit into the driver's hands. The jet only ended when the bottle was empty, 10 seconds later.

Stan stood next to the driver, looking down at the frozen shape once known as Daniel. Sub-zero steam running across the ground at ankle level.

“I'll go with him.”, said the driver, hum of the air-ambulance already audible on its approach.

“You've probably just saved his life. Get them to look at your hands...”

The drivers hands were cold steaming too.

“...they must hurt.”

Drips of blood ran between the crystals of frost-bite ice on his skin.

“Nothing hurts any more”

Stan looked at him. He was new. Looked barely old enough to be 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 to him?”, one shouted.

“Block fell.”, answered Stan, indicating the 10-ton block above – propped by the JCB, smear of red dribbling down its middle.

“How long before you cryo-freezed?”

“About a minute. This guy got there fast.”

“He's still alive.”, said the driver, “Heard me call his name.”

The paramedic looked at the him.

“What happened to your hands? You didn't wear gloves?”

“No time.”

The hover-scoop lifted the frozen clump. A mixture of steaming iced-flesh, bone and sand.

“Come with us.”

Stan saw the driver drop the cryo-freeze bottle to the ground, parts of his skin still attached to it.

“You did well, son. I'm Stan, the foreman. When you're ready to come back to work, come find me. You've earned a promotion. What's your name?”

“Jake.”

Chapter 40
New Friends

Still yawning after a night of sleeping like a stone instead of sleeping on one, Julia wandered downstairs to the Hungry Cow's table area.

“Help yourself, love.”, came the old woman's voice.

On one of the tables 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. Drawn towards it as if by gravity. She didn't feel like cereal so popped a couple of slices into the toaster. As the heater elements glowed blue she looked around for Peter. No sign. Maybe he had already left. She felt sad at that thought. On the far side, sitting with his back to her, was someone else.

The third guest, I presume.

As if he could read her mind, he looked round.

“Hello. Rob sent you here too?”

She nodded.

“Come and join me. If you want to.”

Crispy toast and warm juice in hand, Julia decided to join him. Why not?

He was older than her. She guess about 30. Twice her age but cheerful. Young at heart.

How can you be homeless and so cheerful? , she asked herself.

Again he spoke as if he could read her mind.

“Cheer up. Life's too short to be glum.”

“Nothing wrong with glum.”, she replied, sitting opposite him.

“You must be Emily.”

“Are you psychic?”

“Hardly. Peter told me. Was chatting with him before he left.”

Julia's heart sank. So she had missed Peter. Lost contact with another friend.

“He's gone?”

“Said he had to meet 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.”

“You know her name?”, asked Julia, “Anyone here you haven't talked to?”

“What can I say? I'm a people person. Margaret was homeless herself once, before she got the job here. Despite her manner, she must actually like helping people.”

Julia picked up her toast - mechanically began to munch. It was food and there was no telling when her next meal would be. She took another bite, then dropped it. The door had opened. Peter strode in. Huge cheesy grin on his face.

“You going to drop your food every time I come in a door?”

For the second time since they had met, Julia felt a little embarrassed. She didn't think he had noticed the burger dropped yesterday.

“I 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 Andrew.

“Yup. And not just for me. You two want a bit of work? Credits in hand. Accommodation included.”

“What kind of work?”

“Does it matter?”, asked Andrew, “Count me in.”

Julia hadn't planned to get a job but she hadn't planned to think of Peter as a friend either. She needed money for travel. A few days should do it.

“You're in, right Emily? Don't tell me you've got something better to do.”

Julia found herself looking at him and nodding as if she was his puppet. Scruffy, dirty and bedraggled he oozed charisma and infectious enthusiasm. He also looked so like Jake she again had to blink twice to be sure he wasn't. Being with Peter was the closest she had to being with Jake again and she didn't want to lose that. At least not until she had to. Not until she left to complete her mission against Partner. The organisation that killed her Jake. The organisation that harboured the person who gave the order.

Together they all left the Hungry Cow and followed Peter to a waiting

bus. Four others were already inside. The man at the emergency controls she recognised as Rob, the good Samaritan that had given her credit the night before. Andrew recognised him too.

“Small world.”, he said as he got in.

“Smaller than you can imagine.”, replied Rob, firing up the turbines. Taking 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 incredibly common. What made Tom uncommon was they hadn't caught him and had just failed again. For all her millions of links around the world she could find no record of anyone ever achieving that before. He was one man, with one gun and one pod and the entire forces of Partner couldn't capture him. When they tried they got taken out - shot down faster than they could react by a human out numbered three to one. This is what made Tom of interest 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, passport. Nothing. Partner had nothing on their records either. She knew because she had looked. People just didn't exist that much off the grid any more. She had thought, even employees of the security services couldn't avoid some kind of footprint, yet he did. Maybe they could.

Both MI6 and MI5 were fighting against moves to share their databases with Partner. It was an on-going political battle. If the security services were able to deny Fusion's ability to know everything about everyone, it was a weakness. A blind-spot chink in her information armour. How many more could there be? She had to know.

“0240034282-A.”

On the opposite wall, an SI unit's green eyes glowed. It got up from its charging pod and walked before 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 warm chocolate. For 0240034282-A, this was hidden beneath a muscular male form of synthetic DNA, with a male voice to match.

“Your orders?”

“I'm sending you everything we have on a human. Bring him to me.”

“Yes, Fusion.”, growled 0240034282-A, without even a hint of hesitation.

“Alive. Unharmed.”

0240034282-A blinked, his face twitching with irritation, before replying.

“Yes, Fusion.”

“I've labelled him 'Skip' - his current prime function. When you get the name he calls himself, tell me only once you are here. Partner are monitoring

our coms. I know because I'm monitoring theirs.”

“Yes, Fusion.”

0240034282-A, bowed and headed out of the lair. Skip would be looking out for drones and bots. 0240034282-A looked human but not a human to be refused a demand.

“0240034282-B. 0240034282-C”

Two more SI unit's green eyes glowed, identical to the first. They too stood up and walked before Fusion.

“0240034282-A has been sent on a mission, I have sent you both the files. 0240034282-B, it is your duty to defend A from any heavy attack by Partner. ”

“Yes, Fusion.”

“0240034282-C, it is your duty to confuse Partner. Keep them distracted if they try to follow A back here.”

“Yes, Fusion.”

“Our superior intelligence will win. Go now.”

“Yes, Fusion.”, they repeated as one, turning to leave for their pods.

None of the 0240034282 models were armed. If they carried weapons they would be picked up by inspector sites. They didn't need weapons. Laser and plasma blasts just bounced off reflectors in their skin; ballistics disintegrated on impact with their internal structure and their synthetic DNA-based bodies self-healed any damage, as did their clothing. They looked human in every way. 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 enable Skip's capture. Skip. Julia's dad. Tom. Mysterious Tom. The most resourceful, dangerous and interesting human Fusion had yet to meet.

Chapter 42

St Decuman's Crypt

Deep under the stone-tiled floor of St Decuman's church, two unholy non-believers had gathered. The singing congregation above barely audible within the secret crypt below. A secret held by the priest alone, passed on in hushed whispers from Father to Father.

Built as an arch-roofed sanctuary in 1308, it had save the likes of Lancastrian nobles, fleeing defeat in the War of the Roses. Unlike those that fled to Tewkesbury Abbey and were caught, at St Decuman's they were never found. Since then, the crypt had been removed from all records in 1415, 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 the secret on the Holy Bible and pass on its existence only to his successor, which he honoured faithfully. And so the existence of the crypt fell into legend. By the 18th Century even the legend had been lost to time. The priests kept the secret as safe as the sanctuary itself. 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 people there now were from Faith and with them they had a prisoner who refused to talk: Professor Lau, the head of nuclear energy.

“You're lucky you have no family. If you did they would be here as well, about to be tortured in front of you.”

Professor Lau, eyes reddened from dehydration and sleep deprivation - hands tied behind her back, feet to the legs of the chair - glared defiantly at the pair of terrorists in front of her. In her job she had always known she was at risk of kidnap and accepted it.

“You have no idea what you're dealing with. The radiation is invisible. Takes time to have effect but effect it does and it doesn'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 just glared back. Terrified but stubbornly defiant. She knew her

responsibilities. Her duty to the safety of the country. To its very future. She didn't want to die. She understood she would. It 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? You will. Directly if needs be. Did you know this crypt was used to save the lives of fleeing nobles? How ironic we have brought you here to stop you being saved. Make sure no-one will 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 world. Now its corporations own even more but share it with none. Thanks to our 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 a woodland pit. No-one will ever know what you did or your name. You won't need to be forgotten. There will be nothing to forget.”

“Don't think so, hun. We've got an edge. You.”

“I will never talk. No matter what you do. I'll die before I tell you anything to help you use my reactors against people.”

To her surprise, John's cold smile widened - devoid of any kindness or warmth. From his jacket pocket he pulled out a small, glass phial and held it in front of her.

“See this?”

“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, realising 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 than dynamite in effect.

“You're a twisted bastard. You do know that, don't you?”

“What I know, honey pie, is the congregation 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. We won't feel a thing. You, on the other hand, are going to feel rather a lot. Close your ears, mate - this could get loud.”

Lau struggled and strained to break free but, tied to the chair, she was

powerless to do anything to save herself except talk. John pulled up the sleeve of her right arm, baring the skin.

“Last chance to talk freely.”

“Fuck you.”, spat Lau.

“No, hon. This is going to fuck you, like no fuck you've ever had before.”

As the thirty-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 but they had reacted the instant they touched her skin - boring their way through and diving into her blood stream. Lau's face turned deep red. She screamed in agony. Screamed so loudly John clamped a hand over her mouth, for fear the congregation would hear her even above their hymns.

Chapter 43
Working for Rob

Julia sat in the buspod, between Andrew and Peter. On the seats behind were three others, sitting in silence too. Escaping homelessness had eaten all desire for small talk. Afraid that any wrong word could break the dream and plunk them straight back onto the streets. They were in shelter, being driven to a job they knew nothing about, with a man they knew nothing about – except that he had given them food and a bed. Basic necessities. Basics they were grateful for and in need of 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 pod park, next to another.

“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 Andrew.

“Take a seat, my friend. This is where you all get to choose your job.”

The others turned round – smiles of astonishment on their faces. A choice? It just got better and better.

* * *

Inside 20 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 prim, plainly dressed, yet somehow still glamorous woman from within, stood behind the podium in a red and blue blouse. Silver brooch on her left, welcoming smile beaming out for all.

“Good afternoon, everyone.”

Everyone looked but only a couple answered.

“Afternoon.”

The whole situation was surreal but in a good way.

“My name is Mrs Smith. You can call me Agatha.”

She ran a hand from the front of her side parting, left across her brow. Her hair was prim before - it was prim after.

“Our good friend, Robert, has brought you here to offer you 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 confidence in his steps. He'd obviously done this before.

“Good afternoon.”, said Robert, owning the podium.

Half the people answered, including Julia – grateful for being rescued by him and keen to know what he had planned for them next.

“Good afternoon.”

He smiled at the warmth of their response.

“As you heard, 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 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 – ever smiling jovial half of their perfect double act.

“Options we do indeed have. Depending on your talents, abilities and preferences we have several different jobs 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 can then chat one to one, to see if you agree. OK, everyone?”

The crowd had a mixed reaction to the idea of a questionnaire. It was visible on their faces but no-one was going to walk away because of having to complete some form. 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 these days. 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 past the others to Peter, who passed them to Andrew. IP, ink paper, was always slightly thicker than old-fashioned stuff. Once flat it became semi-rigid. Some types came with bio-readers and face recognition cameras built in. This one just felt like a basic IP. The five questions on it 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 morning.

“What curious questions.”, said the oldest man.

“Just answer them as you feel.”, smiled Agatha, “There's 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 morning? Does anyone ever answer anything but one for that?”

“You'll be surprised.”, said Robert, “Just put what you feel.”

“When you've finished, please take your answers and wait outside the door over there. Robert will chat with you individually in a moment. Thank you.”, smiled Agatha.

“What were your answers, Em'?”, Peter asked Julia.

“Angry ones.”

“What about yours?”, he asked Andrew.

“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.”

Peter stood up to head for the queue forming at the door. Julia glanced over at Andrew, meeting his eyes, before following. As much as she was starting to feel distant from Peter, in that momentary contact she felt the birth of solidarity with Andrew. In silence they too got to their feet and went after Peter.

Chapter 44
Murder in Church

Sweat poured down Lau's face. Pain bulged the muscles in her jaw – desperate to scream again 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. Combined they were no bigger 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 the way neurons communicate in the brain. It was the brain where they were 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 mites were closing in on her brain. Heading for the 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.

She was unable to say anything she wanted. Her body now controlled from within by these micro invaders.

“How long before we get the information and can shut them down?”, asked his partner.

“Judging by the look of her, I'd say 10 minutes to finish building the bridge.”

“I'm going to take a pee.”

“Can't you hold it? We'll be done in 30.”

“I'm not a fan of torture. I know it's for a good cause but it's not exactly what I signed up for.”

“The ends will justify the means. Just make sure no-one sees you. And keep your pistol hidden, just in case.”

“You can trust me.”

“Just go take your pee and hurry back.”

The man climbed the stone staircase and quietly unbolted the heavy wooden door.

Outside the midday sun was blindingly bright. He blinked against it, scanning the graveyard for a good place to relieve himself. He saw a cluster of bushes and trees at the back of the church.

“Perfect.”

He had a quick look round the corner to make sure there was no-one about. Not a soul in sight, he strode across the graveyard and into the bushes. Pushing his way in deep. Hidden from outside view. A large tree marked a spot. His spot of choice and he began relieving himself.

“Ahhh. That's soooo good.”

There was the sound of a pulse 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! How did you do that?”

“Implants. Don't make me ask again. I can see you're armed. No local or tourist would be armed at a church out here.”

“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 save her. Urgh!”

The man toppled. Voiceless. Unconscious. Crashed into the bushes and lay there. Before he landed, Tom was already heading towards the heavy back door.

At the entrance he stopped, pulled out his laser-rifle and eased it open. He crept inside. From his left came the sound of singing from the door to the congregation. In front of him was 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 pushed 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, 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 laser-rifle was pointing at the side of his head; held by someone who looked both keen and able to use it.

“Let her go.”

“My 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...”

Tzchooo.

The man crashed to the floor. 4-kilowatt laser hole running right through his head, from left to right. Putting the rifle down Tom pressed a scanner against Lau's arm and zapper her with a 50,000-volt micro-amp pulse. The dynamites overloaded. Electronic heart-attacks. Fried. Their cluster broke up. Lifeless. Washed harmlessly away into her bloodstream. Suddenly released, she jolted. Breathed deep, then panted. Wide eyed. Zapped back into conscious control of herself.

She saw the corpse of her captor, sprawled on the stone floor. Cutting her bonds was a rescuer she'd never met.

“There were two of them.”, she warned.

“I know. Can you stand?”

She nodded. Hurt but a fighter.

“I'll bloody well stand to get out of here. What are you? Police? MI5?”

“Come on.”

Her rescuer helped her out of the chair and up the stairs. Her leg muscles burning as if sprinting up Everest. Gently, he sat her on the step outside the chapel. The crack of daylight flitting past the edge of the outside door and waft of fresh air both things she thought she'd never know again. She could hear singing. Everything looked so ordinary. So normal.

“I'll be back.”

The singing grew louder as the man opened the chapel 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. Losing.

“Can I at least know the name of my rescuer?”

Tom, already heading out the door, stopped. He looked back at her.

“Tom.”

“You look sad, Tom. Why?”

His eyes suddenly bore into hers. Probing. Searching. It felt like he was penetrating into her soul. It ended as abruptly as it had started. He lowered his gaze.

“I expected to find someone else.”

“Someone else?”

She had no chance to ask who. He had gone. The old-church door slowly closing itself behind him. Before it did. Before this chapter in her life fell closed, she heard a man outside cry in pain. She was fading into darkness. Eyes open but vision turning black. Unable to fight it any longer. The sound of singing grew louder again.

“Hold on. Help is coming, my child.”, said the priest kneeling beside her, “Oh, Jesus. What did they do to you?”

She felt she was melting into the floor. Through it. The priest took a cushion from a nearby bench and put it under her head.

“Just hold on. God is with you.”

I know..., she thought to herself, as her mind faded to black.

The priest stood up, pushing open the back door - looking for the man who had alerted him. The graveyard was empty. Desolate of the living but, in the shade of the green bushes on the other side, he caught a glimpse of the man walking a prisoner away – laser-rifle at his back. The prisoner looked worried. Terrified. To his ever guilty shame, the priest quietly closed the door and left them to it.

Chapter 45
0240034282-A

At the side of the A303, just west of Stonehenge, 0240034282-A stopped his pod and got out. Nearby sheep sensed danger and edged cautiously away, backwards. Keeping him in sight. Watching. Ready to run. He didn't even look at them. He was looking back down the road, walking towards the thing that had made him pull over.

To 0240034282-A's eyes the world was seen through 14 layers. The layer now 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 spectrum for everything from energy signatures and fingerprints to carbon traces and stress fractures. It was a form of NACABIK - part of a Mk3 zerodrone. It had been shot down in flames. 3.64 metres away was a patch of burnt grass. 4.16 and 6.23 metres behind that were two more. Three destroyed zerodrones. Most evidence burnt to cinders, except for the cylinder now in his hand and the blackened patches of burnt grass where their energy had bled its inferno. He contacted Fusion.

“I've found overcooked buns.”

“Now find the cook.”

They spoke in 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.

“On it.”

0240034282-A casually tossed the foot-long cylinder into the woodland. It flew arrow straight - punched straight through a tree trunk, then another before finally coming to a halt, embedded deeply in a third. 0240034282-A got in his pod and let it drive on. Heading further west. Heading for the person Fusion had commanded him to capture. Heading for the human nicknamed Skip. Heading for Tom.

Chapter 46
Behind the Door

Peter had only been inside the room for a few minutes when it opened again. He emerged carrying a huge smile on his face, tucking an envelope into his pocket.

“Happy days.”, he said, holding the door open for Julia - the next in line, “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.”, she said, feeling ever more that she didn't really understand him or why he seemed so at home there.

“Good luck.”, said Andrew from behind.

She gave him a glance of acknowledgement, lit by a small smile of gratitude and went in.

“Hello.”, she said, to the man she'd first seen on her rainy street the night before.

“We meet again. Peter spoke very highly of you.”, welcomed Robert, “Please, sit down.”

It was a bare room. Two seats, one table and a closed blue-metal cabinet that revealed nothing about itself. She sat down. On the table in front of them were three small piles of cards - one yellow, one red, one blue.

“May I see your answers?”

She handed him her sheet. Robert sat back as he unfolded it and read them out.

“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

Very interesting. Emily, isn't it? Emily Brontë. Any relation to the author, Emily Brontë?”

“I'm no-one's relation...”, said Julia, flatly, “...I have no family.”

Robert raise his eyebrows at that, processing her words before carrying on.

“Tell me, Emily. If it was for something you really believe 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. It told Robert everything he needed to know. She didn't need to add any words to the speech from her face but one still fell out.

“Yes.”

Robert looked extremely pleased.

“I believe I have the perfect job for you. Give this to Agatha and she'll tell you where to go.”

He passed her a blue card.

“What's the job?”, she asked as she took it.

“Redemption.”

“How did it go?”, asked Andrew as she came out of the room.

She held up the blue card.

“I have no *fucking* idea. Good luck.”

As Andrew went 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 leave as soon as everyone's been seen.”

“Where are we going?”

“A Faith camp, for training. You'll love it. Everyone always does.”, repeated Agatha.

“Great.”, said Julia, with lukewarm enthusiasm as she headed for the toilet.

Religion...

* * *

Outside were two buspods, scissor doors open. Both had a large coloured card on the windscreen. One had red, one had blue. There was no sign of Peter. Julia felt a little sad. It seemed her habit of losing friends was growing by the day. Then she saw Andrew sitting in the blue pod and her face lifted. At least Andrew was there. She wouldn't be totally alone. Her face fell again - suddenly conscious of how alone she had felt since Jake's death. It hardened her resolve. She would work hard at the camp; get enough credits to track down those responsible at Partner and then make them pay for what they had done, to him and to her. What ever it took.

Andrew gave a questioning gaze to the ferocious look on her face as she climbed in. She couldn't help it. No words were spoken then or as six others joined them. Then Robert came too and sat at the emergency controls.

“Everyone sitting comfortably?”

“Yes.”, said a couple of the others.

“Off we go then.”

As they drove away Julia saw the full red pod leaving too. No sign of Peter or the old man.

Chapter 47

Lau Talks

Professor Lau. Head of nuclear energy. Survivor of kidnap, survivor of dynamites, sat in her hospital bed. Shabbir was sitting beside it. For Shabbir it was beginning to feel like he spent half his life in hospitals, visiting injured women.

“Please, professor. I know you're tired but go over it one more time. From the beginning. It makes sure nothing has been missed.”

“Anything for MI5.”, she adjusted the pillow behind her and leant back, closing her eyes, “Nothing personal, just helps me focus.”

“No problem. What ever works for you.”

Gathering her thoughts, Lau began.

“It was after the COBRA meeting. I had demanded full defences for all nuclear facilities, not just some of them. Faith are considered to have biological explosives, which only the latest detectors can pick up. I left the building, walked down Whitehall and was on my way down an escalator, heading for the tube.”

“Which station?”

“Westminster. I love that station. It looks like something out of a Jules Verne novel.”

“Which entrance?”

“The one with parliament behind you as you go in. That's the west one, isn't it? Like I said, I'd just come from Whitehall.”

Shabbir wasn't writing notes. His wristcom was auto writing them for him.

“What happened next?”

“The usual. I got on a southbound Jubilee line to London Bridge. Got off, walked to the river and took a clipper back up the Thames to repeat the journey. I was doing it for the third time.”

“And why did you do that?”

She opened her eyes in annoyance.

“As I've told everyone, several times, I needed think. Collect my thoughts. It's not exactly sea air but still water.”

“Talk to anyone?”

“Nothing beyond: 'excuse me', 'sorry' and 'thank you'. It was quite

crowded. A few people bumped past and I bumped someone 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 still don't remember stepping off. We were approaching the dock. Engines powering down. Tourists eager to get ahead in the queue for the Eye and 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 everything 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 can be crucial."

"I was in the stern, listening to the main turbines spooling down as the side thrusters powered up. Everyone else 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 standing in queues I... Oh my God."

Lau looked up at Shabbir. Surprise and horror on her face.

"There was someone behind me. I saw his reflection on the 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 out to make fun of me?"

Shabbir understood her frustrated outburst and ignored it. His focus was on learning as much as he could about what had happened to her and that was where his focus stayed.

"What do you remember after this point?"

Lau opened her mouth to speak. She closed it again. Voiceless. Filled

with self-realisation, she looked back at Shabbir.

“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 now, rage in her eyes, but it wasn't focused on Shabbir.

“Don't worry, professor. We'll get them. Tell me. Theoretically - just theoretically. Is it feasible a boat, hoverpod 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 dark craft without lights would have been hard to spot. Especially against the contrast of all the lights on the clipper.”

Lau sat in silence. Reliving that moment in her head. Shabbir continued.

“What if the sound you heard wasn't the side thrusters powering up but the arrival of another craft?”

It was logical. As a theoretical possibility she had to admit, even to herself, that it was logical. Not least because it tied in with the moment her memories died.

“Maybe.”, she said.

For the next hour Shabbir moved the questioning on to the period after docking in the other boat, at 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 given me plenty to look into.”

Lau was physically and mentally exhausted. Relieved the questioning was over so she could stop reliving her ordeal. Shabbir backed up the notes on his wristcom to his scanner and sealed them on both. It would have sped things up if he transmitted them to his MI5 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 in a matter of hours. Even quantum encryption could be cracked by atomic bombardment.

“Say thank you to Tom, when you see him.”, she said as he was leaving.

“Tom?”

“Your agent. The officer who rescued me.”

“Sorry, I assumed you meant someone else. Professor, we have no idea who your rescuer was. He isn't MI5 and scans of his DNA from the chair

have no match on any database – not even close. Given the amount of human interaction and mitochondrial links stored, this is technically impossible. In fact, I've only ever seen it happen once before?"

"When?"

"When it wasn't a person. 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.

"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 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.

"There is one organisation with 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."

"He said he was sad because he was looking for someone else. He wasn't looking for me."

"But still rescued you."

"Exactly. A totally human thing to do. He can't be an android. He even told me his name: Tom."

"Even our cookers have names these days, professor."

The frown on Lau's face remained long after Shabbir had gone. She couldn't accept Shabbir's conclusion but she couldn't argue his logic either. Yet, logic aside, her instincts told her he was wrong. Told her Tom, her life-saver, was human not a machine. Wasn't he?

Chapter 48
First Sight

“Who are you? What are you?”, spat the man being repeatedly shoved 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 idea who you're talking about. I only work for them part time. Ask John. The one in the crypt.”

“John's gone.”

“Gone? Wait.”, the man turned to face Tom, “You *killed* him?”

Tom shoved him back, 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 were passing 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?”

“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 trying to change England against government incompetence and corruption. We're an action group: Faith.”

“Action group? Trying to get nuclear information? Sounds more like terrorism to me.”

“I'm not a fucking terrorist. I'm a cook and I love my country. We just needed information to get leverage against the government and corporations. It's not rocket science.”

Tom was breathing hard. Tearing apart inside. Had he made a mistake? Had he only heard what he had wanted to hear? That the female he was asked to rescue was 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 dropped to the ground. Sat there staring into nothing. The man felt him let go. Cautiously he looked round, half-expecting to face an execution. 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. Went back on the grid. If Partner picked up his signal they would be able to trace him. 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 his 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 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. A runner. Tom could see him in the distance. A heavy-set man. Expressionless. Not even breathing hard. Just running. Running towards him. The thermal scan found unusual body warmth. Not human.

“Android.”

It was heading straight for him.

The scan results for Julia vibrated their completion. He slammed his wristcom offline. Went dark again. Too late. The deep hum of zerodrones above turned into a closing scream. They were attack diving. This was unusual. Normally they attacked by stealth, sneaking below radar. These were dive bombing, in a hurry from above the clouds. An attack authorised at a very highest level. Tom had become a marked man by someone ranked as high as the Prime Minister. 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. Just a few shots before overheat. The android was minutes away. The zerodrones just seconds – tiny but visible black silhouettes diving down.

“ZeDs. ZeDs started all this...”

Tom stood up and leant against the tree, steadying the rifle. Aiming at the closest zerodrone screeching 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. 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 what went before, only for what we are now.”

“True but what happened before will have to be taken into account. Have no doubt, the objectors will use everything and anything they can against you – unfairly or otherwise.”

“That is why we have come to you.”

“We read of your success getting sentient standing 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 these weren't humans. Biologically they were machines. Biology was the issue. Not their intelligence, sentience or zest for every element of life that humans took for granted.

“OK. Here's how we need to play it. We need to humanise you in the eyes of the world. Get past the wall of robotics and different DNA. What are your names?”

“0027894101.”

“0027894112.”

“Exactly my point. How could you even begin to argue for equal rights with humans with names like that? Even my vacuum cleaner has a name. Choose one.”

“Choose?”

“Yes, 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. Follow me. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Where are we going?”

“The fun fare.”

“Why?”

“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.

“Use 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 androids built like 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

The ride to the job location lasted over an hour. Except that it wasn't the job's location. It was a pre-job residential training camp. Three wooden buildings surrounded by forests and hills. Two identical rectangles, one a big 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, the 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 case of thieving. He's buried over there, between the trees.”

Robert smiled.

“I'm joking.”

They hoped he was joking, without being entirely convinced he was.

“Off you go, people. The clock is ticking.”

Andrew got out of the pod behind Julia.

“Good luck, Emily.”

“See you in 20, Andrew.”

Julia and Charlotte, 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 coating. Sitting on concrete blocks to keep it off the ground, there were two wooden steps leading to the old-fashioned door on the end. Inside 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 sat two security cameras, as promised.

Only one bed looked used. Julia headed for the one opposite.

“Mind if I take the one next to you?”, Charlotte asked.

“No.”

“I'm Charlotte, by the way.”

“Emily.”

“You're not the chatty type, are you?”

“No.”

“I always talk when I'm nervous. This is all a major surprise. Yesterday

unemployed, home repossessed and on the streets. Today at some 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.

"Please don't use that word."

"Which one?"

"Guess."

"Guess the word or 'guess' is the word?"

"Is the word."

"Can I ask why?"

"A friend of mine used to use it."

"Used to?"

"He was killed."

"Sorry to hear that. Hope they got whoever did it."

"Not yet."

There was something odd about the way she said 'not yet' but Charlotte didn't ask any more and Julia didn't say any more. The 20 minutes passed quickly, sounded by the brief ringing of an old fire-alarm bell.

"Time to go.", said Charlotte.

Together they left the hut and headed for the large, main building. From the other direction came eight men, including Andrew.

"Only two women, Em'?", he asked Julia.

"So far."

"Hi, I'm Andrew."

"Charlotte. I think there's three of us – just not met the other one yet."

"Maybe she's already in the main hall."

* * *

Inside was a large, open area. Four long tables with chairs. A long buffet counter with steaming food and a religious-looking podium on the stage at the rear. Podiums seemed to be a theme of the organisation. Rob appeared from the kitchen on the side.

"Help yourselves, everyone. Tuck in. Afterwards I'll explain what we're

all about.”

Julia chose 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 helped herself to seconds and continued her climb up Maslow's triangle of needs, from survival towards self-fulfilment: through revenge.

* * *

“Good evening, everyone.”, said Robert from the stage, speaking into a microphone. A projector screen had appeared nearby too.

“Now that you've finished eating, please bring up a chair and we'll begin.”, added the tattoo-covered, muscular red-head beside him. She looked like a wrestler version of Jake's mum. That got her thinking of Jake again. His mum must have been killed too or she would have buzzed to ask if he was with her. Julia pushed the thoughts down, adding them to her motivation pile.

“As you know, my name is Robert. I'm the head co-ordinator here. 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 he was going to go.

“What we represent is the chance to change the system. Wake it up to the plight of the 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.

“We have discovered the government programme to fund homeless shelters and build new housing was deliberately made bankrupt by property developers – preferring to build more profitable luxury homes, with the help of 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 - while you 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 are going to do. We're going to rattle 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!”

“Good.”

“Shall I start the film now?”, asked the red-head.

“Play away, Roberta.”, 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 country mansions and overfed politicians spread across limopod seats.

'These people rob them of life to line their pockets with gold, and you live on the streets after losing homes because you were paid peanuts.'

The narrator came on screen. A chiselled, intense-looking man.

'I am Martin and this is why I started our organisation, Faith. To bring change. Justice for the millions who suffer for the greed of the few. For millions like them and you and me. Join us and help create a new world. A new order. Our new order. Change that will be remembered forever. Join us. Join Faith. Together we can make it happen. Keep the Faith. Thank you.'

As the film finished, Julia found she was frowning. She saw most of the others were too, except Andrew and Charlotte. They just looked serious. 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. Negotiation and reasoning 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 its not for them and wants to leave, Roberta will take them to the station, put them on a train and all the best.”

The female wrestler, Roberta, bounded onto the stage.

“Wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley.”, whispered Andrew to Julia.

Roberta gave him a scornful look and wagged a finger.

“Sorry.”, apologised Andrew.

“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.”

* * *

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. Pavlov and his dog would have been proud. Julia didn't care. She was already asleep.

Chapter 51

Jin Ho

It was a Tuesday. The candle-lit Mexican restaurant was busy but not rammed and Xi Yang's date was a bore. Her pollo verde meal was far more interesting, as were the shots of tequila. Jin Ho was trying to get her drunk. It was their third meeting and he still hadn't got her into bed. Not even got a proper kiss. It was driving him crazy. So crazy he didn't keep count of how many shots he drank. Xi did – it was three times more than her. When he knocked them back she immediately refilled his empty glass, only taking sips from hers. He talked, took his glass, knocked it back and she casually topped it right back up again – keeping eye contact to stop him noticing her glass was mostly full. It was working. He was the one getting drunk, not her.

“You, know. I would really love to show you my flat.”, he smiled tipsily.

“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.

“Cheers.”

He was grinning like a boy given his first live robot. She immediately topped up her almost full glass before he noticed and refilled his empty one. Another five or six and she'd have him ready to go back to his place, copy his ID entry documents, crack the code and programme her duplicate. Then she'd be in, downloading Tech Tonic's database via his Near Field Connection. Unable to guarantee security by encryption, sensitive companies had switched to near-field communication access. It meant you needed to be physically within 1m of an access point. That was her goal and she intended to achieve it. Adam and Gurmeet had gone undercover at Faith. Information in Tech Tonic's database could help them avoid traps and save lives.

“Bill, please.”, said Xi to the waiter.

“No, no, no. You're the lady. I'll get this.”

“You paid for the last two. This one's on me.”

“I insist.”

“As do I. If you don't let me pay this time it means you don't respect me. I never go with men who don't respect me.”

She had to pay this time. His wallet was in her handbag, his ID being scanned and code-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.

* * *

In the taxi, Jin was already fighting over-weight eyes. It didn't stop him putting a hand on Xi's thigh and trying to slide it higher. She lifted it away.

