

THE ROSEHAVEN SHIFT

ROSEHAVEN: STORIES OF QUIET DIVISION



THOMAS X VEIL

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ROSEHAVEN

Stories of Quiet Division

Thomas X Veil

Rosehaven: Stories of Quiet Division

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First edition.

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Content Note

Some stories in this collection contain themes of psychological manipulation, coercion, and implied violence consistent with dystopian fiction.

Dedicated to Elsa

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ROSELIFE

Fighting the quiet tide

A single snare drum kept time. The bass drum pounded a triplet, and the others joined in. Flutes rose high above everything, their melody floating, threatening and sinister.

Huge banners demanding loyalty and faith were carried by big men flushed red with the heat. Boys marched to the front, twirling their batons, throwing them high, never dropping them once.

They strode on, claiming the streets as their own. Past the BMWs and Audis. Past the well-kept gardens. Past the Georgian terraced houses in their stone splendour.

Locals watched from kerbsides with pedigree whippets, from behind sand-blasted stone garden walls and thick shrapnel-proof net curtains. Flags of support were draped from windows and recently clipped hedges, all calling for unity, loyalty and obedience.

No one moved until the march was past.

As the last banner vanished around the corner, Sara detached herself from a knot of onlookers and slipped away down a side street.

Residents quickly took their flags and banners down, never sure which faction's parade would pass, or on what day. Someone had

already seen the chaos coming and made a killing selling banner packs, complete with every faction's colours and slogans. Keep them all handy, switch at a moment's notice, and no one gets offended. Unfortunately, old Mrs. Heatherington at 56 William Place got them mixed up one day and had to be kindly escorted to the community centre for a language test and a mandatory re-education course. Took her seventeen tries to pass, poor thing. Her neighbours were already eyeing up her fuchsias and laburnums and were quite put out when she came home again. Maybe next time.

Survival was essential these days.

Outright supporters of the Heritage Front or New Tomorrow were everywhere. They demanded only English be spoken and only real natives be allowed. The Heritage Front was as intense as ever, but it had also swallowed smaller factions with similar outlooks. Even The Green, which had surprised many.

Times changed.

Most people were like Sara. Neutral, and just trying to get by in the country's latest national insanity. Division and strife, generously seasoned with disbelief, had been the national special for years. Standing up for beliefs, protesting, even fighting the factions achieved absolutely nothing.

Hearing the pounding of feet and drums, seeing the banners or the sudden lack of them, and smelling the fear that always pervaded these occasions steered Sara down the backstreets.

She reached for the scar on her arm, a habit since she had been a teenager. Her fingers always found it. The memory followed immediately. The man she had fought off. The knowledge that his

faction connections would protect him long after she had been told to forget.

Her girls were that age now.

How could she keep them safe when she had barely survived it herself?

Mari was difficult to hide, especially with those looks. Too noticeable. And now the Ethnic Beauty Initiative had started sweeping up girls like her. Sara's fear gnawed at her every day.

Sophia worried her differently. Too clever. It never occurred to her that other people could be just as clever, but far more cunning.

Earlier, Sara had seen New Tomorrow guards pulling people into the old post office on the road to the beach.

Some were taken. Some were persuaded to wear Harmony Pins and released. And some young women, like Sara's ex, Paula, once Paul, were given Warm and Helpful Tips on how they could best help the cause increase membership.

Paula had taken six months to lose the "conditioning" she'd been given.

None of this made one faction better than the other. Both used hypnosis, psychology, or good old-fashioned brainwashing to get their way.

New Tomorrow had seemed more attractive at first, but beneath the fire-breathers, snake charmers, and easily provoked belly dancers, they were just another cage. Despite coming from wildly different

cultures, they still enforced an English-only policy. It alienated the elderly and the children left in their care.

For Sara, both factions provided her income.

She was an English teacher.

Things had been easier before the internet was blocked and the mainstream media abandoned, humiliated by their lies and corruption. Messages, GPS, social media, all gone. People adapted to the new normal.

Sara was on her way home to pick up Mari and Sophia and take them to school for the now compulsory orientation. Who could say which faction would shape the curriculum this time?

Sometimes she wondered if it was all worth it. She could teach them more important life stuff. The thing is, these days, that probably wouldn't be enough for them.

As she reached the gate of their small downstairs conversion, she was whistling Let Me Into Your Heart, a popular song with her students and a signal to her girls that everything was as it should be.

She hugged Sophia first. "Everything OK today, love?"

"So far," she said, pointing to the letterbox. "Someone with a New Tomorrow armband popped the usual flyer through the letterbox. Heritage Protection Drives, Open Harmony Sessions, food banks."

"Creepy sods," Sara muttered, tossing her bag down. "Come to the food bank and we'll feed you as long as you work for us. And don't get me started on heritage. We need to get out of here before it's

too late. Like last time, when we waited too long and your Uncle Leo disappeared overnight.”

“Easier said than done, Mum,” Mari said, coming up and kissing her cheek.

“I know. Anyway, are you ready? We’ve got to get a move on. You know what they’re like if anyone’s late.”

They left the flat quietly and walked up the road, not too fast, not too slow.

Then they turned the corner.

Right into a checkpoint.

“This wasn’t here five minutes ago,” Sara whispered. “Follow the drill.”

Sara was always amused by how New Tomorrow was so well organised considering the chaos surrounding their operators. SUVs and trailers formed a funnel leading into a tent. Inside were the questions, all designed to trap you into an admission.

Mari snapped her fingers. Sophia hummed softly. Their tells were obvious. Nervous. Afraid.

Sara’s hand dropped, fingers straight down. Follow my lead. Don’t speak.

Sara muttered under her breath. These damp tents; the canvas flapping noisily in the wind, the little plastic stools creaking with every movement. She wanted them out.

"Phones. Now!"

The guard's breath stank as he thrust a bag forward. The phones dropped in with a dull clunk.

Grey-uniformed armed guards formed another funnel.

"What can we do for you today?" Sara said brightly. "We're late for the new school orientation."

Raising his voice to counter the gusting breeze, the next guard said, "We'll not keep you long, madam. Names?"

"Smith. I'm Sara, this is Mari, and this is Sophia." Sara forced a stiff smile, clutching her bag strap as if it were a lifeline. "Thank you, sir, but we need to get going."

"Ages?"

"Thirty-four. Seventeen. Fifteen next month."

Crack!

Everyone in the tent froze as a strong gust loosed a flapping canvas wall. A guard retied it efficiently. Relief.

Sara's stomach ulcer twinged as she recognised Chris. An old student.

Of course it would be him. Just my luck.

His eyes were harder now. The way his finger rested easily on the trigger of his gun said he was in charge.

"If Mari's seventeen, she'll need to attend the Ethnic Beauty Initiative. You know the drill; image training, male visual fodder, fertility quotas... and, of course, becoming a hero mum."

Fingers snapped.

Sara's stomach twisted. She'd heard from her friend that a 'hero mum' had to have at least ten kids! What kind of mother would let her daughters go through that?

"She's having problems in that area," Sara said softly. "She needs her mum. Could you make an exception this time? Next time, everything will be fine.""

"She should have a letter from her doctor if she's having trouble," Chris said, shifting his grip. "You know that I'm sure."

"Officer, you know how hard that is now."

"Your daughters' files are both here. Yours aren't. Up against the wall."

Sara's hand went up and formed a fist. The girls started screaming and shouting, even looking as if they would attack someone. Everyone was looking.

Sara peeled off a note from the small pad in her sleeve and slipped it to the guard, the movement lost in the dimness.

Chris glanced at it.

"Halt! Silence!"

The scene stood still.

Only the tent dared to make a noise.

To the girls, he said quietly. "Any more of that and you're taken."

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"Let them through. Wait for your mum."

"You. Come here."

In the dull side room, Chris folded his arms. "If you want to get to school without trouble, you have to wear a New Tomorrow badge."

"Is it like a Harmony Pin?"

"It records everything."

"Yes, sir. Is there no other way?" Her eyes flitted to the door. "Maybe we could be... friends?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." The guard's gaze hardened.

He jotted down the badge's number and pinned it on Sara's jacket.

"It's synced. Don't be late for school. Wear it every day. We'll be listening."

They collected their phones and left.

They turned the corner.

“Bloody hell, they’re everywhere!”

Bad luck. A New Tomorrow march rolling in like some carnival from hell. No coordination. Just a coincidence. No surprise. Not anymore.

Gaudy belly dancers thrust at them, hips snapping to the wild, flutey screeches blaring from behind. The air stank of sweat, spice, and synthetic perfume. Scantly clad supporters swayed beneath a banner-laden platform they carried, making it sail down the street.

Three henchmen lunged forward, thrusting flyers into their hands: We Are New Tomorrow emblazoned across their neon vests. The same phrase blasted on repeat from a sound system the size of a car.

Lashing tongues, wild eyes, and snarling brows. Flashing machetes spun mid-dance. Guns, barely concealed, tucked at every hip.

“Let us go!” Mari was struggling, Sophia yanking her arm away as a lasso coiled around them like a fishing net.

Sara pushed her chest forward, not to entice, but to display her badge.

Freed.

Sara reached into her bag and pulled out a notebook and pencil.

Phones bugged. Everything recorded. Be normal.

The last words were shaky as Sara let out a sharp laugh. The girls grinned.

As they approached the school, Sara pressed her hand to her heart. Be sincere. No cheek.

Inside, a slideshow declared how exam results had suffered due to 'unsettling circumstances'. To remedy this, students would be issued with electronic bracelets and receive a shock if their performance dipped. The school was 'fortunate' to be the first to pilot the scheme.

Mr White greeted his pupil, Mari with a vice-like handshake and spoke enthusiastically about the EBI.

Reading from his script, he said, "First of all, Mari, I'm happy to tell you that you'll probably qualify for the EBI initiative as you can see from the chart here," he said, pointing to a grey chart pinned on the wall.

"You'll make your mum a grandmother many times over. She'll need to be available for the babes," he added, smiling at Sara over Mari's shoulder.

"Now I know that this'll probably sound like a lot of work, so there are graded financial incentives for each successful birth. The more babies you have, the more you'll earn in bonuses. Do you have any questions?"

Then he saw the badge

His brow furrowed, eyes widened. He hastily flicked through the script looking for a more suitable version.

Sara frowned at him and gave the tiny palm-down gesture: calm.

Leaving Mr White to steady his nerves, they went to find Sophia's teacher, Mrs Windsor.

Sophia hummed that song again.

Mrs Windsor froze at the sight of the device on Sara's lapel, but after a subtle signal from Sara, she shifted, quickly scribbled a note, and pointed at a side door.

Leaving Mari and Sophia, Sara opened the door and slipped inside.

A low voice came from the dark: "Close the door; we can talk in here." They cleared their throat, a small familiar catch.

Sara's head snapped up, eyes narrowed.

She hesitated as if her instincts screamed. She stepped in anyway.

"I have a blocker." There was a slight click followed by a faint hum. "The badge can't work in here. Well, it's reliable for five minutes, anyway"

"What do you mean?" Sara stiffened.

"It feeds the badge other noises. We can say what we want."

"Are you with The Return?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?" Sara stepped back, crossing her arms.

"No factions. No madness. Real life again."

“Do you think that’s possible? After everything? The breaks and rifts... even in families?”

That voice...

No, it couldn’t be. Could it?

“We have a plan, and we need people like you.”

Neither spoke.

“People like me?” Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

“People who can flit between factions. Keep control without going all namby-pamby or brave-boy. You always had that, Sara. Even when you didn’t want it.”

Her head bowed, Sara’s hand touched her hairline.

“Recruiters get gear. I’ve got blockers, decoys, and even New Tomorrow override codes. It’s risky, but we need every edge we can.”

Sara leaned closer into the dark.

It couldn’t be...

“You still don’t know? It’s me. Paula.” The voice cracked. “After what they did... I couldn’t stay. I wanted to burn it all down.”

Sara’s breath stopped. Paula.

Hope rose hot and sudden.

"Can you get us out?"

"Yes, maybe not for a while. But we have a plan."

Sara's hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at her sides. A helpless, shuddering gasp escaped her, then another. The dam broke. She wept great heaving sobs she hadn't allowed herself in years, muffled only by the dark and the blocker's hum. She wiped her stained cuff across her face, smearing the tears and sniffles.

"If it means protecting the girls... getting out..." She gasped, forcing the words out. "We're in. What do we do?"

ROSEHAVEN

On the town shared by these stories

Rosehaven is a medium-sized coastal town with wind-swept streets and salt-stained windows. It is bordered by fertile farmland and the ruins of an old industrial district. Further along the coast lie pristine beaches, but the town itself meets the sea with a rocky shoreline. A deep harbour, once echoing with the grit of fishermen's labour, now hums with the lighter chatter of tourists drawn by the promise of easy joy.

Narrow streets twist between cottages and workshops, forcing cars to yield to those on foot. Alongside tightly packed cottages, houses, and tenements stand graceful Georgian terraces built from locally quarried grey stone. Their facades remain proud, though paint flakes from doors and windows. A handful of grand detached homes for wealthier residents are scattered among them, while newer estates for the less well-off sit at the outskirts.

Small-scale manufacturing still lingers in Rosehaven, as do artisan workshops and local markets, but legitimate trade is slow. Immigrants and smugglers are woven into the rhythm of daily life, symptoms of wider troubles no one in Rosehaven can control.

Like the rest of the country, the town is dominated by two competing factions. The staunch and rigidly traditional Heritage

Front clings to the past. The more fluid and charismatic New Tomorrow sells the dream of renewal and a better future. A third movement, The Return, has grown as a popular rejection of both. Unlike many places, factions in Rosehaven have no clear boundaries. Power drifts. Allegiances blur. Even locals are unsure where loyalties truly lie.

Graffiti is everywhere, with flags declaring support appearing and vanishing overnight. Checkpoints are common. Some are permanent, guarding factional headquarters, barracks, and the decrepit old police stations. Others are temporary, marked by sawhorses, barbed wire, and commandeered vehicles. The weary and downtrodden queue without question, papers ready.

Some are taken away for further interrogation, sometimes tortured. Others are pressured into spying, informing, or wearing badges that record everything they say and do, exchanged for leniency.

Life continues under this quiet strain. Markets open, children walk to school, and the sea wind still moves through the narrow lanes. Yet beneath these ordinary routines runs a steady current of fear and fatigue, as if the town itself is always holding its breath.

ROSESLAVE

In the quiet depths

Bill climbs the stile over the dry stone dyke and drops into the field, his boots leaving deep imprints in the mud. As he walks along the narrow, well-beaten path, he smiles for the first time in a while. The fresh icy wind, the birdsong, the threatening rain all lift him from Rosehaven, from his life.

At the brow of the first hill, he turns and looks down on the town below before leaving it behind for the day. He wishes he could leave it behind forever. The problem is he's already left too many places. He's promised himself that he'll make a go of it here, regardless of what happens. 'Can't run forever' is his current motto.

And it isn't so bad; he has a steady job, and he doesn't wake each morning desperately muttering, "Got to get away! Got to get away!" but feels an immense sense of relief when he discovers that he actually is away. He's gone. He's done it. He's escaped. He can breathe again at last.

The damp ground makes the going difficult in places, but he doesn't mind. He needs the effort; he needs the strain. Exercise is one of the best ways to combat stress, the doctors say. Well, for once, they're right.

Today, he's heading for the tiny birdwatcher's hide halfway up the next rise. It's almost impossible to see from here, but he knows it well, so just keeps pressing on.

For some reason, Brie has come into his mind.

What a shame that relationship went to waste.

It was nice in Westlake.

She was a splendid girl.

I don't blame her for leaving.

No one could.

Not after the screaming.

Poor Brie... Said she wanted to help... But she struggled... Couldn't...

And there it is again.

Lurking in the background.

The darkness.

Before Brie, there is just black.

My whole life stopped the day they took me.

Took me to her.

The woman who unlocked the door to my deepest, darkest fears and still has the key.

The pain she caused.

Breathing hard, Bill presses on to the hide.

The wind in his face, the slight twinge still in his left shoulder, the old injury in his right leg. They still ache in pulses, like something under his skin remembering the pressure.

All still there.

He thinks of his new friend, Mathew, who works for one of the hospital's suppliers. Bill sees him a few times a week, and for some reason they've hit it off.

Bill rarely makes friends.

The book the doctor had given him was right; if you keep doing the same things, you'll get the same results.

He and Mathew both like to go hiking, and sometimes even go together. He was meant to come today, but his girlfriend, Caroline, was ill and needed him to take care of her. He didn't know if it was true or not, but chose to believe it.

He'd never believed her before.

The thought of Caroline threatens to send him into a spiral of despair. She's desperate to "fix him up with a nice girl," as she puts it. Bill isn't sure what to do. He's made so many excuses that he's going to have to give in soon or lose their friendship.

Bill thinks Caroline's a bit out of Mathew's league, which would make any friend of hers completely out of Bill's ballpark.

"I'll have to try, though," says Bill out loud as he approaches the hide.

Thankfully, there's no one else there, so he can concentrate on the birds and not have to make idle conversation.

He doesn't like doing that.

"Caroline's not going to take no for an answer," says Mathew on Saturday as the two of them unload the last of the supplies.

"She's dead set on it, Bill, so don't back out. It's all arranged."

"OK, OK, I'll give it a try. Why not? The worst thing that can happen is we have an enjoyable meal."

"Exactly. Good man. Tuesday, 7pm at Millerman's Bistro. Smart but casual. Can you do that?"

"But Tuesday's only three days away."

"You'll be fine. I'll phone you beforehand just to check everything's OK. But remember, Caroline's going to go fuckin' spare if you don't turn up again."

"I'll be there, I promise," said Bill calmly.

"Great. Sign here, and I'll need to get going. See you on Tuesday."

"Bye."

Why, oh why did I agree to go?

I even promised.

If I keep doing the same things, I'll keep getting the same results.

Hold on to that.

No sleep last night.

She'd been in my head.

Inside of me.

Saying all these things.

She can't leave me alone.

Some people would like that.

Bill wanted her to stop being his nightmare.

Concentrating on his work is his only release. A hospital's too important to get things wrong, so he knows when he's tired, he has to double-check everything.

Busy is good.

Caroline stands and waves.

He walks over to the table.

He isn't even late.

"Alright, you two. Caroline, you're looking great, as usual."

"Great to see you, Bill."

"I've got a pint, Bill. You want one too?"

"Please, but I'm taking it easy tonight."

Caroline gestures to the other young woman. "Bill, this is Flora; Flora, Bill"

Breathe

"Lovely to meet you, Flora. Wow! Your dress is gorgeous."

Mathew is grinning.

Caroline beams as she sees Flora's face light up.

"And you, Bill. You look great too. I like that."

...

My heart!

Black is back.

My darkness!

I only felt you, smelled you, heard your voice.

Felt the pain.

My mistress.

I must look surprised or something.

She's looking deep into my eyes, smiling.

The restaurant slowly comes back into focus, its spacious interior skillfully filled with tables set with pristine white tablecloths and silver cutlery. The best are by the vast wall of glass overlooking the beach so diners can watch the waves lapping against the silver sand below. Their table is only close enough to see the sea, but with the additional view of better-heeled diners attacking their fare. The server is charming and efficient as they order a starter of oysters, some French-style chicken dish for Mathew, a beef one for Caroline, Flora a raw, beaten and bruised blue steak tartare, while Bill has a simple pasta dish. The girls order glasses of red wine; the boys have their pints.

Would you like me to give them a little squeeze?

Mathew tells a story of how it used to be for locals only, but word had gotten out to the tourist brigade and since then tables had been like gold dust. Caroline took over, saying she'd been lucky enough to win dinner for four in a work prize draw a month or so ago, so here they are. Flora is sitting back in her chair, completely at home

listening to them chat away. Bill is casually looking around as if admiring the surroundings, checking out every escape route.

The oysters soon arrive on an enormous silver platter with lemon wedges and a couple of spicy dips.

We arrange our crisp white napkins appropriately.

"I love giving them a little squeeze, don't you?" said Flora, raising her eyebrows as she adds the lemon juice.

Mathew and Caroline chuckle.

Bill's hand trembles, lemon juice missing its target.

They all slurp the oysters down.

"I love that feeling as they slip down my throat. It's sexy, don't you think?" said Flora. "Does it make you rise to the occasion, guys?" looking Bill straight in the eye.

He chokes, coughs and splutters.

The oysters have lost their taste.

Mathew and Caroline chuckle again, trying not to show it by wiping their mouths.

Bill tries to show some backbone.

I want to know everything.

"So, Flora. Are you from Rosehaven, or are you new like me?"

"I'm like you, Bill. New to all of this." She talks slowly and confidently. Lots of eye contact.

"Have you come here for work, or for the scenery?"

"I can work anywhere, Bill. I'm highly skilled."

A smirk just for me.

"It's just nice to have a base somewhere so beautiful."

Hands sticky.

Back wet.

"Oh. What is it you do, Flora?" his voice almost croaked.

"I'm a freelance efficiency contractor. I get information quickly." She purrs, leaning towards Bill. "Some people are ever so impatient, you know. They just can't wait. They want everything now," and let out a single laugh. "You wouldn't believe how important they think that is."

Heart beating so fast!

Mathew chips in, "Caroline says you're an expert, Flora. Is that right?"

...

"That's right, Mathew. I love my work, so yes, I do it extremely well. I can charge whatever I want. I always get results."

"Can you tell us anything about it?" Caroline asks.

"All highly confidential, I'm afraid. You wouldn't want all your secrets scattered to the wind like confetti, would you, Bill?" casually turning to gaze deeply into his soul.

"No. Oh. Here you are," he says, handing the server his plate, having to refrain from throwing himself at her feet and begging her to take him away with the oyster shells.

Caroline blethers on about something to do with her job as a faction admin assistant.

Bill counts his breaths and notices where each part of his body is.

"Bill."

His steps are not working so well at the moment.

If I get away to the toilet, maybe I can calm myself down.

"Bill?"

"Eh? What?" fuck!

Mathew said, "Flora was just asking about your work."

"Oh, eh, well, yeah? I work at the, eh... hospital."

"Surgeon, physiotherapist, psychologist...?"

"Oh, right. Em. I work in admin... I order supplies... so all the medicines and so on don't run out.... Make sure all the emergency generators are ready if needed. More disruptions again this week, seemingly. Stuff like that. " He said, screwing up his napkin.

...

"Do you love it?" the slow voice in his dreams asked.

"I, I, I, I wouldn't say I, I, I love it, but th, th, they say I'm good at it."

From your stomach.

Breathe in.

"And why did you move to Rosehaven, Bill?" she asked. "Some woman or another, I bet," giving him a cheeky grin.

Mathew and Caroline, oblivious to her wordplay, were enjoying the evening.

"No, nothing like that. I had a better offer here, and Rosehaven is so much nicer than Westlake."

Why did I say that? Why, oh, why did I say that?

"Oh, you used to live in Westlake?" feigning shock, probing eyes, "I used to live there too."

Be brave.

"Did you? What a pity we never ran into each other."

"Maybe we did. I used to look different then. Dyed hair, always wore black, that kind of thing. I like to shock, you know."

The shocks are running up my legs, down my arms, everywhere. I can't...

"I'd remember you anywhere." whispered Bill.

"Bill, you old dog," howled Caroline. "He's not usually so forward," she said, turning to Flora.

Looking delighted, Flora went on, "Anyway, Bill, what do you get up to when you aren't hard at work or eating out in fancy restaurants?

He loses his chance to answer as the server returns with their main courses and everyone takes a first bite.

"Mmm, this is gorgeous," said Mathew.

"God, yeah," Caroline moans erotically.

Bill finishes his mouthful of pasta. "This must be the best pasta I've ever had."

I love it like this.

Flora was chewing her raw steak, her lips becoming redder. The effect was stunning, almost as if she were a wild animal.

"It's all for me. I love it like this," she purrs.

As they continue eating, the chat turns to eating raw food, especially meat.

Mathew asks, "Do you like to eat anything else raw, Flora?"

"Someone at work once said I eat people alive, but that's a bit of an exaggeration." She laughed. "They're usually unconscious."

Everyone laughs.

You don't eat them.

You take them to pieces.

"What about you, Bill, do you like the taste of raw meat?" she continues.

"Only when it reminds me I'm still alive."

Everyone stops and looks at him. Caroline's jaw has actually dropped in surprise.

"Ha! You are funny!" said Flora. "Bill."

Bill drags his gaze from his plate into her deep, dark, dangerous eyes.

"We're going to get on just fine, you and me," she purrs."

"Yes, m... Flora," mutters Bill, his napkin now a solid little ball. "I hope so."

I remember her devices.

Flora seems to eat more slowly than the others, so none of them are surprised that she is still eating when they have finished.

"You know how they kill cattle?" she asks.

"Eh?"

"They use a cattle prod."

"Cattle prod?"

Caroline doesn't know what she's missing.

I feel it dragged up the back of my thigh.

"It's a stick with two prongs at one end. You poke the animal with the prongs, flick the switch, and it gets an electric shock. They're obedient after that. Well, after a few times. Sometimes."

"That's inhumane."

You're goddamn right it's inhumane!

"It doesn't hurt them. It's been proved scientifically." Butter wouldn't melt in Flora's mouth. "After the first time, they usually move when they see it."

Ugh! I can feel it everywhere in my body.

I want her to stop.

Not excited!

She is not getting to me!

"So, is that how they're killed?"

Tell me.

I'll do anything for you, mistress Vina.

"No. A huge bolt is shot into their skulls. Dead! Super quick. Some say that's what gives the meat its taste."

She can see that I'm desperate.

"So what about you, Bill? What do you do for kicks? You never got around to answering before."

"I go bird-watching."

"Wild birds..."

"They're not angry! They're wild! Sorry, Bill, where do you find them?"

"No, I mean I hike out to the moors and use a hide to watch migratory birds come and go."

"Oh. It must get lonely out on the moors all on your own," her eyes laughing at him. "Never fancy some company?"

Mathew and Caroline would notice what she was doing, but they are having a whispered tiff.

"Would you like to come?"

"I think you'd like nothing better, wouldn't you, Bill?" she teases, smiling.

...

"Dessert, anyone?" interrupts Caroline.

"I'd like you for dessert, Caroline." Bill hasn't seen Mathew tiddly and playful before.

...

"Nothing for me, thanks. I've got to watch my figure," the slow voice pulls Bill's strings.

"I'd like to watch your figure," Bill flushes suddenly, realising what he'd just said out loud.

What did I say that for?

Are you fuckin' crazy?

"So you do like that kind of bird, Bill. I knew it."

You know everything about me.

"After we're finished, do you know what I'd like, Bill?" purrs Flora.

God, she can read me like a book.

I'm standing to attention.

Steps, where are you?

"I'd like you to walk me home tonight. Just the two of us."

"I'd like that too, Flora."

Can't they see me... shaking... hoping... I've got to...