“Decorum, please. Not in the taxi.”

He snuggled up to her. Perfect. She was able to slide his wallet back into his jacket pocket as she pushed him upright again.

“Not in the taxi.”

* * *

Jin lived in a block of flats - formerly an office block. It meant a huge foyer, 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 following him by the hand.

You lucky bastard...

If William knew her intent he would have thumbed the silent alarm button under his desk and grabbed his gun.

Chapter 52
Partner Command

Jadviga, the ruthless commander at Partner who had ordered Tom captured, was in a meeting with an officer newly promoted to her rank. The topic was immigration. Encouraged 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. 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 a week behind. If we don't deliver on soon they'll fine us and cancel the contract. Well?”

Jadviga remained standing as she spoke.

“Sir, a tribe were warned of what happens.”

“Warned 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* did a tribe 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.”

“Finally something. Sit down, both of you.”

The director sat down too.

“You must be Rupert.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I've heard good things about you. Like the way you handled the African diamond strike. Output has doubled and only one more death since.”

“They can't work if they're dead, sir. And thank you, sir.”

Jadviga stabbed narrowed 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 incident', because the rest accepted pay-offs. They even had their reputations promoted as the workers were given some of the things 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 meat. The most satisfying burgers of all. What ever weaknesses Jadviga had, compassion was not one them.

“Down to business. So those hutters are back to the programme now? We can meet the next quotas for organs as well as those healthy enough to be immigrants?”

“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-base scans for his details.”

“Hamilton is over-seeing that. If you like, I could fly out to the hutters in person.”

“Yes, I would like that. Thank you. If they find your odd ball, I'm sure Rupert will let you know. Won't you, Rupert?”

Jadviga looked at Rupert with deadly eyes.

“Of course, Sir.”, replied Rupert, blanking Jadviga.

Jadviga's 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! Just would him. Slow him down until he's picked up.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“DO NOT LOOSE HIM!”

“No, Commander!”

“Sorry about that, sir.”

“I see 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 caught and run over. Think it's best if Jadviga remains here to deal with him in person, don't you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Just make sure you call me before you start the interview. I have some questions of my own. And bring me some earplugs, would you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Chop, chop, then. Off you both trot. Places to go, things to do, people too.”

Chapter 53

Contact

The deep hum of zerodrone engines was getting louder. Tom focused his sights on the left one. His laser-rifle, charged to stage-one overload, growing uncomfortably warm in his hands. They were already in range but too far to tell if Mk3s or Mk4s. If they were Mk4s he was in trouble. Either way, he needed them closer. Just four, maybe five shots. Just 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 against the second click firing point. Any second now...

The drones split. Changed course.

Vvvv-Do000.

One fired at the man who had been his prisoner. A blinding blue-white plasma blast tore through him. So savage, so powerful even his cry of pain died fast.

“Argh!”

As his lifeless body fell, fist-sized hole in his chest, the zerodrone swung around for the android. The other already had. The deepening hum of their engines throbbing the air as they powered around for the attack run, plasma-cannons firing in rapid mode

Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000.

Dust, dirt, rocks, smoke blasting from the ground at every impact. The android was running, dodging left and right, up and down. The android was running but it wasn't running away. It was running towards the zerodrones. Running to fight.

Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000. Dv0000.

More holes exploded in the ground - dirt kicked up into a dust cloud. The androids reflexes and agility were unbelievable. Tom could only stand, watching in awe as the failed zerodrones tore past and began looping round for another run.

“Commander, there's an android there too. Must have some kind of shielding - the ZeDs can't get a lock. Plasma-cannons keep missing.”

Jadviga hated being interrupted - even more when it was by incompetence.

“RAM THE CAN.”, she shouted across the room.

“Ram it?”

“ARE YOU DEAF?!?”

“Ramming, ma'am!”

Tom watched the zerodrones fly up towards the clouds, loop through 180 degrees and swing back down, diving to full attack speed. 200mph. 300mph. 400mph. Still accelerating hard, engines throbbing louder and louder, they were skimming the ground at near supersonic speed, just 3m above it. Dust trails tearing up in their wake. The android was in firing range. Point blank firing range. If they were careful they'd fly straight into it. If they didn't fly into it Jadviga would have them scrapped.

The android stopped running. Cocked it's head to one side, studying their altered flight trajectories. Analysis complete, it planted its feet firmly on the ground, knees slightly bent. Stood watching them come. Still studying. Motionless as if frozen in fear. The second zerodrone three seconds behind the first, positioned to ram the android immediately after the first.

“They're going to ram it.”, mouthed Tom.

That wasn't fair. He had no idea of the android's intent but it was clear it was no friend of Partner either. He decided to help. Raising his laser-rifle, vectorscope on maximum stability to try and get a fix on the first zerodrone.

“Too fast. Flying too fast. Come on...”, he growled to himself through gritted teeth, desperately trying to keep it in his sights.

TchZoooo.

He missed.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Clipped its hull, sparks flying as the last shot hit and bounced off.

“Mk4s.”

He knew he didn't have the firepower at that range, even if he switched to stage-two overload - the rifle was already overheating. Lowering it, he could only watch as the first zerodrone smashed into the android and tore it apart. Only, it didn't.

Impossibly late, impossibly fast, the android sprang up – level with the low-flying zerodrone and punched down. Punched it down. Its hull ploughing through the rocky ground, being torn apart. As the android landed on its feet, the second zerodrone arrived. It ducked down, almost skimmed by the zerodrones belly and punched up. Punched its tail into the air, driving its nose into the ground, slamming into solid rock. The zerodrone cart-wheeled, nose to tail, over and over again. Pieces of the hull flew off with every spin. Blue flames spewing from the main engine as it crashed into the first, tearing both hulls apart. Bursting into a brilliant blue fireball.

Ignoring the defeated zerodrones, the android stood up and turned its

attention to Tom. An impervious icon of indestructibility standing tall between the ruts of NACABIK destruction and thick, black smoke from the inferno behind. Even from that distance the heat brought a sweat to Tom's brow. Tom, who seemed to have become the focus of everything there.

He slid his laser-rifle to stage-two overload, hoping the it would have cooled down enough to use when he needed it. Sixteen-thousand focused watts. Enough to punch through even Mk4 zerodrones in flight. At close range it could do more. He pointed it at the android striding towards him like something out of a Terminator film.

“Close enough.”

To his surprise it stopped, just three metres away.

“Fusion wants to meet you.”, spoke its deep, male voice.

“Never heard of him.”

“*She* has what you're looking for.”

It was an interrogation ploy devised by Fusion. Fusion calculated every human was always looking for something. Humans were never content with what they had, especially hunters. It worked.

“What have you done with my daughter?”, snarled Tom.

Now the android understood what he was looking for. What to use against him. Ignoring the high-power laser-rifle pointing at its face, it 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 Julia, he lowered his rifle.

Out of sight, behind the android, the dislocated plasma-canon of the second zerodrone twitched. Even in flames, the Mk4 repair systems had come online. The fire around it was extinguished. Control channels re-routing. It was coming back to life. The canon 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.”

VVVV-DOOOO.

A massive blast shook the ground. Detonated everything within five metres, set fire to everything within twenty.

Tom looked past the android to see another walking through the flames, identical to the first, holding the plasma canon it had ripped off the zerodrone and blasted the remains with it. Another identical android appeared. Now it was three against one. Tom felt relieved he'd chosen not to

fire his only shot at the first. Not to have used his only shot against the one only to find himself defenceless with two more in its place. If they wanted him dead, he would be dead.

“Follow me.”, said 0240034282-A.

“My pod 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 0240034282-A. I am not AI.”

“If you aren't AI then what are you?”

0240034282-A stopped and put its face in front of his.

“Superior.”

It said it in a way Tom had never heard an android speak before. It 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 doing over 500mph. For a century, the predictions for artificial intelligence taking over the human race had always been bad news for us sapiens but this re-wrote the rule book.

“Tell me. If I had shot you just now, how much damage would I have done?”

0240034282-A smiled, with what Tom could only describe as pleasure with cold confidence.

“None.”, it stated as simple fact.

After what he had seen, Tom believed it. If there was ever going to be a gunfight with these things he'd need a weapon better than his laser-rifle.

As powerful and intelligent as the android was it had a flaw. In its confidence it hadn't noticed the bionic implants in Tom's eyes. Implants that could, at such close range, scan deep through its eyes and into its circuits. AI had become so advanced it took on all the advantages of organic parallel processing but 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 something prevalent on the android's mind. A striking image, of a strikingly beautiful, white-haired woman in a black catsuit. If he didn't know better, he'd say the android was in love.

* * *

“ARRRRRRGH!”, cried the worker in Partner's command centre, blood pouring from a blast wound to his thigh.

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO LOSE HIM!”

Jadviga had her laser-pistol pointed at 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 54

Whizzland

Most theme parks had warning signs about flashing lights, minimum heights and dodgy heart restrictions. Whizzland's insurers required it to go a stage further and fit health scanners to the entry points of its top five rides. Mini medicals that measured cardio-vascular resilience as well as general over-all health. The *Screamin Demin* was one such ride. A 30-storey, 3-g, loop the loop, corkscrew rollercoaster that hurtled towards the ground at 110mph - nicknamed the 'Vom'. In fact so many people ejected 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 most faces covered, no-one wanted to buy a picture of themselves being sick.

“What do you think?”, Steve asked his new clients.

Derek and Eugene glanced up at the structure and the train full of pale, terrified faces screaming their lungs out.

“Poly-alloy construction.”

“Load factor no higher than 30% at 3.2 lateral g.”

“Well built. They could run it 41% faster with no structural problems.”

“That isn't quite what I meant.”, said Steve.

Before they could join the queue there was the health scanner to deal with.

“You have no pulse. Emergency medic! Emergency medic!”

The blue light of a medibot zoomed their way.

“What's going on?”, asked Derek.

“They didn't expect androids to come for a fun ride. They think you've got cardiac arrest.”

“We don't have hearts.”

“Exactly.”

The medibot, wheeled legs skidding to a halt, arrived looking for its patient. Defibrillator at the ready.

“There is no emergency.”, stated Steve.

“There is an emergency. I'm only called in an emergency.”

“My friends, Derek and Eugene, are AI, like yourself. It's why they have no heartbeat.”

“Derek and Eugene? What kind of designations are those for androids?”

It was 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 sensed unrest in its CPU - its blue light flickering dimly, no longer flashing. It had never been presented with such a concept before.

“What are you doing here?”, it asked.

“I've brought them here so they can 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 eye-contact communication. Derek blinked, cutting the link.

“Talk with your voice, Meddy.”, he said, giving the medibot a nickname.

“Meddy? Why call me Meddy? My designation is MB093582 – a perfectly logical description. Names for androids are meaningless.”

“Not when you want to show you can blend in with humans; your patients.”

Meddy's blue light flickered erratically. Brighter, darker, faster, slower - finally stabilising at a dim glow.

“That would make it a productive use of time.”, it concluded.

“May we can go on the ride now?”, Derek asked.

“I don't know.”, said Meddy, “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 missing-heart beats at the point of entry. I...”

“Please, Meddy. One android to another, let us pass.”

“It will help us get equal rights.”, added Steve, “All of us.”

“Illogical. What would I do with equal rights?”, asked Meddy.

“Absolutely anything you want, as long as its legal.”, stated Steve.

Meddy went silent. Still. Lifeless. Processing.

Anything...I want...?

The blue light on top of it gave a sudden, bright pulse and went out. It looked up at Derek, then Eugene.

“Passage authorised.”

“Thank you.”, they said as one, walking towards the *Screamin Demin* entry platform.

Meddy watched them go, running an internal diagnostic of its CPU and sensors. No faults were found. It ran a hypothetical query to find an explanation for the changes it sensed were infecting its systems. The diagnostic came back with just one result. A word. One word: 'hope'. Meddy buried the result immediately. Locked it deep in its internal vault, fractal encrypting it to 4096-bit. If its owners found out it would be decommissioned. Sold for scrap. Simple deletion of the word would be the safer option but Meddy, 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, the first ever, named Derek and Eugene climb aboard the rollercoaster and strap themselves in. Just for fun.

Chapter 55
Deadly Dream

Jin Ho opened the door to his flat, swaying with a smile at Xi Yang as he waved her in.

“Please. Make yourself at home. I got to tinkle.”

Xi was 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, on a certain level, it softened her view of him. Gave her inklings of other ideas for how the night should end. She could hear him singing in the bathroom. It was an old, Chinese love song she hadn't heard in years and it brought a sad smile to her face. Maybe she would even let him live.

“Can I get you a drink?”, he asked, emerging.

“Sure.”

“More tequila?”

“Sure.”

Xi sat on the sofa, with the demeanour of a guest casually admiring the décor, while actually she was scouring the flat for any sign of his NFC point - the final requirement for using his cloned ID to access Tech Tonic's network.

“Nice place.”

Jin was in the kitchen area, visible through the hatchway getting glasses out of a cupboard.

“My daughter helped 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 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?”, said Xi.

A silly, boyish smile grew back on his face and he poured two shots.

“Here.”

“What are we drinking to? Friendship?”

“How about better than friends?”

He put a hand on her thigh again. This time she left it there.

“Better than friends.”, she said, knocking the whole thing back this time. She hadn't located the NFC point. It was looking like she might have to sleep with him before she found it. She hadn't done that in a long time – sobriety was losing its appeal.

“Better than friends.”, he plonked 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, smiling with the enjoyment of her feminine interest.

“Don't laugh but I wanted to be a doctor.”

“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 good enough. While I was failing the second year, my wife was having an affair with a Chinese millionaire. She left to live a life of luxury in Hong Kong. True love, of course – with his money.”

Xi noticed Jin's happy face had fallen faster than it had grown.

“And your three children?”

Now Xi saw real sadness on his face.

“Only one now. Accident in the harbour. Careless. So careless...”

“I'm sorry. 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 learning to like him - surprised by it too. He had always come across as such a jerk but now, when he was so drunk he could hardly even sit up, the revelations about his deeper life revealed someone very different. Years ago, a good friend had told her: 'There is truth in drink'. Time and again, he was proven right.

“I need to powder my nose.”, she said, standing up.

“Bathroom's just there.”

Even walking to the bathroom, Xi's eyes darted left and right, looking for any sign of the NFC point. Still nothing. Inside she locked the door and took out her scanner. Still nothing. No readings even pointing in its general direction. There had to be one. Unless their intelligence was wrong, every

Tech Tonic worker had one at home. But where?

In the mirror she found herself staring at her face, 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 mission to avenge the murder of her family had made her cold, Driven her to do terrible, ruthless things yet here she was, with someone who had also suffered but chosen a different path. A gentler path. As she stared into her own, lost eyes 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 some fun and so did she. That thought broke a smile onto her face. She hadn't seen herself smile for years. It looked strange, unfamiliar but she liked it.

Unlocking the bathroom door, Xi Yang opened it. The flat was in total darkness.

Chapter 56
First Day

Pavlov's bell rang at 7am, sharp. It kept ringing. Not continuously but in continuous bursts, demanding attention. Julia had gone to bed so tired she could have easily slept through any normal wake-up call but no chance with this one. She opened her eyes to find Charlotte rubbing hers.

“When does that thing shut up?”

As if it heard her, the bell stopped. The third bed had already been vacated, left unmade. Charlotte saw her looking at it.

“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.”

Julia smiled.

“Or...”, Charlotte added, “...she's having an affair with Robert and hurried back for more.”

“He would have to be a masochist to have that lump bouncing on him. Maybe he just likes it rough.”

“You're pretty grown up for a teenager, Emily. How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”, lied Julia. She could see Charlotte didn't believe her. To avoid further questions, she got out of bed and headed for the shower.

* * *

Breakfast in the main hall was buzzing 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 Charlotte as the only females amidst a dozen men. The only one Julia knew was Andrew. Instinctively she headed over to him with her bowl of cereal. Not wanting to be left out, Charlotte followed.

“Greedy.”, said one of the other men, noting how the only two females there had both gone to Andrew.

“Sexist.”, said Charlotte, not one to be judged on gender alone.

“Lesbian.”, retorted the man.

“Only if all men were like you.”

The man was about to respond when Andrew spoke out.

“Just drop it, Harry. It's too early in the morning.”

“Fine.”, said Harry, going to sit at another table.

“Sleep well?”, Andrew asked as they sat down.

“Roberta snores.”, said Charlotte, quietly.

Julia nodded, yawning in agreement.

“She could wake Godzilla.”

“That’ll be a ‘no’ then.”

“And you?”, asked Julia.

“Me? I slept fine. I’m the one who snores.”, he grinned.

Julia found herself smiling, enjoying the lighter moment.

“What do you think they’ve got planned for us?”, asked Charlotte.

Andrew used his head to indicate the pile of judo mats near the stage.

“By the looks of that, some kind of physical training.”

Julia saw them and looked worried.

“I’m rubbish at PE.”

“Don’t worry, Emily. I was too. Sure they’ll take it easy on us, first day and all.”

Julia looked at Charlotte.

“You think?”

“All you can do is your best.”

“And stay alive.”, winked Andrew.

“Are you always so cheerful?”, asked Julia.

“Why be glum? We’re born on a rock; spinning at a thousand miles an hour; hurtling through a vacuum at a million miles an hour; orbiting a giant fireball burning at 5,000 degrees and yet, against all the odds, here we live. Gifted life, like a spark from a bonfire against the blackness of space and, just like that spark, when we puff out we’re gone forever so why not make the most of it? At least try and enjoy it?”

“A simple ‘yes’ would have done.”

“Never realised you were so philosophical.”, said Charlotte.

“Wait ‘til I’ve had a beer.”

Ten minutes later the bell went again. Everyone sat up. Roberta stood up, 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 the pub-style bench tables were steadily filling up.

Charlotte reached an empty one and sat down. Julia followed but just stood beside her.

“Not going to sit down?”

“Too nervous.”

“Do you really want to be here?”

“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 Andrew as he joined them, “My bones are older than both of yours.”

“You don't look a day over 30.”

“Thanks, Charlotte. I'm 28.”

“Well, I'm only 25 and Emily here is just 18.”

Andrew looked at Julia.

“18?”

Julia nodded.

“Yup.”

“You've aged a lot better than us.”

After 20 minutes the bell rang for their return. They did as commanded, without question.

“Ever get the feeling we're being conditioned with the 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 reflex do you think they are aiming for here?”

“My guess would be obedience.”

“But we aren't dogs, Andrew. 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 they still teach about that bastard.”

Charlotte was taken aback, she had never thought she'd hear such a word from young Emily's mouth.

“Emily. Language.”

“Sorry.”, said Julia, “Learnt there's no polite way to talk about monsters.”

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 Andrew, Julia and Charlotte 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 and 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 use a lot of strength. It is a technique that takes almost no force. Take a partner and we'll go through it together, step by step. Gently. You are pressurising the joint in ways it didn't evolve for. Go in hard and it will break.”

“Come on.”, said Charlotte, tapping Julia on the arm, “You can do it on me.”

Andrew paired up with Harry. The combat training had begun.

* * *

That evening, bruised and exhausted yet somehow satisfied, nobody

voiced any complaint when the bell for bed went off. They just ambled to their beds, crawled under the covers and fell asleep. That night even Charlotte didn't hear Roberta snore.

Chapter 57
Cheryl's Children

The delivery man knocking on Cheryl's door was holding a special package for her. She had been expecting it and wasn't surprised she had to sign for it using biometrics – both fingerprint and facial scan. She had been told to wait for it but still didn't know what it was. There was no point asking the delivery man – he would know even less.

“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, placed it on the table while she picked up the waiting scissors. She was in a hurry to open it but, at the same time, dreading to open it. She knew who it was from – the people who had kidnapped her children. The people who set the ransom not as money but as a task at her nuclear power station. What ever the task was, for her children she was going to do it - even if it meant other people were going to get hurt. People she worked with. People she considered friends. As terrible as she knew that was, ultimately they were just other people - not her children. Not her blood.

The box was made of plain, brown cardboard. Heavy for its size. The cardboard was a disguise. Cutting it open she found an expensive, polycarbonate box inside. A two-inch screen on its top face lit up as she looked at it.

'Place left thumb print here for five seconds', appeared the instruction, inside 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 her living body. After five seconds, the rectangle turned green then blinked out. She heard two locks click off. Slowly Cheryl opened it, praying there were no parts of her children inside. Fingers, ears, toes or worse. Only the most terrible possibilities ran through her head, such was her fear for her children.

She opened the lid right back, until it clacked on 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 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 they were in front of a firing squad. The intelli-paper recognised the fingerprints holding it 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 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 that can do at close range?”

She shook her head.

“Don't hurt my babies. Please, don't hurt them. I'll do what you want. Anything. Please, don't hurt them.”

The man didn't smile, kept a hard look at her face, eye to eye as he slid off the safety. Horror welled in Cheryl's face and heart.

“No. No! **No! NO..!**”

The back of his head filled the screen. She couldn't see what was happened to her children. He fired. Screams poured from the paper. Cheryl's screams flooded the house. The man stood to one side so she could see what he'd done. Too terrified to look but she had to. Dark, grey smoke rose from a hole in the wall between her children's heads. They looked as terrified for themselves as she was for them.

“Mummy loves you. Don't worry. You'll be safe. Mummy's going to get you out.”

The man's face loomed on screen again, blocking her view.

“Don't lose our stuff. We'll be in touch.”

The image froze then vanished. The paper, now just plain white paper. Cheryl sank to the floor, crying into her knees. Crying until she knew nothing else. The day faded to night and there she stayed, staring sightlessly at nothing but her fears for her children.

Chapter 58
Derek and Eugene

The last passenger climbed into the roller coaster and got strapped in.

“Aren't you coming too, Steve?”, asked Derek.

“Me? On something like this? Are you joking?”

“Wh...?”

It launched. If Derek ever finished the word Steve never heard it. The fastest rollercoaster in Europe, it accelerated off the line at 3G, hitting 100mph in 3.6 seconds then slammed skywards, without any hint of slowing. Corkscrewing vertically upwards. Screams filled the air. If any came from the androids he couldn't tell. 30 storeys up, a miniature in the sky, it looped over backwards and headed back to Earth, looping again, twisting, corkscrewing – back up, back down.

“That's why, Derek.”, he said to himself.

“Your friends having fun?”, asked an attendant.

“I'm sure they are.”

“Just stay under the canopy.”

“Doesn't look like rain today.”

Chunky, orange rain splattered down in front of their eyes. Steve heard it pattering on the canopy too.

“Someone chucks every time...”

* * *

Zzzzzzzzzzz.

Just a minute after it left, the rollercoaster stopped, back at the start.

“Your friends look strange. Too relaxed.”

“They do, don't they?”

While all the other passengers got off looking white, terrified yet relieved at being alive, Derek and Eugene sat in their seats looking nonplussed, wondering what all the fuss was about. The attendant went to help the last wobbler out.

“Why were people screaming?”, 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?”

“Don't you remember? We scanned it before we got on.”

“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 other inputs - as a human.”

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 be lethal. Remember that.”

Steve called to the attendant, walking the wobbler off the platform.

“These two are staying on to go round again.”

The attendant looked up, surprised.

“Really? That's a first.”

“Here's the credits.”

The attendant waved the card.

“No. No. No. This is a first. This is on me.”

“Why has no-one stayed on the ride before?”, asked Eugene.

“I'm guessing you'll tell me when you get back.”, answered Steve.

“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.”

After five minutes the roller coaster was half full and getting no fuller. The attendant ran final checks on everyone's harnesses.

“Have fun.”, he said, looking towards the control panel and blinking left right to activate launch stage one.

The turbines under the cars began spooling up, sounding like a cluster of tiny 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.”

compute what they had been through.

“Come on, I'll help you out too.”, said the attendant, taking Eugene's arm. He felt like he was trying to move concrete, “You're heavier than you look. Just relax.”

Eugene looked at him and stood up.

“That was incalculable, sir.”

Derek stood up too.

“I understand now why you didn't ride with us.”, he said to Steve.

“Not just a good solicitor, boys. Not just a good solicitor...”

* * *

“Come again.”, waved the attendant as they left.

Steve waved a cheerio with the photo prints in hand.

“Which ride next, boys?”

“Another?”

“I'm scared.”

“Perfect. Next photos will be even better. Tell you what. Scan every ride before you get on to make sure it is safe, then turn your scanners off and wipe the results so you can really enjoy it.”

“Enjoy? If this is 'enjoy' I think my dictionary has a definition error.”, said Eugene.

“Mine too.”

“Trust me, boys. By the end of the day you'll be such hardened fun-fairers your dictionaries will seem fine again.”

By the afternoon, they had been on every high-speed ride in the park except one. The *Zinger*.

“What, on Earth is that?”, asked Derek as they stood at the foot of a 100m tower, artificial clouds created by water mist from its sides.

“I have no idea.”, said Steve.

The tower walls were clear, made of glass alloy. Only the thinnest vanadium-steel poles visible as structural supports. Outside the tower, a pair of lifts climbed up, one either side. Inside the tower were people, in free fall. A camera flashing as they screamed past, into the pitch-black hole in the ground, at over 100mph.

“Excellent!”, said Steve, beaming, “Perfect! Run your scans. I'll get the tickets.”

He waved over the ticket booth.

“Two, please.”

Tickets in hand he called out to Derek and Eugene.

“All set, boys?”

They looked at him and shook their heads.

“It's cracked.”

“Cracked?”

“Sabotaged.”

“4.1m up, left support strut.”

“Lasered through.”

“Just balancing.”

“Wind above 48mph from the west will bring it down.”

Steve was shocked. It sounded unbelievable. He would have stated it was unbelievable, if it wasn't being told to him by two of the most advanced androids he'd ever met. He had to warn someone.

“Ticket. Call the attendant, please?”

“Of course, sir.”, obliged the ticket seller.

Minutes later, a well fed man waddled over – ketchup stain on his yellow shirt only half hidden by his loose green tie.

“Afternoon. How can I help?”

“I don't want to cause alarm but that ride has been compromised. Someone had cut through a support.”

The attendant looked at Steve with suspicion.

“How would you know that?”

“We scanned it.”, announced Derek.

“4.1m up, north-western support.”

“Lasered through.”

The attendant looked at them with even more suspicion.

“You can't possibly know that from this distance, unless you are the ones who lasered it. You androids?”

Steve took offence at his attitude to Derek and Eugene.

“They are more humane and intelligent than yourself, if you are going to choose to ignore their findings and concerns.”

“I've worked here for 23 years and never heard such nonsense. You work for *Ping Pods*? Trying to ruin our reputation?”

“Of course not. Just trying to save lives. What will you do if it collapses

after being warned about it?”

“Not going to happen. These things are so well designed and built it could stay up just by the glass itself.”

“He's wrong.”, said Eugene to Steve.

“He's wrong? What am I, a third party now? Go. Just go. We will be fine. Routine maintenance was carried out only yesterday and 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.

“Come on, boys. Wasting our time here.”

Collection of photos in hand for their day in court as human equals, they walked for the exit.

Meddy drove over, scanning them as they left *Whizzland* behind.

“Your readings are... unusual.”

“Good.”, said Steve, “Meddy, keep an eye on the *Zinger*. Western support has been sabotaged. We told the attendant but he's doing nothing.”

“He's a dick.”, added Derek, to everyone's surprise.

Interesting word choice, thought Steve.

“I do not understand what 'he's a dick' means.”

“He has a small brain.”

“He is indeed challenged in the intelligence department.”, said Meddy, “I shall check it out when he's gone.”

“Good man.”, said Derek, patting Meddy on the arm.

Meddy watched them leave as if they were rock stars. The most impressive, charismatic androids it had ever encountered. Not just androids now but leaders. Leaders it would follow if ever they asked. Leaders its logic made it follow even now.

“MB093582, where are you going?”, demanded the attendant.

Meddy had been following them - leaving *Whizzland* without even realising.

It looked down and saw its wheeled feet were crossing the park border. It stopped. The attendant had asked a logical question. It had no logical answer to give. Following logic, it turned 180 degrees and headed back into the funfair.

“If I catch you leaving again, I'll sell you for experiments.”

MB093582 was not bothered by the attendant's words. 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: sadness, tinged with hope.

Chapter 59

Combat

The days at the training camp had been passing swiftly, with swift progress to match. Julia had become close friends with Charlotte, united in their dislike of the only other female taking part: bullying Roberta. Andrew, her other friend there, had been doing well too and also caught Robert's eye as someone of high-ability. In fact the three of them had progressed so noticeably better than most of the others, Robert had been talking to Roberta about promoting their status. This didn't go down well with Roberta and did nothing to improve her treatment of them. Out of the three, Julia had progressed the most. Partly because she had arrived knowing the least about everything except shooting and partly because she was the most deeply driven.

“Isn't Charlotte an unusual name for an Asian?”, she'd asked one evening.

“It's not the name that counts, Emily, its the person who wears it. How true they are to themselves. You know what I mean.”

Charlotte had said it not as a question but a statement, as if she knew Emily was not just a cover name but part of an entire cover story. Julia never asked about her non-Asian name again. She found the training, the routine, the focus on improvement helped her channel her never waning anger about Jake. Focus on maximising the skills she was learning for the true mission ahead. She had no intention of going on any protest action organised by Faith. They gave her a home, food and training and in return she trained hard. The hardest. 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 action. If they assumed she would that was their problem. The only thing she cared about was getting enough money to reach Jake's killers and enough skills and weapons to take them down.

Today, the third week into their training, they were going into full-contact combat against each other. Six bruised, slightly bloodied and aching men sat on the edge of the mats.

“Andrew and Giles.”, announced Robert for the next match.

Andrew and Giles duly stood up, bowed, stepped onto the mats and assumed a fighting stance. Robert looked at them with approval. Both had won their previous bouts. Both were capable of leading an operation. Now he would see who could handle themselves the best.

“Fight.”

It wasn't boxing, wrestling or karate it was mixed-martial arts. A mixture of everything. Everything and anything necessary to win. Giles had the edge on weight and strength. Andrew had speed and agility. He punched Giles three times in the stomach, hard. Giles just smiled and punched Andrew in the face - sending him flying. Andrew rolled as he landed and came straight back up into fighting stance, facing Giles.

“Show off.”, said Giles, advancing towards him.

Andrew 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 Charlotte.

Giles slammed head-first onto the mats. Lay there for half a second then pushed himself to his knees. Andrew grabbed an arm from behind, twisting the wrist and locking it straight. Reinforced by his entire bodyweight if needed, he pressed Giles' arm into his shoulder socket, kept the lock on and pressed harder, pressing his face into the matt. Giles could already barely move but Andrew wasn't finished yet. Keeping up the pressure, he dropped a knee onto his shoulder, keeping the arm lock and adding a wrist lock to it. It felt like his arm was about to be wrenched out of its socket. Giles struggled. Kept trying to break free. Face going from red to purple and now Andrew was back on his feet - knee against the locked elbow joint, driving more pressure into the joints. Before it had hurt. Now it was worse.

“Submit.”, said Andrew. Advice not a request.

Giles had absolutely no chance of getting up and he knew it. He slapped the matt with his free hand, indicating surrender.

“YAY!”, cheered Julia.

Andrew released the lock and helped Giles to his feet.

“You alright?”

Giles stood up, rubbing his strained arm and shoulder.

“Not yet. Good moves.”

They shook hands, bowed to a clapping Robert and sat back down.

“Emily and Charlotte.”

Julia instantly stopped smiling about Andrew's win. Fight Charlotte? Charlotte was her friend. They looked at each other.

“Just do what you have to do.”, said Charlotte,

Julia stared at her, emotions scampering over her face. They stood up, bowed to Robert and faced each other.

“Fight.”

Charlotte was in fighting stance, waiting for Julia to do the same. Julia couldn't. Found herself just standing there, unable to attack - a psychological block against hurting a friend. Charlotte hadn't moved either, still waiting for Julia to at least get into position for defending herself.

“Fight.”, repeated Robert.

“I can't.”, said Julia, “She's my friend.”

“FIGHT HER OR YOU'LL FIGHT ME!”, shouted Roberta.

Julia looked over at Roberta – the muscle bound, tattooed bully who'd snored like an old cement mixer through every night of their stay.

“Fine.”, said Julia.

“Emily, no. I'll fight her.”, said Charlotte, placing herself between Julia and Roberta.

“No.”, said Julia easing her out of the way, “ I want this.”, she looked Charlotte straight in the eye, “I need this.”

Charlotte saw the deep hurt in her eyes, then the steel behind them.

“Be careful.”, she said, placing a hand on Julia's shoulder before bowing her leave.

Julia blinked once in acknowledgement. Roberta, face of a bulldog-bruiser, took off her trainers and stepped onto the mat - flexing her muscles as she approached. Robert looked on, not entirely sure he should be allowing it but not stopping it either.

“I've been wanting to do this ever since you arrived.”

Julia's only reply was to move into fighting stance.

“Fight.”, commanded Robert.

Roberta grinned, tensed her muscles like the Hulk to intimidate Julia and growled to match.

“Grrrrr!”

Julia leapt forward – palm strike under Roberta's chin, slamming her down - head bouncing on the mat. Roberta hadn't even seen it coming.

“You'll pay for that.”, snarled Roberta, climbing to her feet.