"Let's just have some coffee," says Caroline. "I'm stuffed."

"I'm saying nothing," purrs Flora.

After coffee and the bill (or coupon) the four friends make their way outside, breathe in the fresh sea air, admire the disappearing view and say their goodnights. Mathew and Caroline are driving back home, while Bill is walking Flora to her door. Flora takes Bill's hand.

"This way," she says, pulling him towards the beach.

"I thought you said you live up that way," says Bill, pointing behind them.

She pulls him close, facing him.

"Look at me."

She's going to kiss me.

"There's a secret path," she says, and pulls away again. Pulling him towards a stream running over the sand and into the sea.

"Catch me, Bill," she says and runs off.

I could just leave now.

Bill runs after her over the road and into complete darkness.

She's disappeared!

Squinting, he makes out a narrow beaten path alongside the little stream and follows it.

"Come on, slowcoach," she shouts from ahead.

Getting used to the darkness, Bill carefully follows the path ahead.

He doesn't want to fall.

"It's been soooo good to see you again, Bill," her voice purrs, suddenly at his ear. "Hasn't it?"

I'm jelly.

He closes his eyes.

Nothing.

"Mistress?"

"I've enjoyed this evening, Bill, haven't you?"

"Yes, mistress."

"I think this could be the start of something wonderful," taking his hand again. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Bill?"

"Very much, mistress."

They keep walking up the narrow beaten path together, hand in hand.

She stops and stands in front of him.

"You know what I'm going to do, Bill," her nose almost touching his.
"Say please."

"Please, mistress. Please touch me."

She moves round and stands behind him.

"Do you remember, Bill?" A long fingernail trailed up his inner thigh.

Do whatever you want to me.

"Do you remember the excitement, Bill?" The nail digging harder into his leg.

"I do, mistress."

"Do you remember what you said, Bill?"

"I remember, mistress."

"What did you tell me, Bill?"

"I said I'll do anything for you, mistress."

"I think you were lying, Bill."

"I didn't lie, mistress."

"Are you telling me I'm wrong?" Fury surged inside his ear, the nail almost drawing blood.

No!

"... You're never wrong, mistress. I must be mistaken, mistress."

"That's it, Bill. Deep breaths. We don't want you blacking out here, do we?"

"No, mistress."

Nothing

"Mistress?"

Bill spins around.

Nothing.

Not even a shadow in the night.

Follow your breath...

He walks. If anything happened here, no one would find him until morning.

She's waiting for him on a public bench at the end of the path at a road beside a playground in a large park.

"Slowcoach. Come on, I live just along here."

She takes his hand again as they walk the hundred yards to her door.

She opens it, turns, smiles and says, "Want to come in, Bill?"

"Yes, m.."

She clamps her hand over his mouth before he can say the M word.

"Just for a drink."

"I would love that, Flora."

Bill is just about to enter when a voice comes from deep inside.

"Flora. Is that you, dear?"

She looks really disappointed. She whispers, "Wait."

"Yes."

"Make sure and lock up."

She closes the door firmly in his face.

He hears the key turn and the chain slide home.

Like she said... I'll wait... She won't be long...

After an hour, Bill walks home, his head still spinning.

It doesn't stop for more than a week.

His normal routine gradually pulls him back from any grand thoughts about the two of them getting together. He thanks Mathew for a lovely evening and avoids his million and one questions about what happened as he walked her home. Caroline was also keen to know

all the details, but hadn't seen Flora to speak to since their double date.

Things settle down until;

"Ow!" Bill is annoyed. He's dropped the carrier bag full of his week's shopping. His things are everywhere.

"Sorry! Sorry!" comes the voice as he was on his knees collecting some runaway tins.

"Bill?"

He looks up.

He can't see clearly at first.

It's Flora.

"Flora, what a lovely surprise," said Bill, standing up and ignoring his shopping. "How are you?"

"Oh, you know, not bad. Been busy recently. Mum, you know," she says, "and work. What about you?"

"Oh, nothing special. The same old rut," he beams. "I really enjoyed that night."

"Me too; it was great fun, wasn't it?"

"And Mathew and Caroline are great company. What are you doing now? Apart from picking up your shopping, that is."

"Just heading home to make my dinner. You want to come?"

"I'd like that, Bill."

I'm hot all of a sudden.

...

Bill opens the door, and she follows him in.

"Sorry about the mess." He had heard people say this before. She is his first ever visitor.

Stay.

"Let me just boil some water for the pasta."

"Mmm, that sounds lovely, Bill."

Bill comes back from the kitchen to find Flora in his armchair looking flustered and biting her nails.

Will her scent linger?

"You OK, Flora?" bending down.

"Not so good, Bill. I can't sleep. There's too much going on. I need a good night's sleep. I dream about you.

I dream about you.

"Can I do anything?"

"I'm not sure, Bill. You're so sweet, and I'm so mean to you."

"I said I would do anything for you, and I meant it," says Bill, daring to think about stroking her hair.

"But would you, Bill? Because I can't use my mum's medicine, she needs it all now. I used to take a pill now and again, but she needs the whole prescription now, and I had a row with the doctor the last time I went there. They were so mean."

"You can't remember the name of the pills, can you?"

"No!" Tears trickling slowly down her cheeks. "They're yellow, squishy things. They were just right."

"They sound like Temazepam."

"I have no idea."

"Well, why don't I try to find a box of them at the hospital? That should tide you over till you find another doctor."

"You can't do that, Bill. You could lose your job. It would affect our future."

Our future!

"No problem, Flora." Bill boasting, now. "Come round at the same time tomorrow. Is one box enough, do you think?"

"Maybe two or three would be better. How much are they, Bill?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it."

"Oh, Bill. I don't know how to thank you," she says, standing up.

"No need."

She gives Bill a loose hug, putting her mouth to his ear.

"We'd be so good together, Bill. Wouldn't we?"

"Yes, mistress."

"See you tomorrow, Bill," she says, turning to leave him, hoping and hungry.

We'd be perfect together!

She comes only for the pills the next evening and then leaves. She says she is too busy.

A week later. 10:30 in the evening.

There's a knock at the door.

He's in the shower.

Who the fuck?

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

He opens the door. Just a towel.

"I need more medicine, Bill. It's for my mum. I need Diazepam."
She's desperate.

He's dripping.

"But that's restricted, Flora. That stuff is counted in and counted out," he says, slowly becoming alert.

...

"Have a look in here, Bill. Look what I've got." She opens her bag.

...

"Put it on, Bill." Now in command.

The darkness accentuates her voice.

"Hold out your hand, Bill."

It can't be!

"Now!"

The towel drops.

"Recognise this, Bill?"

He feels the stick, the two prongs.

"No gag tonight, Bill."

I hope it's the same as I remember.

"No, mistress."

As his fingers go over the prongs, she flicks the switch.

"Enmm."

"What are you, Bill?"

"I'm yours, mistress."

"Exactly. Are you paying attention?"

The two prongs hit his inner left thigh.

"Ehnnn..."

"Too slow!"

"Focus for me."

"I'll do anything for you, mistress!"

The prongs hit his right buttock.

"Ehnnn..."

"Sorry, they're restricted, slave!"

"But..."

Stroking between his legs now.

The words fall out, "I'll do anything for you, mistress. Restrictions don't matter. Leave it with me."

...

"Would you like it if I came by the hospital one night when you're working?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Are hospital beds big enough for you and me?" The cattle prod prongs still rubbing between his legs.

"Ehhmmm."

"I bet you can go anywhere you like in the hospital, can't you?"
Rubbing a little harder.

"ehhhhhhh."

"Shall I pull the trigger, slave?"

"Please, mistress. Please, mistress."

...

"No."

...

"Not yet."

..

"Maybe next time." She pulls back, puts the prod back in the bag and takes off his blindfold.

I can't stop shaking... I wish she'd done it... Need her...

"I knew I could rely on you, Bill."

And she was gone.

She keeps turning up at his flat.

More pills.

More promises.

Then one night at about midnight, when he is on lates, there's a knock on Bill's office door.

"Hello, stranger."

She's in a good mood.

Looking good too.

"Flora."

"You wanted to see me, didn't you?"

"Eh... Yes, I did... eh, I mean... I do." Bill looking around for any colleagues.

"So, this is your office?" studying everything on the shelves and on the desk, "Impressive, Bill."

"No, it's not."

"Oh, come on, Bill. You've got your own office, and I bet this part of the hospital is your own little domain, isn't it?"

"Well..."

"You said there are beds here, didn't you?" All innocent. "I suppose there would be in a hospital, eh?"

"Yeah... most hospitals have beds, don't they?"

"I want to stay, but not if you're going to be like that. Show me the beds, Bill."

Yes!

They walk along a long, poorly lit, shiny, green corridor until they come to a door marked Room 489. Bill unclips his bunch of keys from his belt and unlocks the door. They step in.

She's on him immediately.

"Who do you think I am, Bill? Look at the state of them! No self-respecting girl would stand on one in work boots, never mind lie in one naked."

Naked!

"I just want to show you what size they are," he whines. "Are they big enough for what you want to do?"

"Not bad, actually, Bill," she says, coming closer. "Where are the clean ones?"

"We'll need to go to another part of the hospital for them. Come"

"Not yet, Bill. Show me your domain first."

He's shown her two more rooms. In the second, she grabs him.

"I'm having trouble, Bill," she hisses. "I'm having trouble keeping my hands off you!"

She's mine!

She expertly twists his arm, forcing him to his knees in front of her.

"Do you like my new outfit, Bill? I bought it just for you."

She bends down over him.

Her bra.

Cleavage.

I'll remember every detail forever.

How can I be with her if I keep whimpering out?

"I love it."

She grabs his hair and holds his face millimeters from her cleavage.

He's shaking.

Breathe them in while you've got the chance.

"I love it, what, Bill?"

"I love it, mistress."

"And what's this?" pushing his head down to her knees.

I can't see; I need to see.

"What do you want, Bill?"

"I want you more than anything, mistress."

"What would you do for a peek, Bill?"

"Anything, mistress. Tell me, and I'll do my best to make it happen."
His breath catching now.

Please give me my reward.

Furious, she throws his head away from her, making him fall over ending up lying on his back on the floor.

"You'll do your best! You'll do your best! I'll give you your best!"

She takes out a pair of shiny red pliers and leans over him.

"Do you remember, Bill?"

A metallic slicing as they open and close.

"Yes, mistress."

"Shall I reacquaint you with them?" she said with a sneer.

The pliers touch his cheek

...

"You know best, mistress."

...

They move to his left eye.

...

"So you'll do your best, will you?"

...

Touch the hair inside his nose

...

"No, mistress. I'll do anything. I promise."

...

Ever so slowly, the pliers are put back in her bag.

...

She looks deep into his eyes. Smirks.

...

His sweat is dripping unnoticed onto the floor.

...

She turns and leaves without a word.

...

I'm learning... Our relationship... From strength to strength...

Three weeks, two days, 20 hours and fifteen minutes later.

He's standing at a urinal in the men's toilets.

The disinfectant is fighting a losing battle.

Drip.

The prod runs up the back of his thigh.

"Hello, Bill," she whispers into his right ear.

The jump was involuntary.

"Not speaking to me, Bill? No need to make a mess."

Drip.

"I'm so glad you're here, mistress," he says, jiggling about and aiming for comfort now the job is done.

"How glad, Bill?"

"Extremely glad, mistress."

You know everything I like.

"You know I do, mistress. You know all about me."

Drip.

"Yes, I do, don't I?"

...

"Have you found clean, empty beds yet, Bill?"

Please.

"Yes, mistress." He whispers hoarsely, "I have some ready. Would you like to inspect them?"

"Not yet, Bill." She was facing him now. Safe.

"Are they on this floor, Bill?"

Drip.

"Yes, mistress."

"What else is on this floor, Bill? We didn't finish our tour last time. You were busy with other things."

"Storerooms, toilets, offices, the morgue, emergency wards, mistress. What would you like to see, mistress?"

"Show me the morgue, Bill?"

They wind their way through a maze of identical corridors and eventually through a pair of wide swing doors. She flinches at the smell.

"It's busy here during the day," Bill says. "At night, there's no one."

"Do bodies ever get lost down here?" she asks. "Misplaced? Maybe someone who doesn't have any relatives?"

"It happens, but only once in a blue moon."

Drip.

"What about extra bodies, Bill? Ones that have been processed wrong or something?"

"I've heard stories, but it definitely doesn't happen every day. I think they need to call the police if that happens."

"What about an incinerator? Do they burn bits of people they don't need? You know leftover bits. That kind of thing."

"It's through here." He almost takes her hand.

The heat is incredible after the cool corridors. They go in, and Bill explains the basics of working the incinerator.

"So, you know how to work it, Bill?"

"Yes, mistress."

"You're going to help me."

"You know I'll do anything for you, mistress."

"I have an extra. Make it disappear," she commands, "and you'll get your reward."

"Yes, mistress."

"It's in my car."

Bill leads them back to the loading bay, takes a trolley and rolls it down to a long, sleek estate car. She opens the boot.

"Take him and burn him. There're a couple of fingers in his pocket; make sure they don't fall out."

"Yes, mistress."

"You will get what you want, Bill. It will be beyond your imagination."

Bill expertly maneuvers the body onto the trolley, pushes it up to the doors and turns round to say something, but Flora is in her car starting the engine, and is gone.

I'm special...

That's what she meant...

She trusts me...

She's so busy...

What could be beyond my imagination?

At the next monthly management meeting, Holly Mickelson idly comments that he seems to be more relaxed.

I'm hers.

There was a flutter of agreement from 'the girls', one of whom asks if he has at long last discovered a romantic attachment.

He lets himself go.

"Too soon to tell, you know. I don't want to jinx it," repeating what he had heard someone say on the bus, "but she's given me a new reason to live."

Much clucking, then obtuse remarks about how it is long overdue, and it's about time someone shagged his brains out.

He returns to his office only to find Flora sitting in his chair studying his spreadsheets as if she is the one in charge.

She is.

This is his life now. She can turn up at any time.

As so often, she is dressed in a black three quarter length coat over a black twinset. A pearl choker around her neck.

"Hello, Bill," she purrs, commanding, and assertive.

"I can't express how glad I am to see you, mistress."

She swivels a little in the chair and starts speaking, but Bill only notices a long blonde hair on her black coat.

"Focus, Bill!"

"Sorry, mistress, I am distracted by how beautiful you look today. "

"Come, Bill."

He goes and stands beside her.

Her nails are long.

Leisurely, she pushes three nails into his left thigh and slowly drags them upwards.

She can feel me quivering.

"Go to my car and get the package in the boot."

He complies.

Opening the boot, he notices a faint waft of cigarette smoke.

Strange, she hates that smell.

Approaching his office, he hears her voice.

"Yes, just like that. Good boy Martin."

A blonde-haired figure rushes out and strides along the corridor before he can react.
He walks in.

Were her cheeks that pink before he left?

"Is everything OK, mistress?"

"Of course, Bill," she purrs. "One of the others was just here."

The bottom fell out of his world.

"One of the others?" hoarsely.

...

"Come, Bill, sit."

She stands behind his chair.

She leans over him, running her hands down his chest to his thighs, his head nestled in her bosom.

"You know you're number one, Bill, don't you?"

"I do my best, mistress."

"But there are others, Bill."

She keeps rubbing her hands up and down from his shoulders to his thighs, never too close.

Closer.

"You're the only one I can trust, Bill. Really trust. I don't know what we'd do without you, Bill."

"We, mistress?"

"Me and the others, Bill" the steam from her breath was in his left ear now.

...

"We're going to take over, Bill. There are hundreds of us now."

Hundreds?

No!

...

"I can only send you messages from now on, Bill."

"I can't see you for the next few months, Bill."

"Mistress?" tears welling up in his eyes.

"I'll come to you."

"You're my guy, Bill. Only you. It's only for a few months. Our relationship is strong enough for that, isn't it, Bill?"

"The strongest, mistress. You can trust me."

"And when it's over, we'll find one of these beds, won't we, Bill?"

I've dreamt about it countless times.

"Yes, mistress."

She stands, walks over to the door, turns and purrs, "Remember what you've done: no one can know."

"No, mistress."

She leaves.

...

She can't do it without me.

Only we know about the bodies and the drugs.

I'll get our bed ready for my beloved now.

ROSECOVEN

Whispers are not what they seem

I look in the mirror, as I do every morning. Check myself out, make sure I know who they're looking at. Chris Jenkins, 24 years and two months old, slim but strong, some would say wiry. A buzz-cut. I enjoy playing football but don't get the chance much these days. Like heavy metal, but also some classics and pop songs. The usual shit for someone my age. My pride and joy is my car, which makes me feel independent, so I really look after it.

I'm single at the moment, but the main reason for that is any girl I like gives me grief about a) staying with my mum, and b) being a checkpoint patrolman for New Tomorrow. Got to change that! Soon! I do have this dream about someone, though. We're always under the stars at night. She's a bit older, and it's a bit weird, to be honest, but she only looks deep into my eyes and smiles. Always wake up with a real morning glory, though, so she must have something.

Anyway, each day, I need to be well turned out, shaved and tidy. My uniform has to be clean and pressed. Thanks, Mum.

That's enough self-love for this morning. Quick brekky, Mum's made me a packed lunch. I'm on earlies this month, so a quick drive to work for a 07:00 start.

As I go out the door, I'm thinking about whether the evening courses I'm studying are worth the hassle. Too much time, too little reward. I want promotion as soon as possible. Maybe I should have a chat with Sergeant Park when we have some free time.

Maybe never then.

Park's OK, not like Major Blake. He's a nightmare. Parky joined up for more or less the same reasons as me. His family thought it was better to have someone on the inside of the system and with good regular pay and benefits. Like him, I've lost most of my friends; they can't handle the fact that I'm in New Tomorrow. But that's just the way it is.

Unlike him, I never go to the pub if I can help it, but if there's a celebration for someone at work, then we're encouraged to take part, so I go. Don't drink much, though.

I get in the car. Ah, my own space.

In the beginning, I found it hard trying to obey all the orders he gave me. I'm used to it now. And cos I just get on with it and do my job without complaining, he and some of the other sergeants are a bit friendlier. Sometimes, if they think I'm up to it, they'll let me stand in for a corporal if one of them's off sick or something. Bit weird, I can tell you, but it makes me feel really confident about my future and everything.

Here I am, just got to lock the car.

I go through my mantra. I am smart. I am clever. I am polite. I am strict. No one fucks with me, or I'll bring them down.

I sign the register, check for any new instructions and go straight on duty, nodding to Derek that I'll take over so he can finish his shift.

"Good morning, madam. Papers, please." She has them ready, as most of them do, but... I have to jump back to avoid a gush of sick from her kid. "Not on my shoes, you don't, son." I'll get her next time. You nearly had to do another wash, Mum.

"Good morning, sir. Papers, please. What? You've forgotten them. You know the drill, sir. Go over to ring number 3 and the patrolman will cuff you to it until someone brings them. Next."

"Good morning, miss. Papers, please. Step back. Not so close, thank you, miss. Please stay behind the line. Ah, right. If you could please go over to Door 6, someone will process you for the EBI program. No, it doesn't matter if you don't want to. Patrolman! Take her to Door 6! Next." She's fuckin' gorgeous! It'll be quite easy for her to be a hero mother, I expect.

"Good morning, madam. Papers, please. I'm sorry to inform you that you've been flagged, so you'll need to wear this badge until that flag is removed. Let me check the number ..." Who's that in line 7? There's something about him. Fuck, he's the spitting image of that photo I have of my dad that his mate gave me. What should I do? Fuck him. "Next."

"Good morning, sir. Papers, please. Stay behind the line, sir. If you don't step back, sir, you'll be taken to Door 1. Have you been there before, sir? DOOR 1! Thanks guys, he's fuckin' huge, isn't he? Next." I hope they give him a good doing. Fuckin' Gym Bunny.

And so it goes on.

No one really likes registering someone for drone watch. Except me, that is. I really get off on the fact that I can have someone followed, and they won't know anything about it. I've become pally with the operators, so if something happens, they can give me the heads up so I can go and see what's going on.

The other day, this woman came through the checkpoint. It was a bit odd. She seemed to hang back a bit so that it had to be me that checked her papers. I was sure I'd never seen her before in my life, but she looked familiar for some reason.

She wasn't a Crazy; she didn't have the wild hair and didn't seem to be covered in all these mental tattoos that some of New Tomorrow front-line staff have.

She was just ordinary, maybe about mid-thirties or something like that. I'm shit at trying to guess women's ages, cos you get so much shit if you're wrong. Anyway, when she came through, all her papers were in order, but as I gave them back, rather than avoiding eye contact as most of them do, she looked me directly in the eye, smiled and said:

"You're coming back."

That's what she said.

I don't know why, I couldn't answer. When I could, she'd gone, and someone else was waiting with their papers.

There was something about her smile.

As far as I can remember, she was called Elma something and stayed somewhere up in East Rosaside, but it really stuck with me.

You're coming back.

What the fuck! Where am I coming back from? When did I go there?

She probably needed glasses and couldn't make out if it was me or Swanney that she wanted. He's always been a bit weird, that Swanney.

And then it happened again. We were really busy. I didn't notice her until I had her papers in my hand. She looked me straight in the eye, smiled and said:

"You're in the cards. You're a good man. You're coming back."

And then she was off. I must've given her papers back. They weren't in my hand when I went to stop her. What cards? That smile.

The thing is you get all kinds of weird fuckers going through checkpoints, but her eyes, her face, her words and her smile were all I could think about after I saw her.

My family. My mum and her brothers in particular thought I'd been smitten by some kind of wonder woman and that I'd finally get my end away and move out of the house. But they were wrong. It wasn't like that; it was like she was stuck in my head. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see hers. Every time I thought I was going to get a little peace and quiet, all I could hear was her voice. It was driving me bananas!

And again. That time I managed to get a good look at her docs.

Elma Harrison, 32b East Rosaside Hill, Rosehaven. 33 years old, single with no children. She was a carer with no affiliations to any

factions, which would have been a red flag.

Again, her eyes drilled into mine. Pressing something small into my hand, she half whispered.

“Sea’s restless. Means change is near. If you need to know what happened, just come and say, I’ve been here before.”

And she was gone. I looked down. She had given me a little token engraved with a star.

What the fuck?

I thought I was going nuts. Things like that didn’t happen to me.

Why was I thinking of stars?

It was relentless. Hearing her voice. Seeing her eyes. Constantly playing with the token that was always in my pocket. What the hell was going on?

I found myself checking out where she stayed on the map. It was just an ordinary neighbourhood in an ordinary area. Nothing special.

One of the drone guys could grab some footage of it for me, but that would mean explaining about her, which would open me up for an immense slagging, especially when people found out that she was almost 10 years older than me.

I asked the boys if they'd had any women say anything weird to them recently. All of them had, but no one had said anything like Elma.

I couldn't get Elma out of my head. What was it about her? I didn't even fancy her. I mean, at all! Maybe it was because for the first time in my life I felt different or special. I wish I knew what she meant.

Maybe there was more to life than that. Maybe if I'm special, I could get on faster and become somebody important. But I hadn't seen her again.

I needed to.

I had Elma's address. What kind of place was it? Where was it? Was it just a house, a shop, or ...?

The problem was, I didn't have the guts to go. I was scared someone'd see. It'd probably have been better if I could have gone there in uniform first, on official business. That way, I could check the area out for any risks or anything like that.

I needed to go.

I didn't really want to make an excuse to patrol her area. That would have been too much. But I could have looked up her address on the database or checked her out on facial recognition.

Her and her address were flawless.

She kept coming again and again. I tried to divert her to another patrolman but couldn't. Each time she said something it was as if she was trying to get me to give in and come.

Come where?

I had to get her out of my head and concentrate on my work

I went.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to go to her. I needed to. How was I ever going to get any peace if I kept going like this? I was suffering, and my work was suffering, just ask the old guy who I'd badged the other day for taking too long to get his docs out of his pocket.

I told my mum I wouldn't be back for dinner. Told Parky I had to leave early that evening.

I drove to East Rosehide Hill.

I drove past 32b twenty times. I didn't have the guts to stop and knock on her door. I parked just along the road. I had a packet of crisps and a drink. I thought about what to do next.

Just as I decided to leave, there was a tap on my window. She smiled as I wound it down.

"Hi. It's alright. I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come. Come on. Come and have a cuppa."

She turned and walked off.

I couldn't stop myself. My heart lifted. I sprang out of the car, locked it and almost skipped after her to her front door. She opened it and we both went in.

"Take off your shoes; you must have had a long day. There's a pair of slippers that'll fit you right there."

As she said it, I felt my feet were hot, tired and uncomfortable, so I unlaced my boots and slipped into the soft, welcoming slippers.

"Oh, that's better."

"I've put the kettle on. Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, thanks."

I heard the kettle boiling in the kitchen.

Her thumb ran along the rim of my cup three times before handing it to me, like she was sealing something in.

"Here you are. Careful, it's hot," Elma said, coming over and closing the book full of strange diagrams that'd been left open on the armchair.

The smell of her coffee mixed with the room's exotic scent.

"I can't stop thinking about you," I blurted out. "I think about you all day, every day from when I wake up to when I go to sleep. If I sleep."

I felt happy, like I was a kid again. I had to carry on.

"I see your face every time I close my eyes. I hear your voice telling me things."

The tea tasted perfect.

“What things?”

“Well, the things you said at work. About how I’m a good man. About how I’m coming back. How you’ve seen me in the cards. All that kind of stuff. I think I even dreamt about you before, but that’d be weird.”

“It’s OK. You don’t need to worry. I knew you’d feel this way,” she said it like she was talking about the weather.

“I’ve got something in the oven. Have some dinner. You’ll feel better, and then you’ll be able to tell me all about it. Won’t you?”

My mum would kill me for being so impolite, but I was starving by this time. I couldn’t resist, especially with the smells that were drifting through from the kitchen.

I felt so relaxed while eating. I think she’d used herbs I’d never had before. Good though, and better than the chippy, an oven-ready meal, or even my mum’s cooking.

I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so relaxed.

We talked about everything. She always seemed to like the same things I did, even football. I thought she was faking at first, but she knew more about some things than I did. It was as if we’d known each other forever.

My muscles didn’t want to move. They’d turned all soft, but as long as I sat on her sofa, I was fine... The aroma, the company, just fine.

The room breathed. Or maybe it was me. I couldn’t tell.

"I can help you, Chris, but it'd be better if you let me do something first. Don't worry, it's not creepy, just a pack of cards that will explain what I mean."

She got up and went over to the sideboard and brought out a package wrapped in dark purple cloth. She set it down on the dining table and unwrapped it carefully, revealing a pack of large cards.

She asked me to shuffle the pack thoroughly and then cut it into three.

"Which pile would you like to choose?" she said, looking into my mind, smiling.

I liked it when she did that.

It was as if it was calling me, "The one on the right."

She looked really cute as she concentrated on laying out the cards in a strange pattern. Then she told me about myself as if she'd known me since I was born. She knew my deepest hopes and fears and every desire I'd ever had. She was kind and took care not to hurt my feelings.

Even though everything she said was true, there was conflict. My work was against my nature, they said, and that if I continued to pursue it as a career, my mental and emotional health could suffer badly if nothing changed.

"I can't believe you know all this about me from just a pack of cards, Elma. I'm sure I didn't mention anything about trying to track down my dad. I even feel closer to him now."

I was so snug and content.

The three of us were completely at ease. Elma, me and the room.

"It's like you can see inside me. It's like you can roam inside my head and know anything you want about me. How do you do that? Are all my doors open?"

"Let's see. Why don't I come and sit beside you, mmm?" She said softly, getting up.

She sat right next to me. Touching. I could smell her. I could feel her breath. It gently blew away all the worries I'd ever had.

"My mum and my grandma taught me how to read the cards. They even taught me how to read tea leaves."

I could only nod. It was like her voice was inside my head. It filled me up.

"I bet you're engaged or something to some nice girl, or about to have a kid. Aren't you?"

"You mean you don't know?" I grinned gently.

When did she start rubbing my knee?

My heart was pounding so hard, I thought I was going to choke.

It'd been a long time since I'd had a girl's head on my shoulder.

She smelled like heaven. Sweet, soft and light.

Her full lips moved closer and closer until I just couldn't control myself any longer. I grabbed her shoulders and kissed her hard,

sticking my tongue right down her throat.

“Woah! Take it easy. There’s no rush. Let’s take it nice and slow.”

Her hand moved a little.

She spoke slower and slower and quieter and quieter and then took me. Took me to heaven, not just once but again and again.

I didn’t know I could do these things.

Everything fits. Everything makes sense. Everything is right with the world.

She’s slow, wonderful, relaxed, comfortable.

Not like any girl I’ve been with before.

This is the life.

I feel calm here, like something is rooting me to this place.

To her. To her taste. To her scent. Everything.

She’s kind, always coaxing, leading me to new heights.

I think I go to work the next day, but to be honest, I’ve no idea. I’m on autopilot.

I’m on cloud nine.

My mum comes to see me at work to make sure I’m OK. She's not sure, so she sends my uncle to check that it’s really me. He grins

from ear to ear when he sees me.

“Take it while you can get it, son,” he says in his best impression of a worldly-wise wizard.

Back to hers after work. I can’t get enough. I’ve thought about nothing else.

She shows me things I’ve never even heard of in the rec room at work.

I’m so in.

I turn my key, walk in, slip off my boots, and into my slippers.

“Hi, I’m home.”

“We’re in here, love. Come and meet the girls.”

“Chris, this is Zingy, Christine, and Lisa.”

“Hiya. How’re you doing? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“All good, I hope.” Laughs all round.

Elma comes up, wraps her arms around me, and gives me a big sloppy kiss.

“How was today?”

“Oh, same old, same old.”

"We were waiting to start dinner. I bet you're starving."

"I could eat a horse. What've you made?"

"The four of us cooked tonight."

Everything on the table is incredible. The more we eat, the more we laugh, the more we relax. A wonderful time.

Lisa is the quietest one, but I get the feeling that she's assessing me in some way, almost like a silent interview. Her blonde fringe is like a curtain that almost hides her eyes; when she does speak, her voice is like silky smooth cream.

She says, "Elma says your readings have been unbelievable, so we've brought our own cards, just to check that she's doing it right." Her hand goes up to cover her mouth as the three of them giggle softly. "Do you mind?"

I just shake my head, grinning.

"Who would you like to start with, Chris?" asks Lisa.

I choose Christine.

The four women exchange a look that doesn't quite include me.

The tall redhead draws some kind of sign in the air above the cards, mutters quietly to herself and begins the reading. After 15 minutes or so, the other two try too.

When they are finished:

"I see what you mean, Elma," said Zingy, her quick grey eyes twinkling. "The Fool, Death, a change for the good is coming."

She approves of me. I don't know why; it's just a feeling.

"Yeah," said Christine, flicking her long red hair over her shoulder. "They all talk about the same thing. Be true to yourself. They show you're a leader. More than one king in each reading with none reversed."

"There was a Hierophant reversed, though," Lisa said in her hushed voice. "So it says that he's on the wrong path right now, and it'll probably make him sick. Paths don't change, only the feet walking them."

I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was glad they liked me.

"Who's for some trifle?" says Elma, coming through with a huge bowlful. "I'll be mum."

After the trifle, the sofa swallows me whole. The weariness falls off my bones. Every ache and pain vanishes.

It's wonderful meeting the girls, but soon they're on their way home.

I don't know why, but it's like I've passed a test of some kind.

I stay as usual.

Saying that, the next night, I have to sleep at my mum's. She's been lonely and is eager to catch up. She's desperate to meet Elma, but I say it's still too early.

The nightmares start as soon as my head hits the pillow. I'm falling endlessly. Crashing into things that should kill me, but I just bounce off and fall in another direction. There's no up. Everything's down.

I wake up about four, but my eyes don't seem to work properly. I keep seeing Elma at the end of my bed, smiling. "Don't worry," she keeps saying, "Go back to sleep."

Now she's beside me, maybe only in the dream, and all my worries vanish.

Then.

"I'm sorry. My friends need me. It's important," she whispers in my ear.

"I need to go. Now."

I drift.

I'm on the sea.

Nothing for miles.

Just sea.

And a huge sun.

It's so hot. It's unbearable. I'm parched. I have to let go.

My skin blistering.

I'm burning!

A fin.

I can barely stay afloat.

I thrash.

Is it circling?

Every time I scream, seawater fills my mouth.

I'm filling up.

Dropping.

Into the depths.

I can't.

I'm going to be eaten.

A mouth.

Teeth!

Then...

"I'm back," she says in my dream.

My panic deflates, and everything's rosy again. I drift off into a deep sleep, with no water in sight.

No sharks.

The cards didn't mention sharks!

After dinner on Thursday, I don't feel right either.

I'm still in Elma relaxation mode, but something's different.

I sleep, but I'm even worse in the morning.

I can't tell her it's the food, cos it was better than usual.

"I'm not feeling very well."

"Oh Chris! You're burning up," says Elma, hand on my forehead.

"My guts," I whine. "Got any pills? I've got to get to work."

"There's no way you're going to work today, love!" She says.

"No choice... must... go."

I clock on; the sergeant sees me, sends me to the medic and I'm back at Elma's within the hour.

"The girls are here. They sensed something was wrong. I hope you're a better patient than I am."

I'm put to bed.

Something smells different. Smoke?

Incense.

My head is against a breast as I'm patiently spoon-fed something smooth and sticky. It tastes, I don't know, kind of like medicine, but...

I'm coming and going.

Gentle white-skinned hands are wiping my forehead with a deliciously cool cloth.

Oh, that's so good.

Voices are chatting in the room.

"He's adapting really well, better than they usually do."

What was that?

Hands everywhere, pulling me up. I think they're pills. Water.

I want more water.

What's happening now?

Why am I on my side?

Wiping.

That's more comfortable. Dry.

I arrive. I leave. I don't know when.

I feel safe here. Safe and seen. Like someone's smoothing my thoughts.

Even my mum can't look after me this well, though only Elma's allowed to give me a bed bath.

After two days off and feeling much better, I'm back at work.

I take a while to get my bearings. I make a few small paperwork mistakes, but apart from that, I'm fine.

It isn't too busy, so I go to chat with Ken in the drone control room. It's fun watching people being followed.

And there she is. Not Zingy, Christine or Lisa, but Leah, another of Elma's friends. The drone's following her through the sparse woodland up on Rosehill.

Lots of things about Elma and her friends seem strange to me at times, but Leah's downright odd. She has all-knowing eyes that look as if they've seen horrors beyond belief, but she's only seventeen. She's so fragile. I can't let her be followed. Elma would never forgive me.

Ken's being his usual efficient self. He's the best drone pilot we have.

I have to do something.

I stand up and stumble against him, nudging his hand. The drone smashes straight into the nearest tree. He's furious.

"What the fuck did you do that for? I'll need to report this, Chris. Someone's going to take the fall for this, and it's not going to be me."

"Come on, man. I didn't mean it. I leaned on the arm of the chair. It moved as I got up. It was an accident."

"It's not that, Chris. Losing any drone has to be reported. They're not cheap, you know. We'll need to get a recovery team out there as soon as possible."

"OK, OK. Report it, Ken. Just say it was my fault. I'm really, really sorry. I don't want you to get into any shit."

"Yeah, yeah, Chris, I know. You shouldn't be here, man. If you're not fit, get yourself back to the medic."

I'm standing in front of Major Blake.

"Why were you in the drone control room, Jenkins?" he asked, checking his clipboard.

"I had to ask Flight Corporal Winslow a question, sir."

"And for the record, could you tell me what happened, please? In your own time."

I retold my version of events in detail.

"Are you aware of how much these drones cost, corporal? Let me tell you, shall I? One of these drones costs around three months' worth of your salary. Were you aware of that, corporal?"

"No, sir."

"Are you aware of how much it costs to send out a recover and repair team? Let me tell you, shall I? It costs the equivalent of a month's salary for you. Were you aware of that, corporal?"

"No, sir."

The guy's really pissing me off. I don't care about your drone, or the money. The important thing is Leah got away without you finding out where she's going.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I don't know what came over me, sir." I did what I had to do.

"You know me, sir. I've never done anything like that before. Probably won't again." Maybe if I sound worried enough, he'll think he's won and will let me get back to my post.

"Let me be clear, corporal, if this happens again, I will deduct the costs from your salary, and then you will be dishonorably discharged."

"Yes, sir!" I'm struggling not to laugh as I imagine my boot stamping on his smug, superior face.

"If that happens, you will never be able to work again. Am I clear, corporal?"

"Crystal clear, sir."

"Now, get out of my sight!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Thank you, sir. It won't happen again, sir. I promise."

God, I hate him. Creepy old bastard!

Elma's right. I have to be true to myself and follow my path. But what path?

God, I want her now!

I feel like I'm caught between two worlds. How can I keep working like this?

On the one hand, I've got my settled life, living with my mum, saving for the security of getting married to a nice girl, settling down and having kids and so on.

On the other, there's Elma and the girls, who look after my every need and make me feel the best I've ever felt in my life.

I believe what the girls say about my work conflicting with my nature, but if I just jacked it in, where would my money come from? What about my car? What about buying Elma things? We wouldn't be able to go anywhere, would we?

But if I keep at it, and keep trying to get promoted, then that conflict will just get worse and worse and I'll probably go crazy or something. Maybe kill myself, or worse, kill someone else.

What the hell should I do?

I can't make up my mind. I need someone to talk to. The problem is, everyone I can talk to about it is involved.

I try my mum, my sergeant, and even my uncle. They've no idea what I'm on about.

I can't tell them everything. They think I'm just being an arse. I should get this new girlfriend pregnant, marry her, and concentrate on family life.

I turn to the person I first thought of but wanted to avoid.

Elma.

"I'm stuck. I've no idea what I want to do with my life. Everything used to be set out, easy to follow. Now, I'm confused. I don't even feel like the person I was six months ago."

"I've told you everything, Elma. What do you think I should do? Honestly, I'm cracking up here."

"You know me, love," she soothed, stroking my hair. "Maybe you think you should leave your job, but I think it'd be really hard for you to change. Let's do your cards. They'll give you a completely different perspective, won't they?"

So, we do my cards. A few times. Each time the answer is clear.

We make love like there's no tomorrow. I'm desperate to please her, and her, me. My feelings are running over. What'll happen if I lose her? What then? The answer is clear.

A warm relaxing shower, and it's obvious that my answer is clear. It's my life; it needs my answer.

We go to Zingy's for a meal with the other girls. Their presence is a tide; warm and inevitable. Wonderful food and such a good time.

Can I go back to what I had before? It's clear.

I'm calming down again. I know what to do, but I haven't told anyone, not even Elma. When the thought occurs, the panic passes.

Calm. My calm.

I am calm and composed at work the next morning. In fact, I feel that way all day. It seems to be the new me. How long will it last? A few more hours, or forever? Who cares?

It's a lovely day. The good weather has made everyone noticeably happier than on the usual grey-day drudge.

It's good to be alive.

Calm. A cool breeze, a relaxed mind, and a relaxed body.

Checking papers. Checking papers. Flag a high school teacher for drone surveillance. Dish out a few badges that'll record anything and everything a couple of eighty-year-old dog walkers will do because they forgot their permit.

Just recently, some days I feel disgusted with myself.

That's a good thing.

Calm. At one with the world.

Another drone for a delivery guy. Another badge for a teenage monster. A girl who can't stop twirling her long black hair flagged for subversion; I let through. Checking more papers.

Calm. No hassle. I could do this in my sleep.

Elma's made me a great packed lunch that smells so good, I have to give half of it to the others sitting at my table in the canteen. They really enjoy it, visibly relaxing afterwards.

Calm. They like it too. It's not just me.

Nothing of note in the afternoon.

Drive home to Elma.

She's going out.

"I'm going to the meeting room, love. Come on, it won't take long. Afterwards, we can drive up to the forest and have some fun. You like that, don't you?"

"Come on, then. I'll drive."

The meeting room is just that. Posters on the wall show what they're about. The cycles of the moon and planets, astrological charts, star signs, Chinese star signs, strange diagrams, aura colours. You name it, it's there. Books on Tarot cards, reading the future in a multitude of ways, and something called astral projection. For sale ads for herbs, mushrooms and stuff their members grow themselves. It's all way over my head. Gentle music is playing in the background.

There are about ten people sitting in a circle, eyes closed, holding hands, and having some kind of meeting that we can't interrupt.

Oh, my God! Is that the girl I let through the checkpoint this morning?

Can't be. That girl had long black hair.

Can it?

She looks different. She's dressed in similar clothes, though. I can't see her face. But she's still twirling her hair, even though it's blonde. Oh, wait!

Is it her?

If I'd said anything about feelings a few months ago, I'd have gone to the doctor. But these days when I know, I know.

It's definitely her.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I can't be here. I've got to get out. I've got to get out!

"What's wrong, Chris?" Elma asks, tugging my sleeve.

My palms are sweating, my mouth's as dry as a bone, my heart is going haywire.

I can hardly breathe.

I want to throw up.

"You see that woman in the circle? The one with the red top?" I croak. "She looks a bit different now. I'm absolutely positive I let her through the checkpoint this morning, even though she was flagged."

The entire circle is watching me, even though their eyes are closed.

"I could get taken."

"I could get tortured!"

"Have you ever seen someone when they get taken out of the Red Room? What am I going to do? I need to get out of here!"

"Calm down, love. If you let her through, you let her through. Nothing's happened. How can they know? Take it easy," she whispers, putting her arm through mine and turning me away to explain one of the posters.

Then, her mouth is right up to my ear. "Remember the cards. Remember how calm you've been today. You're not fighting anything now." And right there, with her words, I began feeling better.

"Now, let's get out of here. I've done what I came to do," she says, turning all cheerful, leading me towards the door. "Let's go get messy in the woods!"

I never even make it to my post in the morning. Just as I'm getting out of my car, three men approach, flash ID, one on each arm and the other speaking.

They lead me away.

"Patrolman Christopher Robert Jenkins, Patrol number 7326371. You will answer our questions. You have relinquished any rights you may have had by your actions."

Calm. There's no point in fighting. Just let them take me.

They walk me to a door I've never noticed before in all the time I've worked here. It opens just before we reach it and closes behind us.

Through air-conditioned offices, some with glass partitions, others closed up tight, everyday chitter chatter and the tempting aroma of coffee.

Into a room.

Just the kind of dull, grey room that you would expect for an interrogation. The reek of piss, disinfectant and stories that don't end well.

Strapped into a cold metal chair bolted to the floor. Ankles chafing, clamped to the legs. Wrists manacled to the arms. Hands turning blue. Back aching.

A blazing light in my eyes.

I shiver.

Calm. I've seen what some people look like after an interrogation. One half-dead man dragged away, comes to mind.

One sits in front of me. The other two, I can't see.

"Christopher Robert Jenkins. We have evidence you purposefully allowed a flagged individual through the checkpoint yesterday at 10:43am. What do you have to say?"

"If I did do that, sir, it's highly unlikely I did it on purpose. It must have been a mistake, sir." You're not getting me for this.

"Records show that you did, and if that was all we had, then you'd be right. It could have been a mistake."

Calm. He's bluffing. Standard procedure.

"Unfortunately for you, we caught the woman in question and under interrogation, she stated she'd been told that if you processed her, she'd be let through unquestioned."

"What do you have to say for yourself, patrolman?"

"I... I... I can assure you that isn't true, sir."

Calm. Calm. Where are you?

My calm was seeping away, drip by drip.

Elma could help.

But not now. Not here.

They would see me shaking if I wasn't strapped in so tightly.

I have to do it.

Reach down and face your fear.

You can't let it win. You'll lose everything.

"You've seen the Red Room, Patrolman Jenkins. You've signed the disposal manifests for what comes out of it. We would so prefer not to have to prepare one for you."

I chose you, Elma.

"You have an exemplary record, so I am giving you one last chance to answer. You deliberately allowed a flagged person through the checkpoint, didn't you?"

I can do this.

"You're correct, sir. I did do that, sir." I can't. I'm lost. Elma, I'm so sorry. Everything's over.

"So, you admit the offence?"

"Yes, sir!" my job, Elma, the girls... I'll lose my car.

"Are you aware of the consequences, patrolman? We could work on you and hold you indefinitely until we believe you cease to be a threat to the New Tomorrow Faction?"

"Yes, sir. I am, sir!" My mum and her family will die of shame.

"We also know you are associating with known anti-faction subversives, namely, The Witches of Rosehaven, or as they call themselves, Rosecoven."

"Yes, sir! I am aware of that, sir." What does that have to do with anything?

"What can you tell us about these people, patrolman?"

The smell, the pain, the cold are all nothing now compared to the utter disgust I feel for myself and the pity I feel for all those I've betrayed.

"Anything you like, sir. What would you like to know, sir?" A flicker of hope?

The questioning continues, and I give them all the answers I can, truthfully and fully.

This goes on for about an hour until:

"Would you spy on the coven for us, patrolman? Be our 'inside man' and report everything, and I mean everything, back to us?"

Calm. Everything ends if I say no. Let go.

"It depends, sir."

"You're not really in a position to negotiate, patrolman," says the faceless intelligence officer. "Does it depend on a raise, Patrolman Jenkins?" He says. "I'm sure we could arrange something like that to oil the wheels, so to speak."

"No, sir." I mustn't cry. "If you want my help, I'd really like some kind of guarantee that my mum will be looked after, sir; protection, a new apartment, immunity."

"I'm sure we can come to some mutually agreeable arrangement son," draws the intelligence officer. "Take it as read you'll be looked after financially."

"In that case, sir. Yes, sir, I can be your 'inside man' and report everything the coven gets up to."

I must be the luckiest man alive.

"We knew you'd see it from our point of view, patrolman."

Calm. I made it through in one piece.

I go straight round to Elma's as soon as I finish my shift. They hadn't allowed me to leave after questioning. We had to talk details, they were worried about what some of the other patrolmen would think if I left early.

Elma greets me with a big hug and an eager kiss as I go in the door. "How were things today, love?"

"I have to tell you. I'm terrified of losing you," I cry. "They were going to write a disposal permit for my body parts! They threatened to torture me. With being banged up for life. I betrayed you, and I betrayed myself. To make it worse, I felt completely calm throughout the whole thing."

I'm frantic now.

"It's OK, love. Don't worry. It's been written."

What?

She already knows. I can't believe it.

A chill runs down my spine

Of course she does.

"What do you mean?"

"We saw what was going to happen a few weeks ago. It's been written."

"And you didn't think of telling me anything about it?"

"If we did, they'd know. It had to be real."

"This is what you've been working for, Chris. Think about it. Your mum'll be better off, you'll get a raise and probably a promotion later. You won't need to lose your job, and the best part of all is that we'll still be together."

"You'll make a great inside man. In fact, you'll make the best inside man they've ever had. They'll leave you to get on with it. It's a win-win situation. You must see that, surely," she said, smiling into my mind like she does.

"And you know what to tell them? Just enough to keep them chasing their tails."

"Just keep me and the girls informed, so we don't suffer. You wouldn't want us to suffer, would you, Chris?"

"Of course not."

"It's all going to work out for the best, Chris, you'll see."

My head's spinning again.

Come here. I'll take your mind off of it...

Three days later.

"OK, sweetheart, I'll see you when I get home. Love you."

"Remember. Zingy, Christine, and Lisa, love." She repeats for the umpteenth time. "Got everything?"

"Yep, I've got it right here. What about Leah and her boyfriend?"

"We'll tell them in a couple of weeks, when it suits us. Everything OK?"

"I'm calm," I say, winking as I leave.

"Me too," she grins, standing at the door.

Driving to work feels great. It's like everything has just fallen into place.

It all goes like clockwork.

When I arrive, I pop into the intelligence office. The grey colour and the hint of that awful smell remind me of what happened, but I overcome any misgivings and give the sheet of paper to my contact.

Calm. This has to work.

"Good to see you again, patrolman. What do you have for me?"

"Just a few names that should cause a lot of damage, sir."

I hand him an A4 sheet of paper.

"Their names, addresses, sir, other places they hang out and their routines, sir. I hear they're planning to leave the area, sir. It might be better to move quickly. Your call, obviously, sir."

"Keep it up, patrolman. Well done!"

"Happy to help, sir."

"Zingy Warnercraft, Christine Morrison, and Lisa James. Good work. Dismissed"

"Sir!"

Nothing happens as I walk away. No order to return, no one blocking the door.

I don't know why I'd been so worried.

Exciting, though.

As soon as I get home, Elma is all over me.

"Did they take the bait?" she asks after my welcome-home kiss at the door.

"It all went exactly as you said it would, even down to how suspicious they all were. There's no need to worry."

"Good man," she says happily. "Come here."

She takes my hand and leads me into the living room. She's gone to a lot of trouble decorating it, and is lit by numerous candles. Incense

burns in the holder I bought her last week, and there are drinks and snacks on the coffee table. Music is playing in the background.

"Sit down here, my inside man," she says, leading me to the sofa. "You just sit here, have one of these," popping a small homemade cookie into my mouth, "and have a drink of this," handing me a glass of something light purple.

She goes over and turns the music up a little, taking a glass and snuggling up to me on the sofa.

After chatting and cuddling for a bit, I feel the first effects of the drink. There's also a lifting kind of feeling spreading from my stomach up to my chest, shoulders and into my arms and head. My heartbeat quickening.

I give an enormous yawn even though I don't feel tired. The whole atmosphere in the room is of love. Everything is a little hazy. It's like looking through rose-coloured glasses.

"Watch this," says Elma, as she gets up from the sofa and dances.

She pulls a scarf from somewhere, then another, dancing, swirling them around and around, their colours melting into each other.

It's like it isn't just her dancing, but three of her. There are no scarves to be seen anymore, but there are three Elmas twisting and turning, swirling and swishing to the music, in and out of the flickering shadows caused by the candlelight.

The three Elmas come over and take my hands, help me off the sofa and coax me to dance with them.

The more I dance, the more they run their hands over me. The more I dance, the more of my clothes they take off. For every piece of clothing I surrender, they lose one too.

Soon, I am naked, writhing in some kind of ritual movement, naked Elmas brushing past, whispering in my ears, trailing their hands all over me, finally pulling me down to the carpet.

I am lost in their bodies. They are all one, then they are separate, sweaty, rubbing, squirming, writhing in pleasure. Moaning, groaning and crying with delight as our dervish lovemaking goes on and on as if forever and forever.

I am at work. Calm. Checking papers, badging people, ordering drone watches and even recommending some to be taken. My standards have changed recently. I just hope my superiors haven't noticed. I don't know if it's because I'm getting a little older, or if it's because of being with Elma and mixing with the girls, but I think I'm being a little softer and more lenient than I used to be.

Calm. Life's like that, I suppose.

"I've been here before," she says, knocking me off my rhythm. I look up and see a nondescript woman standing in front of me with her papers. I take them.

"Who were you?" I reply, giving the stock answer. I look her in the eye, and to my surprise, I recognise the quick, grey, twinkling eyes looking back at me. The smile too is... is... I can't quite put my finger on whose it is.

"Zingy was my granny," comes the standard response.

That isn't code; that's a statement!

There's no way this is Zingy's granddaughter or any kind of relative.

It's Zingy herself. It's all her. The way she walks, her smile, her eyes especially, but the body's different. What the ...

I can't do this here.

"Everything's in order. Move along and don't hang around the exit."

I need to sit down. What the hell is going on now?

I call over a colleague to take over for five minutes while I take a toilet break.

"Next!" he shouts as I walk away.

How am I going to get through the rest of my shift?

I'll just need to.

Calm.

"I'm home," I call as I walk in the door. Elma welcomes me with her wonderful sloppy kiss.

"How was today?" she asks. "Anything unusual happen?"

She knows.

"You know, don't you?" I grin, even though the shock is still very near the surface.

"I know many things, oh master," she says, giving me a deep bow.

"Come on," I say gently. "Stop messing about. I just about had a heart attack this afternoon. I don't know how nobody noticed that something was going on. I was really lucky. You've got to tell me what that was."

We went into the kitchen, and she stuck the kettle on. When we had our drinks, she sat me down at the kitchen table and began.

"The girls at the meeting room," I still don't know why she just doesn't say the coven. "They can all do things that most people can't. They're different in some ways."

"Yeah, I know." I said, smiling, nodding for her to go on.

"Well, one thing they can do when they need to is to shed their skin, or more precisely, to change bodies."

"What?"

"Yeah, I know it's difficult to get your head around at first, but yep, they can do that."

She wasn't smiling; she was just sitting there as if she was telling me water boils at a hundred degrees Celsius.

So, when it gets too risky, they... well I can do it too, so we can change bodies and avoid getting caught by the factions or anyone else.

I hesitate a little. "So... the bodies can get caught, ... but their spirits can't?"

Creepy, if it's true that's really creepy. This one'll take a bit of getting used to.

"Yeah, if you want to put it like that."

I must look stunned.

"It's not as bad as all that, Chris," she smiles deep into my mind. "I could change bodies too, if you want, then you could be with a different woman sometimes. I think that's a real turn on. Shall we try it? If we organise it right, I can change back really quickly. Come on, let's try."

"No way," I say emphatically. "You're my rock. I need you as you are, otherwise I might drift. I like being the new me. I like being us."

"I can't change into a rock." she laughs.

"And what about men? Can they turn into men? That must be weird." You haven't tried that, have you? Could you turn into Major Blake?"

Calm. Calm. Don't even go there!

She sighs, "No, Chris, it doesn't work like that, no, I haven't, and no, I can't. What do you think we are, a circus act?"

We keep talking about it as we go about our chores, then we unmake the bed.