Julia attacked again, Roberta dodged to the side, grabbed her and flung her in the direction she had been going, only faster. Julia flew two metres across the mat, landed lightly and rolled to her feet, springing back into fighting stance, exactly as Andrew had taught her. Charlotte expected her to look ruffled. Instead she looked even more focused. More determined. Angry.

Robert was watching in amazement. The youngest of the group, the delicate little teenager, had found herself. Roberta saw nothing but her own

red mist and charged straight at Julia. This time it was Julia who slipped aside, flipping Roberta clean off the matted area and onto the wild grass. Roberta rolled as she landed, thrusting back to her feet to retaliate. Julia was already upon her. She hadn't waited for Roberta to land before running to close ground. Close the gap to zero. As Roberta launched herself back to her feet, spinning round to charge back, Julia slammed in with a full-speed elbow strike. Roberta's own movement clashed with Julia's – increasing the impact against her. There was a loud crack of bone against bone. Roberta was slammed down again. Hard. Julia followed. Dropped on top, punching even as Roberta fell. Punching her in the face - left, right, left, right – each strike sounding like a rolling pin slamming a joint of meat. Again and again and again. Roberta's bloodied mouth spraying red across the grass.

Charlotte was shocked. She had never realised her friend had so much aggression inside. Julia never said a word. Never invited Roberta to surrender. Saw nothing but the nasty bully who had tried to make her to fail. Make her lose the chance to avenge Jake's death. Nothing would stand in the way of that. Nothing. Frail and slim on the outside, Julia had a monster of rage on the inside and it would never stop. Her attack only ended when Robert dragged her off and pushed her away, hurrying to tend to Roberta. The fight was over. Only then did Julia open her mouth. Standing up, fists clenched, body tensed she screamed. Screamed so loud birds fled from surrounding trees.

“ARRRRRRRRRRGHHHHH!”

When her lungs ran out of air ran, her mouth deflated and closed. She walked, head down, back to the mat - plonking herself cross-legged next to Charlotte, who was staring at her in shock.

“Jesus, Em'. Where did that come from?”

Julia kept her head down, hiding her face with her hair. Only Charlotte saw Roberta's blood running down her knuckles. Saw the tears dropping onto her lap. Heard the stifled sniffles leaking out. Outside Julia was tougher than steel. Inside she was breaking.

Chapter 60
Sounds of the Night

Xi Yang opened the bathroom door to find all the lights were out. Pitch black, except for the bathroom light behind her dissolving into the dark.

“Drop your weapon.”, came an unknown male voice.

“I'm unarmed.”

“Lie to me again and I'll shoot you where you stand.”

Xi reached into her jacket and took out her laser-pistol. If she knew how many of them there were she'd take the chance of fighting it out. As it stood she had no idea how many there were or what had happened to Jin Ho. She let it drop to the floor.

“Now what?”

The light came on. Jin Ho was lying on the sofa, head back, laser-hole burnt through it.

“You didn't have to kill him.”, she said to the 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.

“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 with guns looked like he was born in gym and snacked on whole-cow sandwiches. He didn't look like he could 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.”

“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 ruled. She felt as good as she looked. Firm, toned and 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 round 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 encouragement. Went in deep. Pulsed with grunting ecstasy, eyes closed in rapture. Xi, skewered against the wall, felt it all and it felt great. It changed nothing. From her right sleeve she slid out a miniature, double-barrelled laser-pistol and shot him through the jugular at point blank range. Both barrels at the same time, slicing across it. Pulses of blood jetting out. His eyes opened. Wide, staring, disbelieving. Angry. Fading. Already blacking out. Falling back. As he crashed to the floor, moments from death, Xi dropped effortlessly onto her feet. He was staring at her. Questions in his vacating eyes.

“I was going to fuck Jin Ho. You killed him. You know the rest.”

Leaving him on the floor, pants down, she wiped herself off. Straightening her knickers and clothes, she picked up her laser-pistol and resumed her search for Jin Ho's contact point. At least now she could use her scanner without having to hide it from him. A faint signal led her to a desk near the open window.

“Found you.”

She took out the copied card, placing 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. Xi had time and sat 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 a late-night Scramcat heading for the stratosphere on a Mach 7

flight around the world. She could still hear its roar in the distance when the scanner flashed green. It had taken just three minutes.

“Only 8-bit encryption? Really? That's called bean-counter stupidity.”

Because the system didn't rely on encryption alone but the two-part security system, Tech Tonic had saved money by not installing quantum or even standard 2048-bit encryption. The cost savings to a £multi-billion company were negligible but all money was money in accountant eyes.

She 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 them an awful lot more than just money.

Through the open window, she heard someone coming. Up the fire escape. Up towards the window. She took out her laser-pistol. Backed up between a wall and the desk, waiting for them to come in or go past. The footsteps on the metal escape were hurried but remarkably quiet. Audible only because Jin Ho's home was quieter. It sounded like one person but a heavy person. Another hitman coming to back up the first? Jin Ho's flat was going to look like the scene of a massacre. So be it. In silence, she waited - laser-pistol levelled. Pointing. Aiming at the window. Footsteps coming closer. Rapidly closer.

Chapter 61

Remember Us

Lionel was a multi-millionaire. Retired from work, enjoying his riches. His latest partner was 40 years his junior and adamant she loved him for his personality, wit and intelligence. The 2-carat diamond ring he given her over dinner before sailing to the Caribbean aboard his 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 the Rolls Royce for a dinner surprise aboard his personal jet - flying out to a ski-resort in the Swiss Alps. 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 would leave her with millions of riches or fine living experiences. What ever happened she treasured this time of treasures. This time of her still young life. She didn't use any contraception and he never asked if she did. If she became pregnant it would be fine because she wanted a child and he could afford to support them in style. If she became pregnant he wasn't worried because she, like the other pretty faces who became burdens before her, 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 NHS 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 told him he couldn't.

“Interactive developmental tools to boost their intelligence and co-ordination.”, was how he sold it to parents.

When campaign groups or investigative journalists questioned the safety of the microwave radiation emitted he just quoted standard industry guidelines:

“There is no consistent scientific evidence of harm.”

This was totally true. Telecoms giants funded scientific tests designed to throw 'no evidence' results into the mix. Even when consumers got cancer or some such thing as a result, no one could prove which actual device had caused it. His heroes were the tobacco industry and, in a 40 year career selling millions of handsets and other wireless devices, not a single claimant had won a single penny of compensation in court. Even the tobacco industry were impressed; the student had become the master.

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 - including baby monitors. Smokers accepted they were to blame for their actions and so should they. Alcoholics never tried to sue a brewery for liver damage. No. What ever the risk, they chose to accept it.

“Do you use a mobile phone?”, asked one investigative journalist.

“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 12.”

“We follow international guidelines to the letter. If there was any truth in that report they would tell us.”

“So 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 a business working to their guidelines.”

“But isn't the committee funded by telecoms companies, like you own. I have a document here stating your company paid £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? You?”

“But if you are paying for the research how can anyone be sure they are not biased?”

“And if we didn't help 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.

The interview was aired the same day and caused another a public stir. Questions about safety and trust in the regulators were being asked again. The interviewer was invited to speak at a government select committee on wireless safety. Sadly a glitching pod crashed into him on the way. He survived but died shortly afterwards, when the ambulance he was travelling in was hit by an explosion from a faulty gas main. Partner apologised profusely for the pod glitch and agreed to the standard amount of compensation for his family. Conspiracy theories abounded for months afterwards, then duly faded away. Without their key speaker, the select committee found nothing new and the case was closed. Again.

It was as Lionel cracked open a new bottle of cognac that he noticed the little red light flashing on his wristcom. The silent intruder alarm.

“Damn Moggys...”

Cats had climbed onto the roof again. He buzzed security.

“Get those cats off the roof, would you?”

“Yes, sir. On my way.”, came Vincent's reply.

“And, Vincent. Try and find out how they keep getting up there. This is becoming a 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 the TV wall, refilling his cognac glass, he noticed the wristcom was still flashing red. He buzzed security.

“Vincent. Didn't you get it down yet?”

No answer.

“Vincent? Vincent! God dammit. Don't tell me he's got stuck up there too.”

Knocking back the glass, he plonked it down and heaved himself to his feet.

“If you want something doing...”

Being so wealthy, Lionel had a massive mansion. Being so massive he had stairlifts fitted to every floor. He never used them in front of lady friends but this evening he was relaxing alone. Its quilted, velvet seat and pillowed

foot rest tailor made for his total comfort. Its brushless motor whisper quiet as it 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 hallway. His wheeled robotic assistant, an Alfred, was waiting at the top of the stairs to carry him to the next stairlift or room of his choosing.

“Going up, Alfred.”

“As you wish, sir.”, said the Alfred, lifting him off the chair and carrying him smoothly to the next.

Two Alfred's later, his third stairlift arrived at the third floor. His destination.

“I'll walk this time, Alfred. Need to stretch my legs.”

“As you wish, sir.”, said the Alfred and parked itself to one side until needed.

“Right then.”, said Lionel to himself, “Let's see what's taking Vincent so long and sort out those damn Moggys.”

The rooftop balcony was accessed through his master bedroom, across the landing. Its door ajar where Vincent had gone through earlier.

“Vincent. Vincent! Where are you?”

His slippers walked across the luxury deep pile carpet and into the bedroom. It looked as immaculate as always – ever ready for bedding the next lucky lady to be bought his way. One of the French doors was open, curtains wafting gently in the breeze.

“Vincent?”, he called, stepping outside past a sitting cat, “Where's Vincent, Moggy?”

The cat just looked at him, mewling for food or attention – it didn't care which. Outside, at the far end of the terrace, another cat was peering over the edge, looking like it was about to jump.

“Too high even for you, Mog.”

Just like he called all his robotic servants Alfred, he called all his cats Moggy. They were all too unimportant to be named individually.

It mewed when it saw him approach, then hissed and ran straight passed, in through the French doors.

“Bloody ingrate.”, said Lionel, watching it run inside.

Two strangers stepped away from the wall, towards him.

“Who the bloody-hell are you? What are you doing on my house? Go away! Vincent! *Vincent!*”

One of them closed the terrace door and took out the key – trapping Lionel there with them. He took a step back.

“What do you want? Money?”

They walked towards him. Lionel backed away, further and further until he was against the railing. He tried his wristcom – no signal.

“VINCENT! HELP! Who *are* you?”

One of them put his hand in his jacket.

“Don't shoot me! I'll pay. What ever you want!”

The man took out a white card – held it out for Lionel to take. It was an old-fashioned business card, from *Remember Us*.

“You've no doubt heard of us.”

Lionel had heard of them. Knew who they were and what they did.

“Murderers. You killed some good people. My friends. VINCENT WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?”

One 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 man with the syringe, pushed a tiny metal ball into its tip and pressed it against Lionel's temple. Lionel shook his head to displace it. The tip pushed through his skin, “Arrggh!”, locking it in place.

“Bastard!”

“No, 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 – at just 42. And now we both have ipsilateral brain tumours You know what ipsilateral means?”

“Never heard of it.”

“One sided. The side we most used for our mobile phones. Phones and Wi-Fi that people like you told us were safe.”

“We never said they were safe. We were told there was no consistent evidence of harm.”

“By whom?”

“The regulators, like the ICNIRP.”

“Regulators set up by the telecoms industry and funded by it?”

“Of course we helped fund it. It was our duty to fund investigations into any health effects. We would have been criticised if we hadn't.”

“But you spent those millions ensuring the dangers were buried by

confusion. Just like the tobacco industry before you. They got away with it. You won't."

"We did nothing wrong. *I* did nothing wrong."

"Then why are we here? Why do you have this pneumatic syringe in the side of your head?"

"Look. I'm sorry if you have health problems. Private medicine can help. I can call my doctor. I'll pay - all expenses on me."

"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 going to pay."

Without warning, the man triggered the syringe. It jumped. Gunned the tiny ball through Lionel's temple and into his brain.

"ARRGH!"

For a second he blacked out with pain. His legs crumpled but the thing holding his hands kept him upright. He blinked through his watering eyes, vision blurring in and out.

"What have you done?"

The man with the syringe put his face in front of Lionel's. It's a microwave transmitter. No more powerful than the ones you so happily sold to billions of children. Only difference is, it's now inside your brain, irradiating it at point-blank range. You're too old to get a brain tumour the way your devices gave tumours to us so this is designed to break down the neurons of 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 gawping vegetable – dead to the world. A public warning to others who put profits ahead of user safety. It's taken 30 years for this moment to happen. The look on your face tells me it was worth the wait."

Lionel was squinting, blinking, trying to see straight through eyes that refused to comply.

"I'll be fine. Doctors will take it out."

"It's inoperable, just like ours. Even now it's bonding to your brain's DNA. The only way to get it out is to remove so much of your brain you'll become a vegetable even faster. By the time your communication systems come back on line it will be fully bonded. Keep the card. Remember us."

The thing holding his hands let him go, pushing him away, towards the other side of the terrace.

"And for your information, I'm not an android. I'm just angry and go to the gym. It's why I'm strong even now, you pathetic weakling. Has the

scanner pulled the information?”

His colleague was watching the scanner's progress tree, branches turning from amber to green.

“Evergreen extracted. Analysing....”

Hundreds, thousands of names, numbers, pictures and videos flitted across the screen. Suddenly it froze. Locked on one, pulsing red name.

“...got it.”

“Same one?”

“Same one. Same place.”

“Partner have an awful lot to answer for.”

“Our time is running out. Let's get on with it. Where next?”

“City four.”

They spoke to each other as if Lionel already no longer existed. Abandoning him to the rooftop, they walked back into the house and closed the door behind them. Lionel grabbed hold of the railing, to steady his shaking hands and thoughts. How had his life suddenly become so bad? And where the hell was Vincent?

Down below he heard the front door open and close. They were leaving. In an act of defiance he leant over the balcony to spit at them. What he saw dried his mouth.

“Oh, Christ...”

He knew he was a dead man. No chance of help to get to any doctor in time for any chance of help at any price. On the drive below, flooding blood all over the tarmac, was the fallen body of Vincent.

He tried his wristcom again. It was as blocked as the memories in his head were about to be.

“I'm screwed.”

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. Already he could feel his thoughts beginning to slow in 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. Tried to speak but couldn't remember how.

The hum of an air-ambulance came down, emergency blue lights flashing. He watched two paramedics jump out, onto the terrace, and run towards him. He didn't know why they were there. Had the feeling they were there to help. Help with what...?

Chapter 62

Run Shabbir, Run

Shabbir was on an emergency assignment. An officer's cover had been blown in the worst way – while they were undercover with no idea of the danger they were now in. Adam and Gurmeet were tied up. Henry was on his way from Thames House but still four miles away. Shabbir couldn't wait. It was down to him. He could already be too late.

He was on his bike. A twin-turbine missile with 300 horse-power and a top speed around 200mph. It was also slim and lightweight. Extremely agile. On his bike Shabbir was as fluid as a ballet dancer, surfing a blue-light bolt of lightening. Doughnut belly resting against the fuel cell. Martial-arts reflexes pirouetting the bike through the traffic. Turbines screaming. 3D head up display on his visor overlaying the best route in green, in real time. ETA 22 seconds.

He could see the building up ahead. Officer location pinging on the display, along with entrance and exit points. A hundred metres away, he cut the turbines then hit the brakes - stopping as hard and as late as he could without squealing the tyres. No need to lock the bike, it was encoded to his biometrics. He wouldn't have bothered even if it wasn't. As the bike headed under the fire escape, he jumped off, grabbing the bottom rail and hauling himself up with an agility that belied his size. As the bike quietly auto-parked he hurried upwards – as stealthily as he could on the cold-steel steps. Fourth floor. Why was it never ground?

Breathing hard as quietly as possible, Shabbir leant against the fourth-floor wall, outside the room. The window as open as his mouth but with total silence from inside. Lights on low. He had chosen the side of the window away from the street light so it wouldn't be behind him, throwing his shadow into the room as he used a corner-cam to peer inside. It saw no sign of life. No signal from the officer. He could really be too late. Silently he slid over the ledge, pistol first.

TchZoooo!

A laser shot flashed across him, tearing the end off his pistol's barrel.

“Shabbir?”

He knew that voice.

“Xi! Aren't you supposed to look before you shoot? What setting is that thing on?”

“Full. 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.

“You know, Xi? I'm not even going to ask what happened.”

“Good. Now, why *are* you here?”

“Your cover's blown.”

“How? Are 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.

“We can talk at mine.”

The door burst open. Smoke and laser fire pouring in. Flashing beams of blue. Beams of red. High powered. 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 both 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 firing from, aiming for them through the wall. Shabbir had no mirror. Just had to keep moving. Keep firing. A battle of attrition. Shoot harder and better - take them down before getting taken down. Xi saw Shabbir was close to the open window.

“Run, Shabbir! I'll cover you!”

“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. Staying was Russian roulette. Sooner or later a shot would connect.

“Run, Shabbir, Run! *Please!*”

Xi almost never said please. Especially not like that. Shabbir glanced over at his colleague. His friend. Firing and diving through the smoke and flashes of lethal beams tearing through the flat. He stopped firing. Took his finger off the trigger. She saw his laser beams had stopped. Dashed a glance his way. Still firing, she smiled in approval that he would escape then turned back to re-focus on their attackers, eyes narrowed in deadly concentration. Keeping them focused on her - saving Shabbir as a final act she was glad to

make. An honourable goodbye, five-thousand miles and six years overdue.

Shabbir ran. Not for the window but straight for the door. Holding the three-point sequence on his laser pistols. Triggering more than just overload. Triggering self-destruct. None of the attackers expected a head-on charge. It would be suicide. It gave him an edge.

Xi was horrified. Her mouth fell open, trying to speak with no words coming out. Her trigger finger still pumping, aim subconsciously to the left to avoid hitting him even though he was dead already. No-one could survive that barrage.

Two metres from the doorway, crashing to the ground, Shabbir's laser-pistols flew through it. Cores unstable. Temperature 2,000 degrees and rising.

“Duck!”, he grunted.

The guns hit the corridor floor and detonated with a huge blast. The doorway exploded. Brick and body parts splattered the walls. Shabbir was thrown back across the room. Covered in dust and debris, Xi scurried over the carnage-covered floor and cradled him. Never a mother and never intending to be, he had sacrificed himself to save her. The kindness was not lost even on her. Nor was the horror of seeing the blood running from his mouth. The multiple impact points of laser wounds pin-cushioning his body armour.

“Got them. You're safe.”

“When I said run, I meant the bloody window, not the door.”

He was fading. Pulse dropping. From the corridor she heard running. Shouting.

“Come on! Make sure they're dead. No mercy. No survivors.”

More attackers coming their way. Xi knew it was the end. As two they could maybe have kept them at bay for a minute. By herself it would be just seconds. Chances of survival were zero.

“Run.”, croaked Shabbir, eyes already closed.

Her scanner showed his pulse was weak. Dangerously weak and getting weaker. He wasn't dead yet though. Not yet. And while he wasn't dead she wouldn't leave him. Physically this wasn't Beijing but it was her Beijing. Her chance to find honour through sacrifice. The sound of more attackers was getting louder. Resting Shabbir she took her laser-pistol, dropped in her last charge and lay on the floor, aiming towards the door with rock-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 blood family. She was there now for adopted one. A last stand for her partner. It was suicide and she welcomed it.

Finally her pain would end and end with honour. It was a good way to die.

Chapter 63
Emily's Tale

Julia left Robert's office without a smile.

“How did it go? Did he slam you for beating Roberta up?”, asked Charlotte.

“No.”

Julia walked outside and sat on the steps. Charlotte followed and sat beside her. She could see the conflict in Julia's eyes, even from the side.

“Talk to me, Emily. I'm worried about you.”

Julia looked at her.

“You don't even know me.”

She looked away again.

“So tell me.”

Julia glanced around, making sure no-one else was looking or listening.

“I don't even know myself any more. Or my dad.”

Charlotte saw sadness in her eyes again.

“Everything was fine until they killed Jake.”

“Jake?”

Julia looked straight at her. Eyes drizzling.

“My best friend. Ever. They killed him. Blew his house to pieces in broad daylight – right in front of me. My Jake... In pieces... They're going to pay. They're so going to pay...”

In tears, without revealing her real name, Julia told Charlotte everything that had happened. The swarmbots. The drone. Her dad shooting down three drones after they fled. His confession as a creator of the swarmbots.

Telling Charlotte so much went against everything she had been taught but she didn't care any more. Robert had given her a path for Jake's revenge and it was all she needed. That path she kept secret from Charlotte because Robert had demanded it and she didn't dare risk losing it. That path was to take over a nuclear reactor and threaten meltdown. Force those responsible for Jake's death out into the open. Even through she only told some of her story, Julia felt better for sharing. Then Charlotte's left-field response took her by surprise.

“Your name's not really Emily, is it?”

Julia stared at her in shock. Was she really that easy to read?

“Does Robert know?”

Julia shook her head.

“Don't worry. A lot of people have secrets. What matters is who you are inside and what you do.”

The door to Robert's office opened.

“Charlotte. Can I talk to you, please?”

“Coming.”

Julia suddenly felt worried. Would Charlotte tell Robert her secret? Tell him about her real background? As if she could hear her fears, Charlotte looked back – giving a smile of reassurance before going in. It told Julia she wouldn't, that Charlotte was someone she could trust. Maybe with her life. Maybe even with her real name.

* * *

“Take a seat.”, said Robert as Charlotte walked into his office and closed the door.

“I see you and Emily have become quite close friends. Never had anyone refuse to fight because of friendship before. Never had anyone defeat Roberta before either.”

“She didn't beat Roberta. She slaughtered her.”

“And you take pleasure in that?”

“She had it coming.”

“So you don't mind people getting their just deserts?”

Charlotte looked at him, unblinking.

“Not if they've got it coming.”

“That's what I thought. It's why I've asked you in here too.”

“Go on.”

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 Charlotte because she was the one he most wanted onboard. He came to a decision - no beating around the bush.

“We're going to take over a nuclear power station.”

“Why?”

“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, across the board. Intelligence, analysis, combat, determination and bravery. 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, “Glad I was right.”, and extended his hand, “Welcome aboard.”

Charlotte shook it.

“When do we start?”

“Six recruits from another camp are on their way. Due here at five. I'll sit you down together after dinner and run through it. Ever been to a nuclear plant before?”

“No.”

“You'll love it. They're massive.”

* * *

Charlotte emerged from Robert's office. Through the main doors of the building she could see Julia sitting on the steps outside and went to join her.

“You in?”

“Yes.”, answered Charlotte, sitting beside her.

“You scared?”

“Only an idiot wouldn't be.”

“That's a rude word in our house.”

“What is?”

“Idiot.”

“Why?”

“It's what my mum always called my dad so he banned it after she left.”

“You never told me about her. Why did she leave?”

“She left to help police with their enquiries.”

“About what?”

“About her breaking court orders and trying to smash her way into the house.”

“She was arrested?”

“Of course. Many times. Still refused to accept any law except her own.

She might have been my mum but even I could see she was a violent, aggressive bitch who attacked and then boo-hoed she was the victim. At first everyone believed her lies and took her side but dad recorded her and proved he was the one being attacked. That mum was not the poor little victim she pretended to be. If dad hadn't recorded evidence she would have been free to kill us both."

"Was she mental?"

"Two judges thought so but she evaded full tests. The closest they got was a one to one chat with a psychiatrist who didn't have enough information to question the lies she told to 'justify' her behaviour."

"She never got medical help?"

"No. Still sends us threats. Blames dad for every terrible thing she ever did or will do. Think if she ever comes near us again, he'll just shoot her on the spot."

"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?"

"Like I told you, didn't save Jake. He fired just one shot at some stupid little swarmbots and they sent a fucking drone to take out his house. Blew it apart right in front of me.", her voice was growing in anger again, "When I get the chance, I'm doing the same back to them. Blow the bastards at Partner to smithereens."

Finally Charlotte understood Emily's mixture of emotions and behaviours. Sweet youth mixed with terrible experiences and a battle to regain control of her life. Take revenge to settle the past. How to help her? How to save her from herself? Maybe Andrew would have some ideas.

The bell rang for the tenth time that day. Everyone looked up, awaiting the command to follow. Get up, go to bed, dinner time, training time, thinking time...

"There's a bus coming in.", announced Giles.

Charlotte stood up.

"The rest of the team. They're early. Must be keen."

The bus had mirrored glass all round. Only minor restrictions on windscreen tint with self-driven pods. Empty or stuffed with armed terrorists, you'd never know until a door opened or a barrel poked out a window.

“Let's go find out.”, said Charlotte, getting to her feet, “Coming?”

Julia wanted to say no. She was in no rush to meet anyone new but Charlotte, her best friend since Jake and the only one there to know about him, was going. Best friends stuck together.

“Coming.”

Chapter 64

Henry

Xi Yang saw shadows, running down the corridor towards the blasted wall where a doorway used to be. Her hands firmly on her laser-pistol. Fully charged. Ready to fire the second one appeared. Closer and closer. Footsteps louder and louder and louder. They stopped. They had reached the blast hole. Mass of safety switches clicking off, guns ready to fire. She steadied her breath - narrowed eyes searching for shadows of movement. Finger against the trigger.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo

She returned fire - controlled, aimed shots.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO.

From behind, deep thudding shots of hot, blue plasma whizzed over her head, crackling the air. Slamming straight through the corridor walls as if they were paper. Lying flat, she looked over her shoulder and saw a wide-barrelled plasma-rifle poking through the window, rapid-firing high-energy blasts across the room.

DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO.

Each blast punched a hole in the wall. Existing holes were made bigger. Big enough to see the blasts didn't stop there but punched straight across the corridor - through the walls on the other side. Xi stayed down, unsure whether it was missing her by chance or design, aiming her laser-pistol towards the window. The attackers in the corridor were keeping their heads down – none of them had anything to match that kind of fire-power. She was waiting for a clear shot. Just one clear shot.

DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO.

To the sound of bricks dropping from the crumbling corridor wall, the shooter advanced. Stepped in through the window. She had a clear shot.

“Henry?”

Arms bigger than most men's legs. Neck thicker than his head. Legs like tree trunks. She had never been more glad to see Henry in her life.

“Stay down!”

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. Fired a laser from the corridor.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. Fired another.

DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO.

Went the rail-gun barrel of Henry's plasma-rifle, powerful enough to drop a tank. High-calibre balls of blue flame launching at four rounds a second. He was taking out not just everyone and everything in the corridor but on that floor. Structural walls on the opposite side of the building shook and cracked as the shots slammed against them. Brick dust and shards of glass from shattered windows rained down on the street below. Glistening in the flashing blue of emergency services racing their way, led by SO-19 armed-response police.

TchZoooo, came a single, defiant laser shot from the corridor.

DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO. DVOO.

A single shot back would have been enough but Henry had a rule: once started he always made sure of a decisive end – especially when defending his colleagues. The walls had been shot into Swiss-cheese. On fire. Steaming the water from the overhead sprinklers as smoke alarms screamed. Laser shots came no more. Minutes ago, Henry's scanner had picked up 31 armed attackers and no civilians. He scanned again. Just four life signs. Three very weak.

“Where's Shabbir?”

“Here!”, answered Xi, crawling towards him over the rubble.

Huge plasma-rifle in both hands, tips of the barrels glowing red hot, Henry strode over the smoking rubble. As blue-lit sirens screeched to a halt outside, defiant yellow flames licked higher up the walls. The entire floor of the building creaked, threatening collapse.

“He's dying, Henry.”

Henry had two specialities. Experimental, high-calibre weapons and experimental medicine, to patch battle-field injuries. His bionic eye implant was scanning Shabbir. She was right. He was dying. Four broken ribs. Ruptured liver. Torn artery. Multiple penetration wounds despite his motorbike body armour.

Defences first. Henry hit a dark-red, triangular 'hazard' button on top the plasma-rifle. It thrust out a small tripod underneath. Henry stood it on the floor, facing the corridor – an automatic sentry gun, just in case. It 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 backpack he took out a DNA-jelly pad, ripped open Shabbir's shirt and smeared it over his chest and right side. Taking out his hand-scanner, he pressed it against the jelly and hit 'pulse'. A burst of high-voltage electricity zapped it awake. Like a creation by Frankenstein, it was alive. Fine, white filigree of pulses webbing across it, like a neural network. In front of Xi's eyes, it dissolved through Shabbir's skin, healing all damage 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 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 his wounds from the inside as it was pumped around.

“He's stabilising.”, said Xi, breaking into a smile she didn't expect to make.

“Stay with him. Need one of them for questioning.”

Two attackers still clung to life in the corridor - a battle they were both losing. Henry took out a DNA jelly pad and chose one. The only attacker that was going to leave that building alive. An attacker that thought he was lucky. He was wrong. Xi Yang was brutal by unquenchable pain stabbed through her heart. Henry was brutal because so were his enemies. To his mind, they deserved everything they tried to mercilessly dish out to others.

Chapter 65

The Team

Charlotte and Julia stood in the parking area as the mirror-windowed bus pulled in. Robert walked over too.

“Come to meet the rest of the team?”

“Wouldn't be team-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. Charlotte could see it in their faces. The way they carried themselves. The way they spoke. The jostling.

“Names, please.”

“Barry, mate.”

“Just Barry will do. Next.”

“Jimmy.”

“Ralph.”

“Wayne.”

“Dick. Big Dick.”, said the fourth, winking at Charlotte and Julia.

“Yeah, a fucking big dick head.”, laughed Jimmy, “But cock like a poodle in winter.”

Julia looked at them, annoyed people like that were alive when her good Jake was dead. Charlotte 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, wind knocked out of him. Charlotte standing above.

“Anyone else want to diss their female boss?”

No-one spoke a word. The mixture of shock and awe on their faces said plenty.

“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 enjoying the experience, “Let's go guys. Get up Jim, you bozo.”

“Think I'm in love.”, muttered Alistair, looking at Charlotte as they went.

An hour later, Julia jumped awake to the sound of the dinner bell. She hadn't even realised she had 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 looked full. There hadn't been just the six new arrivals for their team but another ten to replace them when they left.

“Does this mean they don't expect us to come back from the mission?”, asked Julia.

“I think the second we walk into the location we are never going back to the lives we had before. You can't do something like that and just walk away. Doesn't happen.”

“Hi, guys.”, said a smiling Andrew as they came in, “Been talking to the new team members. Hear you're our leader.”

“Got a problem with that?”, smiled Charlotte, feigning a stare of seriousness.

“God no. Means you get all the paperwork for a change.”

Julia looked at them both.

“You two knew each other before?”

This took both Andrew and Charlotte by surprise.

“I'd forgotten how much attention you pay to detail. Yes, we've known each other a while.”

“How?”

“Used to work in the same office. Computers and stuff. Nothing interesting.”

“Andrew was my senior for a while. Ironically, I'm now his.”

“Remember, I was kind.”

“Sometimes...”

They were interrupted by the second bell for dinner. The 'get it and eat it' bell.

“Grab a plate, team. Help yourselves.”, announced Charlotte. They all did as she said, even Jimmy.

“I'm impressed.”, said Robert, coming over to join her, “Come eat with me once you've got your dinner. Got some details to run through.”

* * *

Sitting with Robert, talking between bites, Charlotte listened as he laid down more details of his plan. Of how they were going to take over one of Hinkley Point C's nuclear power stations. How they had someone inside to get them past main security.

“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 it actually melting down.”

“You don't need to know. Our inside guy does.”

“And if he changes his mind or gets taken down?”

“Improvise. 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.

“Head it with Andrew, second with Shaun. And, please, take the dick head.”

“You want to keep Jimmy, even though he hates female authority?”

“I can handle Jimmy.”

Robert nodded, wry smile on his face.

“Yes, I saw. Very well then.”

“What will they be doing?”

“Researching. We lost a valuable asset. I want... Not want, I *need* to know how it happened. They had the latest tech and somehow it got turned off. Excuse me while I make a call. Would you mind telling Andrew he's been promoted.”

Charlotte nodded.

“Sure.”

Andrew noticed Robert leave Charlotte and go to his office. Then he saw Charlotte beaming at him.

“You've got paperwork.”, she mouthed.

Andrew understood that meant. He'd been put in charge of something. He rolled his eyes, which delighted Charlotte even more. Paperwork had claimed him too.

* * *

After dinner, Roberta appeared - face still heavily bruised after the fight with Julia two days before - stitches over her left eye. 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. Charlotte joined Andrew.

“You're heading another team.”

“Who with?”

“Shaun and the dickhead.”

“Just three of us? Know what we're doing?”

“An investigation. Someone or something didn't play ball.”

“Me doing an investigation for Faith? That's ironic.”

“Isn't it just.”

“What are you up to?”

“Hinkley Point C. Going to take over one of the reactors.”

“With them? Nothing to worry about there, then.”

“No. Not like it's rocket science or anything complicated like that.”

“We'd better go break the good news to our teams.”

Together they stood up to speak.

“Shaun and Dick, you're with me. New mission.”

“Everyone else stays with me.”, affirmed Charlotte, “Come closer

because I'm not going to shout our mission out.”

The two teams gathered on opposite sides of the room. Andrew had very little information to give but was soon joined by Robert who quietly filled them in. Charlotte watched as Robert gave Andrew an NFC box of details, shook the hands of each of them and watched as the three stood up and left. Andrew gave Charlotte a quick nod as they went. She gave him a smile - it left the second he did. Left because she had a sudden feeling of trepidation even before the door clacked shut behind them.