Much to Elma's delight, I'm in line for promotion to sergeant, and it might even be in intelligence.

It will.

I know my worth.

After going down this road, I've never had any doubts about whether I'm doing the right thing or not. I've changed, and that change has been for the better. Everything is better.

Calm. I can feel it when I want to these days.

I feel I have a more complete understanding of what's going on than all my superiors at the checkpoint and, as a result; I'm more in control than they realise.

Elma and I are married now, and between us, we control the flow of information to intelligence, not only about the coven girls, but the many other aspects of life that they control now.

Elma has surpassed herself yet again by cooking an exquisite meal for the six of us tonight.

"Could you pass the salt, please?" I ask Marissa, Elma's perfectly proportioned young friend.

"Here you are." Her quick grey eyes twinkle as she hands it to me.

It almost feels like the old gang are back together again when I glance across at the girl who isn't Lisa, but keeps her mannerisms of

peeking out from behind her fringe and speaking in a quiet voice of silky cream.

The wine is flowing.

"Thank you so much for inviting us, Chris. Elma, you really know how to cook; it's phenomenal. Your reputation preceded you at work, but I never really believed it, to be honest. A toast to Chris and Elma."

Ken, the drone pilot, raises his glass and takes a large mouthful.

The girls follow suit.

"To Chris and Elma," says Major Blake. "I see a bright future for all of us here tonight," he continued, only looking at Marissa.

"Have you seen it in the cards, major?" said Elma, grinning. "I hope the future is better for you now that your divorce has been finalised. It seems to have taken forever."

"Maybe I'll get married again, you never know," eyes still on Marissa.

And so the wine flows, and the conversation is steered.

These days, although I'm a sergeant at work, I'm really a manager, or maybe it would be better to say a conduit through which information flows to and from the faction.

It seems like such a coincidence that I met Elma when I did, and how things have turned out. Sometimes I wonder if it's just fate, or if someone has a bigger plan.

Does it matter?

Not to me.

I see the half-dead man being dragged away again.

Once, I'd have flinched.

Now I just observe, steady.

The memory of flinching feels childish.

Calm. I'm not fighting.

I give in.

ROSECELL

A quiet choice

Beneath the polite bustle, Rosehaven's small cells and secure offices do the silent work of the factions.

I've never been in this one before, and that's saying something. I've been in a lot. A bit of a klepto, me, and to be perfectly honest (hee hee) I'm not that good at it.

This one's too fuckin' bright for my liking. I'm on my own, and there's no chance of me being able to get a bit of kip, even though I could lie down on the bench if it wasn't bolted to the wall. If I could rein in the habit a bit, I might put some weight on. Right now, I'd kill for a bit of padding on my arse; this bench is brutal.

And cos it's bright, it looks new, but the subtle smells of piss and bleach, and all the graffiti on the walls tell a different story.

Some surprisingly poetic crap there. How it got there's anyone's guess; cos they're supposed to take any sharps off you before you come in and it's not like they hand out felt pens or anything to show your creative side while you're waiting for the man. Maybe the staff do it on their breaks. Make the place feel

homier. Or scare the shit out of the newbies. The guys watching the CCTV'll know.

The hatch's opening.

God, that sound makes your teeth ache. Like metal screaming down metal. What a nightmare.

Uh-oh, the door's opening now.

God almighty, what's she doing in here? She should be shopping for hubby's health-conscious dinner at the local organic food store. What do they call it again? Oh yeah, Organic Heaven. Right on the High Street. Never been in myself.

A bit overdressed for here, though. Nice black skirt, a little too tight. Bit on the curvy side, wouldn't say no, though. I bet these heels're killing her. They'll be off in a minute. I might be able to get something worthwhile out of her, though.

"Hello. How're you doing? You OK, love?"

She fiddles with her long, curly auburn hair. Takes it out of its ponytail, flounces it up a bit, smooths it down again, and then puts it back in its scrunchie.

"Hello"

"I bet you've never been somewhere like this before, have you? If I can help you with anything, you just let me know. I've a bit of experience with these things. My name's White. Shifty White, they call me. Nice to meet you."

"Hello Mr. White. I'm Crystal. Crystal Daniels. I shouldn't even be here. I haven't done anything wrong. I think there's been a terrible mistake, and I expect someone will be along soon to sort it out, get me released and have the officer that brought me in charged."

"Sometimes these Heritage Front officers can be a bit keen. I swear some of them're on commission. He he."

"It certainly seemed like that earlier."

And just like that, she turns away and starts to cry.

The air pressure changes again as the inspection hatch scrapes open, followed quickly by the door.

This is what wet dreams and porn films are made of, being stuck in a small cell with two women. This one is an absolute fuckin' goddess! Much taller than me (not that that would be difficult) and the way she walks! She almost defies gravity, as if she's floating. She's magnetic, a high-class piece of stuff. Straight back, legs up to her armpits, jet black hair and pale white skin. And eyes. Blue eyes that are looking right at me.

Don't look away, don't look away.

"Hello. I think there's been another mistake."

"Whatever do you mean?" Her voice, just like her gaze. Direct. Clear. Cool.

"Crystal here was just telling me that she'd been brought in by mistake, and I guess that you have too?" I try for a smile, but I

know I'm struggling to hold eye contact. Makes me look even shiftier.

"My name's Shifty, by the way."

"That is the case, Mr. Shifty. I'm sorry to hear you're in the same situation, Crystal."

The sapphire on her ring flashes under the strip light, a sudden wink of blue in the glare. She smoothes down her dark, loose clothes before sitting delicately on the edge of a bench, wrinkling her nose.

"Now, if you'll excuse me..."

She bows her head and mutters something. A prayer, by the sounds of it.

The Heritage Front wouldn't like that.

The scraping and creaking repeat. How many people can they fit in here?

What the fuck have we got here? Mr Grey?

An impossibly fat bloke strides in like he owns the place. Grey hair, grey eyes, grey moustache. Not the least bit embarrassed. Wears his weight like a warning. Go on, say something.

He's been in a lot of trouble before. It could be the group of scars on his chin, the arrogant walk or his look of utter disdain. I'll have to watch him.

The girls barely look up. Like he isn't worth it. No one's batted an eye. What am I missing?

"Liu," he says, quiet as a mouse. "I'm Miller Liu."

"I'm Shifty White," I tell him. "As I said to the ladies here, if I can help, just let me know. Sad to say, I know the drill."

He just totally fuckin' ignores me, sits down, bows his head, and shuts his eyes. Cunt.

But I can't keep my eyes off her. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. 'The score of a lifetime.' If I can get her talking, really talking, that's not just my fine paid off. That's a holiday. Say something, you idiot.

She's sitting closer to me than anyone else.

"I'm Shifty. What do I call you?"

"You may call me Anar."

"That's a beautiful name. I've never heard it before. You from around here?"

"Not originally. I travel a lot." Direct as ever. "I'm Kazakh. And Anar means pomegranate, right? That fruit with all the red jelly and seeds inside?"

"That's right." I say, smiling. "What's Kazakh like?"

"The people are Kazakh. The place is Khazakstan. It's very big, very rich... but I think not very exciting."

"Well, you've found a bit of excitement today, don't you think, Anar?"

"It's definitely different, that's true, Mr Shifty. Heritage Front are so unreliable."

"Mm. Please just call me Shifty."

"That doesn't seem respectful. But if you insist. What brings you here today, Shifty?"

They're saying I nicked a briefcase." I put on my best wounded-innocent face, the one that usually gets a fine, not a stay inside. "It was at the station. Just sitting there. Course I was going to take it to the lost-and-found. What else was I supposed to do? Then, this guy screams blue murder, and before you know it, they're slapping the cuffs on me." I shake my head, letting the injustice of it all hang in the air for a second. "For trying to do the right thing. But no one believes me."

"I believe you, Shifty."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me in a long time, Anar. Thank you. Anyway, they brought me in first thing this morning, and I've been stuck here all on my lonesome until Crystal came in just before you. It's so good to talk. I go a bit funny in the head when I'm on my own for too long."

Just then, Crystal starts wittering to Miller Liu, probably since he was the one sitting closest to her.

She just keeps talking, like she'd learned it for a school play.

"I was down the beach working," she says, "taking pictures for my latest project. You know the kind of thing. Birds, sea, sunset, kids playing; the usual crowd-pleasers. Anyway, I was going about my business when a Heritage Front patrol called me over."

Anar raises her head.

"Of course I went," Crystal continues. "You have to, don't you?"

Personally, I always run. I'll make it one day.

"I always like to do my civic duty. But then they promptly arrested me."

I know this bird; used to teach cons how to tell a story. I'd give Crystal her card if I had one on me. Jesus, she still won't stop. But they pay me to get them to say as much as I can, so come on. Keep it up.

"And if that's not bad enough, they've confiscated my camera, which is worth a small fortune. And more than that, it was my late husband's."

Is that it? I hope you're listening, guys. You should get a good amount for the gear. I'd better get my cut this time, I can tell you.

She keeps fiddling with her skirt. Right at the hip. Where they wear those faction badges. The recording ones.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Is that why she's here? Is hers still on? They pay me to be the only plant in the room. If she's recording too, my take gets cut in half. Or I get nothing. Or they find out I'm not the only ear in here.

Be cool, Shifty. Gotta find out... Hell's teeth, there's more!

Crystal continues. "Anyway, it was probably just as well I went. I've never been a fast runner, so I'd never have gotten away. They interrogated me about last Saturday too."

While she's speaking, I think Miller Liu has fallen asleep, chin slumped on his chest, but at the mention of Saturday, he stands up sharply, his face flushing red.

"Who are you? Why are you asking me about last Saturday? Do you even know who I am? Keep that up and I'll set my lawyer on you, and by God, you won't know what's hit you. He's the best in the land!"

Anar stands, calm as ever. "Mr Liu, please. Don't get too excited. Look at the colour of your face. You might become ill."

Crystal steps beside her. "She's right, Miller. Take it easy. I don't know what I said to upset you so much, but come on, sit down. Take deep breaths. That should help."

"What the hell do any of you know?" he snaps. "Saturday, Saturday, Saturday, that's all anyone wants to talk to me about. My wife, my lover, my business partner, The Heritage Front. What the fuck is so special about Saturday?"

"Come on, mate," I say. "Take it easy or you'll get them all excited and you'll get taken. Sit down, shut up, and take deep breaths, as Crystal said. We don't want you fuckin dying on us. Isn't that right, girls?"

They both nod.

Miller Liu sits back down. Deep breath. Then another. Long, deliberate, almost forced. Dragging in and out.

Alright, he's the weak spot. Saturday. I just need to poke him again.

"Okay, let's kill some time," I say, putting on my cheerful face for once. "You know what? Let's all say what happened to us. It's a good way of practicing getting your story straight before questioning. Crystal, love, you look like you've got a tale to tell."

This should work. Get them talking. The more they say, the better my payout.

"Thanks for doing this, Mr. Shifty," says Anar.

"It's just like what I was telling Miller," she says. "I was out at the beach taking photos for a new project I'm working on."

Anar looks up. "Oh, you're a photographer."

"Yes, and the same thing happened. A patrol called me over, and before I could even explain, they'd hauled me in."

"What?" I gasp. "Just like that? No explanation?" Inflate the injustice just to keep her talking.

"Well, no. I'm an upstanding citizen! I could've taken off with the guys I'd been speaking to in the inflatable dinghy, but I didn't."

"And they didn't chase them?" My bullshit detection meter is up in the red.

"No." She shakes her head, all wide-eyed innocence. "And now they've got my late husband's very expensive camera and all my other gear."

She's practicing alright. I've heard some crap stories in my time, but this is off the scale! Fuckin' hell, I know it's better for me, but does she never stop talking?"

"They said it'd be used as evidence."

"Evidence of what?" Miller Liu asks.

Fuck me, he's awake!

"You'll love this. Smuggling! Me? Do I look like a smuggler to you? Don't you think that's ridiculous!"

There's some play that has a lady protesting too much. Fucked if I can remember its name, though.

"Forgetting to pay for a trolley of groceries or a packet of wine-gums is about my limit!"

She sounds like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but I reckon she's up to her eyes in it. The patrols might be overzealous, but they're not idiots. No way she's clean.

"That sounds terrible, Crystal," says Anar. "Especially about your husband's camera. I hope it's not damaged."

"Oh, don't say that, Anar."

Miller Liu looks up. "Don't worry about it, Crystal. I'm sure everything'll be fine." He even smiles.

I keep quiet. First the badge, now the smuggling accusation? What kind of smuggling, though? Get that info out!

"What did they say you were smuggling, Crystal?"

Her voice does a little shake. Fear, nerves, guilt, the full works. "Drugs," she says. "They said there's evidence I've been smuggling several kilos of narcotics a week."

I could see that. Not many would suspect her, I'd say.

"I don't even know the names of any narcotics, never mind know how to smuggle them!"

That right there. She's taken it too far. She's up to her eyes in some bollocks. I'd stake my reputation on it. Not much then. That'll be ringing bells next door.

Watch it, I can't snigger when she's talking.

Anar says, "It sounds like someone has made you a goat. No, what do you call it?"

"A scapegoat," Miller Liu jumps in. "How about you, Anar? How does a stunning foreign princess like you end up in a Heritage Front cell?" You're doing my job for me, big man. Can't give you a cut, though.

Ha, I reckon he's just like me. Sick of the sound of Crystal's voice.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Liu. I can't divulge any information regarding any supposed crime I may or may not have committed. I'm under instructions from the Khazakh embassy not to speak on matters involving local law enforcement."

That's you told, grey boy.

Miller Liu looks like he's holding back a smirk.

She goes on, smooth as ever: "In any case, I hear what you've all been saying, and suffice to say, I expect to be released as soon as the embassy is informed."

It's like everything pauses. What kind of official crap was that when it's at home? It sounds like the disclaimer on my travel insurance that I read once when my flight was delayed. In the days when there were flights, anyway.

Turning back to Miller Liu, she says, "What about you?"

I can't look at his eyes. They're too cold. People with eyes like that are always up to something. I can tell. Can't tell you what it is, but people with eyes like that are to be avoided in my book. They cause way too much trouble wherever they go. Evil, these eyes are.

"I was caught driving with no insurance", he says in his small voice, totally at odds with his bulk, and especially his eyes.

"Oh, yeah?" I say. I was trying to put him off his stride. What the fuck am I doing? I don't want to upset this guy.

"I was up by the old quarry, coming down the hill into town to go to the antique shop, when I turned a corner, you know the one?"

Crystal and I nod.

"And drove straight into a checkpoint. They checked my papers, and to my surprise, my insurance had lapsed.

In a show of solidarity, Crystal says, "That happened to me once. It's embarrassing, isn't it?"

"It was embarrassing, but it'd never happened to me before. I usually stay on top of those things. I feel like an old fool."

"Tough shit," I say. "When I was a kid, my little brother got killed in a hit-and-run. It turned out the guy panicked because his insurance had expired. Not saying you would do that, but it really gets my back up, if you know what I mean!"

Anar is looking at me. Her big blue eyes are full of sympathy. Maybe she pities me; that could be a way in.

"That's terrible, Shifty. But I'm sure Mr Liu here had no intention of killing anyone."

Crystal nods; Miller Liu looks at the floor again.

"I suppose," I say.

I still amn't convinced... To me, Anar's sympathy feels like one of these unfeeling upper-class responses, so I don't believe her either.

God, it's that hatch again. Like metal fingernails dragging along the edge of your soul.

Who's this youngster coming in? He looks about twelve. Can he even shave yet? Better not be looking for me or I'm screwed. The deal is that I'm always the last one out.

"Could I ask which one of you ladies is Mrs. Crystal Daniels?"

Crystal raises her hand sheepish as anything.

He must have had that uniform for about a week. Just about long enough to spill his lunch on it by the looks of it. Creases still look new, though. His mum's ironing, no doubt. The Heritage Front must be scraping the barrel if its recruits are so young. Maybe his mum made him enroll the second he finished school. The way things are, I wouldn't put it past some people. They're only looking after their families, I suppose. Wouldn't be me, though.

"I need to ask you how you intend to plead, Mrs. Daniels. Guilty or not guilty?"

Her face twists. "Are we going to do this here, really? Isn't there somewhere private we can go to go through this nonsense?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. I've been instructed to ask you here due to... ongoing renovations and current staff pressures."

"Do I have a right to a lawyer?"

Is there a duty solicitor on site?

I don't want these people to listen to everything I say."

She flashes what I suppose is an apologetic look our way.

"Who the hell is in charge here?

I'll have their guts for garters if they don't get in here right now and take control of this circus."

I don't know why I'm not laughing. I'm struggling to keep a straight face here.

She's losing it. Proper losing it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce to you, the one and only genuine Crystal Daniels. Rapturous applause from the audience. Encore!

The poor kid looks as if he's desperately trying to stay professional, bless him.

She's still going full tilt. She doesn't like taking a breath, does our Crystal.

What's happening here?

"Bring him here. Now!"

"I can't, ma'am..."

"Now!"

"I'm sorry, I... everything must be conducted..."

"Son," she steps forward, stabbing her finger into his chest, "if you don't fetch your superior this instant, I'll tear that shiny uniform

off your back and send you home in your birthday suit! Get him! Now!"

He actually clicks his heels. Salutes. "Yes, ma'am. But... you've only received a caution, ma'am."

We all freeze.

A caution?

For smuggling? What the fuck? Who is she? Connected. Has to be. Someone's wife? Someone's daughter? A bigger grass than me?

Everyone stares. Even Liu's sneaky little piggy eyes widen.

Only someone dangerous makes a rookie jump like that. Anar glances at me, not with her cool look, maybe a bit embarrassed or a bit sad. Wary?

Miller Liu, disbelief written large across his fat face, mutters, "I hope we're not all to be questioned in here, officer. That would be completely unacceptable. Don't you agree?" He looks from Anar to me.

Anar stands up, back poker straight, a glint in her eyes and the faintest hint of a smile on her lips.

"It would, in fact, be incompatible with rights granted under Section 252, sub-paragraph 26 of the Human Rights Act regarding the questioning of suspects in custody," she recites.

"That section clearly states that any person not formally charged and still assisting with inquiries must be afforded suitable space for

questioning, in private, so that allegations may be confirmed or denied prior to release or transfer.”

God, I love her. God help me, I do. God, she is a goddess. Not just looks, not just guts, not just grace, but officialese too! We’d be amazing together! I wonder if she can cook. What is it they say in my wife’s videos? I think I’m going to swoon!

Anar isn’t done.

“So, to recap: continuing to question this good lady in this, or any other shared cell, is wholly inappropriate. And if I may add, it would likely be in the best interests of both you and your superior to remove her immediately. Caution or no caution.”

He’s going for it.

“Mrs Daniels, if you could follow me, please.”

Crystal or whoever she really is, is standing beside the guard as he gives the signal for the door to open.

Then it hits.

A sound. Not a sound. A scream that drills straight into my skull like a dentist’s tool from hell. Max volume.

Noise...

I can’t...

The boy and Crystal fall to the floor.

I can barely think...

I can see.

Can't move...

Trying...

Is this real?

What the fuck!

I watch, but...

Anar moves.

Slowly. Deliberately. Beautifully.

Somehow, the shriek in my skull doesn't touch her.

She's fluid, unaffected.

Unnatural.

God, I'd do anything for her.

But How can she move?

Why is she not frozen like us?

She reaches for her sapphire ring.

Twists it.

Pulls it.

Or something.

A thin wire uncoils into something sharp.

A needle?

What the fuck!

The noise.

Is it coming from her ring?

She's not just beautiful... she's dangerous.

All that official crap she was spouting earlier; it wasn't a bluff.

She's government.

Military.

Something.

It doesn't matter.

I've been captured.

Completely.

I'd do anything for her.

Would I die for her?

Yeah, probably.

Well, no.

That'd be stupid.

Dead people don't get the girl.

She's in front of Miller Liu now.

Anar lifts his chin up with her left hand, calm as ever.

I can see her say something.

I've never been a lip-reader.

Then... like it's nothing...

She drives the needle straight into his right eye.

It vanishes deep, right into the brain, and he's about to fall forward... but she's already in motion. One foot on the bench, then the other, straddling him. She grabs his grey hair, yanks his head back, and slices his throat wide open.

Is that joy in her eyes?

No, not just joy.

Pleasure.

I tell you what.

This floor is good.

The blood is already draining. The tiles have pink streaky whirls now. The whole place looks like an abstract art installation. They should leave it like this for the next few weeks to see if it helps people relax or confess quicker or something. Ergonomic blood, the new wave in interior design. It could be a trend!

Anar's at the door. Still open. She hasn't slipped. I couldn't imagine her ever slipping, to tell you the truth. If she did, I guess she'd just bounce gracefully back up and carry on as if she'd meant it.

I can't believe it.

She's smiling.

At me.

Maybe she's not who I thought she was, but she hasn't forgotten me.

Maybe she'll take me with her.

Where would we go? Just the two of us in some cabin in Kazakh nowhere, shagging ourselves senseless by a huge open fire till we can't even stand up.

She's actually coming back.

She's bending down.

My heart's beating too fast!

Am I getting a kiss?

Is she really going to take me with her?

Is she really going to love me forever?

She's put something in my hand.

A token.

A memory.

I can't turn my head to see it. I can't move anything. But I can feel it. Smooth. Cold. Precious.

Please don't go yet. I want to give you something too.

But she's gone. Through the door. Off to... what? Another kill? Another mission? Some other poor bastard's heart to break?

Wherever it is, she's certain she's leaving here.

What a fucking turn-on.

I still can't move, but I can see. Liu's sprawled like a beached whale in a sea of his own blood. The rest of us, Crystal, the kid, and me. We're still down. Covered in it. Blinking through it, trying not to swallow it, trying not to breathe it.

I'll live like a king off this story. Get drunk on it. I was there. I saw it.

But nothing will be the same.

I won't be the same.

Anar. Oh, Anar. Look at me again with those cool blue eyes. Say something else in that perfect Khazak accent.

All I have is what you left in my hand. I'll never let it go. I'll hold on to it forever so I can remember this day for as long as I live.

The noise is fading.

No one's moving much.

Sound's coming back.

The real world's pressing in.

Did that just happen?

What an amazing dream!

Who's this?

"He's still here, sir. Still got the weapon in his hand."

"Take him away."

ROSECOMMERCE

Profits of conflict

Dino

I got up, went over, and looked in the mirror. Time for a pep talk. "No more Dick Clapper, you're now Dino Delfino entrepreneur extraordinaire! Now get your ass into gear and make it work!"

It had been an incredible couple of months; the difference Louisa had made was amazing. She had been determined from the start. She had pushed, cajoled and harried everyone from me to the Heritage Front.

We met when she and her kids, Jake and Arabella, had taken part in the focus group for my 'Privatised Repression' products: Express Strip Searches, Checkpoint Cafes and Loyalty Cards for the oppressed with no time. She had pulled me out of the depression caused by my previous partner running off with all my money. I couldn't afford for this to collapse; financially, professionally, or mentally.

The opening day at our trial checkpoint finally arrived.

After helping our new staff set up, we watched a line of bleary-eyed workers approach the checkpoint.

"Look at the state of them," said Louisa. "Give me a hand. I need to take notes. We need real data to work from."

Louisa and I looked on proudly as things started well. Free coffee was handed out; the express search line was busy with the more relaxed chatting in the slower queue.

Overall, it was a tremendous success for both the Heritage Front and me. We should be on a winner here.

"How are the notes doing?" I asked Louisa.

"Fine. But who's this when he's at home?" she said, peering over my shoulder at a large straight-backed middle-aged man in uniform.

The man wandered up and down the line, listening to what people were saying and watching what was happening. He even chatted with a few of the better off looking people in the queues.

I was trying hard not to stare. "What's he doing?"

Louisa said what I was thinking. "We'd better be careful he doesn't steal our ideas, I think, Dino. It's actually their checkpoint."

"He's coming over."

Louisa

By Monday, the Heritage Front had cloned Dino's idea. Checkpoint cafés, express strip searches, even loyalty schemes, all more impressive than ours and rolled out across Rosehaven overnight.

Our reviews were terrible in comparison, and to make matters worse, the Monday after, New Tomorrow stopped lurking like a pimp up a dark alley and enter the market too.

Jake was headhunted by HF, and Arabella was seduced into a job by an NT manager who she knew fancied her.

“But Mum!” she said. “They’ve got muffins, mascots that you can strip, and drone deliveries and everything.”

“What, they deliver drones?”

“No, when they’re quiet, they’re going to use their surveillance drones to deliver food from restaurants. You just phone in your order, and the drone picks up the food and delivers it hot. That’s brilliant, isn’t it?”

I didn’t know whether to worry about my daughter’s workmates, what she could get up to stripping dolls, or whether I’d like a Chicken Chow Mein from the Chinese restaurant down by the harbour.

“How the hell are we going to keep going now?” said Dino, who had nearly had a heart attack when I told him what Arabella had said. “Think! We make HF and NT compete with each other. They’ll waste time and money while we keep improving. You’re the ideas man. Come up with ideas, come on.”

Jake at HF and Arabella at NT reported back regularly. Recently, most of it was about the drone pilots, who had to push their skills to the limit when they added deliveries to their duties...

Rumour had it that a pilot mixed up the drones and delivered dinner to a suspect being followed and watched a house where they were waiting for a delivery.

Someone also worked out that phoning in the same order to both factions meant two drones arrived at the same time, and CRASH!

The news spread like wildfire. Everyone wanted to try.

I even persuaded Dino to hold a drone-smash picnic. It was a perfect evening, but the drones only glanced each other; it wasn't a full-on crash. The top pilots must've been on that shift.

After the picnic, the kids got together.

Arabella

"We've got to do something," Jake said to me. "Everyone but us is damaging the factions' businesses."

"OK, OK, listen to this. Mum probably won't like it, though," I said. "There's a lot of the guys at work who fancy me and my friend Victoria. Well, that's what the women say, anyway."

"And?"

"Well, they say the drone pilots are kind of competing for our attention."

"Mmm-hmm," murmured Jake, not liking what he was hearing.

"Well, just to be clear, I don't want to do anything myself. I'm too scared of getting caught. I could be put into that programme where

you have to marry really young and have as many kids as you can, or something. It sounds brutal.”

“You’d never get on that programme; Mum would kill you first.”

“But anyway, I reckon I could get Vicky to distract these pilots while they’re working. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea, but you need to get it right. No point in wasting a chance and someone becoming suspicious, is there? Oh wait, that’s it.”

We went into a huddle and threw around ideas until I was sure of what I had to do. It was so simple.

Vicky loved my plan (I hadn’t told her it was Jake’s) but said we had to be careful. She needed the money. I never mentioned having tons of kids or getting tortured. The stakes were high.

Vicky strolled into the drone pilots’ office while I stood at the door. She wasn’t risking anything happening to ‘someone as young as me,’ she’d said.

“Hi guys, what can we get you? Coffee, coke, anything?”

I swallowed and felt the back of my throat tighten.

I had to watch their drone screens and keep a lookout. We couldn’t afford to get caught or to let them report us.

The two pilots barely glanced at their monitors.

James drooled at Vicky. “You.”

Ken leaned in, grinning, gesturing to me. "Or her."

A flush crept up my neck.

Their drones drifted as they shifted uncomfortably in their seats, eyes bulging.

It looked like they were tracking suspects, not making deliveries.

"I don't know how you can work in here. It's so hot..." Vicky said, sitting down on a vacant chair.

"I'll get some water," I said, giving the code phrase, my heart thumping in my chest.

My palm brushed the recorder in my pocket, reassuring myself that it was still there.

"I think I need to loosen my top."

"Just take it off," said James.

They couldn't take their eyes off her.

She undid her top button.

The pilots' breathing changed; faster, shallower. The monitors blurred at the edges of my vision.

The four male eyes were sticking out on stalks.

Vicky caught my nod. Game on.

"That's better," Vicky said, standing up.

She looked calm. I couldn't believe her confidence.

"I think I'll get back to..."

She collapsed onto James.

James couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Didn't want to move because he could see Vicky's bra.

"I'll help," croaked Ken, leaving his seat to get a better view.

After checking to make sure nobody was coming, I tip-toed quickly over to their consoles and violently moved the drone's controls back and forth, then went back, peeking round the door frame to make sure the plan was still working.

"Sit down for a minute," said James, unable to resist keeping his hands off Vicky as he gave her his seat.

The chair creaked; my stomach dropped at how close he was to looking at the monitors.

"James! Stop that! You know what happened last time!" said Ken. "It won't just be probation if you do it again."

"Here's some water," I said, walking in with a couple of bottles. The cue for things to calm down.

Neither James nor Ken noticed that all their drones had crashed. They would get in so much shit for that; these drones were expensive.

As Vicky 'recovered', we spelled it out that she could make a formal complaint if she wanted to take things further. We also made a mental note to check James's employee record to see what he'd done before.

I casually turned off my voice recorder as we left.

Evidence!

That me and Jake had just won a minor victory in fighting the factions and helping Mum and Dino gave me a warm fuzzy feeling. Jake should make more plans.

I told Jake that night what had happened.

"You're braver than me," he said, frowning, "but don't ever do that again. These guys could easily overpower you and your friend. God knows what could've happened."

At least when I was doing something risky, I felt alive. Visible.

Later that night, Jake got in touch with someone from The Return. After The Return aired the stories, the pilots began to be distracted: windows opened by women in various stages of undress, people complained, and more of the town found ways to interfere with the drones. Lines were blocked, loyalty cards were gamed, and the whole delivery project wobbled.

Jake

I was listening to a conversation between my manager and an HF faction major and realised I had the voice recorder Dino'd given me in my pocket. I turned it on.

"It's just not working anymore, sir," complained the manager.
"Business was brisk at first, but now profits are in free-fall."

I followed them. The manager was describing how insurance claims, and other scams were ruining the bottom line.

"Round up the ringleaders. Whip them. Tie them to the racks by the queue. That'll stop the claims."

I itched to move, but I stayed perfectly still, recording everything. I couldn't believe the major had just said that. Sometimes I forgot how ruthless they could be.

My thumb brushed the recorder in my pocket. I almost stopped it. Almost.

He asked, "What would happen if deliveries were stopped altogether?"

"Actually, sir, profits would rise if that happened. They've been losing money for the last few weeks."

The two men stopped at the cafe door, and the major lowered his voice.

Heart hammering, I started tidying up some rubbish near them.

"Stop taking delivery orders immediately. There haven't been enough drones for surveillance duties for the last few days."

I froze for a moment, wondering how Dino and Mum could benefit.

"Sir."

"Dismissed!"

CRASH!

My ears rang; I stumbled back, trying to locate the source. There was a tang of scorched electronics.

"What the fuck was that, son? Look at my uniform!"

The manager bent down and picked up a piece of debris.

"I think a drone just crashed into the cafe, sir."

The major stormed off, but he didn't get far.

"Come on, give us our money. We have the cards and the points; give us what you owe us," said the women crowded around the loyalty card kiosk window.

The crowd surged, bodies pressing around me; I had to brace myself against a wall.

"Sorry, ladies, not today," shouted Mrs. Winston. "The boss says no payouts till next week."

Old Miss Gardener, who must have been about 80, was screaming, "Thieves, that's all you are! Thieves!"

"What the fuck is going on here?" screamed the major, the veins on the side of his forehead throbbing dangerously. "What are you people doing?"

The women totally ignored him, intent on getting something for their points.

I was still following as close as I dared as he pushed his way into the crowd, not using his horsewhip yet.

My pulse hammered in my ears. As the officer got to the centre of the crowd, I stuck out my foot and tripped him up. He fell, elbowed and kneed, on his way down. High heels, work boots, and even Doc Martens trampled him and stamped him down. A few of the shorter women even stood on his back for a better view.

"Help me," the major whimpered before slipping, bruised and battered, into unconsciousness.

"Serves him right," I thought.

I let my mum and sister listen to the recording when I got home that night. Mum went pale halfway through, and Arabella just stared at me. None of us spoke for a while, the noise of the crowd still ringing in our heads.

Louisa

"Mum, from what I hear, things are getting just as crazy at all the HF sites. I'm thinking about asking Dino if he'll take me back if things go pear-shaped. Do you think he will?"

"If things go pear-shaped, he'll need someone like you, Jake. Ask him."

The kettle clicked as it boiled; the sound filled the brief silence.

Jake turned to Arabella. "Are things any better at your place?"

Arabella's eyes flicked to the window as if listening for news on the street.

"A drone crashed into a group of old-age pensioners today."

A cold prickle ran down my spine; I pictured the smoke and the sirens.

When's this craziness going to end? It's unbelievable!

"Eventually a crowd gathered and threatened to wreck the whole place, so eventually NT said it'd pay for their hospital expenses. The staff were absolutely shitting it. What a laugh!"

"Arabella!"

Arabella's face hardened; for a second, she looked much older than her years.

"Well, they deserve it. Heartless, that's what they are. Heartless monsters!"

"Listen, before I forget. I think there could be a huge opportunity soon, so if there's anything you don't know about at work, find out about it as soon as possible."

My pulse sped up. This was the part that mattered; my hands felt clammy. I was agitated. This was important, but I wasn't sure they were up to it.

I rubbed my temples and tried to force my thoughts into order.

"Names, phone numbers or whatever: steal them, copy them, anything. We need them. If you steal them, don't get caught! OK?"

"OK, Mum," they said in unison.

Their togetherness made my chest ache; part pride, part worry.

"Anything about suppliers would be useful too."

"Yes, Mum," they said together again.

Sometimes it felt like we actually had an army. That night, that army showed up; angry, loud, and fed up with the factions.

Major Winfrew

"We want our money!" chanted the crowd surrounding the HF checkpoint cafe office.

They pushed and shoved and tried to get into the office, but to no avail. Then a loudhailer:

"Disperse now, or we'll fire!"

"Disperse now! Go home! Anyone who does not will be taken and tortured!"

"You have until 20!"

“1... 2... 3... 4...”

The crowd wavered, a ripple of panic. Relief flickered in me; the power still worked. But underneath, I thought I felt something colder: they weren't afraid of me. They were afraid of what came after.

I stood and watched as the crowd of women pushed and shoved to get away as quickly as they could. They had all heard stories of the torture room.

After the weekend storm, this had become the norm at HF and NT faction checkpoints. Business had crashed. Soldiers were tense, some unpaid. Income was nonexistent.

I wasn't tense. I was desperate. I knew exactly how bad things were and had even taken the unprecedented step of contacting my opposite number at New Tomorrow.

We agreed it was probably the Return behind any coordinated action. We also agreed that we needed money and needed it fast. We were soldiers, not businessmen.

This meeting should pave the way to recovering some of our losses, but it was essential that a deal was struck and implemented.

I had spelled out the issues to my superiors in case they tried to con Dino Delfino. He could step away, and they would be left to answer to the National Assembly.

Sitting at the table were Dino, Louisa, and me.

Dino continued, “... and so what I'm really saying is that I can take over the running of HF's sites and still make a profit. We also think

HF needs to re-establish the public's trust, so we should all sign an NDA agreeing that Heritage Front is not at fault, and I am praised for my business acumen for taking over the running of the operation."

I nodded. "My superiors will be only too happy to agree." This was going to be easier than I expected.

Louisa said, "We should go over all the figures; I have them here."

"Not now, Louisa," said Dino, waving her suggestion away.

She didn't seem too happy at how Dino had spoken to her. It was as if she had just come to the end of her tether. It was a shame; she was the brains in some ways.

They also thought I didn't know they'd had a similar meeting with a New Tomorrow major earlier that morning. Their generals were coming to the signing too. As long as it happened quickly and we all escaped this mess, that would be fine; I'd still get my bonus.

If the factions didn't sign, everything would collapse and Rosehaven, like the rest of the country, would spiral out of control and into chaos. I think it had something to do with finance.

It was my ass on the line.

Two weeks later, Dino and Louisa met with the regional generals from both factions in a local hotel conference centre. I was there too, to carry the can if need be.

The stakes were high, and everyone felt them differently. Some braced for confrontation, others for compromise.

Louisa

I was just finishing, so I went through the main points regarding commissions, the NDAs, and PR agreements before asking for questions. There were none. The papers were signed, and then we all went to a very fine lunch at Dino's expense.

All sides heaved an enormous sigh of relief.

Dino had had a few glasses of wine, so he was in full flow.

After he'd been talking for 15 minutes, the generals made their excuses and headed back to their respective headquarters to file their reports.

Major Winfrew looked Dino in the eye, clicked his heels, saluted, then shook his hand. Dino winced. "Thank you very much, Mr. Delfino. You've been extremely useful to us throughout this whole affair."

Dino was caught unawares; it was yet another thing that hadn't occurred to him. Unbelievable.

After they'd all left, I turned off the cameras and voice recorders I had installed before the meeting. If we didn't need the footage, I was sure The Return would be interested in studying the generals and their tells.

Dino told me he couldn't have been so successful, and he couldn't have done all this without me and the kids.

Even so, I was feeling bitter, unappreciated and sick to the back teeth of clearing up after someone else's brilliance.

"Whatever, Dino; maybe you've drunk too much. But by far the most important thing is that you have what you've always wanted and have come out of this with a reputable business and a bright future ahead of you."

Even sarcasm went over his head.

With the meeting behind us and everything apparently in order, a quiet unease lingered...

Dino

Over the next six months, it became obvious that Louisa's predictions were accurate. Heritage Front and New Tomorrow were keeping their word, and my reputation had soared. Everyone thought I was a genius for convincing the factions to sell when they had.

I asked Louisa about that month's figures.

"As forecast, stable. Not sure about us, though."

I blinked, trying to process the words; my stomach tightened.

What?

She continued, "Oh, and I forgot to tell you. New Tomorrow's offered to train Arabella in marketing and public relations, so it doesn't look like she'll be working for you anymore."

My chest sank; I felt my heart skip a beat.

"What about Jake?"

I leaned back in my chair, trying to steady my thoughts.

"I talked to him last night, and he really wants to stay. He sees you as a mentor and believes you can teach him ten times more than he could learn on any course. Can you believe that?"

"Not really, to be honest. It never really occurred to me that either of them would leave."

"Well, it wouldn't, would it, Dino?"

A pang of unease shot through me, sharp and sudden.

Something's wrong.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't think a lot of things occur to you, Dino. Do they?"

My jaw tightened as her words sank in.

"You just seem to take me and the kids for granted."

.....

"You have your big success story; what about us?"

Where did that come from?

I stared at her, speechless, the room spinning slightly.

"But the three of you are a part of it, Louisa. We make a great team, don't we?"

"I understand what happened with your last partner, Dino."

A shiver ran down my spine; guilt prickled sharply.

.....

"I get that, Dino. But I'm not that guy."

My hands fell limply to my lap; the weight of her stare pinned me down.

.....

Just like you're not my ex, but you're making me feel invisible, just like he did."

My chest sank; a hollow ache spread through me.

"Do I?"

"Yes, especially recently," she said, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Oh no!

My hands trembled slightly as reality hit me.

She sobbed, "I can't let that happen again, Dino. I've enjoyed everything we've done together, but I think it's time I moved on."

The sound of her tears filled the room; I couldn't look away.

.....

"Don't worry; you know where we live, and Jake'll still be here with you."

"But..."

Words failed me; the silence was deafening.

There was a quick knock on the door, and Arabella appeared.

"You ready, Mum?"

Arabella's voice trembled slightly; the room felt unbearably still.

"I'm coming," she said.

"I can't do it again, Dino. I'm getting too old to keep getting ignored by men. Goodbye."

Louisa stood.

The silence stretched.

Then she walked out without looking back.

Arabella avoided my eyes as she closed the door.

I stared at the closed door, unable to move, breath shallow.

I was dumbstruck.

When had this started?

Checkpoint users focused on muffins, coffee and minor perks, while the express strip search always had customers but was never as popular as before. That was fine.

The factions were happy, the customers were happy, and I was happy until I met with my suppliers.

"Hi Dino, where's Louisa?"

"Louisa used to do it that way, Dino. It was much better. Is she on holiday? Tell her to get in touch when she gets back."

"I'll wait until she's back."

The calls went on and on.

I'd had enough.

I reached for the phone, but...

I didn't know her anymore.

A tear slipped out.

Time for a mirror pep talk.

The entrepreneur extraordinaire was gone.

There was just a hollowed-out shell of a man staring back at me.

ROSECODE

A silent key turns

David

During debriefs, I'd discovered that if I concentrated enough on the New Tomorrow logo at the top of each sheet in front of me, then I could suppress my desire to reach over the table, grab the so-called spy's lapels and shake him uncontrollably.

The glass partition would hum with the air conditioner. The room would smell of coffee and floor polish.

It was their voices. They were so fuckin' monotonous.

But anyway, there I was, Lieutenant David Goodall, listening to yet another spy's end-of-mission debrief in our bid to get The Return codebook. I'd have loved to be a spy. I'd taken courses, read books and knew what they needed to do. I needed to be out in the field, using false identities and the dark arts of subterfuge. I bet I could have brought the codebook back.

My father certainly thought I could. "Goodalls don't push paper, David. Goodalls act." His portrait, the one in the uniform I'd never earn, seemed to stare from the back of my mind. He'd died in an alley off a bleak mud spattered road, a "field operative to the end."

All I had were his medals and a desk that felt like a shrine to my own failings.

Getting the codebook wouldn't just be a mission success. It would be an answer. Proof I was more than the son who only played it safe.

Then one day, Major Jones called me into his office.

"Get your pen and notebook; we've got work to do in Room 10."

I thought it was just another debrief of the guy we had spoken to the day before. But it was nothing like that.

"State your name and occupation for the tape, please."

"Eugene McDougal, I'm a research assistant for The Policy Group upstairs. Call my boss and he'll sort this out in a jiffy."

Major Jones leaned closer, voice cold but calm. "It was your boss who called us. We know what you are, McDougal. Let's not waste time."

At first, all Major Jones could get were some barely believable scraps of information. Changing tack, he dimmed the lights and projected images of torture victims onto the room's blank wall.

I should've felt sick, but I couldn't look away.

Major Jones' features hardened. "How would you like to leave here? As you are, or in the same state as these gentlemen, broken and torn, minus various parts?"

Eugene sat stiff in his chair, eyes flicking from the wall to the little red recording light. His jaw tightening, then loosening again.

"Look," he muttered, forcing a thin laugh, "I've got nothing you want. You'll get bored with me."

Jones didn't respond. He just clicked through the images. One after another: broken faces, ruined hands...

Eugene shifted in his seat. "You're bluffing. New Tomorrow doesn't go in for this kind of thing."

The next image cut him short.

His lips trembled. A bead of sweat slid down his cheek.

Jones finally spoke. "Believe me now?"

For a long moment, Eugene said nothing. Then his shoulders slumped. His voice cracked.

"I... I can't go through anything like that. Tell me what you want to know."

From then on, as Major Jones asked the questions, Eugene's answers just spilled out. He couldn't have been more helpful. He was a spy for The Return, the rising faction that used popular appeal as their USP.

When he finally stopped talking, his voice was cracking on every word, so we took a break.

"What do you think, Lieutenant? Do you think he's holding things back?"

"Not now, sir."

"I agree."

"I do have an idea, though."

"Go on."

"We should turn him and use him to get a spy into their HQ to get hold of the codebook."

I held my breath.

I intended to be that spy.

"We'll see, but it's a good idea. Well done, Goodall."

The next few days weren't easy. Our Eugene wasn't convinced about being a double agent. I think he was just as scared of his own faction's threats as he was of ours, but Major Jones' persistence paid off in the end and he succumbed.

I asked for a meeting with the major before we started again with Eugene the following day.

"Have you given any more thought to my idea, sir?"

"Yes, Goodall. I think it's worth the risk."

This was my only shot; I couldn't blow it.

"I want to be the spy, sir."

"You're green, Goodall. Field work isn't a training exercise."

"I know, sir. But look at the what kind of mission it is. Infiltration via a turned asset. We don't have enough operatives at the moment. Short, in-and-out objective: secure a physical book. It's a starter mission, sir. If I'm ever going to be more than a debrief officer, this is the one to cut my teeth on."

Jones studied me.

"What about your family, Goodall?"

"They know the risks of the job, sir."

Jones tapped his pen on the desk. "Logistically, you're correct. We are short. But that's not why I'd say yes." He paused, making a decision. "I'd say yes because this mission will tell me exactly what you're made of. The debrief room teaches you to listen. This will teach you if you can think on your feet. It's the ultimate assessment. Are you prepared to be assessed, Lieutenant? Not just to succeed, but to have every flaw in your psyche laid bare if you fail?"

The question was a cold slap of reality.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I'll speak to the brigadier. Frame it as a tactical trial for new field recruitment. But Goodall," his eyes were flint, "a test can be failed. Don't."

"Thank you, sir."

Two days later:

"Congratulations, Goodall. The brigadier's agreed that it's you who should infiltrate the Return and bring back their codebook! Well done!"

The bottom of my stomach opened, and for a second, I thought I was going to shit myself.

What had I done?

"Fantastic, sir. That's wonderful news. I don't know how I can thank you enough."

"Bringing back the codebook will be thanks enough, Goodall. Just make sure you do it without getting yourself hurt."

Is it always like this when your dreams come true? I thought I'd be floating on air, but I can hardly walk; my legs are shaking that much.

"And the brigadier says we should 'encourage' and 'persuade' Mr. Eugene McDougal to help you get a head start. Some kind of manipulation will be required, Goodall. Have a seat and we can make a shopping list of what we need our Eugene to do for you."

But Eugene had other ideas.

Major Jones and I had been putting The Return spy under immense pressure for days.

Major Jones leaned on him: "You're done, Eugene. We have enough to bury you. Your only chance is to work for us."

Eugene's eyes narrowed, almost smirking:

"Work for you? I don't think so. I'll... cooperate. On my terms. You want a man inside the Return? You'll never get him through on your own. But if I help? If I say he's mine... my recruit, my find, they'll believe it. I've got just enough left to sell the lie."

"And what's stopping you from burning us both the moment you're back with your friends?"

"Nothing. Except that if I do, you'll make sure I'm nothing more than dust scattered on the ocean. I know how this works, Major. So, I'll do what you want... for now. But I choose the man who goes in." He looked straight at me, sending a thrill right down my spine.

That was it then; it was going to happen, so I'd better get my shit together. I didn't want to let down Major Jones or his immediate superior, Colonel White.

We stopped the interrogation for that day, leaving Eugene hanging, not sure whether we'd agree or not. Things could get bad for him if the Return found out what he was doing.

Not as bad as for me, though. Fuckin' hell, death was the least I had to fear.

Little did I know.

I'll give him this; Eugene was a harder bastard than I could ever be.

We threw every trick in the book at him: threats, bribes, blackmail, but he only cracked when we showed him the photos of him in compromising positions with the Heritage Front intelligence chief. He was speechless, even attempted to say they were fake. We were just in time when he tried to swallow the negatives.

Slippery as an eel, this one, which was great for us.

Bit of a worry for me, though.

And it wasn't all easy sailing when he went back to the Return HQ.

At first, spy boy Eugene kept his word by sending us anything and everything that passed across his desk. Some of it, like exposing a city centre safe house, was absolute gold; the rest was shit.

For instance, his intel had led to an innocent officer being publicly accused of rape. He was exonerated, but it took him off a vital case, wasting huge amounts of time and money.

Then, just as I was due to go to the Return HQ for Eugene to introduce me to their intelligence committee, the brigadier upstairs pulled the plug on the entire operation.

The office was silent except for the rustle of the file.

I waited by the frosted glass, hands sweating on the folder. Voices bled through, Major Jones and the colonel standing up for me.

"He may be green," Colonel White's tone was flat through the door, "but sending him isn't reckless. It's not as if we're risking years of work."

Major Jones cut in, sharper: "Sir, with respect, he's the only one who fits the profile Eugene can sell."

I pictured the aide typing; the brigadier weighing the risks, Jones leaning in. Silence, then a pause heavy enough to feel even from where I stood.

"If he fails, Jones... this is on your head."

Another long pause.

"Proceed."

A thump... probably the official stamp. Top Secret.

Then laughter.

When the door opened, I knew before he spoke.

"Congratulations, Goodall..."

Major Jones and I had gone through the New Tomorrow testing system repeatedly. So, if someone came to us claiming to be a spy, we would know how to find out who they really were and what they wanted.

Jones had drilled it into me: fail a test and they don't send you home for retraining. They take you down to the basement, and you don't come back up. Not whole, anyway.

At The Return HQ, though, there was also the matter of my experience, or the complete lack of it.

I couldn't look too experienced, because that would blow my cover.

I had to learn on the fly.

"What's the safe word for the Thursday drop at the Mornington Road safe house?" The evaluator demanded.

As we'd practiced, I hesitated, looked up to my left as if recalling a memory, then...

"Falkirk."

I knew it was wrong but still felt the ire of my questioner's raised eyebrow.

Later, in a facial recognition exercise.

"Which person is the courier that carries the intel for prisoner exchanges?"

I pointed out the plain girl, not the man in the tie.

"What the fuck are you doing? You know it's not her."

The flinch I'd practised came out on cue. It worked for now.

The evaluator's jaw tightened; someone in the back made a note. Not a failure, not yet, but a mark. That's all it took.

Every tiny slip got me through.

It was a fuckin' nightmare. I just wanted to be me, and I guess after all that wishing and hoping and naked ambition and everything,

being me and being a spy were completely incompatible.

Too late for that kind of talk, though. Far too late.

Major Cleverly

I'd been aware of David for a while. Eugene had been reporting back to me about how the New Tomorrow major was competent, ruthless and efficient, but his sidekick David Goodall was just a boy dreaming of Cold War tradecraft, dead drops and honey traps.

Eugene had played it just as we'd planned. He hooked them, limited their upside, and funneled them into the only viable solution. He was one of my best students. An old hand now, especially after being shown the pictures of his honey trap with the Heritage Front intelligence fool, Bradley. Sometimes you have to balance which is most effective: the embarrassment to the other side or the actual intelligence gained.

I sat in with the old codgers in the security committee and waved through David's clearances, sublimely staying my hand, so his journey didn't seem too smooth.

You know, I don't even feel like a spider anymore, orchestrating my prey's death. With this, it's almost as if I'm directing an Oscar-nominated movie, placing a player, anticipating his every move, cajoling and persuading, even if he struggles to improvise.

David was my star.

David

I was killing it. Maybe I had it in me after all, but the thing that still bothered me was the sacrifice I needed to make. My present. What was I going to give them? I'd rehearsed it a million and one times with Major Jones, but, you know, this was the killing fields, not the cool, controlled atmosphere of the office.

Being walked through the tests by Eugene added a higher, more detailed dimension. He'd been through all the tests and knew the Return major. He'd given us a ton of intel on it during his debrief, so I knew what I was getting into. He also thought I had promise.

What could go wrong?

Major Cleverly

I couldn't remember the exact word, but there was a word or phrase for people who harmed animals when they were children. I had always been ambitious, so I hadn't pulled legs off spiders or insects: I had pinned out cats or dogs, usually cats for some reason. You know, splayed them out, got out my old trusty penknife, and cut their legs off. Bones could be a problem, so I used a stone to hit the blade, which was much more effective than sawing I'd discovered.

It wasn't the blow itself. It was the ritual. I needed to go through the process until he reached the point that he realised that, yes, I really was going to do it. Then I could sit back and watch the look on his face.

Orgasmic.

He lay there like a cat.

Waiting.

The air carried the tang of antiseptic and whisky, biting and intoxicating.

"So, what can you offer to cement our fledgling relationship, David?"

I could see it in his eyes.

He'd obviously rehearsed this extensively, probably with Jones.

"I've got some great files you guys would kill for, Major."

"That I would kill for? Really?"

"Oh, you know; personnel, safe houses, passwords, that kind of stuff."

"Where do you think you are, David? The Amateur Sleuth Society?"

"Eh?"

Leg one. "We have all these files already, David. Come on, don't waste our time."

He expected to negotiate which files. Beads of sweat dotted his lips.

He swallowed.

"Oh, well, I can give you incriminating evidence about the NT brass that would get them chucked out PDQ."

You just couldn't get the quality these days. What an amateur. I was going to overlook the fact that he shouldn't have the clearance for this; practising late into the night had been a waste of time...

Leg two. "I imagine we're talking about the great straw-nose himself, General Wigmore, and his courtesans du jour. Isn't that right, David? You'll need to dig deeper, don't you think?"

I drummed my nails in a slow, deliberate rhythm on the desk.

He was going through the New Tomorrow training manual chapter by chapter. I knew; it lay on my desk at home. My daughter would have admired the way he tried desperately not to look as if he was panicking, but the strain was apparent in the way his wrinkles appeared and disappeared. From experience, I'd say we'd need the extractor fan soon, for the reek.

His eyes welled up.

"What about all the material your own guy's given us, then you'll know what to change and stuff like that?"

The drowning man, clutching at straws.

Leg three. "We use our own levers against our Eugene McDougal, David. He's an open book to us. Dig deeper, boy! You've really got to make this worth our while."

"OK, OK, I'll tell you about Major Jones and his friends." Tears dripped from his cheeks onto the desk. His breathing quickened.

"What about them?"

He was delighted that he'd mentioned something I didn't know. He would have wrapped it up and put a bow on it if he could have.

He was shaking.

He wanted to stall, but he couldn't.

The words came pouring out.

"They've got their own cell. They run their own agents. It's just like a mini secret service. They've asked me to join, you know."

"The group that meets in the back room of the Horsemakers Arms?"

Shock.

"Uh-huh."