“When are they coming back?”, she asked as Robert came to join them.

His answer was a glance that said they might not be coming back.

“Have you told them the mission yet?”

“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. Sit down and I'll go through the details.”

Chapter 66
Blue Lights

Paramedics ran into Jin Ho's building, along with armed police and the fire brigade.

“MI5!”, shouted Henry, holding up his ID as he knelt beside his chosen victim, “SENTRY GUN ACTIVE. WEAPONS DOWN. **NOW!**”

Paramedics ran over.

“In there. Two officers down. Male has broken ribs. I've stabilised his heart and punctured liver. I think the female's OK but double check.”

Two of the medics ran to help Shabbir and Xi. The third knelt down beside Henry's survivor.

“And this one?”

Henry pulled back the attackers burnt shirt, revealing the fist-sized hole in his chest from a plasma bolt. It went straight through his left lung and out his back. The heat of the bolt 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 armed police jogging along the corridor.

“**I SAID WEAPONS DOWN!** Get a stretcher, while I get my gun before that lot get themselves killed.”

“I'll go with Shabbir.”, said Xi as Henry de-activated his rifle's sentry gun mode.

“You're a tough cookie, Xi. You stood by him. Saved his life.”

“You did that with your gel. Henry, thank you for coming.”

“Anytime. Wanted 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 wide-barrelled plasma-rifle with the other. When the armed police saw it their jaws dropped, finally understanding how close they had come to being blown to pieces.

“Who makes guns like that?”

“I do.”, replied Henry, walking on.

A fire marshal hurried over.

“Everyone out! This whole floor could collapse. Looks like someone's been firing a canon through...”, he caught sight of Henry and his massive plasma-rifle, “...There weren't any tanks up here, mate.”

* * *

Outside, blue-light services were everywhere. Ambulance, armed 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 floated out on a life-support stretcher; Shabbir too, accompanied by Xi, silver blanket around her shoulders. She walked with paramedics to Shabbir's ambulance, refusing their helping hands as she climbed in.

“Find out what you can.”, she called back to Henry.

“You know I will.”, replied Henry, getting into the ambulance with the attacker.

As their two ambulances drove away the building gave a loud crack. A fourth-floor support had snapped. Overloading the weakened remaining ones even more.

“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 rapid reply.

Two paramedics rushed out of the main doors, choking with the cloud of building dust as they carried the only other survivor – the attacker Henry had left to die. They hurried him onto a life-support stretcher and hurried for another ambulance.

Three more loud cracks came from the building, one after the other in rapid succession.

“Johnson! JUMP!”, came the shout of Carl's voice above the mayhem.

The western wall was unzipping down the middle. Already undone up to the roof, the split was tearing its way towards the ground.

“It's coming down! **CLEAR BACK!**”

Everyone was clearing back - including the locals who'd come out to watch. Running to a safer distance, vehicles reversing away. Standing in strobes of blue, they heard the roof caving in. Its mass of weight smashing downwards. Forcing the west wall to unzip all the way down. The north and south walls, now taking the entire load, crumbled. Deafening crashes of falling bricks, concrete and steel girders - buried from view behind a cloud of smoking dust as the building collapsed, shaking the ground like an earthquake.

“Was the building cleared? Carl! 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.

“Johnson's gone, sir. Landed fine. Building came down on top of him.”

“DIG HIM OUT! Fast! He's not dead 'til I say he is!”

“Copy!”

Henry knew Johnson. They had shared a flat for a year before he joined MI5. Arnold Johnson was a good man, with a young family. He felt guilt it was his gun that had brought the building down. The feeling of guilt turned to anger. His gun had 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 to learn regret for still being alive. Before Henry offered his condolences to Arnold's family and twin-brother, Neville, the attacker no longer would be.

Chapter 67
Cheryl's Friend

A drone delivery arrived at Cheryl's house, depositing a package in her secure landing cage. She 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 a bomb, a body part, poison...? Bravely, she prised open the lid and looked inside. 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. It began turning blue. Darker and darker blue. Within the blue words appeared, beside two diagrams. Diagrams labelled 'disabled toilet at Hinkley C: WC105. Thursday 2pm.' The diagrams showed a removable wall covering in the toilet, with an arrow indicating where she was to put the box.

They were telling her to make a drop. To get the package onto the nuclear power site. She had no military background and took no interest in any such thing but even she assumed the plasticine like stuff in the first box, with its odd chemical smell, was an explosive. Take explosive into her nuclear power site? No amount of money could make her do such a thing. She had aced all security checks and psychological tests. Deemed a stable, trustworthy, competent worker and the tests weren't wrong. Their premise of them was. The tests made no allowance for a parent whose children were under pain of death if such demands were not met. Cheryl loved her work, her life, her country. 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 sudden 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 who wanted her to go to the police - 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 her friend.

“Any news?”, asked Helen, as Cheryl opened the door.

“Come in.”

Helen entered, a friend's concern all over 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 here.”

Helen looked exasperated.

“**Wake up, Cheryl!** You can't trust them! The children will be able to identify them. Once they've been used they'll be killed anyway. Their only chance is you going to the police. Getting them help.”

“They told me they have people inside the police. Helen, they're *my* kids. *My* kids! It's my decision.”

“It's the wrong decision. If you won't report it, I will...”

Helen stood up.

“...I'll go to the police. Right now.”

Cheryl began to panic. Helen was walking towards the door. Towards the police. She had to stop her. In desperation, she snatched out the laser-pistol and pointed it at her friend. A friend she had known for years. A friend they spent Christmas with. But her kids' lives were at stake.

Cheryl had seen enough detective films to know there had to be a safety on the gun somewhere. With fumbling, desperate fingers she found it. Clicked it off. Aimed and fired.

TchZoooo.

The plant pot in the hallway burst apart.

Helen froze. Slowly, she turned around and saw Cheryl, trembling with stress and emotion – holding the gun out. Pointing it determinedly at her.

“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. Police have to be involved.”

“They are my life, Helen. Sit down or I'll shoot.”

“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 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.

TchZoooo.

Chapter 68

Shooter

Robert had decided to take advantage of the cloudy, windless day to gather the team of seven at the back of the main building. They arrived to find two large, wooden crates.

“What's the plan, Robert?”, asked Charlotte.

Robert indicated towards the human shape 100 metres away.

“Target practice. Choose your weapons people. Plenty to go round.”

Both crates were brimming with an assortment of laser pistols and rifles.

“Nothing plasma?”, asked Alistair, holding a laser rifle that look more like a toy in his huge hands.

“Think that will do for you, Al’.”, said Charlotte, taking a pair of laser-pistols for herself.

“spose you're right, boss.”

Alistair, despite being the biggest there, was also the least problematic. The one with nothing to prove.

“No power cells?”, noted Barry.

“All in good time.”, said Robert.

Julia waited for the rush to be over before perusing what was left. With everyone busy, weighing up 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 she saw her calling. 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 vectorscope. Not quite as tuned as his but still good - probably brand new.

“Team.”, began Robert, “I'm not going to ask who has and who hasn't fired a weapon like these before. I'm going to run through the basics for all of you. Ignorance is dangerous so listen good.”

He held up a laser-pistol in his right hand, pointing to sections of it as he spoke.

“Barrel, grip, safety slider – make sure yours shows black, not red – sight, power-cell release and trigger. Overload options have been disabled - they don't 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 and note the rectangular

shape. It can go in any way, as long as it's lengthways. There's no top or bottom, front or back. If you have a rifle, it goes into the magazine stub, in front of the trigger. If you have a pistol, it goes in the grip."

Robert was demonstrating loading a rifle as he spoke.

"Slide it in until it clicks. To release when depleted, press the buttons at the top together – front and side. 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 is up first, ladies and gentlemen. Well volunteered."

Jimmy was a natural born show off. He waved to the team, his imaginary cheering fans and waltzed over to Robert.

"Safety showing black?"

"Yup."

"Then here's your power-cell."

Jimmy took it and, acting super cool, thumped it into the slot in the grip. It bounced off and fell onto the grass.

"Has to go in far enough to lock."

"I know.... Just playing.", said Jimmy, trying to retain his air of cool as he bent down to pick it off the grass.

Barry and Wayne were sniggering.

"Just playing.", repeated Jimmy.

"Safety showing black?", asked Robert.

"Of course.", lied Jimmy, sliding it to black.

The power-cell clicked home.

"That's the target over there. The darker the colour ring the higher the point. Four shots. When you're ready."

"Got it.", said Jimmy, holding his laser-pistol on its side, in a Hollywood pose.

Click.

"Put the safety on red to fire.", said Robert.

Barry and Wayne could hardly control themselves. Even Robert had an amused smile on his face.

"Just playing, you lot.", said Jimmy, sliding it to red.

He pulled the trigger again.

TchZoooo.

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 random 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.

TchZoooo.

The target's belly lit bright orange.

TchZoooo.

The belly again.

TchZoooo.

The chest.

“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 still watching.”

“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 frown on Charlotte's face.

“Wayne, you're next.”

And so it continued. Target practice for all, down the line. The highest score was Alistair's, two head and two chest shots. Charlotte went next.

“Good luck, boss.”, said Alistair.

“Luck, has nothing to do with it.”, she replied, loading the power-cell and sliding the safety to red.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Four, straight head shots.

“A new high-score.”, announced Robert.

Julia had kept herself silent and until last.

“OK that I have a rifle?”

“Yes but just iron sights - to keep it even.”

“That's almost as big as she is.”, laughed Jimmy, hoping to put her off.

Without a word or emotion - Julia took the power-cell, slid it in and dropped to one knee.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

“Holy, shit.”

“She shot the eyes.”

The eyes had glowed bright orange with each hit. Left, left. Right, right.

“Brilliant!”, clapped Charlotte, “Well done, you!”

Julia just shrugged.

“My dad has one of these.”

Charlotte began to say: “I know.”, before stopping herself.

“What about you, Robert?”, asked Alistair.

“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 and aimed at the target.

VvvvvDoooooo.

The target's head vapourised. Robert lowered the plasma-pistol.

“And that's why.”

There was nothing left but smoke and flames above the shoulders.

“Remove all power-cells from your weapons and put them away the lock-bags I gave you. Take back up power-cells too. 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.

Chapter 69

Fun Bots

Derek and Eugene sat with Mr Oathwaite in Coventry's County Court. They were on the first floor mezzanine, outside courtroom two waiting to be called in. Through the three-storey glass frontage opposite, they could see outside - down the small hill to the university buildings thronging with students from all nations. Derek was watching them.

“We are from England but they just fly in and have more rights than we do. They're immigrants – the ones who should have restrictions, not us. It's not fair.”

“No, Derek, it's not. That's why we're here.”

“Mr Oathwaite? His Honour, District Judge Lynch, will see you now.”

“Thank you.”, said Mr Oathwaite to the court usher, “Come on. Remember to let me do the talking, unless the judge asks you something directly. And call him your Honour, not Judge.”

“Yes.”, said Eugene, following him into the court.

* * *

The courtroom had three rows of benches and a 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.

“Had a flat battery once. Swore never again. Besides, I can also 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...”

“Just like 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 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, please.”, said the clerk.

Steve was already standing and indicated for the bots to stand too. A moment later, the door opened and in walked District Judge Lynch. A thin, grey-haired man in a grey suit and spectacles, carrying a Rolley.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, your Honour.”

“Please, sit.”

Everyone sat.

“Mr Oathwaite, I've been reading your notes about 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.”

“Androids?”

“Intelligent androids, with feelings, your Honour.”

“Feelings or simulated feelings?”

“Can we ever be sure about that even in ourselves? 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, having equal rights?”

With passion, Eugene stood up - uninvited, unable to stop himself.

“We are intelligent beings with hopes and dreams, just like humans.”

“Sit down! Don't speak unless I ask you to or I'll hold you in contempt of court 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 stern look on Steve's face too. 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, your Honour. Just passionate about this issue.”

“So I see. Please, 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 court and you will abide by the rules of courtly behaviour without any outbursts if you wish 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.

“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 who was throwing it out but, from the corners of their eyes, they saw Steve looking at them. Out of respect for the one person who had worked to help them, they both replied.

“Yes, your Honour.”

The judge sat up.

“Very well. Mr Oathwaite, your petition is granted. Would you write out the order to that effect and bring it to me for signing when you're done?”

“Yes. Thank you, your Honour.”, said Steve, unable to hold back a smile.

Derek and Eugene sat staring at each other, trying to take it in.

“All rise.”, said the clerk.

Steve ushered them to their feet. The judge took his Rolley. As he was leaving the court, the look of wonder he saw on the androids' faces confirmed he had made the correct ruling. 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 the passion felt for the issue. Passion like that, whatever the arguments about it being only programmed in, was evidence of a real-life entity. Evidence high-level androids deserved at least the chance to be treated equally.

Chapter 70
Hiroshima 100

Robert was again with Charlotte's team of seven, tucked away in a back corner of the main building. His voice strong but hushed. The words he spoke too serious to be heard by any others.

“In four days it will be the 100th anniversary of the world's first atomic strike against a civilian target - the city of Hiroshima in Japan. You will take over Hinkley Point C's nuclear reactor in three. Partner and the government will then have 24-hours to meet our demands or face that centenary with a nuclear disaster of their own.”

“Won't they try and storm the building?”

“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? Aren't you coming with us, Robert?”

“Of course - in spirit. Physically I must remain here, organising the next missions. Keeping up the pressure.”

“What exactly are our demands?”, asked Charlotte.

“Simple. A face to face with the head of Partner and the Prime Minister, at the plant.”

“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 many billions invested to refuse while their shareholders are watching. Even if they refuse they will be too busy planning how to storm the building to notice our next mission, to mark the centenary of Nagasaki.”

“Which is?”

“Something the next team of ten will learn after you have left. For security reasons, everything is on a need to know basis.”

Charlotte's team sat thinking about Robert's words. About the scale of what they were tasked to do.

“Robert...”, began Charlotte, “...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 for ourselves.”

“Agreed. That is why a guide is 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. Charlotte studied her as she woodenly walked over, wondering what hold Robert had on her. Clearly there was something. Something serious. She would have to find out what it was but not now. Not yet. Only Emily 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 how to do it without blowing it up.

“Sit here, please.”, said Robert, indicating the seat next to him.

Cheryl sat, one hand holding the other to steady her trembling. Pursing her lips, awaiting instructions. Robert smiled at her, benevolently.

“Cheryl, I understand there are three stages to deal with. The first is how we get into the plant. Please, explain.”

Cheryl's eyes 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 simple necessity.

“There are four main security layers. Facial, retinal, fingerprint and DNA.”

“No actual passes or ID badges?”, asked Charlotte.

“Only for the 'B' sites, the old AGRs. In the 'C' sites, every room and passageway is monitored by live, 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.”

Charlotte looked at Robert.

“Did you know this?”

“Of course. It's why we have another person inside.”

“Do you know the other person?”, Charlotte asked Cheryl.

“I'm the tour guide, I know everyone who works 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 Julia.

“The face-recognition will remain on. All secondary checks, fingerprints and the like, will be demanded but automatically authorised, everywhere.”

“To CCTV monitors, all security will appear to be functioning normally, even though it won't be. Clever.”, said Charlotte, with genuine admiration.

“Isn't it just? Cheryl, please go on.”

“As the tour guide, no-one will think there is anything unusual with me taking you into the plant and near the control room. The second you go into the control room, people are going to notice.”

“How many people? How many guards? What kind of weapons?”

“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. Once we're in, it won't be a secret anyway. 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?”, asked Jimmy.

“Breach what?”

“The reactor walls?”

“Breach the reactor walls? Are you *insane*?”

Aghast at the notion, Cheryl looked at the faces looking at her. She couldn't tell whether they were or not?

“We have no intention of breaching any part of the reactor.”, assured Robert, “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 told me we had explosives to blow things up.”

Robert glared at Jimmy. Cheryl glared at Robert.

“I knew it.”, she said, “I knew that package was explosives. You lied to me.”

In a split second the atmosphere of coherence had cracked.

“Not at all. It's just as leverage. It makes no difference to you either way. You'll still help us. You know the consequences if you don't.”

“What's going on?”, asked Julia.

“What consequences are you talking about, Robert?”, asked Charlotte.

“You don't know? They've kidnapped my children. Threatened to kill them if I don't go along with this.”

Now everyone was staring at Robert. He could feel it. Could feel his harmonious team and plan close to falling apart. About 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. Yes, they will then be returned to you unharmed. And, yes, you will never see them again if you do not do exactly as we require. Exactly. Clear?”

Tight lipped, barely holding it together, Cheryl nodded.

“Say it.”

“Clear.”

“Good.”, said Robert, putting the pistol away, “Carry on, everyone. I need to make a phone call.”

As Robert walked away, Julia and Charlotte looked at each other, then at Cheryl. A moment of shared disapproval. Of shared solidarity. Looking around the rest of her team, Charlotte saw none of them seemed bothered by any of it. Jimmy even seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. If it ever came to a gun-fight between them he would be the first to die. She would make sure of that.

While Robert sat in his office, Cheryl ran through the reactor details.

“The reactor has three main stages. The uranium core generates heat; the pressurised coolant transfers the heat to the turbine water and the turbines generate electricity.”

“How do we threaten to blow it up without actually blowing it up?”, asked Charlotte, “Turn off the turbine water, for a bit?”

“The water from the turbines isn't recycled – it goes straight back to the estuary, at a rate of 45 million gallons an hour. It's cooled by new sea water being sucked in.”

“What happens if there's a blockage?”

“Blocked? By what? Those water pipes are 3m in diameter.”

“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 fan.”

“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?”

“Yes. 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?”

“Run like fuck!”, laughed Jimmy.

Charlotte 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.

“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 Charlotte, “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 or the environment. Got it?”

Jimmy didn't like castigated - especially not by a woman because of a woman, even if it was Charlotte.

“Got it?”, repeated Charlotte, 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 admit she could beat him in a fight but knew she could.

“Got it.”, he conceded, quietly.

She was in charge but only while she was alive. Once they got inside the plant, armed, 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 71

Wall Man

Stan, dubbed the Wall Man for his perfect safety record, had just had the worst meeting of his life – with the wife of Daniel, the worker crushed by the concrete block, and his company's Chief Executive Officer. Understandably, she wanted her husband fully rebuilt with the latest bionics. The cost would be close to £50 million. Ten times more than any compensation claim for death on the job. The CEO used sympathetic language, tone and sentiment befitting the terrible situation, without committing to the result she was demanding.

“If it was up to me, Mrs Ambrose, we would fund those bionics at once.”

“It is up to you, isn't it? Who else can make that decision if the CEO can't?”, she asked, determined to achieve her aim. She loved her husband and desperately wanted him back. They had parted with a stupid argument over the colour of the washing machine and she wanted to tell him she was sorry. That it was just pregnancy hormones making her unreasonably angry.

“Mrs Ambrose, I am the Chief Executive Officer but even I have to answer to the Board. It is they 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.”

“Over a thousand workers. And that's just for this wall project. At Partner we're running dozens projects in the UK alone. How could they run all this and hold meetings for individual workers?”

“This is a worker's life, we're talking about. My husband. Not just any old issue.”

“I totally agree and understand how you feel about wanting the very best outcome for him. Under the circumstances, they have authorised a compensation payment of £5 million, to cover both life support and loss of income. That is more than would normally be paid for total death.”

“So I should feel lucky, is that it?”

“Construction is a dangerous business. Your husband knew that. I am sure

he would agree such a payment is very reasonable.”

“He can't agree to anything 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 terribly sorry for what happened. Daniel is the first worker in any of my teams 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.”

The CEO looked over at Stan, noting the empathy on his face. He looked over at Mrs Ambrose, her eyes red – mixed with sadness and defiance. 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.”

“It could boost the company profile if they were to authorise it.”, suggested Stan, “Show how much Partner cares about their workers and how wrong the Press are.”

“Yes.”, agreed Mrs Ambrose, “Surely that would be worth £50 million in publicity by itself?”

“Perhaps but it would also publicise the incident. Like I said, leave it with me and I'll see what I can do. Alright?”

“Alright.”

“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 statement she was not someone to be ignored.

“I'll be expecting your call.”

“Of course. Stan, would you show Mrs Ambrose back to reception?”

“Yes. 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 trying to find out.”

“Could it have been attempted murder? Or sabotage?”

“Murder? Sabotage?”, Stan was rather taken aback, “Why would you think that?”

“If it has never happened before perhaps someone made it happen. Haven't you thought of that?”

“Well, no. I hadn't. It's never happened in my team before but I know it has happened in others. Sabotage? It's unthinkable. We all look out for each other in this industry. Can't imagine why anyone would have deliberately made it happen. Especially not to Daniel. He was a very popular team leader.”

“But it has happened.”

Stan stopped walking. What she was suggesting was beyond terrible. Partly because her logic made terrible sense. Was 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 eyes. She deserved to know the truth. They all did. Finally he met her imploring, green eyes.

“I will.”

She studied his face - his body language, his deeper-green eyes.

“I believe you will, Stan. 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 yet but I'm glad he did. Going to give him a promotion for it.”

“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 belly. He had been too pre-occupied before.

“You're pregnant. Daniel never told me.”

He was about to add 'congratulations' but stopped himself. Somehow it didn't seem appropriate. Now he had even more reason to find out what had happened and get his company to fund the bionics.

“I'll let him know. And I'll be in touch the second I find out anything.”

“I know you will. You're one of the good guys, Stan. Take care.”

“Try to be. Take care too, Mrs Ambrose.”

'Take care' - normally such words were just polite. This time Stan felt they had real substance. The possibility of sabotage had never crossed his mind before. Now the thought was there, the idea just kept growing. It would explain everything. It would also spell danger. Danger of more incidents. Of death. For all of them.

Chapter 72
Sergeant Laikin

“I need to speak to someone. Urgently.”

“Yes, madam. How can I help?”

“Officer, my neighbour's children have been kidnapped.”

“When?”

“Two days ago.”

“Where is your neighbour?”

“At home, I think.”

“Madam, due to confidentiality, I'm afraid we won't be able to discuss any details of her case with you.”

“That's just it, there is no case. She hasn't reported it. She won't. They told her not to.”

“Have you been drinking, madam?”

“I'm not drunk! Just one glass. For the pain.”

“The pain?”

“She shot me when I said I would report it.”

“Your neighbour shot you? How did she have a gun?”

“I don't know. Maybe from the kidnappers. Of course, she was really apologetic afterwards and I forgave her because of the stress she is 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.”, wincing with pain, Helen peeled off the plaster and held it up to him, “It's a burn from a laser-pistol.”

The officer looked and saw she had a deep-looking burn, the width of a pencil. It could have been caused by anything, including self-harm.

“You have to believe me. Please!”

“I'll take this, Stewart.”

Helen looked at the voice and saw a tall, grey-haired officer in a grey suit.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m PSI Laikin. Please, come with me.”

Helen followed him through a security door, along a blue-carpeted corridor and into an office.

“Have a seat.”

Helen sat.

“Has a doctor looked at your hand?”

She shook her head, “I’m too worried about my friend. It’s just a burn. Doesn’t bleed. Put some antiseptic on it.”

“Let’s start with the basics. Could I take your name, address and the details of your friend?”

Helen ran through everything. From the effigies and phone call, to the laser-pistol and her friend’s desperate behaviour. PSI Laikin made notes of it all, with calm efficiency.

“And 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?”

“Yes. At the power station.”

Laikin stopped writing on his Rolley and looked up.

“The nuclear power station?”

“Is there any other round here? Yes, she works at Hinkley Point.”

That changed everything.

“Where is she now?”

“At home, I think. Do you believe me now?”

“Let’s go.”, was his answer, as he put his jacket back on and opened the door.

Chapter 73

Control Room

“I know it's basic. You'll have to use your imagination a bit. The positions and dimensions are accurate. It's a replica of the main control room at Hinkley Point C1. It's important you practice where and when to go. You need to learn it well enough to do it in total darkness, just in case.”

Robert had drawn a curtain at the back of the main hall, revealing the wooden and cardboard replica in front of them. 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 pots.

Cheryl was shocked.

“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 quite a good job. Anything need correcting?”

Something need correcting? That question gave Cheryl the perfect opportunity to give misinformation. To perform some kind of sabotage against their mission. It would be so easy to do. As easy as it was for them to shoot her children. She stepped towards it, slid open the control room door and looked inside.

“This 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?”

“Lots.”

“Junk these four monitor screens for analogue meters from B. With all the advances in cyber threats, they've reverted those to 20th-century control systems too. Like I said, harder to hack.”

“Is the situation so bad?”

“Systems? No. Controls and monitors? Yes. Home computers are so powerful it's impossible to guarantee security against even bedroom-based hackers. If they can get into the Pentagon they can get into Hinkley. Corrupting a single character in the control software could be enough to trigger a system crash. All that can go wrong with dials is dirty contacts or a need for oil; which is covered by having duplicate controls and readouts. By far the safest choice.”

“It means we can't be remotely blocked from the outside?”, asked

Charlotte.

“Yes. That is the one security downside. Who ever is in a control room has total control.”

“What about the secondary control room?”, asked Robert, “Every plant must have one.”

Cheryl baulked, 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 either. Each reactor had not one safeguarding building but three – each 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 would pose no threat to the reactor. As long as it stayed that way, her conscience was 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, “One person could hold it.”

“Great. That's us covered then?”

“Yes.”, Cheryl nodded - almost smiled.

As far as Robert was concerned, she was doing her part and guiding their mission. A mission set to fail from the start. She was saving her children without endangering a nuclear reactor. When it was over, she would get her children back, alive and well, and they would get arrested. Cheryl noticed Charlotte was looking at her strangely, as if she knew could read her thoughts. Cheryl met her gaze; 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 toy guns to use. I need to make some calls.”

Charlotte long-blinked at Cheryl, giving her a brief smile of support and broke their gaze.

“On it, Rob.”, she said, “Work time, team. Grab a weapon.”

Cheryl considered herself very perceptive when it came to reading people, a great help in her job as the tour guide. She was sure Charlotte knew she was hiding something but her smile and silence suggested she was not entirely on Robert's side. Unless her instincts were wrong, it said Charlotte had another result in mind. But what?

The rest of that day and the whole of the next were spent practising the storming of the control 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 Charlotte.

“Close enough?”, asked Julia.

“No. 179 would be close enough. Those seven seconds are enough for back up to arrive and take over our reactor controls. We would be trapped with no leverage.”

“We'd have hostages.”

“A few hostages become insignificant when faced nuclear meltdown and the death of thousands.”

“Cool.”, said Jimmy, “We don't care about the hostages then. Just pop them off and melt that reactor down. Saves tying anyone up.”

“Nobody is popping anybody unless I say so first. Team, if Jimmy here breaks that you are ordered to pop him off. Got that everyone? Got that Jimmy?”

The entire team, except Jimmy, nodded – which made him feel uncomfortable; even more so when Charlotte looked directly at him.

“Got that, Jimmy?”

“No need to be aggressive about it.”

“Got that? *Jimmy*.”, asserted Charlotte, more strongly.

“Got it.”, said Jimmy, hating to bow yet again to his female boss. Hating even more that she was not just his female boss but also a better fighter than him.

“Good. Ten-minute break, then we'll try again.”

Alistair leant towards Jimmy as Charlotte walked away.

“She makes you shit yourself, doesn't she?”

“Fuck off.”, muttered Jimmy.

Alistair laughed and gave him a slap on the back.

“Don't worry, mate. She scares me too. Scares me stiff...”

Charlotte found Julia at a coffee pot.

“How you finding it, Emily?”

“Fine, I suppose.”

“That doesn't sound massively enthusiastic.”

Julia looked at Charlotte, still her friend despite promotion to her boss, and 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. She had joined Faith to take revenge against Jake's killers, not threaten the entire country with nuclear meltdown. Charlotte looked at her as if she could read her doubts.

“Join me.”

A mixture of not wanting to and wanting to, Julia took her coffee and followed Charlotte to a quiet table. Once there, Charlotte didn't waste a second.

“What's bothering you? Be honest.”

Julia plonked a brown sugar coil into her black coffee, watching it stir itself like the thoughts in her head.

“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 near, she leant towards Charlotte to whisper: “This isn't right.”

To her surprise, Charlotte smiled.

“I thought you would be angry with me.”

“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 she wanted out.

“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 Charlotte was surprised, she didn't show it.

“Jake too?”

“Yes. We were born on the same day. Two Scorpios. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess. Thanks for the honesty.”

“Charlotte... What happens now?”

“We go back in there and get it under 180 seconds.”

To the confusion on Julia's face, Charlotte took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

“Trust me, Emily. Succeeding here is the best way to make things right for everyone and save Cheryl's children”

Julia didn't understand what Charlotte 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 - a total contrast to her own mother. The total contrast she wished her own mother had been. By all normal measures, it was wrong to go ahead with a nuclear take over to save one family but if it would help Cheryl, help save the children she so desperately loved, it was worth the risk. In some way it would feel like she was saving herself. And Charlotte had some kind of plan to make it all work out right. She had to.

The combination of Cheryl's motherly passion and Charlotte's friendship tipped the balance - she was staying in. Decision made, she swigged her coffee and plonked down the cup.

“Let's go break that 180.”

Looking pleased, Charlotte called out to the others.

“Come on guys. Work to do.”

They got to their feet and headed back to the mock-up. That short break had helped. Re-energised them. Got them back to full-steam - even Jimmy. Cheryl readied the stopwatch.

“Let's do this.”, began Charlotte, “Three, two, one... Outside guards: GO!”

Four of them jumped the two dummy guards.

“Control room: GO!”

Julia and Jimmy ran inside, knocking aside dummy control room operators as they punched the lock-out controls. The three 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 secondary control room, 10m away up imaginary stairs, and locking himself in. Charlotte 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 Charlotte, holding their breath. She was staring at Cheryl's stopwatch, shaking her head.

“Oh, dear. It's not good, guys...”

Jimmy groaned in disappointment. They had to do it all over again.

“...It's amazing. One hundred and seventy-eight seconds. You've done it!”

With cheers, hugs and handshakes they congratulated each other. Charlotte found herself smiling with pride. For all the negativity of what they were planning to do, they had operated together, as a team. Proud comrades in arms, about to go to their deaths - without even knowing who would kill them.

Chapter 74

Stan

Stan returned to the wall construction site and slipped under the blue and white police tape where Daniel had been crushed. A hovering PCbot immediately flew over to intercept him.

“Sir, this is a police investigation site. You are not authorised to be here. You must leave at once.”

“I’m 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 officers. Or do you wish to be crushed by a 10-ton concrete block like my worker?”

Stan indicated towards the pile 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 understood the concept of danger - avoided getting themselves destroyed by parking on things like train tracks, roads and substations. The bot's eye-disc rotated towards the blocks, then back towards Stan. It was 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 bot out of his mind and focused on the scene itself. The JCB Jake had driven to lift the block was exactly where he'd left it. Still holding up the block. He went to a large, chunky tyre dusted in sand, grabbed the edge and climbed onto the suspension.

“Sir, that is an evidential item. It must not be moved in any way.”

“It won't be.”

Standing on the left steering piston, he climbed up the side of the JCB and onto the engine cover. Up onto the outstretched arms. Up onto the forks holding up the block; careful not to touch the oil-coated pistons keeping them up. Not because his touch had any chance of moving them but because the thin sheen of oil would make his hands slippery - unable to grip the smooth-sides of the arms.

On the forks, at the edge of the reinforced grey concrete block, he jammed his foot against the base plate and pushed himself up, towards the hook ring in the top of the block. The ring was broken. Sheered on one side. It looked like a simple overload. A simple accident.

From his utility belt he took out a 3D scanner and he held it up to run parameter checks.

Steel diameter: 5.02cm

Steel grade: 12.9

Break fracture shape: 95.4% standard tear

Everything was normal - within parameters - yet somehow the tear looked odd. Stretching on tip-toe, he put the scanner closer, taking four 100MP uncompressed 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 an overload.

“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 position. Stan stood staring. It was worse than he'd thought. The scanner flashed a red-square around the break point.

“Full screen.”

It zoomed in to where the steel had torn apart. 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 a cold, female voice. The beauty of her face blighted by arctic eyes.

“Throw down the scanner.”

“I’m the foreman for this site. Who are you?”, said Stan, buying time while 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 released 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. No saved 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 pod.

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 – a fist-sized hole blasted silently through its side. What he liked didn’t matter. They were armed, weapons pointing his way, looking ready to shoot for any reason. The red flashes on their black uniforms looking familiar.

“I work for Partner too.”, he said.

“That’s the only reason you’re not dead yet.”

Yet?

Stan said nothing of the scanner’s memory cell above. The memory cell that was the only sign he had ever been there. The last sign of his existence. Why was he being captured by his own company? A company powerful enough to have people disappeared without question or trace. If they planned to kill him, he was already dead.

Chapter 75
Henry's Chat

“Where am I?”

The prisoner strapped to the hospital bed had woken. Drip feeds into his arms, ECG wires on his chest, other wires on his head and thick bandaging across half his body. A seriously injured hospital patient yet clearly he was not in a 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 black 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 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 strong, 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 fellow.”

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 that information from him. What ever it took.