Leg four. SMASH! The stone hit the blade. "We're bombing that place tonight."

"No."

The tiny little word was barely audible, but it told us what we needed to know loud and clear.

Memories of all the times he and his boss had worked together played across his tear-stained face: the laughs, the close shaves; his mentor steering him toward betrayal.

His little face. I wish I could have recorded it, but all that technology had been lost in the war.

What a shame.

David

I could vaguely hear the machinery grind into action through the door; barked orders, a muted phone call, heels clicking.

I'd handed them the key.

What the fuck had I done? Jonesy, Jonesy, what was I going to tell Ella and little Timmy? I didn't know if I could ever face them again. We'd practiced and practiced, but nothing could've prepared me for Cleverly. I felt like I was his toy, fuck's sake.

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to beat him up. Mostly, I wanted to bury myself alive.

And what about Eugene, who had been so supportive? Whatever happened to "I'll cover for you"? "It'll be fine," and "You're worrying too much." Had he known this was how it would end? Had he set me up?

What a stupid, naive bastard I'd been. A little boy playing a mad, dangerous man's game. How could I have been so vain, so ambitious, so keen to prove myself that it'd cost my colleagues their lives? I wanted to die.

I could see his face as clear as day. "You'll get through this," Jonesy had promised. "The important thing is that you get through the tests to the other side. Then you can do some actual damage."

He couldn't have known.

Could he?

Major Cleverly

I walked into the office.

A faint smell of cigar smoke hung in the air, a cut-glass decanter on the desk.

"Well played, Cleverly. That was a delight to watch," said the colonel, giving me a congratulatory slap on the back.

The others clapped, grinning from ear to ear.

Major Brown laughed as he collected his winnings. He must have won the sweep.

I took a sip of water. "Make sure they get every single one of them at their meeting tonight. If we don't, it'll make us look weak. This needs to be devastating."

Brown nodded, "The boy's pretty devastated already, don't you think? I was thinking of getting a photographer in there. His face was such a picture, we could put it in our manual."

David

Where was the straightforward journey? Where was my boss, who had my back? What had led to this situation apart from my

greed, ambition, and selfishness ...apart from my own need to finally measure up?

None of the answers were good. They all showed off my deficiencies in the minutest detail. Zoom right in, see what an exquisite job I'd made of fucking absolutely everything up.

I hadn't a clue what was on the horizon, but I seemed to have been allowed a few precious moments to relax and reflect.

So, I asked myself, what's on the reflection menu today?

I ran a scan, systematically checking how each part of my body was feeling.

Head, whirling.

Arms, chest, normal.

Heart, dust.

Stomach, churning slowly.

Groin, broken,

legs, shaky.

Feet, ready to run.

I cleared my mind and let go.

Who was I? David. Where was I? The Return HQ. What was I doing there? Not killing my friends. I'd come for the codebook.

What was stopping me from getting it? Cleverly. What was he? A Return officer. Who was he? A man.

Exactly, it didn't matter how good he was; he was just a man!

He was a man; I was a man, that was it.

He'd only won the first round, nothing more.

There was no one to help me. Major Jones was dead; Cleverly had shown me photos of the pub blast, including Jonesy's hand sticking out of the rubble wearing his distinctive wedding ring. The shocking atrocities of the 'terror attack' caused a nearby agent to scream in frustration at losing a source that had taken her months to cultivate. Eugene was still theirs. I was alone. I had to be strong. I could rely only on myself.

Cleverly couldn't cheat or know the answer. There was no one to tell him. He couldn't know my weaknesses; he couldn't know my strengths. Only I knew.

I was there for the codebook. That had to be my focus, but what did I know about it?

Nothing.

I kept remembering something my gran had said when I was a kid. 'You've come this far. Some of your things have been broken, but if you give up now, breaking them will have been for nothing.'

That was it!

She was right. The only way to do Jonesy justice was to keep going and win. Get the book.

I needed to be more proactive.

I needed manageable steps.

The codebook: Where is it? Who keeps it? What did Eugene say about it? Did it really exist?

Cleverly: What did I know about him? Who was he? Where did he come from? What did he want? What did he want from me? What were his weaknesses, strengths, threats...?

Eugene: Was he lost, or could I blackmail him or threaten him with something? All I could think of was his fear of pain and torture.

The only people I knew there were Eugene and Cleverly. Only Eugene could tell me about the codebook, if I could persuade him by using torture in some way. How? He might tell me something about Cleverly too, if I played my cards right.

How could I find a way to speak to Eugene alone? If I could, then I would have to leverage his compromising photos with the HF intelligence leader and the best of his recent reports.

I'm still in Dreamland.

I'm struggling.

But Eugene McDougal was nobody's fool. He must have felt he had to contact me, because he'd been waiting for me in the shadows between the office and the main door. As I was going outside for some much-needed fresh air, he just appeared and 'accidentally' bumped into me, pulled me into a small office and locked the door behind us. The room smelled of stale coffee and fear.

What the fuck did this slippery little eel want?

He spoke in a rushed whisper, "I'm so, so sorry about what happened earlier. You were left with no choice, but you have to believe me when I say that I hadn't a choice either."

I saw red.

I grabbed him by the lapels and head-butted him. Not enough to knock him out, but just enough to take control of the situation, "You'd better start coming up with the goods, McDougal!"

"OK, OK, what do you need? I'm truly sorry about Jones. He treated me fairly when I was in an awful place. Few people do that."

So, I told him what I needed to know about the codebook, and he answered me freely and, I thought, truthfully.

"It's in an office that has a couple of desks, but also a hatch that's manned by a sergeant. You have to sign the book out and sign it back in when you're finished with it."

"OK, but what's it look like? I need to know it's the right one."

It's quite worn. A5 with a reddish marbled cover and a black or dark blue spine. You know the ones; you were at uni."

"OK. And inside?"

"Absolutely crammed full of words, numbers and symbols."

"So, I take it the security's strict?"

“You’re going to have to have a good plan to get it; that’s for sure.”

After asking him for more details about the office, I could picture it roughly: how big it was, what I would see when I entered, who would be there, and what they would be doing.

I imagined the sounds, the smells... the atmosphere. The faint rasp of a typewriter, the smell of ink and paper, the scrape of a chair. That room was in my head.

So was Jonesy. It had been my fault, so I couldn’t let his death mean nothing. In some ways, he was still there beside me, helping me stay strong, guiding me through the steps he’d drilled into me since I’d been a raw recruit.

I’m still raw.

I needed to make this work. It was the only way I could make any sense of what happened to him. If I got caught, I’d die too. If I succeeded, maybe it would put something right. I could only pray for a quick end like in the Horsemaker’s Arms, and not a slow one in that chair bolted to the floor over a drain. Or even worse; a desk. My own desk back at New Tomorrow, a year from now, jumping at doors slamming, staring at reports and seeing Cleverly’s face in the margins. The smell of Cleverly’s interrogation room haunting me. My own personal ghost.

I knew the signs of my fear then: the smells, the tremors, the sweat. I just needed to stand up straight and face them.

My mind was racing.

I was already creating and discarding plans in my head. A notebook and a pen would have been good, but you don’t write these things

down in the middle of enemy HQ.

Clarity came.

Simplicity and speed.

And gigantic balls!

“And Cleverly?”

As for him, he wasn't nearly so forthcoming.

“You saw what he's like. He's a fuckin' nightmare.”

I'd had enough, lost too much self-respect, not to mention the best colleague a man could ask for.

“You fuckin' tell me what you know, or I'll tear your head off right here. Anything about him.”

So, Eugene McDougal, double agent extraordinaire, told me what he could about the ghoul that was Major Cleverly.

As he whispered, I saw it in his eyes: the certain knowledge that no matter who won this game, he was already a dead man. He was just choosing the manner of his execution. I was using a shell. When this was over, Cleverly would erase him, or my own people would tidy him away.

The best this slippery eel could hope for was to be the last one swallowed.

Opposing Cleverly was seemingly pointless because of his vast experience and his cunning and devious mind. I felt a fire of furious anger welling deep inside of me. There was no way I could give up.

Rather than planning everything out, I decided it would be more realistic to make the best of my naivety and stupidity. I'd act like I'd been there forever. Smile at the right time. Look busy, not scared. If I could make them see a man with a purpose, maybe they'd stop looking for a spy.

Surely it would be harder for the master planner Cleverly to compete against randomness and luck rather than guile and ruthlessness.

Amazingly, Eugene's directions to the office were perfect. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

I had no authorisation, no backup, no second chance. So, I'd do what Cleverly never could... trust to luck. Drop his name, act like I belonged, and pray the universe preferred amateurs today. If he pressed, I'd stall and let my forgetfulness pass for nerves.

I knocked and walked in.

"So, you found it, then?"

Cleverly!

The adrenaline wave of hope I'd been surfing crashed.

I nearly drowned.

"So, it seems."

"I imagine you've come for the codebook, haven't you?"

"Right first time."

He caught the sergeant's eye and gave a brief nod.

"This is Lieutenant Goodall, a recent addition to the intelligence staff."

I returned the sergeant's salute.

"Let me sign you in," Cleverly said, signing the registration book.

"Sign here," showing me where. With the formalities over, the desk sergeant produced the book.

Considering the importance that New Tomorrow attached to it, the book looked distinctly ordinary. Just as Eugene had described it, but a bit more dog-eared than I'd imagined.

Cleverly leaned in and put his arm around my shoulder.

"This is our main codebook, David. The secrets that have been passed using this book have been invaluable."

He opened it. "Have a look and tell me how you think it works."

It smelled faintly of polish and sweat, like home, and death.

I studied it carefully, but I had to admit defeat.

"Don't worry, it's always difficult the first time."

"You see, you show if your message is an order, a report or a request by using the symbols at the top."

This was more complex than I'd expected.

"Then you reference the word you need with the number for the symbol."

Ingenious.

"Statistics show these are the most commonly used words; if another is needed, it's spelled out with numbers for each letter."

"Wow!"

"Yes David. Wow, as you say."

He came really close. Threateningly close.

His breath smelled of a mixture of garlic and smoke. "This is how we do it, Davie boy. We don't fuck about."

I hated myself for stuttering a little.

"Th... that must be the b... best way."

"Don't give me your shit, boy." His lips curling, "You're ours and you're going back to your nest to spread the virus. Get it?"

Calm came over me.

"Don't worry, I get it." I couldn't believe that it was me talking.

"You'd fuckin' better. Cos I'm watching everything you do, boy. Every move. Every step. You're mine! Remember that."

He gave me what he obviously thought was a deep, searching look.

"Sure," I said, looking back with what I hoped was a casual stare.

"You'd fuckin' better, Goodall."

A Tannoy announcement broke the spell and called him away.

I followed him at a distance, walking down the long corridor.

"Fuck it! I've got to do this."

As he turned the next corner, I turned on my heel.

Every step was a dread.

Every breath was my last.

Every beat of my heart was a death knell.

Everything that had happened hung heavily on my mind.

The reprimand, the shout, the arrest never came.

I entered the office again, commanding my body to obey.

Just as I opened my mouth to speak to the sergeant, someone ran in, stopped, saluted and barked, "Urgent request for Captain Croft. He needs all the staff attendance records for the past three months."

I was going to have to wait in the worst possible place.

Fate! What a fucker!

The sergeant busied himself, collecting various folders, piling them up on the counter, and noting them in a pale green notebook.

He handed them over, then looked at me expectantly.

I was still trying to look as if I did this two or three times a day.

"Sorry to be a pest, sergeant. Major Cleverly needs the codebook again and sent me back to collect it."

"But Major Cleverly isn't here, sir."

Take a card or fold?

Take a card.

"He was just here with me about a minute ago, sergeant." "But he needs to sign for it, Lieutenant."

Another card

Ah, this is his responsibility.

"I'm not sure, but I don't think he signed it back in, Sergeant."

Time slowed.

He picked up the registration book.

The ticking of the big round clock on the wall was deafening.

He opened it.

The faintest whiff of pen, pencil and sweat.

Ran his finger down the column of signatures.

I wiped the bead of sweat from my upper lip.

Stopped.

"It seems to me, Lieutenant..."

My legs were jelly.

I could barely stand.

I leant casually against the counter for support.

"... that you're right. I'll need to see your ID again, though."

My breathing was sucking the oxygen out of the room.

The phone rang.

The sergeant picked up.

"Sir, yes, sir. I'll do that, sir."

He put down the phone.

Looked up.

His eyes narrowed as he recognised the panic in mine.

He picked up the codebook.

“Here you are. Ask him to return it by tonight, please, sir.”

“... eh, eh, yes, of course, Sergeant. Thank you.”

I was even more terrified as I walked away.

Everyone was watching.

Everyone knew what I was doing.

Caught, and I’m dead.

The book was inside my jacket, tucked into the back of the waistband of my trousers.

Everyone was looking at it.

How did they know?

“Goodall!” like the crack of a whip echoing down the corridor.

Fuck!

It took all my willpower not to run.

My heart is pounding in my chest.

I turned and faced Cleverly as he approached. “Sir?”

"Anything exciting planned for the weekend...?"

"... Just catching up with friends, sir. You?"

"Oh, you know. Running around catching spies. Bending them and breaking them to suit my mood. Throwing them to the pigs for lunch."

"Do you keep pigs, sir?"

Arsehole thing to say.

"I love traitor-flavoured bacon, Goodall." Giving me his cold, hard glare, "You want to try some?"

"Maybe some other time, sir"

"And Goodall."

Nearly hyperventilating.

"Yes, sir."

"See you on Monday... if you make it that far."

At that, he turned and walked casually back along the corridor, leaving me a simpering mess inside a hesitant body, the smell of floor polish mixing with that of my terror.

I had to leave.

Immediately.

I concentrated on walking as naturally as possible to the main door. Not an easy job when you're walking away from the toilets while all you want to do is vent explosively from both ends.

I turned the corner to the door and walked into some kind of security check.

Is it never going to end?

"If you'd like to step over here, sir," the physical presence of the huge, armed guard was professionally pleasant. "There's a security alert; we just need to give you a quick search."

The two sitting at the desk gave each other sidelong glances.

They knew.

My mouth filled with cotton.

Options?

I'm carrying it for... somebody's paperwork...

Major Cleverly will vouch... he said he would...

I thought it was signed out...

I can show my ID... call him... call anyone...

Say I'm authorised.

Say I'm late.

Say anything.

None of those words formed.

They came out as breath.

“Face the wall.”

“Raise your arms, sir.”

My jacket shifted. The edge of the codebook dug into my ribs. One slip. One thud. Game over.

Don’t slip. Don’t breathe. Don’t exist.

“You carrying anything you shouldn’t, sir?” The guard’s eyes flicked to my waistband.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor behind. Someone called Cleverly’s name.

“Private Dunn, over here, now.”

The guard left me facing the wall, arms raised, sweat crawling down my spine. A female voice suddenly close to my ear: “He said you had promise. You really do.”

A file was lightly tapped against my raised arm. “Your clearance just came through. You can go now, Lieutenant. Maybe another time...”

She stepped back, nodding once to the space behind me.

The moment broke.

I tried to return her smile, but I was so at sea, it sank before it left the shore.

And I was out.

Fresh air.

A cool breeze.

I found a disused doorway, quiet and out of sight.

I let go.

My knees buckled against the door... I wanted to throw up, but all I could do was laugh silently.

I was a mess.

But a successful mess.

That was for you, Jonesy.

I made my way back to the New Tomorrow headquarters, still bruised inside.

Once my achievement had sunk in, there were pats on the back, two-handed handshakes and even a few bottles of champagne.

"You've done your bit for history, son. Well done!"

The tension still wouldn't leave my body. I needed some kind of release after all that excitement.

They must use the same floor polish; the smell's stuck in my mind, just like the fear in my stomach.

A group of analysts drooled over the book so much; I insisted the pages should be laminated.

Leaders who I'd never met before called me 'David, my boy.' Staff hovered, eager to please, which only made it stranger after what I'd been through.

And Jonesy. It was impossible to ignore his contribution, so I raised my glass and proposed a posthumous toast to Major Jones, my friend, colleague, and mentor. In fact, after a while I slipped out to have a bit of a cry, it being the first time I'd had the chance to grieve for him. More later, no doubt.

6 months later

Our analysts had become used to decoding The Return messages. All of them made sense and spoke of current events, situations and their important players, but we never seemed to have any major successes; the timing was always off.

Last week, the entire cell we were chasing disappeared an hour before our raid.

Yesterday, we discovered that the workshop under the antique store we'd been surveilling for a month had been shut down weeks earlier.

NT always seemed to turn up late to the party, or even to the wrong address, and the reports I'd read often had phrases I'd seen in intercepts before we had the book.

Strange.

We just needed to keep intercepting, decoding and cross-referencing the intel, and a breakthrough would come.

For me, I could still smell the stale garlic and smoke of Cleverly's breath spraying onto my face.

I thought I'd beaten him.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I kept smelling garlic.

Major Cleverly

I loved it there in my home office, where no one (not even my wife or kids) could glean anything useful.

I had a board. I wanted it like Go or Chess. But it was a wargaming board. All the pawns were in place in mini-Rosehaven. Reporting back, sabotaging or following a long series of wild goose chases. All colour-coded, so I could tell at a glance if anyone was going to step on someone's toes.

I could really relax there and delve deeper into everything.

Mmm, the whisky was lovely.

“Cheers, Lieutenant David Goodall. You did exactly as I expected.”

I placed one hand on the real codebook lying open on my desk.

“The fake one’s doing a much better job than I thought it would. Misdirecting, exposing surveillance teams and causing mayhem. Definitely value for money.”

Another sip.

“You trusted luck, David. I made my own.”

ROSEISTANCE

A war of quiet refusals

In a reasonably busy side street, not far from the town centre, sat a large, run-of-the-mill antique shop. And under its very foundations, a hidden world thrived, invisible to the factions' patrols. The workshop was under its basement, sharing its extractor fans, conveniently mixing the smells of vigour, solder, and explosive with the noxious fumes of furniture restoration: copious amounts of dye, polish, and varnish.

Their last base had been above a bakery, absolutely roasting (baking, technically). Too much time had been lost reminiscing over the bakery's speciality: pea-flavoured cookies. Antiques were better for all.

X

The four of us had decided to use code names when we first got together. The last four letters of the alphabet were the worst code names ever in the history of the universe, but they'd stuck.

And now there were three.

It had been much quieter all round without Y.

"He kept me up half the night again," W muttered, leaning over his drawing board.

I was concentrating on not melting a tiny component with a soldering iron. "Again?"

Z looked up from the reams of paper spread across his desk. "I wonder if we'll ever find out what happened."

W rubbed his eyes. "God knows. Someone like him shouldn't have been dumped in a ditch with his throat cut. He was unique."

"That's just what they're telling us. He was a bit too big to just dump, really."

Collectively, we're the Gremlins. We see ourselves as spanners in the works, one of the brakes preventing the two factions from taking over before the Return are ready.

Could we do it without him?

Our workstations look as if they've been crammed in by brute force and sheer force of will, but it'd all been planned, eventually. A single overhead beam lights up the latest project. Prototypes loom in the shadows. An immense table for meetings and arguments sits beside Z's bench.

Although we're more or less immune to it now, visitors say the air still hums with urgency. We'd mentioned the idea of an apprentice stepping in, but they would never fill Y's size 10s. Something had to happen. The three of us wouldn't be able to manage on our own.

We were having one of our dreaded meetings.

Z tapped the table thoughtfully. "We can't just hit their strengths head-on."

"Oh, come on. Don't start the martial arts thing again."

"But it's true..."

W and I sighed; we'd heard Z's diatribe a thousand times. We chanted together as Z hovered between irritation and laughter.

"If they're big, we use small. If they're cruel, kindness. Rules, we use chaos. Peace, not violence."

Then the three of us together said, "And that's what gets results!" Y forgotten for a moment.

We sat at the table; five mission ideas scrawled on a scrap of paper.

Z's voice dropped. "If we pull one of these off, they mightn't know it was us. Not for years."

"And if we play it right, they could even turn on each other."

"Come on now. Focus," I said, waving a precision screwdriver.

W squinted at the shabby list. "These all overlap. They all depend on infrastructure, don't they? We've talked about this before."

"Solid," Z agreed. His grin widening. "But remember what happened last time. We're too old for this, so we're gonna need apprentices. Who can we trust? One mistake and someone dies"

We looked at each other. The stakes had shifted. This wasn't a game. Not entirely.

By the end of the week, we'd gathered what W described as "an unpredictable lineup of misfits, minor geniuses, and semi-legal animal handlers."

There was Gretta, fifteen, pretty, tactically underestimated and sharper than a comedian's comeback. Squeeze, a little Miss Motivator whose methods came with a health warning. Qi, who could calculate, collate, and tabulate data in his head but couldn't remember what day it was. Monkey Boy, who could train dogs, pigeons and rats like a circus ringmaster. Easter, the utilities con man, and of course Donny Pie, the drone connoisseur.

We didn't interview them for Y's replacement; we set them a challenge.

The Brief (printed by me in 12-point Helvetica, laminated for no reason):

Your challenge: using any means necessary, analyse the major weaknesses of The Heritage Front and New Tomorrow concerning both public and faction infrastructure.

Provide data to back up your results, as long as you aren't caught. If in doubt, stop, or tell one of the Gremlins immediately. Teamwork is essential. So is peer review.

Note: Bonus points for creativity. Unnecessary explosions will result in deductions. Necessary ones may be celebrated.

Good luck.

"We need to replace our colleague Y, who was captured and killed on a job recently." I announced to the assembled group. "We need to decide who that will be."

After that, no hand-holding. No speeches. Z just handed out the sheet and muttered, "Off you go," and let them sort it out for themselves.

Back in the shadows, the three of us leaned over the table and watched as the youngsters met each other and grappled with the challenge.

I remembered Y. He would've hated this. Too messy, too many unknowns.

"This is a bit risky for them. I hope they know what they're doing." Z said as he was fiddling with his nails, a sure sign he was worried.

It was a problem we all had; letting go. We were all control freaks to some extent, and struggled when it came to trusting people, especially those who were so much younger than us. We thought they should still be at school.

The day of the challenge arrived.

Gretta

Donny Pie had been in since 5:30! Fuck's sake, what a goody two shoes.

He was completely absorbed in his laptop, a huge grin on his face.

"I love the smell of stealing secrets in the morning, guys! I've had the boys discreetly flying around outside both headquarters, and it's looking goooooood! Alright Gretta," as he saw me for the first time.

OK, maybe he's alright after all. Gets us a head start at least.

He straightened up, more serious now. "Monkey, excellent stuff for you on the Heritage Front ground floor; I'm better upstairs. First office on the left from the side door, desk against the back wall. A pad of forms. Perfect for your rats."

"On it," said Monkey Boy, already gathering his gear.

Me and Squeeze are in the field. We're not built for hanging around, giving orders or being computery. We like action, so we made our way to New Tomorrow's HQ.

We'd agreed the 'Super Innocent Schooly' look was best today, so we cycled there, men sneaking looks at our short skirts and pigtails. Fuckin' wind was a bit strong, though. It always seems to be against you, no matter which way you're going. I shivered. Not just from the cold.

Our plan was to chat up some guards and see what we could get away with.

As we arrived, something fell out of the sky.

"Did you see that?" said Squeeze quietly as she stuttered to a stop. "It was one of Donny Pie's drones!"

I couldn't believe it. I'd got it into my head that he was some kind of genius. What a pain in the arse if his stuff didn't work.

"Come on, girl, we can be cover until he recalibrates," I muttered.

So, we hitched up our skirts a bit and, hands tight on the handlebars, pushed our bikes up to the guard at the New Tomorrow HQ door.

"Officer, officer!" I pleaded. "We're bursting for the toilet," knees knocking together, "Can we use yours?"

His eyes flicked over us, sharp, sizing us up. Hand brushing his holster. "I'm not supposed to. You could be anybody," he said.

"Us? Terrorists?" Squeeze's eyes widened comically. "Pleeease. I'm going to pee myself right here if we can't!"

The drone wobbled back into the air. He sighed. "Down there. Second door on the left. Be quick!"

We bolted down the corridor, hearts hammering. Ducked into the ladies, waited a beat, emerged and went into an office, empty! Perfect! I slipped the desk diary under my jumper; Squeeze grabbed an official stamp.

Back at the entrance, I turned on my most innocent smile. "Phew, thanks again, officer. Whatever can we do to repay you?"

He leaned closer; my pulse spiked. "You're very ... pretty. How about a kiss?"

"Quick then, no tongues," I whispered, biting back a giggle and pouting my lips. Every second, a risk.

He kissed us fast and shy. I didn't relax. Another guard could turn up.

Squeeze twirled her hair. "By the way, what's your name?"

"William. My friends call me Billy."

I winked over my shoulder. "See you later, Billy. Maybe you can show us your gun next time."

I think Squeeze felt the same as me. We had ridden our luck. Keeping up a front pushed us along, but underneath, we really had to keep on our toes.

When we got back to the workshop, everyone was there.

Donny Pie laughed. "A couple of teenage temptresses in the making."

"You jealous or something?" Squeeze taunted. "We got a diary and an official stamp, and a kiss. What did you get?"

"More than that." Donny Pie said, puffing himself up. "Detailed shots of a faction bank statement and a full overview of that office. That deserves more than a kiss, don't you think?"

"Dream on, Donny! Maybe don't schedule crash landings during our flirting slot next time. It was hard work keeping that guard from seeing it. You could've blown it!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Squeeze, giving him a peck on the cheek. "What about you, Monkey Boy?"

Squeeze thought Monkey Boy was cute. He was so shy, he could hardly look at us.

"Ratdad got that form the drone spotted. It's even filled in." He blushed.

"Got into the Heritage Front HQ," Easter interrupted, changing into his normal clothes. "Gave them my 'someone's complained about the smell of gas' spiel and ended up with a schematic of the entire building."

Qi stood up, coughed, "Oh, and everyone. We all need to be really careful. There's a mention of a spy in that desk diary we got. It can't be anyone in here, but.... Walls have ears."

"Maybe the alpha will be able to help." Squeeze laughed.

I'm lost, "The alpha? What'd I miss?"

"Yeah, the alphabet. W, X, and Z," Squeeze laughed.

X

"You taking the piss?" Z's voice took them by surprise.

"Oh, you're here...." Squeeze squirmed. "Have you been listening?"

The three of us were sitting at the back of the room, taking notes. They'd all done incredibly well.

"We hear everything that's said in here." W said in a deep, dark impression of The Heritage Front leader. "You guys have been fantastic today. Well done! Remember what Qi said about a spy. He knows what he's talking about, so be super careful! Any suggestions on who it could be, let one of us, one of the Alpha, know."

I could feel it too; the invisible presence of someone watching, listening, waiting.

I stepped forward to join the group. "We have The Return, we have us three, we have all of you, if you're in, and we also have The Twitchers, watching everything from behind their net curtains."