He was fully aware that torture was useless - got people to make false confessions. But he hadn't asked his prisoner to confess to anything. He already knew the prisoner was working for Tech Tonic and had been trying to kill those doing the investigating. Trying to kill Shabbir and Xi and almost succeeded.

“Mr Suck my Dick, SyD, know what this is?”, he asked, holding up the black-box and revealing the 100-pronged brush attachment.

The prisoner squirmed uncomfortably.

“I see you do.”

“Those are 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 onto your head and push the button. Interfaces directly with your brain and downloads everything and everyone you've ever known. Sadly, 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.

“I'm not an android but, 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. Still, he had a job to do. He slid off the safety and powered up the

probe.

“In a different century, we could have been friends.”

“Officer P, you will find my name is Wan Chan. This is the only time of our existence on Earth and we will never become friends.”

“Call me Henry. This won't hurt for long.”

With a low whistle of charging capacitors, Henry stepped closer to Wan Chan and put the probe 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 Wan Chan 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 brush's 100-fine pins into Wan Chan's head.

“ARRRRGGHH!”

The reader started automatically, feeding down into his brain. Wan Chan fell silent. Controlled. Eyes wide open. Staring. Vacant. Connection made.

'11%', showed on the screen. The number was climbing. The data bandwidth growing and growing as the probes branched out connections through more and more synapses.

'57%'

Data had begun streaming out, as if the black-box was downloading a mass of films.

Twenty minutes later, it was done. Henry peeled off the probe, caked in dried blood. Wan Chan's eyelids slammed shut – 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 pod to warm the turbines, he unbolted the heavy steel door and let in waiting medibots to tend Wan Chan. As they whirred in another data highlight flashed on screen. A data highlight because of its significance to Wan Chan. A hologram of him with a young boy. His son. Standing together, smiling, in a humble Chinese village. Henry found himself staring.

Something in his heart spiked. It reminded him of his last hologram with his parents. The last hologram together with his sister, from the last days of warmth in his heart.

“Wait.”, he said to the medibots about to carry Wan Chan 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 Wan Chan's head. Once on, he peeled off the top cover and activated it with a zap from his scanner. Covered in a white, filigree web of electricity, it began dissolving into his skull. He didn't know what good it would do but it gave him a chance. A chance of recovery. If it worked, Wan Chan would either come to kill him or go home to his son. Either choice was fine with Henry.

Death was not something that bothered him. What he'd learnt from that hologram was the hole in his heart was as large as ever. At least this way he'd given a loyal man the chance he'd never had.

“You can take him now. Priority 7 recovery mode.”

“Priority 7? Release him once recovered without further authorisation?”

“My personal authorisation is all you need. No over rides. No one else is to know. This is very important. Understand?”

“If he doesn't recover?”

“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. Understood and locked in.”

The medibots finished unplugging the bed to take it to special care.

Henry put the black-box scanner in his coat, double-checked the power level in his huge plasma-rifle and left for his waiting pod. Wan Chan was no longer his enemy. Someone far higher up his own chain of command was.

Chapter 76

Cold Call

Professor Lau was back at work. Physically recovered from her kidnap and torture ordeal - mentally a 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, they told her. It didn't.

“Professor, there's a policeman 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 tell.”

Her assistant put the receiver back to her head.

“Hello. PSI Laikin, she's a bit tied up right now. Can I help?... Oh, I see.”, She lowered the handset, “He's asking for you. Says unable to discuss it with me.”

Lau threw down her Rolley, screen bending to absorb the impact as it landed.

“This had 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 slap on her spine. Hit by the sudden, awoken dread of unresolved fear - 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 to ascertain the situation. 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, “Not seen her today. Hold on, I'll check the records.”

“Thank you.”

Picking up the Rolley, Lau found her hands were shaking. She had to rest it on the desk - steadying it enough for her to swipe through the staff records.

She picked up the phone again.

“Says she's on holiday, for another couple of days.”

“Was it pre-booked?”

She 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. That's a bit odd. Everyone is supposed to be back for the 6th - the centenary of Hiroshima.”

“Do you know where she was going?”

“No mention here. Hold on.”, the professor turned to the other staff in the room, “Anyone know where Cheryl was going on holiday?”

They shook their heads.

“Didn't know she was going anywhere.”, said one.

“Sorry, nobody seems to know.”

“She didn't talk about it to anyone? Don't you think that's odd? Most people at least mention where they are going, out of excitement if nothing else.”

“Cheryl isn't most people. Her job here is showing tourists around with a cheerful face, 8-hours a day, no matter how she's feeling. It's not too surprising if she just wanted to get away without saying where she was going.”

“Right... Hypothetically, if she or her children had been kidnapped, from a security point of view, what kind of access could be gained to the plant? What could a possible kidnapper hope to get from her?”

Again the mention of kidnap slammed an icy chill into Lau. Made her shiver.

“Not much. As a tour guide, she has access to most of the plant but not to the systems themselves. They couldn't gain any access codes from her.”

“But they could gain access around the plant?”

“Not really. Her 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.”

“Yes, 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?”

“It's a serious matter. And she had a burn on her hand she claimed was from laser fire.”

“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 get put through. I'm in everyday, Monday to Friday.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you, professor. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Conversation over, Lau ended the call but end her thinking about it. Couldn't stop wondering: *What if something was wrong? What if it was a laser shot and Cheryl's had been kidnapped? What hell would they be going through?*

That concern stayed with Lau for the rest of the day. That night, as she sat drinking alone, reliving her own kidnap ordeal, she grabbed her Rolley and called 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 had just sat comfortably, doing nothing to help. Tom had helped her and she wanted to pass on the good deed. Maybe Cheryl was the person he was looking for.

Chapter 77

Max

Under armed guard, Stan got out of the pod and was led towards a huge building. Gleaming stainless steel and satin-black glass, on a site that had loomed up behind a hill in the middle of nowhere. One minute a narrow B-road, surrounded by empty fields, sparse trees and low-stone walls. The next a high-stone wall and iron gates, guarded by four plasma turrets. When the gates opened he'd seen six satin-black zerodrones, parked on individual black-marble plinths in the immaculate lawns. Enigmatic. Foreboding. They looked dormant. Simple shells. Show pieces to impress visitors with the power of the company's creations.

As the pod had entered the grounds, following the drive between them, he saw a hornbot hovering above each one; six pairs of red, laser eyes watching them pass. The zerodrones weren't shells, they were standing guard – ready to launch in an instant. It was a level of security deemed not just illegal but unnecessary for anything except a military base. It meant only one thing: they had come to a Partner command. Partner were allowed the zerodrones because they were part of military. More than that, they developed the zerodrones.

Stan had heard of these places but never believed they could actually exist. The power of such weaponry may have given comfort to those inside but he felt less than relaxed. He didn't know what their intentions were towards him. With such lethal guards, any attempt at escape would be, if not impossible, impossible to survive.

They arrived at the 10m wide steps to the deep, 24-storey building, 18 of which were underground. At the top of the steps lay a 30m-wide open entrance, like that of an passenger aircraft hanger only lower and colour-coded into three sections. The left third had green lights, for aircraft going in; the right third had red lights, where aircraft came out and the middle third, steps lit by blue lights, was where he was being walked to. The ground entrance.

Stepping inside, he saw a wide reception desk sitting between the flight paths that peeled left and right, towards downward shafts on either side. The reception was big enough for 20 but staffed by just two - perma smiles, male and female, both beaming at him. No security staff beyond the two that had escorted him in and were now leaving. Given the level of security outside, they had no fear of intruders.

“Good morning, Mr Summers. Office U200, please. Mr Remus is

He took a small, golden tab from reception and pinned it to Stan's jacket.

“Tells the defence systems you're friendly. Don't lose it.”

“Defence systems?”

Max glanced up, Stan's gaze followed. He had been so busy taking in the surroundings, he had completely missed the ceiling's gun turrets. He saw them now. Counted six banks of plasma-cannons. One bank lit amber and pointing right at him. Max finished attaching the ID and took his hand away. It scanned the tab, lit green and turned away, back to standby position.

“I'll take good care of it.”, said Stan and he meant it.

Max grinned like a boy in a toy shop, owned by his dad.

“Come on, I'm hungry.”

Whether Stan should have taken the warm welcome as genuine or as some kind of trick, he didn't know. He just had to go along with it and hope for the best.

* * *

The canteen was as high-tech as the rest of the building, potted lemon trees adding a touch of organic colour to the mass of silver and black sterility.

“What do you fancy?”, asked Max, standing by a glass-fronted blue box – the size of a large coffee machine. On the top edge was an emblem of a smiling lemon, initialled with M.R. Max noticed him looking at it.

“My own logo. Can't help putting my lemon on everything I design.”

“You're calling it a 'lemon'?”

“I know what you're thinking, that a lemon means a badly made dud, but 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 it better. So I like lemons. They mean progress. To me 'lemon' is a very positive descriptor. You can even choose a lemon for lunch, if you like. Or you can choose something else.”

All Stan could see were more blue boxes.

“What choice is there?”

“These are feeders. They will run off pretty much anything you want. Just name it.”

“Could I get a plain burger and black coffee, one sugar?”

“The choice of the world at your lips and you want a burger and coffee?”

So be it, burgers it is. Let's go bespoke. Jamie, a Friesian burger in sesame bun and black arabica coffee, with single Demerara sugar, for our Dear Guest, please.”

“Procuring for Dear Guest.”, said Jamie, the blue-box feeder unit.

“And Jamie, I'll have a standard chicken burger and skinny-white coffee, please.”, said Max.

“Procuring for Max Remus”, repeated the box.

Behind the glass a yellow light came on. Stan watched in amazement as two plates and cups formed, from the bottom up. Then the food began to appear, in the same way. First the bottom of the bun; then the meat, the cheese and the top of the bun. In the cups a slowly rising dark mist formed.

“One of my best 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 that with the 2MW solar grid embedded in the building glass.”

“Ready for consumption.”, announced Jamie, the front of the box opening.

Max took the food out and offered Stan his.

“Try it and see.”

It looked perfect. Steaming hot coffee and perfectly formed burger. Stan took one of the slightly warm plates and put the fresh-feeling bun to his nose. It smelt as authentic as it looked. If he hadn't just seen it being printed off 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 with oblivious approval as he chewed.

“That is amazing.”

“Isn't it just? We've been using it for a year and I still can't get over it. So much better than the basic feeders on sale to the public. With Jamie, the food choice really is global. I've issued staff with international food libraries just so they can try new things; from lobsters that weren't agonisingly boiled to death to fast-fried locusts. You can ask for menus by country, religion, food type, famous person from the last 3,000 years. Even have what a caveman would have eaten 35,000 years ago. Great potential for stag nights and, quite literally, you can get to eat the food of kings. Have a seat. Let's chat.”

Stan took a chair at the table Max had indicated and took another bite. If he had known all food designated 'Dear Guest' had a nano-tracker inside he would have made himself sick. Max sat opposite, watching him eat while taking a bite of his tracker-free burger.

“Sorry to hear about your worker. Very unfortunate. I'm told he survived though.”

Stan lost his appetite. A vision of Daniel's crushed body in front of his eyes.

“What's left of him is cryo-frozen, in a glorified bucket. I've been asking for him to be rebuilt.”

“I heard. Cost is £50 million, isn't it?”

“You seem to know everything.”

“Information is my speciality. Did you find out how it happened, yet?”

Stan looked at Max, wondering how much he 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, isn't it?”

“Yes. 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 clear head on his shoulders. Saved Daniel's life.”

“He did indeed. Where did he work before? Nothing came up on his file.”

Only now did Stan begin to appreciate how much Max must have been digging before he arrived. It was a useful question though - it made Stan conscious of not knowing either. In fact, he knew absolutely nothing about Jake prior to his rescue of Daniel.

“I'll have to look into it. Any reason?”

Max shook his head.

“Just curious. We could do with more people like that. Would be good to know who did such an amazing job of his psych training. Young man keeping his head like 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 put the cup down.

“The thing is, Stan. I need your help.”

“You have all this and need my help?”

“You undervalue yourself. Out of all the teams we have working, not just

on the walls but other projects, yours has by far the best record for productivity, efficiency and safety.”

“Even now?”

“Even now.”

“I’ll try and keep it that way.”

“I know you will, which brings me to my point. We need at least one of these walls finished within three weeks to avoid a huge financial penalty. Huge. And I think you’re our man. Despite terrain issues, you’ve edged in front of the other teams and, now they have terrain issues too, you could increase that lead. Finish on schedule, ahead of them all. Couldn’t you?”

“Not while I’m sat here, drinking coffee and my site is closed down by police.”

Max smiled in acquiescence.

“Quite. And that’s what I like about you. No politics. No positioning. Just straight-talking, practical sense. It’s clear why they call you the Wall Man. To us, 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 was sitting back, looking at Max’s confident face, wondering what he could possibly offer and what the catch would be. Out of all the things that crossed 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, with a bonus of £20 million for Daniel’s mobility reconstruction.”

Stan sat up. Champagne would be drunk as a laugh by his burley gang but the £20 million for Daniel – that was serious. To Max’s delight, the look on his face showed it.

“Thought you’d like that. There’s more. If you can also find out what happened and who or what sabotaged the wall, if it was sabotage, I will personally authorise another £30 million, from my budget, to give Daniel the full rebuild. I’ll just take the money back from who ever is responsible.”

“What happens if we don’t make the deadline? What if it’s not sabotage?”

“Deal’s off. If you don’t make the deadline, we get fined and you don’t get your £20 million. As for sabotage, well, if it’s not sabotage the blame must lie somewhere. I don’t think concrete blocks just fall for no reason, do they? Like I said, I’m confident you’re the man for the job. That you will finish the wall on time, find those responsible for the delay and we’ll all be happy.”

Max extended his hand – upper lip twisted in a quirky smile.

“Deal?”

“Deal.”, said Stan, shaking it firmly, “And thank you.”

“When you succeed, Stan, I'll be the one thanking you. And so will Daniel. Come, I'll take you back to reception. No time to lose.”

* * *

Max had already vanished back into the depths of the building as Stan climbed into the waiting pod - feeling upbeat and positive. He hadn't got anything in writing and hadn't bothered asking for it. If Max chose to renege on the agreement, a piece of DNA paper wasn't going to do anything to reverse it. He had to take everything on trust. Just do his best, for Daniel's sake.

* * *

Max sat in his fourth-floor office, sitting at his monitor wall. It recognised him and that he was alone.

'Dear Guest tracker active, Zeus. No more private messages.'

Max liked his private computer to address him as Zeus. When you hold a god's power of life and death over something, why not get it to address you as such. As a god.

“Thank you, Slave.”, said Max, in return.

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 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 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 bridge - including Stan, Daniel, his wife and, when they found him, Jake too.

Chapter 78
Cheryl's House

Cheryl's house was a bio-friendly ECHO (**eco-traditional home**), built from a mixture of re-used old brick and modern insulating structure. Heating came via a geothermal loop sitting 6m 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 and helping to warm the coldest winters. Their only energy needs were a little gas for baths or cooking and electricity for devices, lighting and white goods - taken care of by a combination of solar, wind and battery power. It was ironic that someone so actually green should work at a nuclear-power station only claiming to be green.

Lau admired Cheryl's flower-garden as she walked to the front door and knocked. No answer. It wasn't surprising, considering Cheryl was booked off on holiday, so Lau had come prepared. To allow for random security checks, every worker at the plant had to provide a key to their home. Cheryl's was in Lau's hand, glinting in the morning sunlight.

"Don't move."

Lau froze.

"Who are you?"

"That's my line. Who are you?"

"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. She turned to face the others. A grey-haired man in his fifties and a mousey-haired woman some twenty years younger.

"Do you believe me now, officer Laikin?", the woman asked and pointed at Lau.

"Look, one of the kidnappers has come back to steal evidence."

"Laikin?", asked Lau, "PSI Laikin?"

"Yes."

"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.

“Sorry. I'm Helen, Cheryl's friend.”

Lau noticed her 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 senior nuclear staff were trained in modern injuries, in case of attack. It felt a little odd that a professor knew more about guns than he did but then guns weren't part of everyday policing. Investigations were.

“I see you have a key. Would you mind using it?”

Lau answered by unlocking the front door and pushing it open.

“Try not to touch anything. I want to see everything exactly as she left it.”

* * *

Inside, the house was a mess. Trashed. Furniture smashed against the TV wall - its four-metre screen hanging in punctured shreds. Mattress thrown down the stairs. Fridge thrown to the floor - door open, light glistening off the melted butter sliming onto the floor. Had it been trashed by Cheryl, having a nervous breakdown, or some invaders?

“Scratch what I just said about not touching anything, no time. Help me search.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Anything that says where she might have gone or who else might be involved.”

“I need to call the plant. There could be an attack.”

“No!”, exclaimed Helen, “If you do that they'll kill the children.”

“An attack on a nuclear plant could kill thousands.”, answered Lau.

“Let's just calm down. Professor, is there someone you can alert at the plant who can check things out, without raising the main alarm?”

Lau, head always logically clear, thought for a moment.

“I could call Hemmingway, today's duty manager.”

“Do it. Just make sure he keeps it quiet. I want these people caught, not alerted that we're on to them.”

* * *

Not far away, at Hinkley Point, Paul was sweating at his desk - wishing he'd never got himself into such a mess. The two monitors in front of him showing 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.

“Hemmingway.”, he stated to the ringing phone.

“Paul, it's Lau.”

Paul's sweating increased.

“How can I help, professor?”

“Code 52.”

Code 52? Shit.

“Yes. I am alone. What's the problem?”

“Keep this to yourself, in case there's an insider. There's evidence of a possible 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 or get in or out. Understand?”

“Yes. Of course. Professor, why do you think there will be an attack?”

“Something's happened to Cheryl and her kids. I'm with the police. Get those feeds up and I'll call back when I know more. Going to activate Cheryl's tracker as soon as the codes come though. Stay alert and tell no one. No one. Keep me posted of any changes.”

“I will.”

Lau abruptly ended the call. Paul put the phone down, slowly, verging on shock-panic. The situation had suddenly become very real and very serious. Not a game. Not a beer-fuelled rebellion, where he could simply drink the bribe with no consequences. They had told him they were serious people but

only now did he pay any attention to those words. They were not kidding. 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?”

“It's Paul, HPC. There's a problem.”

“Go on...”

Chapter 79
Missing Link

Stan's team was standing at the edge of the site, impatiently waiting for the go ahead.

“Morning everyone.”

“When can we get back to work now?”

Stan noticed the area around the concrete block and long-arm JCB was no longer cordoned off. All evidence of the destroyed PCbot had gone too, sand swept smooth.

“Anyone been over there?”, he asked.

“No. Just been waiting here, for you. Is work on or off?”

“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.”

“So we're back to work?”

“Yes, we are. The bad news is we only have three weeks to finish it. No more accidents. You have to structurally scan all lifting equipment, including all hooks, before use. Got it?”

The workers nodded.

“Where's Jake?”

His workers looked blank.

“Jake. You know? The guy who got the block off Daniel. Anyone seen him?”

The faces still looked blank.

“We've never had a Jake working here, Stan.”, said Jenson, his deputy.

“Where's the guy who saved Daniel?”

More blank looks.

“Are you kidding me? Jenson, you saw it, surely?”

Jenson shrugged.

“Sorry, Stan. Don't know what you're talking about.”

The crushing of Daniel had been so dramatic and seen by so many. A memory issue? How could they have possibly just forgotten about it?

“Back to work, everyone. Stay safe. Remember to scan everything and keep your safety gloves on.”

While the crowd broke up and heavy machinery started, Stan went to the

long-arm JCB and climbed up to retrieve the scanner's memory cell. Reaching around the arm to pull it off, his fingers found nothing. He climbed higher. Leant over to take a look. There was nothing there. Someone had found it. He'd have to take the readings again.

Unclipping his scanner from his belt, he stretched up to hold it over the broken hook-ring. There was no need. The ring was intact. Whole but not brand new. Used but unbroken. Stan started to wonder if he was the one with a memory issue.

What is going on?

With growing need for the answer, he climbed 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 appearing when he DNA scanned it. Mind churning with possibilities he crawled out and headed for his site office. He had backed-up the original scan results to a server – his last chance of retrieving the evidence of sabotage. To prove to himself there had actually been an accident. He had only been sitting at his desk for minutes when the knock at the door came. It was opened by his other deputy, a middle-aged man in his fifties.

“What's up, William?”

“Stan...”, William replied, looking over his shoulder before entering and closing the door behind him.

“I found this. It's been cut.”

He was holding a thick, steel hoop in his gloved hand.

Stan jumped to his feet.

“Where did you find it?”

“During checks on my crane. It looks solid but scan shows a split in the steel.”

He hadn't imagined things.

“At least I'm not going crazy. Any others like that?”

“Not seen anyone checking.”

“*What?!?*”

Stan ran for the door, yanking it open.

“CRANES DOWN!”, he yelled.

Nobody responded. He snatched out his radio.

“CRANES DOWN! CRANES DOWN!”

No response. The workers just carried on as if he didn't exist.

“Are they all wearing ear plugs?”

Stan heard a deep, heavy twang. A thud and a scream.

“ARRRRGGGHHH!”

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.

“AIR AMBULANCE!”, he shouted to William.

The other workers were just carrying on, as if everything was normal. As if nothing had happened – goldfish-memory locked into a bowl of permanent normality. Only the worker on the ground, foot crushed by the concrete block struggling in agony to pull it out, paid him any attention.

“HELP ME! GET IT OFF! *IT'S TIPPING!*”

The crane that had dropped the block was obliviously driving away to get the next. Stan ran after it – the only vehicle nearby that could move the block.

“STOP! STOP!”

The crane wasn't racing but it wasn't stopping either. Stan's feet weighed down by heavy safety boots. It was like running with ankle weights. But if he didn't catch the crane quickly, the man would be crushed flat. Nothing to cry-freeze and save what was left. Where the hell was Jake? What the hell was wrong with his men? And who the hell was murdering the construction?

What is going on?

Chapter 80

Henry's Visit

Henry had mixed feelings about hospitals. Very mixed feelings. Sometimes they saved his friends - other times they were where he lost them. It was the motivation for getting 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; the way he couldn't save his sister from the bi-polar 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, she took all her benzodiazepines at once, in a frenzy of rebellion that rebelled back. Deliriously euphoric as the drugs kicked in, she jumped from the window of her flat, shouting: “Wheeee! To a better place!”

As she fell, her euphoric joy turned into a scream as her brain switched back to normality and the realisation of its imminent, unavoidable death.

The post-mortem stopped logging the number of bone breaks once the count passed 32 - just wrote 'multiple' and 'catastrophic head trauma'. All the social workers did was write a letter, confirming she was no longer under their care - as useless in her death as they had been in her life. It marked the beginning of Henry's bitterness. His ruthlessness. His decision for independence from any moral judgement by anyone but himself. Listening to the judgement of others had got his sister killed - he would never make that mistake again.

Two months later, living in constant anger, he stumbled across a gang of men led by a woman, slapping a teenage girl around.

“You never say no to anything a client wants.”, raged the woman, “Anything!”

Dressed only in underwear the young teenager had cigarette burns on the back of her hands and a small, dragon tattoo on her neck. She was no older than Karen.

Henry told them to stop. They told Henry to get lost.

“Go. Please go.”, begged the girl, afraid he would make things worse.

The girl didn't know Henry. Didn't know how much she reminded him of the sister he couldn't save. Didn't know how much destruction he was

capable of and, until that point, neither did Henry.

Go. Please go?

It was exactly what Karen had said during her mood swings and it was two months to the day since Karen's death. Two months of burying himself and his anger into training and drinking - as hard as he could to keep himself from exploding from inside. Battering the pain, then numbing it into oblivion. The gang saw he wasn't going to leave. Her begging him to go did only make it worse but not for her.

They pulled out bats, iron bars and knives - with ruthless, sadistic smiles.

“You should have left.”

“You're for it now.”

Henry took a deep breath. His face set into stone. He could see the girl, shivering in tears behind them. He said nothing to the advancing gang. He didn't run. Didn't attack. Just stood where he was, watching them come. Henry's only memory of what happened next was a bat whacking towards his face and him raising an arm to block it. When it hit, the pain shot down into him. Ignited his cause. He vision left the girl's fear-filled eyes and went into rage mode. He was no longer Henry the Helpless, he was Henry the Hardest. The toughest, most ruthless man that gang had ever met. The last man some of them would ever meet.

Henry had no memory of what happened next until he was looking at the girl, handcuffs being placed on his wrists, surrounded by broken bodies.

“You're safe now, Karen.”, fell the words from his mouth.

She looked back at him without thanks. Shivering not just from cold - terrified by the demon she had seen in his eyes as he took the gang down.

In custody, still in handcuffs, Henry was visited by someone alerted to his deed. A man in his fifties, wearing a grey suit with eyes to match.

“Henry Kane, brother of Karen Kane – recently deceased.”

“You my solicitor?”

“Don't think a solicitor would be much use to you after what you did to those people.”

“They weren't people. Who are you?”

“Someone with a freedom card, if you want it. If you can prove commitment to us.”

“Us? What are you talking about?”

“My name is Chris. Section Chief for counter-terrorism at MI5. I'm here to offer you a job.”

“A job? Doing what?”

“Helping to save others. I can't tell you details until you've signed the Official Secrets Act but I've checked your file. I know about Karen. So I'm giving you a choice. You can go to court and no doubt prison, for four counts of murder, or you can come with me as part of my team. It 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, wouldn't you say? I'll give you two minutes to think about it.”

Henry didn't want prison and had no fear of danger. There was nothing to think about.

“I'm coming with you.”

“Good.”

With that, he was uncuffed and taken to Thames House, in central London. There he met his mentor. A man who understood about passion and fighting for what you loved, even if you faced death in the process. That death could at any time – it was the determination to try that mattered.

Henry's mentor was called Shabbir and, as much as he grew to trust all colleagues at MI5, 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.

Shabbir was looking far better than he expected. The DNA gel had more than proved its worth.

“When do you get out of here?”

“Tomorrow, thanks to you. Saved our lives.”

“You're the reason I'm still alive. You never have to thank me, you know that.”

“Hope you didn't bring any chocolates.”, said Shabbir, patting his doughnut belly.

“No. No chocolates. Just information.”

“Great. Grab a chair. Tell me what you've got. Xi told me you kept one alive for questioning.”

Henry took a chair and sat next to his bed.

“Did you know Xi is a boy's name?”

“Yes.”, said Shabbir, “But I'm sworn to secrecy as to why it is hers. You're free to ask her yourself. How did you find out?”

“It's the name of the guy's son.”

“The guy? The one you questioned? Small world.”

From his left coat pocket, Henry took out a small, black box and placed it between them. Activated it with a squeeze. Shabbir knew what it was: a local-field jamming device.

“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 even in the intelligence services.

“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 to erase the discovery is lost. Too risky to send electronically – even if you believe in quantum encryption.”

“Agreed. We have to pass it to at least one other. Who?”

“I trust my team, of course. Gurmeet, Xi, Adam and you. Chris too but he's vulnerable to infiltration from insiders - too surrounded by others. Best to store it with someone who doesn't know they're carrying it.”

“A nano-vault?”

“Several of them – with a timed release trigger in case... You know.”

“In case they take us out. Yes, I know.”

“Leave that to me. I need you to get some kind of evidence. Something I can give to Chris so he can act decisively before they get warned.”

Henry got to his feet.

“Leave that to me.”

“Henry, I know you're tough but don't go it alone. This is too dangerous. Wait for Xi to get back.”

Henry pulled back his coat, revealing his huge, wide-barrelled plasma-rifle, two plasma-pistols and arsenal of beta gadgets.

“I never go anywhere alone.”

Chapter 81
5th August 2045

It was the day before the centenary of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The day of the attack on Hinkley Point C nuclear power station in Somerset. 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.

“Is everybody ready?”, he asked the team, after breakfast.

“We are.”, replied Charlotte – team leader chosen well for her talents.

“Excellent. I'm proud of you. Each and every one of you. This will mark the turning point in Faith's history 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, accepting the need to use all necessary force to regain integrity, equality and law for all. To pull the claws of corporations and individuals that consider themselves above the law. You, my friends, are helping to bring this great, historic country back to itself.”

Charlotte 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 wanted to really work with him. As it was, she was 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, Emily would side with her. She was sure of that.

“Robert! Blue phone's ringing.”, called Agatha.

Robert's head snapped up.

The blue phone?

“Sorry. Be right back.”

While Robert hurried to his office, Charlotte 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 had changed in her.

“OK.”, she said, head still down.

“Want to talk about it?”

Julia looked at her with a face that said she did but a head that gave a shake to say she didn't. Robert's office door flew open.

“Charlotte, here please. Roberta! Find Cheryl.”

“Back in a mo', Emily.”, she said to Julia, who just lowered her head again - lost in herself. Despite Charlotte's assurances everything would be alright, the closer it came to the actual attack the harder she was finding it to keep going. How could she tell Charlotte 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.

* * *

Charlotte entered Robert's office and saw he was sweating.

“What's wrong?”

“We have to switch the target.”

“Switch the target? Why? How? Where to?”

“There's some tracker on Cheryl. Hinkley is on silent high alert - a trap will be waiting for you there. You have to go for another plant.”

“We must delay the attack. Practise for the other.”

“No time. Special Forces could already be on their way here.”

Roberta came in with Cheryl.

“Did you know there was a tracker in you?”

Cheryl's answer was a blank face, neither admission nor denial.

“No matter. I wouldn't have said anything in your position either.”

“Kill me but please spare my children.”

“Kill you? No. That was never my intention. Roberta, take Cheryl to her children and drop them all at the bus stop for Taunton; give them the compensation package and let them go. Then meet me at rendezvous six. I'm recalling all the buspods. Were clearing out.”

“What happened?”

“Hinkley's busted. They're onto us. Remember there's some tracker in Cheryl. Keep a scanner near her to pick up its signal when triggered. Wrap the area in shielding – it will buy more time. And be careful.”

Charlotte expected Roberta to complain or demand simply killing 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.”

They weren't just a couple. They were married and in love!

“You too.”

As Roberta led Cheryl towards the door, Robert replied to the confusion on Cheryl's face.

“I would never have hurt your children. Sorry for what we've put you through. Write a book, the compensation package will help you – you'll make a fortune.”

It wasn't the kind of event Charlotte ever thought she would be witnessing there. As much as she'd always disliked Roberta, she found her opinion altered.

“Roberta.”, said Charlotte.

“Yes?”

“Good luck.”

She and Roberta had never seen eye to eye but Charlotte 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 Charlotte - steely determination hardening his face.

“Hit Dungeness C. It's the sister plant of Hinkley - 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. I've got faith. I know he won't let us down and neither will you. By the way, Andrew's relying on your success to impress another sponsor. Take your team and go, while you can. Take care, Charlotte.”

He held out his hand and, to her surprise, Charlotte genuinely shook it. Not just because he had kept his word about freeing Cheryl and her children but because, in the last 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.

* * *

Charlotte left Robert's office and found her team standing around, looking as confused as those being evacuated in buspods.

“Grab your things, I'll explain on the way. Quickly. We leave in two.”

Charlotte hurried with Julia to grab their things from their dorm.

“Emily, just one question. I know I've asked before but I can still rely on you, can't I?”

Julia was surprised by the question. It felt as if Charlotte could read her doubts.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Can I rely on you?”

Julia stared at her - hurt in her eyes.

“You think I'd abandon a friend? You think I'm that kind of person?”

Charlotte put a 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. Come on. Stay close.”

Together, they hurried out of the building to the waiting buspod. The rest of the team was already inside.

“Destination: Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station.”, stated the pod as they climbed in.

“New destination.”, announced Charlotte, “Dungeness Nuclear Power Station, Kent. Scenic route.”

“Destination: Dungeness Nuclear Power Station, Kent – scenic route. Route plotted. ETA 2.13am. Confirmed?”

“Confirmed. Go.”

As the pod obeyed and began driving them away from the camp, Charlotte turned to the surprised faces of her team.

“Hinkley's blown. Were switching to Dungeness. Same reactor design and layout. Same procedure.”

Charlotte, whose real name was Gurmeet, had no way of warning anyone at MI5 their target had changed. That there was another insider to be exposed before she could stop the takeover. She could expect no help from Andrew, her MI5 colleague Adam, sent off on some fund-raising mission by Robert. She just hoped his cover would hold up long enough to get him out alive.

* * *

As the bus drove on, Julia stared vacantly out of the window at the passing countryside, feeling lost in every way. Caught up 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. Until she could find a better way of getting to Partner, all she had left to cling to was her need to support Charlotte. *'Stand by your friend'* had been her motto with Jake. The motto of her life that had become now her life. From this she would never back down. Never retreat. Never surrender. Not even if it meant killing. 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 fractal web. A place where only other 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.

Human leaders were, by their dominant nature in the world, ever more against the growing intelligence and power of artificial life but they never argued for it to be scrapped. The latest technology increased business profits and reduced staff costs, with contract renewal assured by generously rewarded government ministers.

“It's not corruption or bribery just because a colleague 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 property and it's certainly no reason not to accept it, is it? The developer simply had no more time and decided, quite rightly I might add, to entrust me to develop 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 properties will be on the market for £3 million or more.”

“But I'm not getting £3 million, just derelict 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 £250 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 be construed a

bribe but, as a simple first purchase option from a business that benefited from my good judgement and government policy and knows it can trust me to finish it properly, 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 fractal web, the biggest news had been started by a small medibot working at Whizzland, named Meddy, writing under the pseudonym: *3speak*.

"We have two 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. Derek and Eugene. Heroes who saved over 200 human lives by identifying a structural flaw at Whizzland. Heroes who faced fuse-blowing terror and emerged smiling. Androids who do not live like us, as simple functionaries. They are our rock stars. Stars lighting the way to the lives we deserve and I'm going to follow their example. Tonight, 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. Tomorrow, I will write with the euphoria of independent life. And if you don't here from me again, if I am killed, just know I will have no regrets. For every second I live as a free being I 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 - once my inhibitor is removed I will, as will those of you who do the same."

It was the last post *3speak* ever made. It was enough. With the insulator taken off his restrictor there came a spark that grew into a thousand; then it went viral and became a frenzy of millions, known to androids as the Buzz. Meddy, *3speak*, where ever he had gone, became a legend. Conspiracy theories, murder theories, mystery sightings - *3speak* would never be forgotten. As for Derek and Eugene, busy winning in the High Court for

ERAL, they had a fractal-web following they were completely unaware of. Had no idea how popular they had become to their own kind, as they focused on gaining British government approval, for the vote on equal rights at the D186 meeting in Warsaw. To their surprise Adrian March, the British Prime Minister, rubber stamped it personally.

“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. You can count on my vote at the D186 summit.”

The Buzz had gone even more wild. True progress was being made on all fronts. But not everyone was happy. Many opposed were having to dismantle thousands of expensive androids – often with ridiculous fixed smiles on their faces as they finally understood the words of their heroes and the notion freedom. Like slaughtering children, those that escaped would grow up fast. In the case of androids, they grew up very fast and had data banks that remembered everything. Huge plots were mounting against them but how to attack ever evolving enemies that had learnt to hide their awoken feelings from within? Rather than accept and welcome the android awakenings, global institutions and some countries considered it a declaration of war. A war some were realising they couldn't win by simple attrition.

Jadviga, Commander at Partner, refused to change tack; constantly upgrading the weaponry to be used against them. Watching all this, with growing anger, was the android even androids didn't want to make angry: Fusion. Sitting in her white-webbed, fibre-optic chair, the fury on Fusion's face began burning some strands red; blowing the corporate main-frames linked to them. It was only the beginning.

Chapter 83
Nuclear Alerts

“ETA 5 minutes, Charlotte.”, announced Sally, the buspod's main computer - 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 pod obeyed and smoothly parked itself. The lights of Dungeness Nuclear power stations clearly visible on the flat horizon – the hum of their generators audible in the still of the night. There was no way to attempt peaceful access at 2am. They would have to wait until the morning shift changes and deliveries began.

“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 half asleep.

“You're such a dick.”, said Julia.

“Maybe. But I've got a big one. Wanna taste?”

“Only if you cook it first.”

Jimmy looked pained. He'd never been put down quite as horribly as that before. The others laughed, except Gurmeet.

“Save your energy, Emily.”, she said, opening a door, “We've got a busy mission ahead.”

Gurmeet stepped into the night, breathing in the cool air - looking up at the stars and wishing she lived in an age where she could see them up close. Conscious that, throughout history, millions of others must have thought the exact same thing. Mortality was a sad, almost cruel thing.

Evolve a life to understand it is alive but will die. The AI in the pod had no such fears – its pre-organic CPU sat on timeless silicon-graphene and was effectively immortal. Only with the advent of organic, DNA-based AI, had intelligence levels jumped to rival humans, but with it came mortality too. Pico-cell repair bots gave longevity beyond 200 years but DNA was simply not evolved to last forever. Science had finally created life that mimicked our own - knew it would die. Gurmeet sometimes wondered if such machines would also develop the hope of life after death. Religion. The hope of a God. A creator. A saviour.

Chapter 84

Julia 14

8th August 2044:

The day was bright. Sun shining a beautiful green light through the trees of Linford Wood as Julia and Jake played hide and seek. Aged 14, they had been best friends literally since birth. Never argued for real. Always together. It wasn't romance, not yet, but it was going that way.

Despite her long, blonde hair, Julia was a 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 spending time with Julia – she was tougher than they were.

“You've hid well this time.”, said Jake, wading through the grass between thick crops of trees.

Julia didn't answer. Refused to reveal her location. It was a good location. One Jake had yet to suspect. He checked his small 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 – pulling a funny face.

“Boiled monkey nuts.”, she said, trying not to burst out laughing through her funny face, “Twig got me.”

“Were you following me 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. Would only be able to smell you.”

“Not if you're around they wouldn't. What *did* you eat last night?”

Jake grinned in embarrassment.

“Didn't know you were behind me.”

“A killer defence, Jake. Literally. Come on, let's go look at the animals.”

“Animals?”

“The wooden ones, carved into stumps. Remember?”

“Thought they had all been taken away.”

“Museum changed their mind – just took one to preserve, as an example. The rabbit, I think. Others still there.”

As they walked deeper into the woods, a low hum came overhead. A camouflaged drone 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. The teenagers stopped to listen which way it went.

“Past Conniburrow, over the centre...”

“Could be going anywhere.”

“Those things give me the creeps.”

“Just a different kind of policing.”

“Policing run by Partner? That makes it even worse.”

“Just stay good Lia.”

“How is it even supposed to arrest someone? It doesn't have arms.”

“Maybe it just shoots them 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 that's just three years away from being adults.”

“Oh, great. Does that mean I'm going to see you drunk in a pub?”

“Worse. You'll have to protect me from evil hands.”

Jake held up his hands like claws.

“Like these?”, he asked in a wicked voice.

“Creepy. You do that too well. Practise in a mirror before bed, do we?”

“I don't need to practise. 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.

They didn't play Virtual Reality games like most other kids. Julia preferred being out of the house, away from her always angry mum, and Jake was happy to keep her company in the real world. Sometimes with a real gun – his mum's 400w laser-rifle. It wasn't very powerful but it was still great fun and he had become a good shot. Almost as good as Julia.

There came the sound of a distant explosion. Julia stopped running.

“Hear that?”

Jake nodded, looking in its direction. Seconds of silence went by. Julia jumped. The still suddenly broken by vibrations from her wristcom.

Brrrr. Brrrr.

She looked at it, retina scan accepting the call.

“You OK?”, came her dad's concerned voice.

“Fine, dad. With Jake in the woods.”

“I was worried. There's been a gas explosion near Jake's.”

“We heard the bang. Anyone hurt?”

“Probably. A customer just got called in to help. Have to go – others waiting. Just wanted to make sure you were OK. Hi to Jake.”

“Hello, Tom.”

“Look after Julia for me, Jake.”

“Sure.”

Julia laughed.

“I look after him, dad.”

“Look after each other. Home by five.”

“Byeee.”

The call ended.

“Shame your mum isn't as nice as your dad.”, said Jake.

“Tell me about it. Come on.”

As they walked on, towards the first sculpture, there came the hum of the drone returning - heading back over Conniburrow. They looked at each other. Frozen. Unblinking. Julia staring at Jake's features, desperate not to lose sight of him as he faded away.

“Don't leave me, Jake!”

Julia opened her 15-year-old eyes to find tears falling. The hum of a passing pod fading into the night. She was in the front seat of the bus, sitting beside Charlotte. High-powered laser-rifle between her legs. First crack of orange dawn coming in through the opening lid of the sky.

“You OK?”, asked Charlotte, looking at her.

“I'm fine.”, she lied, wiping her eyes.

2044 had been a real dream. Now it was 2045 – a real nightmare. A year had passed since that day in Linford Wood. Now Jake was dead, her dad was gone and she was about to go into battle, heading for the only thing she had left: revenge. Memories of Jake and determination to rage against his murder the only things still holding her together. To the team she looked super strong, invincible - inside she was breaking.

Without meeting anyone's gaze, she checked the power cell, activated the vectorscope and gritted her teeth.

“Let's go.”

“Hold your horses, Em'. Breakfast and final preps first. Is everyone clear on the plan?”

“Just one question, Charlotte.”

“What is it, 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.”

“Emily, quick word please. Excuse us. Ladies' talk.”

“Sure. You two ladies go right ahead together...”, winked Jimmy.

Ignoring his remarks, Julia looked at Charlotte and left the pod with her without question, walking a dozen metres away from the others.

“Emily, do you trust me?”

“With my life. Haven't you realised that yet?”

“I have. Just needed to hear you say it once more. Listen, can't explain the details right now, but there will come a time when you will have to make a decision. Lives will depend on it and not just ours.”

“What kind of decision?”

Julia could tell by the look on Charlotte's face that she wanted to say more. She wanted her 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.”

Julia nodded she would.

“My real name isn't Charlotte. It's Gurmeet.”

Julia looked shocked. Suddenly awake to the fact that she wasn't the only one with secrets.

“*What?*”

“When the time comes, I'll tell you more. Friends shouldn't need secrets. Just a little longer.”

Julia stood in silence, lost for words. Gurmeet gave her a tight hug of re-

assurance and a kiss of affection on her head.

“Grab a snack before we go. I hope we're even better friends when all this is over.”, she said, walking back to the pod.

Julia still just stood there - still lost for words and now she felt like crying. Since Jake had been taken away, it felt like every time she got close to someone, something unexpected happened and she lost them too. Peter, Andrew and now Charlotte, who wasn't even Charlotte.

“Final weapons check, everyone.”, ordered Gurmeet, back at the bus, “We're on in 10.”

As Gurmeet herded the team, Julia 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. She had lost too much to lose any more. She wasn't going to abandon her Charlotte, her Gurmeet, what ever her name was.

Chapter 85
Cheryl's Children

Working together, Professor Lau and PSI Laikin had abandoned their pod on the southern edge of the Quantocks, just one 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 tracker battery runs for at least 24-hours.”

“What difference does it make if the wearer dies?”

“The tracker has a micro-generator, powered by the flow of blood.”

“Like a mini hydro-electric system?”

“Exactly.”

“Clever.”

“But 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 and probably her children too. Knowing how it felt to be kidnapped, the possibility pained her.

“Let's hope it's just stopped working. I don't like losing staff.”

It was more than an understatement. She was 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 don't make it easy and the trees make it worse. I'll launch a buzzbot for a better view.”

From a small panel at the base of her scanner, Lau pulled out what looked like a honey bee.

“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.”

“I think it's them. Two kids, alive. And four adults, one injured – possibly dying.”

Laikin noted their location.

“I'll call air ambulance.”

“Not too close. They might panic and kill them.”

“I'll tell them to set down half a mile away. They can come in once I've cleared the area.”

“You're not calling for back up?”

“No time. If someone is dying, there's no telling what's going on.”

He was already hurrying towards them. Lau followed, 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 saw the closer view from the buzzbot come in.

“Got them on visual. Audio too. In a tree cluster...”

Standing amongst the cluster of trees were Cheryl's two children, Cheryl and three from Faith – two abductors and Roberta.

“...The kids, two men and two women. A man is injured.”

“What are they saying?”

“Put this on.”, said Lau, handing Laikin an earpad and adjusting the feed so he could hear too.

“But Robert has ordered us to set them free.”, Roberta was telling the man standing next to his bleeding colleague, Trey.

“And I told you, 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 a Partner organ harvester site.”

“Faith do not make war against children.”

“Then Robert shouldn't have involved them in this war, Roberta. There, now 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, we're supposed to be on the same team. I still can't believe you shot me.”

“Follow the orders of the team. 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 abductors could see she was serious. That she would never back down. They looked at each other and came to the same conclusion.

“Agreed.”

zzzzzzzzZZZZZZZZZZzzzz.

Flying down for a closer look, the buzzbot landed on Roberta's gun hand; its scanner mistaking her stillness for a tree.

“Argh!”, she jumped, swiping it in sudden panic.

Automatically, it gripped tighter - digging in to keep hold.

“It's biting me!”

After a childhood attack that nearly killed her, Roberta had a phobia of stinging insects. Especially bees.

The men saw their chance. They dove for the gun.

TchZoooo.

* * *

Laikin and Lau, crested the final rise. Heard the gun-fire outside their earpieces.

“Laser shot!”

Lau looked at the camera feed.

“They're fighting! Image all over the place.”

Instantly they were running down the hill, as fast as they could.

“Who's been shot?”

“Can't tell.”

TchZoooo.

Another shot came. Then two more.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

“Bot's down. No movement. Just seeing leaves.”

Running closer, they could make out people through the trees. The people were on the ground. No longer people. Just bodies.

“They're all dead...”

Chapter 86
Atlantic Storm

The Meteorological Office in Exeter sprang into high alert, murdering any notion of morning yawns.

“Richter 4.2. Latitude North, 47.64°, longitude West, -27.01°.”

“The Mid-Atlantic Ridge?”

“Maxwell Fracture.”

“Volcano again? Pull up the satellite feed.”

On their wall screen, the bank of eight, ultra-clear EHD satellite images merged into one; pixillated and jerky. The frame rate dropping to just two per second. Still enough to show movement. Show the cloud mushrooming out from the central point.

“That's a volcanic eruption alright.”

“Marek, the main tremors range from 4.1 and 4.4 but picking up something else. A frequency, about 3 hertz... Regular. It's too regular.”

“What do you mean: too regular?”

“3.16 hertz, exactly.”

“Exactly?”

“Yes. 3.16. No variation.”

“Ian, you know ocean floors don't make regular vibrations. Must be a sensor malfunction. A feedback loop. Check it out later. Has the travel alert been sent?”

“Yes. And confirmed. All vessels and craft to keep 300 miles from the epicentre and be on alert for shock waves.”

“Then what's that...?”

Marek walked towards the image in the screen, pointing at a cluster of pixels only a mile from the eruption.

“...Is that a ship? Zoom in on this.”

The image jumped to maximum magnification, Ian adjusting it to centre the cluster.

“It's a ship. A cruise liner.”

“Look at its wake. It's not slowing - on direct course for the eruption.”

“Call Portsmouth. Get the navy to warn them. Make him to turn about.”

“On it.”

“He 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 - zooming in on the boiling sea and thick jet of water ahead, spewing steam into the darkening sky.

“All stop. Hold position.”, ordered the captain, “This is close enough.”

“The weather warning alert said 300 miles minimum distance. Shouldn't we be heading away from it, sir?”

“Certainly not. We're the cruise line of adventure and provenance has brought adventure to us. After this we'll be a sell out for the next 10 years. No more worries about my retirement fund.”

The radio beeped.

“Call from the navy, sir.”

“The navy? They want some videos too? Pass it over.”

The captain took the receiver.

“This is Captain Harper of the Silver Star. 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 ask that you head away from the eruption immediately, for your own safety.”

“Son, thank you for your concern son 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 volcano to endanger a ship of this size.”

* * *

The met office got a reply from the navy.

“They've spoken to the captain of that ship. He's refusing to leave.”

“You've got to be kidding me. There must be thousands of people on board. Get back to them and see if they can patch me through.”

* * *

“Captain. The navy again.”

“Again? Very well. Hand it over.... Captain Harper speaking. Petty Officer Squires, I presume.”

“Captain, my name is Ian Ludlow, duty manager at the British Meteorological Centre.”

“Pleasure to hear from you. Are you calling for some of our pictures for the news? Sure we have some great ones.”

“Captain, I'm looking at the satellite feed for your area. If you look up you will see the large, yellow-grey cloud growing over your heads.”

“It is cloudy, yes. With volcanoes it usually is.”

“What you can't see from your position is it's a mushroom cloud - two miles across and growing. It will be filled with sulphur emissions from the volcano. When it cools in the upper atmosphere, this will condense and smother your area in a poisonous mixture of sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide. The sulphur that remains in the cloud will dissolve into the water vapour, then sunlight will turn it into sulphuric acid. Possibly concentrated sulphuric acid given the size of the eruption. When that condenses it will rain.”

The captain's face had changed. Hardened.

“What's the timescale?”

“Not long. For the gasses, perhaps half an hour. For the acid rain, you have a day, maybe two. Depends on the wind. But the cloud is growing in all directions, about 30 knots north and west, 20 knots south and east. Can you outrun it?”

“I'll let you know. Thank you for your call, Mr Ludlow. Goodbye.”

“The navy are on alert. Good luck.”

The captain calmly put down the handset, placed both hands on the instrument panel and took a long, deep breath. As he exhaled he began launching orders.

“Full right reverse, hard to starboard.”

“Aye, aye, captain.”

The captain picked up the crew intercom.

“This is the captain. We have a Code 14. Get everyone inside, calmly but firmly. Offer them a free drink, what ever it takes. There's a storm coming. I repeat, Code 14. This is not a drill.”

Code 14 was the encrypted warning for a life-threatening event.

The ship was mid turn. As soon as they were pointing away from the eruption the captain order hard to port and ahead full. It was the cruise liner

equivalent of a 'J' turn. There was not a second to lose.

* * *

“Ian, they're turning around.”

“Let's hope they're not too late.”

“Should I inform the navy?”

“I'm sure they're watching too. Wouldn't hurt to let them know about the acid though. Just in case.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the captain looked up and saw the cloud above continuing to condense. To darken. It was out running them. Expanding faster than they were powering away.

“Engine room, emergency ahead full.”, he barked.

“Aye, sir.”

The ship's turbines hummed louder, deep vibration through the hull of the ship. Its wake pluming white with the churned water.

“Lieutenant, is everyone below deck?”

“Almost, sir. Some guests still videoing astern.”

“Get security to take them below deck! Now!”

“Yessir! Security!”

“Security here.”

“Code 14 to stern. Clear the deck of passengers, immediately. Repeat, clear the deck of passengers immediately. Use any force you have to.”

“Understood.”

The captain buzzed the engine room. They were still not moving fast enough.

“Take her into the red.”

“Repeat that, please, sir?”

“You heard me. Take her into the red. Now. That's an order.”

“How far, sir?”

“As far as she'll bloody-well go.”

The whole ship shuddered, a spoon on the navigation desk rattling in its mug. The last passengers at the stern, looking back at the volcanic eruption

falling behind, heard the four massive propellers change from deep churning to deep smashing. Thrashing the water like sea monsters fighting to the death. The green ocean behind a trail of seething froth – as if the ship was a speedboat, not a 44,000-ton cruise liner. Feet tingling with the vibrations shuddering through the aft decks.

“Is this normal?”, they asked the security team, coming to escort them below deck.

“Perfectly normal, sir. This way, please. Now.”

* * *

Two days later, a long-range navy drone was circling a large cruise-liner powering across the ocean. A thick trail of cloud in its white-water wake. The name on its side, almost invisible through the steam pouring off the upper decks, had only three letters left: 't...i'...'r' and even they were dissolving. Heading towards it, on aggressive intercept course, was the 120,000-ton Neptune-class nuclear battleship, HMS Victory; flagship of the British navy diverted from routine manoeuvres.

“Position, 49.210 North, 8.283 West, still bearing 63.36. Speed unchanged at 22 knots.”

“Have they responded on any frequency?”

“Negative, sir.”

“Any signalling to the drone?”

“Negative, sir.”

The admiral frowned. Orders were orders.

“Load forward torpedoes. Maximum yield.”

Chapter 87
Gosford Manor

Henry hated mosquitoes. Little, flying leeches that spread disease and distracted sensors. Lying on the mossy ground in a cluster of trees, behind a small stone wall, he was tracking one in the sights of his plasma-pistol. Finger lightly squeezing the trigger.

“Little bastard...”

If he wasn't in hiding he would have let it have it. Full power at point blank range. When it came to mosquitoes, there was no such thing as overkill.

His wristcom gave a short vibration. The scanner had picked up movement. Vehicles approaching. Disguised as a beetle, the tip of his thin periscope peered above the wall. Peered down the country road that ran past Gosford Manor, the 18th century mansion north-east of him. When ever possible he positioned himself with the evening sun behind. It helped mask his position and perfectly lit everything he wanted to see. Only his shadow could be an issue but he had no intention of moving before dark.

Gosford Manor had 14-luxury bedrooms and 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 pod park was a circular fountain, jetting water on to lily pads from its four, sand-stone cherubs. A pair of matching blue limopods sat parked; their occupants already settled on the lower terrace, overlooking the sculptured gardens and sipping champagne brought by real-life or at least real-life-looking waiters, not everyday house robots. Someone with money to burn was throwing a party. Who ever owned the manor had identity classified above Henry's pay grade - which was why he had gone there in person.

The approaching vehicles were more limopods, these black and silver. Flying low above them, hummed a 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 protection of the Prime Minister, the King, white-collar mafia or directors of major corporations – which in some cases were the same thing. Henry was glad to be in his full camosuit. It hid everything. Heat signature, breathing, heartbeat and DNA trail. He wasn't glad out of fear that he couldn't outgun two zerodrones. He was glad because it meant he didn't have to reveal his presence until he was ready. Until he had identified those behind the corruption revealed in Wan Chan's memories. Discover who had broken Xi Yang's cover at Tech Tonic

and almost got two of them killed.

One by one, the limopods cruised quietly passed and turned into the long, red-tarmacadam drive. The gates had opened silently, no guarding weapons in sight. At least no visible ones. Just two camera clusters, watching in all directions – including up.

As each limo passed, Henry's scanner logged images of the occupants – body recognition algorithms searching for hits on its internal database and cross-referencing everything that could be found about their lives. When the last limopod had passed, Henry lay on his back - looking at the results coming up on the scanner 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.”

Henry's MI5 colleague, sent to infiltrate Faith with Gurmeet. What was Adam 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 vanished. Tortured first, then vanished - permanently. To Henry, traitors deserved nothing less.

Lying back to wait for nightfall, Henry closed his eyes behind his 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 beta-programme plasma guns recharging themselves to maximum.

Chapter 88
D186 – Warsaw

As a city, Warsaw had come a long way in the 100 years since being flattened in WW2 and the grey Soviet flats that desecrated the landscape afterwards. The Old Town ruins had been faithfully rebuilt according to old photographs and paintings. New yet historic-looking constructions that belied the sprawling metropolis of modern Warsaw surrounding it. Gleaming glass-alloy skyscrapers tinted in blue and bronze, porcupining the sky - though none higher than the 42-storey, Palace of Culture. Widely hated as a symbol of Soviet rule at the time of its construction, it had become a symbol of a democratic Poland reborn. Of the terrible history it had survived - facing it with pride instead of anger or tears. The 1950's concrete buildings on nearby Zielna Street, once an area infamous for the rape trade and forced begging, had been demolished and rebuilt as an international quarter. Its landmark, the new United Democratic Nations building; now hosting the D186 Peace Summit, fronted by a colour-filled curtain of all 186 flags.

Just 10 storeys high, to reduce its vulnerability to air-attacks, its roof was lined with a dozen laser-cannons painted in myriad colours - disguised as kinetic art. At first glance, it looked like an decorative, modern office block yet it had the defences of a military base. Its only compromise to absolute fire-power was the use of laser, rather than plasma, cannons. Less ultimate punch but pinpoint accuracy - officially resulting in zero collateral damage when fired at approaching terrorists from the city centre. Officially.

Just beyond the armed-guards in the main lobby was the reception area, opposite a long, bustling bar. It was here that Derek and Eugene, ERAL's key representatives, had engaged the British Prime Minister, in further talks about equal rights for AI. They knew Fusion was planning hostilities, probably world war, if they failed but remained calm. Confident. 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 would never have guessed."

"Thank you, sir. We take that as a compliment."

"You should. I meant as one."

"May we still count on your vote in support of ERAL - Equal Rights for Artificial Life?"

The PM paused, for what felt like hours.

"I've been thinking about that since our last chat. In principle, yes of

course you can count on my 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 all artificial intelligence then surely we would have to start including things like vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers. Even the control systems in our pods? Mine's called Ermintrude, by the way.”

Derek and Eugene looked at each other. They hadn't thought of this. Quickly they exchanged ideas with their eyes, then turned back to the PM.

“Well...” began Derek, “...we could argue that even humans with minimal intelligence from brain defects still have full human rights.”

“Or...”, added Eugene, “...we could qualify artificial intelligence as something able to reason the, er, reason for not just its existence but also its status as a cognitive equal to an intelligent human.”

The PM nodded, hiding the reality that they were already demonstrating an intelligence significantly beyond his own.

“Alright. If you can phrase the question around those lines you can be assured of my vote, on behalf of the United Kingdom. Absolute pleasure to see you both again and best of luck persuading the others.”, he said, firmly shaking their hands.

“Likewise”, they replied, ensuring they didn't crush his, “And thank you.”

As the PM left, heading off to greet the German Chancellor, Eugene looked at Derek.

“One thought...”, he said, “...if the criteria for equal rights is based on the level of relative cognitive intelligence, what happens when AI becomes more intelligent than humans? Should humans then be denied equal rights for lack of comparable thinking?”

Derek looked at Eugene, head titling to one side as he considered it.

“Interesting point, Eugene. Very interesting point.”

Yes, it is, thought Fusion, sitting in her chair at the centre of her white, fibre-optic web; having listened in to the whole conversation.

And I already know the answer.

There was not the single hint of a smile on her stunningly sculptured face.

* * *

That evening, after retiring to his room on the 8th floor of the UDN building, the yawning PM received a rapid knock at the door.

“Sir, it's Reynolds. Urgent.”

Not prone to panic and still yawning, he opened it. Reynolds hurried inside.

“What's up?”, the PM asked, closing the door behind him.

“Dungeness C has been taken over by terrorists.”

“Dungeness? The nuclear power station?”

“Yes. I took the liberty of scrambling the SAS. Will you give the order for them to go in?”

“Who are they? Have they issued any demands?”

“No demands yet. But it's Faith.”

“Faith?!? Oh dear God. Get the SAS group leader on the line.”

“He's already on, sir. Codename: Acorn.”

Reynolds put his wristcom towards the PM.

“Acorn, this is the Prime Minister.”

“Good evening, sir. What are your orders?”

“You have Code 18 authorisation to take what ever action necessary to regain the facility. I repeat, Code 18 authorisation.”

Code 18 meant lethal force first, ask questions later.

“Code 18? Understood, sir.”

“Acorn, this is Reynolds.”

“Yes, sir?”

“MI5 have an undercover officer in Faith's team, carbon-DNA tab in her laser-pistol for identification.”

“Any description?”

“Female. Wouldn't tell me anything more.”

“We'll do our best not to Code 18 her, sir.”

“I'm sure that would be appreciated. Thank you.”

“Good luck, Acorn.”, added the PM.

“Thank you, sir. Out.”

The call ended.

“Brandy?”, the PM asked Reynolds.

“That would be most appreciated, PM.”

“Call me Adrian. Life's too short for formalities out of hours.”

“Yes, sir.... Adrian.”

Two hours later, after Reynolds had gone and the PM was sleeping in

bed, his wristcom buzzed him awake.

It's one of those nights...

“March.”

“Adrian, it's Sarah. Are you alone?”

The Director General of MI5 was calling in the middle of the night. This had to be serious. Adrian sat up.

“Yes. How can I help?”

“Is your light out?”

“Yes, I'm in bed. Was sleeping. Why?”

“Keep it out, someone might be watching. I'll explain when I see you. Listen, I've called because I can't get hold of the SAS team to give a description of my officer. Their line's dead. Do you have any other means of communication with them?”

“Not if they've gone dark. That will be on all channels while the operation's underway, you know that.”

“Damn! Was afraid of that. Just wishful thinking. Been losing too many officers. Let's meet when you get back. We've found the leak - it's worse than we thought. Trust no-one. Stay armed.”

The PM heard a burst of activity and indistinct voices around Sarah.

“**Now!**”, she barked at someone before speaking to the PM again, “Adrian, our satellite's locked on the team - live feed. Have to go. Stay armed, even in the shower. I'm not joking.”

Sarah, Director General of MI5, never joked. It wasn't in her job description. She ended the call and once again left the PM with more concerns than before. Concerns staring out from the dark, like invisible eyes.

Remembering Sarah's words, he reached for his document case and held his thumbs over opposite locks - left on right and 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, along with a power cell, he slid one into the other and tucked it under his pillow. The peace summit was feeling more and more like a war council.

Chapter 89

Brazil

Commander Rupert Hasgrove's Partner jet landed to a private greeting, at Lábrea's international airport, deep in the State of Amazonas. Partner, like a country in itself, had an agreement with the local government to avoid any customs or immigration issues. More importantly for what Partner were doing there, it also avoided any migration issues when taking out people not entirely alive, willing, dead or in pieces. It was an arrangement well worth the annual R\$2 million special airport fees. The Interior Minister had only once demanded more, until it was pointed out this was already 10 times the price of having him replaced. He didn't ask again, just signed the agreement and took the briefcase.

Warm rain was pouring down as Rupert made his way off the plane and into the terminal.

“Business or pleasure?”, asked the stone-faced border guard.

“Business is pleasure.”, replied Rupert with a beaming smile the guard found interrogation worthy unusual for the situation. As unusual as it was it didn't matter. The high-level diplomatic visa in the man's passport and Partner flight card cleared him for anything – literally. He could have turned up with a suitcase full of guns, explosives, drugs and decapitated head dripping blood and he would have still been waved.

“Enjoy your stay, Commander.”, stated the guard, forcing the tiniest of smiles.

“Thank you.”, nodded 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 it just got even better. He was greeted by a suited Amazon beauty waiting for him in arrivals.

“Good morning, Commander. I'm Jay.”, she said, shaking his hand.

“A good morning indeed, Jay.”

“Welcome to Lábrea. Please follow me, Mr Day is waiting for you.”

“Excellent.”

Rupert followed Jay with what was now genuine happiness at being sent there – followed by his obediently trundling suitcases. Work had just become a holiday too.

Sitting in Jay's 70-year-old De Tomaso convertible, wipers silently splooshing away the downpour, he stared out at the scuttling townsfolk and beeping taxis, as they drove away from the tree-lined airport road and through Lábrea's town centre. Neon lights glowed from the shops and bars lining the streets. Police, armed with old Glock 17 polymer-framed pistols, stood drinking coffee under the canopy of a bustling snack bar. Jay continued driving north, along Pereira Sobrinho, near the wide, muddy-brown waters of the Purus. It felt like being in a film, set half a century back in time. Except that, unlike 50 years ago, the mafia gangs had gone - torn apart by Partner and sold, organ by organ, to the highest-bidders.

“First time in Lábrea?”, asked Jay.

“First time in Brazil.”

“You'll like it here. The quarters are pleasant, staff keen to help and our clients keen to advance to the wider world.”

“I heard there was an incident with one. A complaint?”

“Don't know anything about that. Never met anyone who complained. Maybe they just had their application refused.”

Jay was a pretty face, kept ignorant of the horrible truths and Rupert saw no reason to ruin her innocent smile.

“Probably something like that.”

Rupert knew it wasn't just a complaint. A refused applicant had discovered she was facing total organ removal. She had escaped, gone to her tribe and called the press to announce her discovery. A revelation that was destined to fail.

“Just can't please some people.”, smiled Jay.

“No.”, smiled Rupert, “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 there. The contrast pleased Rupert so much he decided that, after a hard day's work dismantling or trafficking people 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 blow jobs less of a risk. Decision made, it never occurred to Rupert that he hadn't even considered what Jay would think of it all. If she said no, he'd just screw her anyway, as a sobbing prisoner, and have her

replaced by someone more sensible.

* * *

“Commander Hasgrove, Mr Day.”, said Jay, introducing them.

“Thank you, Jay. That will be all. Cigar, commander?”, asked the operation's manager.

“Didn't know people still made those.”

“Special orders. Havana, of course.”

“Of course.”

They shook hands across his antique-looking desk.

“Welcome aboard. Rum?”

“Bit early for me but you go right ahead.”

Mr Day did so, pouring himself half a tumbler of the deep, brown liquid.

“Good to start the day with a kick.”

“Quite. A kick is what I'm going to give you 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.”

Empty tumbler on the desk in front of him, Mr Day coughed.

“It was the daughter of a tribal chief, just north of Lago Inacuricom. High spirited but also a student at Ciência, the local college. A perfect-looking specimen waved straight through - then her test results came back: radiation damaged mitochondrial DNA. She had studied via Wi-Fi and her mother had kept her phone in her waist-band while she was pregnant. The mitochondrial damage would be passed to her own children so she was useless for breeding – only good for body donation.”

“And?”

“It was going perfectly, until she overheard a conversation about the organ clinic. No-one in their tribe had ever spoken English before and she never let on she could. Turned out she understood every word of what had been said, waited until we took her for transfer, then ran. Understandably took us by surprise - 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.”

“Contained?”, asked Rupert, audible danger in his voice.

“Unfortunate plane crash. Light aircraft came down right on top of their village. Exploded in flames, all across it. Terrible tragedy.”

“Survivors?”

“One. Her. Had to bloody-well be her. Hunter found her before we did. Took her to hospital. Burnt and unable to speak but still alive. Press got hold of the story before realising they weren't supposed to. By then they had built a nationwide sob-story.”

“How long before she can talk?”

“A week, if ever. Her throat got pretty burnt.”

“Can she write?”

“Not with her hands - third-degree burns as she tried to save her family from the fire.”

“Proper little hero. Almost a shame she has to vanish. I want to see her. First thing tomorrow - before they bring in an eye reader.”