"We want to control the infrastructure," Z explained. "Even the food supply if we need to."

He looked around suddenly serious. "It has to work. It has to be super-secret! No drones spotted. No girls compromised. If that happens, the game's up. They'll hunt us down, torture us, and dump us in some nondescript ditch next to the sewage farm."

Just then, there was a knock on the outside door, a boy with a box of 3 pea-flavoured cookies for W.

"Something's up," said W, taking the box. "Must be urgent if Mary's sending me these."

Each took a cookie and bit it. The message was in Z's. He read, "There's just been a Heritage Front officer in, asking if anyone's been trying to sell stolen paperwork. Ordering us all to keep an eye out and to let them know immediately."

"My sister's an excellent judge of character," said W. "We need to verify this. Quietly."

W's gaze landed on Gretta and Squeeze. "Girls. You're up. Find him, watch him, don't let him see you."

Ten minutes later, Gretta and Squeeze were cycling around the neighbourhood and spotted the officer. They dismounted and followed.

Gretta

"I'll give him one thing," said Squeeze with a grin. "He's got a nice arse. A nice wiggle."

"Are you off your trolley? Arses like that don't go for girls like us. He's more Easter's style, I reckon. Where's he off to?"

The officer cut up the alley on the right of the mini-market. The girls both hesitated and looked at each other, paused, then went in too.

"... and I was saying to my aunty the other day how nice the town is looking, but bloody hell, this lane's a bit of a state, isn't it?"

"You're not often wrong, but I tell you something, doll, you're right again. It's like a shithole. It stinks of piss down here! They could do with putting up some lights too. Hold up!"

Their target was shaking a scruffy homeless guy in a doorway. The officer suddenly threw him down, took a baton from his belt. The man's screams ripped through the alley. The officer's lips peeled back, his breath turning sharp as his grip tightened the baton landing again and again, thud after thud after thud.

"We're trapped," whispered Squeeze. "We can't just walk past without drawing attention to ourselves. He could have a go at us."

"I can't fuckin' believe it!" I said, throwing my hands up in the air, my bike falling against me. "I've left the shopping bag at the shop! What a fuckin' idiot! Come on, we'll need to go back for it. It's got tonight's supper in it."

We just managed to keep the bikes upright as we turned them around. We could still hear the officer grunting with each blow as we made our way back to the street. I was pushing, Squeeze's foot was on a pedal, ready to push off for a quick getaway.

"Fuckin' hell, girl," she said. "I need to sit down, my legs are shaking like a leaf."

"Too right. Not the kind of knee trembler I'd like."

When we got around the corner onto the street, Squeeze leaned against her bike frame, head down. "I can still hear it," she whispered.

I just nodded; my own hands wouldn't stop trembling. The officer's wiggle was the last thing on my mind.

The alpha were seething when we told them what had happened. X was worst.

"Right!" he said. "Y would have told us we were mad... We do this now, for him, and so these kids don't end up in a ditch next to him."

The decision was made.

Over the next weeks and months, the whole team built up a wall of data for the factions' properties, analysing risks, vulnerabilities, who was approachable, and who would shoot. Schematics marked where crucial materials were kept. The picture was coming together.

The operation started for real on Monday, May the fourteenth, not the Sunday. Some were still superstitious.

The goal: a 15-minute power cut, just long enough for Donny Pie's bots to access the security cameras around both Heritage Front and New Tomorrow HQs.

Time to turn all the planning into reality.

Donny Pie

Everything was a go; contacts at Rosehaven General Hospital alerted, check. Comms disrupted, check. The airspace was mine, check.

I hovered above the courtyard, fingers tight on the controller. Wobbled slightly in the morning wind; my thumb twitched on the joystick. Compensate. Steady. On my screen, the world was a silent, grayscale ballet.

Below me, Gretta and Squeeze moved into position, crouched like bored teenagers. They were about to witness chaos the right way. They were talking to a guard, keeping him out of my sightline. They took him around the corner. Good. But any second another patrol could appear, glance up, notice the drone and our little army would be exposed.

Another window showed Ratdad's feed, blurry and dusty beneath the floor. He scuttled through the vent, tiny paws padding silently. Monkey Boy's dogs lined up outside the alley, ears up, waiting for the signal. I could see everything: guards pacing their routes, shadows shifting. The main conduit, a fat, pulsing, glowing target.

Timing was everything. My mouth was dry. I keyed the mic. "Standby... standby... now."

On the dog feed, Monkey Boy's hand dropped, and the dogs surged forward, barking like hounds from hell.

The courtyard exploded into chaos. Guards scrambled. Some trying to fend them off, some running, one even tossing the dogs biscuits.

On Ratdad's feed, a set of keys gleamed in a drawer. A tiny paw hooked them. Retrieval confirmed.

My eyes flicked to the power grid overlay. The countdown hit zero. I sent the kill signal. The entire courtyard block went dark. Not a flicker. A deep, swallowing silence. The barking sounded louder.

I love it when a plan comes together.

My bots swarmed the security cameras, a digital swarm flowing into the blind spots. Data streamed across my screen.

Access granted. Downloading. 10%... 40%...

I saw Gretta and Squeeze wander away on the main screen, even their grins visible.

But I stayed in the zone, scanning the courtyard, monitoring the drone feed, guiding each movement.

The guards were shouting, chasing imaginary threats, flashlights trying to make sense of it all.

They thought it was a simple outage. They never looked up. 85%... 90%... Come on, come on.

A new alert blinked red on the edge of my screen. Anomalous signal. Unauthorised ping.

Was it the spy? A patrol on an unscheduled route?

No time. Focus. I guided every move.

My heart hammered against my ribs. No time. 95%... "Wrap it up!" I hissed into the mic, my voice cracking with a panic I didn't recognize.

The last of the dogs slipped back into the alleyways, and Ratdad vanished under the floorboards. My bots finished and self-deleted. 100%. Transfer complete.

I exhaled, my hands still trembling.

I guided the drone up, up, into the morning cloud cover. On the street below, the lights flickered back on. The 15-minute window closed. From a thousand feet up, the city looked calm. Peaceful. Completely unaware of the miniature war that had just been waged.

After we got back to the workshop, my hands finally stopped buzzing from the tension. I led the debrief, my voice steady again. We'd done it. We'd really done it. In a way, I was glad that I was at a distance from the action. I'm not sure if I could handle being as up close and personal as the others. We do complement each other very well, though.

But at the back of my mind, a pixel blinked: Anomalous signal. Unidentified.

The same overhead beam lit up the latest project. Prototypes still loomed in the shadows. But we'd need a bigger table. Change was in the air.

X

Later, I watched the team go their separate ways.

Gretta and Squeeze bought ice cream, heads bent in conspiratorial chatter. Easter walked home, his toolbox swinging with a spring in his step that was pure Y. Monkey Boy crouched to give Ratdad a biscuit, whispering praise. Donny Pie stood apart, staring at his screen. The tense line of his shoulders was gone, but his eyes still flicked to every corner..

They all breathed easier. So did I.

In HQs across the city, they'd blame a fuse. A faulty switch. The weather. Not one of them suspected us.

Just the way we liked it.

Back in the workshop, the hum of the soldering iron swallowed the last echoes of laughter.

W was the first to break the quiet.

"Y would've loved this."

No one spoke. I shook my head. He'd have hated it, I thought. The noise, the flirting, the mess. But he'd have come around.

Z's voice was soft. "The kids aren't just helping. They're leading."

I nodded. We adapt. That's what we do.

The soldering iron hummed. Somewhere, a faint laugh echoed and died.

Outside, the town was peaceful. Calm. Orderly.
I glanced at W and Z. "Same time tomorrow?"

They nodded.

And I knew we would.

ROSERAIN

It washes nothing clean

It must have begun in the night, because it isn't so hot now. I can feel a cool breeze wafting its lazy way through the bedroom window, making the hairs on my chest stand to attention. But it's the sound. The downpour drumming against the canvas awning sheltering the window. It makes me feel so relaxed, and to be honest, it could easily lull me back to slumberland. It hits the perfect pitch. Does everyone have a sound that switches them to standby mode? That would be a great way to win a war, just beam the dreamy sound of rain hammering against canvas over enemy lines, and they, blissed out and drowsy, would be putty in our hands. I could be putty.

Memory is a strange thing. Sometimes it favours a story you prefer. I'm back in the tent, trying to get back to sleep, but I can't shake off the feeling that they're here. They can't be here; no one knows. Cold hands grip my wrists; something heavy is across my legs. I can't move, can't kick, can't get up. The mask is clamped to my face. What is this? What is this? I can't... and breathe. Inhale. In and out. In and out.

The rain is even more hypnotic as I drift, only just aware of the giggling beside me as they release the rubbery gas mask and give the curling blue smoke inside to someone else. I always remember it as them laughing, though sometimes the laugh sounds like

mine. Sinking into the rhythm, I float. These were the days; they were the best times. Mates for life, we were. Whatever happened?

Oh yes, I remember.

John, Peter, Clem, and I grew up together in the Rosehaven of old, went to school together, almost living in each other's houses, much to the annoyance of our mums. We told each other everything, helped each other with our homework, and stood up to Max Dogget together. We actually ambushed him and his cronies one day, leaving them covered in white paint and glue just before registration. We couldn't stop grinning about it for weeks. I'm glad I was there that day, even if people remember it differently.

By the time we left school for university, none of us had dads. My dad had died when I was three, John's just before his third-year exams, and the other two lost to messy divorces. "We were each other's dads," we used to say. It wasn't a joke.

We shared flats and went to the same uni. John buried in balance sheets, Peter sharpening his arguments, Clem half lost in fumes, and me, turning life into lines on a stage. Six days of work, one for escape. Saturdays were sacred: tent in the boot, the road open, laughter billowing out the windows. "Enhanced relaxation," we used to say, like it was something we'd invented. Ask any of them and they'll tell you the story with me in the best light.

Then the war came.

No one knew who fired first. It didn't matter after the bombs and barricades arrived. Cities splintered; allegiances fractured. We picked our way through the day's checkpoints and flashpoints. It could be quite hard to tell between New Tomorrow and the Heritage Front, or even the Blue Wheel, although they were mostly blue

(colour-coded soldiering at its best). Anyway, it was worth it just getting away for a day, being super relaxed on the way back, gameified to the max. Some close calls, but they only bound us closer together.

Inevitably, the war took its toll on the university. First, creating a microcosm of the conflict on campus, leading to arrests and vandalism, then later arson and attacks on staff. Some didn't make it. We took no side but our own. One dark, wet night, rain lashing the streets and dampening the sounds of war; we made a pact. We would be on our side. We would use what we had learned so far to take what we needed from a breaking society and turn it into something better. For us. Fuck New Tomorrow. Fuck the Heritage Front. Fuck the Blue Wheel and any other useless little fuckers in factions. We were better. I was the best.

And so, it worked quite well, cutting through the chaos like a hot knife through butter. Using our skills and creativity to save many from the surrounding violence. Many masterpieces, many pieces of classic jewelry, and many sublime examples of the most exquisite porcelain in existence. Over the coming months, we identified museums, corporate offices, dealers, and private collectors. We disabled security, human and otherwise, and moved the best pieces to our 'invisible' storage facility in the sticks. Concealed entrance, waterproofed, ventilated and entered through an almost invisible door camouflaged with a nasty-looking clump of briar. Inside were units of shelving storing the best objects d'art, waiting for normality to return and for the winners who needed proof of their importance by owning a few rare items. We could have given it away to the needy, but we stockpiled, waiting. Well, that was the plan.

John did the sums, Peter found the weak spots in people, Clem took care of the messy work, and I was the front, the actor, the liar, the

necessary charm. We rehearsed our moves, studied old raids and movies, creating a small, organised and motivated team.

As usual, John and Peter identified our next target, and all four of us worked out the plan of attack. We made sure there was a diversion by 'encouraging' unrest in the area. It was a sizeable townhouse in an exclusive neighbourhood in the middle of the city. Guards and alarms, no doubt, but the patriarch, a prominent hedge fund manager, had died a few days before, so the family would be in a state of flux, making them an ideal target. Inflammatory rhetoric played on a loop at high volume from an old loudhailer we'd left lying in the street. Flash bangs and a burning minibus set the street alight; Clem wedged the crowbar home and the back door, hidden from the street, gave way. We bound and gagged the maid and the butler, who wouldn't listen to my perfectly rehearsed reason. This time, done with a slight foreign accent, not too much though. Maybe they wouldn't understand. Some might think a riot is too messy, too unpredictable. But that's its beauty. If there were any response, it would be human. Faced with a burning bus and a hundred screaming people, or a silent alarm from a rich man's house? They'll choose the fire every time. As for the mob coming in here? Please. They were after the symbols of power in the square, not some banker's porcelain. And the help? Once they were tied up, they were furniture. My little performance wasn't for them; it was for me. A dry run. A bit of fun. The real security was the gag. Within ten minutes, we were on our way with the loot in our backpacks and a moving street riot behind us.

We jumped into the escape car and tore up the road, checking the mirrors until they fell empty. We arrived at our little bank, our favourite spot. No tent that day, though. We built the place ourselves. It took us weeks. I volunteered to sort out the ventilation system, making sure the fans ran silently through the narrow, briar-protected entrance. I told them I'd seen something similar in a documentary about ancient wine cellars, although I might have

embellished it a little to sound useful. The spy cameras covering the hideaway could be accessed from our phones, so we all checked them before the final approach. All clear. I'd set the cameras up myself, because no one else had the patience for that kind of detail. John reached the door first, pressed the secret switch, and it opened. I kept my hand near the inside pocket of my jacket out of habit, fingers tracing the seam. We all piled in, eager to have a rest and spark one up, and nothing.

Nothing.

Bare shelves. Empty cases.

Everything was still in place, just stripped clean. Nobody exploded. Nobody collapsed. Just gutted, like a silent blade had sliced through all four of us at once. One by one, we sank to our knees, holding our heads as our dreams slipped between our fingers.

The silence was the worst part. No alarms, no broken locks, no boot prints in the dust we'd left.

"How?" John finally croaked, his accountant's brain grasping for logic. "The cameras... the door... the codes. It's impossible."

"Of course it's fucking possible," Clem snapped, staring at a dust-free rectangle where a Fabergé egg once sat. "It's done. It's happened."

Peter stood up slowly. He didn't look at the shelves; he looked at us. "John's right. It's not possible for someone who didn't know. Not like this. This is... surgical."

Another silence, thicker now. The word someone hung in the air, but we all flinched from the next, logical word. Someone with a key.

Someone who knew the schedule. Someone with six nights and a quad bike.

It was easier to invent a phantom.

“Cheeky fuckers,” Clem spat, grabbing onto the idea of an outside enemy like a lifeline. “Who would fucking believe it? They’ve stolen our nest egg right from under our noses!”

“Who are they?” John demanded, voice rising in panic. “I still don’t get how they got past everything.”

We spent a full minute constructing an all-knowing “them.” It was the only story that kept us from being the villains. But you can only believe in ghosts for so long before you start staring at the living.

The blame game didn’t begin with an accusation. It began when Peter’s eyes, sharp with a lawyer’s cold logic, stopped searching the room and settled on me.

“It’s all your fault,” he said.

I stood my ground. “Who the fuck are you? I’m a fuckin’ lawyer, so I’m Peter fuckin’ perfect? Everyone knows lawyers’re all the same. Slippery little cunts who think they rule the world. It’d make more sense if you’d done it. Greedy bastard, like the rest of your kind. Couldn’t give a monkey’s about anyone else. Bet you’ve been planning this all along.”

“Well, someone was!” shouted John. “The only reason I doubt one of us did it is because it’s so well planned. We’re good, but not this good. I can’t believe they got around the security. How’d they get the stuff away without tyre tracks? God knows we’ve been careful! How’d they even know about the stuff?”

About us? About anything? I agree with Peter. It must have been one of us. The only thing I'm sure of is, it wasn't me!"

Peter, Clem and I all shouted, "It wasn't me either," so much in sync and harmony it would have been hilarious if it hadn't been so serious.

"OK, OK, OK," I said, holding my hands up, the universal signal for surrender. My voice was all reason, a flat, steady deck in a roiling sea. "We can't just implode. Let's be practical. What's the move? Do we hang a traitor? ... Build a guillotine? Or do we get our heads together and find the actual problem?"

I let the silence hang after the word traitor, watching it land. Peter's jaw tightened. Clem's eyes, already hard, narrowed as if recalculating a threat. John just stared at my placating hands as if they were holding a hidden knife.

"So," I pressed on, softer, the voice of the only adult in the room. "Do we tear ourselves apart, or do we think?"

It was the wrong tone. Peter took a step forward, not back. "Think?" he spat. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Trying to copy me, the lawyer. Talking us in circles while you pocket the evidence."

Clem started it. Fuckin engineers, they're so Neanderthal. Without saying a word, he shoved me. Then a headbutt. If I hadn't dropped my head, my nose would have been mush. He was much bigger than me. I dropped. Clutched my face. The rest broke loose: fists flying, feet scrambling. As Clem drove me into the dirt floor, I didn't see my friend. I saw a liability. Peter's shouting wasn't a plea for reason; it was evidence. John's panicked eyes weren't searching for truth; they were measuring my guilt. Our lifelong partnership; the inside jokes, the split profits, the shared purpose, collapsed instantly

into simple, brutal arithmetic: three against one. The laughter was a memory. The trust was a lie. The future and the fortune were phantoms. All that remained was the problem in front of me, and the solution in my pocket.

One more shove, one more accusation, and I knew they'd turn on me for real, drag the truth out of me.

So, I stood up, reached into my pocket, fiddled about a bit until I felt a click, pulled out my concealed firearm, as they'd say on American TV, and, sticking to my fallback plan, shot each of them in the eye.

Avoiding their gaze, I went to the reinforced corner I'd taken extra special care over; the one I'd told them was for humidity control. I dragged the empty shelving unit away from it, found the hidden catch, and opened the concealed inner door I'd built into the wall. This was where I had crammed the loot. It took me six nights. Parked an old farm quad down by the stream. Covered the wheels with carpet. Every trip I made, I was drenched in sweat and fear. It was unusual for the others to be otherwise occupied for so long. I checked everything was as I'd left it, then opened the outside door.

It was chucking it down, so I got an umbrella from the car. I love that sound, especially when I'm dry. I attached ropes from the main uprights of our place to the towbar, and then slowly but surely pulled our little secret hideaway down, so everything blended in, just subtly misaligned enough to look like old storm damage or erosion. Nobody would find the bodies; nobody would find the loot, and it was there whenever I needed it.

It's the rain that brings it back.

Lying here in bed, the sun's come out, just like it has in my life. I get up and look out the window at the wonderful view over the

Caribbean. Never mind; the rainy season will soon be over.

But that was just the story, the legend. In reality, I'm still in Rosehaven, the only home I've ever known. And I still chuckle whenever I hear of Rosehaven's infamous Robin Hood, the art thief who stole from the rich to feed the poor in wartime and then quietly slipped away to the Caribbean. A fine story. A convenient lie. I know. I put it there. A neat lie keeps curious hands out of the wrong places.

ROSEWAR

*What quiet sounds like when it
breaks*

Gradually, a noise, a constant drone, became apparent. Shoppers stopped, hands weighed down with carrier bags full of that morning's purchases, heads tilted up, mouths agape. Shopkeepers stepped outside; hawkers fell quiet, all staring upwards. A few of the older adults might have recognised the sound from their nightmares; most, only from old films or TV.

Bombers!

The sound was unmistakable, but only the underside of the grey weary clouds was visible. Whose were they? What was happening? Where were they going? Why? ... were the questions many were asking.

No one seemed to know. The thought of the vast planes above contrasted with the quaint but continually conflicted seaside town of Rosehaven.

But the bombers changed everything.

It was a typical summer, changeable and unpredictable. On this particular day, rain had been threatening all morning.

Mary stood at the bakery door, staring up. Her shift had started early; that day's bread and cakes were almost sold out now. Taking a deep breath, she smiled as she took in the fading aroma of baked bread. She had been thinking of getting ready to close up, but she forced herself back inside and pressed the hidden button behind the counter.

This activated the surveillance around the building for the Gremlin saboteurs in the lower basement of the antique shop, who made tech to oppose the factions. She was proud of 'W', her brother, who was a key player down there. Sometimes, though, she would love him to be proud of her in the same way.

As the sound faded into the usual background noise, speculation sprang to life in the street.

"We're all going to die!"

"They aren't bombers; they're just these new cargo planes full of imports."

It went on and on and was all Mary heard people talking about for the rest of the day. Later, a little grey van began to pass again and again, a tape loop playing from a loudhailer strapped to its roof.

'All factions have formed the Unity Accord in response to this morning's events.'

'The Unity Accord will have a meeting tonight at 7pm in the old community centre.'

'Only volunteers are welcome.'

Comments varied.

"It must be serious if the factions are working together, don't you think?"

"I don't have the time; I need to get my Ken's dinner ready."

Mary thought she should go. Her brother, the cheeky little bugger, had worked really hard to get things back to some kind of stability rather than the constant argy bargy between the factions and the weak attempts by The Return to ease the situation.

Yes, she thought, she would go to the meeting and volunteer. If that meant missing a few shifts at the bakery, then so be it. Better to be involved than just sitting around worrying. She liked that. A frisson of excitement ran through her body.

So, she went.

She arrived at five to seven, and as she expected, the turnout wasn't great. Only about half the seats in the hall were taken. The stale smell mixed with floor polish took Mary back to teenage dances she hadn't thought about in years. Where had the time gone?

Unbelievably, the meeting started on time.

It must be important.

A long table was on the stage, and the seats behind it filled quickly with well-known faces from the two main factions, The Heritage Front and New Tomorrow.

A speaker introduced himself. "I'm Colin Reamer, the chairman of the cross-faction alliance, the Unity Accord."

"Citizens, there is an unprecedented national emergency, and with the lack of reliable communications with the rest of the country, we must take clear and decisive action."

"That's why the Heritage Front and New Tomorrow have agreed to suspend their conflict and form the Unity Accord. To inform our decisions, we are calling for volunteers to go to the nearby towns and villages to gather information and secure alliances."

"Can I see a show of hands, please?"

Only seven.

Mary thought of all the times she'd wished she'd taken part more, and of the heroes in films who went into the unknown to save those left behind.

I don't want to miss another opportunity.

Fuck it, she thought, I'm doing it.

I can't.

Can I?

I'll make a difference.

No, I won't.

Yes, I will.

She raised her hand.

"Thank you; we have eight people. Going in pairs will be much safer and flexible."

Mary hadn't thought about a partner.

Looking around at the others' startled faces, she realized she wasn't the only one.

Mary had never met him before, but didn't like his eyes; they wouldn't meet hers, and his hand felt like a dead fish when she shook it.

He was called Martin. Martin Shivers.

Yes, he gives me the shivers; she thought to herself. He said he was a data analyst, but what does that mean? Could they not have paired me with that other guy? At least he's good-looking, tall and doesn't look as if he's just smelt his own fart. I guess beggars can't be choosers, though. I'm no looker, and thanks to Delia's danish pastries, I'm not as trim as I should be. Not bad considering how many I eat, though.

What have I done?

They were allocated the northeastern quadrant, which mostly included other coastal towns and villages. Mooredge, Clifton, Blackton, and the villages of Havencastle, Seaton, and Littleton.

They had their work cut out for them, so they'd better get started.

They agreed to go home and meet back at the hall in an hour, then they'd set off.

The long-awaited rain chose their moment of return to start absolutely chucking it down. They had decided to walk and cadge lifts rather than take one of their own cars. That way, they wouldn't miss any valuable information or gossip.

It seemed like a stupid idea, even though they had come prepared.

Just a few hundred metres up the road was a checkpoint. A combined checkpoint, which was really weird after years of them belonging either to the Heritage Front or to New Tomorrow.

They saw for the first time this this alliance would be a fragile affair. Here were two sets of patrolmen from opposing factions standing nervously together, but really not together. The closer they got, the more obvious it became that the soldiers were watching each other rather than the people going through.

After showing their orders from the Unity Accord, they were let through without even a body search, which was a first for both of them. It was actually quite pleasant walking away from the checkpoint, even in the pouring rain. The release of the tension was palpable.

The rain eased off as they made their way along the road to Mooredge, their clothes sticking to them, shoes wet.

As they approached its outskirts, they saw some obviously abandoned homes; belongings strewn across lawns, open front doors. They must have relatives or friends in safer districts, Mary thought. They couldn't possibly leave the country. Could they? Anyway, where would they go? Impossible to know if you don't know who the enemy is.

Martin, she was struggling to be nice and call him by his first name, was quite sarcastic about the runaways or 'the escapees' as he called them.

"They're only running away from where they heard the news. They could be heading right into more serious trouble."

Mary was kinder. "Maybe they have more to worry about than you do," she was still trying to keep up with Martin's long strides. "Look at these family photos, Martin. These people want to be with their families."

Then Mary spotted some graffiti on a wall on the other side of the road. "What's that? That sign on the wall. I've seen that before somewhere, haven't you?"

"What sign?"

"Over there, on the wall. It's foreign."

"Oh, I don't think we need to worry about that, doll. We should be worried about getting somewhere nice and warm so we can dry off, so we don't catch our death out here. I'm starting to feel it."

Martin Shivers shivers. Mary laughed to herself. "But we've got to think about who could want to attack us, don't you think?"

"Well, they say there're loads of immigrants here. It could be something to do with them. You never know."

"I suppose so, but we should copy it."

"OK, OK, you've got a point, I suppose," said Martin taking his notebook out of his hip pocket, finding a dry page and making a

sketch.

"You got any idea which countries would want to attack us, Mary?"

"Haven't even thought about it, to be honest. They say a lot of them are unhappy with the things we did in the past. You?"

"Haven't a clue. I think what we're doing is a good idea 'cos we should soon find out and be able to get an early heads up about which way the wind's blowing."

"I'm more worried there'll be an invasion, and foreign soldiers will run riot all over the place. Pillaging n raping n stuff like that."

"Rape and pillage? That's the least of our worries. The real danger isn't soldiers running riot. It's efficient men in clean offices deciding who eats and who freezes. That's what the factions have been practicing for years."

"I suppose."

"Oi, you boys. You got a minute?"

Trying not to slip on the wet leaves, Mary followed Martin across the road to the group of youngsters hanging around in a decrepit bus shelter.

Still shivering, Martin said, "We're from Unity Accord. You guys seen anything strange happening since those planes flew over earlier?"

"I reckon nothing else really happened today, but we saw a bunch of foreign guys getting picked up by a van a day or two ago. We think that was kind of strange."

"And there's this fuckin' sign been sprayed on walls around the town. That's nothing to do with any of our lot. Bit odd, that's all," said another.

Just as they were turning away, another man walked up.

Mary put on her nicest voice and said, "We're from Unity Accord, and we're trying to find out any info or gossip there is about what's going on. Any ideas?"

"No, not really, but I was in the pub earlier and kept hearing talk of young uni graduates disappearing."

"What, into fresh air?" Martin quipped.

"No, the story was always the same. They told their families they were going out and haven't been heard from again. That's all. Weird, eh?"

"Thanks, mate, we should get moving. Any idea who we should ask around here?"

"Try down the Horsemaker's Arms; it's full of people wondering what's going on. It's about 150 yards down that way on the left. Come on, I'll go with you."

The pub was packed, dry and welcoming, but with a damp odour of beer and wet clothes. Their new companion was called Les and spoke to the landlord as soon as they got to the bar. Mary and Martin managed to order drinks, shouting above the hubbub.

The landlord rang the bell and shouted, "There's a couple of people here from Rosehaven trying to get a take on what's happening and asking if anyone has noticed anything odd going on lately."

Mary stepped forward and said in as loud a voice as she could manage, "We're from Unity Accord and we'll be here for about 20 minutes and are willing talk to anyone who has any ideas about what's happening. Gossip is OK, but this is too important to mess about. You can speak to either me, Mary, or Martin here."

It soon became clear that opinions were not scarce.

"What the fuck are they playing at joining the factions together?" said one.

"If you ask me, it's all got to do with these immigrants. They just look after their own," said another.

"That's not true, and you know it," said someone behind them. "I've been on the council here for years."

Mary looked around. "Is that you Simon? I haven't seen you for ages. How're you doing?"

"Battling on, Mary," giving her a quick hug.

Mary poked Martin in the ribs and shouted over the racket.

"I'm just going for a word outside with Simon. I'll be back in a minute."

"What? Oh, right," sneered Martin, taking a gulp of his pint.

Outside with the smokers, Mary leaned close to Simon and said in a low voice, "We haven't talked to that many people so far, but two of them have mentioned groups of immigrants and a sign sprayed on the walls around here. You know anything about that?"

"It's really serious stuff. Dangerous even. I don't really want to get involved because I don't want anything to happen to my family."

"You risked your life to come to this country, Simon. Tell me. I won't say where it came from."

Simon kept looking over his shoulder, his eyes flitting everywhere. There are a lot of them who really like it in this country and aren't really up for causing trouble, but they're being forced into it by these ring leaders. They're not too happy."

"OK. I also heard you say you're on the council. Can we meet with any of the leaders? I know it's a long shot."

"You're too late. They had a meeting after the planes this morning. They've all left. It's a disgrace," he spat.

"You're a diamond, Simon; I'll let you get away. I need to get back inside to my partner and see what he's found out. I don't really know him that well, so I need to keep an eye out."

A wave of tiredness crashed over her as she went back into the pub. It was about eleven, and she'd been wound up all day. Martin was still at the bar.

She poked him again.

"You found out anything useful?"

He rubbed his thumb and index finger together as if he were feeling the quality of cloth. "Not really, a few people complaining about youngsters just leaving at the first sign of trouble, and others about the immigrant situation here. Apart from that, it's just been faction shite. You?"

"Maybe," Mary said, then repeated most of what Simon had said. She left out that some of them were reluctant. She'd wait and see how things played out.

"What about the graffiti?"

"Damn! I completely forgot. Agh. Give me a sec and I'll see if he's still out there."

A few moments later she returned, shaking her head.

"Well done, Mary." Martin winked. "Anyway, I think we're done here. Let's move on. I say we walk to Seaton. It's not that far and the rain's stopped, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go."

Outside, they took a second to get their bearings, then turned left to go to Seaton.

"Hang on a minute," Martin said. "I need to go back to the pub. You stay here. I won't be a sec."

Mary was looking at her watch when she heard a low whistle.

"Oi," came a voice from the shadows. "Over here."

Trying to look as if she weren't in some second-rate spy movie, she casually moved towards the voice coming from the butcher shop doorway.

"You might be interested in this." The man in the shadows pushed a sizeable piece of paper into her hand, then rushed off into the dark wet night. The paper smelled of oil, which Mary thought was at odds with the aroma of meat coming from the shop.

Gone.

Mary took out her dim little torch and shone it on the crumpled piece of heavy, high-quality paper. It was some kind of electronic schematic, some of it smudged.

Martin returned and looked at the paper over her shoulder.

Still peering at the details, Mary said, "There's something there at the top. It's a guidance something, but the rest of it's been torn off. Can you see it?"

Martin rubbed his fingers, thinking. "It's got the same sign that we've seen sprayed on these walls."

"We're on to something; we're on the right track. Come on," she said, putting the paper in her pocket. "Let's go."

They were both quite glad it was a short walk to Seaton. So much had happened so far that evening; they were both feeling exhausted when the heavens opened again, and it poured with rain. They weren't too tired to miss the sign sprayed by the road, though.

These days, Seaton was a commuter dormitory town for Rosehaven, and as with Mooredge, the first sign of life was a brief whiff of sweet-smelling smoke in the rain, which made them notice the gang of teenage bikers hanging around across the road.

The bikers exchanged uneasy glances and threw away their smokes as they approached, but Martin explained who they were and why they were there.

The lanky one hesitated, glancing around as if checking for anyone listening. "Look... it's not really our place to tell..."

One of the shorter kids nudged him. "Mate, we've got to trust somebody. Don't make it worse."

The lanky one swallowed hard. "Okay, fine... guns. Lots of guns. Locked up somewhere. It's dangerous as fuck."

Martin nodded slowly, keeping his voice calm. "Right. Can you show us? We need to know where they are."

The youths exchanged another nervous glance, then one shrugged. "Alright. We'll take you on the bikes. Hop on, but stay quiet." Thankfully, the rain was easing off.

No spare crash helmets here. Soon after passing under a disused railway arch, they stopped at an old railway storage tunnel with its door smashed open.

"It was fine this afternoon, wasn't it?" The boy said, looking at his mates.

They all nodded.

Martin took charge.

“Shine your headlights inside.”

It was like an arched brick storage space. Like half a tunnel, but maybe only 20 metres long. Water was dripping from the roof in places; a strange oily smell hung in the air.

Mary couldn't shake off the feeling that she was being watched. There was nothing she could do about it, but these kids could be anyone.

There were large, empty, metal-edged plywood crates strewn around. The mysterious sign stamped on their sides.

Mary and Martin had no way of answering the group's questions that were coming thick and fast.

Martin ran his finger along a smear of oil in one of the boxes and put it to his nose.

“Gun oil.”

Mary's head spun, the gorgeous smell of bread replaced by gun oil. What's happening to me?

Martin just nodded and rolled his hands as if to say to Mary, “Let's go.”

He paused. “Any of you heard anything about groups of immigrants?”

"Nothing about them here. They say they come in at Havencastle. The beach is ideal there."

"Yeah, and nobody'll talk about it. It's like they're afraid of something, even more than the factions."

Martin held up some cash. "This can be yours if you'll take us to Havencastle now. You up for it?"

After 10 minutes of freezing on the back of the motorbikes, they were left wet and shivering on Havencastle village green, with no feeling in their fingers.

"God, my sister... used to give me hell... for never dressing for the weather." Martin stuttered, folding his arms around himself for any possible extra warmth.

"She was right."

Only the hotel was open. They went in. The warmth grabbed them like a long-lost friend.

A receptionist laughing at her book barely glanced up. "Can I help you?"

They both flashed their ID.

Martin didn't mince his words. "We need to speak to someone about immigrant landings at the beach."

She stood, straightened herself up, and said, "Why don't you let me contact the owner, although it's a bit late. Come, you can wait in the dining room."

Soon, the girl brought a pot of tea with a couple of towels to dry themselves with, and said the owner should be about 20 minutes.

A little dryer, they checked they were alone and brought out the schematic, examining it more closely on a table under the lights.

"You're right, Mary. I'm sorry. This does look important, and it looks like it's military-grade."

Mary took another sip of hot tea. "It has the sign; it's obviously foreign going by the writing. It could be Arabic or something."

Martin nodded. "And it says 'Guidance' something, so we've got to assume it's something to do with the bombers. Maybe some kind of beacon? What do you think?"

"Who can say? But anyway," Mary said, "I keep meaning to ask. Did you get any more info when you went back to the pub?"

"Nah, but..."

"Oh well," she interrupted, "anyway. Right now, we need to work out what we need to ask this owner before he gets here."

No matter what Martin said, Mary still felt that he was holding something back. She still didn't trust him.

As they were talking, a tall, thin, dark-haired man with a big black beard appeared at the dining-room door and, speaking in halting English, said. "I see many guns today. I do not want here my family danger same as home."

Mary shot back, "At Seaton?"

"No, here, beach." and then he was gone.

Mary dashed after him, but he was gone. The only sign he'd been there was a slightly pungent, spicy scent hanging in the air.

"Damn! He might've known something about that sign."

Her eyes darted about the place as if trying to tie the guy at the door with the guns. Tie the hotel and the guns? It would be somewhere to keep them, she supposed.

Had the immigrants come to kidnap young graduates? That was too far-fetched, but then this whole thing was mental.

Maybe these kids had run away. The thing is, if they had, Heritage Front or New Tomorrow would have them by now, and fuck knows what they would do with them.

All the conversations, admissions, and discoveries were whirling round her head. Signs, guns, pubs, bikes.....

And, as Martin would say, this fuckin' device schematic. What was that all about?

The door opened again, and a well-dressed man in his mid-forties marched in, a big smile on his face.

"Hello, I'm Gary Nightingale and I'm the owner of this hotel. Rachel informed me about your request, and I'm only too happy to help you."

After they had introduced themselves, Martin left it to Mary to talk to Gary Nightingale, while he watched him carefully.

She said, "They say that the beach here is good for immigrants to land. Have you heard anything about that?"

Smiling and rubbing one of his ears, Gary Nightingale thought for a while, then replied, "Nothing like that happens around here. I would check your sources if I were you".

Mary shot straight back at him. "So, can you explain the arms caches stashed around here? If nothing is going on, then I suppose these arms must be for the villagers, am I right?"

That hit the mark.

He gave a little laugh, ran his fingers through his hair and then clasped his hands together tightly on his lap. "What is this? I'm sorry, but I've just got out of bed to come over here and help you as any upstanding citizen would, and all you want to do is act like this is some kind of thriller."

Mary could see that Martin was fading. She didn't even reply.

More confident now, Nightingale said, "Why don't I give you a lift to your next port of call. Both of you have obviously had a long day."

"A lift to Littleton would be very kind. Thank you," said Martin, his jaw clenched, tension, and tiredness overwhelming him.

Mary realised that the more polite Martin was, the more he was trying to control his temper.

Gary Nightingale's smile was sincere this time. "Anything to help," as he uncoiled and relaxed.

"Let's go."

There was only tension and silence in the car.

They stepped out at the tiny village with a cursory thank you. Weary but determined, they headed to its only habitation: a row of farm cottages, only one with a slight glow behind its window, all the others dark to the now dry, moonless night.

Martin walked up to the door beside the window and knocked. It opened immediately, almost as if they had been expected, and were ushered in to a fusty livingroom where three women in their thirties sat on a threadbare three-piece suite.

"We heard the car," said one. "No one stops around here."

"I'm sorry, but we need help," said Mary, doing the introductions.

She explained their situation. Meanwhile, Martin just sat on the arm of one of the chairs in silence.

"You two look like you are just about dead on your feet. Come on, relax, and we'll rustle up something for you to eat. How about some soup?"

Sighing with pleasure as she took the weight off her feet, Mary said, "No, no, but a cup of coffee and a sandwich would be perfect. Wouldn't it, Martin?"

The one with the red hair, Agnes, said, "Why don't we get the coffee ready, and we'll tell you what we know. I recognise you from the bakery, by the way, but you probably don't know me."

"Aye, me too," said the one with the perm. "I wish I had one of these danishes to give you right now. The cinnamon ones." She went through to put the kettle on with the aroma of freshly made coffee following soon after.

It came with a big plate of thick cheese sandwiches.

Agnes started their story. "Our boys came home the other day and were kind of quiet, which isn't like them at all. I mean, they're eleven, and after playing on the beach, they always have something to tell you."

"So, I had to drag it out of them."

"What?" Mary urged, the caffeine perking her up.

Elsie took over. "They'd been playing in the derelict factory near the bay. You know, that building that you can just about see from the road."

Agnes carried on, frowning at Elsie for stealing her show. "They went in, which is pretty brave really seeing as how they're under threat of a damn good hiding from their dads if they even go near the place, never mind inside."

"But what was inside?" Mary said, gnawing at her bottom lip. "What did they see?"

"There's some kind of machine. They said it hummed, and the coil's light throbbed faster as the sound got louder, but it changed to beeps when the planes went over," Agnes continued.

"They got such a fright, they just jumped on their bikes and pedalled home like the clappers. They were shitting themselves.

They thought they'd broken it."

"You mean they touched it?" said Mary.

"They swear they didn't, but reading between the lines, they probably did. I don't know about yours, but our Lee's going to get hell for this, I can tell you!"

Mary nodded.

"We were thinking about going down to have a look, but now that you're here, it'd be better you two going instead. Then you can report it or whatever." Agnes said, still trying to be the leader.

"You're right." "Mary said, "We're knackered, but we have to go. Now!"

Martin sounded irritated. "Why the rush?"

Mary's tone sharpened. "So, we can find out what's going on rather than just guessing all the time. Even you could've worked that one out, Martin," she seethed, too tired and fed up to care what he thought of her anymore. Maybe it was the caffeine speaking, maybe she still didn't trust him.

"Come on, I'll take you," said Annie, speaking for the first time. "Let's get going before the rain starts again."

A few minutes later, the three of them set off into the pitch black until they came to a gate. The smell of wet grass hung in the air, with the sound of waves lapping in the distance.

"Let's go this way," said Annie. "It's much quicker and there's no traffic. I've got a torch, just in case, but it'll be better if no one sees

us.”

They climbed over the gate and followed a path through the field to a deserted farmyard, then out onto the road again.

It was on the other side of the road. The derelict factory.

Annie led them through the hole in the wall her son had mentioned. As soon as they went in, they could hear the humming sound and see a kind of glowing coil.

Annie turned on her torch, so Mary took out the crumpled schematic, and held it up.

Mary gasped and grabbed Annie for support.

The serial number on the side of the machine matched the one on the paper!
The same!

They’d discovered the device.

Now, all they needed to do was work out what it did and how it worked.

At their direction, Annie moved the light around the machine. Even though the humming sound wasn’t that loud, Mary could feel it in her feet and chest.

It was a thick black metal tube, about two metres long, a metre thick and mounted on a heavy metal frame. Attached underneath was a box, maybe a power supply, and the glowing coil

was on the right of that. It was warm and vibrating slightly when Mary touched it.

The device brought an air of almost surreal high technology to the dusty and disused factory interior.

The first thing they noticed was that above the serial number, there was a name, presumably a company, then the number, then underneath in smaller letters "Aerial Guidance System".

Mary couldn't stop herself. "If this is a guidance system for these bombers, then we have to destroy it."

Martin rubbed his fingers together. "It would be better if we reprogrammed it so that the planes dropped the bombs somewhere that would damage their country most. That would be the smart move, wouldn't it?"

"So, what do you want to do?" Mary spat, "Wait until tomorrow to change it so innocent people in another country are killed or left homeless and starving?"

Annie was nodding furiously, tears streaming down her face.

Mary grabbed Martin by the shoulders and started shaking him furiously. "Don't you care?"

"You make me sick! It's just a game to you, but hundreds die. All because a plan changes! I fuckin' hate that!"

Shivering slightly, Martin looked into Mary's eyes, breathed out slowly, escaped her grasp and pleaded with her to sit down. He was so compelling; she did so immediately.

Martin rubbed his thumb and index finger together.

"I think there's something you should know," he said, so kindly she almost thought he was someone else.

"Today, well yesterday now, the factions joined for the good of the country and formed Unity Accord. But the fact is, there's always been a Unity Accord above faction level that's responsible for national security."

Mary looked at Annie sitting there with her mouth open. She supposed this was good news after everything that had happened.

He went on, "Both Heritage Front and New Tomorrow have foreign backers. It's not a secret, although many of those investors would prefer it to be."

Annie made a leap. "So they're behind the immigrant problem, then?"

"Yeah, and what we've got wind of tonight is the activation of immigrant sleeper cells. They're waiting for the signal to rise."

"So, these bombers are theirs, then?" said Mary, totally engrossed in Martin's revelations now.

"That's right. The bombs are dropped, and then these groups or cells go in and take advantage of the resulting devastation, while their other forces are probably waiting off the coast to invade. You following me?"

"Yes. So, these hidden arms are for them, then. The invasion forces?"

Martin grinned. "Yes, and no. The immigrants think they are, but these guns are actually for our side. The youngsters who have been disappearing all over the place are all members of the resistance formed by the original Unity Accord.

"What?" The two women's heads snapped up at exactly the same time.

"Yes. About half of them come from immigrant families too, so they understand the chaos these other incomers want to cause. Our ones like their life here too much to stand by and do nothing."

"So, you knew all along that the weapons were going to be used by our side, and you didn't say..."

A distant drone interrupted them.

It was as if time had stopped.

The glowing light of the coil fixed to the tube throbbed.

Annie was frantic. "It's the bombers! They're coming back! What about my kids? What about Jim? I've got to get home." And she rushed out the door with the torch.

Mary raced after her. "Annie, Annie, go, go as fast as you can, but leave us the torch. Please leave us the torch! You're worried about your family; we might be able to save thousands of them."

She stopped, handed it to Mary, saying, "Do the right thing, Mary. I trust you! And after you've finished, if you can, come back to the house and get something to eat before the two of you collapse."

Mary rushed back in to find Martin poring over the diagram.

They needed to decide. Change or destroy.

Between a rock and a hard place.

Mary stared at the device.

Her hands were shaking.

Her eyes welled up.

The drone, the hum and her heartbeat were all she could hear.

A knot in her stomach.

She ached for the safety of her bakery with its smell of bread.

Much better than this smell of hot metal and fear.

Martin looked up.

"We can't turn it off; it's wired directly into the high-voltage cable in the floor."

Mary slumped.

"But I think we can do this, Mary. I think we can re-purpose the device quickly enough to stop these planes and give us breathing space until our experts can get here tomorrow. What do you think?"

Mary appreciated being asked for her opinion and also realised there wasn't any time to waste thinking about it.

“Let’s just get it done.”

Martin held up a small metal box. “I found this toolkit; let’s get the device open.”

He compared the tools inside with what was obviously the inspection hatch on the top of the black metal tube.

Using one of the screwdrivers, Martin undid the hatch screws.

The drone sounded closer.

The coil’s glow throbbed faster.

With Mary helping, they manipulated the hatch, so it opened completely, exposing an array of electronics, flashing components and numerical displays.

Mary made a jump. “We have to get this done before it starts beeping, otherwise it’ll have sent its signal, and we’ll be too late.”

Nodding, Martin consulted the diagram, then put his hand inside the machine.

Aghhh!!! “My hand, my hand!” Martin pulled his hand out, pouring with blood.

Mary quickly looked around for some cloth to staunch the flow. Finding nothing, she took off one of her long socks.

“This’ll have to do for now,” she said, wrapping the slightly damp sock around the deep cut in his hand. “Come on. Move, I’ll do it.”

"There's supposed to be a button with that sign on it. Can you see it?"

"Yup."

"Press that. That's it."

"OK."

She still felt a vibration in everything she touched.

"You see that screw there next to the display? Screw it in as far as you can."

"The other way!"

"That's it. Now, see the little buttons on the left-hand display. Press the one with the 'Up' arrow until the number gets to 50."

"That's it. Now, you see the tiny red wire under the display? You have to cut that."

"What with?"

"These snips," he said, handing her a tiny pair of red-handled snips with his good hand.

"Oh!"

The snips disappeared into the machine.

The coil's glow was throbbing faster as the drone sound came closer.

"I've got nail clippers in my bag."

Using her nail clippers, hands shaking, Mary cut the red wire but cut another wire too.

"This is doing my head in" screamed Mary. "I don't think it's going to work."

Mary bent to the floor. Martin leaned down to console her, but instead of crying or giving up, she stood back up with a large rock in both hands.

"We're out of time."

And started smashing everything she could inside the big black humming tube.

It was still humming.

She hit it again and again.

"I've never been so angry in my whole life, will you just fuckin' stop, you fuckin' bastarding thing."

Her blows started to go in time with her words.

YOU.

ARE.

NOT.

GOING.

TO.

KILL.

ANY.

MORE.

OF.

US!

At the 'us', the humming stopped.

"What have I done?" She cried, terrified now.

They stared at the coil. A metallic, acrid, burnt smell seemed to cling to the back of their throats. The silence felt fragile, almost expectant.

"Have we done enough?" said Mary.

"I think we should destroy as much as we can until the bombers are gone, just in case."

Martin did his best with his injured hand, but Mary did most of the destruction, sweat pouring down her face.

The innards were unrecognisable.

There was no beep.

They both collapsed onto the floor, huffing and puffing, completely out of breath.

Then there was only the drone.

They looked at each other and suddenly burst out laughing.

"What a night! We won't forget this for a while."

Mary sobbed, "I only hope it was all worth it."

Martin was out of breath, too. He talked in short, sharp sentences.

"It's alright."

"There's nothing we can do now."

"We can learn a lot about these devices."

"There could be more of them."

"I'm sure we have people who can work out how to use them."

Mary still didn't say anything about her Gremlin brother.

"Come on, Martin," said Mary, blowing her nose and wiping her eyes. "Let's go back to Annie's and get something to eat. It'll be almost breakfast time." She grinned. "I'm absolutely starving."

Outside, the cool, fresh sea air slowly brought them back to reality. Listening, they could still hear the drone of the bombers high in the

sky, but it soon faded into the background noise of chirping birds and barking dogs.

Diverted?

Aborted?

Destroyed?

After they had eaten, Elsie's husband insisted on giving them a lift back to Rosehaven."

Martin fell asleep as soon as the van door shut, but all Mary could do was sit there in the earthy-smelling silence, wringing her hands and worrying. She was exhausted.

"If you want to sleep, just listen to the rain on the van... I find that helps."

Mary watched the rain gather on the glass, tracing paths that disappeared before she could follow them.

What had she done? Had she made things worse?

She started praying for sleep to stop the turmoil.

How could national security depend on secrets she and Martin had found so easily? Can these people really keep us safe, or is it up to us to do it?

As she stared blank-eyed at the familiar landscape passing by, she worried the nation's leaders were just doing their job, but that job

could decide whether hundreds and hundreds of men, women and children lived or died.

She thought about how tired she was and how she might have to go to work the next day. If she made a mistake, the baking would burn, or they wouldn't make any money that day.

If these leaders made a mistake, maybe because they had had a sleepless night, they would still have their jobs. It could be life or death for ordinary people, though.

"I'm absolutely knackered," Mary muttered as she and Martin got out of the van. "You slept like a log."

"What's wrong? Why didn't you get any sleep? Was I snoring?"

"Too much stuff running around in my head, Martin."

It was funny; she thought. She felt as if they'd known each other forever now, even though they'd met less than 24 hours ago.

A thin young man blocked their path into the committee room.

"Don't try to stop us, son. You tell that fuckin' committee that we need to see them RIGHT NOW!" Martin growled, back to his snarky self.

"I don't care if they're on the bog, or having their breakfast, if we don't see them right this minute, there'll be hell to pay!" he shouted as the slightly scared young man scurried away.

He returned a few minutes later.

"They'll see you now."

"You do the talking, Martin, I'm too frazzled."

Grinning, Martin nodded and related their night's adventure to the committee. He was careful not to miss anything out and always looked to Mary for confirmation whenever he wasn't sure about a point.

"Finally, I want to emphasise that the actions of Mary here last night saved many lives, and I recommend that she should be decorated for bravery."

Mary blushed, feeling a warm, fuzzy sensation about Martin.

"Oh, I'm not sure if we could do that. Only the factions may decorate members of the public. We don't have the wherewithal at the moment here at Unity Accord," said Chairman Peterson.

Mary's feelings changed, and so the arguing began over how to recognise Mary's bravery, even though the new alliance had only been formed less than 24 hours before. But this time it didn't go on for long.

The door opened, and a straight-backed, very well-turned-out young woman came in and spoke quietly to the Unity Accord leader.

Everyone watched until she left.

The leader stood up.

"It has just been reported that the resistance has just taken most of the sleeper cells into custody, although there are one or two individuals still at large, including Gary Nightingale."

"Good to know, but I just want to go home and have a bath and get some sleep." Mary yawned.

After the meeting was over, Martin took her back to her house just to make sure she was OK.

"Martin, let's try to meet up sometime and try to be friends, yeah?"

"That'd be good," he said. "Now get some sleep."

"Oh, Martin," Mary said, her eyes half shut.

"Yeah?"

"What really happened when you went back into the pub in Mooredge?"

"Nothing that mattered, really. You were ahead of my game, then."

"Mmm..."

Water running hot.

Don't stay too long.

And bed....

Mary slept but couldn't settle. Too many things running around her head again.

Smash it, smash it, harder!

Martin being nice.

She might as well be at work if there were work to go to. Maybe nobody wanted to know her anymore.

Maybe everyone thought she'd ruined their chances of safety. Word travels fast in these parts.

She turned the corner into the bakery's street and suddenly couldn't move for people.

"Eh?" she yawned. "Why's it so busy at this time of day?"

"Here she is!" A cry went up.

And suddenly she was being hoisted up and carried on a couple of men's shoulders towards the bakery. The street was crammed with people all chanting:

"Mary! Mary! Mary!"

She could feel herself blushing and knew from experience her face would be bright red.

She could even see her brother standing with his colleagues X and Z across the road. Code names were important to these guys. She'd thought they were stupid until Y got killed. She would tell them about Martin and the device later.

Everyone was clapping and cheering.

Smiling and laughing, she thought, “God almighty, our bread must be fantastic! It smells wonderful!”

Above the crowd, there was a noise.

A child pointed up to the sky.

Everyone looked, eyes wide, mouths open.

Silence fell.

She was put back down on her feet.

The constant drone was almost overhead.

But which way were the planes going?

She scanned the surrounding faces. All ordinary people, some familiar, some not.

“It doesn’t matter,” she thought. “If it’s here or somewhere else, ordinary people are going to die.”

She followed the smell of bread to the shop and opened the door.

Thank you for spending time in Rosehaven. These stories were written slowly, carefully, and with more care than I can easily explain — so if any part of them stayed with you, I'd be grateful to know.

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Thomas X Veil

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About the Author

Thomas X Veil is a Scottish writer of dystopian fiction whose stories explore the quiet tensions beneath ordinary life.

Having lived for many years in different cultures, particularly in East Asia, he draws inspiration from the subtle ways societies shape belief, loyalty, and resistance.

His work focuses on ordinary people navigating morally complex worlds, where identity, ideology, and survival are often intertwined.

Rosehaven: Stories from the Quiet is his first published collection.



For more information, [click here](#)

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