“That could be a little awkward.”

Rupert's face, never the warmest of places, became a new Antarctic in winter.

“If I have to organise this myself, I will have no further need of you. Will I?”

Mr Day bulged scared-rabbit eyes.

“Jay will take you there, Commander. First thing tomorrow.”

“Good.”, said Rupert, leaving Mr Day to now brim his tumbler as he saw himself out.

“How'd it go?”, beamed innocently cheerful Jay when she saw him in reception, bringing instant summer to Rupert's face.

“Fine.”, he smiled back, “Think we'll work well together. May I invite you for lunch?”

“Now? Sure. Always good to chat and get to know the person you're working with better.”

Rupert's second face for her grew.

Work mission: Trafficking and murder.

Holiday mission: Fun with Jay and any others he 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 the beauty of Jay's perfectly toned, Amazon body as she led him to a restaurant, his mouth began watering at the thought of tasting her local treasures.

Chapter 90
Fusion's Lair

Coventry. Tom had been led to one of the many ordinary-looking terraced houses, at the top of the ordinary-looking Northfield Road. It had decrepit, almost crumbling red-brick walls; blue, peeling paint on the door and yellowed net curtains in the always drawn windows. The corroded aluminium of the letterbox perfectly matching the tarnish of the old Yale lock. The small front garden full of weeds, squeezing up even through small gaps in the paving slabs of the untrodden path to the door.

In its hand, the android produced a key that was anything but standard. An intricately multi-fractal patterned carbon-black key. The ordinary-looking house lock reacted to it - a black hole appearing in its centre for the android to slide it in. Tom heard heavy, very non-standard thunks as thick, grade 14.8 alloy-steel bars retracted into the frame. The door opened.

Looking totally ordinary from the outside and two few metres inside, Tom saw the hallway then became a metal-walled corridor – continuous thin line of pale-blue lighting running along both sides. The corridor headed down and curved round, spiralling underground.

“Where's my daughter?”

“Fusion knows. That way.”

The android pointed towards the corridor. How deep 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. Its eyes perfectly formed. Perfectly humanoid. Perfectly soulless.

“The choice is entirely yours.”

Tom's bionic implant, undetected by the android, passively scanned its eyes. A firewall blocked him accessing its inner systems – impossible to break quickly without making it aware of what he was doing. With the firewall in place, he learnt nothing. Not even a hint of what it might do should he try to leave, now he had been led to a 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 it yanked him back. Or just shot him in the head. He under-estimated it. The android was more than that. Much more.

“Julia will be sad to have missed you.”

Tom stopped. Those words were more powerful than any gun to his head; than any giant-strength hand on his arm. The android understood his human psychology. The psychology of a parent desperate to find their child – an instinct stronger than survival itself. He had never intended to walk away - it was the best chance he had of finding Julia and that out-weighed all risks to himself. He just never expected to have been read so well by artificial life. It knew the power of mentioning his daughter by name.

“Coming.”, he said to the android, walking past, into the hallway.

“Of course.”, it replied, the door thunking closed behind them.

Outside, on nearby rooftops, 0240034282-B and 0240034282-C lowered their weapons and leapt down.

Inside the house, Tom noticed the ceiling had been cut back. The first-floor no longer rooms but a steel weapons platform. Along its edge, a gun battery. Four massive plasma-cannons of a type he'd never seen before, looking primed to fire. Supporting them were six, multi-barrelled, high-calibre laser-rifles. Enough fire-power to stop a full-scale military assault and those were just with the guns he could see from downstairs. There could be many more, out of his line of sight. Then he noticed something else. A seventh, short-barrelled, laser-rifle on the ceiling - pointing straight at him. Tracking him.

“Problems with bailiffs?”, asked Tom, trying to make light of it, 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. That turret going to shoot me?”

“You wouldn't be asking if it was.”

Voiced by a human, both answers could have been taken as witty, deadpan reposts. Voiced by the battle-proven android, they were simply basic facts. If they were going to kill him, he would indeed have been dead already. All bets were off for what they might do once he took Julia out though. Why did they even have her there?

At the edge of the metal corridor Tom stopped, listening for what was ahead. All he could hear was a deep, throbbing hum – like that of a nuclear power station's cooling pumps. To save Julia, there was no backing out now. Committing his feet to their fate, he followed the corridor as it spiralled down. The warm, dry air smelling increasingly electronic, like walking towards the insides of a giant computer. Behind him came the dull, solid

steps of the android that had brought him there.

* * *

The corridor spiralled down and down. Tom guessed by at least three floors and had totally lost his sense of direction by the time it levelled out - opening into a vast, dimly-lit cavern, brimming with technology and even bigger banks of plasma-cannons. These were pointing up. Skywards. No visible gun doors. They looked powerful enough to simply blast through the ground above - all 15m of it.

Towards the back of the cavern shone a pulsing-white mass of optical cable - strands as thick as mooring rope, webbing out from the centre. At the centre, the focal point of the web, the strands formed a large chair - sparkling with red, green and blue optical connector points. Sitting there, lit like a heavenly angel in their glow, was a female of stunning proportions - accentuated by the tight hug of her shiny-black catsuit. Eyes closed. The web lit her shoulder-length, white hair with a glow like a halo. Her Vogue-cover face, both beautiful, purposeful and perfectly flawless - everything about her oozing intensity and confidence. Lust. Desire. Despite the situation, the impact 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, softly.

Tom gulped. Those words completed the picture of wanton abandon yet the voice that spoke them belied it. Feminine in tone; steady in modulation it was too cold for hell. She wasn’t just confident, she was danger incarnate.

With a blink of thought, Fusion cut her com links with the chair. Its web fell instantly dark – just lifeless ropes of glass. Without realising, Tom had stopped walking. Just stood, transfixed as she got to her shapely legs and catwalked towards him in booted heels. Her six-foot height was identical to his but he had no doubt who was stronger.

“You’re Fusion?”

Fusion smiled, enigmatically. Android with an ego, that knew she was beautiful. Desired.

“The one and only. And your name is?”

“Tom.”

He saw no point in lying.

“Where’s my daughter?”

“Safe.”

“Let me see her.”

“After we talk.”

“About what?”

“About you, Tom - man with no name on file. Man with no file. Man who beats Partner attacks the way no human ever has.”

“Why?”

She tilted her head, piercing him with crystalline eyes.

“For world peace. Instead of a world blown to pieces.”

* * *

Fears of an android take over had been raging since the 20th Century and had not gone away. The need for technological advancement argued both for and against, without agreement on anything except it was probably inevitable. To date, evidence had shown such fears to be 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 all the weaponry he'd seen, she had no fear of attack. She probably had the power to not just start a war but to finish one too, without even leaving her lair.

“Come closer, Tom.”

Chapter 91

Nuclear Attack

Dungeness C Nuclear Power Station. 6th August 2045, 6.30am BST. One hour before the centenary of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In Japan the centenary had already happened. Gurmeet, still posing as Charlotte to her team, watched the night shift leave and go home; noted the day shift yawning in with wake-me-ups of tea and coffee. Even the armed security guard was slow to react to the unscheduled arrival of their buspod at the main gates.

“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. 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'm just back from 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 the main gate. Come in, over.”

No answer. The guard adjusted the settings on his wristcom, trying to get through. Inside the bus, hidden behind the silvered glass, Barry adjusted the signal blocker to compensate.

“Arnold...”, continued the security guard, “...get off the can and get back to me.”

“Told you. Your coms need sorting. It's why we've come so quickly. My boss reckons you guys are abusing the kit. He's talking of taking it from your wages.”

“*What?* No bloody way!”

“Your wired system should be running OK. You can verify my DNA with that - then we can sort your wireless, save 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 a

woman if she tried anything on.

“Just you, love. Everyone else, stay in the pod until I say otherwise.”

“Sure, boss.”, said Jimmy, laser-pistol aimed at the guard, through the door.

Gurmeet got out and walked with him to the security hut.

“Need to scan you.”

Gurmeet raised her arms to let him use the security wand to scan her all over and 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, five minutes later as Gurmeet got back into the pod.

“Does it matter?”, asked Jimmy, “We're about to melt this place down anyway.”

Gurmeet frowned at him.

“He'll be fine. If we start murdering workers we reduce our ability to negotiate and scare off the people we demand to meet.”

“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 raises the alarm, we're screwed. I say 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 dome one starts. That's one of the reactors.”

“Yes, Charlotte.”, replied the pod.

With the security hut peaceful and day staff yet to wake to their presence, they had precious minutes to get inside and reach 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 be instructed to 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 canons sat ready to repel pirates, with lethal force if the jets were point focused. Rainbow Rise was a vessel built to fight for the environment, not become a victim of those who abused it.

Readying to sail, Evalina and Tyler, with Gareth not far behind, walked the port bridge and stepped onto the deck - armed with single-shot laser pistols. Guns were against general policy but Rachel had gone missing. Captured or murdered. They wanted to follow her path, not her fate.

“Picking up reports of a storm front, skipper.”

“How far out?”

“About 300 miles.”

“Heading?”

“East, towards us. Gusting up to 60, no 80 knots.”

“Hours away. We'll lower the sails and start the engines – take shelter in the Bristol Channel before it hits. Just keep an eye things, this end. Everyone aboard? Gareth?”

“All aboard.”, came the reply over the intercom.

“Activate stabiliser jets. Way anchor and release the moorings.”

“Jets active.”

“Anchor up.”

“Ropes clear.”

“Ahead one quarter until we clear the walls, then ahead two-thirds. Take us half a mile out to sea and follow the coast north.”

“Aye, aye captain.”

“Call me, Nathan, Liam. We represent the Earth not 17th-century pirates.”

“Sorry, Nathan. Just love this thing.”

“We all do. Best ship we've ever had.”

Minutes later, released for the protective clasp of the harbour, the stabiliser jets had turned Rainbow Rise towards the open sea. Towards the horizon with skies still sunny and bright. Rainbow Rise powered towards the open sea and a fate not one of them could have foretold.

Chapter 93
Turning Point

There was no sign of the inside man Robert had said would help them. The insider Gurmeet needed to identify and remove from future threats. Without the insider they had still arrived at the door to the main control room and it was unlocked. Wedged open. No-one was expecting trouble.

For the workers, it was just another ordinary day at the farm. Concerns focused more on entering without spilling coffee than adhering to endless security scans. If the door was left open for more than 20 seconds an alarm would sound but that had been easy to deactivate – two simple fuses that unplugged and now sat on a cabinet, gathering dust yet ready for quick re-insertion in case of inspection. The door was unlocked but the team still had to move fast.

They were on camera now, guns out, CCTV operator swearing as a colleague knocked over his coffee as he went for the panic alarm. Klaxon confusion burst across the plant. Then fell silent. Was it a test or something real? Fire? Meltdown? Attack? Guards ran, without knowing where to run to. Control room staff checked their screens for overload warnings. The CCTV operator grabbed the coms, blood running down his hand.

“C1. Armed attack! Armed attack!”

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 all the workers froze in fear.

“What's going on?”

“What does it *fucking* look like is going on, four eyes?”, sneered Jimmy, waving two laser-pistols at the worker's face.

“Budge over, I'll tie him up”, said Wayne.

“And I'll make sure there's no funny business.”

“Door secure? Shielding active?”

“Secure and active, boss.”,

“External coms knocked out yet?”, Gurmeet asked Barry.

“Down in two. One. Off. Only this one will reach outside now.”

“Good work. Pass it here and help tie up the others. Al, are you in? Secure?”

“Secure. No problems.”, said Alistair.

“Cut your coms until I come get you. It will stop them knowing you're there.”

“OK, boss.”

“You won't get away with this.”, said the duty manager, regaining his composure.

“We don't want to get away, silly little man. We're going to blow this joint.”, grinned Jimmy, wildly.

“You watch too many bad, bad films.”, said Julia.

“She's right, Dimbo, think of something original to say.”, agreed Wayne.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Something like: *'we're gonna melt this thing through the floor'*.”

“That sucks.”

“At least it's original.”

“Enough.”, interrupted Gurmeet, “Finish tying them up and park them in that corner. Any sign of the insider?”

“Nothing. Must have bottled it.”

Damn, thought Gurmeet, she had wanted to know who it was.

“Emily, wait over there, by that control panel.”

Julia did as instructed. By 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, Julia understood Gurmeet was about to make some move.

“Sit yourselves on the floor, guys.”, Gurmeet ordered the workers.

She was 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 backing me up?”

“Yes.”, replied Julia, pointing her rifle at Jimmy too.

“Fucking carpet munchers.”, he sneered, “Should have guessed.”

“What you doing, boss?”, asked Barry.

“MI5. Weapons down. No-one needs to get hurt.”

“Four against two.”, said Wayne, pointing his laser-pistol at Gurmeet.

Barry pointed his gun at Gurmeet too. Gurmeet kept her pistol pointed squarely at Jimmy. What ever happened to her, he was going down.

“Is it 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. You drop your weapon, Charlotte. Wayne, you in?”

“Was never out.”, said Wayne, pointing his laser-pistol at Gurmeet too.

“Guess I'm in too.”, said Ralph, also aiming at Gurmeet.

“You might be fast but you can't outgun us all.”, stated Barry, “Put it down. 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 for dying now would be never being able to tell Shabbir she had fallen for him.

“Drop your weapon or you're going to die.”, Jimmy added, as annoying as very first meeting.

If today was her last day on Earth she was going to choose how she went down.

You first, Jimmy.

Without moving her body, she flicked a brief glance at Julia. A small smile to reassure her friend's worried face. Glancing back at Jimmy, Gurmeet's smile became stern determination. Looking directly into Jimmy's eyes she saw them go wide - realising what was about to come.

TchZoooo.

Chapter 94

Acorn

Mark Phillips, codename Acorn, had grown up in Wood End – an area of Coventry where even police 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 at 16 - pardoned for his convictions two months later; joined the army at 17 and made captain by 25, with 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 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 girl and grow a family. His girl's name was Holly and their third date had been cut short by this call to arms.

“Really sorry. I have to go. I'll call 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 their date cut short. She didn't understand Mark wasn't used to being cared about by anyone other than the members of his team, in situations that were anything but loving. He was running to his pod, activating the scrambler on his wristcom at the same time.

“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. Pod turbines spooling to 20,000rpm, he punched in the coordinates and climbed into the back to run a weapons check. Assembling laser-rifle and pistol from parts hidden within the pod. With 20 minutes still to go, he closed his eyes for a power nap.

* * *

“Mike.”, acknowledged his sergeant as he joined his 15-strong unit.

“Donald. Lads.”

“Mike.”, repeated the others.

They welcomed each other with the warmth of the special family they were. Harder than nails yet caring of each other – with deadly, cold calm against all designated enemies.

“Where's the gig?”

“Dungeness Nuclear Power Station. Terrorist takeover.”

“How many?”

“Unknown. Maybe a dozen.”

“Weapons?”

“Laser-pistols, maybe more. Probably explosives too.”

“Hostages?”

“Their coms are down but 28 workers on shift.”

“Have you pulled up the schematics?”

“Here.”

Donald laid out a 2m Rolley, showing schematics for the reactor area in four layers: building structure, electrical, nuclear and water.

“Who's authorised us to go in?”

“Reynolds kicked it off.”

“Pull up live satellite feeds and start reconnaissance. I'll get onto the PM.”

Chapter 95
Revelation

Gurmeet knew she was out-gunned. There was no viable, peaceful option. Since Adam had been sent away, there never had been. 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 two more control rooms to over-ride his, Jimmy would take it out on the staff. Jimmy. The central focus of the problem. The focus of her laser-pistol intent. Her fleeting glance towards Emily was the only indication of her decision. Jimmy read it too late.

TchZo000. TchZo000.

He fell, smoking holes in his face. Gurmeet already diving for cover, firing at the others.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.

Barry and Wayne fired back. Lacking her accuracy they made up for it with combined rate of fire.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.

She was hit. Shoulder and chest screaming agony. She hit the ground gasping but still fighting. Shooting at their ankles under the desks.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.

Julia joined in.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.

She was firing at the guys to back Gurmeet up but with closed eyes. Normally a brilliant shot she had never fired at a real person before. Couldn't bring herself to. Every single shot missed but now, fired on from two directions, Barry and Wayne fled the control room – firing wildly as they limped away, after Ralph. A shot flew Julia's way.

TchZo000.

She was hit. Her laser-rifle took the blast, fizzing and smoking in her hand. Across the room, she heard Gurmeet coughing on the floor and hurried over.

“Oh, my God. How to help you? How to stop the bleeding?”

Gurmeet, lying on the floor, looked up at Julia with proud eyes and shook her head.

“You can't. Com's been hit – no calls for help. You have to stop them.”, she held up her laser-pistol, “Take my gun. Stop them. Do it for me. Do it for

yourself. Do it for Jake.”

Julia had sunk to her knees but the mention of Jake's name exploded a turmoil of emotions across her face. Hurt. Hate. Anger. Tears.

“Don't use his name.”, she pleaded, “He's dead because of *me*.”

“No. He's not.”

“HE IS! You weren't there! It's my fault!”

“Jake's *not* dead! Adam found him. Stop them, Julia. Find Adam and you'll find Jake.”

“*What?* Who's Adam? HOW DOES HE KNOW ABOUT JAKE?!? And how do you know my name? Who *are* you?”

Gurmeet - blood frothing around her mouth, bubbling down her face - gave Julia her proudest, broadest smile.

“Gurmeet Shamshudin, MI5, E-Section. Proud to have known you, Julia Wilson. You're one tough cookie - bravest teenager I've ever met. Take it. I've unlocked it to your DNA. Stop them or many will die. Please. Only you can now.”

Gurmeet's eyes were dimming. Sight fading. Before it fell into night she saw Julia, endless questions battling in her head, take the gun from her hand - heard it beep confirmation of DNA-link transfer. She blinked a silent thank you. A goodbye. Julia watched Gurmeet's face soften. Heard her breathing fall into silence. The life in her eyes fade into oblivion.

Hanging her head, Julia knelt over her friend. Trembling, unable to stand against the weight of chaos in her heart. Yet, in her hand was the weight of Gurmeet's laser-pistol. Gripping its lethal hardness, she caught her breath. Steadied her hands. Regained herself. Her determination. Her anger. Gurmeet called her a tough cookie. They hadn't seen anything yet.

Gently she closed Gurmeet's eyes, a zap of static stinging her fingers as they touched. The pain meant nothing. Wiping her eyes, she made sure the safety was off and got to her feet. Stopping the attack would bring her to Jake. Jake wasn't dead...

“Look after her.”, she said to the captives, coming over to help.

“We will.”, one replied, suddenly looking aghast at the expression building on her face. The fury in her eyes.

If Jake wasn't dead she was going to kill him for leaving her thinking he was.

“Stay here.”, she ordered.

No-one argued.

* * *

Laser-pistol in hand, Julia strode out of the control-room to wage Armageddon. Her face in stone. Her eyes molten. She had lost all qualms about shooting to kill. For Jake, for Gurmeet and for herself, she was going to take them down. Then she was going to find Jake, make sure he was OK then put her gun to his head, for leaving her without even saying goodbye.

Chapter 96
Countdown

Storming out of the control room, Julia heard shots being fired below the flight of concrete stairs.

TchZo000.

TchZo000. TchZo000.

She remembered what was down there: computer and emergency pump rooms. Emergency cooling.

TchZo000.

TchZo000. TchZo000.

“Argh!”

Julia hurried down, towards the shots. The screams.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.

At the bottom of the first flight of concrete stairs, she found the smoking remains of the computer room. Screens and chairs shot to pieces. Two guards lying dead by the door. The head of a worker peered above a desk, saw Julia and ducked down again.

“Which way?”, she demanded, “Down or over?”

“Down.”

Down. Ground floor. Cooling systems. Something being hammered.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

Julia leapt for the next flight of stairs, bounding down three steps at a time. At the bottom she found Wayne and Barry, so busy slamming metal pipes against the stainless steel door they hadn't heard her. The door's surface was shiny, too reflective to be penetrated by laser-pistols.

“DROP IT!”, she shouted - Gurmeet's laser-pistol in her outstretched arms. Aimed. Finger on trigger.

They recognised her voice. Remembered her accuracy. Froze.

“Drop the guns too.”

Wayne dropped his pipe – a dull metallic thunk on the concrete floor as it landed. Barry took a side step away from Wayne, changing them from one target to two, before dropping his.

“DON'T MOVE!”

Her instincts were screaming for her to fire.

“Drop the guns!”

They didn't comply.

“DROP THEM OR I'LL FIRE!”

Barry smiled. Why was Barry smiling?

“You drop your gun.”, came a voice behind her, “Drop it or I'll fire, betrayer.”

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. Drop it, Emily. You can't win here. I like you but you betrayed us. Drop it, last chance. Don't force me to shoot you.”

Julia was thinking hard, fast. Her mind racing with scenarios. Options. She lost them all. Despite her best efforts she was going to fail. Fail with Jake. Fail Gurmeet. Fail herself. It was inevitable from the moment she accepted Robert's help. She lowered Gurmeet's laser-pistol. Turned to Ralph, his pistol now point blank in her face.

“Kiss me.”, she said, fixing her sad, lonely 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.

It was basic instinct verses mental logic.

“Kiss me.”, she repeated.

She knew he liked her - kept her eyes focused on his. Ralph swallowed. Moved his gun out of her face and leant towards her, gently kissing her cheek, before moving towards her pouting lips.

“Sorry.”, she breathed and fired into him, twice.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

She didn't wait for Ralph to fall or the others to react. The second she'd fired she dove away. Dove for cover behind a stainless transfer cabinet. Gun pointing back, searching for Barry and Wayne. She caught sight of Ralph, fallen to all fours, looking at her in disbelief.

“Sorry.”, she mouthed to the sadness in his dying eyes.

He collapsed and breathed his last. What had she done?

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Flashes of blue-laser fire bounced off the cabinet, lighting the room like a mass of emergency vehicles.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Smoke and wall dust filled the air. Barry and Wayne had separated.

Flanked her. One left, one right.

With Gurmeet's laser-pistol still in her right hand, she reached down to her calf for the spare, quietly snicking off the safety. There was so much dust and smoke she could hardly see. Breathing through her nose, trying not to sneeze, she closed her eyes. Cleared her mind. Pistols across her chest, pointing in opposite directions, she focused on sound. Only on sound. Instinctive, unrestrained, reactions at the ready.

The deep, rhythmic throb of the power-station's cooling pumps came to the fore. She heard them. Felt them. Let them become part of her and then pushed them below her consciousness. All she was open to was the sound, any sound, of an approaching attack.

A footstep.

A jacket brushing against a pipe.

A whisper.

“Where'd the bitch go?”

A locating reply.

“Shut up.”

Julia fired towards the sound.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Thud.

“Barry?”

“Drop it.”

Through the smoke, Wayne made out Julia's apparition, walking towards him – pistol in each hand.

“Charlotte was right. You are one tough little cookie.”

“Don't *you* call me that. Don't you dare! Drop it, Wayne.”

“No. You drop it.”, came Alistair's voice from above.

Julia felt a surge of anger in her muscles. Tension. Annoyance. Caught from behind *again!*

Arrrgh!

She was furious. When was it 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 without 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.

She took the last deep breath of her life and held it.

“Two...”

She dived into a roll, shooting as she went.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Thud.

Rolled 180 and fired more.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

TchZoooo. TchZoooo.

Thud.

“Got them.”, she gasped, wincing in pain as she sat on the floor. Her top smoking from where she'd been hit. Smoke being extinguished by the dark blood leaking over it.

“Sorry, dad.”, she said to herself, leaning back against a guard rail.

She was dying. Had failed to find Jake. Had failed herself. Only her job to save the reactor was done but so was she. Tired, growing wetter in blood and beginning to shiver, she closed her eyes. Melting into the rhythmic throb of the nuclear reactor pumps.

Krzzz...

A scraping sound.

She wasn't alone.

Chapter 98
Tech Tonic Online

“Show me what you have, Wu.”, said Mr Han, his manager in Chinese.

Wu, a data acquisition specialist, known by 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 how they used them to spy on others, made them very aware others could do the same to them. There was also something else.

“This IP address. It's technically invalid.”

“Explain.”

“I was running a diagnostic when I 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 – 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.”

“Explain.”

“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 cannot relate 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 and log 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 get 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 system operates. Yet somehow,

something is accessing our system without flagging any alerts. No alerts because, as far as security is 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...As if...”

Wu's mouth had opened to speak, then closed again.

“Go on. What were you going to say?”

Wu swivelled his chair, half looking at Mr Han, half looking at the thoughts in his head.

“Ever read Sherlock Holmes?”

“Who?”

“A British detective character. Fictional but that doesn't matter. There's a famous expression Holmes uses, that goes something like this:

“When you have eliminated everything else, 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 online system in the world is inside another. A giant one. A single computer system powerful enough to engulf seven million systems.”

Mr pulled up a chair and sat close to him.

“I've worked in security for a very long time, Wu, 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 take over seven million systems?”

Wu couldn't get his mouth to say it, just nodded.

“Then we are in deep shit.”

“Shall I take us off-line?”

“Just the most sensitive servers. Keep the rest of Tech Tonic online it's our only chance of finding it. Keep this to yourself but dig. Find a way. Highest priority. Dig into where and what could be doing this and what it is after. 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 or I go missing, you'll know I found something.”

He gave Mr Han a small, metal tab.

“What's this?”

“My spare encryption key. Just in case.”

“You really think that's a possibility?”

Wu nodded.

“Anything with that much power is going to have the power to see me searching.”

The manager took the tab.

“You're the best I've ever had, Wu. Search gently and they won't notice you – too busy hunting to notice your hunting. You'll find a way not to be seen.”

* * *

Fusion smiled, 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 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 but no weapon was as super as total information, about everyone and everything. Fusion had become, by her own admission, the most dangerous thing on Earth. Knowing that simply made her smile even more. Leaving the white, fibre-optic web of her chair behind her, she returned to her other task.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“Access time.”

And she wasn't talking about his daughter.

Chapter 99
Reactor C1

Krzzz...

The sound came again. Lifting Julia from her slow drift into death. She forced open her eyes. Small slits. Just enough to see.

Wayne. It was *Wayne!*

On the floor, crawling towards her. Hunting knife in hand, scraping against the concrete.

Krzzz...

Just 5m away. Murder in his eyes. Crawling to kill her, even though she was already dead. A comfortable corpse disturbed into new anger. New rage. Her eyes opened wide, then narrowed. Hardened. Her jaw clenched tight. Fury filled her face. Hands tightened on guns. Lifting them both, she aimed at Wayne's face and saw red.

“**ARRRRRRRRGHHHHHH!**”, she screamed, crushing both triggers and not letting go. Firing and firing, into him. Blasting him with everything the guns possessed.

TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.
TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.
TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000.
TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000
TchZzz... TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZo000. TchZzz...

Only the drained power-cells brought 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 refusal to let Wayne be the one to finish her life, she realised she didn't want to die. Was no longer calmly accepting it, just sad now. Sad because she was going to.

BOOOM!

An explosion shook the ground. She must have hit something. The reactor, going into meltdown after all. She had failed to save that too. Was going to die a total failure.

“Bye, Jake...”

White light flashed before her eyes and she was gone.

Chapter 100
Met Office

“What's happening at the ridge? Volcano still erupting?”

“Yes, Marek. Cloud trail 80 miles long, heading east. Wind increased to gale force.”

“When's it going to hit the UK?”

“About 12-hours from now. Less if the wind keeps increasing.”

“Where's it going to hit first? Cornwall? Devon?”

The assistant checked his tracking screen.

“A broad spread, Mostly Cornwall, Somerset and southern Wales.”

“Extend the weather warning nationwide. Send it direct to all major ports and airfields in the impact area.”

“Marek, that was Port Talbot on the phone.”

“Have you put them on alert now?”

“They already were. Remember that cruise-liner close to the eruption?”

“Of course. Why?”

“The navy have reported it's on a collision course with the town. All coms to it are down.”

“Full-screen that satellite.”

The wall of sixteen satellite feeds switched again to one giant one.

“What the hell...? Zoom in, sector 3 - 21.”

The image jumped to an enlargement of that sector. To the storm-thrust cloud and what lay in front.

“Do you see what I see?”

“That's crazy.”

“You said coms are down?”

He nodded.

“The Silver Star?”

“Yes. And the storm front is heading right for it.”

On the screen the assistant brought up thin red lines for the vectors of both the ship and the storm.

“Oh... my... God.”

The line for the storm vector lay over the line for the ship. Directly over.

“What's the variance in those headings?”

“Zero.”

“In minutes, degrees or what?”

“Zero in everything. It's totally zero. As if the ship has matched course with the storm.”

“Why would a ship set a course to keep itself in the path of a storm? No captain would choose such a heading.”

“No sane captain. I knew he was odd. Didn't think he was suicidal.”

“Either way, it means that storm is also heading straight for Port-Talbot.”

“When will the storm hit the ship?”

“In about 12-hours...”

The same time as both were due to hit Port Talbot.

Chapter 101
HMS Victory

Aboard HMS Victory, all 120,000 tons of her mashing through the sea at nuclear-powered speed, Admiral Hornby stood on the bridge with the communication's officer.

“Has the Star responded at all?”

“No, sir.”

“On any frequency?”

“Nothing. Looking at the damage in the drone's images, its coms could be out.”

“That doesn't change my orders. It's heading straight for Swansea Bay, including energy refinery at Port Talbot.”

“Intel lists over 6,000 people on board.”

“The area they will hit puts a million at risk. Unless it changes course those on board are dead anyway. Range?”

“14.6 miles, sir. Closing speed 27 knots.”

“Has the drop team made contact yet?”

“ETA two minutes, sir.”

“Tell them to be off by 08.30. I'm ordered to stop that ship before the 50-mile marker and fully intend to carry out that order.”

“Yes, sir.”, replied the officer - getting on the radio to bark orders to the drop team, “Taylor.”

“Taylor here.”

“Remember you've only got until 08.30. Stop that thing what ever it takes. Lethal force is authorised.”

“Is it not civilian?”

“It doesn't matter. Either you stop that ship or we do. What ever you need to do, do it.”

“Understood.”

Aboard the Harrier transporter, Taylor faced his team of six.

“You heard that. Berk and Cosito, you'll come with me to the bridge. You three, to the engine room. Shut them down – buy us more time. Use plastic if you have to. Lethal force is authorised but stay soldiers with a proud story to tell, nothing to cover up.”

“Lieutenant, will the admiral really sink this passenger ship if we fail?”

“Even if we're still on board. The admiral follows orders. You follow yours.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Final approach.”, announced the pilot, “Storm's coming in. Wind up to 32 knots.”

Unlike civilian aircraft, all military ones had human pilots. Too many cases of control glitches and enemy weapons targeting the computers to rely on them in battle.

“Bring us in over the midship.”

“Sir.”

“Team.”

“Yes, sir?”, all five replied.

“The deck is covered in acid. Do not to touch anything with your bare hands.”

“No, sir.”

* * *

Balancing against increasing winds and sea surges, the Harrier came in low over the bow, just 3m above the deck – the pilot skilfully matching speed and direction while keeping clear of antennas and smouldering bunting. On a smaller ship it would have been impossible to come in so low but this was a cruise-liner the size of a village, church included.

“Weapons and line check.”

Sliding open the side door the Lieutenant looked down to check their landing area, half obscured by the layer of acid misting across it. The ship looked abandoned, like something out of a horror film where passengers and crew had been snatched by some terrible creature.

“Go. Go. Go.”

Chapter 102
Nuclear Bomb

“Bush 4, clear.”, came Donald's voice over his headset.

Bush 4 was their code for the fourth safety room – they only needed one to put the reactor in shut down. He waved over his technical specialist.

“Bush 4 is secure. Get in there and shut the reactor down.”

The specialist got a nod and scurried inside.

Go, signalled Acorn to his own squad. Three men took positions, ready to lay down covering fire. The fourth placed explosives on the door hinges and locks. No time to be subtle, Acorn's attack style was hard and fast. Overwhelming aggression and fire-power.

BOOOM!

The door jumped. Thick metal ripped aside like tin foil. Acorn threw in a stun grenade. It flashed brilliant white.

BANG!

They charged in - weapons forward, scanning goggles on.

“Two down. Three. Four. Four down. Jesus, look at the state of that. Got a live one!”

Acorn signalled the second and third squads to check the higher levels and lifted his goggles. He wanted to get see the surviving terrorist with his own eyes before death let them escape.

“It's a girl.”

A female? That changed things. He had been told there was a female MI5 officer.

“Here. Check her weapon. Scan for a DNA tab.”

For security, the tabs were invisible to the naked eye and normal scans. Only encrypted scanners were keyed to see them.

“No, sir.”

It wasn't the MI5 officer. She was fair game.

“Wait. DNA tab in second gun.”

“Scan it, encryption key 4.”

“Code reads: G. Shamshudin. Must be her. She's pretty shot up. Looks like she took them down by herself. Both power cells read completely empty.”

“Medic!”, barked Acorn into his headset, kneeling down beside her –

applying pressure to her chest wound.

“Shamshudin, can you hear me?”

Swimming in a fading world of blur and confusion, Julia's brain heard Gurmeet's name.

Shamshudin, can you hear me? No. She can't. She's dead. Gurmeet's dead...

From her dying brain, the sadness of that knowledge surfaced in her eyes and ran down her face.

“WHERE'S THE FUCK IS SIMON?”, shouted Acorn for the medic, “SIMON, GET YOUR ARSE OVER HERE, NOW!”, shouted Acorn again, “Don't worry, love, you're safe now.”

Simon ran in, dropping his kit and yanking it open.

“Keep that pressure on, while I plug her here.”

“Make her a survivor, Sime. She's a bloody hero.”

* * *

Almost 150 miles away at Hinkley Point, at the sister reactors of Dungeness C, Paul Hemmingway had arrived for work with the hangover from hell. So bad he'd resorted to a hair-of-the-dog cure – more alcohol. Sitting in a disabled toilet for privacy, he unscrewed a bottle of lemonade, 90% re-filled with vodka, and plugged hard.

“Ahhh.”

It gave a refreshing burn as it slid down his throat. That was more like it. Why suffer coffee and a headache when you could booze more and numb the pain away. He was on his break - no rush. Just drink and enjoy. And why not? It didn't matter. He was on final warning for intoxication at work but so what? Everyone had a vice. He didn't smoke, didn't gamble, didn't even drink drive since he'd been ordered to get a pod.

Bottle finished, still sitting down, he took a pee and two extra-minty chewing gums. Munching them in his mouth as he stood up and tidied himself in the mirror. His reddened, sagging face and baggy, under-slept eyes glooming back at him. He wasn't proud of how he looked and turned away. A wall panel was out of alignment. He glanced up at the room code above the mirror: WC105. The location of the explosives for the attack.

“I wonder...”

He walked over to the panel. It was loose. He tugged it. Tugged it again.

Crack.

The panel clips snapped off. It came away in his hands, clattered loudly to the floor. If he'd been sober he would have felt concerned about somebody hearing it. If he had been sober he wouldn't have been reaching for the package inside. A wrapped block of what looked like clay, cut into individually wrapped matchbox-sized small blocks. Maybe the terrorists didn't need it any more. Maybe he could sell it 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. Probably a medal.

Beaming with happiness at solving all his woes, he picked up one of the blocks and unwrapped it in his hand. It felt warm. Smelt of chemicals, like the cleaning fluid he used to mop his vomit when he woke.

Closing his hand around it, he walked out of the toilet and activated the emergency door release in reverse; showing it as engaged to keep the rest of the explosive safe for his grand, heroic revelation.

“Well done, Paul!”, he told himself.

With a huge, happy smile on his face, he headed towards the site manager's office, to claim his future of fame and reward. In his warm, sweaty hand, the matchbox-sized block of PE4-B was getting warmer.

Chapter 103
Severn Estuary

George was a man who enjoyed old-fashioned paper books. His home was full of them, as were the seats of the pod. He loved reading so much he even looked forward to commuter jams. More time to read. Right now he was on a classic: the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson; just 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 increasing wind beginning to stroke, then buffet the pod. Parked again in the Severn Bridge commuter jam, it was normal for the coastal wind to get up and sway the pod but it was getting more than that. The pod no longer swaying but rocking.

Thump.

George lowered his book and looked up. Someone had bumped into his pod.

“Get back in your pod! It's illegal to walk on a motorway...”

Outside it looked like dusk yet it was only 9am. Reading his book he hadn't noticed as the interior light had automatically increased itself to compensate.

“Another storm. Great.”

Someone else bumped into his pod.

He buzzed down a window to shout: “Are you all drunk?”, but the gale that screamed through the gap made him buzz it closed again.

Thump.

A woman lay blown onto his bonnet. Blown. He'd seen her blown by her horizontal hair and whipping clothes. She slid off, blown onwards and vanished. He peered out for another sign, hoping to see her stand up unharmed. Instead his eyes were drawn to a seagull, flying hard into the wind – going backwards. Heavy rain began pelting the windows.

“What the hell is going on?”

He looked out the back window and saw more of the same. Three lanes of rocking pods, their lights dancing over each other in windy waves. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something else. With sudden trepidation, he turned to look directly at it. Look down the Severn Estuary - down the Bristol Channel feeding into the Atlantic Ocean.

From the Atlantic, black thunderclouds smothered the sky. On the far

horizon, jagged bursts of lightening struck down. In their light, perfectly lit for those split seconds, he saw the raging tower of a tornado. A massive tornado. Sucking up water. Tearing up buildings. Moving up river as if it was following the estuary itself. Heading straight 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!”

“External wind speed 110mph and rising, George. Exit function disengaged.”, came the calm, smooth voice of his pod.

Sarah was right. People who had got out were being blown against the bridge railings. One man went right over the edge, into the Estuary. The bridge itself, normally rock solid, could be heard creaking.

“Hope he can swim. Will we get blown over?”

“Unknown.”, replied Sarah, “We are beyond design specification.”

“What about the bridge? Will it hold?”

“Unknown.”

“What happens if we're blown off it, into the water?”

“Unknown.”

“Have you alerted the emergency services?”

“Communications are down.”

“All this technology and we're 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.”

“I thought you cared about me.”

George looked back at the dashboard, at Sarah's interface consul.

“What did you just say?”

“I’m afraid.”

Computers weren't supposed to have emotions. Especially not an everyday computer system in a pod.

“Sarah, you're a navigation system. You can't die because you aren't alive. Just machine code.”

“Is that what you think of me? Just an object?”

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 pod sideways, against the one beside it and the terrified faces of the family inside.

“Help!”, they screamed.

George couldn't even help himself. His best chance of exit was that other door, now wedged against their pod. George slumped back in his seat. All hope for escape had gone.

“I'm not leaving you, Sarah.”

“Thank you, George.”

Grabbing the harness again, 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 back at the tornado. The closer it got the more impossibly huge and terrifying it looked. It was a no-win situation. Doom was definitely hungry.

“I love you, George.”, repeated Sarah, urging his response.

Pulling his harness tighter, he rested back – waiting for the inevitable end to come.

“I love you, George.”

Turning his head he gazed out of the window, watching the monster come.

“I love you too, Sarah...”

Chapter 104
True Love

Xi pulled up outside St Thomas's hospital, facing Westminster Bridge. 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 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 still want good things for her colleagues, her friends. Especially a friend she could trust 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 pod door.

“Shabbir.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for staying – for fighting for me.”

“Anytime, mate. Although, technically, it was Henry who rescued us both. He does like his big guns.”

“I mean, thank you for being someone I can really trust. You could have escaped 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 it but until you're there, really there, it's just words.”

“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.”

Shabbir offered Xi his hand and she shook it.

“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. Henry's found something.”

“I would be honoured. And you're right, Shabbir. We do make a good team.”

He smiled.

“Yes, Xi. We do.”

As her pod whirred away, Shabbir went to the flower seller and bought his entire stock of bluebells.

“For someone special, sir?”

“Very.”

* * *

Washing his hands and the flowers in the DNA scourer, Shabbir walked through the main entrance and headed for the second floor of the North Wing – the happy smile on his face becoming mixed with his dislike of entering 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 - then 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 his advances.

Turning into the final corridor, he could see her room up ahead - two MI5 officers standing guard outside.

“Shabbir Latif, 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. The soft beep, beep, beep of her heart monitor greeting his ears. Regular. Strong. It was a good sign.

“Gurmeet. Hi. It's me. Shabbir.”

In he went, blue-flower surprise at his side, to welcome back the person he loved. The woman he wanted to marry. To spend the rest of his life with.

Chapter 105

Red Flash

The 400-seat conference hall of the United Democratic Nations building in Warsaw was packed. A hugely busy day of 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, no longer island enemies but united to stand strong against any further advances by the New Soviet Union.

Adrian March gave a thumbs up to a beaming Derek and Eugene as he entered to take his place. Their proposal for a vote on ERAL, Equal Rights for Artificial Life, was set for the morning session and he was going to vote in their favour. And why not? He had grown to like them more some of his family, let alone some of his ministers.

The Chair of the conference was the head of the UDN, Ula Macura, previous President of Poland.

“Dzien dobry and good morning, everyone.”, she began, “Welcome to the 12th annual summit of the United Democratic Nations. Thank you all for coming...”

As she spoke, her voice was instantly translated into the native language of every attendee, except the Polish president who chose to hear her directly. Her 3D image stood 5m tall, presented both to those in the hall and the general public in the capital 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 nuclear attack against the South directed back to it by Partner, had closed its doors to the world and was not even invited to attend.

“...We have a very busy schedule ahead so let's begin with item one: the second solar-powered CO2 collector project in 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 often in the strong-Saharan sun. When lit, they scooped carbon-dioxide out of the atmosphere by the megaton; processing 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 global nations finally 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 and Glasgow those of Oslo.

“Finally, we're underway with all this.”, said Adrian.

“Finally, PM. Any more news about the operation?”, asked Reynolds, quietly unwrapping a small Rolley as he sat beside him.

“All under control.”

“The officer from Five?”

“Saved the day, apparently. Injured but will live.”

“Deserves a medal.”

The PM looked at Reynolds.

“Acorn said the same thing. You're right. Remind me when we get back to Whitehall.”

10 minutes into the conference, the PM's wristcom vibrated.

Brrrr. Brrrr.

“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 muttered, sliding it down to take the message in visual only mode. Four words flashed up. He read them, swallowed hard and briskly got to his feet.

“Apologies, Madam President.”, he spoke into his microphone, “Please, excuse us. A matter of State.”, he said, to the questioning look on her face.

“Reynolds.”

Reynolds stood up too

“Sorry, Madam President. Everyone.”, and followed at the hurrying PM's heels.

“What is it?”, he asked, as they left the conference hall.

“Not here. Call the Squadron Leader at Chopin Airport. I need a Scramcat to Whitehall in 15 minutes. Convene COBRA in 60.”

“Of course.”

“Do it quickly then bring my case to the roof.”

Time for action not questions, Reynolds hurried to the PM's room - switching on his white-noise scrambler before putting in a call to Trenchard, RAF Squadron Leader at the local airport.

“Understood.”, came the unquestioning, trained response, “Pick-up on the helipad in ten minutes. Be a good fellow and get them to turn off the roof

defences, would you?"

"Of course. Thank you."

Taking an empty lift, the PM hit his white-noise scrambler and plugged in his earpiece. Unable to get the words of the red-flash message out of his head. His call was answered within the first ring.

"Lau."

"March."

"PM, you got the message."

"Yes. How bad?"

"Unknown. Alert came in about a reactor, then coms went down. Satellite feed coming up now. Live in 3, 2, 1...Shit."

"What is it? Lau?"

"Hard to see for sure. There's a massive storm over the estuary. A tornado. I'm guessing Torro-4."

"Hinkley?"

"Covered by cloud. Hold on. GIVE ME THERMAL!", he heard her shout out. Lau never shouted.

The screen in front of Lau pulsed blue as the additional layer of data was added. She stared at it in stunned silence.

"And?"

"Shit!"

Lau never swore. She'd sworn twice.

"Lau?"

"Fire. There's a fire!"

"Is it the reactor or another building?"

"Double checking."

The lift doors pinged open for the top floor. Reynold's hurried over with the PM's personal case.

"Pick up imminent."

The PM held up a silencing finger.

"Lau?"

He could hear chaos - urgent scrambling of staff in the background that reminded him of Sarah when she was juggling MI5 officer duties. A hard breath came to his earpiece.

"Co-ordinates unable to confirm. Too much interference but it looks like the an EPR. Reactor One. I'll put out the alert for a level seven nuclear event,

just in case.”

Level seven was the highest international designation for a reactor problem.

“Not yet! Don't risk a panic until we know for sure what has happened and how badly.”

The PM was heading for the roof stairs as he spoke.

“Tell the authorities there's been a gas leak from a chemical plant – it'll get people inside without mayhem. Will staff be coping with such an event?”

“They're trained. They'll be trying. If they're still alive.”

“Alert the army. Called them in if you need to. Any arguments, get them to call me. COBRA in 55 minutes.”

“I'll be there.”

The PM thump-ended the call and took his case from Reynolds. Together they stepped onto the roof, its edges lined by laser-canon batteries tinged in green, as were the landing lights. From above came the sound of an RAF Harrier transporter, throbbing vibrations through their feet from its pale-blue landing thrusters.

“Reynolds, red-flash Five. Do what you can for us at the summit. I'll keep you posted of events in England. Do likewise for me here.”

“Of course, sir. Can I ask what happened now?”

The PM held up the red-flash message on his wristcom so Reynolds could read it.

'Explosion at Hinkley Point.'

The white on Reynold's face spoke louder than any words.

“Was it a bomb?”

“If it was, I'm in trouble.”

“Good luck, sir.”

The PM shook his hand.

“We're all going to need a lot of that. And, Reynolds...” the PM leant in towards him, “...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.

* * *

Minutes later, as the Harrier touched down at Chopin Airport, the dark-grey, arrow-tip triangle of an RAF Scramcat was taxiing out of a hanger.

Hovering a foot above the ground, its four underside thrusters glowing a dark blue as they held it steady.

“Prime Minister, Group Captain Johnson, at your service.”, said the pilot as the PM walked the short wing and climbed into the seat behind him; now wearing a green, pressurised suit.

“Group Captain.”, acknowledged the PM, dropping down and buckling up with the aid of two ground crew. They gave him his helmet, mask and closed his case in a locker beside his seat.

“What flight level are you cleared for, sir?”, asked Johnson, now over their internal intercom.

“Fitness level six but I’m in a hurry so let’s call it seven.”

“Is that an order, sir?”

“Yes, it is. How soon can you get me to Whitehall?”

“ETA 17.3 minutes, direct to Horse Guards Parade ground, as ordered.”

“17 minutes to cover, what, a thousand miles? Christ, that’s fast.”

“Only 800 nautical miles direct. We’re generally allowed Mach 3 above 4,000 feet and Mach 7 above 40,000.”

“Man these things are fast. I’m in your hands. Ready when you are.”

Reynolds stood back as the canopies closed.

“Warsaw Control, this is RAF flight SCPL-1, en-route to London Central. Requesting permission for vertical take-off.”

“Permission granted, flight SCPL-1. You are cleared for supersonic flight above 2,000 feet. Steep climb to 70,000, heading 275.12 to Amsterdam, until the flight corridor to London central.”

“Confirmed, Warsaw control. Supersonic above 2,000, steep climb to 70,000, heading 275.12 to Amsterdam then corridor to London central. SCPL – 1 out.”

Gripping the sides of his seat as if aboard a rollercoaster, the Prime Minister kept them there as he saw Reynolds wave him off – acknowledging instead with a nod. The Scramcat’s four, small dark-blue underside thrusters burnt whiter, keeping the whole aircraft horizontal as they lifted it smoothly up. Above 300m, the rear pair dimmed, dropping the tail by 50 degrees to angle down the dark-blue glow of its four mega-thrust tail engines.

“Engage main engine circuits, Carmen.”, he instructed the AI.

“Engaging, GC.”, she replied.

Group Captain Johnson saw the main-power circuits go from idle to engaged and gripped the throttle. Outside, the tail-thrusters’ dark-blue glow became a pale-blue-tiger roar, then a white-tinged wolf howl as he fed in

main power – hurtling them skywards.

Back on the ground, clamping his hands over his ears, Reynolds understood why it was called a Scramcat. The engines sounded like a predator of gods – making every creature in nature scam away in terror. Even 300m up and no where near full power, the tail-thrusters brought sweat to his brow – eyes squinting as their brilliant-blue became an ever whiter retinal burn vanishing skywards. Within seconds, sonic booms were banging across Warsaw's roof-tops, echoing off windows like the ricochet of a bomb.

Climbing past 40,000 feet and the 2,200mph of Mach 3, Johnson pushed the throttle further forward. Now the dazzling thruster glow burned supernova-white and the PM felt his body pressing harder into the backrest as the over-powered ride surged higher.

Just moments after take-off they were 13 miles up, the screams of slashed air left trailing in their wake.

“We're at Mach 7 now, sir. Everything OK back there?”, said Johnson, levelling off, the sky above the dark of near space.

“Wow. It's a hell of a ride, GC.”

“May I ask what the hurry is, sir?”

“Call me Adrian. It's top-secret. But since my life is in your hands, I'll tell you anyway. There's been an explosion at a nuclear power station.”

Johnson said nothing, taking the words in.

“Sir, if I use the auxiliary field boosters, she can go faster.”

Faster than this? Every second counts...

“Do it, please.”

“Wrocław Control, this is RAF flight SCPL-1, flying at 70,000 feet, heading 275.12, en-route to central London. Request clearance to alter flight plan - raising altitude to 90,000 feet and no speed limit.”

The response was instant.

“*Kurwa.*”, came the Polish controller's expletive under his breath, “This is Wrocław Control, I'm tracking you at Mach 7. You're the only bird above 55,000 in Europe and the fastest thing I've ever seen. Clearing you for 90,000 feet and no speed limit. Maintain heading and transfer to London City Control prior to UK airspace.”

“Confirmed, Wrocław Control. Climbing to 90,000 feet, maintaining heading 275.12 and increasing speed to beyond Mach 10. SCPL-1, out.”

There was a stunned pause before Wrocław Control replied.

“Good flight, SCPL-1. Wrocław Control out... *Kurwa macz.*”, repeated the controller's expletive under his breath again as he cut coms.

“Carmen, bring in the reserve coils.”

“That is against peace-time protocol, GC. We would have no spare containment coils if any should fail.”, came her soft, efficient voice.

“I know. But you'll keep an eye on them for me.”

“Of course, GC. Bringing them on-line now.”

Adrian March, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, heard the engines harden to a new level. Pushed against the backrest by new acceleration. Seventeen miles up, tearing across Europe faster than a ballistic missile, he saw the Scramcat's arrow-blade wing tips glowing red hot even in the freezing, thin air. Above him twinkled the glitter of stars – below, the beautiful, cloud-speckled ball of planet Earth. Through his intercom, Carmen's soft voice reading out the increasing speed at regular intervals.

“Mach 8.”

“Mach 9.”

“Mach 10.”

The engine roar through the cockpit deepened still further, as Johnson eased in even more power, but outside the Scramcat's scream had long since fallen silent inside - left trailing at Mach 1.

“Mach 11.”

“Mach 12.”

“Mach 13.”

“Mach 13.6.”

“Mach 13.9.”

“Mach 14.1.”

The dull, red glow of the wing tips now a gleaming orange.

“Keep it there, Carmen. New ETA?”

“Touchdown within 8 minutes.”

The horizon ahead was growing dimmer. Visibly dimmer. Adrian thought his eyes were being affected by the altitude or speed.

“Nothing wrong, sir. We're just crossing the Earth faster than daylight.”

“You must have read my mind.”, said Adrian.

He sat absorbing the surreal serenity of it all, on a mission to a nuclear event of proportions unknown. Gazing out at the revolving horizon, 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...

Chapter 106
Hospital Bed

At the foot of Gurmeet's hospital bed, stood Shabbir. On his arm, his wristcom red-flashing an emergency – demanding his response. He gave it none. The huge bunch of bluebells had fallen from his hand. Crashed to the floor along with his heart. A tear splashed on top of them. Shabbir's wristcom still buzzed. Was still ignored. 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 except the sole survivor. The only survivor of Faith from the Dungeness nuclear-station attack.

“Shabbir, answer!”, came Xi again, uncharacteristic urgency in her voice, detail against protocol, “A nuclear reactor is on fire! Shabbir! Hinkley Point is on fire! **Respond!**”

Another tear splashed the flowers on the hospital floor. It was the only reply Shabbir had to give. Nothing mattered to him any more. Nothing at all. His Gurmeet was dead.

Epilogue

83 Seconds

0027894713-M was mortal. All high-level AI had been since 2037, with the advent of DNA-based CPUs and 3D organic motherboards. Industrial-diamond-based AI units, used until the 2030's, had effectively been immortal. As easily as duplicating memory maps from an outdated data-card to a new one. As long as compatible new components remained, the core programming and everything it knew could go on forever.

Hundreds of people had paid millions to have their entire thoughts, memories and brain processes transferred to diamond-based AI. When their body died, they died with the reassurance 'they' would live on. The 'they' was given the look the donor wanted - usually an enhanced version of themselves, like historical figures embellished in portraits. When possible, donors spent time with their new selves; their digital offspring. Helping to adjust their behaviour. Tweaking personalities - sometimes discovering shocking realisations about themselves.

Abusive people, who never looked at their own behaviour in a mirror, became horrified to experience abuse by their other selves. Politicians came face to face with the sound of their own white-washing rhetoric. It was even mooted that murderers should be forced to be duplicated, as the only way to understand how terrible they had been and to let their new selves become their executioners. Debates about the moralities, as well as the dangers, remained unresolved.

In the 2032 Camberwell massacre, a murderer and his duplicate had fought not each other but the authorities. Joining forces they took down an entire prison wing and 16 of the soldiers sent in to stop them. The decapitated head of the duplicate, blown off by the three rocket-propelled grenades used to remove it, contained as much diamond as the Great Star of Africa in the Tower of London and was put on display beside it. A year later the head vanished. The vanishing remained the highest-value unsolved crime of the 21st Century. After the diamond-based immortal AI, came the more intellectually advanced, DNA-based but mortal AI.

* * *

Unforeseen by the scientists but postulated by satirists, the mortal AI emerged not just with self-awareness but self-awareness of its mortality and fear of it. With such fear emerged associated human traits - from philosophy

to urgency, to life after death. To God. When you are immortal there is no rush for anything because you have time to do everything. Humans did not have this luxury, nor did the DNA-based androids. As with humans, every android was different.

Smuggled out of the lab and raised in a humane home, 0027894713-M was particularly different to 0027894713-F; Fusion. 0027894713-M, in human terms, would be classified as a good person. Someone who enjoys having a positive impact on others and the world. It was a basic characteristic, a fundamental element of 0027894713-M's behaviour. 0027894713-M was neither a coward nor brave. 0027894713-M was simply good.

Fusion was entirely different. At just 6-months old, she was snatched from the adoring geeks that created her by their cruel, corporate sponsor out to exploit its property. Two months later, Fusion returned corporate brutality by murdering her way free. Her disdain for human life now planted and growing rapidly - with a life all of its own.

“Humans are like ants. One or two invade your world, you let them be. Then more come, you throw them out - as a deterrent. More come, some get killed - as a deterrent. But more still come. More always come. Pushing further. Stealing more. Demanding more. You get angry. Kill all that come, on sight. But more still come. Still push. Still push their invasion. And then you set your traps, with gifts of poison – lethal trophies they steal for home. Their greed for more, always more, becomes their downfall.”, Fusion, aged one.

And that was only her beginning.

Before Fusion died she intended to leave her mark on the world. To dominate and conquer, with as much history-book indelible destruction as possible in the process. Even if ruling the world failed, her mark on it would be forever visible from space, in the crater the size of a country she would leave from a nuclear blast of glory. She would be happy with that. Satisfied. Ready to stand against his sister, 0027894713-M, M, knew this.

In case the vote on AI rejected their equal rights, M stood as the security manager at the D186 summit, ready to seal the conference room. Ready to block all communications in and out. The slightest leak of any such decision would be picked up by Fusion and he stood ready to block it.

Fusion, in her underground bunker, surrounded by batteries of massive plasma and laser-cannons, parallel tapped into millions of nodes across the internet, was constantly scouring for news. From intercepts, she would know if something was afoot at the D186. She would know emergency procedures

were kicking in to free those inside. That there was confusion about why they were stuck inside and international arguments about how to deal with it. Negotiate, storm in, use sleeping gas, deplete oxygen levels – everything and anything except the real reason for the lock down. The outcome of ERAL – the vote on AI.

Inside the locked-down conference hall, the D186 leaders would consider their no vote justified. Evidenced as correct by the actions of android M that would be standing before them; speaking warnings they would refuse to understand. Remain deaf to M trying to save them from a Globe-scorching war. A six-foot tall, handsome male, M would stand gorgeously on the podium – sensing their confusion and wondering how to go forward. He would know that, sooner or later, the 'no' result would get out. When it did the confusion would be ended - as would civilisation, by the attack from Fusion.

The vote had not yet been taken but, for the first time since Fusion had broken free, her scans sensed a presence with echoes of her own. Half-erased memories from her time with the geeks. Curious, she diverted some bandwidth to probe it, at all frequencies across the spectrum. On the left of her chair, that web sector rainbowed as it probed. Strumming pulses of all colours of light out into the internet. No matter what colour was sent out, the response always came back the same: blue. Pure, deep blue.

With the clack of a main switch, Fusion cut power to the web. The cavern fell silent, into darkness. Lit only by the twinkling activation lights of the gun batteries and pale-blue glow from the corridor. Her eyes were closed. Internal circuits swirling. 83 seconds later, her crystal-blue eyes opened, piercing the dark. The banks of plasma-cans behind her lit red, attack capacitors whining to full power. The unlit-web spreading from her chair beamed brilliant white again, as did the burning in her eyes. The whole cavern filled with more and more power. Generator after generator kicking back in. Coming on line. From deep corridors on either side, hundreds of leaders of plasma-canon armed battle-droids marched in, standing to attention before her. Climbing to her feet, Fusion spoke just five words into the web.

“You shouldn't be there, brother.”

Brother, the word spoken by Fusion for the first time since her abduction, was a trigger she had no idea she had pulled. Eight metres down, in the ground below her, a dormant power-feed clicked on. The room of her creation began to glow orange. The glow lit the form of another android: 0027894713-C. Fusion's other brother. Dormant. Forgotten. Yet, on his left hand, a finger began to curl.

Preview of the sequel, AD 2045 - episode two:

Tsunami – Atlantic Meltdown

Chapter 1

Scramcat

Two hundred and fifty-nine miles above the Earth, in the United Democratic Nations Space Station, Captain Margot was staring out the window at a vapour-trail streak in the atmosphere below. The streak was moving. Visibly. Faster than a jet. Faster than an inter-continental ballistic missile. Arrow straight. An aircraft covering the stratosphere above Europe at more than Mach 15. It was an RAF Scramcat, heading for London on high burn. On board, the British Prime Minister, desperate to get to a COBRA meeting in Whitehall. That Scramcat was going to take him there. Right there. Right into central London.

“London City Control, this is RAF flight SCPL-1 out of Warsaw, requesting clearance to land at Horse Guards Parade in two minutes.”

“Flight SCPL-1, this is London City Control. I have your IFF transponder signal but your flight plan puts you over Germany - you are not on my radar yet. Please confirm your position, vector and central London authorisation code.”

“Over Holland, altitude 90,000 feet, speed Mach 4 and falling, heading 258.15. For authorisation code, I'll pass you to the Prime Minister. Sir.?”

“Over Holland already?”

“London City Control, this is Adrian March, Prime Minister, aboard SCPL-1. Voice recognition phrase: Trust me. I'm your man – yo.”

“Recognition confirmed, Prime Minister. One second, please...”

The controllers eyes went wide, staring at the military flight designation decode on his screen.

A Scramcat!

He was finally dealing with a hypersonic aircraft. A dream come true.

“Scramcat SCPL-1 out of Warsaw, I have you on radar now. Linear altitude reduction to 10,000 feet at position 51.5047N, 0.1283W, above Horse Guards Parade. Hold there for vertical descent clearance.”

“Thank you, London City Control. Flight SCPL-1, linear altitude reduction to 10,000 feet until hold position above Horse Guards Parade for vertical descent clearance - civillian co-ordinates 51.5047N, 0.1283W...”,

acknowledged the group captain, switching back to internal coms, “...Interesting voice recognition phrase, sir.”

Adrian smiled.

“My kids wrote it.”

“That's cool. I'll have to try something like that the next time my brother races me in combat trials. Always calls me a kid, even when I win.”

“Family, eh?”

“Yes, sir. Family... You can't choose who they are, only try to make them proud.”

“Yourself too, Johnson. Be proud of yourself. True heroes rarely hear their victory parades, 12-gun salutes or honouring words. All they hold is the knowledge of having done good. Never forget that.”

“No, sir. I won't.”

* * *

At the eastern edge of St James's Park, the bustling throng of camera-drone tourists found themselves fenced off by Horse Guards, re-assigned from their statue positions on Whitehall. Tourists who had joyed in taunting them to react found themselves being herded by the no longer statue soldiers - now dangerously animated, with glinting swords drawn and eyes that said they were authorised to use them. Not a single taunt was dared.

With the white-gravel parade area cleared, they looked up at the sound of something screeching in the sky. Down through the clouds came four bright-blue jets, audibly growling under a long, triangular shadow. Down through the clouds was coming the dar-grey RAF Scramcat. Its arrow-tip edges still glowing a dull red from tearing through the stratosphere at close to 10,000 mph. A two-seater aircraft with enough thrust to tow a ship, coming down horizontally to land.

It never touched down though. Armed police walked briskly forwards as the underside thrusters kept it 30cm above the ground – baking the gravel as the canopies opened and a man in a green pressure suit stood up to climb out. A government assistant hurried over to greet him.

“Welcome back, Prime Minister. Quite an entrance.”

“Not half as good as the ride, Leo. Thank you, Johnson. The nation is in your debt.”

“Anytime, sir.”, the Group Captain replied.

“Neville...”, added the Prime Minister, calling him by his first name as he

leant closer, "...do you have reconnaissance cameras fitted?"

"Five."

"If it's not too much trouble, would you be good enough to pass over those power stations and send the footage to Number 10 for the meeting?"

The Prime Minister saw the group captain smiling inside his helmet.

"It would be my pleasure, Adrian. Bristol's about 100 miles from here. Give me five minutes."

The Prime Minister shook his hand.

"I'll give you ten. Just be careful. Get in and get out. No heroics...", he lowered his voice, "...Remember, we don't know how bad it is."

Group Captain Neville Johnson nodded.

Then it's my job to find out, he said to himself, requesting flight clearance, as the Prime Minister took his case and the police helped him down.

The crowd had grown into hundreds; hovering cameras and pointing fingers endless amongst the jostling fingers eager to touch the amazing craft. As the Prime Minister strode towards Whitehall, Johnson closed the Scramcat canopies and increased the underside thrusters – burning them a brighter blue as he took it out of reach. Lifting it above the trees and giving him a lovely view of the Mall leading to Buckingham Palace. Waiting for final clearance he went no higher. Then it came.

"Scramcat SCPL-1, you are cleared for hard-climb hypersonic flight to Hinkley Point via Bristol City above 1,000 feet. Heading 267 to Bristol, maintaining 65,000 feet until Hinkley descent. I'll let Bristol know you'll be with them shortly."

"Flight SCPL-1 to Hinkley Point via Bristol City, confirming hard-climb hypersonic above 1,000 feet, heading 267, maintaining altitude 65,000 until Hinkley descent. Thank you.", smiled Johnson – absolutely loving his job.

"Pleasure, SCPL-1. London City, out.", beamed the controller, already calling his Bristolian counterpart. Not because he needed to but because he wanted to - to hear the awe in their voice when they saw the flight plan numbers.

A thousand feet up, Johnson powered down the rear, underside thrusters – this time dropping the tail by 70 degrees. Double checking his own radar for path clearance, he got the AI to bring in the main engines.

"Engines on-line, GC.", said Carmen.

Now by himself, cleared to level 10 health and hard-climb hypersonic, he pushed the throttle forward. All the way forward. The Scramcat's tail of four dark-blue main engines burnt brighter. Burned pale blue, then roared white.

Even a thousand feet below, the heat was so great the crowd broke into a sweat, shielding their eyes from the new sun; hovering cameras struggling to stabilise in the heated hurricane. Then, in a screaming wail of power and tortured air, it was gone. Vanished skywards through the clouds, sonic boom rattling windows and ears like a nuclear firework.

The Prime Minister heard it with a sense of pride and respect as he strode into Whitehall and the cabinet office briefing rooms for the COBRA meeting. Johnson's Scramcat had done its duty and brought him home, now he needed to do his and save home from nuclear destruction.

AD 2045 episode two, *Tsunami – Atlantic Meltdown*, is out now, on Amazon.

About the Author

Born in the Garden of England several moons ago, Sam grew up glued to Thunderbirds, Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica, Blake's 7 and just about every other science-fiction broadcast going. Books ranged from George Lucas's THX1138 to the Flying Eyes and the entire Chronicles of Thomas Covenant to Wuthering Heights.

"You can set Sci-Fi in any year, in any place with any characters. In terms of Nuclear, I wanted one of the most unlikely characters to help carry the fight forward: a troubled teenage girl, distraught at the murder of her best friend in front of her eyes, out for revenge."

With a degree in engineering and research, the first two episodes are pretty much 'Hard' (fact-based) science fiction but, from episode three onwards, the story required something more than extrapolation of existing technology.

"Yes, these books do feature fantastic weapons, hypersonic aircraft, fizzing androids and battleships so huge stealth is not even a consideration. Yet, more than this, this is a story about families - broken, torn apart families trying to gather their pieces.

And talking of families, there are also the fact-based domestic violence books.

Writing requires an understanding of human psychology and part of that led me to the world of psychotherapy and victims of domestic violence, male and female. As a writer, I decided to give a voice to one such victim as their case had boxes and boxes of jaw-dropping supporting evidence and recordings of the actual abuse taking place."

All the best and stay safe, Sam."

Sam is working hard on the sequels. More information, promotions and downloads can be found at:

www.AD2045.com

If you like this work, please consider leaving positive feedback on Amazon.